

Whither the Underground?

Film review

Bill Boyer

2003

The rather quiet release of “The Weather Underground,” the new documentary of this late 1960s bomb-toting, clandestine splinter group, presents us with a fascinatingly decisive (and divisive) historical moment, a collision within call-and-response activism still relevant today. This is simply an inspiring film, even if much of the Weathermen’s more repulsive politics remains hidden in the smoke of their detonations.

Most Weather alumni are still living, and some are still quite active. The interspersed fresh interviews of Mark Rudd, Bill Ayers, Bernadine Dohrn, Brian Flanagan, Naomi Jaffe, David Gilbert and even Todd Gitlin, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) co-founder (and major sellout within the group) are surprisingly understated and never uninteresting. The inspired directors, Sam Green and Bill Seigel, do commit various sins of omission, beginning with a hasty gloss-over of the massive police riots surrounding Chicago’s 1968 Democratic Convention. They prefer to jump off from Chicago 1969, where the painfully outnumbered and outgunned Weathermen lost their street clashes with cops in the shortened “Days Of Rage” fiasco. These Battle of Chicago defeats convinced the male-dominated Weathermen to specialize in covert demolitions, eluding law enforcement, and generally repelling other activists and would-be allies. Still, their timely, methodical bombings of mostly symbolic government buildings, including an astonishing blast from a White House bathroom, offered powerful reactions to a succession of announced atrocities, such as the murder of Black Panther Fred Hampton, the My Lai massacre, the invasion of Cambodia, and the Kent State shootings. Amazingly, their dozens, some would claim hundreds of explosions, always avoided casualties—except for the tragedy of three who accidentally blew themselves up in a Greenwich Village townhouse.

Panther leader Hampton, soon to be slain in a brutal COINTELPRO raid, eerily earns the film’s best laughs with poignant remarks of the Weathermen as bulls-eye targets for the FBI. Despite the overwhelming sexual appeal of these youthful renegades, one may notice how the Weather Underground exacerbated and exploited the split within SDS (and related organizations), ultimately to the probable delight of the FBI and Nixon administrations. Yet, what really carries the film—the relentless onslaught of unlimited Vietnam horrors clashing with the limits of domestic protest—effectively captures a late sixties desperation missing in even such better-known classics as the quasi-documentary *Medium Cool*.

Somehow, this “little picture” thankfully digs deeper than say, the dated “War At Home,” and although the ending understandably wanes with the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the resurging activism from the early 1980s onward is better left for other storytellers anyway. The film’s central debate over what constitutes necessary force still plays out across America, and not just with radical groups like the Earth Liberation Front. At the very least, *The Weather Underground* shows how dubious bomb making can eventually lead to remarkable filmmaking.

P.S. Look fast for the unexplained appearances of Dustin Hoffman and Peter Werbe.

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