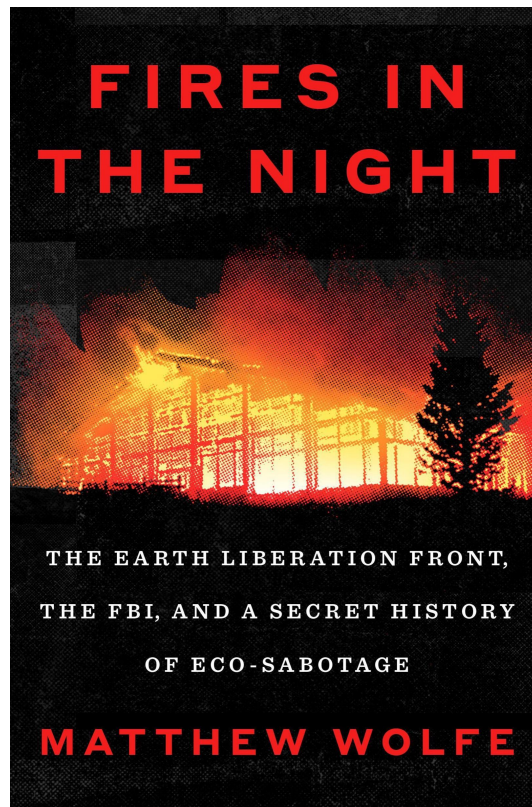


Fires in the Night (Preview)

The Earth Liberation Front, the FBI, and a Secret History of
Eco-Sabotage

Matthew Wolfe



2026

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The explosive true story of the rise and unraveling of the Earth Liberation Front, a secret group of radicals who carried out the most audacious series of politically motivated arsons in American history — and the relentless federal hunt to bring them down.

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For Agnes, hope in an imperfect world

There is the story about Georges Clemenceau that when he traveled around the world in 1921 he came to New Delhi and was taken to see the huge Baker-Lutyen office buildings which were just then completed. He stood gazing at the buildings for a long time without uttering a word. Finally, the British officer who was with him asked what he thought of them. "I was thinking," said Clemenceau, "what ruins these will make!"

—Eric Hoffer, "The Return of Nature"

Prologue

Joseph Dibee was asleep, his dreams deep and pleasant, and then, suddenly, he wasn't.¹ When Dibee opened his eyes, he saw three strange men peering down at him. The men were dressed in military uniforms—Cuban, Dibee presumed, trying to

¹ Motion for Release from Pretrial Detention, *United States v. Dibee*, No. 6:06-cr-60011-AA-1 (D. Or., Eugene Div., filed Sep. 10, 2020); interview with Matthew Schindler.

FIRES IN THE NIGHT

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VIKING

drag himself back into consciousness. Dibee had only stopped in Cuba for a layover, grabbing a nap on the polished floor of the Havana airport between flights. Trained as a structural engineer, Dibee was an American citizen, born and raised in Washington state, but now living in Russia. After a monthslong consulting trip around South America, he was eager to finally head home to his wife and stepson. The trio of men demanded Dibee's passport then briskly escorted him out of the terminal and into a waiting sedan. Dibee, still foggy, asked where they were going but got no response. Sandwiched between his captors, he was driven miles through the night, the end-of-summer air muggy and oppressive. Finally, the car stopped at what appeared to be a detention center, a massed blackness rising against the dark sky.

For the next three days, Dibee would later claim in a court filing, he was imprisoned and, in effect, tortured. Dibee's squalid concrete cell had no windows, and when the sun rose his cage became a hotbox. As Dibee slapped away mosquitos and sweat through every fiber of his clothes, the jail's guards provided him with only a few, intermittent sips of water—just enough, it seemed, to keep him alive.² He quickly became sick, trying his hardest not to vomit, and started to pass out. In lucid moments, Dibee worried that, if he died, his family would have no way of learning his fate or retrieving his remains.

Though the specific circumstances of his arrest had been a shock, Dibee could not, in all honesty, claim that the apprehension itself was unexpected. The lank, saturnine passenger, it turned out, was a wanted man. On his way to Cuba, switching planes in El Salvador, Dibee's fingerprints had been run through customs and flagged by Interpol, after triggering one of the international law enforcement agency's famous Red Notices.³ More than a decade before, in the United States, Dibee had been indicted by federal prosecutors for his participation in a series of arsons. The crimes had been carried out by a mysterious band of environmental activists known as the Earth Liberation Front, or the ELF.

In the late 1990s, the ELF became notorious for setting fire to a number of prominent symbols of ecological destruction. Their targets included logging companies, slaughterhouses, animal laboratories, car dealerships, and a mountaintop ski resort. Through a series of public communiqués, the anonymous group warned of imminent planetary catastrophe, vowing to strike back at those responsible for ravaging the Earth. The Elves soon found themselves widely demonized. Their acts of sabotage were mocked by the media and inspired a furious crackdown from law enforcement.⁴ The Federal Bu-

² For an account of the Cuban government using the deprivation of water as a form of torture, see Article 19 Office for Mexico and Central America et al., "Torture in Cuba: Report of Civil Society Organizations to the United Nations Committee Against Torture," March 2022, 22.

³ Government's Sentencing Memorandum, *United States v. Dibee*, Nos. 6:06-cr-60011-AA-1, 6:22-cr-00134-AA-1 (D. Or., Eugene Div., Oct. 26, 2022); Reporter's Transcript of Proceedings, Telephonic Status Conference, *United States v. Dibee*, No. 6:06-cr-60011-AA (D. Or., Eugene Div., Dec. 23, 2019), 7–9.

⁴ See, for a representative example of mockery, "The Boy Who Cried 'ELF,'" *Wall Street Journal*,

reau of Investigation even deemed the ELF to be, at one time, the country’s foremost domestic terrorism threat.⁵ Fleeing before he could be arrested, Dibee spent years on the run, hiding in Mexico, Syria, and Russia, while trying to begin a second life. Yet, even as the ELF’s misdeeds faded into the past, the FBI quietly kept up its search for those members who had escaped justice. Dibee had assumed he would enjoy safe passage through Cuba, which has a long history of sheltering Americans wanted by the law.⁶ But his arrest, on August 17, 2018, brought an abrupt end to Dibee’s years-long interlude as a fugitive.

While Dibee perspired in his cell, it was not lost on him, a disciple of science, that in the decade since his indictment the Earth’s ecological trajectory had dramatically worsened. Within just that time, humans had collectively added around 100 billion pounds of plastics⁷ to the oceans and 1.3 trillion pounds of aerosolized carbon to the skies.⁸ Average temperatures on land had risen almost half a degree Celsius, and the seas had, in aggregate, become a modest but highly consequential 0.03 pH more acidic.⁹ Approximately 780,000 square miles of Arctic ice had melted away,¹⁰ while 225 square miles of Louisiana’s coast were swallowed up by the encroaching Gulf of Mexico.¹¹ Whole species of animals were blinking out of existence.¹² The last western black rhinoceros had vanished, declared extinct, as had the Vietnamese Javan rhinoceros, the Baiji dolphin, the Japanese river otter, and a tiny, charismatic amphibian known as the Mount Glorious day frog—to say nothing of¹³ countless insects and plants, many dying off before biologists could even grace them with a name or record their presence

February 14, 2001.

⁵ *Animal Rights: Activism vs. Criminality*, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 108th Cong., 2nd sess., May 18, 2004, S. Hrg. 108–764 (US Government Printing Office, 2005), 5.

⁶ Jon Lee Anderson, “The American Fugitives of Havana,” *New Yorker*, August 31, 2016.

⁷ A 2015 article in *Science*, estimating for 2010, gives an annual range of about 4 million metric tons to 12 million metric tons, or approximately 8 to 26 billion pounds per year. I am offering an estimate on the lower end of this range. See Jenna R. Jambeck, Roland Geyer, Chris Wilcox, Theodore R. Siegler, Miriam Perryman, Anthony Andrady et al., “Plastic Waste Inputs from Land into the Ocean,” *Science* 347, no. 6223 (2015): 768–771.

⁸ Erin E. McDuffie, Steven J. Smith, Patrick O’Rourke, Kushal Tibrewal, Chandra Venkataraman, Eloise A. Marais et al., “A Global Anthropogenic Emission Inventory of Atmospheric Pollutants from Sector- and Fuel-Specific Sources (1970–2017): An Application of the Community Emissions Data System (CEDS),” *Earth System Science Data Discussions* 12, no. 4 (2020): 1–49.

⁹ See National Centers for Environmental Information, “Global Times Series at a Glance,” available at ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/climate-at-a-glance/global/time-series/globe/land/12/12/2005-2021.

¹⁰ See the European Environmental Agency, “Indicator Assessment: Ocean Acidification,” available at eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/ocean-acidification-2/assessment.

¹¹ See National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “Arctic Sea Ice Minimum Extent,” available at climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/arctic-sea-ice.

¹² Vanessa Schipani, “Land Loss in Louisiana,” March 20, 2017, factcheck.org/2017/03/land-loss-in-louisiana.

¹³ International Union for Conservation of Nature, “Red List of Threatened Species,” available at iucnredlist.org.

into terrestrial annals.¹⁴ It had, somehow, snowed in the baking Sahara Desert, and¹⁵ the unyielding Siberian tundra had been thawed by a heat wave.¹⁶ Despite the lethal absurdity of such a situation—a gun shoved into the mouth of every living creature on the planet—this industrialized destruction was still grinding onward, a ruinous machine that couldn’t be switched off. Dibee had never even been a leader in the ELF, participating in only a handful of actions. Amid such a blood tide, he wondered, what right did any government have to judge his humble crimes?

On his fourth day of confinement, Dibee, now badly weakened from dehydration, was dragged to an air-conditioned trailer in another part of the jail. There, he was met by a chipper, middle-aged man in fatigues who introduced himself as an officer in Cuba’s state intelligence service. Smiling, the officer held up a bottle of water. Dibee, his lips cracked and bleeding, looked at it longingly.

“But first,” the officer said, “tell us about the fires.”¹⁷

Extract from Chapter 8: Masa La Flambeau

Several years before, on the afternoon of April 24, 1995, a postal van pulled up to the Sacramento headquarters of the California Forestry Association.¹⁸ A lobbying group representing the state’s timber industry, the CFA worked to encourage legislation favorable to lumber companies. Recently, it had successfully pushed lawmakers in the state capital to expand salvage logging in several national forests and sought to ease the reach of the Endangered Species Act. Within the day’s mail was a package about the size of a shoebox, wrapped in brown paper and affixed, curiously, with a few too many postage stamps. The package was addressed to the group’s former president, who had retired the previous year. His replacement was a courteous, forty-seven-year-old

¹⁴ Michael L. McKinney, “High Rates of Extinction and Threat in Poorly Studied Taxa,” *Conservation Biology* 13, no. 6 (1999): 1273–1281; Matilda J. M. Brown, Steven P. Bachman, and Eimear Nic Lughadha, “Three in Four Undescribed Plant Species Are Threatened with Extinction,” *New Phytologist* 240, no. 4 (2023).

¹⁵ Jason Dailey, “Snow Falls in the Sahara for the First Time Since 1979,” *Smithsonian*, December 22, 2016.

¹⁶ Frank Günther, Guido Grosse, Benjamin M. Jones, Lutz Schirrmeister, Vladimir E. Romanovsky, and Viktor Kunitsky, “Unprecedented Permafrost Thaw Dynamics on a Decadal Time Scale: Batagay Mega Thaw Slump Development, Yana Uplands, Yakutia, Russia,” *AGU Fall Meeting Abstracts*, vol. 2016, GC33G-05.

¹⁷ The phrase “tell us about the fires” comes from Dibee’s Motion for Release from Pretrial Detention, while the phrase “but first” comes from an interview with Matthew Schindler. Motion for Release from Pretrial Detention, *United States v. Dibee*, No. 6:06_cr_60011_AA_1 (D. Or., Eugene Div., filed Sep. 10, 2020).

¹⁸ Ron Arnold, *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature; The World of the Unabomber* (Free Enterprise Press, 1997), 2–5, 13–14; Robert Graysmith, *Unabomber: A Desire To Kill* (Berkley Books, 1997), 303–309; Lis Wiehl, *Hunting the Unabomber: The FBI, Ted Kaczynski, and the Capture of America’s Most Notorious Domestic Terrorist* (Nelson Books, 2020), 200–201.

marine veteran named Gilbert Murray. Murray's secretary took delivery and asked her boss, half joking, whether he thought it was a bomb. A week before, a nine-story federal building in Oklahoma City had been blown up by an explosives-laden rental truck, and everyone in the CFA's office was still a little on edge. The return address for the package was a custom furniture store in Oakland—reasonably unthreatening. Murray's secretary, eyes swollen with seasonal allergies, handed her boss some scissors and then retreated to her office to answer a phone call. A moment later, the building filled with an enormous roar. When Murray's secretary stumbled out her door, she ran into a cloud of acrid black smoke. All but blind now, she could just make out a mound of knee-deep rubble in what, seconds before, had been the reception area. It would later be determined that Murray had been killed instantly, the force of the bomb blowing much of his torso into the drywall.

Murray was the third person murdered by a suspect authorities dubbed the "Unabomber." (The name was a portmanteau denoting his early targets of universities and airports.) Later revealed as Theodore Kaczynski, a virtuosic mathematics professor at UC Berkeley turned primitivist recluse, the Unabomber engaged in a years-long campaign of mailing explosives to individuals he associated with his archnemesis: technology. Diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic, Kaczynski believed that the advancements offered by industrialization had left humans alienated and clapped in psychic irons, forced to bend to the unfeeling logic of machines. His antimodern belief system didn't fit neatly into a single recognizable ideology, and Kaczynski resisted affiliation with any political party or movement. "This is not to be a POLITICAL revolution," he wrote of his project.¹⁹ "Its object will be to overthrow not governments but the economic and technological basis of the present society."

While he cited the destruction of the natural world as one of the foremost costs of technological progress and was an avowed fan of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* author Edward Abbey, Kaczynski was not himself a radical environmentalist.²⁰ He abhorred the contemporary left and, in one journal entry, denounced "the cult of nature-worshippers" while also expressing his fondness for littering.²¹ Yet his ideas were influential among some in the movement. In September 1995, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, blackmailed by a threat from Kaczynski to resume his bombing campaign, each agreed to run, in full, his thirty-five-thousand-word polemic entitled "Industrial Society and Its Future." Recently enrolled at Evergreen State, a young Chelsea Gerlach had printed out the entire essay in the college's library. She didn't agree with everything

¹⁹ Theodore Kaczynski, "Industrial Society and Its Future," *New York Times*, May 26, 1996.

²⁰ Kaczynski conducted an interview with the *Earth First! Journal*'s editor Theresa Kintz in 1999. "I read Edward Abbey in mid-eighties and that was one of the things that gave me the idea that, 'yeah, there are other people out there that have the same attitudes that I do.'" See "Theresa Kintz's Interview with Ted Kaczynski," Ted K Archive, thettedkarchive.com/library/theresa-kintzs-interview-with-ted-kaczynski.

²¹ Bron Raymond Taylor, "Religion, Violence and Radical Environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 4 (1998): 15.

Kaczynski wrote—and she certainly didn’t condone killing anyone—but the manifesto gave shape to some of her more unformed thoughts. Kaczynski shared her newfound skepticism about leftist protesters “lying down in front of vehicles,” which he read as a symptom of masochistic self-hatred. And his main point, that the Industrial Revolution had been a disaster for both nature and humanity, seemed dead-on.²²

Before his death at Kaczynski’s hand, among Gilbert Murray’s friends had been a fellow lobbyist named Ron Arnold, an *éminence grise* within the conservative movement who, though now all but forgotten, at one time did more than almost anyone to weaken and discredit environmentalism as a political force. As these things often go, Arnold was, at one time, himself an environmentalist. In the 1970s, he had been a card-carrying member of the Sierra Club, helping lead teaching expeditions into the wilderness of Washington state.²³ At some point, believing the club had grown too radical, Arnold quit the group and began dedicating himself wholeheartedly to annihilating environmentalism, root and branch.²⁴ “We’re out to kill the fuckers,” he told one reporter.²⁵ The next decade, while working as a consultant for the timber industry, Arnold published an influential series of articles calling for an unflinching new countermovement, composed of loggers, ranchers, miners, and oil companies, to check the growing power of the greens and to more aggressively exploit public lands for their natural resources.²⁶ Success in this venture, Arnold asserted, would require some trickery. In a fight for popular opinion, industry would usually lose because their arguments seemed nakedly self-interested. Instead, Arnold advised, anti-environmentalists should create a number of ersatz “citizen activist groups” to give the impression their views enjoyed popular support.²⁷ And, rather than blatantly advocate for opening up public lands to exploitation, private enterprises should instead position themselves as responsible stewards of the Earth, seeking to apportion the country’s natural resources according to the greatest common good. Under Arnold’s “Wise Use” movement—the name his own, Orwellian touch—a coalition of industry front groups pushed for national parks to be mined, old-growth forests logged, and wildlife refuges drilled for oil, helping set the environmental agenda for the newly elected Republican president George H.²⁸ W. Bush.

²² McKenzie Funk, “Firestarter,” *Outside*, July 2007.

²³ Jim Halpin and Paul de Armond, “Alan Gottlieb: The Merchant of Fear,” *Seattle Eastsideweek*, October 26, 1994.

²⁴ Timothy Egan, “Fund-Raisers Tap Anti-Environmentalism,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1991. “We want to destroy environmentalism by taking their money and their members,” said Arnold.

²⁵ David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The “Wise-Use” Movement, the New Right, and Anti-Environmental Violence* (Random House, 1994), 8.

²⁶ Harvey M. Jacobs, “The Anti-Environmental ‘Wise Use’ Movement in America,” *Land Use Law & Zoning Digest* 47, no. 2 (1995): 3–8.

²⁷ Quoted in Stephanie Hendricks, “The Perversion of ‘Wise Use,’ ” *Brooklyn Rail*, May 2006.

²⁸ For a fuller examination of Arnold and the Wise Use movement, see Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens* and Phil Brick, “Determined Opposition: The Wise Use Movement Challenges Environmentalism,” *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 37, no. 8 (1995): 17–42.

A cunning media strategist, Arnold had a particular talent for stirring up ordinary citizens with a spicy mix of half-truths and outright lies.⁽¹⁾ In 1990, after the Forest Service released a draft of an innocuous document describing the future of Yellowstone National Park, one where the environmental health of the park was given primacy, Arnold helped rally opposition with a blitzkrieg of direct mail.²⁹ Nearby residents were sent letters—unsigned but bearing all the marks of Arnold’s dark hand—claiming that the federal government was planning to seize twenty million acres of Wyoming, within which it would outlaw all tourism, hunting, and fishing. Industry groups pitched in to charter buses that carried hundreds of apoplectic locals to a hearing on the plan, where the mob stood and screamed at Yellowstone’s superintendent, Robert Barbee. One woman, jaw quivering, used her allotted speaking time to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, then denounced Barbee—a mirthful army veteran who worked his way up from seasonal ranger—as a Nazi. The next year, in an interview with the journalist Jon Krakauer, Ron Arnold—who Krakauer described as a “tall, trim man with cold eyes and a surly comportment”—proudly proclaimed that “facts don’t really matter.” But the growing trend of vandalism in defense of the environment left Ron Arnold unsettled.³⁰

(End of Preview)

²⁹ This episode appears in Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens*, 45–48.

³⁰ Jon Krakauer, “Brownfellas,” *Outside*, December 1991.

⁽¹⁾ Lisa Stampnitzky’s writing on the semantics of terrorism were crucial to unpacking Ron Arnold’s strategy in weaponizing the term. I attempted to interview Ron Arnold multiple times before his death in 2022, with no response. Kendall Tankersley was also known as Kendall Harvey, the name by which she was referred to in investigative documents. In the manuscript, I refer to her as Tankersley, to avoid confusion with Eugene Detective Greg Harvey.

The Ted K Archive

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