

Politics and Prose Interview with Thomas Zeitzoff

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About the Book

Thomas Zeitzoff — *No Option But Sabotage: The Radical Environmental Movement and the Climate Crisis*

An authoritative history of the radical environmental movement in the United States, *No Option But Sabotage* explores how far activists are willing to go to defend the planet in the face of repression and the escalating climate crisis.

After 9/11, the radical environmental movement was considered the number one domestic terror threat by the U.S. government. But by the end of the decade the movement had largely gone silent. What happened? And given the threat from climate, why haven't more radical tactics re-emerged?

In *No Option But Sabotage*, Thomas Zeitzoff traces the origins, rise, fall, and potential rise again of the movement. Using in-depth interviews with past and current activists, as well as experts, Zeitzoff covers the main factions and actors. These include: Earth First! and its early advocacy for “monkeywrenching;” the “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski and his years-long anti-technology bombing campaign; the connections between animal liberation, punk, and the emergence of the Earth Liberation Front and its arson campaign; and more recent climate activists and their use of disruptive tactics.

Along with providing a comprehensive overview of the movement and its various sub-movements that emerged over time, Zeitzoff also asks the bigger question—given the scope and threat from climate change why haven't activists escalated their tactics? Property destruction, sabotage, and even arson were once regular features of the movement in the 1990s and early 2000s—will activists use them again, or will they stick to non-violence? Will the threat of increasing state repression scare activists, or radicalize them?

Not just a history of a major extremist movement, this book tells the story of radical environmentalism and highlights how activists are confronting the dual threats of climate change and repression, and asking themselves how far they are willing to go to protect the planet.

About the Speakers

Thomas Zeitzoff is a professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University. His research focuses on political violence, social media, and political psychology. His work has appeared in *Science Advances*, *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *International Organization*, *Political Psychology*, among other journals and he is the author of *Nasty Politics: The Logic of Insults, Threats, and Incitement*.

Zeitsoff will be in conversation with JJ Green, who is the National Security Correspondent at WTOP radio in Washington, DC. He reports daily on international security, intelligence, foreign policy, terrorism, and cyber developments and provides regular on-air analysis on both radio and TV. He is also the author of *The Noise War: How to Fight Disinformation and Find the Truth When Everything Is Lying to You*. He hosts Global with JJ Green on YouTube, and the weekly WTOP podcast Target USA, which examines the threats facing the US. He has been embedded with the US military three times in war zones. He's travelled extensively across Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, South America, and Africa. He's the recipient of more than 50 local, regional, and national journalism awards, including the 2017 Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation Award for Distinguished Reporting on National Defense for his series "Anatomy of a Russian Attack." He also received a National Edward R. Murrow Award in 2009 for his reporting aboard a Los Angeles-class nuclear-powered submarine. In 2023, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Champlain College in Vermont for his international security reporting, writing, and analysis.

Introduction

JJ Green: Hey everybody. Hello. How are you? Thank you for coming out tonight. I know it wasn't easy. Yeah. I know that. But thank you for being here.

I'm super excited to be sitting here with Thomas because the book that he wrote is a story of America these days and it's a story that is going to keep repeating and I'm so excited to be here to ask him these questions about this book, because as somebody who's covered terrorism for 20 years, these are the things I've often wondered about how they work.

But thank you for the opportunity to do this, Thomas, and it's good to be here with you.

Zeitsoff: Thank you. Yeah. No, I'm really excited.

I just want to give a shout out to Politics and Prose, JJ, thank you for hosting me. I've got a list. My parents, there they are. My mom, thank you. Yeah, all the way from Albany and if you have negative things to say, my mom will find you. My wife, right there, friends and colleagues and it's ironic to be talking about a book about climate change, et cetera, when it's the coldest it's been in a long, time. But anyways, thank you guys.

Conversation Begins

JJ Green: All right, so The name of the book is No Option But Sabotage. We're ready to do this, right?

Zeitsoff: Yes, it's game time.

JJ Green: All right, it's game time.

It's called *No Option But Sabotage* and this is, there's a wrench on the front of the book and the background is if you were able to see the book, when you're able to see it, the coloring and all that, it tells a story in itself.

But can you tell us about that cover? See that cover over there and what that's all about? And then we'll jump into the book because that is really attractive.

Zeitsoff: Yeah, so first thing I will say for like any agencies or other people that are here listening, I'm kidding.

But this is a rhetorical question, right? I'm not advocating sabotage, right? I'm not saying that it should happen.

So that's like the first part.

But the title comes from a question that a lot of activists are asking themselves is, given the threat from climate change, what are we willing to do? Are we willing to, it seems that peaceful protests, maybe that isn't having the effect that some activists think, right? Do we need to do civil disobedience or something more? And the wrench is an ode to the fact that one of the earliest groups that I talk about in the book, Earth First, which was founded by a bunch of of kind of ragtag conservationists who would maybe look a little different than environmentalists today because instead of driving Priuses, many of them drove pickup trucks.

Some of them even had bumper stickers that said rednecks for wilderness.

They were Republicans, some of them and they followed this idea that they were going to basically do anything to defend Mother Nature.

Their motto was basically anything in defense of Mother Nature and one of the things, the wrench, is this idea of monkey wrenching and it comes from a book by Ed Abbey who wrote this book called *The Monkey Wrench Gang* about a bunch of people who go around the American Southwest basically preventing development and so this idea of monkey wrenching, and there's even this book that you can look online in the Anarchist Library that's a field guide to monkey wrenching.

So that's where kind of the title of the book, et cetera, come from.

JJ Green: All right, so the first thing I need to know is what attracted you to write this book? What made you say, I gotta do this?

Zeitsoff: So I think it's a good question and what got me interested in this topic was actually teaching in class.

So every semester I talk about Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, the guy who engaged on a 20 plus year bombing spree, killed 3, wounded 20, wrote an anti-tech manifesto.

At the time, he was seen as kind of a crazy person.

Still, you know, he's this reclusive math genius, et cetera and every semester I'd have my students read his manifesto about industrial society and its failures and every semester I'd have more and more of my students say, professor, he has some good points here except when it gets to the part about like killing everybody and bringing down Western civilization.

Why haven't we seen more of this? And I was like, that's a good question and so I started doing some research, and then one of my colleagues, Joe Young, good friend, et cetera, he's at Kentucky now, he was at AU, and he said, you should watch the documentary *If A Tree Falls* and it's the story of the Earth Liberation Front.

It came out in the early 2000s, and it's about a bunch of radical, those who started as kind of normal activists who were passionate about the subject.

Eventually, some of them found their way into Earth First, this kind of radical umbrella group, and then formed a splinter offshoot, the Earth Liberation Front and they engaged in arson, sabotage, after 9-11, they were declared the number one domestic terror threat and to me, it's kind of wild having done a lot of research outside of the US in places like Ukraine, Turkey, Mexico, Israel, places where there's what I would say, you know, the idea of a terrorist is somebody who basically bombs somebody else, assassinates somebody.

It's not somebody who maybe burns down a ranger station and doesn't harm anybody.

How is this the number one domestic terror threat and what happened to it? And so that's kind of the genesis of it.

JJ Green: And when you started the research, what's the first thing you did? I mean, when you started the process, I mean, I know everybody, you sit down, you scribble things down and you have notes and outline maybe, but what was the first thing you absolutely figured you had to have to make this book work?

Zeitsoff: I had to find people who were willing to talk to me and I will say it's been one of the sort of most interesting things about this is I interviewed over 110 mostly activists, some experts, some former, some current law enforcement.

But I will say is having done research in a lot of different places that the folks in the radical environmental movement were some of the most suspicious people I've ever dealt with, right? So I've had Signal now for several years before SignalGate, right? I had people run background checks on me.

I had people ask to see if I, you know, my faculty ID and at first, when I started, I was like, they're paranoid, right? This is kind of crazy and then what's happened, as we've witnessed, and then the people who I've interviewed for this book, some have come under investigation, some have been arrested and other things, I realized maybe they weren't so paranoid after all and then when you start reading and digging into the history of the radical environmental movement, and especially what happened in the early 2000s during a period of repression that they call, the government calls Operation Backfire, but activists call the Green Scare, you start to understand, oh, now I kind of get it.

So The way I started was trying to reach out and getting people to who were active in the scene, willing to talk to me.

JJ Green: So let's talk about that suspicion.

So what was the suspicion for? Was it because they were clean and hadn't done anything illegal or were they just suspicious of the government as many people are and probably should be sometimes, especially right now.

But What was their suspicion about?

Zeitsoff: So I think it's a really good question is that, so some of this, a lot of people, so if you look at the Earth Liberation Front, which was the target of the government in the early 2000s, the major target that was responsible for a lot of actions in the Pacific Northwest, and it was kind of centered in Eugene, in the Pacific Northwest, Eugene, Oregon, home of University of Oregon, right? Very lefty.

JJ Green: Phil Knight, Nike.

Zeitsoff: Yes, okay, for the sports fans, yes, Nike, et cetera.

So it was kind of headquartered there, and there was this scene that was around it in the 90s.

There were people involved in the punk scene.

There were people who were these kind of conservationist earth firsters.

There were people who were kind of hippies, who would sort of still were involved in the counterculture, and there was this scene that had formed and in the 2000s, when the government said, we need to do something about this after 9-11, they formed a joint terrorism task force, this Operation Backfire, they started investigating, they started subpoenaing people, all, you know, anybody who was tangentially related to this movement, and you talk to people who weren't necessarily involved directly in things that were illegal or sabotaged, but they have agents raid their houses, they were subpoenaed, they had, you know, document, like massive files.

There's a very famous testimony that happened in the early 2000s, I think it's February 2002, where they get, they're called in to testify people who were spokespeople who would release these communiques about these actions and so people were very suspicious and then the big thing that happened is it turned out that some of the people who were associated with the Earth Liberation Front were wires and they turned informants and that created a ton of suspicion.

There are still websites up where you can see people who cooperated with the federal government and sentences you can see people like where there are like pictures of people like there's a very famous guy Jake Ferguson who had a very nasty heroin habit in the Pacific Northwest and I talked to people on the law enforcement side who said It was unfortunate for him that he had a heroin habit, but it was very fortunate for us because we were able to use him and to basically break the back of this group that had up until then had been very hard for the federal government to get their hands on.

JJ Green: Okay, so we got that part, the suspicion, and we got what drew you to it, and we got what essentially was the first big thing you did.

So let's jump into the book a little bit if we will.

So what are we going to get when we open that book, when we crack it open, knowing what you told us and when we go page one, blah, blah, blah, what are we

going to get and how are we going to, when we get to the end, what will we be, what will we come away with?

Zeitsoff: I hope it's a read.

Like you guys can enjoy the reading process.

I hope you get that.

I think there are like a couple things that surprised me about it was, again, one was this sort of far-right radical, not so much radical, but that we think of environmentalists as left-wing people.

We think now it's got like somebody has a sign on their yard that says, in this, you know, in this house, we believe in science, et cetera.

They again, drive a Prius or, you know, they used to maybe drive a Tesla, not so much anymore, right? And back in the day, the origins of the environmental movement in the US are like super racist.

I mean, Madison Grant, who was a conservationist, helped sound like the Bronx Zoo, right? And he was instrumental in creating our national park system.

He also wrote a book called *The Passing of the Great Race*, which is one of the most vile, like white supremacist tracks.

He basically says that the Western white man is committing suicide by allowing immigrants into his country.

was one of Adolf Hitler's favorite books.

So there's that part, right? And one of the things that happens, and I think to me was surprising doing this, is I talked to some of these, you know, mostly guys, some of them were women, but there were a lot of dudes in the environmental movement and some of these guys from the 70s and 80s, right, who were involved in this movement, right, would talk about, wanting to preserve public lands, et cetera, but they were also worried about population and you ask them, this is a period of time when people are really worried about, the population bomb comes out in the early 70s, right, and people are worried about overpopulation.

But when you get to, asking them what kind of population are they concerned about, it's actually non-white people, right? That's what it comes down to and so some of these people went on to form these anti-immigrant groups like John Tanton who was in the Sierra Club forms this anti-immigrant group.

He forms this whole network of societies and basically what ends up coming out of that, that's the through line to Stephen Miller in the current anti-immigrant policy.

It's actually from this environmental move.

So that's surprising and then the other thing is I didn't think I would get so immersed into punk subcultures because that was a big part of it.

There were a lot of punks I talked to.

JJ Green: Wow.

So Okay, after 9–11, the radical environmental movement was considered at the very top or close to the top of the list of domestic terror threats by the government.

By the end of the decade, you write, and I learn from you, that movement had largely gone silent.

So what happened?

Zeitsoff: Read the book.

No.

I think One, I think repression works, right? And this is something that we're figuring out.

Again, unfortunately now in the US, what's happening is that the government is trying to find ways to repress movements that it doesn't like arresting people, right? And many times, right, I mean, I think one of the things that happens is repression works and then the other thing too is that a lot of movements, they depend on these kind of subcultures, right? So for instance, in the Pacific Northwest, it wasn't just that there were like 20 or 30 activists who were active in this, sort of network of, the Earth Liberation Front.

It was the fact that they had a tea house that they could go to, Icky's Tea House, where they celebrated, you know, Ted Kaczynski's birthday.

They had an anarchist bike shop. They had punk shows, right? They were active in, you know, the 1999 WTO protests or what some people call the Battle of Seattle.

So it's this broader network of people and the repression didn't just kill the people, not kill, but didn't just kill the movement and arrest the people who were involved in it, but it also kind of took down that broader scene.

JJ Green: So what about now? I mean, you were talking about this early on tonight.

You know, they told us, and I say they, I'm talking about the weather forecasters.

every year around, what, October or something, November, they start talking about snow predictions and stuff and somehow I thought that we weren't really gonna get any snow or anything like that this year.

Just maybe a dusting here and there.

That's what a couple of them said and lo and behold, honestly, yesterday I had to chip my way through 4 inches of ice that was on top of 5 inches of snow so my wife could get out of the driveway and me too, frankly.

But we weren't expecting that.

So this movement went silent.

What took place over the weekend with this big snow deal and these torrential rains that we've been having, which sort of remind me of some of those rains they were getting in Sao Paulo a few years where they would have these massive rains that would just flood everything and then, climate change, bottom line.

So these groups, they disappeared, or seem to have.

Right now we're having climate change.

So what's going on? What are they, are they planning something? Are you planning something?

Zeitsoff: I'm not, first of all, I'm not a spokesperson for this, because I'll say that.

You know, and again, I'm also not a climate scientist, though there is a debate about whether, you know, climate change disrupts the polar vortex, it opens the freezer door and gets it cold here.

But again, I do think one of the things that's surprising to me, and it's sort of a question that animates the other part of this book, is We witnessed wildfires.

I mean, several, July, what was it, 2023, 2022? It looked like Apocalypse Now out in DC.

It was insane.

I mean, my then like four-year-old was like, daddy, why does the sky look orange in the middle of the day? Right? And to me, and I think to other activists, their view is that it's strange in some sense that we would just let the world burn.

We wouldn't do anything and I think it's even stranger, right? A lot of activists are looking, if you look at the moves that the Trump administration has made on environmental policy, right, opening up public lands to drilling, right, cutting and gutting as many renewables as they can, removing permits.

The big one is basically removing scientists at EPA and saying that the cost of air pollution, right? We don't care if people die.

That's not going to be into our cost.

So there are all these things that suggest that they're going after, like there's not a policy to be had and so the question is what are people willing to do? And one of the things that I found was that activists have not disappeared, right? It's that they've changed, right? So many of the people, like we talked about, that I was interviewing who are currently active in the broader climate movement, So some people aged out.

The older people aged out.

It's hard to protest when you're in the 50s or you slip on ice or you do whatever.

But some of the younger people have been active in pro-Palestine protests.

They've been active in George Floyd.

Many of the people who I interviewed for my book who are involved in climate action, they're now focusing on ice and one of the people said, and I think it's sort of indicative of the thinking of a lot of activists, again, not a monolith, but I think their view is We can't have a climate movement and we can't even have a climate policy if we don't have a democracy and that's the view that they are taking right now.

JJ Green: So one of the things that I know that's taking place, and I need to ask you about this, I know this is not in your book, but it may be, I mean, but I'll ask the question anyway.

One of the things that we've been learning is that the approach that government agents have been taking, at least we've learned this in recent weeks, maybe the last couple months, is that they're using tactics and tools that never have been used before to track people to figure out what connections are and all that and so So if these activists, these environmentalists are sort of stepping back and redefining themselves for a minute so that they can figure out what the threat is here and how to work the threat, to your understanding, how much, what kind of resources are they putting into

it or what kind of approach are they taking? Is it a tech approach? Is it a scientific approach? What kind of, how would you describe what they're doing in this time? Yeah.

Zeitsoff: So again, I think it's, one, I think it's too early to tell sort of what is kind of happening and I think unfortunately, and again, for US democracy, we're not going to know until 2026 and 2028 what really happened, what worked and what didn't and I think that's a scary place.

As a political scientist, it's a scary place that we're in.

I mean, if you said to people outside the US and you said, let's remove the word US, but you said there was a country where an aging autocratic leader who's unpopular has poorly trained mass soldiers arresting people and throwing them into prisons left and right, you'd say this is not a good place and the activists who I've talked to said that's the same thing.

Like we're not in a good place.

They're, ahead of our talk, I reached out to some of the folks who I've kept in contact with and said, what do they think about what's happening? And so some people said it's, too early to tell.

They've been heartened by what they've seen of people in Minneapolis, right, resisting through whistles and other sort of very, you know, non-violent civil disobedience, right? They've been heartened by the scale, you know, the scale of organizing, but they've also been I would say, become very pessimistic because the amount of repression that has taken place, right? The murder of Alex Pretti, Renee Good, others in Cussey have been shot, right? One person said, I asked how they were doing, and they said, well, I've taken up smoking.

So there's that.

I'm a runner.

I think What's the question? I think the fundamental question is like, what, they're asking themselves if we do something more extreme, like kind of more radical, like that happened in the 90s and the early 2000s, right? What's that going to do in terms of law enforcement? They're not, they're gonna, you know, there was Antifa is a terrorist organization.

That's the joke is right.

Antifa as an organization is something that, you know, it's a bunch of anarchists.

They can't organize anything.

But that's another story.

But you know, they know that the financial tools, right? I think all of these groups have, and NGOs, right, know that if they find anything where it's related to climate and there's some kind of disobedience, they're going to face IRS investigations.

So I think there's a big concern, but there's also optimism.

So it's kind of, we're sort of, again, we don't know.

We're sort of at a precipice and it could go down or maybe not.

JJ Green: Yeah.

So what was, you know, this is kind of the question that everybody gets asked who writes a book.

what was your favorite part of the book.

But I want to know, I'm assuming you've been working on this book for a few months, maybe a year.

I don't know how long exactly.

Zeitsoff: That's my, I mean, like 3, three, four years.

Yeah.

JJ Green: So the question then is what was your favorite part of the book when you started out and is it still your favorite part of the book now?

Zeitsoff: That's a good question.

I can tell you my wife's least favorite part of the book is my wardrobe, sartorial choices, is that I have a lot more wolf shirts and animal shirts.

That's a problem.

JJ Green: So that's connected to the.

Zeitsoff: I mean, it's a fashion choice, but that's the.

JJ Green: So it's not a part of the branding for the book?

Zeitsoff: No.

JJ Green: I mean, the pocket square? I mean, that is a banging pocket square.

Zeitsoff: Thank you, thank you.

But what was my favorite? I think my favorite part though was just hearing people tell their stories about sort of how, I mean, I grew up in Texas.

I grew up in Austin.

I had friends that were into punk.

I went to a few punk shows, but like hearing the number of people who came, it was to me, it was kind of fascinating is these kids, you know, who started as kids, some kid who was like a skateboarder in upstate New York and he was like, you know, I was, you know, he goes, I was throwing rocks through windows and then I went to my first punk show and there was a zine for the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front and he goes, oh, now I know which windows I want to throw the rocks through.

Right? So it's kind of this idea that there was this, you know, the pathways that people found into activism, the stories that they told me or, you know, about somebody who she ran away with the Rainbow Family, which is a group of hippies, and she traveled the country.

She was in a tree sit for, 500 days, was involved in that and these stories that people tell, I think is kind of the really fascinating part of it and I would say that the most interesting and peculiar, but also, yeah, the part where I didn't shake my head, but it was something that I just had not heard of before was I interviewed a lot of people also, because What's the right-wing environmentalism look like? A lot of the people now are left-wing.

You know, we're talking about environmentalists.

But what does right-wing environmentalists look like? And it's MAHA.

It's make America healthy again.

I interviewed several people who were involved in the raw milk scene and these are people who are very concerned about pesticides.

They're very concerned about big ag or big chemical, things that we all think of as kind of left-wing environmental thing.

They don't believe in climate change and they are virulently anti-vax and that was, I think, that was pretty interesting to see.

JJ Green: So does the environmental movement believe in violence still? I mean, I know a while ago there was, I mean, this was even before the Teslas were being burned and those kinds of things were taking place.

But I mean, there were lots of acts of, there were lots of attacks on companies and indirectly individuals who were, they believed were threatening the environment and some of the stuff was, there were fires and things like that.

So to your knowledge, do you think they're still into that? Are they thinking through this, how do we do this a different way right now? And is no option but sabotage still their go-to?

Zeitsoff: So I think the way, and it's a really important and deep question for people who do social movements, is do movements that have radical flanks, like people doing like sabotage, burning cars or other things, does that hurt the mainstream movement by saying, look at all those terrorists doing stuff out in the streets They're crazy and we can't negotiate with any of them.

Or does it say, look, we're the moderates.

These are the crazy people who you want to keep out, like this kind of radical flank effect.

I think right now, at least, I would say for people in the movement, there is a recognition that if they do turn towards, the tactics like, if they were to do anything with arson, firebombing, et cetera, I think they have, there are enough people with legal training and history and know what's coming that they will be repressed in perpetuity during this whole regime.

So I think they're during the Trump administration.

So I think there's that.

Now, do I think there are impulses within there who are saying, enough of this, like, we shall overcome, we're going to remain peaceful, etc.

I think there are people who don't necessarily agree with that, from a moral sense.

There may be tactically they are.

I think what was interesting was talking to somebody who was active during the Earth Liberation Front and was involved with certain people who were in that kind of nexus of people who were involved in those arsons and what they said was, look, there was a momentum when you are in a group like that and there were people who had very mixed feelings about Ted Kaczynski and the fact that he killed people.

They said there was this idea that if we weren't stopped, potentially we would graduate towards more extreme actions.

Now they never did.

Right and then there's a whole nother debate we can have about whether arson, in property destruction, is that the same as, other kinds of violence, but, we treat it as a violent crime in the US to engage in arson.

JJ Green: So in your book, the chapter that you want to pick a chapter, any chapter, and just hit us with something from that chapter that is going to give us Just hit us with the best thing you got in that in that you want us to know about in the book.

Zeitsoff: It's all great.

No.

JJ Green: I mean, all yeah, it's all it's all good.

I mean the best.

What do you think is the without giving it away, of course, but.

Zeitsoff: I'll give the pen the second best because the best I'll save for reading.

But I do I got to be pretty good friends with some folks and there was a an animal rights activist, Robert, who had zoomed into some of my classes before.

I'd see my student nodding, who was maybe in one of these classes, et cetera.

It was always interesting because it was like, you know, you're going to have somebody who's going to zoom into class, who spent time in prison, who did it for animal liberation reasons.

And, you know, Robert grew up in the Pacific Northwest.

He was in the punk scene, right? It was this kind of trajectory and I remember one of my students asked him, Do you regret anything that you did during your time? It's a good question.

Like, do you regret the fact that you went to jail or other things? And he paused and he said, yes.

I have regrets.

I regret I didn't do more.

I regret that I didn't realize that prison was so easy.

If you're gonna do something, wear black, put your cell phone in a Faraday bag and bike and I was like, no, don't do that.

But right, and I mean, it was a humorous like anecdote, but it was also, I think one of the things that a lot of people pointed out, it's something again that I wasn't expecting was that there was an energy that came from, there was this time period from the 80s to the early 2000s when the punk scene was super political and there were people coming in and they had a certain edge in energy and that affected what happened and when that died, because punk goes through like this, and when that connection died, I think it definitely shifted how people engaged with activism.

JJ Green: Yeah, I want to talk to you about today's activism specifically what we've been seeing with the No Kings and certainly what Minneapolis and Portland and Los Angeles and other places have, how they've informed this movement.

But would you just take us through Operation Backfire, which is I think a key piece of your book, at least to me and tell us how that reshaped the movement, certainly in the time running into the 2000s.

Zeitsoff: So I think there's debate about this.

I mean, Will Potter has an amazing book called *Green is the New Red* and there's This, so after, leading up to 9-11, there are these increase, you can, I graph it in the book, you can see this increase, arson, sabotage, and a lot of it is clustered in the Pacific Northwest, right? There's this part of this, like this growing anti-globalization movement, right? This movement against this is involved with the WTO protests in Seattle in 99, right? In Eugene, they had their own little mini version of it where the police were overrun by anarchists, you know, activists, and There's this idea that it's sort of, it's growing, it's growing.

9-11 happens.

There's this shift in focus, especially around, you know, terrorism.

You know, before they were like, you know, they called us eco-terrorists, but we're like, that's ridiculous.

After 9-11 being labeled a terrorist, right, it came with this joint terrorism task force.

It came with all these things.

But, and I think this is, you know, part goes to the idea of why did people in the movement, right, why were they so suspicious when I asked them, hey, I want to talk, I'm an academic.

is because the government actually wasn't making headway in the case until they were able to turn Jake Ferguson an informant, until they were able to basically kill the movement from within.

Because up until that point, the people involved in these activism, they were people who I interviewed would say, you know, I would tell people I was going, you know, camping.

I was a big camper and everybody thought I was camping.

No, we were meeting up with people, we would do an action, then we'd never talk about it again, release a communique, right? They were early on.

So the trade craft from like an operations perspective of the people who were in the Earth Liberation Front was generally pretty good, but they were undone by informants and by this kind of, fact that there was this increasing pressure and it wasn't just, it wasn't just the informant.

The informant was sort of downstream of the federal government decided we need to crack down on this and it turns out that, you know, I think like a lot of violence that we think about is it's not that there's like a 5,000 person, you know, listserv of everybody engaged in violence.

There's a small number of people who were core who were involved and once they penetrated those folks, they kind of fell in line and they were facing, I mean, if you look at the sentences, I mean, the sentences that people end up serving, it was 5, 6, 7, but what they were actually facing was way, way, way more because they were charged with terrorism enhancements and they faced some pretty heavy sort of jail time and they, you know, as people said, you know, they were in, some of them were in maximum security prisons.

So I think it's this idea that the police in Eugene, right, the Oregon, you know, the Oregon State Police, the police in Washington, but then also with the FBI.

this joint terrorism task force, they started raising and upping the temperature and that's kind of, and there's debate as to how they got exactly lucky with Jake Ferguson, because some people were like, well, some lady said that he stole a car and there was the suspicious, but that was kind of the key sort of downfall.

JJ Green: Yeah.

You know, as a journalist myself and someone who's been working in the national security space for two decades, it has always been making sure that I had the ability to separate myself from just the nasty stuff that's going on every day and people still to this day ask me, how do you sleep at night? And I say, pretty good.

But it's something that I learned over time.

But there are things that stick with me that I will never be able to forget and it's what you've been doing with this book, with the research, getting to know people, sort of becoming trustworthy to them, them checking you out, the background checks and making sure that you're good to go.

It gives you this special access that other people won't get, but at the same time, you have their trust and they tell you things, they show you things, you learn things.

So how has all of that access impacted you away from the book, away from your work, away from the studies, just as the man.

Zeitsoff: I mean, I like hiking a lot more.

I brought my family out to the Pacific Northwest.

But it's, I think it's hard because, I have two small children and I think about like what kind of world are they going to grow up in? And I think about people and some of whom, hold views that I don't agree with or that I find abhorrent, but I do think climate change is a problem.

I think what we're seeing in the summers, again, we're in this cold snap right now, but more wildfires, right? More disruption, people being displaced, right? This is something that, you know, my sons and their kids eventually, they're going to deal with and the question is, what is both the most logic, not logical, but what is the most effective way to prevent that from happening, right? And then what is the ethical thing that we should do to prevent that from happening? I mean, these are kind of big questions and some of the people, again, who I talk to, very different than me.

You know, I think about there's a guy in the book, his name is Bernard.

He was an Earth First activist and he, you know, spent time in the Pacific Northwest for, you know, he grew up on a commune and he had a bad bout with heroin.

I remember meeting with him and him, some of the things he said, I was like, I'm not going to go do a spiritual drum circle in the middle of the forest.

Maybe someday we'll do it, Joss.

I don't know.

But on the flip side, some of the things that he said, which is like, it doesn't matter what we say, right? And I think one of the things that's the most haunting part is we would think that the kind of environment, what's happening, right, with pollution, with forest fires, right? The thing that's really scary is that if you look at the best data we have is that the effects of wildfire affect people's votes and tension, like being exposed while having your house burned down, all these things that we know are caused by climate change shifts people a percentage point and basically dies out within six months and Bernard said to me, he said, people will justify whatever they have to until the last tree is incinerated and that's something that like it sticks with you a little bit because it's something he wants to, he said, he goes, I'm willing to put my body on the line, but not everybody is.

But he goes, it's not, you know, it's not just a persuasion story.

This is the world we live in and that's a tough way to think and one of the things that he said to me, because I asked him about Minneapolis, and he said, and this is directly what he said, I'm not sure I feel optimistic or pessimistic.

I feel like we've succeeded in creating a situation where a lot of things feel possible.

That's all I could have asked for.

I feel tremendous solidarity and love for people bearing the greatest cost of those burdens.

JJ Green: Yeah, that was the next thing and the last thing I was going to ask you about was Minneapolis.

How has that, to your thinking, informed perhaps people in these movements watching that unfold?

Zeitsoff: I mean, I think in some ways, what's happened in Minneapolis is both of a different level.

in terms of the level of oppression, I mean, 3,000 federal agents, right, masks, doing all kinds of human rights abuses that we know, right, again, we've seen in other countries when this happens, but again, people in the US were like, this is a policing action, right? We're going to call it law enforcement or immigration, right? I know what I see when I see in Minneapolis, and it's, this is, authoritarian policing.

This is paramilitary, not in a good term, paramilitary.

This is, you know, untrained people throwing people in jail, seeking to intimidate people.

I think what they, the people in the environmental activist community, when the people that I chatted with, what they see is some of them were down in Atlanta at Stop Cop City.

Some of them were charged with RICO charges, right? They were hit with charges. They were beat up.

They've been tear gassed before, And their idea is this is a continuation of stuff that has happened from Cointel Pro, right, back to Ku Klux Klan in the 19th century, 20th century, et cetera.

There was a history of this in the US.

It's just this is on a different scale and I think to them, again, it's, we'll start with, I'll end on this with what I sort of, we started with is they're both optimistic at the fact that people are sort of willing to organize, et cetera.

but also pessimistic at the scale of the repression that they're facing, whether it be from new technology tools or the fact that we have a massive new police apparatus in this country that doesn't seem to be accountable.

JJ Green: Well, Thomas, thank you so much for having me to do this.

One of the things I always do is at the end of any interview, I always ask the guest if there's anything that because I have this habit of talking too much.

But is there anything that I haven't asked you about or anything we haven't spoken about that you want to share before we open it up to questions?

Zeitsoff: No, I think let's open it up.

Yeah.

Thank you.

Thank you, JJ.

JJ Green: It's open.

Thanks.

Did writing the book change how you think about the role of property destruction in like movements?

Zeitsoff: So the thing that probably, I'm going to dodge the question sort of, but no, I'll say.

I think the thing that was interesting to me was that the people that I became friends with, who I interviewed, et cetera, would ask me like, hey, can you send me the latest studies on what works versus what didn't? Like for instance, one of the tactics that they talked about, which is debate, controversial to a lot of activists is like home demonstrations, like demonstrating outside the homes of people, right? turn more people off than not, right? And they were talking about, some of the papers that have come out that suggest that maybe there is a positive effect of having a radical flank.

They're like, send me this paper because, this is something that I can tell my boss who's super leery at the NGO I work at about sponsoring like home demonstrations, which is not property destruction.

Did it change my view about it? I don't know.

I mean, what was interesting was I talked to two people I'll say this.

I think I chatted with somebody who was a law enforcement officer who was involved in Operation Backfire, very conservative, and was, had a lot of negative things to say

about the Pacific anarchist scene, said, you know, they're bums, they smell terrible, like they don't have jobs.

their politics are ridiculous.

But then said, right, he was talking about there was a long sort of forest defense campaign in Warner Creek in outside of Eugene that lasted a long time where there was some property destruction, but mostly it was basically blocking a logging Rd.

that they were trying to log a bunch of old growth forests and he said, in hindsight now, I have a lot of respect for the people who basically defended the forest.

They're the reason we have old growth forests in a lot of parts of Oregon.

Now there was, now do I think like lighting bulldozers on fire would have achieved the same effect? I tend to be like skeptical depending on the circumstances, but I do think that the idea that was surprising, the biggest surprise to me is that like groups that were engaged in some of maybe these sabotage or monkey wrench type actions were also doing like Earth First was doing public opinion polling in Oregon, like at the same time they were spiking trees and they were saying, oh, you know, we actually moved the needle.

It used to be in Oregon, 3% were opposed to a moratorium on logging.

We got it to like 27%.

So that was like a victory to them.

So I think they were more open to using the way a lot of these folks thought was, we're going to delay, do some kinds of light property destruction, sabotage stuff, anything, and then engage in lawfare, like legal challenges, et cetera, to delay, delay, delay and so they didn't see it as one or the other.

Now there's become a big debate among activists about sort of and the taboo on it should be released, et cetera and I think right now a lot of folks are, it's not whether they agree with it ethically or not.

It's whether they think, and I think a lot of the way they think is that depending on what happens, it could cause the repression that it brings down. Maybe it's not worth the benefit to the movement. But I don't know. It's changed.

I would say it's made me think that a lot of these groups that we think are like less radical.

We're also like secretly supportive of the more radical because some people said like friends of the earth needed earth first so that they could like so that we could look less radical.

Audience Questions

Trisha: I have a question.

Zeitsoff: Hi Trisha.

Trisha: So when we think about the far left, most of the far left in the United States has calibrated its violence, right? And how far they're willing to go and we saw

last year we had more far left attacks in the United States than far right for the first time in a long time.

Do you think some of that calibration in terms of what the far left is willing to do will sort of be loosening in this generation of far left violence?

Zeitsoff: So I know what our friends at Fox News would say, yes, it's here and it's been here for a while.

I don't know, I mean, so I would say like the sort of the grievances that kind of stoke this, like the fact that, people in the environmental movement or in other leftist causes, if they see like the courts are never going to do anything, and especially if they see sort of the continued kind of authoritarian policing like we've seen recently, I think there's definitely going to be increasing levels of grievances and folks that maybe want to act out.

But I also think the repression that they're going to face for that is also kind of maybe a countervailing force.

I will say that many of the people who I interviewed had a lot of thoughts on like Luigi Mangione who gunned down the United Healthcare CEO.

Most of them were laudatory in different ways.

So I don't think that's just that people on the left are like, I would put it this way.

I don't think it's that people on the left are somehow like we're not into violence.

There are people, right, who did say, like, I joined the, I'm not a, I'm not going to take up arms.

I joined the environmental movement.

I want to be outside and just chill out and drum, right? But I think, in the broader sort of left-wing movement, I think, I mean, I think that is a concern, right? As if they think that they can't achieve politics through conventional means, they start thinking about other kinds of politics.

So that's always, I think, there.

Introducer: So exciting, Thomas.

Great job.

So my question as it relates to, I'm fascinated about this kind of the connection with racism and so my question is, the option of sabotage tied in any way to the identity of the actor or is the approach to sabotage shaped by one's identity?

Zeitsoff: It's a good question.

I mean, there were, I mean, and I think this was something that I was surprised by but maybe in hindsight probably shouldn't it was again like there is some really racist stuff in the environmental movement like that's like a through line and so when you say rednecks for wilderness right that's a that's a like that's not that coded of a language and I think the idea of like you know sabotage one of the big rifts that happened in Earth First as a group, right, and again, it wasn't so subtly racially coded, right, was the idea that there was a concern that it was becoming a quote urban movement and that it was letting in people who are maybe not conservationists, not wearing Stetson hats, wanting to go hunt all the time and then The other thing too that I think has

changed is that the climate movement has decided that it needs to be intersectional, right? We need to think about, right, one of the biggest things that happened in this period in the Pacific Northwest was this idea of total liberation is liberation of animals, liberation of the environment, but also liberation of people, right? And so it became taboo to only care about the environment, right? That became seen as like, oh, you're not a real political person and I think that comes with pluses and minuses for the movement, right? A movement that was almost all white dudes, right, became less like that and there were some thoughts about like, hey, maybe we need to rethink, you know, why women hate being at Earth First gatherings and stuff.

But on the flip side, I think the other view that some people have is that, you know, then who's going to, you know, There were people I talked to who said we could only get 30 people out for a climate march, but we can get 10,000 out for the George Floyd and that's great, they would say, but also who's going to go for climate, the environment, where does that leave us as a movement if we hop, hop, hop, right? And I do come back though to this idea that, right, the view that I think has sort of solidified among the activists is that, right now their view is that we can't have a climate movement, we can't have a Black Lives Matter movement if we're not in a democracy and that's their kind of first step that they've sort of moved to, and that's where I think a lot of folks are.

Introducer: This will be our last question.

Audience member: A question for localized environmental stuff like Cuyahoga River or something like that, vis-a-vis climate change, which is international.

Like you could kind of petition the US government to do whatever you want, but it has kind of minimal impact at a global level.

What the activists that you spoke to, how do they see that? Like are they talking to the CCP one day? Like what do they want to do?

Zeitsoff: So what do they want to do like writ large or what do they like how do they feel about local versus sort of global?

Audience member: Global.

Like what does that look like?

Zeitsoff: So this is I think one of the big things that they pointed out and I think is I think it's an important point, is the shift from Earth First, which was we're protecting this forest, we're protecting these trees, to we're trying to stop climate change, which is large.

One of those is much easier than the other, right? And the place-based campaigns that they had, many of them were effective, right? They were able to save redwoods.

They were able to do all these things that were effective.

The problem right in now is, okay, so doing something major about climate change means thinking about industrial policy related to renewables or other things and that's, not all those people enjoy getting into that and so I think some of them have thought, what are the most localized things we can do that will also have a big impact on

stopping climate change? So it's like people who are protesting building of new fossil fuel pipelines or other things.

But I think it's, but I think your question is like one of the big problems, right, is an environmental movement that's built on place, right? And if you go to the Pacific Northwest, you can obviously see why it kind of became so such a hotbed for it is because there are these amazing mountains, amazing hiking trails, like pristine nature, and then you see logging trucks taking away like, you know, 500 year old trees, and that's going to cause an effect to people.

But yeah, sort of answered your question, but yeah.

JJ Green: All right, ladies and gentlemen, Tom Zeitzoff.

Zeitzoff: Thank you guys. Thank you. Thanks.

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