Green Rage

Radical environmentalists are caught between their love for the Earth, trespass of the law, and the U.S. government's war on terror

Matt Rasmussen

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PEOPLE LIKE TO THINK of the courtroom as a crucible of justice, but to me it's always seemed a diluter of passions. The atmosphere is restrained, so respectful and genteel it's easy to forget that people's lives hang in the balance. The system has a way of straining out emotion. It is designed to objectify, to control the soaring passions that created the need for the courtroom in the first place. The perpetrators and the victims pour their passions into the settling ponds of the attorneys, and the attorneys, in turn, pour the diluted stuff into the deep vessel of the judge, and, by extension, into the even deeper water of The System.

If you sat in the gallery of a federal courtroom in my hometown of Eugene, Oregon, last summer and watched as six young men and women entered guilty pleas in a string of environmentally motivated arsons—crimes that the federal government describes as the most egregious environmental terrorism in the nation's history—you might have wondered where the passion had gone. One by one, in a windowless chamber, the defendants answered perfunctory questions posed by Judge Ann Aiken, who sat Oz-like in the highest chair. One by one, they listened to descriptions of the crimes they were accused of committing. One by one, they accepted the government's offer of plea bargains, and one by one, they said the word.

"Guilty."

Kevin Tubbs, thirty-seven, an animal rights activist who migrated to Eugene from Nebraska, mumbled the word and shook his head. Kendall Tankersley, twenty-nine, who holds a degree in molecular biology, choked it out through a gathering sob. Stanislas Meyerhoff, twenty-nine, who wants to study auto mechanics, said it with an odd sort of let's-get-this-over-with politeness. They addressed Judge Aiken as "your honor" and "ma'am."

In the gallery, reporters scribbled. Federal prosecutors with American flag pins affixed to somber blue suits looked on dispassionately. Sentencing dates were set, and the prosecutors, seeking lengthy terms, asked the judge to employ guidelines issued under counter-terrorism laws when considering how much time each should serve.

The crimes to which the six confessed included seventeen attacks, all but one of them arson or attempted arson. The actions took place in five western states between 1996 and 2001. No one was injured. Sport utility vehicles were burned at a Eugene car dealership. So was a meat-packing plant in Redmond, Oregon. Other targets included federal facilities in Wyoming and California and Oregon, where wild horses and burros were let loose and buildings burned down. And in the most notorious action, a spectacular nighttime blaze high in the Rockies destroyed several structures at the Vail ski area. Many of the attacks were followed by communiques issued under the banner of the Earth Liberation Front, a shadowy, leaderless offshoot of the group Earth First!, and by its sister group, the Animal Liberation Front.

Prosecutors say those who did the crimes took extraordinary means to conceal their involvement. They met in secret gatherings they called "book club" meetings, discussing details such as computer security, target surveillance, and lock-picking. They required that each attendee describe actions they took to avoid detection while traveling to

the meeting sites. They used nicknames and code words. They called their criminal actions "camping trips," and dubbed the timing devices they attached to incendiary bombs "hamburgers."

"Terrorism is terrorism—no matter the motive," FBI director Robert Mueller said in January 2006, after the Bush administration announced indictments in an investigation it calls Operation Backfire. "The FBI is committed to protecting Americans from all crime and all terrorism, including acts of domestic terrorism on behalf of animal rights or the environment."

Many were appalled. How could anyone possibly use that singularly loaded word to describe these acts? Where is the moral equivalence between burning an SUV in the dead of night (and doing as much as you can, given the nature of the business at hand, to see that no one gets hurt) and ramming a 767 into a skyscraper? When Eugene's daily newspaper, the Register-Guard, used the word eco-terrorism to describe the investigation, at least one reader took its editors to task, writing that the paper "appears to confuse arson occurring within the context of a nonviolent campaign with terrorism." The paper opted for the softer-sounding eco-sabotage thereafter.

Chelsea Dawn Gerlach is twenty-nine now. Under the terms of her plea bargain, she'll likely spend ten years in prison—assuming she cooperates with government prosecutors as they continue their investigation. If she had been found guilty at trial of all the government had accused her of, she could have been given a life sentence. (Federal prosecutors are seeking life sentences for the majority of those indicted in the Operation Backfire investigation, yet, according to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, the average sentence for arsonists in 2003 was just around seven years.) Along with Meyerhoff, Gerlach is an alum of South Eugene High, a school with a sterling reputation in the heart of Eugene's liberal, affluent south side. In fact, all six of those who entered guilty pleas had close ties to Eugene, as did four others who awaited trial at the time of this writing and three more who had fled the country.

By the time she was in her early twenties, Gerlach had come to believe that Western culture was having a ruinous effect on the global environment, that the Earth faced environmental catastrophe. She felt compelled to do something about it. At some point, passion and frustration drove her over the boundary of her country's laws. Playing by the rules, it seemed, was doing no damn good. At some point, according to the details of her plea bargain, she found herself at the base of Vail Mountain, watching flames light the night sky, awaiting the return of another ELF operative, Bill Rodgers, who had set the fires. Two days later, she found herself at the Denver Public Library, composing a claim of responsibility on a computer that couldn't be traced to her. The message said ELF took the action "on behalf of the lynx," whose habitat would be harmed by an expansion at Vail. "For your safety and convenience, we strongly advise skiers to choose other destinations until Vail cancels its inexcusable plans for expansion," Gerlach wrote.

Skiers did not stop coming to Vail. The arson attack sparked a wildfire of popular condemnation that was directed toward those responsible and, by unfair association,

toward more mainstream environmentalists who had also been fighting the expansion. Ultimately, Vail's owners got $12 million from their insurers and the expansion whistled through.

Last summer, in that Eugene courtroom, Gerlach reached her day of reckoning with the system. She, too, said the word. "Guilty." Then she asked the judge if she could read a statement. Gerlach, who has straight black hair and a round, welcoming face, gathered herself and took a deep breath. The words tumbled out in a rush:

"These acts were motivated by a deep sense of despair and anger at the deteriorating state of the global environment and the escalating inequities within society. But I realized years ago this was not an effective or appropriate way to effect positive change. I now know that it is better to act from love than from anger, better to create than destroy, and better to plant gardens than to burn down buildings."

Gerlach admitted to participating in nine of the seventeen attacks described in the government's indictment. In addition to the Vail arson, she served as a lookout as other operatives put incendiary devices next to a meat-packing plant in Eugene; she tried to burn down a Eugene Police Department substation; she participated in an ELF arson that did more than $1 million in damage at an Oregon tree farm that grew genetically modified poplar trees; she helped topple an electrical transmission tower in the sagebrush-and-juniper country east of Bend. And on Christmas night in 1999, she sat in a van that she and her friends had named "Betty" and served as lookout as others placed buckets of diesel fuel next to a Boise Cascade office in Monmouth, Oregon. The buckets ignited and destroyed an eight-thousand-square-foot building, doing $1 million in damage. Then Gerlach sent out an ELF communique: "Let this be a lesson to all greedy multinational corporations who don't respect ecosystems. The elves are watching."

THE FIRST TIME I CAME TO EUGENE I wondered what all the fuss was about. I knew its reputation well—a university town, a hotbed of liberal activism, home to Ken Kesey and other '60s holdouts. But when I drove through the arterials and back streets on the north side of the city I realized that much of Eugene is just plain old suburbia—ranch homes, tidy lawns, and conservative values.

After a decade of living and working in Eugene, I know this about the place: It's a slice of America, profoundly divided along fault lines of politics, values, and culture. On the south side of the Willamette River, which bisects the city, you'll find the liberal Eugene of renown, full of University of Oregon faculty and tie-dyed hippies who attend the freewheeling Oregon Country Fair each July. Conservative Eugene is on the north side of the river, full of satellite dishes and American flags and folks who favor the traditional charms of the Lane County Fair in August.

There are divisions within the divisions, just as there are in America at large. There are monied fiscal conservatives and working-class Bush supporters. There are affluent liberals who vote Democrat and there are the more disheveled activists who have no patience for the compromises made by mainstream liberals. Those who committed the ELF arsons, and their supporters, come from this latter milieu.

If there is a physical heart of the radical environmental movement in Eugene, it is a leafy precinct of old wooden houses just west of downtown, known as the Whiteaker neighborhood. An outsider—someone from, say, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, or St. Petersburg, Florida, or Provo, Utah, or from any of a thousand bastions of conventional American culture, including many corners of Eugene—might fixate on a curbside cardboard box offering "free stuff," or a do-your-own-thing piece of art in a front yard, a dreadlocked couple strolling hand in hand, a FUCK BUSH sign, a flash of tattooed flesh, a braless woman, a pair of ratty Carhartt cutoffs, a pierced tongue, eyebrow, nose, belly button, or neck, and feel a skosh uncomfortable.

Whiteaker rose to national prominence in 1999, after perhaps a couple dozen of its residents—young adults who described themselves as anarchists—helped foment the lawlessness at the World Trade Organization conference in Seattle. Suddenly "the Eugene anarchists" were a cause celebre. Reporters from the BBC, the Los Angeles Times, CNN, the Wall Street Journal, and other major outlets descended on Eugene, their editors demanding analysis pieces explaining what the hell had happened in Seattle. In Eugene, there was a good deal of uneasy eye-rolling. Local civic leaders reacted with a mix of revulsion and denial to the notion that their city was Anarchy Central. The consensus was that the whole thing had been blown out of proportion.

No one knows how many anarchists there really are in Whiteaker; they don't keep membership rolls. At least some of those who donned black garb in Seattle were kids doing what kids the world over often do: immerse themselves in an adrenaline-charged cause that's greater than oneself. Not all of Eugene's anarchists are callow youths, though. Some are genuine, steadfastly committed, and deep-thinking.

Eugene's brand of anarchy is "green anarchy." Unlike old-style industrialist anarchists, green anarchists are primarily concerned with the effects of civilization on the global environment. They are more radical in their thought than, say, Marxists are. They would certainly agree that capital accumulates in a fashion that creates a wealthy elite at the expense of the exploited masses, but their critique goes far beyond that. Their central precept is not that civilization needs to be reconstructed, but rather that it needs to be overthrown in its entirety and never replaced. Things started to go wrong, they contend, when humans first domesticated plants and animals.

The nexus between the green anarchists, the Earth Liberation Front, and those ensnared in the government's investigation is not perfect. Several of the defendants don't claim to be advocates of the green anarchy movement now, if they ever were. And some of them, it seems, had not thought through the intellectual justifications of their actions in a formal sense—perhaps they just felt in their gut that things like SUVs and animal slaughterhouses and plantations that grow genetically modified trees were wrong. Whatever their motivations, their actions and rhetoric match up quite well with the principles of the green anarchist philosophy.

If they are in need of intellectual mentorship, Eugene's green anarchists have a resource close at hand. John Zerzan is in his sixties, a graduate of Stanford and San Francisco State University and one of the foremost anticivilization thinkers in the world.

In the '60s he was a Marxist and a Maoist and a Vietnam protester and a devotee of the Haight-Ashbury psychedelic scene. He now believes that Paleolithic humans and the few remaining primitive cultures provide the best models for how humans should subsist. His books include Elements of Refusal, Future Primitive, and Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections. He is an editor of Green Anarchy, which calls itself "an anticivilization journal of theory and action." He was a confidant of Theodore Kaczynski during the Unabomber trial.

On a sunny afternoon last summer, I sat down with Zerzan on his shady back deck. His house is small and tidy, a wooden bungalow that sits near a busy one-way just south of the Whiteaker neighborhood. I asked him if he thought too much had been made of the Eugene anarchists after the WTO riots.

"60 Minutes was here. You can't say that would have happened just because we have a good idea," he said. Then he switched to the recent indictments. "All of the people who have been arrested in this thing used to live here in Eugene. There was a lot happening here, and that whole neighborhood [Whiteaker] was the key part. Now it's quieter."

I had never before spoken with Zerzan, although I knew that he lived in Eugene; around town, he's taken for granted in the way that minor celebrities who live in small cities often are. He has a salt-and-pepper beard, straight bangs, and a quiet, almost patrician demeanor that I found disarming. He seems younger than his age.

I asked him if he thought the arsons outlined in the government's indictment had done any good. He pointed out that most of the actions were followed by anonymous communiques explaining precisely why the actions were taken. The combination of action and explanation can be quite powerful, he said.

Zerzan clearly struggles with the question of violence. Of Kaczynski, he said he found him "lacking in the basic kind of human connection that most people have." He hopes that the anticivilization movement will prevail without great bloodshed, although he quickly adds "my anarchist friends mainly laugh at me for being too hopeful." Humans, he believes, may very well forge a new way of living on Earth, or, rather, return to old ways of living on Earth, before utter environmental collapse imposes a Malthusian end.

"You can't make the revolution happen by promising people less," he said. Then he swept his hand out in front of him, taking in his house, the sound of cars and trucks hurtling past, the hum of the city, of human civilization. "You can't say all of this is more. This is becoming more sterile and cold and fucked up by the minute."

DOWN AT SAM BOND'S GARAGE, in the heart of Whiteaker, organic beer is served up in old jam jars. Tots in hemp smocks frolic on the wooden floor. A black t-shirt hangs on a wall sporting a skull and crossbones on the front and "Whiteaker" in pirate scrawl beneath.

It's a Sunday night in June, and the place is filling up fast. There's a disco ball hanging from old wooden rafters in the eatery's barnlike interior space. Two large ceiling fans beat the air, but a thermometer on the wall reports eighty-three degrees

nonetheless. The usual customers, the ones who just came by for beers or a bite to eat or to chat with friends, seem a bit bewildered by the gathering crowd. A middle-aged man shoulders up to the bar to settle his tab and a young woman inquires if he's here for the rally. When the man asks what rally, she says, "It's for Free Luers. He got twenty-three years for burning up three SUVs." Soon the hall is full, a standing-room-only crowd of perhaps two hundred.

Jeffrey "Free" Luers is a skinny kid from suburban Los Angeles who is serving his fifth year in prison. In 2000, when he was twenty-one, Luers and an accomplice were arrested for setting fire to three SUVs in the middle of the night at a car lot near the University of Oregon (a separate action from those included in the Operation Backfire indictment). A Eugene judge sentenced Luers, who refused all of the government's plea bargain offers, to nearly twenty-three years in prison. The authorities say they made an example of Luers to forestall further crimes; activists say they made a martyr of him. Luers remains unrepentant. In a recent message to his supporters, he said, "I got careless, I got sloppy. I slipped up. I got caught."

I find a seat at the bar and order an ale. An acquaintance recognizes me and squeezes over to say hello. He points to a man sitting at a table in the center of the hall. Amid the young tattooed-and-pierced set and the older pony-tailed-and-sandaled set, this man is conspicuous. He looks as if he just walked in from an engineering convention. He has a conservative haircut, wears chino slacks, and keeps his reading glasses tucked in his left shirt-pocket. He's perhaps in his late sixties, and sits next to his tastefully dressed, bespectacled wife.

"That's Luers's dad," my friend says, and then pauses. "Just think—he'll probably never see his son out of prison again."

The elder Luers, whose name is John, shuffles up to a small stage at one end of the room. He leans on a cane as he walks. Rallies for his son have been held annually for the past few years, and Luers notes that this is one of forty-three around the world on this day. "The crowds just keep getting bigger," John Luers says. "We are so grateful for the support you have shown our son."

I introduce myself later and ask if he speaks with writers and he says politely but firmly, "No we don't."

There are other speakers. Jeffrey Luers may be the poster child of the government's crackdown on so-called environmental terrorists, but this night most are preoccupied with the recent arrests. This crowd refers to the government's Operation Backfire investigation as The Green Scare, seeing it as an all-out effort to discourage environmental activism and dissent. Many have been interrogated by FBI agents, and many believe their phones are tapped.

One of the organizers of the rally speaks up and says "we know what real terrorism is" to loud applause. Misha Dunlap of the Civil Liberties Defense Center, a Eugene nonprofit that has lent assistance to Luers and to the more recent defendants, gives an update. Then anticivilization author and thinker Derrick Jensen takes the stage. He asks any FBI agents in the audience to please raise their hands. When no one does, he

shrugs and says, "Worth a try." Then he says, "What you're doing is wrong and I plan on seeing you brought to justice." More applause and a few boisterous hoots. Jensen speaks for more than an hour about environmental holocaust and resistance, and the audience is rapt.

When someone mentions the name Jake Ferguson, the room erupts in a chorus of hisses. Ferguson, a former Whiteaker insider, is the government's primary informant in the Operation Backfire case. He has not been charged in any of the crimes, but has admitted to being a key operative in many of them. He agreed to wear hidden recording devices when speaking with fellow activists, and now his name is anathema in Whiteaker—a stop sign just a few blocks from Sam Bond's has been defaced to read STOP JAKE.

Ferguson may bear the epithet "snitch," but many radical activists consider the six who have accepted plea bargains to be snitches too. Still, there is an unmistakable aroma of violence in the green anarchists' attitude toward Ferguson. A typical posting on the Portland Independent Media Center website, which has served as a clearinghouse among activists for information and commentary on the Operation Backfire case, described Ferguson as "the worst type of scum on earth." Another writer added, "jake admitted being a snitch to people in the community after the story broke. why he can still talk is a good question." (It's worth noting, though, that Ferguson had suffered no physical harm at the time of this writing, at least not to my knowledge. The talk may be streetwise and tough, but the vast majority of Eugene's radical activists would never intentionally harm another person or animal.)

I leave Sam Bond's before the music starts—a hip-hop duo is on the bill. Outside, the night air is cool. It feels good to be out of that space, not just because of the stiffling heat, but because of the intensity in the room.

I find my car and drive through the quiet streets of Whiteaker. Downtown is empty except for a trio of homeless youths hanging out on a corner by the city library. The curtains are drawn in most of the homes in my own south side neighborhood. The crowd at Sam Bond's may be ready for the revolution, but the rest of the world just seems to want a good night's sleep.

THE OPERATION BACKFIRE INDICTMENT is sixty-five pages long and identifies the first building the Eugene arsonists burned down as the Oakridge Ranger Station, just up the road from Eugene. On the night of October 30, 1996, a motorist saw the flames and called 911. When firefighters drove into the parking lot, nails stuck in the tires of their trucks. The building was too far gone to save. By morning, it was a pile of cinders.

The Oakridge arson was one of the first subjects I wrote about after returning to my native Northwest. I had just left a job as a newspaper reporter on the East Coast, and had taken another job, editing a small magazine that covers National Forest issues. Nothing like this had ever happened in Oregon. People were shocked.

Within the region and throughout the federal government the presumption was immediate. This was the work of environmental extremists. Two nights earlier, someone

had torched a Forest Service pickup truck at a ranger station seventy miles to the north, and had left graffiti including "Forest Rapers" and "Earth Liberation Front." They had also scrawled the letter A with an extended crossbar—the symbol of the anarchist movement. No one claimed responsibility for the Oakridge fire, but many people assumed both acts were done by the same people.

Dan Glickman, President Clinton's Secretary of Agriculture, who oversaw the Forest Service, told reporters then that he had "absolutely no tolerance for individuals or groups that engage in terrorism." Jack Ward Thomas, who was chief of the Forest Service, said, "This is what people do who do not understand how to operate in a democracy."

But to me, and to many in the mainstream environmental community, these assumptions made no sense. At the time of the arson, environmentalists had just scored a major victory in the steep forestlands just a few miles away from Oakridge.

In the early 1990s, the Forest Service had proposed a salvage-logging project on the slopes bordering nearby Warner Creek. The area had burned in 1991, leaving behind a patchwork of both blackened wood and healthy trees. When a Eugene judge ruled the Forest Service's plan legal under the notorious Salvage Logging Rider in 1995, protesters sprang into action. They built barricades, dug trenches, and fashioned makeshift structures to keep logging equipment out. Then, in the summer of 1996, after activists had maintained the blockade for nearly a year, the Clinton administration ordered the Forest Service to shelve its plans to log Warner Creek (and more than 150 other controversial sales around the West).

So why would an environmentalist of any stripe decide, just months later, to burn down the Oakridge Ranger Station?

Aboveground activists did all they could to distance themselves from the act. The Oregon Natural Resources Council, fearing a public relations disaster, offered a $1,000 reward to anyone who provided information leading to the conviction of those responsible.

Years passed with no arrests. There were rumors that the fire had been an inside job, the work of a disgruntled employee. The Forest Service built another ranger station, a fetching structure with two stories and broad eaves, in exactly the same spot where the other had stood.

Then, last summer, Kevin Tubbs, one of the six who accepted the government's plea bargain offer, owned up to the deed.

At the Warner Creek blockade, Tubbs, curly-haired and deeply committed to the cause, had kept vigil atop a structure built from logs; if anyone tried to move the thing, he said, it would collapse and send him falling down the steep mountainside to his death. In Eugene's federal courtroom, wearing standard-issue Lane County Jail garb, with close-cropped hair, and looking a little middle-aged, he admitted to this:

On the night of the arson, he drove two fellow activists, Ferguson and Josephine Sunshine Overaker, east from Eugene to the vicinity of the Oakridge Ranger Station and dropped his passengers off. According to the account read in court by U.S. assistant

attorney Stephen Peifer, Ferguson and Overaker placed incendiary devices around the ranger station. They threw nails onto the parking lot to slow down emergency responders and then the three drove back toward Eugene. They took back roads to avoid detection. They paused at a covered bridge near the town of Lowell and tossed the gloves they had used while committing the crime into the dark waters of a reservoir. The incendiary devices worked as intended and the ranger station was destroyed.

Despite Tubbs's confession, Timothy Ingalsbee, one of the leaders of the Warner Creek effort, still has trouble accepting the notion that environmentalists burned down the ranger station. Tall and lanky and gentle of manner, Ingalsbee holds a doctorate in environmental sociology from the University of Oregon. After the Warner Creek battle, he had wanted to work with the Forest Service to establish the site as a permanent wildfire research station within the National Forest system. "What the fire did was to destroy that opportunity," he said.

"I had excellent professional relationships with the Oakridge Forest Service staff, and after the fire that ended."

Mainstream environmentalists reacted with the same sense of puzzlement and disgust to the majority of the attacks described in the Operation Backfire investigation. And while many on the left are critical of the aggressiveness with which the federal government has pursued the case—viewing the millions spent as evidence of the Bush administration's overzealousness in its war on terror and a convenient distraction from the failings of the administration to counter real terrorists—virtually no one in the environmental community believes the attacks have done anything but harm.

"It's bad for our cause all around. It stinks," Rocky Smith told High Country News in the days after the Vail attack. Smith, a Colorado environmentalist, had worked tirelessly to fight the Vail expansion through legal means. "There are lots of reasons to hate Vail," he said, "but not enough to justify arson."

SO, WHY? Those who are directly involved in the cases—those who are under indictment or who have accepted plea bargains—won't talk about motives. Most of those who are closest to them won't say anything either. Government prosecutors have indicated that there may be more indictments, and many activists are afraid to talk openly about the actions and those who allegedly committed them.

It's hard, though, to escape the conclusion that the main motivation of the Eugene arsonists was sincere, passionate conviction.

"I believe these arsons were a result of total frustration," one Whiteaker activist who knows several of the defendants told me over coffee. "It's just very painful to witness, so clearly, the rape of the planet."

Consider the story of Bill Rodgers. He was forty at the time of his arrest, making him the oldest of those indicted in the Operation Backfire investigation. Authorities describe him as a ringleader in the group of arsonists—they say he served as a sort of mentor to Gerlach, for one. Police arrested him last December at the modest bookstore and community center he ran in Prescott, Arizona. Two weeks after his arrest, he put a plastic bag over his head and suffocated himself.

In a farewell letter, he wrote, "Certain human cultures have been waging war against the Earth for millennia. I chose to fight on the side of bears, mountain lions, skunks, bats, saguaros, cliff rose and all things wild. I am just the most recent casualty in that war. But tonight I have made a jail break—I am returning home, to the Earth, to the place of my origins."

Here's what activists like Rodgers believe: They believe we face a crisis of mass extinction, caused by civilization. They believe the atmosphere is being spoiled, the climate pitching on the verge of ruinous change, because of civilization. They believe our bodies are being poisoned and so are our spirits, by civilization.

They've considered the state of the planet and they've decided against some hopeful half-critique. They've looked all the way down into the pit and, rightly or wrongly, come to the conclusion that the whole damn thing is undeniably, irretrievably messed up. The government is wrong, mainstream culture is wrong, the tokenist sellout environmental community is wrong, civilization itself is wrong.

The green anarchists are historical determinists, as are Marxists and Christian fundamentalists. Their worldview is based on more, though, than extrapolations of weighty political treatises or divinations of holy texts. It is based on the work of scientists such as E. O. Wilson and Jared Diamond and respected, peer-reviewed biologists and climatologists and ecologists the world over whose work suggests that human activity is having a calamitous effect on the Earth's natural systems.

Globalization. Capitalism. Greed. Civilization. Call it what you will. It will end, the green anarchists insist, whether by means of environmental collapse, violent revolution, or the collective enlightening of human consciousness.

"We are now witnessing the final days of Western Civilization," declared a recent posting on the Portland Independent Media Center website. "As this civilization decays around us—as the wars spread and the natural disasters increase in frequency—and as those trapped by western culture slowly break from their cognitive dissonance and open their hearts and minds, a new reality will begin to reveal itself. Our task is to let this transformation take its course, and to speed it along where we can."

History is littered with historical determinists who were convinced the revolution was just around the corner. A few were right, most were wrong. And history is full of social upheavals in which true believers decided the cause was so great that they would step beyond the boundaries of law. Some have been vindicated by history, some scorned.

When I consider the ELF arsonists, I find myself thinking of the militant nineteenth-century abolitionist John Brown. So appalled was Brown by the institution of slavery that he tried to spark a revolution. He thought all that was needed was a firm nudge and the whole South would erupt in a slave rebellion. He was wrong, and was caught. His actions enraged the southern populace, and the system against which he struggled prosecuted him, convicted him, and hanged him.

At the time he was viewed as a crazed visionary whose quixotic strivings had changed nothing. But as the forces of abolition gained strength—as the real revo-

lution unfolded—he became something much more potent. He became a symbol. Over the course of decades, what was first considered lunacy and extremism came to be regarded as courage and righteousness.

Years from now, when we have a clearer understanding of the full damage we have done to the Earth, is it possible the ELF arsonists will be remembered in similar fashion?

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