

In defense of Bill Ayers

David Walsh
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Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain and his supporters are continuing to pursue their smear campaign against former Weatherman radical Bill Ayers, now a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In its desperation, the McCain campaign is attempting to link Ayers to his Democratic opponent Barack Obama, claiming that the Illinois senator has been "palling around with terrorists," in the words of Alaska governor Sarah Palin, the Republican vice presidential nominee.

In the final presidential debate Wednesday night, McCain returned to the issue, declaring, "I don't care about an old washed-up terrorist. But as Senator [Hillary] Clinton said in her debates with you, we need to know the full extent of that relationship." He went on to claim that Obama had "launched his political campaign in Mr. Ayers' living room" and that the Illinois senator "chooses to associate with a guy who in 2001 said that he wished he had bombed more, and he had a long association with him."

Ayers once hosted an event for Obama early in the latter's political career and they both served on the board of an anti-poverty group, the Woods Fund. Ayers contributed \$200 to an Obama campaign in 2001.

Ayers, now an elementary education theorist and author of several works on the subject, left his radicalism behind him years ago. Like many of his generation, he slid back into liberal and community politics.

A private citizen, with no official position in the Democratic campaign, the former Weatherman has become the victim of a ferocious and cowardly assault, aimed at furthering McCain's electoral ambitions. Ayers is coming under attack from people who have the enormous resources of the American state and media behind them.

The effort is unlikely to move public opinion or put McCain in the White House. However, given its source and the type of social element the Republican Party is attempting to whip into a frenzy, it raises the real danger of violence against Ayers and his family. The campaign is utterly cynical and dishonorable.

The attack on Bill Ayers needs to be placed in its political and historical context.

Born in 1944 in a Chicago suburb, the son of a prominent

businessman and philanthropist, Ayers was radicalized by the civil rights struggles and the Vietnam War.

In his memoir, *Fugitive Days*, he writes of his thinking in the late 1960s: "Humanity itself, it seemed to me, was what was at stake. The humanity of people in Vietnam and around the world, the humanity of Black Americans, and, finally, my own humanity. You could not be a moral person with the means to act, I thought, and stand still. The crisis demanded a choice. To stand still was to choose indifference. Indifference was the opposite of moral. If we didn't speak out and act up, we were traitors. To fail now was fatal, and so there was nothing that could justify inaction. Nothing."

However mistaken his eventual political choices, Ayers' was part of a generational experience. His sense of horror over US crimes in Vietnam, the destruction of a small nation, and his shame that this savagery was being committed in the name of the American people were sentiments shared by thousands and thousands of college and high school students, and young people in general.

The massive, lethal bombing raids, the use of napalm and other barbaric weapons, the razing of countless villages, all justified in the name of the fight for "democracy," sickened vast numbers of Americans, as did the unceasing lies and propaganda of the US government, under both Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican Richard Nixon.

It is entirely to his credit that Ayers took up opposition to the war in Vietnam. The best members of his generation did the same.

It is useful to compare him to Sen. John McCain, his principal accuser, both as a human type and in regard to the 'violence' in which each engaged.

McCain's father and paternal grandfather both became four-star US Navy admirals. In fact, McCain's father was commander of all US forces in the Vietnam theater from 1968 to 1972.

The vast majority of those who served in the American military in Southeast Asia were conscripts who had no choice in the matter. Most didn't want to be there and many came to hate the war and the army officialdom.

McCain, on the other hand, welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Vietnam War, to drop bombs and kill

human beings who had done him and the US population no harm. He had no scruples about it.

When he was shot down in October 1967, McCain was taking part in Operation Rolling Thunder, an aerial bombardment campaign conducted against North Vietnam from March 1965 until November 1968. His specific target, which he failed to hit, was a power plant in the center of Hanoi.

On December 31, 1967, the US Defense Department reported that American planes had dumped 864,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam during the operation, compared with 653,000 tons of bombs dropped in the entire course of the Korean War and 503,000 tons in the Pacific theater during World War II.

Estimates of civilian deaths caused by US bombing in Operation Rolling Thunder range from 52,000 to 182,000. The war eventually killed a total of more than 3 million Vietnamese and wounded another 600,000.

As a leading member of the Weatherman group, Ayers admits to having set off several small bombs, which blew up a police memorial and damaged public buildings. No one was killed or injured in those actions. Ayers was never charged with, let alone convicted, of a crime.

His greatest sin, one might say, was holding very confused and disoriented views. An examination of his political views is not the subject of this article, but, in any event, they were not of a criminal character.

Influenced by anarchism and Maoism, cut off from the working class by the reactionary AFL-CIO bureaucracy, Ayers never found his way to genuinely Marxist and socialist politics. Instead, his youthful radicalism led him to terrorist operations. This was, above all, an expression of extreme frustration. He was no doubt a courageous and idealistic individual.

Not to his credit, he eventually found his way to 'respectable' politics. There is an element of tragedy in the political evolution of Ayers and a good number of others of that generation.

On what moral scale shall we weigh McCain and Ayers? In however confused a manner, the latter conducted a struggle on behalf of the oppressed. The same can hardly be said of McCain.

Another key element in the Ayers controversy is the reprehensible role played by Obama himself. The problem is not that the Democratic hopeful 'consorts' with terrorists, but that he is a craven opportunist and careerist of the first order.

To the extent that Ayers was a figure with a reputation and connections within certain political circles in Illinois, as well as, apparently, a fundraiser, Obama seized on that and made use of it. When, as he entered the national political arena and

the once-advantageous relationship threatened to become a liability, Obama turned his back on his erstwhile supporter and repudiated him, declaring Wednesday night, for example, that Ayers had "engaged in despicable acts with a radical domestic group. I have roundly condemned those acts."

This is not merely a personal failing of Obama's. In recent years, the Democratic Party and the media have enthusiastically joined in the effort to discredit opposition to the Vietnam War and legitimize this imperialist atrocity. It is not simply a matter of defending old wrongdoings, but preparing to justify new ones, all over the world.

Thus, Obama never misses an opportunity to refer to McCain as an "American hero," when he could more properly be identified as an "American war criminal."

There is an utter lack of principle at every level of the liberal establishment. No one in the mainstream media, with the honorable exception of Thomas Frank writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, has come to Ayers's defense.

The *New York Times* has accommodated itself to the McCarthyite attack on Ayers, describing him in one recent editorial as "a violent, 1960s radical" and referring in another to "Mr. Obama's ill-advised but fleeting and long-past association with William Ayers, founder of the Weather Underground and confessed bomber."

We catch in this affair a small glimpse of what is to come if Obama is elected: craven cowardice in the face of right-wing provocations and treachery toward his supporters on the left, if only of a liberal character.

One might add, as a postscript, there is such a thing as personal honor, standing up for people who lent you support. Even during the anticommunist witch-hunts of the Cold War, there were liberals who defended Alger Hiss and others. One can only say of Obama's behavior in this episode: What swinishness!



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