# History of the *Fifth Estate*

### Part I: The Early Years

Peter Werbe

1996

"The Fifth Estate supports the cause of revolution everywhere."

—FBI Report

In my estimation, the above twelve-word summary by the nation's secret police serves adequately as an abbreviated history of this paper on the occasion of its 30th anniversary.

However, it will definitely not satisfy my friends and comrades on the FE staff who urged me on our 20th and 25th anniversaries to write a comprehensive account of the newspaper's long existence as a radical publication.

It is not due to an inflated sense of self-importance that people feel the story should be recounted, but rather because the history of this paper mirrored a period of large-scale rebellion in its early years and continues today to give expression to a body of ideas which find little exposure elsewhere.

## Origins of the *Fifth Estate*

The FE was started by Harvey Ovshinsky, a 17-year-old Detroiter who had previously self-published what was then called a fanzine in high school. After visiting California in 1965 and spending a summer working on the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the first of what was to be dubbed the underground press, he returned to Detroit filled with enthusiasm for a similar effort here. Our founder also brought back the title for his paper, named after a coffee house he frequented on Sunset Strip. The owner later threatened to sue The Fifth Estate for appropriating its name from his shop.

Ovshinsky assembled a staff of his siblings and a few friends at his parents' suburban home, and borrowed money from his father to pay the printer. The inaugural issue of the *Fifth Estate*, dated Nov. 19, 1965, proudly announced on its masthead that it was "Detroit's New Progressive Biweekly Newspaper." It was produced on a portable typewriter, taking advantage of the so-called "off-set printing-revolution," which meant anyone who could type and had scissors and glue, could publish a newspaper. Previously, typographic technology meant only those with specialized equipment or a goodly amount of money could see their views in print.

The first issue featured a critical review of a Bob Dylan non-acoustic concert, [1] a "borrowed" Jules Feiffer cartoon, a "hip" events calendar, and an announcement of a March on Washington to end the war in Vietnam. The finished product was passed out to friends and concertgoers. When I received a copy of the first edition at a University of Detroit Mr. Bo blues concert, I was amazed that a paper with radical content could be produced by young people like myself.

Such a publishing venture doesn't seem so out of the ordinary today, but 30 years ago, with the exception of a few newspapers like New York City's Village Voice, little similar to this was being printed anywhere. The mainstream press didn't review Dylan, or publish calendars (certainly not for poetry readings and the like), and articles critical of the growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam was unheard of' except in a few socialist papers.

# THE FIFTH ESTATE

dedicated to norman t. morrison


THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

THE FBI AND U of M

THE C.I.A. AND VIETNAM

REPORT FROM NATCHEZ, MISS.


DETROIT'S NEW UNDERGROUND BI-WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

November 19 - December 2

ISSUE No. 1

10¢


# Bob Dylan; In Memoriam

Detroit took its first glimpse at the "new" Bob Dylan in his concert at the Masonic temple on Sat. 24. The first half of the spectacle was the traditional Dylan. Following the intermission, the audience was confronted by Dylan wielding an electric guitar, surrounded by his rock & roll combo.

The first song, "Tombstone Blues", resulted in cries of "We want Dylan!" to which he replied,"Well, what'd you come to see? After a few unfavorable responses he hit a snag, he seemed himself at the piano and sang, "Ballad of a Thin Man." The chorus let "There's something' goin' on up here but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" The audience remained quiet for the remainder of the concert.

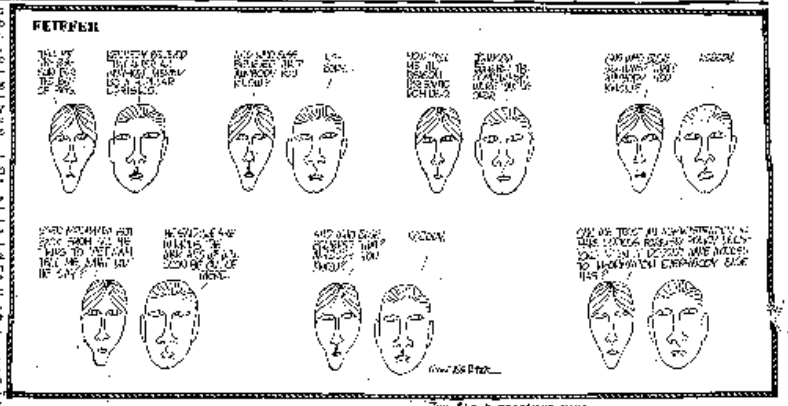
When the concert ended, those who had come responding the "new" Dylan were enlightened and, offended. Others merely shrugged their shoulders and left the auditorium. For most of the audience, the image of Bob Dylan, hero of young America, was crushed.

Detroit's reaction was not so radical or unusual. Dylan has met the same response throughout the United States.

The question which remains in the minds of many is simply "Why?" "Why the change?" Dylan states, "I don't have to prove anything to anyone. That's people who dig me know where I'm at — I don't have to come on to them. I'm not a bathroom singer," Regarding those who dislike the rock & roll, he states, "I'm not interested in them. I'm not selling and singing for anybody. I'm not the truth. Yes, really, I don't care what people say. I don't have what they want other people to be."

Why Bob Dylan feels he can "make it" in rock & roll, Perhaps he can...

STEVE SIMONS




## JOE HILL; A TRIBUTE

Labor History students of Wayne State University is commemorating the 50th anniversary of the execution of Joe Hill. America's most famous "Rabble and the Man Who Never Died."

The program will be held at 8 p.m. Friday November 19, in the MSU McGregor Memorial Conference Theatre, Second at Perry, and will highlight Hill's life in "living newspaper style." Further details about the event can be obtained by calling the University Archives office at TE 3-1400.

## ACLU BLASTS DRAFT AS PUNISHMENT

The American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan (ACLU) has denounced the announced intent of Colonel Arthur A. Holmes, state Selective Service Director to use the Selective Service Act "as a device to punish dissent".

Colonel Holmes was reported earlier as calling for "the immediate induction" of Vietnam war protestors who had violated Selective Service regulations or had caused any interruption of processes.

Mollena G'Lane, Chairman of ACLU of Michigan, commented:

"Until now, no one in any position of responsibility in the government has suggested that the Selective Service Act may be used as a device to punish dissent. If young men who disagree with the government's policy in Vietnam may be singled out for discriminatory application of the Act today, who can say how the threat may be used to dragoon youth into conformity tomorrow?

"The selective service system, which places powers in the hands of government administrators must, as a matter of law, treat all who come within its scope fairly and uniformly on the basis of reasonable classifications weakly applied. The system is to be allowed to deviate from these limitations, we have placed the lives and liberties of a sizeable portion of the population of the United States at the unbridled whim of what this or that draft board or functionary considers the national interest to require.

"If any person in the course of his protest on the subject of Vietnam or any other matter of public concern transgresses the law, he may obviously properly be made to answer in a court of law for his act and, if found guilty, be punished in accordance with the law. The Selective Service Act lends itself from provisions carrying criminal penalties which, however, are to be enforced by a court, not a single administrative officer."

# NEW LEFT

A group has formed calling itself the Detroit Circle. Its purpose is to fill the void that exists among those who consider themselves part of the independent left. One of its spokesmen said this about the organization: "There is a need for meaningful, evaluating the old ones, and fresh discussion among us who reject both capitalism and any form. There is a need for the youth and the adults of this city not only to discuss in depth new concepts, but to re-evaluate old ones. There is a need to have a forum for the community as a whole so that others who are continuing to creative thinking can be heard-people like Hal Draper, Erich Fromm, etc. We ought to get up a dialogue with the Detroit liberal and radical community with the purpose of helping, and even, when necessary, initiating actions concerning the burning issues of peace and civil rights."

The first meetings were enthusiastic ly received. The group plans to meet every two weeks. Information concerning the next meeting,write to: TEL FIFTH ESTATE PO Box 363, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

## PRISON NOTES

NATCHEZ, MISS.- Within the last month, more than 900 people have been arrested in the city of Natchez, Mississippi. Although most of the arrests received wide circulation, the brutality and the indignities which the prisoners were forced to endure during their stay in Parchman State Penitentiary has continued to be kept secret. However,with the release of some of the arrested, the story is finally getting out. What follows is the report by two of those recently released:

James Merson Johnson, twenty-year old Alcorn College junior,states that upon arrival at Parchman, he was forced to disrobe and to allow his private parts to be examined by a police officer. Johnson is one who takes pride in his body, weighing over 200 pounds.

Phil Lecinsky, 21 year old white SNCC volunteer from Seattle, Washington gave this report of his arrest: "After our arrival at Parchman, we were admitted to the various security buildings where we were stripped of all our clothing. Each of were forced to swallow approximately eight ounces of laxatives. Makes me wore


(continued on page 3)


## DISCREDIT WHO?

WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 (AP)-- Senator Stephen M. Young, Democrat from Ohio, said Thursday that he has requested that the Central Intelligence Agency fired persons to discredit us Vietcong and blacklist Communists in Vietnam by committing atrocities.

The C.I.A. and Representative Cornelius E. Gallagher, Democrat of New Jersey, said it was untrue.

Thursday night Senator Young denied having said that the report came from a C.I.A. man, but he said that he got it from an American military officer whom he did not name.

Nevertheless, Mr. Young said, "I maintained through the C.I.A. today that it employed some South Vietnamese mercenaries to pose as Vietcong—and I take a dim view of that."

Mr. Young, who recently returned from Vietnam, had at first said he would name that C.I.A. agent told him the C.I.A. hired South Vietnamese who dressed as Vietcong, then committed such acts as killing men and raping women.

Mr. Young, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he would ask that group to investigate C.I.A. activities. Mr. Gallagher has also recently visited South Vietnam.

NOTE: The above article is reprinted exactly as it appeared on Friday, October 28th in The New York Times. Because of reproduction difficulties, the article has been retyped. Nothing has been changed or edited.

## Saved from an Early Extinction

The fledgling FE stumbled along for a few issues, (changing its self-description by the second issue to "The Voice of Liberal Detroit") covering the emerging alternative arts, culture, and political scene. [2] But in early 1966, after Ovshinsky moved the paper's office from his parents' basement to a mid-town Detroit storefront near Wayne State University, it became almost a one-man operation. The move, however, saved the paper from an early extinction when it was quickly discovered by young activists from the newly-formed Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam, John Sinclair's Artist Workshop, and others in what was a bohemian, arts, radical politics, student, youth ghetto. Overnight the paper's office became a bustling center of writers, photographers, and artists, all anxious to contribute their efforts.

As the anti-war, civil rights, hippie, New Left and alternative culture movements grew in Detroit, so did the paper. Our pages became-a forum for the new and rebellious ideas that characterized the era. By late 1966, the FE relocated to a high-visibility, hippie hang-out area known as Plum Street where we opened a book store above our offices. The early paper's content was a mix of articles about psychedelic drugs, the anti-war movement, rock and roll, the alternative culture, and anything that was anti-authority.

## Denouncing "the Pigs"

Though the 1960s have received a bad name in some quarters for hyperbole in writing and excess in action, they are exactly what attracted me to it. When I look back through crumbling early issues of the FE, with their colorful psychedelic artwork, articles denouncing "The Man" and "the pigs" and "Amerikkka," and photos of exuberant young people holding up clenched fists or dancing with abandon at a "Love-In," much of the writing and ideas still look good to me even after the passage of a generation.

The nation-wide underground press movement was enormous in scope, with at least 500 regularly appearing tabloids, and perhaps thousands more which disappeared after only an issue or two. The FE office's mimeograph machine was used by numerous high school, civil rights and anti-war groups, dissident union caucuses, and even GIs, to print newsletters. To the horror of their officers, active-duty GIs circulated hundreds of anti-war papers and newsletters at U.S. bases, on ships, and even in Vietnam.

Liberation News Service in New York City sent out twice-weekly news packets with reports of protests and features from around the world including much from the North Vietnamese side of the war. The Underground Press Syndicate was established to coordinate connections between the papers and promote their distribution. It was estimated the combined weekly circulation of the alternative papers was two million.

On FE publication day, thousands of papers were distributed to local stores by a collective specializing in the distribution of radical periodicals. Hundreds were mailed to GIs in Vietnam who apparently were not offended by either our call for the victory of their enemy in the field, or for them to mutiny as a way to end the war. Soldiers often wrote to tell of how our papers were passed along from unit to unit throughout the war zone or in the U.S.

Also, a small army of street sellers would assemble at our offices to grab a bundle of papers for resale at demos, concerts and shopping malls. The cover price was 15 cents and the sellers kept a nickel. We had to fight constant battles with cops, military brass, security guards, principals, and foremen for the right to distribute our paper without harassment. Later, 80 FE coin boxes were installed across the city.

## Making Love and Revolution

The early paper reflected the lives of people who thought either the Age of Aquarius or World Revolution (or both) was at hand, and who believed that we were a vital part of it. Maybe this sounds like youthful foolishness today, but in the 1960s the empire appeared to be unraveling at home and abroad. We saw ourselves at once as the allies of Third World guerrilla movements which were assaulting U.S. foreign bastions, and as the leading expression of revolution at home, "within the belly of the beast," as we glamorized it in those days.

To us, making love and revolution to the sounds of the MC5, the Stooges, and other seminal Detroit rock bands was fun as well as a serious calling. Add the entire psychedelic experience and we were a long way from the lifestyles of either our parents or from the last generation of revolutionaries who had their origins in the 1930s labor movement.


The edge of "fun" began to diminish, however, with the advent of events such as the massive 1967 Detroit uprising/riot (the FE offices were tear gassed by the National Guard) and other urban black insurgencies, the police rampage at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention, the escalation of the U.S. war against the civilian population of Vietnam and revelations of massacres like that at My Lai, the domestic counter-insurgency murders of Black Panther Party members, the assassinations of Martin Luther King (to halt his potential for labor organizing and antiwar opposition) and Bobby Kennedy (who would have beat Nixon handily in the 1968 elections and probably ended the Vietnam war), the Tet Offensive, the murder of the Kent and Jackson State students, and the 1970 declaration of martial law in Canada to combat Quebecois separatists. These and other similar events came down on us child revolutionaries with an intensity we hadn't anticipated.

We suddenly realized that the Empire we had characterized as "a house of cards" was fighting back tenaciously and with deadly force. Our publishing efforts reflected this change. There was less "fun" and more "struggle" in

our pages. We became a weekly with a circulation of 15 to 20,000; strident calls for revolution became standard fare on our covers with frequent images of armed Black Panthers or Viet Cong guerrillas. By 1969, our founder, feeling increasingly isolated by the radical fervor of the staff, quit the paper following his disagreement with a vote to print a front cover taken from a Cuban poster featuring an array of guns and the quintessential one-word slogan of revolutionary impatience, "NOW!," in six-inch letters.

During that period, FE staff members traveled to North Vietnam, Cambodia and Cuba to meet with the "enemy" in a show of solidarity with those at the forefront of combating "U.S. Imperialism." Although we may have exhibited a large degree of naiveté about the nature of the Stalinist regimes we glorified, the fact that young people in their teens and twenties took on the tasks of internal opposition to a monstrous war machine still seems admirable to me.

## End of the 1960s

Every important social and political current of the '60s found expression in the pages of the *Fifth Estate.* The anti-war, civil rights, gay, feminist, youth and labor struggles, were cumulatively referred to as The Movement. In retrospect, it seems incredible that the rug could have been pulled out so quickly from under a social phenomenon of such breadth and depth. Although the reasons for the dissolution of the movements of that era and the collapse of the underground papers are complex, I would date the watershed event as the 1972 elections to mark the official end of the "'60s."

The emergence of the 1970s "Me Generation" and the Reagan years began with the massive defeat of presidential "peace candidate," George McGovern, and the landslide re-election of the war criminal, Nixon. Our realization that the American voting public was unwilling to elect a Democrat with a barely tepid anti-war platform, and instead chose to return to office the person responsible for the mass slaughter in Vietnam, was a blow from which the anti-war movement and the New Left never recovered.

The dreaded Nixon, who had won office by less than a percentage point four years previous, had actually improved his popularity despite all the returning body bags and illegal bombings of North Vietnam and Cambodia. Also, the ending of the hated draft and the Vietnamization of the war began to erode public support for The Movement which had become increasingly more radical in its beliefs and actions.

Those at the core of the resistance and publishing projects began to burn out. By 1972, the FE had resumed its twice-monthly schedule after appearing weekly for almost a year—a schedule, which combined with our intense political work, had nearly destroyed our brains and bodies. For five or six years, many of us had literally done nothing else night and day other than movement work, never taking a vacation, rarely even a trip to the movies. (People were dying in Vietnam; how could one justify "entertainment?")

Relentless contestation—unending rounds of meetings, demonstrations, rallies, occupations, deadlines, conferences, arrests, courts and the like—took its toll. [3] Although these activities contained the positive moments of an oppositional movement (being at a march with a million people or with thousands of young men burning their draft cards is indeed a rich and memorable experience), they were also emotionally grueling.

People throughout the movement began bailing out. Jobs, families, gurus, rural communes, even leninist sects, plus a host of other activities were sought to provide some respite from years of relentless revolutionary agitation. Alternative papers across the country began folding at a rapid rate as internal disputes, lack of purpose, financial problems and official repression took its toll. By 1975 Liberation News Service and the Underground Press Syndicate had disappeared and all but a few radical publications ceased publishing within a very short period.

In 1974, I joined the exodus, leaving the paper after eight years, for a combination of the above reasons (with the exception of a guru and leninism). Rather than endure what one staffer suggested would be a "dignified death," the remaining FE members began thrashing about for a new identity and took on a fortunately short-lived perspective of labor militancy influenced by the International Socialist group before managing a burst of energy in what was to be a precursor to the many fashionable alternative arts and political weeklies that exist today. For about a year the FE was a lively and innovative bi-weekly publication, both editorially and in its design.

## Internal Contradictions

Soon, numerous internal contradictions began to crash in on the paper, and by 1975 it was almost terminal, deeply in debt to printers and suppliers, almost devoid of staff following several serious personality clashes, and dependent upon commercial advertising including X-rated movies and cigarette ads for revenue and salaries. The remnants of the staff printed a notice in the paper that they would soon close up shop unless they received an influx of new participants.

A number of us, including several other former staffers and friends, who were influenced by the writings of Fredy Perlman, Jacques Camatte, Jean Baudrillard, council and left communists, and the Situationists, answered the call. Eleven of us had constituted ourselves as the Eat the Rich Gang and undertook a number of projects in 1974 through '75, including publishing Wildcat!, and The Irrational in Politics at the Detroit Print Coop, producing a number of Fifth Estate inserts, setting up study groups, as well as some sabotage activity and radical pranks.

When our group arrived at the *Fifth Estate* office, the three remaining staffers were less than enthusiastic about us rejoining the paper. But, by an 11 to 3 vote, we (the new staff) decided to become a monthly, to no longer accept ads (they were the voice of capital, we said), and to stop paying salaries. The three holdovers were horrified and left after a few issues.

Unlike those remainders of the '60s who devolved into dreary workerism or cynicism, we were enthusiastic about the ideas we had discovered and were happy to discard Marx, Lenin, political parties, unions and all of the rest of what the left held dear. [4] In my estimation, the readiness on our part to adopt new and challenging analyses of what constituted revolutionary activity is what accounts for our maintaining one of the few newspapers to survive the 1960s.

Although the University of Michigan's Labadie Collection of libertarian and radical materials lists us as the oldest continually publishing anarchist paper in American history, when we set out on our present course in Summer 1975, we had no idea any anarchists had survived the 1930s, nor did we identify ourselves as such. We were quite surprised to discover a small, but thriving anarchist movement whose activity was primarily confined to publishing journals.

We were soon contacted by a group of older comrades who were the remaining participants of the '20s and '30s anarchist movements with whom we established cordial and rewarding relationships. These stalwarts of another era have almost all passed from the scene, but their memory as committed, militant, unswerving proponents of "The Ideal" remains with us as a model of resistance and vision.

Articles in the new monthly Fifth Estate were based on the ultra-left perspectives gleaned from our readings of Camatte, Jean Baudrillard, the Situationists, Wilhelm Reich and others. Other perspectives developed from exciting discussions hosted by Fredy and Lorraine Perlman at their home where we furiously debated and discussed ideas contained in the books and pamphlets published at a rapid pace by Black & Red. [5]

By 1980, we decided the dictum, "All isms are wasisms," was correct and began extending the anti-authoritarian critique beyond the obvious oppression of capitalism and the state to uncover deeper roots of the repression of the human spirit and the biosphere. This led us to the positions often characterized as anti-technology and anti-civilization which this paper is best known for advocating.

Writing the last two sentences makes me realize this may be a good place to end Part I of this history. Our story from 1975 to the present is much more difficult to relate quickly and simply since it involves the development of complex ideas as well as events. Also, in a sense, we're still in the midst of it.

The rest of the story will be told in a future installment.

## Footnotes

1. Dylan's use of amplified instruments was very controversial at the time since he was considered a folk artist, not a rocker, who backed himself with only acoustic guitar and harmonica. When he began his second set at Detroit's Masonic Temple with a full rock band including guitar great, Mike Bloomfield, a portion of the audience

began chanting, 'We want Dylan," and a handful walked out. Laconic as always, Dylan responded from the stage, 'Who'd ya come to see?"

2. At some point in the '70s, our definite article, "the," literally fell off the layout when we adopted our current masthead. (The one on this cover from the '60s contains the "the.") This deletion caused the Post Office to list us as *Fifth Estate* which is how many readers refer to us as well.

3. Many underground papers, including this one, had become dependent on ad revenue from record companies who correctly saw our publications as the best venue for tapping into the emerging youth culture. However, as mainstream media got "hipper," and rock papers, such as Rolling Stone, more corporate, the radical press was left high and dry with ads falling off to almost nothing.

4. In 1974, The Eat the Rich Gang helped organize a successful demonstration against an assemblage of Detroit's wealthy and distributed a cookbook we had produced for the event entitled, "To Serve The Rich." It contained recipes calling for human ingredients and included dining on Split Priest Soup, Rocky Mt. Oysters Rockefeller, a Hearst Patty, and others named after long gone politicians and corporate heads.

A disdainful Marxist we knew advised us we'd have better spent our time on a pamphlet about socialism. "Socialism is about work," he sternly reprimanded us. "I thought it was about ecstasy," I said. "No," he assured me. We took him at his word and looked elsewhere for a political philosophy.

5. Lorraine Perlman's memoirs of Fredy, Having Little, Being Much is an excellent resource for an understanding of this period. Also, FE back issues contain the ideas which are the wellspring of our current publishing efforts and the original form is certainly superior to their being summarized. Also, Bob Hippler's essay, "Fast Times in the Motor city," in Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, edited by Ken Wachsberger (available from FE books, $25) is a good account of our first ten years.

## Sidebar: What Does "Fifth Estate" Mean?

People always ask about the origin of the paper's odd name. It is odd, and for our purposes over the last twenty years, an unfortunate one. The title refers to the three powerful French estates at the time of the 1789 revolution—the aristocracy, clergy, and common people. A wag in the 1920s quipped that the popular press exercised such power over public opinion, it was literally a fourth estate—so, apparently the fifth is one up on the fourth.

So, we've been saddled with a terribly dumb name for three decades which seems all the worse in later years since the quantification of life is nothing we are fond of and we oppose estates of any sort. Although we've often considered changing the title, it seems more trouble than it's worth, particularly since we still encounter people who remember us fondly from the '60s and are glad we are "still keeping the faith." Also, the name signifies a continuity we don't want to lose.


Peter Werbe
History of the *Fifth Estate*
Part I: The Early Years
1996

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/347-spring-1996/history-of-the-fifth-estate
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