Almost 40 years ago, I was called an American terrorist—that’s what Time magazine called me in 1970, and the New York Times, too, and that was the word hurled in my direction from the halls of Congress. Terrorist. I was indicted by the Justice Department in 1970 on two single-count conspiracies—broad charges (in my case, crossing state lines to create disorder and destroy government property) the government brings against groups it considers “criminal enterprises,” people who have committed no actionable offenses and yet the state hopes to intimidate or disrupt or silence. But I had no intention of answering in federal court—so many others had seen their best efforts reduced to legal fees and support committees—and so I took off and lived on the run for the next decade. I was part of the Weather Underground and thought of myself as a radical, and immodestly I suppose, as a revolutionary, but I knew that “terrorist” was tattooed over every inch of me—it was an electrifying label, even then. I imagined a pale figure dressed in an oily overcoat, feverish eyes blazing, beard and hair wild and unkempt, sitting in the back of a theater with a black bomb sparking and sizzling in his pocket. Nothing at all like me, I said to myself at the time. I’m no terrorist.

When I turned myself in over a decade later, all federal charges against me had been dropped—“extreme government misconduct” combined with a deep desire in the broader culture to forget Vietnam (the United States of Amnesia) had set me free. I picked up where I’d left off, took up open political work, returned to graduate school and to teaching, and the label—terrorist—faded into the haze of memory. But not, it turns out, forever. I’ve partly myself to blame: moved to remember and to rethink, I wrote Fugitive Days, a memoir of the wretched years of the American war in Vietnam, the dark decade of serial assassinations of Black leaders, the exhilarating upheaval, and the sparkling fight for freedom and peace and justice.

Fugitive Days was published on September 11, 2001, the day our world cracked open, and everything seemed for a time brittle and off balance. We had already been living in a post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam world—each a marker of mass terror perpetrated on innocents—and now this, the horror of commercial airliners turned into giant missiles piloted by fundamentalist suicide bombers slamming into buildings: a post-Holy War world. The images of crimes against humanity close-up and in living color, of planes slicing into office towers, of falling buildings and falling bodies playing over and over, had its toxic effect, dulling and sickening, less and less illuminating as time passed.
The coincidence of timing forced some hard questions onto the book: Why did you do this or that and not something else? Was it a reckless or a sensible thing to do politically, and was it in any sense the right thing ethically? Did you cross some lines you wish you hadn’t? It also raised some fundamental questions about our country and politics: What role does the United States play in the world? What should that role be? What is our responsibility as citizens? What are the limits of protest? What are terrorism, political violence, radicalism, and revolution?

And underneath, a question that almost every memoir must grapple with: How did a person like this get into a spot like that?

I was born at the end of World War II and grew up privileged in the post-war United States—my little world a place of prosperity and well-being and insularity, of instant gratification and seemingly endless superficial pleasures, of conformity and obedience and a kind of willful ignorance about anything that might exist beyond our well-ordered enclave and our neatly trimmed hedges. We were collectively and insistently sleeping the deep, anesthetizing American sleep of denial, and so my next steps are improbable perhaps, but true.

I blinked my eyes open and saw a world in flames. The Black Freedom Movement was defining the moral and political landscape in the United States and beyond, and anti-colonial struggles were setting the agenda for progressive change everywhere. The deeper I looked, the clearer it became that the United States—my country, my government—was on the wrong side of an exploding world revolution. The hopes and dreams of people everywhere—for peace and bread and worthwhile work to do, for a world free of nuclear threat, for independence and self-determination, for dignity and recognition and justice—were being contested in every corner of every continent, and my own government had become both the greatest purveyor of violence on earth and the command center of the counter-revolution. Like everyone else, I had to choose. I joined the Civil Rights Movement, then, and the effort to stop the U.S. war against Vietnam, and soon I became a radical committed not only to ending war and racism, but also to overthrowing the system that made them so predictable, so seemingly inevitable. I began to think of myself as a revolutionary.

I was first arrested opposing the U.S. war against Vietnam in 1965 in a non-violent sit-in in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The war was popular then—about 70% of Americans supported the U.S. invasion and occupation—and yet 39 of us were arrested, and we had the support of hundreds of fellow students. Of course, most students supported the war at that time if they thought about it at all, and there was a huge counter-demonstration underway, but 39 of us raised the banner of refusal, noisily urging all within our reach to join in. It was public pedagogy on a mass scale, and in the best tradition, we were learning about ourselves, about the effectiveness and limits of protest, about the ways issues like war and economic and racial justice intersect, as much as we were offering lessons to others. We had the first teach-in in the country on the University of Michigan campus that month, and we confronted military recruiters and debated flacks sent out from the State Department to defend the insanity. We were following in the footsteps of the Black Freedom Movement, and we were aware of protests and student upheaval in Europe and throughout the world. In fact the demonstration was globally organized—the first International Days of Protest Against the War, October, 1965.

By 1968 the American people had come to massively oppose the war—the result of protest and organizing, of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. denouncing the war as illegal and immoral and linking racial justice with economic and global justice, of veterans returning home and telling the truth about the reality of aggression and officially sanctioned terror. All of this was public pedagogy, but King can be seen as emblematic—a teacher, an organizer, an artist who performed justice on a giant stage, and orchestrated bit characters like the brutal sheriff Bull Connor to come out to play their sinister parts.
The Tet Offensive destroyed any fantasy of an American military or political victory, and the U.S. government was isolated in the world and found itself in profound conflict with its own people. I was sure the war would end after President Lyndon Johnson stepped aside at the end of March, 1968. But, of course, the war didn’t end—in fact it escalated into an air and sea war, a catastrophe that resulted each month in a couple of thousand more people being tossed into the furnace of death constructed by the United States in Southeast Asia. Many were the result of a policy of terror, “free-fire zones,” for example, Vietnamese territory outside U.S. control where bombers dropped ordnance on anything that moved, destroying crops and live-stock and entire villages. John McCain flew some of those missions. As a young lieutenant, John Kerry testified in Senate hearings that troops under orders committed war crimes every day as a matter of course.

We’ll bomb them into the Stone Age, an unhinged American politician had intoned, echoing a gung-ho, shoot-from-the-hip general, each describing an American policy rarely spoken so plainly. Boom. Boom. Boom. Poor Vietnam. Almost four times the destructive power of Hiroshima dropped on a country the size of Florida. Bombs away. Millions of Vietnamese lives were extinguished and destroyed—each had had a mother and a father, a distinct name, a mind and a body and a spirit, someone who knew him well or cared for her or counted on her for something or was annoyed or burdened or irritated by him; each knew something of joy or sadness or beauty or pain. Each was ripped out of the world, a little red dampness staining the earth, drying up, fading, and gone. This is a face of terror—the export of violence and the official policy of indiscriminate murder.

Still, in this democracy the government would not respond to popular will, and we could not find a way to stop the war. The anti-war forces splintered then—some people tried to organize a peace wing within the Democratic Party, others organized rural communes or fled to Europe or Africa, some went into the factories in the industrial heartland and tried to build a workers’ party to contend for power. I and some others built a clandestine force that would, we hoped, survive what we were certain was an impending American fascism, and that could fight the war-makers by other means. We didn’t believe that the struggle would come to an armed confrontation between the greatest military behemoth ever assembled on earth and a raggedy group of kids with sling-shots. But we did think that the conflict would eventually be between the broad masses of people awakened to the horrors of a system built on exploitation, hierarchy, oppression, and organized violence, and willing at last to confront the powerful clique of big capitalists who ran that system.

We thought of ourselves as part of the Third World project—liberation movements in their fight for self-determination would cut-off the tentacles of the monster one by one, and in demanding justice and freeing themselves from empire would simultaneously transform the world. We thought that we who lived in the metropolis of empire had a special duty to “oppose our own imperialism” and to resist our own government’s imperial dreams. We wanted to help educate and agitate and organize the opposition, and our community and our classroom stretched to embrace the entire public square.

Those who opposed the war invented a thousand different ways to organize and to educate our fellow citizens. Our public pedagogy took us to the streets where we marched and picketed and resisted, it’s true, but we also drew up fact sheets, created teach-ins, embraced music, dance, murals and agitprop, circulated petitions. The resistance organized as mothers and students, as lawyers, as returning veterans, as union workers, as churches, as teachers, as whole communities. Sites of protest included draft boards and induction centers, coffeehouses set up outside military bases across the country and in the Philippines, ROTC offices on campuses, institutes on war research, Dow Chemical, and appearances by every politician associated with
the administration. The earlier peace movements to ban the bomb and prohibit nuclear testing contributed to our activism and therefore to our efforts. The most difficult and exhilarating project for me was “Vietnam Summer,” a concerted effort to knock on every door in working-class neighborhoods across America and meet people face-to-face, listen to their concerns, and engage them in a dialogue about war and peace. The more we tried to teach others, the more we ourselves learned, about Vietnam, about White supremacy, about violence against women, about the cost of war at home for housing, health care and schools, about culture, politics, and possibility—about ourselves. These front door encounters became an entire education in the concrete consequences of war and empire on ordinary people: loss, dislocation, confusion, sadness, anger, and awakening. We became more radicalized as we made the connections between foreign war and domestic racism, between economic hierarchies and the hollowing out of democracy for the majority, between the sexual exploitation of Vietnamese and Thai and Filipina women to service the military and the subjugation of women at home. Eventually we thought of ourselves as revolutionaries, committed to overturning the whole system.

I’m writing this on September 12, 2008, the seventh anniversary of the spectacular hijacking of the monstrous crimes of September 11—the hijacking of the hijackings, carried out in plain sight by a different band of right-wing zealots just as determined to impose their arid ideology on America and the world as the thugs of 9-11. It’s a hijacking still underway, a work-in-progress whose disastrous consequences are only partly apparent.

The attacks of September 11 were—no doubt about it—pure terrorism, indiscriminate slaughter, crimes against humanity carried out by reactionary fanatics with fundamentalist fantasies dancing wildly in their heads. Public pedagogy in the service of awe and obedience. And in the immediate aftermath Americans experienced, of course, grief, confusion, compassion, solidarity, as well as something else: uncharacteristic soul-searching, questioning, and political openness, but not for long.

A headline in the *Onion* got it only partly right: “Unsure What to Do, Entire Country Stares Dumbly at Hands.” Actually Cheney, Rumsfeld, Ashcroft, and their gang knew exactly what to do, and they did it—they pulled out their most ambitious plans to create a new American empire, to remake the world to their liking, to suppress dissent, to bail out the airlines by transferring $20 billion without safeguards or benchmarks from public to private hands in a matter of days with a single no-vote in the Senate, to scuttle aspects of the law that checked their power, to deliver the country, in the words of Arthur Miller, “into the hands of the radical right, a ministry of free floating apprehension toward anything that never happens in the middle of Missouri.” The ideologues filled up all the available space with their fantastic interpretation of events, and they shouted down anyone with the temerity to disagree, donning the mantle of patriotism to defend their every move. Here again, public pedagogy in the service of obedient silence.

The “Boondocks” and Bill Maher came under steady attack, Susan Sontag and Edward Said were told to shut up, give up their jobs, and by implication to retreat to their caves with their terrorist soul-mates. When mild-mannered, slightly right wing Stanley Fish suggested that all the mantras of the day—we have seen the face of evil, the clash of civilizations, we’re at war with international terrorism—are inaccurate and unhelpful, failing for a lack of any available mechanism for settling deep-seated disputes, he was targeted as a destructive leech on the American way of life. Asked to apologize for his post-modern devil work of 40 years, he cracked wise, telling me he could picture the headline: “Fish ironically announces the death of post-modernism—Millions cheer.”

The president said repeatedly that America was misunderstood in the world, and that what we have here is mainly a failure to communicate. He sounded like the sadistic warden of the prison plantation in *Cool Hand Luke*, whose signature phrase is the focus of ridicule and reversal. What’s clear in both cases is that a failure to communicate is the very least of it.
The for-profit press, public pedagogues with an agenda far from Jefferson’s call to afflict the comfortable while comforting the afflicted, rolled over, gave up any pretense of skepticism, and became the idiot-chorus for the powerful. When the president looked soulfully out from our TVs and implored every American child to send a dollar for Afghan kids, no one asked how much money would be required to feed those kids, or how the food was going to get there and by-pass their parents. Starvation ahead. The so-called war on terror was simply accepted on all sides, no one qualifying with the necessary, “so-called.” No one in power asked whether a crime didn’t require a criminal justice response and solution—perhaps a massive response, but within the field of criminal justice nonetheless. No one in power asked what the field of this war would be, or how we would know if we’d won. No one in the power centers of the Fourth Estate demanded evidence or proof.

Terrorism: Metaphor, Myth, and Symbol

“Terrorism” is regularly referenced in our public discourse—and it never fails to arouse an emotional response—but it is rarely defined. It is neither analyzed nor understood, beyond its unchallenged existence as a menace to human values and survival. It has no cause—in fact, according to those in power, to ask, for example, the cause of Palestinian terrorist actions is to, prima facia, express sympathy for those actions. And our revulsion of terrorism is manipulated selectively: we are meant to abhor the bombing of an Israeli café, and simultaneously to celebrate the bombing of a neighborhood in Gaza.

A terrorist engages in terrorism, of course, but that settles little.

1. What is terrorism?
2. Is the concept—terrorism—consistent and universal, that is, does it apply to all actions of a certain type, or is it selective and does it change over time?
3. Which “terrorist” had a 100,000 British pound reward on his head in the 1930s?
4. When did that “terrorist” become a “freedom fighter,” his image rehabilitated?
5. How many Israeli Prime Ministers were designated “terrorist” by the British government at some point in their political careers?
6. Which group of foreign visitors to the White House in 1985 were hailed by Ronald Reagan as the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers, “freedom fighters” against the “Evil Empire”?
7. What did George W. Bush call these same men? When?
8. Who offered the following definitions? “Terrorism is a modern barbarism that we call terrorism”; “Terrorism is a threat to Western civilization”; “Terrorism is a menace to Western moral values”; “[W]e have no trouble telling [terrorists from freedom fighters]”; “Terrorism is a form of political violence.”
9. Which U.S. president said, “I am a contra,” referring to the Nicaraguan group designated “terrorist” by international human rights observers?
10. Has there ever been a U.S. president who refused to employ “political violence”?
11. Which form of terrorism—religious, criminal, political, or official, state-sanctioned—has caused the most death and destruction in the past 500 years? One hundred years? Ten years? Which has caused the least?

Terrorism can be thought of as warfare deliberately waged against civilians and noncombatants for the purpose of intimidation or provocation in a political struggle. It is the willful introduction of violence into the public square—the employment of methods designed to generate an intense and overwhelming fear. Terrorists intend to effect change through bullying and violence.
against innocents, and in that way, to undermine policies they oppose. A terrorist might be a reactionary, a religious fanatic, a person of the right or the left, or a respectable man in a clean suit or a pressed uniform. Every thug and criminal is not a terrorist, but every terrorist is indeed a thug and a criminal.

Acts of terrorism can be inflicted on people by an individual or group, a party or faction or religious order, a gathering of insurgents, or an established state. No one—individual, group, sect, or state—has a monopoly on terror as a form of combat. Even a casual nod at history reveals just how pervasive a tool it has been: the Roman legions, the Crusaders, the Ottoman Turks all used massacres, pillaging, burning of homes and farms, and mass rape in the service of empire, as did the Incas and the Aztecs, and later the Spanish who overwhelmed them both. In modern times, the German war machine terrorized the Dutch at Rotterdam, the Royal Air Force terrorized the German people in the early 1940s by obliterating 135 cities, and the U.S. terrorized the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The founders of Israel used terrorism against the British and the Palestinians; the Palestinians use terrorism against Israelis; and Israel currently employs terror in the service of settlement and occupation. We see Russians employing terror in Chechnya, China in Tibet. In our own national story, terror is a defining signature of the Indian wars, Sherman’s “March to the Sea,” and the bloody war in Vietnam, to name a few. If we use a stable and consistent definition, then it is a fact that the overwhelming number of terrorist events in the world today are caused by established governments, notably our own.

And here we are: international law shredded, torture defended, citizens rounded up and held without honoring their Constitutional rights, nationalism promoted relentlessly, disdain for human rights on the rise, militarism ascendant in all aspects of the culture, the mass media flat on its back, people nodding dully as we accede to an orange alert and march in orderly lines through security checkpoints and random searches, organized voter suppression and rampant fraud at the polls, mass incarceration of Black men, war without end, and on and on. We might still stir ourselves to oppose this criminal cabal, we might prepare for the international criminal trials these domestic hijackers deserve, and, at the very least, we might tell the truth in the public square and thereby contribute to building a mass movement for peace and justice.