Weather Underground

American militant group

Alternate titles: Weather Underground Organization, Weatherman

By Laura Lambert • Edit History

Weather Underground, also called **Weather Underground Organization**, formerly **Weatherman**, militant group of young white Americans formed in 1969 that grew out of the anti-Vietnam War movement. The Weather Underground, originally known as Weatherman, evolved from the Third World Marxists, a faction within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the major national organization representing the burgeoning New Left in the late 1960s. Members of the Weather Underground sought to advance communism through violent revolution, and the group called on America's youth to create a rearguard action against the U.S. government that would bring about its downfall.

The original Weatherman, the "action faction" of the SDS, was led by Bernardine Dohrn, James Mellen, and Mark Rudd and advocated street fighting as a method for weakening U.S. imperialism. At the SDS national convention in June 1969, the Third World Marxists presented a position paper titled "You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows" in the SDS newspaper, *New Left Notes*. The article, the title of which was taken from a song by American musician Bob Dylan, asserted, among other things, that black liberation was key to the movement's anti-imperialist struggle, and it emphasized the need for a white revolutionary movement to support liberation movements internationally. The article became the founding statement of Weatherman.

Early actions

Weatherman launched an offensive during the summer of 1969. In one action in the Northeast, it tried to recruit members at community colleges and high schools by marching into classrooms, tying up and gagging teachers, and presenting revolutionary speeches. At the Harvard Institute for International Affairs, the group smashed windows, tore out phones, and beat professors.

From October 8 to 11, 1969, Weatherman worked to organize thousands of young people in a direct assault on the police, whom they called "pigs." The group called this a "National Action," but newspapers called it "Days of Rage." The protests were to begin on the second anniversary of the death of Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara and were to coincide with the trial of the "Chicago 8"—eight men charged with conspiracy for their actions during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago one year earlier. On October 6, 1969, Weatherman members blew up a statue in Chicago's Haymarket Square that commemorated the policemen who had died in a riot

in 1886. That message of confrontation and violence was echoed in Weatherman's signs and slogans, which read, "Bring the war home" and "The time has come for fighting in the streets." However, "Days of Rage" proved to be only minimally successful. The demonstrations had a low turnout—as low as 100 by some counts—as well as several incidents of random pointless rioting. By the end of the weekend, 284 people, including local youth and SDS members, had been arrested; total bail amounted to more than $1.5 million.

Frustrated with the inefficacy of traditional forms of political protest after "Days of Rage" and other antiwar demonstrations throughout November 1969, Weatherman members called for a national "war council" meeting of the SDS that December. Members of the group discussed the need to instruct themselves in the use of firearms and bombs in order to target and attack sites of power in the United States and discussed the need to kill police. Much of this discussion was fueled by the killing of two party leaders of the Black Panthers, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton, by Chicago police. In that meeting, held in Flint, Michigan, Weatherman decided to go underground and become a small-scale paramilitary operation carrying out urban guerrilla warfare.

Weatherman goes underground

By early 1970 Weatherman had split into several underground cells throughout the country. These cells, usually with three to five men and women living together in a house, were connected to the Weatherman leadership, called the Weather Bureau, by active members who provided aboveground support. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which began investigating the group in June 1969, estimated Weatherman's total strength at this time at 400 members. The cells were located predominantly in Berkeley, California; Chicago; Detroit; and New York City.

Within months Weatherman made its way into headlines and the public imagination. On March 6, 1970, three founding members of Weatherman—Diana Oughton, Ted Gold, and Terry Robbins—died in an explosion while making bombs in a Greenwich Village townhouse. Two other members, Kathy Boudin and Cathy Wilkerson, escaped. Investigators found 57 sticks of dynamite, 30 blasting caps, and timing devices in the rubble. The FBI stepped up its investigation. By April, federal indictments for the "Days of Rage" action had come down against 12 Weatherman members, and Weatherman, collectively, was charged with conspiracy.

Weatherman members began bombing targets across the country in 1970, using tactics from the handbook *Firearms and Self-Defense: A Handbook for Radicals, Revolutionaries, and Easy Riders* and from Brazilian Marxist writer and terrorist Carlos Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*. The more significant targets included the New York City Police Department headquarters, the Presidio army base in San Francisco, a Long Island City courthouse, and several banks in Boston and New York. Most of the bombings were preceded by a warning, to prevent casualties, and were followed by a communiqué, dubbed "Weather Report." Weatherman used these

“Weather Reports” to justify attacks, citing recent police and government actions such as the Kent State shootings, which involved the killing of four students by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University, or the unlawful incarceration of other revolutionaries. The reports also often commemorated revolutionary efforts throughout the world. By year’s end, several Weatherman members had made it onto the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list, which had been expanded to 16 to accommodate them.

The bombings continued throughout 1971. Weatherman placed two bombs at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., both of which exploded on March 1. In August the group attacked three offices of the California prison system after the mysterious murder of prison revolutionary George Jackson in the San Quentin prison yard. Two weeks later, after 30 inmates were killed in a revolt at New York’s Attica penitentiary, Weatherman bombed the office of the state commissioner of corrections in Albany.

Postwar attacks

The Pentagon bombing on May 19, 1972, the birthday of Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, marked the end of Weatherman’s major actions for almost a year and a half. After the signing of the peace treaty between the United States and Vietnam in January 1973, the group grappled with its postwar identity, and soon it was virtually alone in the struggle for armed resistance, joined only by the Black Liberation Army, an offshoot of the New York Black Panthers, the George Jackson Brigade, and the Symbionese Liberation Army. By the spring of 1974, the FBI believed that Weatherman, which by then had changed its name to Weather Underground, was one of the last radical groups of the antiwar movement that still endorsed all forms of violence.

The Weather Underground continued to bomb targets for political reasons, but its efforts, though pointed, were sporadic. In 1974 the group issued “Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism,” the first statement of Weather Underground’s politics since 1969. Soon, Prairie Fire Organizing Committees sprang up throughout the country as the aboveground arm of the Weather Underground. Dissension struck in 1976, and the West Coast faction split off to form the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), which was infiltrated by the FBI in 1977.

Starting in 1978, members began to resurface, and they either turned themselves in to authorities or were tracked down by authorities. In 1994 one of the last Weatherman members indicted for the “Days of Rage” actions was tried in court, ending nearly 25 years of pursuit by government agencies and two decades of life underground.