

**You don't need a Weatherman...to ruin the Boston Marathon**

**Curtis Seltzer**

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—The closest I've come to the bombing that killed, maimed and terrorized innocent individuals at the Boston Marathon last week happened more than four decades ago.

From my time at Columbia University in the spring of 1968, I knew by sight and sound a couple of the leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) who later formed the Weather Underground Organization (WUO).

On March 6, 1970, they had moved from campus protests to making bombs. An accidental explosion occurred around noon that day which demolished a WUO bomb factory in the basement of an elegant, four-story townhouse at 18 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street in New York's Greenwich Village.

A group of six had purchased 100 pounds of dynamite and blasting caps in Keene, N.H., to make pipe bombs that they stuffed with roofing nails. The plan was to explode the bombs at a noncommissioned officers' dance at Ft. Dix, N.J., and at various spots on Columbia's campus, including the main library.

The townhouse bombers were part of an underground organization of perhaps 500 to 1,000 who saw themselves as revolutionary communists waging war against the United States government, capitalism and the American culture from which they all came (summarized as, "Work. Study. Get Ahead. Kill.").

They had become increasingly extreme in their politics, moving from peaceful civil disobedience to terror tactics they styled as "armed struggle."

In some ways, events -- the War, conscription, the 1968 assassinations, the politics of polarization, Nixon's "Southern strategy," racial conflicts and federal counter measures against black militants and white left-wingers -- provided a platform for their dive into the abyss.

But in other ways, they did this to themselves through their internal dynamics, celebration of "revolutionary violence," Marxism and self-indulgence in the name of "social change." The deep-seated hostility all felt toward authority was, I've come to believe, to some extent an extension of their rebellion against their WWII-era parents, as sociologist Daniel Bell wrote at the time.

The anti-personnel bombs they were fashioning would, they thought, “bring home” a small bit of the War’s violence and unjustness by killing Americans in America. They thought that escalating anti-war tactics into a domestic guerrilla rebellion through sabotage, assassination and random killing would create public pressure that would force President Nixon to end the conflict and also overthrow American capitalism and imperialism.

The idiocy of this approach was apparent to those, including me, who were not ensnared in their self-reinforcing group think.

But it was convenient to just dismiss them as a handful of “crazies” who were thrashing around as the deranged do. Not many realized at the time how deeply they came to represent the left in the public’s mind and how profoundly they discredited that side of the political spectrum.

Three of the five bomb-makers in the townhouse were killed instantly -- Diana Oughton, Ted Gold and Terry Robbins. All were bright and college-educated -- Bryn Mawr, Columbia and Kenyon, respectively -- from middle-class families. The two survivors -- Kathy Boudin and Cathlyn Platt Wilkerson whose father owned the townhouse -- fit a similar profile.

Boudin (Bryn Mawr) had checked out a book from the library, The Chemistry of Powder and Explosives. She dogmatically advocated anti-personnel bombings; Oughton had reservations.

A sixth member of their collective, former Columbia undergraduate John Jacobs, who along with Boudin and Robbins was a leading proponent of terror tactics, was away from the townhouse when the bomb exploded.

Robbins has been described by those who saw him before the explosion as being out of touch with reality. He apparently crossed the wires, causing the blast that obliterated him and Oughton who was by his side. Gold was killed as he entered the townhouse on his way back from the nearby Strand Bookstore. Boudin and Wilkerson managed to escape.

Jacobs felt responsible for the accidental deaths. After being drummed out of WUO in December, 1970 for advocating “the military error,” he spent the rest of his life underground, mostly in and around Vancouver, British Columbia, working blue-collar jobs, smoking dope and avoiding politics.

After the explosion, WUO backed away from anti-personnel bombing. They refocused their bombings on buildings and bathrooms.

The communism WUO espoused for the United States can only be imagined. Boudin and Bernadine Dohrn, another leader, expressed a bloodlust admiration for the Manson family’s murders of Sharon Tate and others. The idea of WUO running a country as a dictatorship of “the people” was a dreadful prospect. I’d seen an early version at Columbia in the spring of 1968.

Not enough people, including me, said strongly enough at the time that this lunacy was not acceptable left-wing politics.

The War ended in 1975, about the time WUO had played itself out. This ideology founded on terror never gained support. Its few hundred adherents found nowhere to go from where they had landed.

Boudin, a WUO holdout, would later plead guilty to one count of felony murder in a 1981 Brinks armored-car robbery in Nanuet, N.Y., where two policemen and a guard were shot dead. She served 22 years of a 20-year-to-life sentence. Paroled in 2003, she is now an adjunct social-work professor at Columbia where she earned her graduate degree after release.

She did admirable work with fellow prisoners on AIDS, parent-child relations and adult education. She expressed shame and remorse for her role and responsibility for the Brinks murders (Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin, Summer, 2001). But at her 2003 parole hearing, she soft-pedaled her associations, ideas and roles in WUO activities.

Wilkerson (Swarthmore) stayed underground for 10 years and then served 11 months for illegal possession of dynamite. She's spent the more than two decades since her release teaching math in high schools and adult-education programs.

Members of WUO received very light sentences, because the FBI had engaged in such flagrant due-process violations (illegal searches and wiretaps) under its anti-radical COINTELPRO efforts that prosecutors had to drop most of their charges.

I don't think it can be argued that WUO's activities added a single gram of weight to the scale of constructive political change, or even to achieving its own goals. WUO did, however, seize the country's imagination, though not the time.

The Tsarnaev brothers who are accused of planting the bombs that killed three and wounded more than 260 in Boston last week seem to have been similarly committed to killing Americans in America.

The 1970 townhouse bombers came from families that had financial and social resources with functioning connections to American ways and culture. They were not children of families that had been exploited or oppressed.

The Tsarnaevs' father, a lawyer, worked as an auto mechanic after coming to the United States in 2002. He didn't adjust to urban life here and returned to Dagestan with his wife. He grew closer to radical Islam on his return, which seems to have been a factor in their divorce after 25 years.

The WUO bombers had done well in elite American schools until their political ideas took them into broad-gauged opposition.

Nineteen-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the survivor, adjusted to America more completely and readily than his brother, Tamerlan, seven years his senior.

Dzhokhar appears to have done well in high school, but was having trouble in college. Tamerlan does not seem to have tried very hard with his engineering studies and had little going for him other than an American wife and child. His increasing alienation from the culture in which he lived matches that of the WUO in 1970.

The brothers were Muslims and ethnic Chechens who do not appear to have ever lived in Chechnya. It's not exactly clear how the parents gained asylum status here.

Tamerlan's identity became increasingly locked into his support for the Muslim Chechens who have been fighting Russia for independence for more than two decades. He seems to have romanticized the Chechnya he never knew. He embraced the idea of "global jihad, which advocates assassinations, bombings, sabotage and kidnappings.

News reports suggest that Tamerlan held sway over his younger brother and brought him toward jihadist views.

The Tsarnaevs bought explosives from the Seabrook, N.H., location of a national chain, Phantom Fireworks. They seem to have followed a bomb design published in an online Al-Qaeda magazine, Inspire.

The brothers appear to have been self-directed freelancers. No evidence has yet come to light that they were financed or directed by any jihadist organization.

Like the townhouse six, the Tsarnaevs opposed American wars. They -- Tamerlan, in particular -- saw anti-Islam motivations behind U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The WUO's ideology was secular, but like many cults, it took on an intense us-against-them religious fervor as it became increasingly isolated and inward-looking.

The Tsarnaevs and the WUO bombers alike grew addicted to an ideology that advocated terror attacks in the name of a greater good. The ideas of terror, "global jihad" and "armed struggle" emerged in large part from an internal group dynamic that in both WUO and jihadist circles rewarded those advocating as much violence as possible.

Terror against civilians is a tactic of an opposition that's small, weak and not gaining. Its intent is to get a third party, usually a government, to

stop doing something. It's often justified as a legitimate response against state terror.

Anti-civilian terror is easy to do and causes great distress. Soft targets are plentiful. Bombings are a quick-fix action that beguiles its advocates, because it looks like it has done something significant.

Soft-target bombings can never be completely prevented. On a scale of warfare, they amount to no more than a nuisance and usually create more outrage and backlash than new support. But the damage terror does to innocent individuals and to our collective sense of safety in daily affairs is huge. Governments always respond with repression and a drift toward a police state, from which no one benefits.

It seems to be almost universally true that terror against civilians, alone, never defeats or changes the policy its perpetrators oppose. It's self-defeating, because it disgusts almost everyone.

I think the job falls to non-jihadist Muslims here and in other countries to stop jihadist terror against innocents. That means opposing the jihadist ideology in both its soft and hard forms.

At the most cynical level, anti-personnel terror is a tactic that doesn't build support for opposition to U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the legitimate claim of Palestinians for a sovereign state.

It's an ugly business, turning your own in. But if you don't do it, you -- and everyone else -- will suffer repercussions that are not deserved.

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