



If A Tree Falls Discussion Guide

Director: Marshall Curry
Co-Director: Sam Cullman
Year: 2011
Time: 85 min

You might know these directors from:

Street Fight (2005)
Racing Dreams (2009)
King Corn (2007)
The House I Live In (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

IF A TREE FALLS explores two pressing issues — environmentalism and terrorism — through the actions of a radical environmental group which the FBI calls America’s “number one domestic terrorism threat.” While the film focuses on several members of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), its central character is Daniel McGowan who was arrested by U.S. federal agents as part of a nationwide sweep of radical environmentalists in 2005. The film tracks Daniel’s transformation from a budding environmental activist involved in non-violent demonstrations and civil disobedience to his eventual participation in acts of arson that target dozens of businesses that ELF believes are actively destroying the environment.

This nuanced and complex film also shows the increasingly aggressive tactics used by law enforcement against peaceful demonstrators and the impact of their actions in radicalizing activists like Daniel. IF A TREE FALLS raises a host of provocative questions about the role of protest in a democratic society, and asks if radical acts of protest such as arson are justifiable if you no longer believe in the effectiveness of legal, non-violent protest and legislative action. Nominated for an Academy Award in 2011, IF A TREE FALLS asks a lot of questions, stirs up a pit of fury in your stomach, and in the end, just tries to make sense of things. It wants to understand.

FILM THEMES

IF A TREE FALLS is not your typical environmental film as it has no easily identified heroes or villains. The “good guys” do bad things which adds a new dimension and raises complex ethical questions. It explores the tumultuous period from 1995 to 2001 when environmentalists were clashing with timber companies and law enforcement, and the word “terrorism” had not yet been altered by 9/11.

BECOMING RADICAL

The film speculates whether government actions can encourage the very “radicalism” it was trying to prevent, and therefore asks if the police and other counterterrorism agents are employing the most effective tactics to achieve their objectives. According to a 2010 investigation by The Washington Post, there were 3,984 federal, state and local organizations in the U.S. working on domestic counterterrorism. They are trained to use weapons and engage in combat, but not to interact peacefully with the public, or try to understand the motivations behind civilian protest.

IN OR OUT OF THE SYSTEM

Unlike Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. who practiced nonviolence resistance, the late Nelson Mandela embraced armed struggle to end apartheid. Those who challenge the status quo must confront difficult moral questions and make hard choices. Is it more effective to work within the system to create change, or to “fight fire with fire” to overthrow established regimes? IF A TREE FALLS explores the choices people make, and why. Specifically, it reveals a split within the U.S. environmental movement between those who took extreme measures like arsonry and those who protested in democratic, nonviolent ways.

TERRORISM?

Terrorism has become an emotionally-charged word that is increasingly difficult to define. One person’s “terrorist” is another’s “freedom fighter.” One can argue that the actions of the Earth Liberation Front don’t justify the name “terrorist,” the same word used to describe the actions of Al Qaeda on 9/11. ELF members ensured that no one was hurt by their actions, whereas Al Qaeda’s objective has been death and destruction. But if the definition of terrorism is to instill fear in people and force them to live in fear, then many more people could be labeled as terrorists.

SECURITY VS CIVIL LIBERTIES

In the aftermath Edward Snowden’s data leaks, a raging debate has unleashed about U.S. government security interests. Does the massive gathering of personal phone and online metadata justify the loss of privacy and civil liberties that comes with it? Since 9/11, many governments have adopted controversial security and surveillance tactics aimed at preventing future terrorist attacks. Proponents argue that they are essential to national security, while opponents say they threaten personal freedoms, give law enforcement too much power, and come at too high a cost to civil liberties.

“When you’re screaming at the top of your lungs and no one hears you, what are you supposed to do?”

Daniel McGowan

“The word “terrorism” is, at this point, one of the most potent in our political lexicon: it single-handedly ends debates, ratchets up fear levels, and justifies almost anything the government wants to do in its name.”

Glen Greenwald

FILM FACTS:

- Since 2001, the FBI has had more than 15,000 informants on its payroll.
- “Hip pockets,” is an FBI term for unofficial informants who are NOT listed on the FBI’s books or in its records. One estimate is that there are as many as three hip pockets for every official informant.
- In 2010, the New York Times reported that late photojournalist Ernest C. Withers, famed for his photographs during the civil rights era, served as an informant. Withers was so deep in Martin Luther King’s inner circle that he was in King’s room at the Lorraine Hotel on the night King was assassinated.
- According to a recent article in the Guardian, a significant number of U.S. hackers work for the FBI. Eric Corley, publisher of a hacker journal, estimates that 25% of hackers in the United States have been recruited.
- Since 9/11, counterterrorism has been the FBI’s top priority, according to a special investigation done by Mother Jones magazine. Counterterrorism accounts for \$3.3 billion of the bureau’s budget, compared to \$2.6 billion for organized crime.
- “Made” is a common term used by an informant or a handler, meaning that an informant’s identity has been discovered or compromised, as in, “You’ve been made.”
- The FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorists list was created after the September 11, 2001 attacks and is separate from its Ten Most Wanted list.
- Eco-terrorism was added to the FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorists list in 2009. The FBI estimates that the ALF/ELF have committed more than 600 criminal acts in the U.S. since 1996, resulting in damages in excess of \$43 million dollars.
- The U.S. government can legally persuade an individual to become an informant by: offering up to \$500,000 or 25% of a drug bust take-in in exchange for information; threatening to charge the individual with a more serious crime; threatening to charge one of the individual’s family members with a crime.
- When investigating a target, government informants can legally: provide and pay for ingredients, manufacturing facilities and expertise to manufacture illegal drugs; pose as an activist in a political group and recruit new members; develop an intimate relationship and have sex with the target.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to learn about these political and environmental topics. Then consider discussing the film together, as there isn’t always an easy or clear answer to all of the questions raised. Talking through it with others and hearing their perspective can be quite useful.
2. Check out the [Civil Liberties Defense Center](#), a nonprofit organization focused on defending and upholding civil liberties through education, outreach, litigation, legal support and assistance. Lauren Regan, the group’s executive director who provided legal counsel to Daniel McGowan, is interviewed in the film.
3. Learn more about critical environmental issues. [Earth First](#) offers news on current environmental issues, events and actions, as well as an extensive set of links to other environmental organizations.
4. Consider what you learned from this film, and whether or not there are any small changes you can make in your daily life to support the values you believe in.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.