



If A Tree Falls Discussion Guide

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

You might know these directors from:

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

FILM SUMMARY

IF A TREE FALLS explores two pressing issues—environmentalism and terrorism—through the actions of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a radical environmental group the FBI has called America’s “number one domestic terrorism threat.” But this was in 2001 before 9/11, which transformed the way we understand terrorism. The film presents an overview of ELF, its origins, development, and organization of separate anonymous cells. But the filmmakers focus on one member, Daniel McGowan, who was arrested by U.S. federal agents as part of a nationwide sweep of radical environmentalists in 2005. His sentence came with a “terrorism enhancement” allowing a judge to apply a harsher standard. With nuance and complexity, the film examines how we define terrorism, the role of protest in a democratic society, and radical acts such as arson committed in the belief that legal, non-violent protest isn’t enough to demand change and produce results.

Daniel transforms from a budding environmental activist who participates in non-violent demonstrations and civil disobedience to a complicit arsonist who’s involved in targeting dozens of businesses that ELF believes are actively destroying the environment. The 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.

Nominated for an Academy Award in 2011, IF A TREE FALLS is a provocative, sympathetic film that presents voices from many sides of a complex issue and challenges viewers to reconsider their understanding of terrorism, environmentalism, civil disobedience, and our nation’s legal system.

FILM THEMES

IF A TREE FALLS explores the tumultuous period from 1995 to 2001 when environmentalists were clashing with timber companies and law enforcement, and “terrorism” had not yet been redefined by 9/11. The heroes and villains are difficult to identify.

BECOMING RADICAL

The film speculates whether government actions can encourage the very “radicalism” it aims to prevent, and 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, and therefore, rarely understand the motivations behind civilian protest.

IN OR OUT OF THE SYSTEM

Unlike Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. who practiced nonviolent resistance, the late Nelson Mandela embraced armed struggle to end apartheid. Many who challenge the status quo in societal structures and the law 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?” IF A TREE FALLS explores the choices people make when demanding that their voices be heard. Specifically, it reveals a split within the U.S. environmental movement between those who take extreme measures like arson and those who protest with nonviolence.

TERRORISM

Terrorism is an emotionally charged, semantically fraught word with powerful connotations that has been used for various agendas and purposes. One person’s “terrorist” is another person’s “freedom fighter.” One can argue that the actions of ELF do not justify the name “terrorist,” the same word used to describe the actions of Al-Qaeda. ELF members made sure that no one was hurt by their actions, whereas Al-Qaeda has attacked civilian and military targets, causing the deaths of many. The dictionary’s definition of terrorism is the use of violence and intimidation for political aims, but the FBI’s definition involves acts that are dangerous to human life and “mass destruction.”

SECURITY VS. CIVIL LIBERTIES

In the aftermath of Edward Snowden’s data leaks, a raging debate has been unleashed regarding 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

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How did this film confirm or challenge your perception of radical environmentalism, law enforcement, and those in the timber industry?
2. The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) developed from a philosophy founded on the belief that there is “no compromise in defense of Mother Earth.” Do you think this is a defensible position and why?
3. Why do you think so many of the activists in the film are concerned with deforestation, especially of old growth forests? What is the significance of old growth forests?
4. What do you think motivated the activists to use arson in response to their environmental concerns?
5. According to former ELF member Suzanne Savoie, “Consumer America is destroying the world and destroying the planet.” Would you agree? If so, how can a capitalist society be more responsive and less destructive to the environment?
6. What do you think of the government’s deal with Jake Ferguson to turn in the others in exchange for not serving jail time? Do you think such deals are good policy? Why or why not?
7. There has been some debate even within law-enforcement circles about the use of “terrorist” to describe the acts carried out by the ELF. Would you define their acts as terrorism? Why or why not?
8. Who benefits most and who benefits least by the use of the phrase “eco-terrorism?”
9. How would you personally define “terrorism,” and do you think the term is too narrow or too broad and why? How has the term been used/misused by the media, by the law, and governments?
10. What are current or historical instances where political movements began with peaceful protests and non-violent civil disobedience then increasingly used violence and/or destruction? How do you compare these instances with the actions of ELF?

NOTES:

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 U.S. 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.
2. Learn more about critical environmental issues. EarthFirst.org offers news on current environmental issues, events and actions, as well as an extensive set of links to other environmental organizations.
3. Check out the Civil Liberties Defense Center, a non-profit 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. www.cldc.org
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.