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Terrorism Chic

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By Sam Tanenhaus. Mr. Tanenhaus, a contributing editor of Vanity Fair, is the author of "Whittaker Chambers: A Biography."

In the aftermath of last week's terrorist attack many are saying we have reached a turning point. Everything has changed, the editorials announce. Our country and the world both look different today.

This is true enough. But what needs re-thinking is not so much the present as our understanding of the past and the prominent role terrorism has played in our politics and culture for many years now.



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A Greenwich Village bomb factory, March 6, 1970. Fawning profiles of the Weather Underground followed right up to Sept. 11, 2001.

Consider the news reported in the weeks, days, and even hours preceding the horrific events. There was, first, the case of Kathy Boudin, a New Left extremist recently denied parole for her conviction in the 1981 robbery of a Brinks truck in Rockland County, N.Y., which resulted in the deaths of four people. That was not an isolated crime. In 1970, Ms. Boudin, a member of the Weather Underground, was part of a team that was building bombs in a Greenwich Village townhouse before their bungling caused an explosion that killed two of their own. Thomas Powers, who wrote a searching account at the time of one of those who died in the blast, Diana Oughton, subtitled the book "The Making of a Terrorist."

But blunt language of that kind is distinctly absent from current discussions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. You won't find the word "terrorist" in a story that appeared in the New York Times on Tuesday, Sept. 11, the day of the World Trade Center attack. It was an affectionate profile of

Ms. Boudin's comrade-in-arms and Ms. Oughton's boyfriend, Bill Ayers, author of a boastful memoir of his exploits 30 years ago. "I don't regret setting bombs," Mr. Ayers told the Times interviewer in the living room of his spacious Chicago home. "I feel we didn't do enough." Mr. Ayers, wrote the dazzled reporter, "still has the ebullient manner, the apparently intense interest in other people, that made him a charismatic figure in the radical student movement." As if this weren't enough, the Times returned to Mr. Ayers a few days later, in the Sunday magazine, with another fawning interview.

Of course Mr. Ayers's "intense interest" assumed a different meaning when "other people" became the objects of his violent fantasies. The terrorists of his generation would have approved of the targets selected by last Tuesday's suicide pilots -- the World Trade Center is an emblem of American commerce, the Pentagon a fortress of our military might. In fact, Mr. Ayers got there first, way back in 1972. "Everything was absolutely ideal on the day I bombed the Pentagon," he writes in his memoir. He describes in detail how the bomb was built and then placed in a Pentagon restroom. Reflecting on the incident today, Mr. Ayers evades responsibility. "Even though I didn't bomb the Pentagon -- we bombed it, in the sense that the Weathermen organized it and claimed it." He also helped bomb New York City Police headquarters in 1970 and the Capitol in 1971. Sound like terrorism? Not to the Times, which calls these "daring acts." But weren't last Tuesday's suicide missions "daring acts," too?

In 1969, Mr. Ayers's present wife, Bernardine Dohrn, once the New Left's mini-skirted Joan of Arc, gushed over another "daring act" -- the murders committed by Charles Manson and his followers. "Dig it!" she told a student audience. "Manson killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they shoved a fork into a victim's stomach." Nowadays Ms. Dohrn disavows those comments -- sort of. "It was a joke," she explains. "Even in my most inflamed moment I never supported a racist mass murderer." But what if Mr. Manson had been a racially sensitive mass murderer? Would his "daring act" then be OK?

The evils of racism no doubt motivated Patrick Dolan Critton, a schoolteacher in Mount Vernon, N.Y. He too appeared in the news on the morning of the World Trade Center attack, after he was arrested for a crime committed in 1971. Mr. Critton is accused of hijacking a DC-9 in Ontario and forcing the crew to fly him to Havana. This came after he robbed a bank, had a shootout with police and then, as a member of a black "liberation" group, assembled pipe bombs in an explosives "factory" on the Lower East Side. Today, the Times reported, Mr. Critton has "the appearance and demeanor of a gentleman," nothing like his earlier self. Nor was that earlier self a terrorist. He was "a revolutionary with a taste for" -- yes -- "the most daring of crimes."

Why the romantic language? The message seems to be that we must not confuse "good" terrorists, like those who belonged to the Weather Underground, with "bad" terrorists, like those who claimed some 5,000 lives on Sept. 11. But are the two really so easily distinguished? In Europe controversy has lately engulfed the "68ers," student radicals who wrought so much havoc in France, Germany and Italy some 30 years ago and in some instances went on to become establishment figures. One such, Germany's current foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, has been under fire ever since photographs published in Stern, the popular magazine, captured him and four others engaged in another daring act in 1973 -- the brutal beating of a policeman. Mr. Fischer has apologized for that deed. He has been less forthcoming about other items on his résumé, however.

According to The New Republic, Mr. Fischer "attended a meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Algiers back in 1969, at which the PLO adopted a resolution to achieve final victory, which is to say, the destruction of Israel."

Thus do the passions of the New Left mingle with those of the New Fanatics, and the daring acts of good terrorists find common cause with those of the bad. This is not surprising. The "critiques" of America offered by the likes of Osama bin Laden and the Palestinians who jubilantly filled the streets after the attacks on the World Trade Center echo those made long ago by the New Left. They, too, branded our nation, its leaders and citizens, as war-mongering, imperialist and all the rest.

Does the New Left bear any responsibility for last Tuesday's horrific events? Obviously not. The point, rather, is that while those crimes may appear to signal the beginning of a new era, they should be seen instead as the climax of malign, inchoate energies that have been at large, here and abroad, for a generation now, ever since it became not only commonplace but fashionable to despise the U.S. and all its works in the name of radicalism.

Joschka Fischer has come a long way. He now supports NATO, another longtime symbol of American "imperialism." Yet how many other veterans of the New Left have owned up to the reality of their appalling misreading of what the Western democracies have really stood for during the past half-century or more? And how many alumni of the Weather Underground acknowledge today the part they played in fostering a culture of terrorism in which assaults on the U.S. and its citizens are wreathed in the glory of "daring acts"?