

## CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AS TACTIC, NOT CULTURE

(Edited transcript of a speech by Mitch Friedman, Executive Director of Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, to the Ancient Forest Activist Conference in Ashland, OR, 2/3/96)

I'm substituting up here for Matt McWilliams, who I understand is pretty good at talking about campaign message and strategy. I don't know what he would have said, but you can think of me as Matt McWilliams in handcuffs. Actually, my reputation has changed quite a bit, as I haven't been arrested in about seven years. Though I had previously been getting busted at a rate of maybe three or four times a year. So, while I may now be "radically challenged," I hope those of you who think I've sold out or compromised will give me a little bit of slack.

The first thing I want to do is honor the role that Earth First! has played in the ancient forest issue over the last thirteen years. Feel free to applaud -- not for me but for Earth First! And not just Earth First!, but also for civil disobedience. (Applause)

What I want to talk about is staying on message in a campaign that's tactically aggressive. I see civil disobedience as a tactic for delivering a message, rather than as a culture. In 1985 in the Millennium Grove, on the Willamette National Forest, we carried out one of the first tree sit actions. I was one of six people in what at that time were the oldest trees in Oregon. Sitting eighty feet up on a platform for a few days, looking down and having time to think, and I can remember what was in my mind. I was acting out of desperation. I didn't have confidence that we would protect substantial ancient forest tracts. By no means did I believe at that time that we would see the cut reduced by over 95 percent, as we have on forests like the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (dropped from 300 million/year to about five million board feet). I think for many of us working at that time -- in the front lines with kryptonite locks on our necks -- our progress has outpaced our wildest dreams, though we know there's still a lot to do.

Aggressive civil disobedience had a key roll in that history. It brought the original attention, from which the issue matured to the point where we could make substantial gains. This issue has a history of boldness, forged in direct action, that allows us to even talk about Zero Cut. Though we are now trying to beat back an offensive from the other side, like the clearcutting rider and other congressional assaults, I feel that this is a year of opportunity for us. We have better organizing opportunities now than ever before.

Our opposition refers to us as the *environmental industry* even though we are few, sometimes feeble, and always outspent. They see us as strong even as we gripe about corporate media, how the government is bugging our phones, or whatever. We think everything is against us! It is true that we are the little guys.; but that has advantages. We can be more guerrilla-like and dynamic, quickly shifting our tactics, our message, our alliances. These are the advantages of smallness and of guerrilla movements.

But instead, we too often have stagnated. When we always go with the same message and tactics, we are easily defeated by an opposition that, while much slower (at least in theory), has danced circles around us too often over the years. We need to think of ways

to be dynamic and utilize our advantages, especially in how we employ civil disobedience.

Sitting on a logging road in 1988, after I had run up a dozen or so arrests over a few years, I looked left and right and saw the same people sitting next to me as did the week before. They looked, acted, and kind of smelled the same. I started to think that we had stagnated. Here we were - with our efforts for an endangered ecosystem having captured the nation's attention, and with mainstream scientific support for even our ostensibly *visionary* wilderness proposals - getting carried away with how radical we were. It occurred to me that this attitude came at the cost of strategic alliances.

At the time, I was trying to infiltrate the North Cascades Audubon chapter. I started to observe that Auduboners were kindred spirits that they didn't need my infiltration; the things I stood for they as well stood for! I started to wonder why the scientists and the little old ladies in tennis shoes weren't sitting next to me on the logging road instead of the guy with dreadlocks. And I started to think that there would be better ways to convey our message to a public which, if polls are to be believed, supports our issues.

Don't take offense if you like to feel kind of cutting edge and radical, but what we stand for in the ancient forest movement is now mainstream. Okay, maybe some of us do have other agendas that are more radical than protecting ancient forests. But we come together to advance a common theme, not to weigh it down with those other agendas.

I want to talk about this dilemma in the context of something that's recently gone on. As I left Earth First! to organize other efforts, such as the Ancient Forest Rescue Expedition and the Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, I've always hoped for the opportunity to revisit civil disobedience. I dreamed of the day when the scientist and the little old lady would sit in the logging road and the Earth First!ers would sit on the side quietly applauding, providing support, and ducking media cameras. I see that opportunity this year. I see anger and passion when I talk to my friends in Audubon and the community groups. The people that were active in Adopt-a-Forest groups seven or eight years ago are now coming forward and they're angry! They are saying, "I'm ready to get on the front lines!"

While Washington is not being hit by the rider nearly as bad as Oregon, Montana, and Idaho, we do have logging happening on the Olympic Peninsula which provides for great organizing opportunities. At risk are classic ancient forests inside Late-Successional Reserves and Tier 1 Watersheds. I hear from long time organizers that there is a high anxiety level, and that people are ready to act. Mainstream, community people. I wanted us to develop a comfort among these people; To train them in civil disobedience and give them a chance to empower themselves to where they felt it was their campaign, and that they could go out and protest in their own idiom. I hoped they would take on this tactic that has radical overtones, but modify it to be an expression of their own viewpoints.

But what happened instead was that Earth First!ers from other communities came in. I think there is a notion that logging protest is an intellectual property right of Earth First! And that every protest must feature people in torn jeans carrying an Earth First! banner. When it began to look like this would happen, energy dissipated from more moderate part

of the community. People were willing to act but not in association with that idiom. It was a frustrating lost opportunity for movement growth and impact.

In contrast, there is a remarkable group at WWU in Bellingham, the Western Endangered Species Alliance (WESA). These are passionate, aggressive young activists; not moderate sell-outs like me. They're vegans, maybe anarchists, every bit as idealistic as anyone in the movement. But they are strategically savvy and humble. They want to do what's going to most help the forest. We were able to work with these students and link them with elders of the Tacoma Audubon and Sierra Club chapters and put together a very effective protest within the office of Congressman Norm Dicks. Fifteen people got arrested, mostly WESA activists, all wearing formal business clothes. The charge was led by a 63-year-old constituent of Dicks' district and elders of the Audubon Society. What we got out of that was superlative: Frontpage press and primetime coverage that emphasized the community support for the forest, not distracted by radical imagery. It confirmed for me that this sort of thing is achievable if we can get out of our own way.

Our goal is to mainstream the radical idea, not radicalize the mainstream one.

Bringing activism into the 90s is not a matter of making the 60s look like the 80s. It is instead going back to the *civil* aspect of civil disobedience that Dr. Martin Luther King described so well in *A Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. This, I believe, will make our movement far more effective.

This change involves more than Earth First!ers in disguise. We need to correct some deeper perceptions that have contributed to stagnation and cynicism in our movement to allow us to evolve to greater effectiveness. Paraphrasing Rita May Brown, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over again yet expecting different results. We need to try new things, which means changing old assumptions.

I recall a whole series of myths that I once believed (and maybe even helped to create) within Earth First! culture. I want to challenge them now, in my own gratuitous way.

**THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS BAD PRESS.** That's a Richard Nixon adage that didn't work for him and won't work for you. A corollary is, "The press is going to screw you no matter what." We get so caught up in our outrage of the corporate juggernaut that we think the press as a conspiracy to damn us. While those tendencies may or may be evident, we the guerrillas need not be conquered. We can be dynamic. We can creatively bring forward new messages and new messengers each time.

**THE HAIL MARY PASS IS GOOD STRATEGY.** In the closing seconds of a football game, a team may attempt a Hail Mary Pass, which is to throw the ball high and far in prayer that a teammate catches it for a touchdown. Activists often adopt the similar futility of "Nobody's doing anything, so let's just do SOMETHING!" Then the same five people go climb a tree, lock down to a bulldozer, or conduct a puke-in. The question that follows the action is "Did we get press?" instead of the more important questions, "Did we get good press?" or "Did we advance our issue?" We can't afford to leave organizing

and media messages to chance. The Hail Mary Pass is nice to have as a last option, but we usually have time to do things right.

**EXTENDING THE SPECTRUM ALLOWS MAINSTREAM GROUPS TO TAKE STRONGER POSITIONS.** Let's call this one *Foreman Envy*. It's a great ploy that probably deserves to be on page one of any strategy book. But the Earth First! strategy book seems to end there on page one. It should instead be as thick as the Bible, which says, "For everything there is a season." What is today the season for? What will we do tomorrow? If we do a puke-in today, what can we possibly do for an encore? People have been studying and practicing strategy for thousands of years, usually in military contexts. If it was as easy as always taking the extreme, we would all have been blown up by now.

**NOBODY IS KEEPING SCORE.** Those of us in urban communities look at things differently than rural activists because rural people know that the score is being kept. When a rural community experience something like a confrontational action or activists from the basecamp acting like spoiled brats at the tavern, locals get feedback. Bad press and bad grapevine effects them and their issues. Rural leaders learn that what goes around comes around, and that mistakes may linger for years. For instance, I wish like hell that we had not laid siege to the Okanogan National Forest headquarters after the 1988 Rendezvous. Since that fateful day, the whole movement in that area has had to work hard to overcome obstacles to alliances and support. We gave people an excuse to turn off to us. In urban areas, it's harder to receive feedback. That's only because the scoreboard is less visible in the frenzy of urban media and life. I won't go so far as to say that God is watching, but I will say that only an excellent strategist can keep track of the score on a regional or national scale and advance a difficult objective like Zero Cut or Rider repeal. I assure you it will require more than "throw a Hail Mary Pass then go to the pub."

**IMAGE IS NOTHING, THIRST IS EVERYTHING.** Sprite is very wrong with this ad. I observe in contrast that "What's in your heart counts, but so does your hairstyle." I know I'm going to get a lot of heat for this, but its damn important. We need to find affective messengers, not just affective messages. We all know that even if God Herself was sitting on a logging with a kryptonite lock around her neck, the TV camera would focus on the hippie-with-a-drum in the background. Nothing against the hippie; there is a lot he could be doing to advance to the message and the movement. But strutting countercultural cred on camera is not one of them. Most people will respect your message if they believe you are respecting them. But people understandably take offense when their norms are flaunted. Why should they listen to you when your appearance seems to convey that you don't respect them? If you don't care about reaching those people, then don't call the media.

**WE RADICALS ARE CHOSEN TO SUFFER.** Maybe this myth is rooted in the rich Hebrew heritage within our movement. While lots of Earth First!ers (e.g., Daryl Cherney, Howie Wolke, Dana Lyons, John Seed, myself) have Jewish blood, we can't allow ourselves its indulgent self-flagellation. The notion that "If I wasn't imbedded in concrete in the freezing rain, then nobody would be," is a crock. If the Earth First!er was instead

organizing, spreading information and enthusiasm, we might find there to be a lot of people willing to commit. But only if they can convey their own message. The commercial fisher wants to deliver a fish message. The racial minority wants to deliver an environmental justice message. The child wants to deliver the future generation message. The Auduboner want to deliver the bird message. The senior wants to deliver the responsibility message. And they all have their own ways of doing so. Working with others is not a matter of convincing them to get behind the Earth First! banner; It's a matter of convincing yourself to get behind a common shared banner. It does not serve the ancient forest to have a radical image foisted onto it.

I believe radicals are at their best when organizing moderates to do radical things. Here are some tips for doing so:

**EARTH FIRST; NOT EARTH FIRST! FIRST:** I remember the rally before Clinton's Portland Forest Summit, where we had seventy thousand people in the pouring rain supporting forests. It felt like an epiphany. We had worked our butts off for two weeks to make the rally something that would celebrate the message of ancient forests, and our success was extraordinary. But from some people we got grief that that we should have focused on fallen activists rather than fallen trees. I saw that divided loyalty as indulgent. The same recently happened at a rally in Seattle during a Clinton visit there, where two Earth First!ers stormed the stage because they resented not being forsaken for fishermen, clergy, and an elder Audubon woman. It's maybe sad that the public doesn't particularly care for environmentalists (especially protesters) these days, but it still supports our cause. We must find others to carry our issues. If it bothers you that the message is more important than the messenger, than you have slipped into the trap of "Earth First! First" righteousness, and only a long stint away from jail and fire circles may cure you. Of course, those who promote forest protection as part of a broader goal like subverting the dominant paradigm or smashing the state will not be satisfied with protected forests. But resisting progress is not a viable plan for greater change.

**GIVE CREDIT, DON'T TAKE CREDIT:** To be effective organizers of a broad-based movement we will need to win, we must be willing continually to give the credit to others, particularly to grassroots, other constituencies, and even, sometimes, politicians. This is about being ecocentric not egocentric.

**FEIGN HUMILITY:** David Brower taught me this when I was a younger and more rambunctious. I was about to be in a public debate with timber industry hacks, and asked David, "I can kick these guys' butts because I know more than they do and I'm right. But what tactics will help me succeed." Brower replied, "If you're so smart and know you can win, what you need is to feign humility." Right. If you're full of dignity and respect for other people and for the Earth, wear it on your sleeve. If not, then feign humility.

This year we have great issues to organize around, like the clearcut rider, sweetheart deals in Congress, and the Radical Right's attacks on the environment. These resonate with the public. And we have energy greater than we had even at the height of the ancient forest wars. Polling shows that people care about the environment. The keys will be

finding the right messengers and doing quality organizing. If you are not reaching out to new folks, then you are by definition not a movement. We will have only have ourselves to blame if we fail to make great progress on national forest protection.

I want to close now with a story about an article that Ken Brower, David's son, once wrote about Earth First! Ken is a conservationist and a fine writer. He came out to Portland where some friends and I were protesting something. At the time I was coordinating Washington Earth First!, where our motto was "If you're not irreverent you're irrelevant." (I was one of the principal agitators behind the short-lived but infamous Stumps Suck movement.) We thought we were so darn cool and we expected Ken Brower to share that opinion. But when his article came out, it described us reminiscing on getting arrested somewhere. One friend was making fun of the police, talking about some "fat-assed cop." Brower wrote that if he were stuck in a foxhole with someone, he'd rather it was that fat-assed cop than one of us Earth First!ers.

That made me think about how we sometimes alienate even our allies. The way that we make progress on these issues is for everything we do to be infused with a spirit of dignity and respect. We have one hell of a sales job ahead, and the audience has to be greeted on its own terms. They are receptive to what we have to say, but only if we approach in ways that inspire them to hold open the door while we say it. Otherwise we isolate ourselves from the public, and we lose. Too much is at stake to allow that.