

Weatherman

Eulogy to SDS

J.R. Kennedy

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Politically speaking, Chicago is a very heavy city, and, as it begins to fall apart and crumble under the weight of its own contradictions, it seems to breed repression and conspiracy.

As you know by now, another event was recently added to that city's ever-growing list of political confrontations when twelve national leaders of Weatherman SDS were indicted on federal conspiracy charges for "crossing state lines with intent to incite a riot."

Incredible as it may have seemed, things did get worse as Judge Julius Hoffman, the seventy-two year-old grey, senile, reactionary was actually selected once again to execute another railroaded conspiracy trial of white Amerikan radicals. As before, the scene for this political inquisition will be in Hoffman's courtroom, a luminated "neon oven" filled with riot-police on the twenty-third floor of the Federal Building in downtown Chicago.

U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell himself announced the twelve indictments that emerged from charges filed against the Weathermen. The arrests followed last October's four-day rampage that escalated into pitched battles with police lines, window trashing and widespread vandalism during the SDS National Action that was billed to "bring the war home" to the streets of Chicago.

After Mitchell announced the indictments, bench warrants for the arrests of Mark Rudd, Bill Ayers, and Jeff Jones were issued charging them with "unlawful flight to avoid prosecution." None of the twelve Weatherman cadre that were indicted have shown up in Chicago for any court appearances so far.

The three Weathermen, Rudd, Ayers, and Jones, became national officers of SDS at last June's convention. The leadership of the Weatherman faction then controlled the SDS national office. Since they rejected most parts of all other SDS political lines, they eventually broke with, or drifted from, the organization; developed much more militant tactics; and identified strategically with secretive under-ground work.

Aside from those three SDS leaders, the other nine Weathermen that were indicted include: Bernadine Dohrn, John "JJ" Jacobs, Terry Robbins, Mike Spiegel, Linda Evans, Howie Machtinger, Judy Oark, Larry Weiss, and Kathy Boudin. Fugitive warrants for "unlawful flight" have also been issued for all of these Weathermen. Kathy Boudin is already being sought by New York City Police and by the FBI who connect her with the "bomb factory" explosion March 8th in a Greenwich Village townhouse.

The sweeping federal conspiracy indictment went on to name twenty-eight other Weathermen as "co-conspirators" in the October police confrontations. Many of these "conspirators" are either from the Detroit area or were active here during the last year.

According to the legal crap, "co-conspirators" are not on trial as defendants, but, since none of the twelve individuals indicted as conspirators intend to show for the trial, if I were among the twenty-eight named as co-conspirators, I would not stay around and wait for them to decide to find twelve new "conspirators" to prosecute.

Among the “co-conspirators” from Detroit Weatherman (Motor City SDS) were: Anne Hathaway, Dave Chase, John Pilkington, Jim Mellen?, Mark Laventer, Lynn Garvin, Karen Lattimer, and Sam Karp.

Others from the list of twenty-eight “co-conspirators” include: Johnny Lerner, Dianne Donghi, Courtney Espoito, Celeste McCullough, Chip Marshall, Jeff Melish, Corky Benedict, Howard Emmer, Mathew Flanagan, Roberta Smith, Peter Clapp, Lenore Kalom, John Butney, Brian McQuerry, David Millstone, Karen Daenzer, Susan Stern. Also named were Ted Gold (New York) and Diana Oughton (Detroit) who were both killed recently in that Greenwich Village blast.

Aside from the obvious political implications, one of the more significant aspects of these latest indictments is that they signal the final collapse of SDS as a national organization.

The Federal government, disturbed by the rising tide of militancy among white radicals, is using the “anti-riot-act” as a means of destroying the Weatherman organization. Most of the twelve Weathermen indicted are members of the leadership collective of Weatherman — known as the Weather Bureau. The government openly admits that they are aiming their attack on this Weatherman leadership.

Few Weathermen in primary or secondary leadership positions have been seen in public since the December, 1969 “War Council” national convention in Flint. Unlike most political trials so far, the Weathermen have no intention of standing trial. They have rejected the notion that in their particular situation a public trial would be advantageous.

They seriously doubt the effectiveness of legal-political defense, and also repudiate the concept that a public-trial-media-assault could raise the issues and educate people to political repression. They are also convinced that as Weathermen, who have heavy critics even on the New Left, they would be quickly railroaded and convicted by the courts without even having time to present any political issues.

Although there are some obvious differences, this new “conspiracy” indictment is, in political content as well as in legal form, a duplicate of the federal charges brought against the “Conspiracy Eight” in their five month trial which recently ended in Chicago. At that trial, the initial test for the new federal conspiracy law, Black Panther Bobby Seal, whose case was severed from the group to be tried separately, was also sentenced to four years in prison for “contempt” of court by Judge Julius Hoffman.

The remaining “Conspiracy Seven” were found “not guilty” of the conspiracy charge, but this became objectively meaningless as all seven defendants received prison sentences for contempt, and five were convicted of individual acts of incitement. The object of a conspiracy law is legalized repression. The intent is to imprison national radical leaders. The details of the verdicts don’t really matter.

Though the straight media claims that Judge Hoffman’s selection for the new trial was a matter of chance in a drawing, no one was really shocked by it. In the long run, however, this too makes little real difference. The trials, the judge, the city all add up in many ways.

This country is moving rapidly to the right, toward fascism and all the liberal indignation in the world about the Constitution and “due process” and freedom of speech and assembly, will not stop that motion. Liberal lawyers, politicians, and professionals are not expected to come to the aid of the Weathermen. Of course, they did for the “Conspiracy Eight” and it did not effect those verdicts.

A year and a half ago Students for a Democratic Society was a mass based organization with a membership near 70,000. In the wake of the series of Weatherman disasters an analysis of the demise of that organization is badly needed. A lot of criticism, though general and sketchy, was leveled at SDS following last year’s national conventions in Austin, Texas in late March, and in Chicago last June.

These criticisms, however, were never clearly addressed to a mass audience, and what discussion there was only vaguely centered on the problems of elitism in the National Office and around the isolationistic tendencies of the Weatherman proposal. But, it was the splits and factionalism that set the pattern for the current death of the entire organization.

The Revolutionary Youth Movement (R YM) statement, the “Weatherman Proposal,” the expulsion of the Progressive Labor Party (PL), and the RYM-2 statement, all products of those conventions, did not generate a mass understanding or insight into the future fate of SDS. They all, in fact, seemed as if they would strengthen the organization.

They were aimed at rejecting the narrow, parochial, “student power” concepts and aimed toward building a mass movement that strove to reach out and draw the connections between university authoritarianism with its sprawling alienating, non-education and the international crises of capitalism and imperialism. The trends in the proposals further moved toward relating to a black revolutionary vanguard, to black nationalism, and to third world liberation. The statements also steered radical activism toward concentration on problems of the “dropped out and forced out” youth.

Yet, something went wrong. The content of the SDS political line following those conventions and statements was heavier and more revolutionary, but the form by which the changes were made was manipulative and autocratic. Lacking practicing internal democracy, the rank and file membership were not involved in creating those changes.

More importantly, the fact that the National Office was isolated from the local members in terms of action co-ordination and clear communication, led to serious disunity. The regular membership, the regional leadership, and even the secondary leadership were not involved in setting up programs for execution, nor further interpretation, of those changes.

Despite rank and file caucus revolts, the National Office, then controlled by writers of the Weatherman Proposal, moved like an autocratic bureaucracy and would not yield. The National Office would periodically dispatch the latest political line and local collectives would either accept it in a non-struggle way, or ignore it.

Throughout the country during the SDS “summer project,” evidences of serious misinterpretation began to crop up. Unfortunately, there was no mechanism through which to articulate wide-spread feelings that the National Office was making disastrous errors. Leadership positions in SDS began to evolve even more deeply into strange political in-crowd games that reflected back, despite the rhetorical changes in political line, to the days of petty bourgeois student status.

In the fall, organization for the October National SDS Action in Chicago began and the conflicts in analysis began to crystallize. The Weatherman propaganda was predicting that thousands of heavy street kids would join thousands of rank-and-file members and attack Chicago, like a “Red Army” that would “trash Pig City,” liberate the schools and smash the jails. What actually happened was that a scarce 600 to 800 dedicated Weathermen and a handful of other radicals arrived in Chicago and for four days valiantly and in some cases suicidally fought the Chicago pigs in the streets.

They had brought no new people into the organization. They had, in fact, lost vast portions of their membership, and almost half of the Weathermen that came were arrested. Over 280 members were arrested and charged with everything from mob action to assaulting a police officer, to attempted murder.

After the confusion had settled down, the rest of the movement people began to catch on to what had happened. The constructive criticism that had been desperately needed for months now came in volume in the form of derision and condemnation. The underground media leaped at the chance to run negative polemics against isolated violence.

This criticism, for the most part, was not revolutionary criticism that dealt with the causes of the failure or criticism that offered alternatives. It was reactionary rhetoric that missed the issues and ignored the goals. The entire method used to deal with the issue only served to further isolate the Weathermen and force them into a defensive mentality.

What would the criticism have been had 20,000 people showed up and scored realistic victories? The Weathermen were trying to “raise the level of struggle” in anti-imperialist activities. They wanted white Amerikan radicals to break out more than ever before and launch an aggressive offensive against the government.

If traditional forms of protest and activism become so common that the police and the government can contain and accept them, then they are useless. Protest is valid only if it poses a threat and can affect “business as usual.” This was the Weatherman theory, valid in most ways, but in practice they failed to mobilize the numbers needed to make it happen.

Revolutionary violence is not wrong. Violence, unlike any other radical activity, only becomes wrong when it is misdirected, poorly organized, or suicidal. On this point, the Weathermen made several incredible

errors. Errors that grew out of the arrogant elitist leadership of the organization, and out of an analysis that ignored vast segments of the population including most of the working class.

The propaganda and organization were incorrectly done. They assumed that kids would respond to their contrived street gang rhetoric and exaggeration about smashing schools and offing pigs. Neither the young street people nor the politicians believed them. The leadership knew before Chicago that they didn't have that mass base, but went ahead with the offensive anyway. That's when it became suicidal. Leadership led 800 kids into a dead-end confrontation with police. The police were armed, trained, and outnumbered the Weathermen four to one.

The violence was mis-directed? it concluded that the pigs and bank windows were the final enemy. It lacked political depth. The analysis was a desperate cop-out. It mistook the stage that the revolution in Amerika is at. Organization and education are currently the primary functions of white Amerikan radicals. Further, the Weatherman analysis rejected wholesale the entire working-class as hopeless honkies. It side-stepped the cardinal rule of Marxism that revolution in the capitalist era must come from the proletariat—not from middle-class anger.

The Weathermen were impatient and frustrated. Youth street violence should be seen for what it is. It is not an end in itself. It is not a total movement, but a part. To even be a part, youth violence must be organized effectively and directed in a revolutionary way that relates to a mass movement on all levels. On a day to day basis, youth must be a political force that is run with internal democracy and void of bourgeois elitism.

The Weatherman Cadre, frustrated over their own inability to organize a mass based revolutionary youth movement, carried that anxiety to the "War Council" at the Flint National Convention. Unable to confront their own failures, the Weather Bureau chose to further isolate themselves. In their addresses to dwindling crowds and familiar faces they began to completely lose touch with political reality.

They gave up all pretensions of organizing a mass base. Not even youth could be won to their position. They gave up all other movement involvements and elected to zone out. They dissolved as an organization and SDS was over. They exchanged real political struggle for individualistic machismo.

Two months ago there were maybe 200 Weathermen left. The largest mass-based revolutionary movement in the U.S. has now ceased to exist as a visible movement force. Little was known about the real product of the Flint "War Council" and the extent to which the bizarre line had moved. This was made clear on March 8 when the dynamite-bomb explosion shattered a West 11th street townhouse in New York and three Weathermen were killed.

Sabotage or bombing is at best a part of a long term revolutionary struggle. It is never a whole, never a program. It is always subordinate to a mass movement. Even when its object is education, it must be coordinated and confined within an over-all strategy.

They had, as a group, made the same errors. They had abstracted themselves from the movement as a whole. They had taken their actions out of a realistic context and instead acted out of personal frustration and impotence. Unable to cope with external political reality, the Weathermen expended vast amounts of energies on useless internal struggle.

The Weathermen have not only failed, but have been divisive and destructive to themselves and to the movement. Once again, however, the criticism has gone too far. It has come from the Right. The critics have taken the easy way out and attacked the organization and the individuals within it. They have ignored the objective reality of the actions. Why bother to criticize an organization that has ceased to exist? The effect and the messages are all that is important.

The error was not the bombings; the error was engaging in bombing exclusively. They carried out their activities at the expense of the existing movement by giving the government an excuse to bring new forms of repression down against those other segments, and further, perpetuated their tactics at the price of their own movement which they destroyed.

Perhaps they were able to raise the issues. Perhaps the effect of the bombing and sabotage was educational, and they were able to objectively function as revolutionaries. Street fighting, trials, conspiracy,

bombs, death, indictment, and disappearance all spell the end of a 70,000 member radical movement, the end of SDS.

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