

Debates of the Weather Underground:
Defining the Role of the White Revolutionary

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In one of the final publications from the Weather Underground Organization, Weather¹ asked its readers, “Can we overcome the small points that divide us? Can we come together to confront the enemy? Can we build a revolutionary practice firmly rooted among the masses of people? Can we transform our lives in order to play our part in the developing storm?”² The members that made up Weather struggled with these questions, answering them in different ways at different times, throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The answers they gave to these questions led them to create a faction within the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and split the group. It prompted them to pursue militant tactics to achieve a revolution, and later pushed them to reconceptualize their organization so much that it became unrecognizable to the New Left. These questions and the debates that they inspired continued to impact Weather’s decisions and actions, eventually resulting in its own dissolution in 1976.

Weather was tied to many other organizations of the New Left. It grew from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and contributed to its split in 1969. Likewise, the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee (PFOC) grew from Weather and contributed to its dissolution in 1976. Over this span of almost a decade, the same questions were constantly turning members against one another and shaping their actions. While these organizations could have unified behind their common goals like recruiting a mass movement, ending the Vietnam War or combatting racism in the US, they instead split over differences in strategy and theory. Because the stakes were so high by the end of the 1960s, any seemingly small disagreement in the white Left turned into massive arguments about the role of the white revolutionary. At each moment of crisis, members

¹ Weather had many different names from its inception to its dissolution. Weatherman was its nickname while it was a faction in SDS; Weatherman Underground was its title when they moved underground in 1969 until they dropped ‘man’ for being sexist. Finally, they changed to Weather Underground Organization in 1975. For continuity, I will refer to the group as Weather throughout the paper.

² “Where We Stand” *Osawatomie*, 1 April 1975, 3.

of these organizations faced criticism that they were opportunists who could not or would not renounce their white privilege and were therefore complicit in the racist, imperialist system they hoped to reform, an accusation that was hard to recover from and could result in the dissolution of white New Left groups.

These organizations were composed of white middle- or upper-class people who were often fighting against the very privilege that had shaped their lives. As a white leftist organization in a white supremacist society, they were constantly rethinking what their role should be in the revolution and trying to prove they could tear down the system that had granted them so much privilege. Because they were so aware of their privilege, they often took drastic action to prove themselves as revolutionaries who could willingly fight against structures they had benefitted from. Throughout Weather's eight years, they reinvented their organization multiple times to better encapsulate what they believed made a good revolutionary, often defining themselves against their white peers and fracturing groups over disagreements to prove they truly supported the revolution above all else.

Weather wanted to confront their privilege, but they also wanted to be revolutionary heroes. John Brown was a hero for Weather as a white abolitionist who used violence to enact change, but they were equally impacted by his leadership and martyr status. This often cast them in a contradictory role of wanting to be the leaders of the revolution but claiming they would follow the leadership of others like the Black Panther Party. This desire was a direct result of the international circumstances in which Weather came to be. The New Left was greatly inspired by what appeared to be an international revolution against undemocratic regimes and imperialist powers. They had witnessed Cuba's revolution in favor of a communist regime and were greatly inspired by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Other nations, like Algeria and Vietnam, were

throwing off imperialist control and winning their independence through force. These movements and many others illustrated the power of the people to overcome repressive governments. As students in the New Left considered their own country—state violence in Black communities, meddling in revolutions abroad, and the increasingly violent Vietnam War—there was a sentiment that they could be these influential leaders in the US and bring about a revolution. As much as Weather wanted to prove themselves as supporters of the people they sought to help liberate, they were not necessarily content to be cast in a supporting role. The urgency and romanticization that accompanied these international movements and their leaders greatly influenced Weather as they tried to figure out their role in the movement.

Scholars have often studied Weather in conjunction with their racial and class identity because the group was so cognizant of their privilege and so eager to renounce this privilege. However, Weather has a mixed reputation amongst scholars who see it either as a chaotic terrorist organization that helped destroy the promising leftist organization SDS, or as an idealistic but misguided organization trying to inspire a revolution. For example, David Barber explores the New Left and SDS, ending his book *A Hard Rain Fell* in 1970. He focuses on Weather's implicit biases and unwillingness to confront their white privilege as a cause for SDS's dissolution in 1969.³ Weather certainly had implicit biases that prevented them from acting as an ally to others in the struggle, but by exploring Weather as an extension of SDS and taking their story up to 1976, we can see that it was not their unwillingness to confront their privilege but their confusion in how to successfully do this. Other scholars of the Weather Underground are more generous in their analyses, although similarly contemplate how Weather members' identities got in their own way. In *The Way the Wind Blew*, Ron Jacobs explores the

³ David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008.)

missteps of Weather as a missed opportunity but always maintains that race and white privilege stayed at the forefront of Weather's consciousness.⁴ Similarly, Dan Berger illustrates the myriad of factors that impacted Weather's actions and prevented them from achieving the impact and legacy they had imagined for themselves.⁵ Other scholars such as Bryan Burrough and Arthur M. Eckstein likewise explore why and how Weather failed to accomplish their goals.⁶

Other works concerned with whiteness in the New Left include Slonecker's "The Columbia Coalition," a microhistory of a protest at Columbia University that demonstrates a possibility for a united New Left, and Hale's *A Nation of Outsiders* which argues that the problematic romanticization of oppressed groups by white leftists contributed to the failures of the movement.⁷ These two works demonstrate the importance of examining whiteness in the New Left and how it impacted the trajectory of the Left, although miss the damage done by Weather's constant awareness and reevaluation of their whiteness. By focusing on a close reading of the bulletins, communiques, and manifesto of Weather, I will illustrate the contradictions that arose in the organization and how they were tied to their attempts to renounce their privilege and best help the revolution.

Building on the works of these scholars, this paper will examine Weather's moments of decision-making. By drawing on the bulletins published by these organizations, this essay shows that contradictions are evident throughout Weather's existence and reveals instances in which the

⁴ Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground* (New York: Verso, 1997.)

⁵ Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006.)

⁶ Bryan Burrough. *Days of Rage*, 2015. and Arthur M. Eckstein. *Bad Moon Rising: How the Weather Underground beat the FBI and Lost the Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016.)

⁷ Blake Slonecker. "The Columbia Coalition: African Americans, New Leftists, and Counterculture at the Columbia University Protest of 1968." *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4, 2008: 967–96. Grace Hale. "New White Negroes in Action: Students for a Democratic Society. The Economic Research and Action Project, and Freedom Summer" and "Too Much Love: Black Power and the Search for Other Outsiders" in *A Nation of Outsiders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.) 163-236.

group felt a need to reinvent themselves to better serve the revolution. Weather progressed through four phases of distinct change with each phase illustrating their attempt to better serve the revolution, although they fail repeatedly. The first phases consisted of their decision to form the Weatherman faction within SDS and split SDS over their emphasis on action and support of Black Nationalism. When they lacked support from the white left, they decided to become a militant underground revolutionary force, cutting themselves off completely from the mass movement. This resulted in the accidental deaths of four Weather members, closing the second phase of Weather and moving them into a new phase, a blending of violence and propaganda that recommitted Weather to the mass movement. The final phase of Weather continued this trend. They slackened their militant efforts and emphasized building a mass movement instead. Through each phase, Weather struggled with the overarching question: how could they serve a revolution against a system and society that they belonged to. At each moment of reinvention, they had to balance often contradicting goals such as a commitment to the mass movement, support for Black nationalism, and their own desire to lead revolutionary action. The phases of Weather illustrate their willingness to change to help the revolution, but it also demonstrates a rashness which led to severe mistakes in the group and the movement.

These action and the writings that accompany them reveal Weather's decisions were always accompanied by a fear that they were failing as revolutionaries. Because they were rebelling against class and racial structures that they had benefitted from, the stakes of proving themselves as revolutionaries and allies were extremely high. This fear ran rampant within white leftist groups like SDS and Weather, and the combination of fearing complacency and confidence in individual solutions resulted in members tuning against each other and splitting groups. This prevented these New Left groups from ever creating an effective mass movement

that could accomplish the goals of revolutionary change. This paper will argue that Weather demonstrates that the missteps of white radicals in defining their role as white revolutionaries was not because they lacked an awareness of their white privilege but because they faced many other challenges and desires that prevented them from acting as allies in the revolution. The infighting and factionalism that destroyed these groups and their hopes for a revolution was a direct result of their simultaneous insecurity of their own whiteness and their overconfidence that they alone knew how best to direct the movement.

Debates In SDS

We cannot understand the creation of the Weather Underground and the principles they organized around without understanding the divisions within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that resulted in the split in 1969. Founded in 1960, SDS was the most prominent student movement of the 1960s advocating for racial and economic equality and eventually the end of the Vietnam War. While SDS had always had an element of lively debate in its organization, the events of 1968 highlighted fundamental differences between members, eventually leading to the establishment of opposing factions.

1968 brought an increase in violence at home in the form of racial violence, riots, and assassination and abroad as the war in Vietnam escalated.⁸ Many people in the New Left turned to new tactics to combat this increase in violence. SDS reconsidered their protest methods after a protest outside of the Chicago Democratic National Convention (DNC) in August of 1968 turned violent. A militant police force escalated the protest and arrested protestors and antiwar leaders including Tom Hayden, a former leader of SDS. This protest was planned by a coalition of anti-

⁸ Katsiaficas, George. *The Imagination of the New Left*. (Boston: South End Press, 1987.) Katsiaficas dedicates a book to exploring the global history of 1968 and response of leftist groups to these events. Such a tumultuous year implied an impending revolution for many.

war groups to protest the Democratic party's support for the Vietnam War, and while SDS did not lead the protests, many of their members participated and witnessed the response by the police. A *New York Times* article reflected the shock the nation felt at such a violent protest and focuses primarily on the extreme police response: "The police and Guardsmen used clubs, rifle butts, tear gas and Chemical Mace on virtually anything moving along Michigan avenue..." Sympathy for the protestors was perhaps nurtured by the treatment journalists experienced in the chaos, facing indiscriminate arrest and injury from police forces.⁹

The DNC protest and other events of 1968 convinced many members of SDS that they needed to change their methods to match the escalation of violence. SDS knew Chicago was a turning point in protest: "Chicago will definitely become a new point of reference... We can anticipate more mass-arrest situations; more conspiracy and related charges will be brought against Movement people."¹⁰ Their confrontation with the police further demonstrated to SDS that different tactics might be required to achieve their goals. If the state was willing to suppress protestors so violently, more than non-violent marches were required to answer this oppression. A Weatherman founder, Bill Ayers, encapsulated this feeling in his autobiography: "Everything seemed urgent now, everything was accelerating—the pace to be sure, but also the stakes, the sense of consequences."¹¹ This sense of urgency presented an opportunity and a necessity for SDS to change. This in turn fostered increased factionalism and heated arguments over the role and responsibilities of SDS to the revolution and, by extension, white radicals to the movement.

The events of 1968 prompted more people to join SDS, but this created a challenge for the fractured organization. By the end of 1968, SDS membership had increased to its all-time

⁹ J. Anthony Lukass, "Police Battle Demonstrators in Streets," *The New York Times*, 29 August 1968.

¹⁰ "NIC Discusses Chicago, Elections, Elitism." *New Left Notes*, 9 September 1968.

¹¹ Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 117.

high, demonstrating the momentum behind certain SDS goals such as ending the Vietnam War. However, besides a unifying goal of ending the war, SDS faced internal divisions about almost everything else, resulting in factionalism and paralyzing debate. In *Outlaws of America*, Dan Berger argues that this increase in membership and the conditions of the country in 1968 created a situation in which SDS leadership could not bridge the gaps between internal factions. SDS has historically encouraged and fostered debate. The founding document stated, “opposing views should be organized so as to illuminate choices and facilitate the attainment of goals.”¹² With so many new voices bringing their own views to the movement at the end of the 1960s, however, SDS failed to produce a nationwide program to encompass all these factions.

Ironically, this foundational principle prompted some members to question whether SDS was acting efficiently. SDS members spent hours discussing theory and the writings of famous revolutionaries, time some members thought should be dedicated to action. Known as the ‘action faction,’ these members resented the relatively slow-moving pace of SDS in the midst of what they believed was the beginning of the revolution. Inaction following the events of 1968 was inconceivable and dangerous to many members and proved that SDS members were not ready to leave their elite institutions and truly fight in the revolution. Some members recognized the violence that people of color were facing across the globe and were eager join in against these oppressive forces. Unsurprisingly, many of these “action faction” members formed the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) faction, also called Weatherman. Decades later, Bernadine Dohrn, a founder and leader of Weather, discussed her frustration with the pace of SDS in an interview on the podcast, *Mother Country Radicals*. She explained these discussions were dominated by white men and consisted of “...ideological debates ad nauseum [and] very

¹² “The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society” 1962.

radical word-smithing, but not something people wanted to be a part of.”¹³ While the debate-centered meetings and structure of SDS was grounded in its history, RYM member Mark Rudd blamed the Progressive Labor Party (PL) faction within SDS for encouraging theoretical discussions that paralyzed real revolutionary action, prompting the formation of RYM/ Weather to oppose PL.¹⁴ Rudd, Dohrn, and other Weather members believed that SDS, under the influence of PL, was too comfortable in their inaction which pushed them to be more militant so they would not be seen as complacent white leftists too comfortable in their elite universities.

SDS was also concerned with recruiting a mass movement for the revolution. The group followed the Marxist idea of a proletariat revolution, but SDS was a college organization formed by educated, middle- and upper-class students. These identities alienated them from the working class. Mike Klonsky, a co-founder of RYM, wrote “Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement” based on this challenge. He defined the inability of SDS to pay more attention to the working class as symptomatic of internalized chauvinism, racism, and elitism, terms that Weather later used against PL during their expulsion and again reveal that the greatest fear of white radicals at this time was their own complacency.¹⁵ The working class was therefore greatly discussed but not greatly understood by SDS, an issue that continued to plague Weather after the split.

No one challenged the need for a mass movement—every international movement they had witnessed over the 1950s and 1960s depended on the masses—but how to accomplish this crucial goal was controversial. Members of the “action faction” believed the working class would only respond to action and would join the revolution in the streets. In “You Don’t Need a

¹³ “Chapter 1: The Most Dangerous Woman in America” *Mother Country Radicals*, 9 June 2022. Zayd Dohrn, son of Bernadine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, interviews his parents and other Weather members and radicals on this 2022 podcast.

¹⁴ Rudd, *Underground*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 143.

¹⁵ Klonsky, Mike. “Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement,” *New Left Notes*. 23 Dec 1968.

Weatherman to Know which way the Wind Blows,” the foundational document of RYM that gave Weather their name, Weather outlined theories but emphasized practice: “Without practical revolutionary activity on a mass scale the party could not test and develop new ideas and draw conclusions with enough surety behind them to consistently base its survival on them.”¹⁶ Rudd recalled a member suggested the line from “Subterranean Homesick Blues” as an homage to Dylan but Rudd believed it would also show PL “you don’t need ancient dogmas to understand the reality around us.”¹⁷ He, like many others, believed the masses were ready to join in revolutionary action if SDS would initiate this action. This document therefore embraced action in direct defiance of the PL way, foreshadowing the split of SDS in June 1969.

The Split of SDS

1968 and 1969 were years of unyielding dissension and factionalism within SDS as the white left tried to establish their role in the revolution. This culminated in the split of SDS at the June 1969 national convention. National conventions were a staple in SDS, organized so students could meet, debate, and plan future actions. The June convention was held at the Chicago Coliseum. Around 2,000 students who had come to witness the factional battle they had been following in the *New Left Notes*.¹⁸ At this convention, the RYM/Weatherman faction of SDS ousted PL and took control of SDS. While differences in methods created divisions in SDS and led to the creation of Weather, the convention culminated in an argument over race, specifically Black nationalism, the Black Panther Party, and the role of white radicals in fight against racism.

Black nationalism grew throughout the 1960s as the limited successes of the Civil Rights Movement prompted people to look for alternative ways to ensure their safety and equal rights.

¹⁶ “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows” *New Left Notes*, 18 June 1969.

¹⁷ Rudd, 146.

¹⁸ Berger, 82.

Like Weather, the continuation of state violence against non-violent protestors challenged their beliefs in the effectiveness of non-violence. Nationalists believed the Black population formed a colony within the US with a distinct culture and history, facing oppression from the imperialist US. They linked their liberation struggle to nationalist movements across the globe who had thrown off their imperialist oppressors through armed struggle.¹⁹

Black nationalists fought for Black communities to seize power in their communities. Malcolm X's speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet" lays out his theory of Black nationalism, stating, "black nationalism only means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community" and "we should own and operate and control the economy of our community." Malcolm X and Black nationalists believed that liberation would not come through integration with white Americans, but through self-determination and freedom from oppression.²⁰ This sentiment formed the basis of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in 1966 to protect Black communities from oppression in its many forms. The first point of its foundational Ten Point Program reads, "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community."²¹ Black nationalists were now focused on forming their own organizations of Black people to protect and liberate the Black community. The role of the white revolutionary in the eyes of Black nationalists was clear: support the leadership of Black nationalists and focus on unifying a white mass movement against racism.

Black nationalism, however, was not accepted by many people in SDS because it imagined a revolution based on nationalism rather than working class solidarity. SDS members

¹⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, "Roaring from the East: Third World Dreaming," in *Freedom Dreams*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 60-109.

²⁰ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," 12 April 1964.

²¹ Black Panther Party, "Ten Point Program" <https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/25139/the-black-panther-partys-ten-point-program/>

were active in the struggle against racism and heavily influenced by the civil rights movement, but the Black Panther Party and their support of Black nationalism was controversial. Some SDS members like Bernadine Dohrn and other Weathermen believed the white radical role in the race struggle was to support the Black struggle for racial equality in whatever form it took and recognized that racism in America posed a unique challenge for an unrevised Marxist framework. In “You don’t need a weatherman,” RYM members argued that Black Americans faced a different level of oppression and violence from the US than any other sect of the working class. Their priority would naturally be concern for their “Black Proletarian Colony.”²² Like many other issues in SDS, members utilized *New Left Notes* to engage in a dialogue about SDS’s relationship with the Black Panthers. An article written in January 1969 entitled, “Racism Resolution Misses the Point” discussed what one member of SDS believed were mistakes of the December national council. SDS committed to fighting racism as a major goal of the organization, but the author of the article challenged their stance on Black nationalism, as many other members would have done. He argued that Black nationalism did not contradict Marxism and was a beneficial organizational feature that could unify Black workers against US imperialism. He explained that because Black Americans were oppressed on multiple levels, as a racial group as well as workers, their resistance against their race-based discrimination would lead into resistance as workers, accomplishing the Marxist goal of class-based revolution.²³

Dohrn responded to a proposal in SDS to formally endorse the Black Panthers in an article entitled, “White Mother Country Radicals.” She endorsed building a white mass movement rather than a symbolic action of written support, again illustrating a frustration with

²² “You Don’t Need a Weatherman” *New Left Notes*, 18 June 1969.

²³ Wayne Draznin. “Racism Resolution Misses the Point.” *New Left Notes*, 29 Jan 1969

words that lacked concrete action.²⁴ She also wrote an article in February of 1969 encouraging SDS chapters nationwide to join in the celebrations of Black Panther co-founder Huey P Newton's birthday calling for his release from prison.²⁵ Weather members continued to push SDS to better support the Black Panthers by extending an invite for the Panthers to join the National Convention.

PL did not agree with Weather's viewpoint on this. They believed that a class-based revolutionary struggle would successfully dismantle systems in the US that were causing racial discrimination and violence, so by dedicating themselves to the Marxist revolution, they were fighting against racism. Mark Rudd outlined his view of the PL in his autobiography. He believed PL wanted to opportunistically take control of SDS to promote their own program. The PL faction was tied to the national Progressive Labor Party, so there was a distrust that PL was attempting a coup in SDS to support their national program. Rudd explained that PL believed that Black people were first and foremost "a sector of the working class" and the issue of racism had "nothing to do with white supremacist culture or real economic privilege."²⁶ While Rudd's anti-PL sentiment is clear, this reflection reveals the feeling of Weather that PL was not effectively recognizing their own privilege or the history of white privilege in the US.

At the June 1969 convention, the Black Panthers showed up and addressed SDS multiple times. They referred to PL as "armchair Marxists" echoing Weather's own critique of PL.²⁷ They went on to attack the position of women in the movement, however, saying to the women in the crowd, "You have a strategic position in the revolution: prone."²⁸ This compromised the position

²⁴ Bernadine Dohrn. "White Mother Country Radicals" *New Left Notes* 29 July 1968.

²⁵ Bernadine Dohrn. "SDS and Panthers to celebrate Huey's Birthday." *New Left Notes*. 5 Feb 1969

²⁶ Rudd, 143.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 150.

²⁸ This quote was originally said by Stokely Carmichael, leader of SNCC, and was infamous in the Left for embodying sexism of the movement. Breines provides a history of Carmichael's quote and sexism in SNCC in her

of the Black Panther Party amongst the students who were beginning to consider issues of sexism. PL and others began to chant “fight male chauvinism” in response.²⁹ The statements by the Black Panther Party, however, did not undermine the commitment of the Weatherman faction to their cause. The next day, the Black Panther Party issued an ultimatum to SDS, insisting that they “will be known by the company they keep.”³⁰ This comment was enough to inspire many in SDS to do something drastic, spurred by a desire to prove themselves as revolutionaries in solidarity with people of color. After months of debating through their bulletins, the Black Panthers insisted that SDS take action and prove their support to Black liberation.

Dohrn initiated a walk-out for all members who stood with the Black Panthers and against PL. Dohrn explained this pivotal moment in an interview on *Mother Country Radicals*. She acknowledged that the comments were misogynistic and sexist but saw the role of white people supporting Black nationalists as paramount at that time. Even though her role as a woman in the movement was questioned and challenged by the Black Panthers, Dohrn believed white radicals must support the black struggle and accepted that this issue was important enough to split SDS.³¹ According to a newspaper article following the split, however, Weather’s position in the revolution was immediately challenged by the Black Panthers who “told them they had better realize that the Panthers are the Vanguard [of the revolution]” not Weather.³² This comment reflects the contradictory position white revolutionaries held in the revolution, eager to play a central role yet bound by their own claims of solidarity to support and not control the momentum

chapter “Together and Apart: Women and SNCC” included in *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*. 2006. Pages 19-50.

²⁹ Male chauvinism and sexism was a common and complex issue for the New Left and Weather, and is too complex to fully discuss in this paper. Weather attempted to incorporate women’s issues into their organization, but male chauvinism was ultimately used to discredit the organization in 1976.

³⁰ Rudd, 150.

³¹ “Chapter 1: The Most Dangerous Woman in America,” *Mother Country Radicals*, 9 June 2022

³² “500 Walk Out as SDS Picks New Leaders” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 June 1969.

of the oppressed. Members who followed Dohrn and other RYM leaders out of the conference met for rest of the conference and officially expelled PL from SDS while PL continued to meet down the hall. Both claimed to be the true SDS and charged each other with “serving imperialism” demonstrating the tendency of these groups to turn against one another with charges of not relinquishing their privilege.³³

SDS faced other challenges that contributed to its split such as FBI infiltration and meddling under COINTELPRO, but the formation of these factions and the expulsion of PL is a direct result of debates concerning the role of the white radical. The final split of SDS at the National Convention was the moment in which SDS was finally forced to accept that their broad membership base had irreconcilably different opinions on their role in the movement. They did not think PL simply had different opinions than their own but believed PL was essentially anti-revolutionary, unwilling to truly confront their white privilege and support Black revolutionaries. By the time of the National Convention, Weather believed that the stakes were so high in the struggle that any group unwilling to commit in the way they thought was best were actively harming the movement.³⁴

The Weathermen and the Days of Rage

After the National Convention, Weather took control of the SDS national office and enforced their new programs. Some arguments were put to rest, but Weather faced many difficulties over the coming months. Issues like race and the role of the white radical created new challenges and recruiting a mass movement became an insurmountable challenge for the organization. By the end of 1969, Weather had moved underground and sacrificed some of their original goals to do what they believed they had to do for the revolution.

³³ “Rival SDS Units Pick Own Leaders” *The New York Times*, 24 June 1969.

³⁴ New Left Notes, “National Convention Expels Racist PL, and Elects New Officers” 25 June 1969.

Weather members agreed they needed mass action. They immediately began planning an action for October 1969, known as the Days of Rage. They also widely accepted that the revolution was imminent, an important fact to keep in mind in viewing the actions that they took in late 1969 and 1970. They believed they were entering a war against US imperialism that would follow the revolutionary structure of Cuba, China, or Vietnam. They also did not initially debate the need for a mass movement. These ideas unified the members of Weather, but they alienated the organization from the New Left and the working class who did not share these beliefs.

With PL members expelled from SDS, the Weather/ RYM faction took over SDS and elected their members to now-vacant leadership positions including in the publication for the *New Left Notes*, which they continued to publish until the end of 1969. Their first publication after the national convention revealed the new direction they hoped to take SDS in. Along with their commitment to Black nationalism and Vietnamese nationalism, they echoed their beliefs from “You don’t need a Weatherman” that a mass movement recruited from the working class should be a main priority, but that recruitment would naturally follow from action. They began planning the Days of Rage, advertised with the slogan “Bring the War Home,” but they neglected to create a well thought out program to recruit working class people. “You don’t need a Weatherman” reveals this unpreparedness as their plan for recruiting members reads, “We will try to involve neighborhood kids who aren’t in high schools too; take them to anti-war or anti-racism fights, stuff in the schools, etc.”³⁵ They had only this vague plan of action. The June 25th bulletin reveals that Weather believed the working class would be easily won over, stating that “the situation, as well as the mass work of the anti-war movement, has already won a majority of

³⁵ “You don’t need a weatherman” *New Left Notes*, 18 June 1968.

working people to opposition of the war.”³⁶ Weather imagined it would be a small step for the working class to join the revolution. They incorrectly assumed that their frustration with current events, acceptance of an impending revolution, and eagerness to overthrow the imperialist US system was shared by a majority of people. That the working class had not yet rallied to the cause was indicative of SDS failure to plan concrete action: “involvement in the struggle is the best education about the movement, the enemy and the class struggle.”³⁷ While opposition to the war was widespread by late 1969, many people believed the war was simply a mistake and not symptomatic of the downfall of imperialism and capitalism.

Weather wanted to recruit from the working class, but they committed to principles that prevented this goal. Weather established an increased commitment to militancy and even believed that members of the working class were naturally more militant.³⁸ This shows their negligence in trying to understand the American working class as opposed to the working class that Marx believed would incite a revolution. They resorted to shows of strength and machoism that they thought workers would respond to. In one recruitment event, Weather marched on a beach frequented by the working class with a Viet Cong flag, inciting a violent response from beachgoers who were likely both annoyed with Weather and insulted by the flag. Oddly, this was viewed as a success. Wilkerson explained, “if we could gain the respect of the young men who attacked us today, they might join us tomorrow.”³⁹ They continued with different actions throughout the summer to prove their strength and commitment to the revolution, hoping it would convince others to join the cause.

³⁶ *New Left Notes*, 25 June 1969.

³⁷ “You don’t need a weatherman” *New Left Notes*, 18 June 1968

³⁸ “Take the War to the People” *New Left Notes*, 25 June 1969.

³⁹ Cathy Wilkerson, *Flying too Close to the Sun*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 281.

Even so, others like Mike Klonsky could see that these actions angered and alienated the working class from the movement and were damaging the reputation of the New Left. In his article, "Why I Quit," Klonsky explains, "...the working class must be won over with patience and not arrogance." He condemned the Weather policy of machoism, argued that Weather had not made an effort to understand the working class, and reasserted his commitment to recruiting the working class to the movement first and foremost.⁴⁰ Klonsky established RYM II, splitting Weather only a few months after Weather had split SDS.

Michael P. Lerner, leader of the Berkley SDS chapter also outlined these mistakes in an essay entitled, "Weatherman: The Politics of Despair." He describes the actions of Weather as not only lacking a theoretical base but completely illogical: "...If one believes high school students are prepared to join the struggle, it does not follow that one should run through high schools yelling 'jailbreak,' hold a brief rally, and then split over the state line... However bad weatherman theory may be, Weatherman practice proved far worse, earning enemies among those who wanted to be sympathetic." He even says, "Weatherman was involved in tactical errors so serious that sympathetic Movement people began to suspect police agents intent on discrediting the whole left."⁴¹ Like Klonsky, Lerner formed a new organization called the Seattle Liberation Front and planned concrete aid for the working class like free health care and childcare, housing security and tax breaks for the lower class, although other aspects of their organization resembled Weather's program.⁴² Weather was intent on taking action to inspire revolution, but others in the New Left saw how actions without some theory to give it direction were not only ineffective but actively preventing the formation of a mass movement.

⁴⁰ Mike Klonsky. "Why I Quit" *New Left Notes*, 29 August 1969.

⁴¹ Micheal P. Lerner, "Weatherman: The Politics of Despair" *Weatherman*, 402

⁴² "Seattle Liberation Front: Program for Action" 1970

<https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/imlsmohai/id/16177>

By the Days of Rage in October 1969, Weather recognized its failure in recruiting the working class and dismissed anyone who did not join the revolution as racist and chauvinistic. If the working class failed to show up for the revolution, they had proved themselves as a lost cause, unwilling to confront their own white privilege. Weather believed this freed them from trying to recruit from the working class since they appeared to be content cogs in the imperialist machine. Criticism of their tactics from members in the New Left could be dismissed as too soft or too focused on theory and talk rather than action. This shift alienated them from the bulk of the New Left who, “criticized the Weathermen for urging militant actions by committed revolutionaries (or cadres) instead of seeking opportunities to broaden mass support...”⁴³ The Days of Rage marked a shift in the priorities of Weather from forming a mass movement in the working class to accepting that they alone were capable of being white militant radicals.

This embrace of militancy also created challenges for Weather. Weather viewed themselves as militants in the revolution against US imperialism and planned the Days of Rage as a battle against the imperialists. They considered themselves soldiers in the revolution and trained as such, spending the summer practicing karate and challenging each other to be as revolutionary and radical as possible. Ayers explains the mindset that each member of Weather was held to. They needed to exude strength and complete dedication to the cause, even at risk to their own safety. “All through the summer we worked and fought and practiced, and when we got time for a breather late at night, we criticized ourselves for not doing enough... organize, fight, practice, criticize.”⁴⁴ Mark Rudd labelled their leaders as generals, responsible for organizing a battle plan for the Days of Rage.⁴⁵ This commitment to a militant revolution and the

⁴³ “Pig City ’69: Bringin’ it all back home,” Liberation News Service, issue 198. 1 October 1969.

⁴⁴ Ayers, 154.

⁴⁵ Rudd, 172.

seriousness in which they acted was necessary in the eyes of Weather members who felt that at last they were dedicating themselves completely to their cause, but this warlike mentality revealed that many on the left would not follow such violent leadership.

Even though protestors accepted the possibility of violence every time they protested, joining a group like Weather was higher stakes than many would accept. Weather was proposing violence as a tactic to draw an enemy into battle. Their language in *New Left Notes* indicates this change to its readers in what remained of SDS. They referred to the Days of Rage as an offensive attack and explained that their motivation and goal for this action was to open another front against the US to aid the Vietnamese war effort and take the pressure off Black communities experiencing heavy policing.⁴⁶ Weather accepted violence as a necessary component of the revolution. In an article entitled, "Violence & Pigs," Weather members wrote, "This country went up on violence. The conquerors slaughtered the Indians and the Mexicans and the blacks, and stole their land in order to get the riches and powers they have... now that some people are fighting back, the rulers squeal 'law 'n' order' and 'no violence.' Fuck that." They concluded the article by insisting, "Ending state violence is an act of love. People's violence is progressive."⁴⁷ In a nation whose history and power was so steeped in violence, Weather felt justified in using this same tool against the government, even believing it was the only tool they could hope would be successful. They knew that to return to Chicago would certainly bring an extreme level of violence from police as they had witnessed this happen just a year prior and knew the Chicago

⁴⁶ "The Time is Right for Fighting in the Street" *New Left Notes*, 20 September 1969.

⁴⁷ "Violence & Pigs" *New Left Notes: The fire next time*, 2 August 1969. This subtitle is taken from a book by James Baldwin of the same name that greatly discusses the role of white leftists in the movement. Weather changed the name of their periodical to FIRE in the following months, illustrating the new theme of urgency and violence in the organization.

Mayor had issued a “shoot to kill” order, making it an ideal location to incite a war against police.

In contrast to this, the Boston chapter of SDS maintained a more traditional SDS view. Boston considered itself the true SDS after the split, or what they called a coup by the Weathermen who seized the national office in Chicago. They published their own *New Left Notes* and often warned their readers not to fall for the imposter SDS publication coming out of Chicago. A National Press Release included in a *New Left Notes (Boston)* publication reveals this deep divide in SDS. They do utilize some fear mongering, saying that Weather believed the Days of Rage “won’t be a success unless some are killed.” They argued that this action was counterrevolutionary and played into the hands of imperialist America by dividing and discrediting SDS.⁴⁸ Boston SDS believed in powerful action, even condemning the peaceful protests of the Moratorium to end the War in Vietnam, but they did not condone violence as a tactic. They defined their actions as “militant struggles,” but they embraced defensive strategies rather than offensive attacks and outright violence. An article in the Liberation News Service bulletin further reveals the loss of support for Weather, “People suspect that many Weathermen have a fetish on illegality and secretly long for a suicidal masochistic gun-fight with the Chicago police in order to make instant history.”⁴⁹ For this reason, many on the New Left maintained that violence would accomplish nothing for the movement and represented the misguided direction of Weather that bordered on opportunistic martyrdom.

The Days of Rage themselves further illustrated this divide within the New Left. Many leaders of Weather seemed to never doubt that the Days of Rage would be a success, conflating

⁴⁸ “Excerpts from National Press Release, October 2” *New Left Notes (Boston)*. 2 November 1969.

⁴⁹ “If you’re going to Daley’s Chicago, be sure to wear some schisms in your hair,” Liberation News Service, issue 198, 1 October 1969.

their own dedication to the revolution as an eventuality for everyone. Their actions once again revealed their lack of understanding of the mass movement and the working class. Ayers reflected, “I don’t remember any hesitation: we would fight in the streets, the kids would come and join us, and we would march arm-in-arm in the service of world revolution. Without a doubt.”⁵⁰ They had grown accustomed to turnouts in keeping with past SDS events and believed the events of 1968 and the impending revolution would easily draw a large crowd. Just a year prior at the DNC convention protests, an estimated 10,000 protestors gathered in Chicago, hundreds of which were arrested by the end of the protests.⁵¹ In October of 1969, however, only a few hundred protestors showed up at all.

The Weathermen, in their haste to prove themselves as dedicated soldiers willing to escalate the battle like John Brown, bombed a statue of a police officer that commemorated police action in putting down a riot in the 1800s in Chicago. This symbolic bombing illustrated to the police and establishment that the Weathermen were different from the force they met a year before, but it also demonstrated to members of SDS and the New Left that the Weathermen were not bluffing and were willing to go to extremes to aid the revolution. The *Chicago Tribune* coverage of the bombing would have made anyone question their decision to become involved in this organization and protest: “In the Haymarket riot, it was the police who were on the receiving end [of violence]. The pavement was covered with their dead and dying. Police again could be on the receiving end if violence breaks out this week.” They also pointed out that the bomb could

⁵⁰ Ayers, 165

⁵¹ “Violence was Inevitable: How 7 Key Players remember the Chaos of 1968’s Democratic National Convention Protests, *Time Magazine*. 28 August 2018, <https://time.com/5377386/1968-democratic-national-convention-protesters/>

have injured or killed civilians, a thought that would have caused anyone thinking of joining the Days of Rage to stop and really consider if this was the right way to achieve change.⁵²

Some Weather members also questioned how much violence should be used in the struggle. Bill Ayers recounts a conversation between Diana Oughton and Terry Robbins debating the use of bombings. According to Ayers, Oughton asked Robbins, “how many innocents killed or hurt would be acceptable?” and warned, “you can catch the very disease you’re fighting... You want to stop war, you become warlike. You want to fight inhumanity, and you become inhumane.”⁵³ How clearly Ayers remembers this conversation we cannot know, but the words take on a prophetic meaning as Diana Oughton and Terry Robbins were both killed less than a year later as Robbins was building a bomb to use in an attack. Cathy Wilkerson also questioned the effectiveness of bombing the statue right before the Days of Rage. She worried that this bombing would only incite more violence by the police in the coming days and wondered why they had chosen days before their public demonstration to escalate their organization to “armed attack[s]”.⁵⁴ Escalation could maybe have been accepted by the New Left, but the detonation of this bomb raised the stakes higher than most were willing to go.

The Days of Rage took place on October 8-11, 1969 in Chicago with a few hundred participants. A full schedule of events was included in the September issue of the *New Left Notes* and the action began in Lincoln Park in the evening of the 8th. Members arrived with protective clothing, helmets, and makeshift weapons. Weather banned guns but encouraged makeshift weaponry like “steel pipes and slingshots, chains, clubs, mace, and rolls of pennies to add weight to a punch.” further illustrating the battle mentality of the Weathermen.⁵⁵ After a few speeches,

⁵² “The Haymarket Bombing” *Chicago Tribune*, 8 October 1969.

⁵³ Ayers, 126.

⁵⁴ Wilkerson, 299.

⁵⁵ Ayers, 167.

Weather member Jeff Jones issued the code word to begin the riot, the name Marion Delgado. Marion Delgado had been appropriated as a hero to Weather earlier that summer. The young boy placed a slab of concrete on train tracks and derailed a train. *New Left Notes* from August 29 includes a photo of Marion Delgado on their front page next to the tracks with a big and rather remorseless grin on his face.⁵⁶ Jeff Jones announced, “I am Marion Delgado” and the protestors knew this was their cue to begin the action. They began marching through the streets chanting until the crowd turned into a mob and began using the makeshift weapons they had brought. Protestors smashed windows indiscriminately, often resulting in destruction of private businesses and even homes.⁵⁷ They were immediately confronted by a police barricade which left many members maced, injured, arrested, or on the run. Rudd estimates the casualty count from the first day to be “six weathermen shot, many dozen more injured, sixty-eight arrested.”⁵⁸

On the second day, the Weathermen joined a protest organized by other New Left groups outside of the courthouse where the trial of the Chicago 8, the eight protest leaders who were arrested after the 1968 DNC protests, was being held. The other event was organized by Mike Klonsky and the RYMII and featured a speech by Fred Hampton, Chairman of the Chicago BPP. In his speech, Hampton states, “We do not support people who are anarchistic, opportunistic, adventuristic, and Custeristic,” again revealing that many in the New Left viewed this action as a publicity stunt for martyrdom.⁵⁹ This condemnation from a leader of the organization Weather had split SDS in support of demonstrates another flaw evident in Weather. Although they were dedicated to serving the movement and using their white and class privilege to aid others, they often did not listen to what these other groups asked of them.

⁵⁶ Cover of *New left Notes*, 29 August 1969.

⁵⁷ Tom Thomas, “The Second Battle of Chicago, 1969” Published at Grinnell College, N.d.

⁵⁸ Rudd, 175.

⁵⁹ Tom Thomas, “The Second Battle of Chicago, 1969” Published at Grinnell College, N.d.

Another striking example of this followed from a trip some Weather members took to Cuba to meet with a Vietnamese delegation right before the Days of Rage. Rudd recalled the Vietnamese tasked Weather with building support for them in the US.⁶⁰ Ayers later wrote of this same moment, stating, “The Vietnamese were only mildly interested in our willingness to die for their cause and much more animated about how we planned to reach out to our Republican parents, something that didn’t interest us at all.”⁶¹ This again reveals the desire of white radicals to be the vanguard instead of playing a supporting role to other revolutionaries. The two groups they had sworn to fight with told Weather clearly that an action like the Days of Rage would be less helpful to the cause than a dedication to building a united movement, yet Weather would not reconsider. While they did believe the mass movement would respond to this event, their actions also reveal a naivete and an eagerness to act. They were willing and excited to become martyrs for the cause to prove themselves as hardened militants, even at the expense of the needs of their own allies.

Events for both protests continued for the next few days. The Days of Rage consisted of school breaks, a women’s demonstration, protests to free the Chicago 8, and different speeches and meetings with members. Leaders of Weather had to adapt their actions to fit the number of people who had shown up—a number that steadily declined as more and more people were arrested—but they kept their final action, a “massive march in support of the Vietnamese, blacks, and worldwide liberation struggle” ominously and succinctly entitled, “Bring the War Home” on the schedule.⁶² This action became a violent mob as protestors and police clashed. While a few hundred Weatherman did battle with police in Haymarket Square, 2,500 protestors joined the

⁶⁰ Rudd, 167.

⁶¹ Ayers, 160

⁶² *New Left Notes*, 20 September 1969.

RYM II protest occurring simultaneously about five miles away. This coalition demonstration explicitly condemned Weather and told their members that “at this point of the revolutionary struggle it was important that people fight only in self-defense.”⁶³ In a *New York Times* article following the Days of Rage, this RYMII protest was granted only a paragraph of coverage in which they were said to have “marched peacefully through poor white and Puerto Rican neighborhoods.” The rest of the article recounts the shocking violence carried out between Weather members and police with no sign of the sympathy for protesters following the DNC protests a year earlier.⁶⁴ Weather was therefore successful in starting a war against police, but RYM II and Hampton were correct in believing nonviolent protest would better connect them to the masses and garner public support.

This confrontation with police concluded the first and only national action of the Weathermen. The Days of Rage resulted in over 200 arrests, countless injuries for police and protestors, and high costs in property damage the protestors had carried out including against businesses owned by working class people.⁶⁵ They had, however, proved themselves as a militant fighting force willing to go to extremes for the revolution. Undercover FBI informer Larry Garthwohl who embedded himself in Weather and took part in the Days of Rage later reflected, “Three weeks earlier, Sergeant Berry had asked me a question: ‘Do you think the Weathermen are serious?’ He had his answer.”⁶⁶ No one would question their dedication or willingness to fight after the Days of Rage, just their methods and effectiveness.

The Days of Rage also effectively ended any hope of forming the coveted mass movement. Their methods resulted in very limited attendance while the RYM II protest was

⁶³ Tom Thomas, “The Second Battle of Chicago: 1969,” n.d.

⁶⁴ John Kifner, “103 Youths Seized in Chicago Battle,” *The New York Times*, 12 October 1969.

⁶⁵ Berger, 112.

⁶⁶ Larry Garthwohl, *Bringing Down America*, (New Rochelle: Arlington House Publishers, 1976), 41.

much more popular. While a couple hundred protestors joined the Days of Rage, over a million people attended the Moratorium to end the war in Vietnam just a few days later on October 15.⁶⁷ Weather had proved themselves to be a vanguard in the white militant and armed struggle, but this lost them the support of many in the New Left who believed more violence in response to violence would not bring the change they wanted to see. Zayd Dohrn discussed this dilemma in the podcast *Mother Country Radicals*. “And this, of course, is the result of emphasizing escalation over inclusion. Splitting SDS, criticism/ self-criticism, insisting only the most militant people are welcome. You find yourself outnumbered and alone.”⁶⁸ Mark Rudd wrote in his autobiography that, “the Days of Rage had killed SDS” because it was around this national action that chapters separated from the national office or dissolved completely.⁶⁹ They changed the name of the *New Left Notes* to *Fire!* shortly after the Days of Rage, illustrating the urgency felt by Weather and their embrace of violence, and stopped publishing altogether by the end of 1969. The mass movement they had hoped to form, that the Vietnamese and Black Panther Party had needed them to form, was even farther out of their reach when they decided to go underground a shortly after the Days of Rage.

Moving Underground

If the violence of the Days of Rage had not convinced people that Weather was a serious and dangerous militant group, the Flint War Council that took place at the end of December 1969 did. The atmosphere of this council was chaotic and bloodthirsty. Cathy Wilkerson attended Flint and reflected that the major theme of the event was the glorification of violence. “Violence was cleansing and resurrecting. Violence was the only act that could absolutely separate us from what

⁶⁷ Mitchell K. Hall, “The Vietnam Era Antiwar Movement,” *OAH*, 2004.

⁶⁸ “Chapter 2: Days of Rage” *Mother Country Radicals*, 9 June 2022.

⁶⁹ Rudd, 188.

the United States was doing to injure others.⁷⁰ Mark Rudd, also present at Flint, gave a detailed account of some of the worst comments at Flint, “There were crazy discussions at Flint over whether killing white babies was inherently revolutionary,” he recalled “since all white people are the enemy.”⁷¹ This followed from Bernadine Dohrn’s regrettable and rash decision to celebrate the Manson murders that had taken place that August.⁷² These comments reflected both the crazed atmosphere of Flint and their desire to prove they had completely renounced their white privilege. Rudd also remembers himself saying, “It’s a wonderful feeling to hit a pig. It must be a really wonderful feeling to kill a pig or blow up a building” and explains that these words came from the all-consuming anger he felt in December 1969. This was partially due to the brutal assassination of Fred Hampton in which the police stormed the Panther headquarters in the middle of the night, shooting and killing the unarmed and sleeping Hampton in his bed at the beginning of December. Despite differences during the Days of Rage, members in Chicago attended his funeral and mourned with the Black Panthers and the community. Weather felt this assassination demonstrated there were no more rules in the war between the revolutionaries and the police. Undercover FBI informant Larry Grathwohl recalls joining a group that was challenging its members to be ready to kill.⁷³

At Flint, Weather decided to form collectives—called tribes at that time—to carry out armed action across the country. They also moved underground and closed the SDS offices, officially ending SDS as a national organization. This move underground would also effectively

⁷⁰ Wilkerson, 321.

⁷¹ Ibid., 189.

⁷² Dohrn is quoted in saying of the Manson murders, “Dig it. First they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them...” She later gave an interview explaining this was meant to be an ironic remark demonstrating how the American public was so preoccupied with the Manson murders yet ignored state sanctioned violence against the Black Panthers and in Vietnam. The interview can be found at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4460430/user-clip-professor-bernardine-dohrn-remarks-manson-family-remarks>

⁷³ Grathwohl, 104.

kill any chance at forming a national mass movement, a very big shift from their goals of not more than six months previous. The Days of Rage had taught them that they were the only ones dedicated enough to fight in this war, and that most people, especially white people could not be counted on to join in the revolutionary struggle. Wilkerson explained the common notion was “if you are not with us, you are against us,” echoing Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, “If you are not a part of the solution, you are part of the problem.” Those unwilling to participate in the armed struggle were “unwilling to give up their privileges of security, comfort, and consumption, despite the price of other people’s slavery or oppression.” Weather saw themselves as an “elite force,” the only ones capable and willing to fight for what was right and the only white people who would renounce their white privilege.⁷⁴ In this way, moving underground would not be a loss. They would be out of touch with the mass movement and unable to participate in any national actions or protests, but the mass movement had disappointed them at the Days of Rage. They now accepted their role as a covert and intentionally small guerilla fighting force, the antithesis to SDS and to what Weather had imagined for themselves all throughout 1969. The debates and challenges of the 1960s New Left, however, would follow Weather underground and into the new decade.

Townhouse explosion

After the war council meeting and the move underground, Weather formed collectives across the US. While there was a national leadership, known as the Weather Bureau and headed by Bernadine Dohrn, Jeff Jones, and a few others, their goal was to form a decentralized group in which each cell was responsible for planning their own local actions. Conversations between the cells were strictly on a need-to-know basis. Even Dohrn, de facto leader of Weather, claimed she

⁷⁴ Wilkerson, 320.

did not know the intricacies of what each cell was planning. This decentralized structure would in theory protect Weather from sharing too much information with FBI informants who they suspected wanted to or had infiltrated the group. This was a valid concern as an FBI memo from early 1970 states, “Because of the terroristic acts of violence in past by Weatherman groups...it is vitally necessary that every Weatherman member is identified... In this regard each office is to afford immediate action to the placing of an informant in each Weatherman collective.”⁷⁵ They were mildly successful, however, and although Larry Grathwohl had infiltrated a chapter of Weather, another FBI memo reads, “Because of their now degenerate living habits, their immoral conduct and use of drugs, it has become extremely difficult to obtain informants who fit into this mold and are willing to live as they do.”⁷⁶ The FBI failed to mention that Weather was actively pursuing policies to avoid infiltration and were highly suspicious of new members now that they were underground. Larry Grathwohl, who was recruited to Weather before they moved underground, faced an intense criticism/self-criticism session in which members accused him of being a “pig”, and was outed as undercover by mid-1970.⁷⁷ These safety measures also meant, however, that decisions were often made in echo chambers. Rudd, a member of the New York collective explained that the cell was hierarchically organized with very few leaders at the top making decisions. The rest of the group were expected to fall in line as privates would follow their commanding officers or face harsh criticism/self-criticism sessions.⁷⁸ Weather had already established that anyone who did not support them was against the revolution and a potential enemy. Members were expected to be hardened soldiers at this point, ready to do whatever it

⁷⁵ “Bureau File Number 100-439048 (Domestic Security Investigation): Section 60, 27.
link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5100117455/GDSC?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=4701068a&pg=27

⁷⁶ Ibid. 70.

⁷⁷ Grathwohl, 120-122, 178-179.

⁷⁸ Rudd, 197.

took to aid the revolution. To make matters even more precarious, collectives across the country felt a competitive edge to out-perform their peers, creating an atmosphere in which actions were taken without any discussion to prove their grit and dedication. From December 1969 to March 1970, Weather put themselves on a path that could only lead to violence.

In the early months of 1970, the New York collective began planning a violent and deadly action against a symbol of the War in Vietnam. They chose to target a US Army officer's dance at nearby Fort Dix and planned to use homemade shrapnel bombs filled with nails. This act follows naturally from their mindset after the Days of Rage and Flint War Council. Bombs were being dropped in Vietnam and Weather had sworn to bring the war home. This action, however, would result in the deaths and injuries of noncommissioned officers and their dates. Cathy Wilkerson and Mark Rudd were both members of the New York collective and recount the conversations leading up to this decision. Wilkerson recalls, "When the proposal was floated about Fort Dix, no one argued against it... no one said anything about the possibility of people getting hurt or killed." She also talked about the decision to use a shrapnel bomb, stating "The nails would wound people, too, and, in their suffering, perhaps they would develop more empathy for how the Vietnamese felt when the United States dropped daisy bombs...". She later added, "I didn't think about the fact that the nails might actually kill people... Like soldiers of most armies, I focused on the theoretical goals of the war, on defeating the enemy."⁷⁹ Rudd expressed similar sentiments, stating that "At that point we had determined that there were no innocent Americans, at least no white ones. They—we—all played some part in the atrocity of Vietnam, if only the passive roles of ignorance, acquiescence, and acceptance of privilege."⁸⁰ Their recollections of this time period reflect the sentiment that everyone was an enemy and

⁷⁹ Wilkerson, 343.

⁸⁰ Rudd, 195.

illustrate how this mindset could justify any violence. They began thinking the end could justify any means, aided by the environment in Weather of constantly challenging each other to be more hardened and radical.

There was no longer a debate forum available—an impending terrorist attack is not something to publish in a newsletter anyway—and any members who might have questioned this action risked being attacked by their fellow members for being weak, hurting the revolution, and essentially allying with the imperialists. After talking with other members in the collective, Rudd found out any member who questioned the plan faced accusations of hiding behind their white privilege.⁸¹ They put the plan in motion and 22-year-old Terry Robbins accepted the responsibility of building the antipersonnel bombs in the basement of Wilkerson's family townhouse in Greenwich Village. Around noon on March 6th as Robbins finished the bombs in the basement with Diana Oughton, Cathy Wilkerson ironed her parents' sheets, Kathy Boudin showered, and Ted Gold headed for the front door to run some errands, Robbins' inexperienced hands tripped the bomb and the townhouse exploded.

The townhouse explosion claimed the lives of Oughton, Robbins, and Gold, but it also changed the trajectory of the Weather Underground and sent them to another meeting. This time, the meeting was a time for mourning, healing, and reconsideration of their current trajectory. Not only did the explosion reveal to all members of the Weather Underground the deadly plans of the New York collective, it also forced them to contend with the very real possibility of loss of life in what they were doing. Weather leaders met at the home of Bernadine Dohrn in California in a meeting that resembled the days of SDS in their willingness to talk and debate. Importantly,

⁸¹ Rudd, 197.

Dohrn halted all action until they could discuss a way forward together, an obvious departure from their “action faction” notion that debate slowed down progress.

They also began some of the old debates once again, most notably the role of violence and their role as militants. The New York collective was held up as an example of what not to do. The Weather Bureau, led by Bernadine Dohrn, Jeff Jones, and now Bill Ayers, led the meeting and redefined what Weather should be. Bill Ayers later wrote that Bernadine Dohrn began the meeting by defining Weather as a political organization responsible for political organizing, not as soldiers whose only tools are violence.⁸² There is no record of the meeting besides recollections years later, and other members do not quote Dohrn saying this. This sentiment, however, was clearly expressed as Weather slowed down, considered the political ramifications of action, and once again turn to the role of the mass movement. The press coverage following the townhouse bombing reveals how crucial this change in direction was and Rudd remembers the realization that, had the bomb been successful, they not only would have killed innocent people but would surely have turned all of America against Weather and the movement.⁸³ National press coverage of the townhouse explosion already revealed the country viewed Weather as a misguided and mostly irrelevant fringe group at odds with the rest of the New Left.⁸⁴ At least one member, John Jacobs but known as JJ, defended the militant extremism that resulted in the townhouse explosion and maintained their only mistake had been not knowing how to build the bomb. JJ was expelled by Bernadine Dohrn, an action supported by many others.⁸⁵ This is reminiscent of Bernadine Dohrn’s expulsion of PL from SDS just a year

⁸² Ayers, 204.

⁸³ Rudd, 213.

⁸⁴ Lawrence van Gelder, “Two Figures in ‘Village’ Blast Linked to Politics of New Left.” *The New York Times*. 11 March 1970.

⁸⁵ Ayers, 206.

prior for not being revolutionary in the right way and therefore not truly being revolutionary. Once again, Weather had established their definition of the right way to be a revolutionary and expelled those who could not or would not conform.

“New Morning—Changing Weather”

Weather was still committed to hurting the US imperialist structure, but they established a policy of “armed propaganda,” which Rudd defines as bombings and violence against symbolic targets to bring attention to the Vietnam War and cause a good amount of economic damage for the US government. Each bomb, however, would be accompanied by timely warnings so that people could evacuate.⁸⁶ The war against US imperialism was not over for the Weather Underground. In fact, their first communication with the public following the townhouse explosion was entitled, “A Declaration of a State of War” issued on May 21, 1970. Even this declaration marks a shift in the policies of Weather as it recalls the writings in the *New Left Notes*. While it is more radical and perhaps sinister than the debates in the SDS bulletins, they nonetheless spend a good portion of it explaining their goals and grievances. They connected themselves to the mass movement and explained their new strategy of guerrilla warfare against US imperialism. Dohrn ends the statement by paying tribute to Robbins, Oughton, and Gold, and then states, “We will never go back.”⁸⁷ She is recommitting the organization to their original goals, the statements in “You Don’t Need A Weatherman,” and their reasons for splitting from PL, but, in a way, the organization is going back. Simply by opening a communication channel with the public they showed they recognized at least some structural policies of SDS were effective. “A Declaration of a State of War” is a document that should have followed

⁸⁶ Rudd, 214.

⁸⁷ “A Declaration of a State of War, May 21, 1970” *Sing a Battle Song*, 149-151.

immediately after the SDS split in June 1969, but it nonetheless illustrated the lessons Weather learned from the Days of Rage and townhouse explosion.

This shift was also evident in the first substantial message from the Weather Underground since the *New Left Notes* ended, “New Morning—Changing Weather.” In a collection of writings from the Weather Underground compiled in 2006, Ayers, Dohrn, and Jeff Jones introduce this statement by saying, “It completed the withdrawal from the Days of Rage mentality, a process which began in the days immediately after the deaths of Diana, Terry, and Ted.”⁸⁸ Their homage to Oughton, Robbins, and Gold in both statements illustrates not only the grief they felt for their fallen comrades but the immense impact these casualties had on the organization and their policies. “New Morning—Changing Weather” also indicated a return to *New Left Notes* communication. They expanded on their goals, tactics, and even theories, and acknowledged their mistakes. The document reads, “This tendency to consider only bombings or picking up the gun as revolutionary with the glorification of the heavier the better, we’ve called the military error.”⁸⁹ Acknowledging their mistakes revealed that they had allowed internal debates to occur. Even if they no longer had the *New Left Notes* to call out the mistakes of their fellow members, this process took place within the organization through criticism/ self-criticism sessions and meetings like after the townhouse explosion. With a reestablished tolerance for at least some internal debate came an established policy and plan of action and a desire to communicate this plan to the public.

The Weather Bureau also changed the structure of Weather. They would still have collectives across the country and embrace a “need to know” policy for most members, but the Weather Bureau leadership would travel amongst the collectives and be informed of all Weather

⁸⁸ “New Morning—Changing Weather, December 6, 1970” *Sing a Battle Song*, 161-169.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

actions to avoid a rogue collective repeating the mistakes of the New York collective. They also began rebuilding Weather as a secure and elaborate organization connected to other underground networks. The FBI declared twenty-one known Weather members as fugitives in April 1970, disseminating pictures of the wanted fugitives to the public.⁹⁰ The FBI pressure on the organization following the explosion meant that they would need to be securely underground from now on—members could no longer live half underground while maintaining a semblance of an aboveground life. Ayers explains that many members at this point adopted aliases and created papers to support their false identifications, connecting assets to aliases in an untraceable web of false papers.⁹¹ In short, they became a coherent organization with central leadership, rules and limits, and consequences for people who were too radical and violent. Members had learned a lot since the Flint War Council in which violence and radical action were the only requirements for a revolution. They now knew it required much more.

Weather also returned to the issue of the mass movement and tried to find a new source of support amongst the youth. This was immediately evident to the public in their “Declaration of a State of War”: “Freaks are revolutionaries and revolutionaries are freaks. If you want to find us, this is where we are. In every tribe, commune, dormitory, farmhouse, barracks and townhouse where kids are making love, smoking dope and loading guns—fugitives from Amerikan justice are free to go.”⁹² Their direct attempt to connect with youth culture is much more explicit in “New Morning—Changing Weather.” Reflecting on their changing policies after the townhouse explosion, they wrote, “It was a question of revolutionary culture. Either you saw the youth culture that has been developing as bourgeois and decadent and therefore to be treated

⁹⁰ Bureau File Number 100-439048: Section 62.

⁹¹ Ayers, 209-210.

⁹² “Declaration of a State of War,” *Sing a Battle Song*, 150.

as an enemy of the revolution, or you saw it as the forces which produced us, a culture that we are a part of, a young and unformed society (nation).”⁹³ They even included a paragraph explaining the importance of drug use: “organic and consciousness-expanding drugs are weapons of the revolution.”⁹⁴ Considering how little Weather communicated to the public once they were underground, their inclusion of this explicit embrace of youth culture was notable as a key tenet of their post-townhouse explosion organization. Their declaration of youth culture as a nation implied they thought the seeds of a post-revolutionary world could lie with the teens and young adults taking acid trips. This was a dramatic shift from SDS and the early days of Weather in which the seeds of a post-revolution government rested with the working class or the Black community, a shift that was criticized by many people within and outside of the organization.

Cathy Wilkerson did not feel a part of the youth culture. She explained, “I did not feel like I had come from youth culture at all, but rather from the nuclear and civil rights movement.” She goes on to explain that it was a challenge for SDS to encourage hippies to attend meetings, organize political events, or even care about political issues.⁹⁵ An underground newspaper editor illustrated this feeling, warning any hippies who wanted to join the 1968 DNC protest, “If all you want to do is lie in the sun and groove on life, stay away.”⁹⁶ There was a clear skepticism from those who saw themselves as political intellectuals and activists when it came to youth culture organizations. Weather had grown out of one of this intellectual and political culture in SDS, which had formed from Civil Rights organizations like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and based their methods and goals on Marxism. While many members were participants in youth culture and may have been as influenced as it as by Marxism and the Civil

⁹³ “New Morning—Changing Weather,” *Sing a Battle Song*, 164.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 167.

⁹⁵ Wilkerson, 354.

⁹⁶ “Dissenters of Widely Varying Views are Focusing on Chicago” *New York Times*, 18 August 1968.

Rights movement, the weight that Weather placed on youth culture in the formation of their organization was not entirely accurate. In this moment, Weather did appear to be opportunistic, spinning their history to fit a narrative that might appeal to potential supporters.

Weather also helped LSD expert Timothy Leary escape from prison to prove their solidarity with the youth movement, a move that Wilkerson explains was Weather's way of "spinning the image of cool."⁹⁷ In their communique following Leary's escape, Weather explains, "Our organization commits itself to the task of freeing these prisoners of war. We are outlaws, we are free!"⁹⁸ Leary, however, is the only political prisoner that Weather has publicly claimed to help free. Leary was sheltered by Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver on the run in Algeria until Cleaver restricted his movements, stating that the revolution could only be carried out, "...by sober, stone-cold revolutionaries motivated by revolutionary love."⁹⁹

Eldridge Cleaver was not the only Black Panther who questioned the usefulness of drug use to the revolutionary movement. The Panther 21, a group of Black Panthers on trial in 1970 for an armed action that police and FBI infiltrators had instigated, wrote an open letter criticizing "New Morning—Changing Weather" and their embrace of youth culture. They warned it indicated "frustrations and a sense of isolation," and "the loss of direction, the confusion and chaos running rampant out there [in the movement]."¹⁰⁰ They also warned that youth culture groups are no like Weather Underground, the Black Panthers, or other anti-war and anti-racist activist groups. They were not necessarily committed to protecting the Vietnamese or dismantling US imperialism. They may have been anti-war simply because, "they don't like

⁹⁷ Wilkerson, 359.

⁹⁸ "Dr. Timothy Leary" *Sing a Battle Song*, 15 September 1970. 153-155.

⁹⁹ "Eldridge Cleaver on the drug culture," American Archive of Public Broadcasting, Broadcasted on 30 January 1971. https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_28-fj2988307x

¹⁰⁰ "Open Letter to Weatherman Underground from Panther 21" Reprinted in *Breakthrough*, October 1977.

war,” a belief that contradicted the goals of Weather who had just declared a state of war publicly and maintained militant solidarity with the revolution. Their criticism specifically targeted the paragraph in “New Morning—Changing Weather” in which Weather embraced drug use in the youth movement. The Panthers stated, “We—you especially, under the circumstances—must realize that ‘grass and organic consciousness-expanding drugs’ are NOT weapons of the revolution—they may be a tool to bring you together in a sense of community—but they will not bring the Amerikkkan system down.” They explained drugs had been used as a tool of oppression against black communities, pumped into their neighborhoods to distract them from political organizing and resistance. They then asked, “where do blacks and the rest of the third world fit into the scheme of things in your ‘new families?’”¹⁰¹ For an organization that broke with PL and split SDS to support the Black Panthers, their criticism of this new trajectory should have stopped Weather in their tracks or at least pushed them to reconsider. Instead, Weather made no response. In *Outlaws*, Berger explains this grave misstep undermined the authority of Weather as an anti-racist revolutionary group, a misstep they themselves acknowledged years later in a new manifesto called *Prairie Fire*.¹⁰² Their era of reinventing had reopened the possibility of creating a mass movement, but this came at the cost of their other principles and their history like a foundation in Marxism and solidarity with the Black revolutionary fighting force, setting in motion a new phase of Weather that eventually resulted in their dissolution.

Prairie Fire and the Aboveground Movement

Over the next few years, the Weather Underground followed their new operating procedure established after the townhouse explosion. They bombed locations central to the war in Vietnam or in retribution for anti-revolutionary action by the US but warned each location in

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Berger, *Outlaws*, 147-148.

advance to ensure evacuation. On February 28, 1971, Weather bombed the Capitol in response to the invasion of Laos on February 8. After social welfare programs shrunk in California in 1974, Weather bombed the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare building.¹⁰³ They also continued their trend of increased communication with the public to explain their theories and motives. Most bombings were accompanied by a communique. The May 19, 1972 communique was issued after Weather bombed the Pentagon in response to Nixon's escalating bombing campaign in Vietnam. It reads, "Today we attacked the Pentagon, the center of the American military command. We are acting at a time when growing U.S. air and naval shelling are being carried out against the Vietnamese." The rest of the Communique explained the war in Vietnam and Nixon's policies to the American people. The language was precise and lacked their usual counterculture flair, illustrating a return to the serious political organizing of the SDS days and perhaps a maturing of the Weather Underground members, many of whom would be close to thirty years old at this time. In the spirit of educating the people, Weather explained, "The Provisional Revolutionary Government...has proposed a program for peace in Viet Nam. The American people should read this proposal. It calls on the United States government to set a date for total withdrawal from Viet Nam, so that the Vietnamese can solve their own problems."¹⁰⁴ They had by this time stopped spelling 'America' with a 'k', a countercultural and revolutionary spelling of America meant to indicate the imperialist nature of the US. Their communiqués followed this trend: a clear statement on their action and why they did it plus at least a few paragraphs educating their readers on the history of whatever struggle their action attempts to

¹⁰³ A full timeline of Weather bombings is compiled by Weather members in *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiques of the Weather Underground (1970-1974)*. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 59-65.

¹⁰⁴ "The Bombing of the Pentagon," *Sing a Battle Song* 19 May 1972. 184.

draw attention to. Weather now saw their most important role as drawing attention to struggles against US imperialism and violence and educating for the American people.

Their attempt to practice more moderation and safety in their attacks limited the shock value of their bombings. Their commitment to 'safe' bombings allowed the American public to view Weather and their extremism as an inconvenience rather than a sign of a coming revolution or to ignore Weather completely. After the pentagon bombing, the *Washington Post* entitled an article, "Bombing Fails to Disrupt Pentagon," stating, "The blast destroyed a women's lavatory on the Pentagon's fourth floor and caused extensive water damage to the three floors below, but there were no injuries and virtually no disruption of daily business."¹⁰⁵ Each bombing received some press coverage, but this small, invisible group that had committed itself to doing no more harm than water damage had to look for another way to stay relevant. They once again turned their attention back to the issue of the aboveground mass movement.

Ever since Weather moved underground at the end of 1969, people on the New Left and in the American public considered that the organization might be in its final days. In a leftist publication in 1970, James Weinstein published an article entitled, "Weatherman: A lot of thunder but a short reign" in which he explained how the failings of Weather would likely result in the organization's quick demise. He concludes his article by asking, "The scarlet hues of Weatherman sinking in the west raise the question: what next?" already dismissing Weather as a failure six years before their formal dissolution.¹⁰⁶ After the "Declaration of a State of War," a Berkeley student wrote, "I read your communique, and was really excited to find out that you're still here in America, and into doing heavy stuff."¹⁰⁷ This student likely lost track of Weather

¹⁰⁵ "Bombing Fails to Disrupt Pentagon" *Washington Post*, 20 May 1972.

¹⁰⁶ James Weinstein, "Weatherman: A lot of thunder but a short reign" *Weatherman*, (Rampart Press, 1970), 393.

¹⁰⁷ "Notes to the Underground" *Berkeley Tribe*, 12 June 1970. *Weatherman*, 515.

when they moved underground at the end of 1969, as much of the aboveground world did. As an underground organization, staying relevant would require constant action as well as an ability to communicate with the aboveground mass movement. Weather therefore shifted their focus back to the mass movement and to communicating with the aboveground, even at the expense of their armed action. In 1974, they wrote and published their manifesto *Prairie Fire* and began publishing a new bulletin entitled *Osawatomie*. They even participated in creating a documentary in which five leaders of the Weather Underground sat around and discussed theory and visions for a revolution.

Osawatomie reveals an explicit return to SDS methods. Named for an 1856 battle between abolitionists including John Brown and slaveholders, this periodical opened a consistent communication channel between Weather and the aboveground movement.¹⁰⁸ They were not appealing specifically to youth culture and wrote in their “Who We Are” section, “We grow from the civil rights, anti-war and youth movements of the 1960’s, in particular Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).” In another divergence from their original founding principles, Weather wrote to their readers, “Theory and ideology are important tools, and we should make study of Marxism-Leninism an important part of our work.” They still urged that practice of these theories is necessary to create a revolutionary party, but they gave their readers homework, urging them to “study the particular problems and concerns of the people. Look into things deeply. Organizers must be intimately aware of every problem and each injustice...”¹⁰⁹ For an organization that grew from the “action faction” in SDS and rashly threw together shows of machoism to impress the working class, this statement clearly reflected Bernadine Dorn’s

¹⁰⁸ Every issue of *Osawatomie* explains the history behind the name on the second page of the document.

¹⁰⁹ *Osawatomie*, Volume 1, issue 1. Spring 1975.

insistence that Weather return to its roots as a political organization after the townhouse explosion.

Prairie Fire also revealed the return to debate and the importance of ideology and theory to the organization. *Prairie Fire* is very long compared to their communiques and outlined everything from the history of oppression in the US to the Israel-Palestine conflict. They urged, “Organize poor and working people,” the same people they called incapable of anti-racism and revolution only five years earlier. Their primary focus in *Prairie Fire* was once again organizing a mass movement with a cohesive strategy to achieve revolution. They even encouraged debate, saying they “will respond as best they can” to questions, concerns, and ideas inspired by *Prairie Fire*.¹¹⁰ *Prairie Fire* encapsulated everything Weather had learned from their failures from the split of SDS through their bombings, and demonstrated the realization that they needed to create an SDS-like national aboveground organization to truly be leaders of the revolution. Wilkerson recalled, “I, too, held out hope for a remobilized movement that looked like the one we had known, inspired if not led by some new organization, much in the way SDS had influenced activists.”¹¹¹ While Weather was still underground and still a militant revolutionary force, the organization was rapidly forming into something else, something that resembled SDS much more than it resembled Weather in the Days of Rage.

Osawatomie also illustrated a change in the priorities of Weather. These journals were a hodgepodge of current events, history, art, poetry, and calls for action. *Osawatomie* depicted an organization trying to remain politically important and active even though the Vietnam War, their most powerful unifying force, had ended. Now that Weather was attempting to connect to the mass movement, they utilized *Osawatomie* to inform their readers of Marxist principles,

¹¹⁰ *Prairie Fire* in *Sing a Battle Song*, 233.

¹¹¹ Wilkerson, 371.

educate on historical fact, and demonstrate the causes that the movement must still contend with. The Spring 1976 issue is 29 pages and includes articles such as “Zionism is Racist,” an obituary for Paul Robeson, and a brief article in which Weather echoes the calls of SDS for the working class to unify as the proletariat to overthrow the imperialists.¹¹²

Importantly, the language was consistent with their later communiques and was concerned with educating the public rather than inciting anger and violence. Their articles were well researched and thorough. They argued their point but did not consider those who disagree as being inherently racist or imperialist. This is a major shift from their tone at the Flint War Council in December 1969. In fact, the educational tone of the articles seems to specifically target people who are new to these issues and might not immediately agree with Weather illustrating they were at last trying to build a white mass movement to support the oppressed. The article on Zionism explained the creation of the state of Israel by the UN in the 1940s as well as the US involvement in Israeli affairs, but they also anticipate counterarguments about Palestinian antisemitism, writing, “The Palestinians struggle to reclaim their homeland is not antisemitic Robbed of their land, deprived of the most basic human and civil rights, the Palestinian people justly see the state of Israel as their enemy. The only truly incendiary language they use is in the closing paragraph in which they refer to “the imperialist murderers of My Lai” but even with this it is clear they have shifted their tone to better connect with the masses.¹¹³

The Split of the Weather Underground

Weather reconnected with the mass movement, but like SDS, the increased number in membership increased differing opinions. From 1974-1976, Weather, now known as the Weather

¹¹² *Osawatomie*, April 1976.

¹¹³ “Zionism is Racism” *Osawatomie*, April 1976, 22-23.

Underground Organization, attempted to navigate these new issues and adapt the organization to new demands, resulting in a decrease in political action. They were busy publishing *Osawatomie* and creating a documentary about the organization called *Underground* with filmmaker Emile De Antonio. They were in constant communication with their aboveground counterparts who formed the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee. The members of Weather had also changed. Many members were now in monogamous and steady relationships and now considering having children. Their primary target for revolutionary action, the war in Vietnam, had also ended, leaving the members scrambling for a new unifying message for the Left. While they were still underground and still dedicated revolutionaries, greatly decreased the number of bombings they claimed responsibility for following *Prairie Fire*. The changes Weather made to the organization, especially their encouragement of the aboveground Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, resulted in their dissolution in 1976.

The Prairie Fire Organizing Committee defined themselves as an aboveground activist group that broadly supported the ideas and goals of the *Prairie Fire* manifesto. They were originally called the Prairie Fire Distributing Committee, tasked with disseminating the manifesto, but members soon organized study groups to meet and discuss *Prairie Fire*, ironically creating groups to discuss theory and debate like SDS. They also began their own newsletter, *Groundswell*, in 1975 and later published *Breakthrough*, a journal they published well into the 1980s. *PFOC* naturally had a close relationship with Weather. In fact, Bernadine Dohrn's younger sister Jennifer Dohrn was one of the leaders of *PFOC*. Weather was still underground, however, and most of their members were fugitives. This meant that *PFOC* had to organize much of their aboveground events with the advice of Weather members, but without their direct involvement in the events.

The Hard Times conference in Chicago on January 30- February 1, 1976 demonstrated this. It followed the same format as many of the SDS national conferences. PFOC worked with a coalition of other Leftist organizations and planned different workshops for participants to visit.¹¹⁴ While the conference initially seemed to be very successful, attracting over two thousand participants outdoing the attendance of the Days of Rage by more than 100%, they soon ran into the first round of criticisms that hinted at the trouble to come. A Black caucus formed at the Hard Times conference, criticizing PFOC and by extension Weather, for no longer prioritizing the needs of the Black community. Another Leftist group at the conference recalled the caucus criticized the conference for not including Black people in the planning process or in the workshops despite the need to educate the public on Black Nationalism.¹¹⁵ Weather and PFOC had taken on a string of new issues to focus on including the recession, working class organization, military struggles in other countries, but they had once again neglected to focus on supporting their allies in the Black community. Weather split SDS because PL did not support Black Nationalism. Six years later, that same criticism was hurled back at the leaders of Weather.

The Hard Times conference was perhaps a success for the Left, but it delivered a real blow to Weather and PFOC who was bound to their underground parent organization. Weather responded to these criticisms by undergoing a new round of criticism/self-criticism sessions. They felt obligated to report back on their findings in order to prove they were not opportunists succumbing to their white privilege. In an issue of *Osawatomie* following the Hard Times conference, Weather admitted to and tried to rectify four critical errors that they had found: “abandoning revolutionary anti-imperialism, submerging the national question into the class question, especially in relation to the Black liberation struggle, downplaying the struggle against

¹¹⁴ “Hard Times in Chicago: National Conference on Economic Crisis” *On the Line*, March 1976.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the special oppression of women/ sexism and male supremacy, [and] downplaying the essential role of revolutionary theory and communist organization.”¹¹⁶ All of these points were echoes of the debates SDS was dealing with at their final national convention in 1969. The remainder of the article discussed their ignorance around the working class and their mistake in thinking revolution would occur naturally from the people. Both were causes of the Days of Rage. They also admitted they had failed to support Black nationalism and feminist issues, two challenges in which the white, predominantly male Weather had always attempted to address but fallen short.

At this point, Weather was no longer utilizing revolutionary violence to achieve their goals. They were a political organization that no one could meet or see and who seemed to have lost touch with the issues of the aboveground. PFOC was a much more visible target for criticism, however, and acted quickly to protect their organization. To prove they were not like Weather and could still be leaders in the left, PFOC systematically dismantled their parent organization.

In the wake of the Hard Times conference, PFOC faced as much criticism as Weather, if not more. They quickly began to scapegoat Weather, admitting they had made mistakes but that they, unlike Weather, could change. PFOC was also experiencing factionalism of their own. A faction within PFOC known as the Revolutionary Committee believed the leaders of Weather were no longer revolutionary. They had been underground for so long and were no longer in touch with the aboveground movements that had blossomed in the 1970s such as the feminist movement and LGBT community.¹¹⁷ The leader of the Revolutionary Committee, Clayton Van Lydegraf, advocated a return to the armed struggle Weather had championed in 1969. Like

¹¹⁶ “Anti-imperialism vs. opportunism: Self-Criticism” *Osawatomie*, 1 June 1976.

¹¹⁷ “Chapter 8: Hard Times”, *Mother Country Radicals*.

Weather expelling PL, the Revolutionary Committee begins pushing members they thought were too moderate or opportunistic out of Weather and discrediting the organization.

They specifically targeted Bernadine Dohrn with criticism/self-criticism sessions, eventually forcing her to create a tape admitting everything she and Weather had done wrong. Dohrn explained on *Mother Country Radicals* that these sessions were attacks on her as a leader and a revolutionary, although they often contained criticisms of her as a person.¹¹⁸ The transcript of the tape that resulted from these criticism/self-criticism sessions reveals how serious the situation had become for Weather. Dohrn declared, “I repudiate and denounce the central committee of the WUO, myself included, who bear particular responsibility for the criminal consequences of having led the WUO into full blown opportunism.” She condemned Weather for being opportunistic, aiding white supremacy and intentionally oppressing women and hindering the feminist movement: “We sought therefore to oppose, control or destroy who disagreed with us; to control Third World groups, destroy the women’s movement, and to achieve hegemony of the WUO on the left.” She even specifically named Jeff Jones and Bill Ayers as the creators of this plan, condemning them as white supremacists and male chauvinists.¹¹⁹ At the time of this tape, she was a close friend of Jeff Jones and was expecting a child with her future husband Bill Ayers. When she read the transcript of the tape on *Mother Country Radicals*, she remarked, “I said what they wanted to hear... I didn’t know what I thought either... That makes me sick that I wrote that. We could’ve just made a mistake. It’s so grandiose and horrible and cringing.” Dohrn explained that she put herself through this because she believed in the movement and the process, and even feared the Revolutionary Committee might be right about her and Weather.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “Tape from Bernadine Dohrn.” In “The Split of the Weather Underground Organization.” *Breakthrough*, 1977.

¹²⁰ “Chapter 8: Hard Times” *Mother Country Radicals*. 14 July 2022.

Weather had tried so hard to relinquish their white and class privilege that they took the accusation that they hadn't very seriously. She was also following the trend of Weather to admit when they made a mistake in the hopes of growing from it. After the townhouse, they admitted their mistakes and became a more cohesive organization because of it. Perhaps Dohrn recognized the danger in not admitting mistakes. Refusing to take responsibility for chauvinism would only prove that she was hindering the revolution. At this point, Dohrn and Weather were in an impossible situation with no real hope of getting out. Weather quickly fell apart as members were pitted against each other or expelled or simply could no longer take the constant criticism and accusations they were experiencing in 1976.

PFOC published a new bulletin called *Breakthrough* in 1977. Their issue entitled, "The Split of the Weather Underground Organization" detailed why Weather was beyond saving but why PFOC was still eligible to lead the revolutionary movement. The issue is dedicated to the faults of Weather, sometimes going line by line through *Osawatomie* articles pointing out how opportunistic and unrevolutionary Weather had become. The beliefs of the Revolutionary Committee are immediately clear in the introduction, "The WUO rode on its reputation as a revolutionary anti-imperialist organization gained through its history of armed actions... Since the publication of *Prairie Fire*, the organization systematically negated these politics when it abandoned armed propaganda and liquidated national and women's oppression in *Osawatomie*."¹²¹ Weather did cease their bombings and overt militant action after the publication of *Prairie Fire*, clearly demonstrating a recognition that building a mass movement should be their priority while violence could alienate people from the movement. Unfortunately for Weather, this cast them in the role of moderate opportunists who would rather make movies

¹²¹ "Introduction" in "The Split of the Weather Underground Organization," *Breakthrough*, 1977.

about themselves and talk about revolution than take action to help the revolution. In a word, there was a new “action faction” that resented what they saw as too much talk and not enough action. This time, Weather was in the role of PL facing a faction that believed they were standing in the way of revolutionary progress. Weather learned their lesson from the Days of Rage: an open endorsement of violence will prevent masses from showing up. The people who read and supported *Prairie Fire*, however, knew Weather’s history and saw a retreat from their militancy as a sign of opportunism.

The issue included other articles like “Class and Revolutionary Politics” in which PFOC criticized Weather for not clearly emphasizing the importance of nationalist struggles in communities in the US. They wrote, “our task is to combine the universal truths (world experience) of Marxism-Leninism with the revolutionary experience of the working class and oppressed peoples of the US.”¹²² Again, this article echoed Weather’s own claims from their founding documents. They were committed to Marxist principles and believed in the working class as a revolutionary base, but they also recognized the US contained oppressed groups who contributed to the revolution through nationalist politics, not working-class solidarity. This was a direct response to the criticisms hurled at PFOC at Hard Times. PFOC does criticize Weather for being anti-theory in this article, explaining that Weather’s writings on the working class revealed a laziness in understanding Marxist ideology. They defined this “extreme hostility in theory and science, except in terms of immediate results” as “a major weakness, not only of the new left, but of the US historically.” At this point, Weather made a direct attempt to explain their actions as it pertained to their ideological principles, but like the split of SDS, PFOC could easily discredit Weather by saying they did not truly understand the needs of the revolution. Weather utilized

¹²² “Class and Revolutionary Politics” Ibid.

this same technique when they argued that Marxist-Leninist principles encouraged theory to be formed from real world practice which PL was not doing. Ironically, PFOC did not criticize Weather in their Days of Rage days when their only guiding ideology was violence and destruction. They used Weather's new communication with the mass movement and scrutinized every line they authored in *Prairie Fire* or *Osawatomie* for mistakes.

"The Split" also included "W.U.O. Public Self-Criticism" in which PFOC closely examines the *Osawatomie* article, "Anti-imperialism vs. opportunism: Self-Criticism" and explained why this is not actually a self-criticism. In fact, they said "true self-criticism of the WUO's errors [is] impossible" because of the corrupt leadership and their lack of Marxist understanding.¹²³ Another article, "Criticism of the Central Committee" targeted specific leaders of Weather and charged them with different "crimes" against sects of the revolution such as gay liberation and the women's movement. With Weather firmly discredited, PFOC had to reestablish themselves as leaders of the revolution. Van Lydegraf contributed an article entitled, "In Defense of Prairie Fire" admitting mistakes that PFOC had made—it was PFOC who had worked so closely with Weather and hosted the Hard Times Conference—while also explaining that they were still going to use the best parts of *Prairie Fire*.¹²⁴ As their organization was founded around and named after the manifesto of a group they had now destroyed, this article was a reclamation of their foundation and name for PFOC.

Weather could not recover from their final criticism/self-criticism sessions. They had faced the same accusations they had hurled at PL or anyone else who had opposed them. They had seemingly abandoned their foundational principles, turned their back on the Black community, and quit fighting the revolution. They were called racists just as they had called

¹²³ "WUO Public Self-Criticism" Ibid.

¹²⁴ "In Defense of Prairie Fire," Ibid.

those who did not support Black nationalism and the working class who would not fight with them. They were also utterly out of touch with the aboveground movement, leaving out any mention of new groups that had formed while they were underground. They returned to the age-old problem for the Left of how to create a mass movement, but the mass movement looked very different in 1976 than it did in 1969. Just as the factions of SDS illustrate an evolution of the organization as more people were attracted to the movement, PFOC was evolution from Weather, keeping many of the same beliefs, goals, and methods as Weather but adapting to what was needed in the Left in 1976.

Before Weather split, they asked, “Can we overcome the small points that divide us?... Can we transform our lives in order to play our part in the developing storm?”¹²⁵ The great irony was of course Weather’s own history of expelling or disparaging anyone who strayed from their own idea of what would create the revolution. When PL believed they needed class solidarity above everything else to make a revolution, Weather expelled them from SDS for being racist and hurting the revolution. When people questioned whether explicit and offensive violence was the best course for revolution, they accepted that only members in Weather were dedicated enough to help in the revolutionary struggle and abandon their own privilege. With each mistake Weather made, they learned a lesson, but the lesson of staying united even in the face of differences came too late to save them from their own dissolution.

SDS, Weather, and PFOC all faced the same challenge. They had to prove that in spite of everything they were, they were still capable of being revolutionaries. These organizations were mostly white, middle and upper class, well-educated and integrated into American society. Their biggest fear was not being revolutionary enough and succumbing to their white privilege or

¹²⁵ “Where We Stand” *Osawatomie*, 1 April 1975, 3.

accepting the comfortable lives their parents had in mind for them. Because of this, these organizations were especially prone to criticizing their own peers in order to better establish themselves as the right kind of revolutionary. Of course, the right kind of white revolutionary according to the groups that these organizations allied with was one that could successfully build a white mass movement to support the oppressed and make real and lasting change in the US. With so many big questions to divide them and their own insecurities and guilt from their privilege, however, group after group failed to accept one another for their differences, mistakenly believing they alone could lead the white revolutionary struggle instead of combining forces and perhaps accomplishing more of the big hopes the New Left had had in the 1960s.

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