The Rise and Fall of America's Environmentalist Underground

This year, one of the last fugitives of the Earth Liberation Front pleaded guilty to arson — at a moment when climate activists are again flirting with radical ideas.

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The Two Elk Lodge in Vail, Colo., ablaze, in October 1998.

Mark Mobley/Vail Fire and Emergency Services

Late one summer evening in 2018, an American citizen named Joseph Mahmoud Dibee was sitting in José Martí International Airport in Havana, Cuba — trying, unsuccessfully, to sleep — when he was approached by three men. Dibee, a civil engineer, was in Havana on a layover. After a long business trip in Ecuador, he was heading home to Russia, where he lived with his wife and stepson. The men demanded his passport, then led him out of the terminal and into a waiting sedan. Dibee asked where they were going, but got no response. Sandwiched between his captors, he was driven miles through the night before finally arriving at what appeared to be a jail.

For the next three days, Dibee would claim in a subsequent court filing, he was imprisoned without explanation and, in effect, tortured. His small concrete cell was open to the elements; during the day, the cage baked. As Dibee, who was then 50, sweat through his clothes, the jail's guards gave him little to drink. He soon became nauseated and began to repeatedly pass out. With no way of contacting his family, Dibee worried that, if he died, they would never learn what happened to him.

On his fourth day of confinement, weak from dehydration, Dibee was dragged to an air-conditioned trailer in another part of the facility. He was met by a middle-aged man in fatigues who identified himself as an officer in Cuba's state intelligence service. Smiling, the officer held up a bottle of water.

"But first," he said, "tell us about the fires."

Several days later, on Aug. 9, 2018, Cuban authorities handed Dibee, in shackles, over to agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. To the F.B.I., Dibee's arrest marked the end of a decade-long manhunt for one of the agency's most wanted domestic terrorists. In 2006, Dibee was indicted on a charge of participation in a series of arsons carried out by a shadowy band of environmental activists known as the Earth Liberation Front. In the late 1990s, the ELF became notorious for setting fire to symbols of ecological destruction, including timber mills, an S.U.V. dealership and a ski resort. The group, which warned of imminent ecological catastrophe, was widely demonized. Its exploits were condemned by mainstream environmental groups, ridiculed by the media and inspired a furious crackdown from law enforcement.

Fleeing before he could be arrested, Dibee had spent years as a fugitive in Syria, Russia and Mexico, until he was picked up passing through Havana. After his interrogation by the Cuban authorities, the F.B.I. flew him in a Gulfstream jet to Portland, Ore., where he was arraigned for charges relating to his role in the attacks. This April, Dibee pleaded guilty to arson and conspiracy to commit arson.

The plea comes at a moment when the story of the Earth Liberation Front seems more relevant than ever. After decades in which America's environmental movement confined its activities largely to rallies, marches and other lawful forms of protest, frustrated activists have begun taking a more confrontational approach. Younger groups like the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion have blockaded roads and occupied the offices of lawmakers. During the Standing Rock protests of 2016, thousands of demonstrators sought to physically impede construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Tim DeChristopher, a founder of the Climate Disobedience Center, which supports protesters who engage in nonviolent resistance, told me that, in the 2000s, such direct action was championed mostly by a fringe group of anarchists. (DeChristopher himself was sent to prison after placing winning bids at public auctions for oil and gas leases and then refusing to pay.) Now, even staid Washington-based environmental groups, sensing an increasingly unruly mood among their base, have slowly started to embrace more radical tactics. In 2017, the Sierra Club formally lifted its 120-year ban on civil disobedience after its executive director and other senior members were arrested for strapping themselves to a gate outside the White House.

Recently, some climate activists have begun to openly contemplate the possibility — in their eyes, the necessity — of directly sabotaging the infrastructure of the carbon economy. Foremost among them is the academic Andreas Malm, whose recent book, "How to Blow Up a Pipeline," calls for smashing the tools of fossil-fuel extraction as a last-ditch means of averting ecological collapse. In interviews with mainstream outlets such as Vox and The New Yorker, Malm contends that climate activists should give up their dogmatic attachment to pacifism and start to destroy the machines that actually produce carbon. While acknowledging that such attacks might fail, Malm nevertheless argues that the urgency of global warming — in the 16 years since Dibee's indictment, the world has collectively pumped about 500 billion more tons of carbon into the

atmosphere — demands new tactics. “I think that the situation is so dire, so extreme,” he told Vox, “that we have to experiment.”

This summer in Oregon, Dibee will be sentenced by Judge Ann Aiken. The prosecution is recommending a sentence of more than seven years, as well as a yet-to-be-determined amount of financial restitution. When Dibee and his lawyers plead for leniency, Aiken may hear some of the largely forgotten history of the ELF — how a small group of activists, fueled by idealism and rage, brought the entire weight of the federal government down upon themselves, severely curtailing what remained of the radical environmental movement in this country. As climate change, no longer an abstraction, has begun to transform American life in the form of heat, fire, floods and smoke, it is a story that may sound different to some listeners now than when prosecutors first told it.

The smoldering remains of Two Elk’s restaurant.

Jack Affleck/Associated Press

The series of events that would ultimately lead to Dibee’s capture by federal authorities began 30-odd years ago, when a bookish teenager named Kevin Tubbs was leafing

through the Utne Reader and came across an ad for the National Anti-Vivisection Society. Curious, he wrote away requesting a pamphlet. When it arrived a few weeks later, Tubbs was horrified. Animals, he learned, were being routinely tortured in the name of science. The photos he was able to find — dogs with their faces sliced open, rats butchered alive, monkeys screaming at the electrodes implanted in their abdomens — seemed like windows into hell. Tubbs's family lived on the outskirts of Omaha, a few miles from the stockyards. On some nights, when the wind drifted south, he could smell the cattle, their dung giving off a lush, loamy scent. He read that mother cows sobbed when separated from their calves, and it occurred to him that he was living next to the infrastructure of atrocity.

Tubbs went vegetarian, then vegan, and was soon a full-time activist, getting regularly arrested at protests. But Tubbs wasn't naïve about what such demonstrations could realistically accomplish. Seeking a new approach, he applied for an editor position at the Earth First! Journal, an environmental newsletter in Eugene, Ore. His application included a copy of his rap sheet; he was hired immediately. The organization that ran the journal was founded a decade and a half earlier, in 1980, by a group of activists who became disaffected with the professionalized, incrementalist approach of the environmental establishment, embodied by groups like the Sierra Club. They were, in other words, radical environmentalists. The radicals believed the modest reforms pursued through traditional legislative channels simply weren't sufficient to save the planet from ecological annihilation.

By the mid-90s, the city of Eugene had become an incubator of political dissent and a gathering place for radical and militant environmentalists. In the working-class Whiteaker neighborhood, anarchists had regular battles with cops. To the east, the land turned primeval, with millions of acres of ancient forest spread across the vast Cascade mountain range. While some Eugene residents earned their incomes off timber, others were drawn by the song of the trees.

In Eugene, Tubbs met a man named Jacob Ferguson. Ferguson wore all black and was covered in piercings and tattoos, including an ornate pentagram on his head. A vagabond, freshly sober from heroin, Ferguson had recently settled in Eugene with his pregnant girlfriend. Tubbs detected something gentle beneath Ferguson's piratical exterior, and the two men soon became inseparable.

In 1991, an unknown arsonist set fire to a portion of the vast Willamette National Forest, not far outside town. The blaze burned for two weeks, destroying about 9,000 acres, much of it old-growth firs, in the Warner Creek watershed. There were no suspects, but among activists, suspicion fell on the local timber industry. While most old-growth forest was protected from logging, a loophole in federal law meant partly burned sections were fair game. After the fire, the U.S. Forest Service — the agency that coordinates the sale of national forests to industry — prepared to sell the scorched acreage to logging companies, who would "salvage" the remaining trees. Activists persuaded a court to grant an injunction against the sale. But then, in 1995, President

Bill Clinton signed a bill suspending protection for Willamette and hundreds of other forests, opening them to logging.

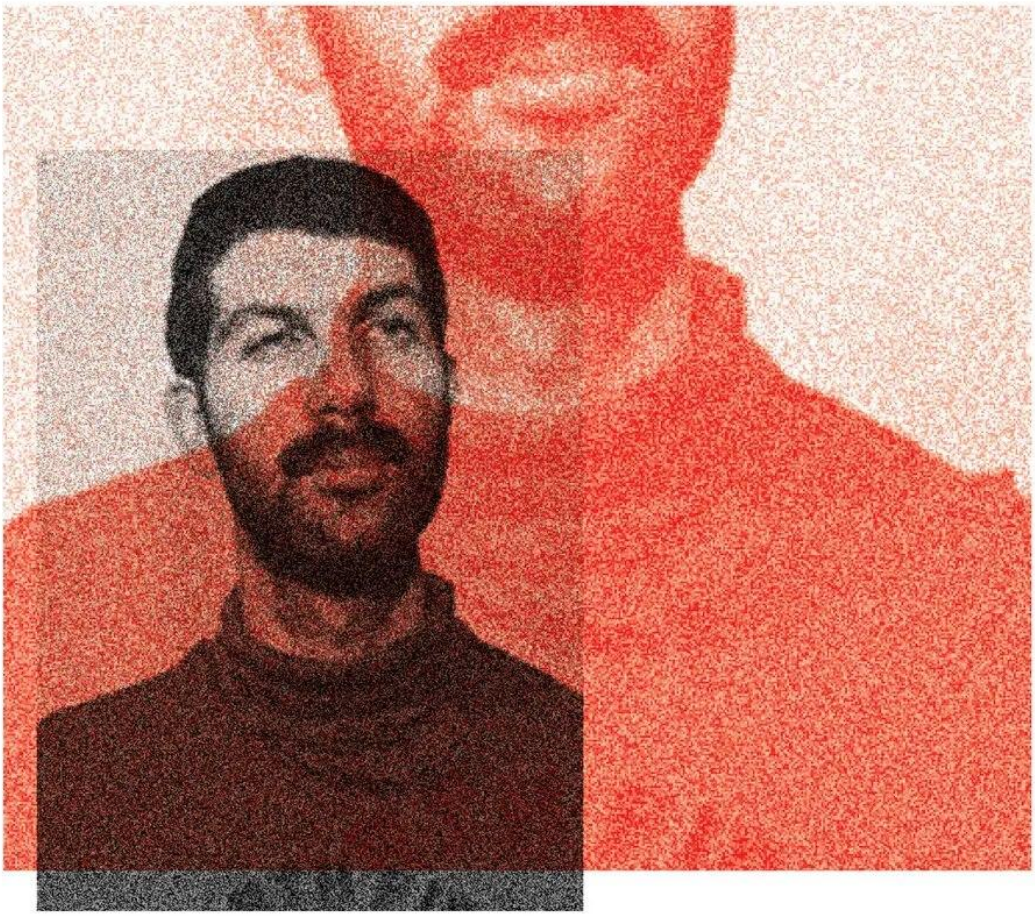
Dozens of incensed activists, including Tubbs and Ferguson, took to the mountains in hopes of physically defending the wilderness. Whenever logging trucks tried to approach the old-growth trees, the protesters jumped into the road and handcuffed themselves to barrels filled with concrete. As the campaign stretched on, the activists built a small settlement near Warner Creek, digging trenches and erecting a fort with a working drawbridge. Tubbs occasionally occupied a towering 20-foot structure ingeniously constructed by a fellow protester who had also found his way to the Cascades — Joseph Dibee.

Like Tubbs's, Dibee's environmentalism was rooted in an adolescent wounding. Dibee had been a shy child who suffered from asthma. His parents moved to the United States from Syria before he was born, and until he was 8 he spoke only Arabic. His father, an avid outdoorsman, would lead him into the mountains, where they'd forage for mushrooms. On one of these trips, Dibee's father took him to a small, sunlit meadow, with a creek, secreted away in an obscure corner of the forest. He began hiking up to the spot by himself, for the tranquillity — a sensitive boy's inviolable retreat. And then, one day, when Dibee arrived at his sanctuary, he saw it was gone. A vast plot of trees had been felled for timber, leaving the scalp of the ancient forest with a bald patch, as if shaved by a colossal razor.

Surviving on donated food and braving a glacial winter that buried their tents in snow, the occupiers lasted almost a year. It ended when the Clinton administration issued new restrictions on logging in national forests, saving Warner Creek. While most local activists took the occupation as an unmitigated success, to Tubbs the victory felt empty. At that point, he was 26 and had been trying to make substantive change for nearly a decade — letter-writing, leafleting, canvassing, tabling, teach-ins, lawsuits, blockades, boycotts, vigils, pickets, rallies, even guerrilla street theater. And yet nothing seemed to be getting better.

A few months after Warner Creek wrapped up, the Earth First! Journal received and published a mysterious message. It was from an entity calling itself the Earth Liberation Front. The ELF was said to be a clandestine, leaderless group, dedicated to aggressive vandalism in the name of the environment. The first cell of "Elves" had recently popped up in Britain, followed by others on the European continent. The missive to the journal was a call to arms, inviting its American readers to "allow those who are destroying this planet to be witness to some of the most destructive eco-sabotage and criminal damage ever seen, persuading them to either give up their practices or suffer the consequences!!!"

In the predawn hours of Oct. 28, 1996, a newspaper carrier for The Salem Statesman Journal was making his rounds when he passed a federal ranger station in the forest near the town of Detroit, Ore., and noticed that a truck in the parking lot was on fire. The blaze was easily contained, but a worker later discovered, on the station's roof, a



The eco-activist and ELF member Joseph Dibee in the early 1990s. He pleaded guilty last month to arson and conspiracy charges.

Photograph from the Federal Bureau of Investigation

milk jug filled with fuel that had failed to ignite. On one of the station's walls, someone had spray-painted the phrase "Earth Liberation Front."

Two nights later, a group consisting of Tubbs, Ferguson and, federal prosecutors claim, a midwife named Josephine Overaker drove to a second ranger station near a town called Oakridge. At the station, Ferguson placed a gasoline canister inside a dumpster and a second canister next to its eastern wall, before igniting them with incense sticks. Sprinting back to his borrowed Subaru, he scattered nails in the driveway to slow down firefighters. Before returning the car to his friend, Ferguson changed the tires, throwing away the old ones to prevent the treads from being traced. By daybreak, the Oakridge Ranger Station had burned to the ground.

The arson threw Eugene's environmental community into an uproar. Small-scale sabotage, like pouring sugar into a bulldozer's gas tank, had always been part of radical-environmentalist culture. But arson was something different. Besides destroying the structure itself — an estimated $5 million loss — the fire also consumed decades of forest-related data collected by naturalists and biologists. The fire blazed so hot that, weeks after the attack, when the staff opened a safe, admitting oxygen, papers stored inside burst into flames. Many activists felt that, while the U.S. Forest Service might be complicit with the timber industry, the arson squandered much of the good will generated by the Warner Creek victory. The Sierra Club offered a reward for information that led to the arsonists' capture.

Committing himself completely to ecological sabotage, Tubbs quit his aboveground activism and took a job at a market-research company. Many of Tubbs's companions in ELF actions were veterans of Warner Creek, including Joseph Dibee, whose technical expertise made him an invaluable ally. After months of planning, on July 21, 1997, the Elves gathered in the Oregon desert several miles from the Cavel West Horse Rendering Plant. Every year, under a little-known federal program, thousands of wild horses were rounded up by the Bureau of Land Management and purchased, sometimes by buyers who would go on to sell them for slaughter. Cavel West killed as many as 500 horses a week, shipping the meat to Europe. For years, locals had complained about the plant — its sickening smell, the screams of the horses and the vast amount of blood it generated, which would sometimes overwhelm the sewer system and burble up through storm drains. While Tubbs manned a police scanner in their getaway van, the rest of the team trudged through the night toward the plant, dressed in dark clothing and communicating with two-way radios. According to a court filing by the prosecution, Dibee drilled holes in the facility's walls, filled the hollows with a mixture of glycerin soap, diesel and gasoline — the group called this "vegan Jell-O" — and set timed igniters. After the plant was in flames, and before going their separate ways, everyone threw their clothes in a hole and doused them in acid.

A week later, Craig Rosebraugh, a vegan baker in Portland, found an odd-looking note in the mailbox of an activist group where he volunteered. The letter — which appeared to have been written with deliberate sloppiness — denounced the Cavel West plant's role in horse slaughter and claimed its destruction was the work of a new group

of radical environmentalists. Believing the group wanted their message shared with the world, Rosebraugh released it to the media. For years, he would receive regular communications from the ELF, eventually becoming a kind of spokesman for the group. In subsequent communiqués, which mixed doom-laden prophecies of ecological disaster with furious demands for change, the group described its ethos in greater detail. "We are the burning rage of this dying planet," began one, which was posted to the internet. "The war of greed ravages the Earth and species die out every day. ELF works to speed up the collapse of industry, to scare the rich and undermine the foundations of the state." Property destruction, they explained, was a way of levying a kind of fine on despoiling nature — of, in effect, removing the profit motive from killing the planet — and arson was the simplest, cheapest method of extracting this tax.

ELF cells would eventually spread all over the country, but the Eugene group was the first and easily the most prolific. The group's methods were low-tech, but the precautions they took to avoid being caught were exhaustive. Security culture was big in Eugene, where activists were well versed in the government's infiltration of older radical movements. The group used email "dead drops," a system that involved exchanging coded messages in the Drafts folder. Arsons were called "BBQs," timing devices "hamburgers." Supplies were purchased in cash or shoplifted, and, before every action, tools were scrubbed with ammonia to remove any genetic material. The Elves intentionally avoided socializing — many members, in fact, never met each other. The Eugene cell took pains to be less a formal organization than a loose collection of actions with an overlapping cast of activists. The Elves also adopted aliases to keep their identities secret. A couple of members had a romantic relationship that lasted years, during which they never learned each other's real names.

In the fall of 1998, the ELF took on its largest target. A resort in the mountains of Vail, Colo., was planning to clear more than 800 acres of forest to make way for new ski runs and roads, threatening the habitat of the Canada lynx. A coalition of environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, had fought the expansion in court but were denied an injunction to stop the logging. With the help of a young woman named Chelsea Gerlach, another Elf named William Rodgers devised a plan. On the night of Oct. 18, 1998, just before the logging was scheduled to begin, Rodgers ran across the mountain ridge, setting fire to the resort's buildings and ski lifts one by one. Soon, eight structures were aflame. There would have been nine, but Rodgers skipped a cabin after peeking inside and finding two sleeping hunters. Rodgers and Gerlach then drove to a library in Denver where Gerlach emailed Rosebraugh an anonymous communiqué. The resort had been destroyed, she explained, on behalf of the lynx.

Detective Greg Harvey's first day with the Eugene Police Department's Special Investigations Unit ended with a riot. It was June 18, 1999, and a march through downtown Eugene, led by hundreds of anarchists, escalated into mayhem when protesters began smashing windows and police officers responded with tear gas. The S.I.U. was founded specifically to address the threats posed by radical groups, whose crimes often required complex investigations. Since its inception in the 1970s, the S.I.U. had pur-

An officer with the Oregon State Fire Marshal investigating the remains of the Cavel West horse-meatpacking plant in Redmond, Ore., in July 1997.

Photograph from The Bulletin of Bend, Oregon

sued student leftists, outlaw motorcycle gangs and white supremacists. In the 1990s, its focus shifted to crimes committed by the anarchist and radical environmental movements. When the arsons in Oregon began, the S.I.U. joined a working group with a half-dozen other law-enforcement agencies, including the F.B.I. and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, to crack the case. Authorities were convinced it was only a matter of time before the fires accidentally killed someone or the perpetrators escalated to deadly violence.

Harvey and his colleagues began by establishing a network of confidential informants among the radical environmentalists. But who was behind the ELF was just as much a mystery to the activist community as it was to the police, so Harvey decided to go undercover. As he attended gatherings of college students and crust punks in the Whiteaker neighborhood, wearing a dirty wig from a Halloween costume of Jesus, he gradually assembled a map of the activist community. He scoured anarchist zines, trying to learn everything he could about the tenets of radical environmentalism.

The F.B.I. had promised swift justice for Vail, but a year on, the case had stalled. Agency analysts had tried monitoring the phone traffic of activists, seeing who was calling whom, on the assumption the ELF could be taken down like a drug gang. But as Harvey — who had grudgingly come to admire the Elves' discipline — expected, this yielded next to nothing. Harvey's counterpart at the F.B.I., Special Agent John Ferreira, was also getting frustrated. A minor legend within the Bureau, Ferreira had worked cases involving the Bonnano crime family and the Japanese Yakuza. And from the beginning, Ferreira had been fixated on one suspect: Josephine Overaker.

During a routine canvas after the Detroit arson, police had discovered Overaker's address book in a nearby phone booth. Further suspicion fell on Overaker after she was arrested in Tacoma for shoplifting sponges — an ingredient in several of the ELF's devices — shortly before a nearby fire. Investigators had noticed Overaker at protests, and Ferreira became convinced she was involved in Vail. Yet all his evidence was still circumstantial, and after several years, the ELF was beginning to look uncatchable. As Ferreira put it to one reporter, "They kicked our butts."

The ELF, meanwhile, was facing its own setbacks. Vail had made them a household name — the attack even became a plot point on "The West Wing." But a feeling was simmering within the group that they weren't accomplishing much. The fires failed to spark a larger social movement. While the media focused on the spectacle of the fires, it mostly ignored the reasons they were lit. Some targets were being rebuilt with insurance money. More than that, the arsons didn't seem to have had an impact on the financial calculations of the industries they had targeted.

William Rodgers, who was a particularly outspoken and influential member of the group, decided the ELF needed to scale up. He set about recruiting more members, and the Eugene cell soon doubled in size. Rodgers also started to hold meetings — called "book clubs" — intended to spread the group's methods. Rodgers, along with a quiet man named Stan Meyerhoff, wrote and published a manual for building incendiary devices, and posted it to the internet. But as the cell expanded and took on more

actions, it began to lose some of its original discipline. In May 1999, during an attack on a meat company in Eugene, someone placed an incendiary device next to a natural-gas line, risking an immense explosion. In September 2000, several members of the group tried, unsuccessfully, to set fire to a Eugene police substation, a target bearing little obvious connection to the environment. A few months later, a team torched Superior Lumber in Glendale, Ore., issuing a communiqué that labeled the timber company a "typical Earth raper." The arson gave some Elves pause. Superior was a small, family-owned business and its town's biggest employer. Such an action seemed unlikely to win much sympathy.

These disagreements underscored a contradiction in the ELF's approach, namely that the group saw itself as the vanguard of a revolution, when in fact it was all alone. As Andreas Malm notes, many largely peaceful social movements have, in the past, included a radical flank that engaged in more aggressive tactics. Indeed, some movements that are now all but universally admired involved more violence and property destruction than we like to remember. Suffragists smashed windows. During the Civil Rights era, Black residents of segregated Northern cities burned down buildings. Even Nelson Mandela, as head of the militant wing of the African National Congress, took part in a campaign of bombing unoccupied government buildings. Yet all were wedded to larger political movements, with specific aims, for which sabotage was but one form of pressure. The ELF's fires, Malm has observed, existed in a political void.

The ELF disdained the mainstream Washington-based environmental groups, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. Many, including Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund and the Sierra Club — which offered cash rewards on several occasions for information leading to the capture of eco-saboteurs — made statements denouncing property destruction. The executive director of Greenpeace USA declared that peaceful civil disobedience was a cornerstone of the organization's philosophy, citing Nelson Mandela as a model.

On June 16, 2000, two activists, Jeffrey Luers and Craig Marshall, set fire to three pickup trucks at the Romania Chevrolet dealership in Eugene, unaware they were being tailed by Detective Greg Harvey. The two men were arrested, with Marshall pleading guilty and Luers going to trial. As a show of solidarity, the Elves decided to strike Romania a second time. On March 30, 2001, a small crew crept into the dealership in the middle of the night. While Rodgers waited in a van and Tubbs stood lookout, Stan Meyerhoff and another ELF member placed kitty-litter pans under the vehicles and filled them with fuel, linking them together with gasoline-soaked linens scored from thrift stores. By dawn, 35 S.U.V.s had been torched. A communiqué dedicated the action to Luers.

The ELF's arson seemed to have an unforeseen effect. Luers was found guilty and, for the crime of setting fire to three trucks and another attempted arson, received a sentence of more than 22 years, the longest ever handed down for what was then a relatively new concept: eco-terrorism. For years, the phrase "eco-terrorism" had more often been used to describe violence against the natural world than vandalism committed

in its name. When Saddam Hussein dumped millions of gallons of oil into the Persian Gulf, President George H.W. Bush denounced it as an act of "environmental terrorism." Yet, by the mid-90s, conservatives had begun warning of the eco-terrorism perpetrated by radical environmentalists. News outlets, including The New York Times, regularly described the ELF as terrorists — despite the fact, as activists pointed out, that the ELF had never killed anyone.

Some members of the Eugene cell, wanting retribution, doubled down. Early on May 21, 2001, Elves torched two structures and 18 vehicles on a tree farm in Clatskanie, Ore. That same night, 150 miles north, flames devoured an office building on the University of Washington's campus in Seattle. The ELF's communiqué explained that the motive for the twin attacks was the "ecological nightmare" of genetic engineering. But the arsons were based on false information; neither target was nearly as involved in G.M.O. research as the Elves believed.

These misadventures widened rifts, ideological and personal, that had been slowly growing within the group. With early idealism wearing off, it became clear that not everyone in the group believed the same things about why they were setting fires. The Elves had initially agreed on the necessity of a new tactic, but when it became clear the tactic wasn't working, their philosophical differences became insurmountable. At a "book club" meeting soon after the double arson, one attendee raised the possibility of escalating to physical violence, even assassinations. Others — who had joined the ELF because of its commitment to preserving life — were repulsed. On Sept. 5, 2001, after a disagreement with an Elf over an unapproved edit to a communiqué, Rosebraugh stepped down as the group's putative spokesman.

A week later, Chelsea Gerlach was sitting in a hotel room, preparing to reconnoiter a potential target, when she saw on TV that a pair of planes had crashed into the World Trade Center. Hours after the towers fell, Representative Don Young, a Republican from Alaska, suggested there was "a strong possibility" that radical environmentalists were behind the hijackings.

The attacks transformed the F.B.I. overnight. The bureau had been founded in the early 20th century as a law-enforcement agency, but after Sept. 11, its central mission, underwritten by expansive new congressional funding, became counterterrorism. Over the next few years, the F.B.I. turned ever more attention to property destruction committed by environmental activists. While most of this pressure was directed toward radical environmentalists, it also opened terrorism investigations into members of mainstream groups like Greenpeace and PETA for their potential involvement in ecological sabotage. In 2002, James Jarboe, chief of the F.B.I.'s domestic-terrorism division, declared to Congress that the investigation of animal rights extremists and eco-terrorists was the bureau's highest domestic-terrorism priority. This period in the environmental movement — marked by aggressive police tactics and tough new punishments for crimes ostensibly committed in defense of the earth — was one that some activists would come to call the Green Scare.

Exactly why the F.B.I. made eco-terrorism a central concern remains a subject of debate. Some have speculated it was because of corporate pressure. According to the reporting by The Intercept, industry trade groups had been directly pushing the Justice Department to pursue eco-sabotage cases since the 1980s. Yet F.B.I. officials contend that the fixation on the ELF stemmed, in part, from the trauma of Sept. 11. Fearful of being blindsided a second time, the bureau sought to make up for the failure of imagination that had led them to miss signs of an imminent attack from Al Qaeda. There was a conviction that, even if the ELF had so far only targeted buildings, it was just a matter of time before the group began attacking people.

"The question after Sept. 11," James Jarboe told me, "was 'Who else wants body bags?'"

By early 2003, the leads had dried up in the ELF investigation. The group had been quiet for almost two years, and the main person of interest, Overaker, was off the grid. It was then that Kirk Engdall, a federal prosecutor in Eugene, decided to try a new strategy. Engdall, who was assigned to the Justice Department's domestic-terrorism squad, had been obsessed with the ELF case for years. On his wall, he kept a poster of the burning Oakridge Ranger Station. Instead of casting a wide net, Engdall suggested, why not take a meticulous "cold case" approach to a single arson, one that occurred just blocks from his office: Romania Chevrolet.

For the next six months, investigators turned over every clue related to the S.U.V. fires, looking for anything they had missed. Finally, they noticed something unusual. The day after the Romania fire, an activist known as Sparrow had walked into a Eugene police station and asked for an incident report about the arson. Told it was confidential, she then asked for a second report, concerning a stolen truck, taken on the night of the fire. This was a red flag: Investigators assumed a truck had been used to haul fuel for the arson. The second report, about the stolen truck, had been filed by a woman who suggested that the theft had been committed by her neighbor — a man named Jacob Ferguson. (Investigators believed that Sparrow requested the reports in order to figure out how much the police knew.) John Ferreira, meanwhile, had long been interested in Ferguson because of a woman he had dated: Josephine Overaker.

With Ferguson now their main suspect, investigators sought evidence linking him to Romania. For the next six months, Harvey, still in his Jesus-wig disguise, followed Ferguson constantly, up to 14 hours a day. Ferreira and Engdall brought Ferguson in for questioning and presented him with evidence that he had perjured himself when speaking to federal investigators — he'd claimed not to know Overaker — which carried a five-year penalty. According to Harvey, they also bluffed, hinting they had enough evidence to charge him for arson and send him to prison for a long time. Still, Ferguson resisted. The investigators knew that Ferguson had a son born during the Warner Creek occupation, and they knew that his father had spent time in prison when Ferguson was a child. Did he really want his own son to grow up without a dad?

In 2004, Ferguson made a plea deal: little to no jail time in exchange for full cooperation. The government also agreed to pay for heroin-addiction treatment. At the time,

investigators still didn't know the extent of Ferguson's involvement in the ELF. When Ferguson told them he had participated in over a dozen arsons, they were stunned. (The Romania S.U.V. arson, in fact, was one of the few in which Ferguson played no role.) Investigators were surprised again when Ferguson started naming his associates, most of whom they had never heard of. Harvey assumed Ferguson's colleagues would be like him — in a word, "punks" — not college-educated people with jobs.

After Ferguson came on board, the F.B.I. designated the ELF investigation a major case, branding it Operation Backfire, freeing up more money and resources. Dozens of agents were soon working the case, with President Bush said to be receiving regular briefings on their progress. Ferguson also reluctantly agreed to wear a wire, and the agency started flying him around the country, arranging for him to bump into his former ELF colleagues, most of whom had moved away. Ferguson soon showed up in Portland, where Chelsea Gerlach worked as a D.J., and a college in Virginia, where Stan Meyerhoff was taking engineering classes. The one person who Ferguson refused to tape, at first, was Kevin Tubbs. It would be, he told investigators, like betraying a sibling. Harvey and Ferreira tried to assure Ferguson he was doing the right thing. They also reminded him he'd only received immunity in exchange for full cooperation.

The arrests happened in two main waves, the first in December 2005, the second a month later. In total, 19 Elves were charged in connection with 20 incidents, causing over $40 million in damage. In the indictments, prosecutors referred to the group ominously as "The Family," a name, with its mobbish and Mansonian connotations, that was seldom, if ever, used by the ELF. The F.B.I. director, Robert Mueller, announced the arrests at a televised news conference. "Terrorism is terrorism," Mueller said, "no matter what the motive."

The backlash against environmental sabotage, meanwhile, was continuing to intensify. In 2006, the House of Representatives passed a bill that meant environmental activists could spend up to 20 years in prison for property destruction, based on language provided by the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC, a group known for drafting laws with the input of major industries and lobbying for them in Congress. Later that year, a version of the bill passed the Senate with bipartisan support. By 2007, 30 state legislatures had passed statutes specifically addressing ecoterrorism, many also drafted by ALEC. Republicans used the attacks to scold and chasten mainstream environmentalists.

At his sentencing in 2007, Tubbs began by apologizing for his role in the fires. He had come to realize, he told the court, that arson was both reckless and politically ineffective. But, Tubbs continued, the ELF was born of desperation. Mass extinction, deforestation, eroding soils and melting ice shelves — climate change, he said, would soon bring with it an Old Testament plague of droughts and floods. The actions he had taken, Tubbs acknowledged, were wrong, but they were also a reprieve from overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, despair and cynicism. More than that, though, the fires, he said, were lit to raise an alarm about the state of the world.

"It's as if the ecological destruction and the cataclysmic events that follow it are a huge train bearing down on us, and we are asleep on the tracks," Tubbs said, in tears. "I was just trying to do my part to help wake us up."

Tubbs was sentenced to 12 years, seven months in prison. Chelsea Gerlach was sentenced to nine years. William Rodgers, meanwhile, ended his life while awaiting trial. Despite being the second person to cooperate, Stan Meyerhoff received the longest sentence, 13 years. The indictments also tore apart Eugene's tight-knit environmentalist community. Activists had screaming fights about whether the Elves who spoke to investigators merited sympathy or shunning. The Earth First! Journal started — and still maintains — a website listing the case's informants, including Tubbs, a former editor. The radical environmental movement slowly disintegrated. Operation Backfire was a resounding success.

On the day of the arrests in 2005, Joseph Dibee was served with a grand-jury subpoena. The F.B.I. asked him to come in, outlined the case they were mounting against him and asked him to help with their investigation. Dibee declined. Instead, prosecutors claim, Dibee enlisted a friend to drive him to Mexico. From there, Dibee flew to Beirut, then on to Syria. Several other Elves also fled the country before they could be arrested.

For more than a decade, Dibee was listed as one of the F.B.I.'s most wanted domestic terrorists. Yet, even in hiding, he continued with his environmental advocacy. In Syria, Dibee taught environmental engineering at a university while helping plan a national project on renewable energy. As the Syrian civil war escalated, Dibee fled to Russia, where he married and started a business recycling used fuels into biodiesel. When Dibee was finally arrested, he was coming home from the jungles of Ecuador, where he had agreed to build an ecologically friendly device for mining gold. By then, most of his fellow fugitives had already been caught. Even Jacob Ferguson ended up in prison, for heroin possession. Only Josephine Overaker remains at large.

Through his lawyer, Dibee first agreed to speak with me about his case, but later changed his mind. By way of explanation, he forwarded a link to a short New York Times story from 2009 with the headline "Fugitive Still Licensed to Fly by the F.A.A." The Times article noted that, although the F.B.I. had accused Dibee of being a domestic terrorist and was offering a $50,000 reward for information leading to his capture, he still held a valid U.S. pilot's license. After the story ran, the F.A.A. revoked it. Last year, after catching Covid while in federal custody, Dibee was conditionally released on house arrest.

When I knocked on his door in Seattle, Dibee stepped briefly outside, and again politely but firmly declined to talk. Standing on his porch, Dibee looked worn down. His two years in jail had overlapped with the summer of 2020, and the protests over George Floyd's murder had come right to his front door. One day, as Dibee was taken to the federal courthouse in downtown Portland to review documents for his case, the clashes outside became so intense that police deployed tear gas. Whether the demonstrations — and the vast amount of property destroyed in Floyd's name — led

to any substantive political change is a question that will be debated for decades. For Dibee, the immediate effect was that the tear gas triggered his asthma.

That same summer, while Dibee was in lockup, 3,000 square miles of Oregon and Washington were burned by wildfires. The infernos consumed over 4,000 homes and other structures, including a cattle ranch, a gas station and a timber mill — precisely the kind of symbols of environmental degradation that the Earth Liberation Front had targeted. Now, though, there was no one to take credit, no one to hunt down, no one to put behind bars.

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Matthew Wolfe
The Rise and Fall of America's Environmentalist Underground
This year, one of the last fugitives of the Earth Liberation Front pleaded guilty to arson — at a moment when climate activists are again flirting with radical ideas.
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