

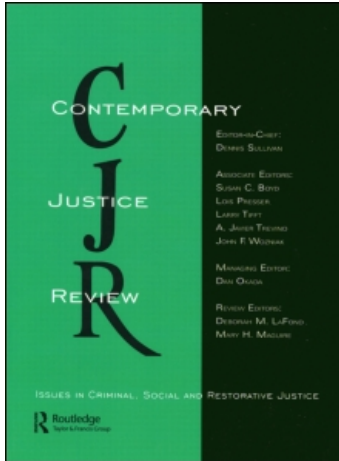
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Perspectives on Ecoterrorism: Catalysts, Conflations, and Casualties

Randall Amster

The invocation of the label 'terrorist' has been deployed with increasing frequency and to such an extent that it blunts effective dialogue on important cultural and political issues. In particular, the burgeoning category of 'ecoterrorism' has emerged as the leading domestic threat, according to officials. It has increasingly been invoked as a method of discrediting and investigating mainstream environmental groups that employ strategies of longstanding, acceptable, democratic behavior. The prospects for meaningful dissent are becoming tenuous at best, drawing parallels with US history wherein acts that would now be called terrorism were justified on the grounds that nonviolent petitions for redress had been rendered to no avail. In this sense, the terrorism talisman becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, since clamping down on legitimate peaceful dissent tends to foster the appearance of more confrontational, even violent, methods. This cycle is not without its casualties, and the personal toll it can take is often omitted in the analysis.

Keywords: Terrorism; Ecoterrorism; Patriot Act, Environmentalism; Animal Rights; Social Movements

Introduction

Recent revelations about domestic spying by the government, the widespread use of torture in prosecuting the so-called 'war on terror,' and the repeated invocation of 9/11 as a catchall justification have left many gravely concerned about the moral and political legitimacy of the United States. In this historical moment, it appears to some that a dying empire is clutching at its last straws, that oil as the prime economic lubricant has almost certainly peaked, and that environmental degradation is exacerbated by initiatives such as SUV subsidies and the promotion of greater resource extraction. Against this backdrop of surveillance, perpetual war, fear-mongering, rampant waste, and surging environmental assault, a new 'threat' has emerged that somehow has

Randall Amster is a professor of peace studies at Prescott College. Correspondence to: Peace Studies and Social Thought, Prescott College, 220 Grove Avenue, Prescott, AZ 86301, USA. Email: ramster@prescott.edu

vaulted to the top of the charts as a dominant front in the ongoing conflict of 'good versus evil' and in the battle for the very soul of civilization itself. Enter the specter of *ecoterrorism*.

If it seems that I am exaggerating the attention paid to this burgeoning threat, look no further than recent events and the government's own assessments for confirmation. In early December 2005, six individuals were arrested in a nationwide sting on alleged ecoterrorists (Shukovsky, 2005). All stand accused of various federal crimes involving arson or explosive devices dating back to 1997, including the destruction of a wildlife research facility, wild horse corrals, a reputed GMO tree farm, an SUV dealership, and most notably the ski lift expansion in Vail, Colorado. Invoking provisions of the USA Patriot Act to conduct the investigations, searches, and seizures, the government created a national splash by billing this as a major salvo in the war on terror. Indeed, in 2002 while testifying before Congress, James F. Jarboe, Chief of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division, referred to the Animal and Earth Liberation Fronts (ALF/ELF) as 'a serious terrorist threat' that would be considered on a par in terms of investigative priorities with 'the recent focus on international terrorism' (FBI, 2002). In the summer of 2005, FBI Deputy Assistant Director John Lewis proclaimed ALF/ELF the 'number one domestic terrorism threat' despite the fact, as CNN reported in August 2005, that 'no one has died from any of these attacks' (Schuster, 2005)—a point echoed by Chief Jarboe when he noted that these groups adhered to an 'operational philosophy [that] discourages acts that harm "any animal, human and nonhuman"' (FBI, 2002). And in fact, no human or animal was injured in the acts attributed to the recent eco-arrestees.

William (Bill) Rodgers, co-proprietor of the Catalyst Infoshop and Bookstore in Prescott, Arizona and a personal friend of mine, was one of those arrested in the recent crackdown. In court hearings after his arrest, the federal government, through unsupported hearsay and uncharged allegations, anointed him the 'mastermind' of ecoterrorist operations in the United States (Hendricks, 2005), essentially branding him the bin Laden of the radical environmental movement. At his detention hearing, the government even went so far as to proffer prurient innuendo about child pornography (a photo of a nude young woman leaning against a tree) and referenced three firearms that were found during the search, including a vintage collectible gun (interestingly, despite allegations of terrorism and being 'a danger to society,' none of the weapons were actually seized since they were all apparently legal). Rodgers and the other eco-arrestees would face penalties ranging from 20 to 290 years for acts in which no-one was injured or killed. All were initially denied bail despite financial support and significant ties to their communities. Trial dates have been pushed back repeatedly and are now set to begin in the fall of 2006, at least for those who have not plead guilty.

I offer this introduction to set the tone for a deeper analysis of the contours of ecoterrorism than that often undertaken in the media or by the state. I do not intend this article to comprise a moral justification for the actions ostensibly taken on behalf of the environment, nor do I intend it as a moral condemnation. I merely aspire to generate a dialogue that touches upon both political and personal dimensions in exploring a burgeoning phenomenon that is bound up with larger issues of war and peace, security

and liberty, and the relationship between humans and the biosphere. As with any such effort, this piece is intended as the beginning of a conversation in which reasonable minds can—and often do, rightly—differ. For me, this is when notions of ‘social change’ are at their most viable.

Terrorism: A Primer

In testimony given before Congress in 2002, Chief Jarboe of the FBI’s Counterterrorism Division defined ‘domestic terrorism’ in the FBI’s lexicon as

the unlawful use, or threatened use, of violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States (or its territories) without foreign direction, committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives (FBI, 2002).

He continued to define eco-terrorism specifically as

the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims or property by an environmentally-oriented, sub national group for environmental-political reasons, or aimed at an audience beyond the target, often of a symbolic nature (FBI, 2002).

Chief Jarboe then cited a number of examples of ecoterrorism, including some that were unsolved at the time but have now been attributed to the recent wave of eco-arrestees, including Bill Rodgers. Of particular note in this calculus is the inclusion of acts solely against ‘property’ for political, social, or environmental purposes—removing the notion that an act should harm ‘persons’ in order to be considered terrorism. This contradicts a leading internationally accepted definition advanced by the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, which states that ‘the targets of terrorism are civilians’ and stresses that terrorism ‘is an act purposely directed against civilians’ (Gristmill, 2005).

Lowering the threshold for terrorism to include acts against property also contravenes the understandings of some academics and individuals in radical movements who have engaged in a ‘longstanding debate over property destruction and its validity as a form of non-violent protest’ (Oko, 2002). Taking up these themes, Dave Foreman, in his classic and controversial how-to guide *Ecodefense*, argues that ‘monkeywrenching is nonviolent resistance to the destruction of natural diversity and wilderness. It is never directed against human beings or other forms of life. It is aimed at inanimate machines and tools that are destroying life’ (Foreman & Haywood, 1993, p. 9). In a scholarly assessment of monkeywrenching tactics, Thomas Shevory (1996, pp. 190, 195) affirms that for activists such as Foreman, ‘the destruction of property is not considered to be a “violent act,”’ and further contends that in some views

actions against property ought to be judged in terms of broad political purposes and not on the moral distinction between violent and non-violent behavior. In other words, property’s meaning is socially constructed, and actions resulting in its destruction need to be judged within an historical and political context.

Bluntly addressing these contextual parameters, Elaine Close, a spokesperson for the ELF, opines:

Property destruction targets the motive behind environmental destruction: profit.... I don't consider damaging property to be violence. The end goal of the ELF is to save life on this planet, to stop violence. If we are concerned about violence, then we have to be serious about stopping environmental destruction (quoted in MotherJones.com, 2002).

In terms similar to the FBI's working definition, the USA Patriot Act passed in 2001 defines terrorism as

activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States (18 U.S.C. 2331(5)).

Many critics have pointed out the broad and dangerously vague nature of the term *terrorism* as contained in recent federal legislation. Steven Best, for example, a philosophy professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, has observed that

labeling legitimate acts of protest as 'eco-terror' is made possible through fuzzy definitions in the USA Patriot Act ... nearly any protest group can fit the definition of terrorists, for what is it to 'intimidate' or 'coerce' a 'civilian population' or 'to influence the policy of the government by intimidation or coercion'? Protests are often intimidating, and their entire point is to 'influence' policy (quoted in Hearn, 2005).

Not coincidentally, it has recently been reported in the *New York Times* that 'counterterrorism agents at the FBI have conducted numerous surveillance and intelligence-gathering operations that involved, at least indirectly, groups active in causes as diverse as the environment, animal cruelty, and poverty relief' (Lichtblau, 2005). The article notes that, after 9/11, the government

loosened restrictions on the FBI's investigative powers ... in developing terrorism leads. The bureau has used that authority to investigate not only groups with suspected ties to foreign terrorists, but also protest groups suspected of having links to violent or disruptive activities

including Greenpeace, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and the Catholic Worker movement (Lichtblau, 2005). At the same time, the *Washington Post* observed that 'FBI and government Joint Terrorism Task Forces across the country have expanded the definition of domestic terrorism to people who engage in mainstream political activity, including nonviolent protest and civil disobedience' (Hsu, 2005); as one commentator has observed, 'the definition of domestic terrorism already is broad enough to include a whole lot of people doing nothing to terrify anyone' (Spencer 2005b). And immediately on the heels of these reports came widely reported revelations that the government has in fact been engaged in broad, widespread, and warrantless domestic spying since at least 2001 (e.g., CNN, 2005).

Back in early 2002, when the memories of 9/11 were still fresh and the threat of foreign terror at its height, FBI Counterterrorism Chief Jarboe proclaimed that the

agency had 'developed a strong response to the threats posed by domestic and international terrorism.' He cited the creation of as many as 56 Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) with staff at every FBI field office in the country as representing 'an effective response to the threats posed to U.S. communities by domestic and international terrorism.' (Note that the recent wave of eco-arrests were in fact undertaken and accomplished by a JTTF originating in the Pacific Northwest.) Chief Jarboe went on to conclude finally that the agency

and all of our federal, state, and local law enforcement partners will continue to strive to address the difficult and unique challenges posed by eco-terrorists. Despite the recent focus on international terrorism, we remain fully cognizant of the full range of threats that confront the United States (FBI, 2002).

Interestingly, even predating the events of 9/11 there was significant hysteria about ecoterrorism, reflected in the preface of a 2000 book on the subject: 'A new environmental problem has entered the limelight in recent years. A problem far more dangerous to the present and future of our world than any pollutant previously discovered: The problem of eco-terrorism and eco-extremism' (Miller, 2000). In that same year, Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-Ca.), who recently pleaded guilty to accepting bribes, proposed HR 5429, the Researchers and Farmers Freedom from Terrorism Act of 2000, which was designed to increase penalties and establish a national clearinghouse for 'ecoterrorism incidents.' In support of the bill, Cunningham implored:

All across America, animal rights terrorists have declared war on our nation's farmers and researchers. These terrorists claim that they are fighting for a noble cause. However, their violent reign of terror is not a noble or just cause; it is a threat to all American security and liberty.... These groups advocate the harassment of people that have a prime goal for the betterment of mankind (quoted in Woolf, 2000).

In June of 2001, Rep. George Nethercutt (R-Wash.) introduced the Agri-Terrorism Prevention Act, which was designed to impose and increase mandatory minimum sentences, and even included the death penalty in certain cases. 'Is it harsh?' Nethercutt rhetorically asked, 'Certainly it's harsh. But I think if there isn't a harsh response there will be harsh activity on behalf of the terrorists' (quoted in Burns, 2001). Finally, in a speech on Capitol Hill before the Frontiers of Freedom Institute in mid-2001, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) issued a remarkable statement that seems quite prescient in retrospect:

With the election of George W. Bush, the battle lines are redrawn. Rather than continually reacting to the outrageous legislative and regulatory proposals offered by others, falling into the political trap of being denounced as 'anti-environment,' we now have the opportunity to be more proactive. We must be that much more persuasive. We must be that much more astute. We must be that much more conscious of environmental issues and concerns in order to guard against excessive governmental intrusions into our economy and our culture. The environment-versus-development argument has been a politically calculated conflict. It has been a war without an enemy, and yet our rural families and their children are its casualties. The election of George W. Bush holds forth the promise that this is a battle we can begin to win. I am excited at the opportunity we have to restore balance

to our country's natural resource policies and to the debate surrounding them (quoted in *Frontiers of Freedom Institute*, 2001, p. 45).

In terms of legislative efforts contemplated subsequent to 9/11 and the Patriot Act, the Associated Press (AP) reported in May 2005 that conservative lobbyists and lawmakers were pushing a national effort to pass state laws creating separate offenses for acts considered to constitute ecoterrorism (AP, 2005a). The head of the FBI's terrorism unit in Ohio noted that 'state ecoterrorism bills could allow more federal terrorism prosecutions under the Patriot Act' (AP, 2005a). By October of 2005, Senator James Inhofe (R-Okla.) had introduced S. 1926, the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act of 2005, which would create penalties up to and including death (depending on the severity of damage caused or life threatened) for acts undertaken 'for the purpose of damaging or disrupting an animal enterprise,' including actions that intentionally damage, disrupt, 'or cause the loss of any property (including animals or records),' or that contemplate 'a course of conduct involving threats, acts of vandalism, property damage, trespass, harassment, or intimidation' (S. 1926). In this context, an 'animal enterprise' means 'a commercial or academic enterprise that uses or sells animals or animal products for profit, food or fiber production, agriculture, research, or testing,' and includes zoos, furriers, and rodeos in addition to entities such as research facilities and factory farms (S. 1926). A specific example would be the National Wildlife Research Center, which advocates 'wildlife damage management' through the development of 'technology to reduce wildlife problems' and the 'registration of chemicals and drugs used to manage wildlife' (National Wildlife Research Center, 2005); notably, Bill Rodgers was officially charged with the destruction of the Center's research facility in Olympia, Washington in 1998, although the government implicated him in a number of other ecoterror acts as well.

Conflating Categories: Ecoterrorism or Environmentalism?

In 2004, Senator Inhofe submitted a 30-page report to Congress calling for investigations into groups such as ALF and ELF, and any of their potential sources of funding, which might extend to organizations such as Greenpeace or PETA. 'Just like al Qaeda or any other terrorist organization, ELF and ALF cannot accomplish their goals without money, membership and the media,' Inhofe declared (quoted in Lewis, 2005). Indeed, 'lawmakers have compared the [ELF's] loose, secret membership to al Qaeda' (Martinez, 2004), and a memorandum released in late 2005 specifically alluded to Greenpeace's role in 'suspicious activity with a nexus to international terrorism' (Lewis, 2005). Earlier in 2005, a draft of the year's terrorism priorities from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reportedly 'did not mention right-wing terrorist groups (such as militias), while eco-terrorism was placed front and center' (Kavanagh, 2005). A terrorism specialist at the Rand Corporation was likewise skeptical about elevating ecoterrorism above other domestic forms, pointing out that 'anti-abortion campaigners ... are more violent, having murdered individuals' (quoted in Harding, 2001). And when Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.) asked to testify before a congressional panel that discussed ecoterrorism and threats to the nation's infrastructure, 'his request was denied by the panel's chair, Sen. James Inhofe'; as reported in *Grist*

Magazine, this was ‘only the second time in history ... that a member of Congress had not been given the privilege of making remarks before a panel’ (Kavanagh, 2005).

Most strikingly, in April 2005, the publication *Congressional Quarterly* (through its on-line publication *CQ Homeland Security*) released a report by the DHS with a section marked ‘Threat and Vulnerability Assessment,’ noting that the report ‘does not mention anti-government groups, white supremacist and other radical right-wing movements, which have staged numerous terrorist attacks that have killed scores of Americans’ (quoted in Martin, 2005). Under the heading ‘Who are the adversaries?’ the report mentions al Qaeda as the main overall threat, while

the only other domestic threat specifically noted is from so-called ‘eco-terrorists,’ who [according to the report] ‘will continue to focus their attacks on property damage in an effort to change policy.’ The document claims that although ‘publicly ALF and ELF promote nonviolence toward human life ... some members may escalate their attacks.’ It is remarkable that there is no mention of the anti-abortion, militia, racist and homophobic groups that do not ‘publicly promote nonviolence,’ but rather openly advocate the killing of blacks, gays, abortion providers and government workers (Martin, 2005).

The implications of all of this recent counterterrorist activity, and the selective coding of what constitutes a ‘terrorist threat’ in legislative, intelligence-gathering, and law enforcement circles, seem clear: it constitutes a ‘campaign to link environmentalism to terrorism’ (Lewis, 2005). More broadly, it threatens to criminalize dissent altogether; ‘If people think that if they attend a protest against logging or the war they’ll have their name in a file labeled “terrorist,” that could stifle expression and dissent in this country,’ Ben Wizner of the ACLU told the *LA Weekly* (quoted in Lewis, 2005). As the perfect foil for forces seeking to curtail political dissent and ecological action, ‘eco-terrorism has been used by opponents of the environmental movement to generalize about the extremism of all conservation efforts,’ said Ryan Bidwell of Colorado Wild in a *Denver Post* column (quoted in Spencer, 2005a). As one writer has noted, ‘if acts of property damage in the name of environmentalism and animal rights didn’t exist, they would have been wise to invent them’ (Lewis, 2005).

A recent article in *Grist Magazine*, subtitled ‘Conflating Environmentalists and Terrorists is All the Rage’ (Kavanagh, 2005), argues that

equating ELF and ALF direct actions with the deadly attacks of terrorist groups fuels the anti-environmental rhetoric of the right and irresponsibly conflates two very different kinds of criminal activity. What we lose in the process is our grasp on both the real nature of environmentalism and the real nature of terrorism.

The article specifically observes that ‘the framework of terrorism is an easy and useful one for the FBI and DHS to use’ when dealing with acts of ‘ecological sabotage,’ and concludes that ‘9/11 complicated the use of a tool that has been always essential to the environmental movement: direct action’ (Kavanagh, 2005). An article in the *Financial Times* written shortly after 9/11 makes this evident:

Until September 11, the ELF was just a fringe freakshow.... Now, the world and, in particular, America is more frightened. The ELF and their kind are no longer just violent cranks. They will be branded as terrorists (Harding, 2001).

As Elaine Close, spokesperson for the ELF, explains: ‘Our corporate-run government and media label actions that oppose their policies “terrorist acts.” They decide who are “terrorists” according to self-interest’ (quoted in MotherJones.com, 2002). In this sense, the mere invocation of the ‘terrorist’ label appears a device for blunting dissent, curtailing expression, and advancing hegemonic interests at the expense of democracy.

Implications: The Lessons of History

We find ourselves in a historical moment where a dominant national mood is difficult to discern. Recent revelations about widespread domestic spying, hyped intelligence in the Iraq war, demonstrable patterns of torture and coercion abroad, and ethical clouds hanging over many prominent elected officials have seemingly broken what was a tenuous consensus about the political, social, and military realities of our time. If opinion polls are to be believed, large numbers of people do seem concerned and disillusioned in a fashion that has not been very apparent since President Bush first took office in 2001. And while the events of 9/11 remain a seminal episode in these times, there seems to be a sense that the Bush administration has invoked the talismans of fear and terrorism far too often. Still, having legally lowered the threshold of terrorism to such an extent that it might even include what have traditionally been considered mainstream, democratic forms of political expression, and by creating special investigative powers and enhancing penalties under those legal rubrics, the administration’s difficulty of surmounting a working definition of a terrorist as ‘anyone who disagrees with us’ remains palpable. In this light, the stakes in who gets to define subjectively what constitutes terrorism have perhaps never been higher.

Under such circumstances, certain tools of historical and political utility that have led to important changes in the past may have lost their viability. As Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherds describes it, ‘terrorism is a tactic applied by disenfranchised, under-equipped poor people against superior odds’ (quoted in Scarce, 1990, p. 112). In an article from *The Oregonian* titled ‘Can Sabotage Have a Place in a Democratic Society?’ an assistant United States Attorney who has prosecuted ecoterror cases admits:

I think people are getting a sense that nobody is listening to them and they don’t have any control over our government, or any decisions that are being made. And they get frustrated and decide to take things into their own hands and try to change it, if they can, by force (quoted in Denson & Long, 1999b).

A recent student column in the Prescott College newspaper, *The Raven Review*, similarly intoned,

The FBI can re-define terrorism in any way it likes, but the fact remains that violence, ugly as it is, will remain the people’s most powerful tool for governmental change. And as our ability to petition the government with our grievances is reduced to a laughable scale, we will see more and more of it (Lepper, 2005).

This column, written in response to the arrest of Bill Rodgers and the other purported ecoterrorists, concluded that ‘the people will always have the power to influence the

policies of the nation-state, whether the powers-that-be want them to or not. And the founders of our fine country understood that.’

Indeed, even a cursory review of the vaunted Declaration of Independence clearly makes this point. In justifying the resort to arms against the British, the founders argued that

whenever any form of government becomes destructive [to the ends of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness], it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and ... when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government.

Interestingly, the specific allegations leveled at King George include that

he has refused to assent to laws ... he has affected to render the military independent of and superior to civil power ... he has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burned our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people ... [and] he is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous age, and totally unworthy the head of a civilized nation.

In the end, the founders concluded that they had no recourse but to take up arms, since,

in every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.... We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends.

Now, this is not to suggest that the actions of ALF/ELF are on a par with those of the American Revolution, nor is it intended to glorify the use of violence for political ends. Yet the irony remains that under present definitions, some of our cherished colonial lore would plainly be viewed today as illegal acts of terrorism:

Terrorism does not include destruction of property. If it did, then this country was founded by terrorists. After all, what was the Boston Tea Party but a bunch of ‘revolutionaries’ masquerading as Native Americans, destroying the property of the East India Tea Company, a rather important company to the British Crown (Gristmill, 2005).

Moreover, it has been noted that ‘of course the Boston Tea Party and other actions by the Sons of Liberty, including burning the homes of Loyalists, were terrorist activities in the eyes of the established government’ (Gristmill, 2005), and that obviously ‘the Boston Tea Party was an act of property destruction and would be called terrorism today’ (MotherJones.com, 2002). As likewise noted in an *Arizona Republic* column during a string of eco-arsons in Phoenix by an entity calling itself the Coalition to Save the Preserves: ‘Perhaps the judgment of history vindicates freedom fighters or vilifies terrorists, implying a moral order in which the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution are hailed even though they involved illegal acts, property crimes, and violence’ (Amster, 2001). And finally, as one scholar has argued: ‘All kinds of radical political actions, some violent (the American Revolution) and some not so (the civil rights movement) have been incorporated to and celebrated within the American political tradition’ (Shevory, 1996, p. 189).

Taking this a step further, it is equally apparent and strikingly ironic that many of the actions undertaken by the government itself would constitute acts of terrorism under current definitions. The prosecution of the war in Iraq, for instance, almost certainly involves ‘acts dangerous to human life that ... [and] appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population [and] to influence the policy of a government by mass destruction.’ Further, under the definition of the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, it is equally apparent that the US policy of ‘regime change’ in Iraq would qualify as terrorism as well, since it involves ‘the use of violence ... [and] the goal is to attain political objectives [by] changing the regime, changing the people in power, changing social or economic policies, etc’ (Gristmill, 2005). By embracing such policies and denying its own revolutionary history, the US has lost moral suasion in condemning the tactics employed by so-called terrorists, be they of the international or domestic varieties. This may in fact be one of the most problematic aspects of the current era—namely that we cannot legitimately gainsay those who would use methods such as violence or torture for dubious political aims.

Finally, as inquired in the *Arizona Republic* column cited above: ‘By what logic is blowing up a mountain for upscale construction seen as “progress,” whereas burning down unoccupied mansions to preserve mountains is viewed as ecoterrorism?’ (Amster, 2001). Indeed, it might be argued that true ecoterrorism is precisely what it sounds like: terrorizing the environment. Taking this view, the targets confronted by ALF and ELF would actually be the terrorists, since they generally involve animal research, genetic modification of plants, and the promotion of ecologically unsound practices such as driving SUVs. As EarthFirst! activist Rod Coronado (who spent over three years in prison for fur industry arsons and currently faces an eight-year sentence for attempting to disrupt a mountain lion hunt) contends: ‘I personally consider myself an anti-terrorist, because everything I oppose I see as acts of terrorism. When I think of eco-terrorists, I think of corporate executive officers in high-rise buildings’ (quoted in Denson & Long, 1999a). Paul Watson of Sea Shepherd plays with this role-reversal concept as well, in that he admits to being ‘terra-istic. The Latin translation for that is *terra*, the Earth, -istic ... of the Earth! Yeah, we’ll agree with that’ (quoted in Scarce, 1990, p. 113).

Again, in invoking these sentiments I am not attempting a moral justification of the use of arson or arms in the service of social change; in fact, I am quite skeptical of arguments taking the form of ‘the ends justify the means’. Historically, concepts such as genocide and slavery have often relied upon such arguments—that the net good produced would outweigh any suffering experienced along the way. And yet I have a hard time condemning a slave who would use violent or confrontational means to achieve the end of escaping the condition of bondage. In the case of people who take action ostensibly on behalf of animals or the environment, there is a sense that they ‘believe that environmentalism offers them that moral justification’ (Rhodes, 1998), that they are ‘protesting against the establishment from a stance of moral superiority’ (Denson & Long, 1999b). As Jeff ‘Free’ Luers, serving a sentence of over 20 years for burning three SUVs, succinctly intoned during his sentencing hearing: ‘I did this because I’m frustrated that we are doing irreversible damage to our planet, our

home.... I fight to protect life, all life, not to take it' (EarthFirst!, 2001). These questions of moral justification and tactical efficacy are among some of the thorniest issues in the social movements sphere and in political theory literature; they deserve robust discussion and analysis, but unfortunately the general effect of branding someone a terrorist in these times is essentially to forestall any such meaningful discussion, to the detriment of all concerned.

Outcomes: A Personal Perspective

In addition to delimiting necessary dialogue and cultural self-reflection, there is another sense in which the invocation of the terrorist label works to serve the ends of injustice—namely the impact it has on the people to whom it is applied. In the case of my friend Bill Rodgers, it would have tragic consequences. During the preliminary phase of his case, it became apparent that the legal deck was stacked against him. For instance, the charge he was indicted on (arson at the National Wildlife Research Center offices in Olympia, Washington in 1998) carried a presumption of incarceration pending trial that was referenced at his detention hearing before a federal magistrate. The court also credited unsupported hearsay testimony from an FBI agent who implicated Bill in a number of other arsons, including the ski lift expansion at Vail, Colorado that was the most costly act of ecoterrorism at the time with damages totaling \$12 million. Bill's court-appointed attorney, David Barrow, did a yeoman's job at the detention hearing, cross-examining the agent's unsupported and circumstantial testimony, offering three strong character witnesses on Bill's behalf, and demonstrating his significant ties to the Prescott community (Hendricks, 2005). Nevertheless, Bill (like the other recent eco-arrestees) was denied bond and at the conclusion of the hearing was led away in arm and leg shackles. This would be the last time I saw him, so please allow a brief digression as I connect the dots back to the main argument being advanced here.

Bill graduated from Prescott College in 1988 with a degree in environmental studies. Subsequently, he led wilderness trips and facilitated courses in outdoor education, was a National Park interpretive ranger, worked for the Nature Conservancy, and traveled with the Audubon Expedition Institute across North America. Upon returning to Prescott in late 2001, he helped a nascent peace group get off the ground, worked with Food Not Bombs, and opened the Catalyst Infoshop and Bookstore in 2003 as a community resource center and meeting space. In the time it has been open, the Catalyst has been home to reading groups, a philosophy salon, a knitting circle, a high school girls club, a free school, and a non-alcoholic performance venue. The shop is staffed by volunteers who range in age from high schoolers to senior citizens. It runs largely on donations and the good will of people in the community (see <http://www.catalystinfoshop.org>).

When there was a conflict, Bill was someone people would often turn to for mediation or support. When someone needed a place to stay, or a ride somewhere, or to borrow a tool, Bill was a reliable resource. When I moved into a new place and couldn't figure out how to turn on the water main, Bill drove out and got it working in short order. When a student of mine needed a mentor for an independent study, Bill happily agreed. This is just a small sample of his persona. Since his arrest on December 7, 2005,

the words most frequently deployed have been 'gentle,' 'kind,' 'compassionate,' 'good natured,' and 'friend' (Buric-Adam, 2005a). His guilt or innocence wasn't really an issue so much as the government's presumption of guilt and heavy-handed tactics in prosecuting the case. When Bill had his detention hearing in Flagstaff (almost 100 miles from Prescott), dozens of supporters filled the courtroom and held a vigil outside the courthouse in freezing temperatures (Hendricks, 2005). Activists from around the state offered aid, and even helped create a website (<http://www.supportbill.org>) for his legal defense.

In Prescott, a group called Friends of the Catalyst formed to coordinate assistance. We issued a statement immediately that reflected our affection and unconditional support for our friend and community member. Instead of running from him (a logical choice, given the scrutiny that obtains in these kinds of 'terrorism' cases), we drew closer. Instead of judging him by the charges being prosecuted in the court of public opinion, we recalled the totality of the individual and the good works we had known him by. Due partly to our efforts, articles that repeated uncharged allegations against him would still reference his 'peaceful persona' (AP, 2005b). We stood strong as a community and vowed to keep the Catalyst open in his absence, as he hoped would happen. Bill's situation became a rallying point for deepening our community bonds, and this gave him solace. It even got back to us that his fellow prisoners learned of our vigils and efforts through the media, and that he became something of a celebrity on the inside because of this. Through brief phone calls we also learned how much our show of support meant to him personally throughout this ordeal.

Recently, we were asked by an independent television network to film some images and record a few interviews around the Catalyst and the larger community for possible airing in early 2006. We completed the taping on the morning of December 21, 2005, the day of the winter solstice. It felt good to memorialize some of the feelings about Bill and the Catalyst that had been expressed in the previous weeks. We knew that Bill valued our support, and we felt positive about the prospects of going forward with his case, sustaining the Catalyst, and strengthening our community. And just then the phone rang. The media was calling us for a reaction to the news about Bill. What news? Bill had been found dead in his jail cell that morning, an apparent suicide by asphyxiation. Did we have a reaction? Did we know why he would do this? Did we think it was really a suicide? Was this an admission of guilt? Was he capable of killing himself, or of being an ecoterrorist? Did this change our opinion of him in any way? Did we know how to reach his next of kin?

Finding out through the media wasn't exactly the preferred option. In our grief, we huddled up and put out a short statement, a final show of support for our comrade and colleague:

We mourn the passing of our dear friend and community member, Bill Rodgers, who worked tirelessly for the causes of social justice and environmental responsibility. We ask that he be remembered as the gentle, kind, and compassionate person we all knew and loved here in Prescott. We remain committed to continuing the work of community building and ecological awareness, through the Catalyst Infoshop, as part of the legacy Bill

helped to create. We wish our friend the peace and serenity that he strived so hard to manifest in this world. This is a great loss for our community. We love you, Bill.

At a small community gathering that evening we recalled funny Bill stories, his ‘pack rat’ alter ego, how he was ‘the ultimate recycler,’ and how he smiled even when he disagreed with you. The following day at Food Not Bombs, we held a sidewalk-chalking fiesta on the town square in his memory that had a colorful and celebratory quality to it. Plans are being made for a memorial service, and people from around the region (and beyond) have expressed interest in attending. There seems to be a sense that Bill is still very much here with us in this small but vibrant community.

Many of the bloggers and comment posters on independent media outlets have grasped the depths of our support and love for Bill. Many have also speculated on the cause of his death, surmising that he may have been tortured during aggressive interrogation, or simply murdered. Given the circumstances around his death—*asphyxiation* by a plastic bag the day before he was to be moved, a supportive community and loving partner, and no outward signs of depression—the reasons for the rumor mill are evident. Combine this with the historical moment—a nation that has lost its moral legitimacy regarding torture, an administration with flagging poll numbers desperate for a victory in the war on terror, and a culture of surveillance and secret police like something out of Orwell’s imagination—and the bloggers have even more to run with. Nevertheless, an investigative report issued by the jail where Bill was being held concludes that his death was in fact most likely a suicide, and a series of letters Bill wrote contemporaneously do seem to confirm this finding.

I don’t know for certain what happened in Bill’s final moments, just as I don’t know what he was or wasn’t involved in before I met him. I only knew him in a post-9/11 world of war and terror; whatever the cause of his passing, Bill appears to many as a casualty of that world. Still, his attorney called him ‘a beautiful man with high principles’ (quoted in Buric-Adam, 2005b), and friends chalked ‘live wild’ on the sidewalk in his honor. Casualty or free spirit, saboteur or man of principle, guilty or innocent—no matter. His gentleness and compassion will be sorely missed.

Conclusion

I’ve shared this brief story about the case of Bill Rodgers because it puts a human face on the realities of elevating acts done in the name of environmentalism to the category of ‘terrorism.’ Often overlooked in public calls for vengeance or critical academic treatments is the fact that individuals who allegedly engage in these acts of ‘ecotage’ (ecological sabotage) are often treated worse than murderers and rapists by the justice system. And while there are certainly victims to be found on all sides, including those whose research or facilities are destroyed, it seems unconscionable to apply a criminological model wherein penalties are increased when someone breaks the law because they actually believe they have a moral reason for doing so. In other words, it appears to be precisely the political and ethical rationale for the act that turns a garden-variety crime like vandalism into a purported act of ecoterrorism. By what logic does the criminal justice system make acts of conscience more serious than acts that lack any

conscience whatsoever? Shouldn't the category of terrorism be reserved for acts that have a random, indiscriminate quality to them, instead of being applied to acts done with a purpose? And if we are to call something terrorism, thereby implicitly acknowledging that it had a higher purpose, shouldn't we actually have a conversation about what that purpose was and why the so-called terrorists did it in the first place?

By raising queries such as this and offering tentative working responses, I have attempted to trace the contours of the current debate around the concept of *terrorism*, focusing in particular upon the sub-category of *ecoterrorism* that has emerged as a major focal point for media analysis and governmental interdiction. In so doing, I have sought to reference both larger political repercussions as well as smaller personal ones. This remains an area in desperate need of greater consideration and dialogue, and it has been my intention to foster that process through this effort. While much remains to be done in this regard, I am sure that my friend Bill would want us to forge ahead.

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