

The Weather Underground

a film by Sam Green and Bill Siegel

92 minutes/color

2003 Sundance Film Festival, Documentary Competition
2003 South by Southwest Film Festival
2003 Philadelphia Film Festival
2003 San Francisco Film Festival — Golden Gate Award, Best Documentary Feature

PRELIMINARY NOTES

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SYNOPSIS

Hello, I'm going to read a declaration of a state of war... within the next 14 days we will attack a symbol or institution of American injustice.

Bernardine Dohrn

Thirty years ago, with those words, a group of young American radicals announced their intention to overthrow the U.S. government. In *THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND*, former Underground members, including Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, Mark Rudd, David Gilbert and Brian Flanagan, speak publicly about the idealistic passion that drove them to bring the war home and the trajectory that placed them on the FBI's most wanted list.

Fueled by outrage over racism and the Vietnam War, the Weather Underground waged a low-level war against the U.S. government through much of the '70s-bombing targets across the country that they considered emblematic of the real violence that the U.S. was wreaking throughout the world. Ultimately, the group's carefully organized clandestine network managed to successfully evade one of the largest manhunts in FBI history, yet the group's members would reemerge to life in a country that was dramatically different than the one they had hoped their efforts would inspire.

Extensive archival material, including photographs, film footage and FBI documents are interwoven with modern-day interviews to trace the group's path, from its pitched battles with police on Chicago's streets, to its bombing of the U.S. Capitol, to its successful endeavor breaking acid-guru Timothy Leary out of prison. The film explores the Weathermen in the context of other social movements of the time and features interviews with former members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Black Panthers. It also examines the U.S. government's suppression of dissent in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking back at their years underground, the former members paint a compelling portrait of troubled times, revolutionary times, and the forces that drove their resistance.

THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND

DIRECTORS STATEMENT

This documentary tells the story of the rise and fall of the Weather Underground, a controversial group of idealistic young people who, outraged by the war in Vietnam and racism in America, tried to violently overthrow the U.S. government during the 60s and 70s. Presenting a balanced and meticulously researched portrait of the Weather Underground, this film will in no way endorse or glamorize violence, but instead will encourage viewers and especially younger viewers to think critically and to responsibly engage in the pressing issues of our time.

During the group's hey-day, the Weathermen were extremely controversial. Operating underground and eluding the FBI for almost a decade, the Weathermen became Bonnie-and-Clyde-like figures, revolutionary outlaws whose confidence and胆 inspired many young people. Bernardine Dohrn, a leader of the group, became something of a radical pinup on college campuses. At the same time, the general public was mortified by the group's violence, and even many political activists felt strongly that the group did more to discredit the Left than to advance its goals.

Thirty years later, the Weather Underground has been largely forgotten. Most of the former members of the group now live relatively normal lives (ironically most of the charges against them were dropped due to FBI malfeasance). When the group is included in histories of the 1960s, it is usually only as an aberration—a final spasm of senseless violence punctuating a decade that somehow went off the rails. We feel very strongly that the real story of the Weather Underground is far more complex and morally ambiguous, and that in this nuanced version of history there are many ideas and questions that can help us better understand society today.

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept 11th especially, this project has taken on an added urgency and importance. In the film, former members of the Weather Underground including Bernardine Dohrn, Mark Rudd and a number of others speak candidly about their own thoughts and experiences, many for the first time ever. What drove the group to embrace violence? How did violence effect their cause? How did it change them? And how do they feel about their actions thirty years later?

The goal of THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND is not so much to give answers but to raise questions. By exploring this controversial subject with depth and balance, we hope to encourage a broad debate of some of the most important issues of our time. What would real social justice look like—not just in America, but throughout the world? What is our responsibility as Americans for the inequalities of globalism? How do we as a society define violence and terrorism? And can violence ever be justified in the pursuit of social change?

These are questions that defy black-and-white notions of right and wrong, good and evil. They evoke the full complexity of human behavior and the subjective nature of modern morality. We have entered a new era in this country since September 11th. We feel very strongly that there must be a real and open discussion about the current terrorism and the issues that it raises if we are to have any hope of creating peace and justice in the future.

It is an odd, and perhaps unfortunate, coincidence that THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND feels so timely. We have been working on the film for almost five years now. When we started the project, the story of the Weather Underground was certainly obscure and perhaps, to many people, it seemed irrelevant in the context of the now happy-seeming late 90s.

We both belong to the post-boomer generation (Sam Green is 36 and Bill Siegel is 40) and had both grown up knowing bits and pieces about the Weather Underground. I think that there was something about the mystique of the group that captured our imagination.

We met in the early 90s while working together as researchers on a documentary series about Muhammad Ali that aired on TNT. We shared a lot of common interests: a passion for research and history, as well as an interest in politics and dissent in this country.

In 1998, we decided to make this documentary. We both felt very strongly that the story of the Weather Underground raised important and provocative questions and issues. And also that it was important history for young people. One of the things that struck us both was that most people over 40 know who the Weather Underground was and have strong opinions about the group — they either think that they were great or that they were terrorists and ruined the Left. On the other hand, it seems that 99 percent of people under 40 have no idea who the Weather Underground was. They've never even heard of the group. This, to us, seemed both puzzling and unfortunate. We feel very strongly that this is important history and that the story offers important insight into the state of the world today.

After diving into the project, we spent more than a year researching the story and locating former members of the Weather Underground, to essentially see if enough of them would talk to us to make this undertaking worthwhile. Since then, we have met with about 70 people who were either members of, or somehow involved with, the WUO, from helping them out to tracking them down.

These include: Many of the key WUO leadership figures, underground members, above ground supporters, Yippies, Black Panthers, White Panthers, SDS activists, journalists and photographers of the day, as well as law enforcement officials. All of these research interviews were done for background information only, and have been immensely helpful to our understanding of this complex story.

Sam Green and Bill Siegel

THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND

INTERVIEWEES (in order of appearance)

Bernardine Dohrn was part of the leadership of the Weather Underground and was considered the figurehead of the organization. She spent the 1970s living underground and was on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted list. Today, Dohrn runs a juvenile justice program at Northwestern University.

Mark Rudd was famous for his role in the 1968 Columbia protests. As part of the Weather Underground's leadership, he lived underground for several years during the 1970s. He now teaches at a junior college in New Mexico.

Brian Flanagan was a member of the Weather Underground. He is currently a bar-owner in New York City.

David Gilbert was a member of the Weather Underground. When the organization dismantled, he joined the Black Liberation Army and plunged deeper into revolutionary violence. Gilbert is currently serving a life sentence at Attica Correctional Facility for his role in a holdup gone awry.

Bill Ayers was a central figure in the Weather Underground. He lived underground for 10 years, which he writes about in his memoir *Fugitive Days*. Ayers is currently a school reform activist and a professor of education at the University of Chicago at Illinois.

Naomi Jaffe was a member of the Weather Underground. She currently lives in Albany, New York and is executive director of a foundation that supports women's activism.

Todd Gitlin was president of Students for a Democratic Society in 1963. He has written extensively on the Weather Underground and the 1960s counterculture. He is a professor of culture, journalism and sociology at New York University.

Laura Whitehorn was a member of the Weather Underground. She currently lives in New York City and is active in a wide range of progressive causes.

Don Strickland is a former FBI agent. As an agent, he was a member of the Weatherman Squad, an FBI bureau that investigated the Weather Underground.

Kathleen Cleaver is best known as the former communications secretary of the Black Panther Party. She is a writer and senior lecturer at Emory University Law School.

THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND

KEY PERSONNEL

Sam Green, director, producer and editor, received his Master's Degree in Journalism from the University of California at Berkeley, where he studied documentary film with acclaimed filmmaker Marlon Riggs. His documentary *The Rainbow Man/John 3:16* premiered at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival and screened at festivals worldwide, winning the Grand Prize at the USA Film Festival in Dallas and Best Documentary awards at the Ann Arbor Film Festival and the New York and Chicago Underground Film Festivals. His most recent documentary *Pie Fight '69* premiered at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, where it won an honorable mention in the shorts category. *Pie Fight '69* won first prize at the Black Maria Film Festival and Best Documentary at the 2000 Chicago Underground Film Festival. Mr. Green currently lives in San Francisco and is an artist in residence at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito.

Bill Siegel, co-director and producer, is a Chicago-based educator and documentary filmmaker. He has worked on a number of documentary films, including *Muhammad Ali: The Whole Story*, *Hoop Dreams* and *One Love*, an upcoming documentary by Leon Gast (*When We Were Kings*). He grew up in Minneapolis, cut his teeth on rock and roll, and is currently the director of school programs for the Great Books Foundation, a non-profit educational organization dedicated to literacy and lifelong learning.

Carrie Lozano, producer, is a Bay Area writer and editor. She studied film at the University of California at Berkeley and has a background in experimental and documentary film.

Andrew Black, director of photography, is an award-winning filmmaker and cinematographer. He has been working on documentary, short and feature films for more than 14 years, and his work has been widely distributed theatrically and on television worldwide. Black's credits include *The PLO* and *Drylongso: Picas Story*.