



## Notes from the *Weather Underground*

Should Barack Obama be worried about the Oscar-nominated documentary on Bill Ayers?

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Bill Ayers has seen two recent spikes in popularity. We all know [the latest one](#). During ABC's April 16 Democrat debate, which is still regularly confused with the ninth running of the Gotcha Games, George Stephanopoulos asked Barack Obama about his relationship with Ayers. After describing Ayers's past, Stephanopoulos added that "on 9/11, he was quoted in the *New York Times* saying 'I don't regret setting bombs. I feel we didn't do enough.'"

Hillary Clinton also hit the 9/11 connection on her way to the dogpile, using her debate rebuttal to clarify the "deeply hurtful" nature of Ayers's comments. So too did John McCain, in his April 20 appearance on Stephanopoulos's "This Week." But Ayers's actual comments, however troubling, were made before the attacks on the World Trade Center. This was bad luck as much as bad taste, yet Stephanopoulos, Clinton, and McCain all omitted that fact. It seems all three could have learned something from Ayers's earlier celebrity—not his days as a Weatherman, but the award-winning documentary that chronicles those days.

Blending archival footage with new interviews, Sam Green and Bill Siegel's [The Weather Underground](#) traces the history of Ayers's group, from their 1969 split with Students for a Democratic Society to their eventual disbandment. The film premiered at Sundance in January of 2003 to wide acclaim. In June, *The Weather Underground* ran in select cities and, in 2004, it was nominated for an Oscar and broadcast on PBS.

Since then, it has received little attention, even as Ayers has reentered the news. Surprisingly, Ayers is not the star of the documentary, as fellow Weathermen Mark Rudd and Brian Flanagan get far more screen time. But, as is often the case, the best scene belongs to the supporting actor. Call it the Philip Seymour Hoffman effect: about 20 minutes in, Ayers saunters through present-day Chicago and waxes reflective, all the while carrying a wooden baseball bat. Green and Siegel include enough 8mm clips to remind us that, in 1969, the Weathermen held one of their first events here, the "Days of Rage," in which a couple hundred college students vandalized businesses and brawled with police. The message is clear enough: when he pauses at the corner of State and Division, Ayers isn't repenting. He's recreating.

It wouldn't take much imagination to pitch an attack ad based on footage like this—we open with a slow-mo shot of the modern-day Ayers, bat squarely on shoulder, face firmly in grimace, as “OBAMA’S ‘FRIEND’?” scrolls in a bold, blinking font . . . But it would be a mistake to dismiss *The Weather Underground* as a one-stop-shop for vindictive YouTubers (though a few have already [plumbed](#) these [depths](#)). Instead, the documentary presents a more nuanced picture of Ayers and the Weathermen.

To be fair, Ayers never voices any remorse or sorrow in the film, and this is probably why he plays such a small role. Green and Siegel smartly realize that this attitude turns Ayers into a static artifact; there are two dots—Ayers then and Ayers now—and only a straight line to connect them. But if this seems to play to the worst possibilities of the Obama/Ayers link, the rest of *The Weather Underground* frames Ayers's actions, past and present, in two important ways.

This starts with Mark Rudd, who is in many ways the antithesis of Ayers. While Ayers is now a Distinguished Professor, Rudd teaches at a community college in New Mexico; while Ayers is sure that the Weathermen were right, Rudd speaks about “guilt and shame.” “These are things I am not proud of,” he says in the film’s final scene, “and I find it hard to speak publicly about them.” As his eyes evade the camera, you can’t help but believe him.

Rudd’s statements become even more powerful through Green and Siegel’s careful contextualization. The various 1970s newsreels—such as a shot of Rudd talking to bristling microphones, with Ayers at his shoulder—stress that the Weathermen were a team effort. The reels also capture a war-torn America, and do it better than many films explicitly about Vietnam. While including this history, Green and Siegel avoid a Michael Moore-like figure, a stumbling, bumbling Everyman who shows (not tells) us how to feel or what to think. The combined force of the unfiltered history and Rudd’s confessions means that even someone like Ayers can come off as conflicted and confused, instead of just plain crazy. Green and Siegel don’t come down in Ayers’s favor, but their film offers a more objective, thought-provoking take than something like Stephanopoulos’s sensationalism.

This gets at the second, more important effect of watching *The Weather Underground*. In the various reviews of the film, the most popular praise was that it rescued a forgotten historical episode. As [the New York Times](#) put it, “Sam Green and Bill Siegel have unearthed a great story that had fallen into oblivion.” Certainly, the film still stresses how removed these events are from our current moment, but now, after Obama, this separation seems as important to the present as it is to the past. Like Obama, Green and Siegel are in their mid 40s, and their film is a recovery project. Their sharp break between then and now reinforces Obama’s point that he was a kid during the Weathermen's heyday.

If Green and Siegel’s film has the potential to alter or balance the perception of Obama’s relationship to Ayers, it still needs time and space to do this. It’s not a quick fix. Of course, the Obama campaign should be familiar with this problem. After all, if Obama’s the progressive candidate, he’s just as much the progressive *rock* candidate. Often, and especially in debates, Obama can sound like a bloated Dream Theater song—expansive and then atmospheric,

noodling toward something profound if only you'll stay with him. *The Weather Underground* faces a similar struggle: how do you create nuance and narrative in a clip-sized world?

A related question: Do you need to? At the ABC debate, Hillary suggested Ayers is “an issue that certainly the Republicans will be raising.” As April turned into May (and June), phrases like this became increasingly important to Clinton’s campaign. But the Republicans, for their part, still seem unsure how exactly to raise Ayers. In his April appearance on “This Week,” McCain brought up Ayers unprompted: “I’m sure [Obama]’s very patriotic, but his relationship with Mr. Ayers is open to question.” When Stephanopoulos pressed him, McCain tried no less than three different lines of attack, but he never did reach a coherent conclusion. (More recently, the McCain camp has returned to the Ayers issue—[for example](#), to deflect attention from its lobbyist purge—but they still haven’t settled on a unified message.)

Stephanopoulos was just as clueless at that ABC debate, lumping Ayers with the “general theme of patriotism.” And that’s currently the best angle: Ayers works as another piece of anti-patriotism to pin on Obama, but not as something that can escalate to Wright-like levels. That’s partly due to the more flimsy nature of their connection—as far as I know, Obama’s not planning to title his next book *The Audacity of Ayers*—but it’s also due to the fact that there’s not yet a conventional take on Ayers and Obama, in the way that the issue of “judgment” always inflects the Obama/Wright discussion. To try and make the Ayers story juicier, you have to distort facts—like making Ayers’s comments about 9/11, instead of occurring on 9/11.

*The Weather Underground* can provide a different explanation, a dose of rationality, a complicated sketch of a complicated problem. Its biggest problem is that it takes 90 minutes to do so. Even explaining it took me 1,300 words, and that’s about 1,230 more than you get in a 30-second TV ad.