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## Interview with Bill Ayers

William Ayers

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #233  
AYERS, Bill**

**AYERS, Bill**

1960s leader of anti-war movement, educator, and educational reform activist

*Interviewed:* April 3, 1994

*Interviewer:* Ron Chepesiuk

*Index by:* Alyssa Jones

*Length:* 1 hours, 40 minutes, 54 seconds

**Abstract:** In his April 1994 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Bill Ayers detailed his part in the 60s Radical Movement. Ayers described his motivations for joining the Students for a Democratic Society community, the Weather Underground, and his eventual leading of the groups. He covered several issues of the anti-war movement, including communism, radicalism, social hierarchies, government distractions, bombings, and the Vietnam War. Ayers focused greatly on educational reform and the educational aspects of joining a social movement. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

**Keywords:** School reform movement, 1960s, parent-teacher relationships, race, racism, government interaction, poverty, urban failure, school failure, resource allocation, society, educational system, self-entitlement, selfishness, Radicals in Profession, Children's Community School, Vietnam draft, capitalism, Bill Clinton, radicalism, social hierarchy, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), "Vietnamization", Vietnam War, Weather Underground, anti-war movement, capitol bombing, communism, Leftist

**Interview Session (April 3, 1994): Digital File**

**Time      Keywords**

00:00:00    *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:08    *Question:* What is your present position and how long? *Answer:* Moved to Chicago in 1987; professor at University of Chicago.

00:01:30    *Question:* Tell me about the school reform movement. *Answer:* 1987 movement changed from board/union struggle to parent/community struggle against the system. Thirty day strike led to parent councils to inform parents about school issues.

00:02:55    *Question:* Parent-teacher partnerships as a lasting reform? *Answer:* Not there yet, there is still antagonism between parents and teachers. BA's view is that a

- partnership is possible.
- 00:04:12 *Question:* In what ways have you been trying to structure a partnership between parents and teachers? *Answer:* Legislation failed to create partnership.
- 00:05:03 *Question:* Is Chicago a microcosm of what is happening America? *Answer:* In some ways, but in others it is an instance of urban failure. There is not failure across the board, just instances. There are two systems; one that fails and one that succeeds. A struggle of race, economics, etc.
- 00:06:03 *Question:* Allocation of resources? *Answer:* Allocation is not exclusively the problem with the school system failing poor children. Resources also include human resources, buildings, transportation, etc. The bureaucratization of the system is another failure.
- 00:08:15 *Question:* Sounds like the critique of American education in the 60s. Has nothing changed? *Answer:* Things have intensified. Things have changed, some good, but the changes are unquantifiable because they are in the hearts and minds of the radicals and people like them. Racial segregation, intensification of poverty-things have gotten worse.
- 00:09:40 *Question:* Your critique of the situation has not changed? *Answer:* BA's analysis of the situation has not changed. The only thing that has changed is that BA has become more agnostic about what works—less certain about what works when trying to change the system because things didn't work out the way he thought they would.
- 00:11:13 *Question:* Bashing of the 1960s? Allan Bloom's critiques on 60s permissive society. *Answer:* BA negates idea of permissive society. Believes problems that society confronts are ethical and political issues that are often ignored when speaking of society's issues.
- 00:13:48 *Question:* 1960s quintessential philosophy: community is the basis for changing your life and changing politics. *Answer:* We live in a culture and educational system that is defined by capitalist social relations. People have become selfish and entitled. People unable to see the selfishness of society. The aim of the 60s was to open people's eyes.
- 00:16:55 **[no question]** BA speaks about origins and influences of 1960s. The movement was influenced heavily by the Civil Rights Movement. Explains why it is important for children, especially African American children to understand the 60s Reform Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. The people moved behind a moral idea. Gives an understanding of what it's like to be a citizen, which people don't understand anymore.

- 00:18:18 *Question:* With the death of communism, capitalism has become the model. No alternative? *Answer:* BA responds with summary of a New Yorker article. The promotion of America's capitalism was meant to cover up America's problems; the poverty, the struggles of the American people, etc.
- 00:23:11 *Question:* Capitalist system is becoming global? "The Disposable Worker". *Answer:* The capitalist system may make it easier to fix the country; create solidarity for people. Or, it could go terribly wrong for the country.
- 00:24:27 *Question:* Are you optimistic about the change from the Reagan/Bush era? Or do you think it will be the same? *Answer:* Wouldn't say it is the same thing, but always considers everyone he votes for the lesser of two evils.
- 00:25:21 **[no question]** BA talks about the importance of voting and why he votes. Voting is a democratic right that people should insist upon.
- 00:26:23 **[no question]** BA circles back to the question about the change from Bush to Clinton; stating differences and similarities between the two. Reiterates why he votes and the importance of voting.
- 00:27:04 *Question:* What about education? Is Clinton better for education? *Answer:* Clinton has an opportunity to improve education. Secretary of Education can either do some good or be very destructive. Drive for equitable way of looking at education and fairer distribution of resources. BA fears national standards and testing (much like the GOP educational focus) because it is destructive. BA thinks Clinton means progress in education.
- 00:30:25 *Question:* Trend of privatization? *Answer:* BA thinks it is very real and very serious; a dangerous and disturbing idea to both Ayers and Chepesiuk. Crisis in the schools is very complex and there is no easy fix. Believes school system in Chicago district will be finished/dead by the next year.
- 00:33:51 *Question:* This closing and failing of school districts is symptomatic America? This is going to happen in other states, too? *Answer:* Yes, goes on to give reasons why this is happening in big urban systems. Big urban systems have 50% high school dropout rates.
- 00:34:44 *Question:* 100 billion dollars into drug war and high dropout rates; what are we doing? Class and race problem. *Answer:* Witnessing a major student boycott of the schools because no one believes in the school systems. They end up being trouble, basically, but they have no choice.

- 00:36:14 *Question:* We're at a crossroads and people don't realize it. *Answer:* U.S. is headed towards a crisis. People voted for Clinton because they are dissatisfied with the school systems failing them.
- 00:36:42 **[no question]** BA starts talking to his son about his math homework and life.
- 00:37:14 *Question:* Does that mean another movement is going to happen. Perhaps a 60s type revival? *Answer:* BA is unsure, but he knows that it is coming. He doesn't know who will be in charge of the movement or exactly what the next big movement will be. Environmental, women's rights, survival, another African American movement—all potential future movements.
- 00:38:00 *Question:* Isn't that the problem—it's so fragmented? *Answers:* It is fragmented and disoriented, but there are natural tie-ins that with the help of leadership, something like the environmental movement could turn into an anti-capitalist movement and encompass other movements.
- 00:39:22 *Question:* Why did you go into early childhood education? *Answer:* Was in childhood education at the same time as being a radical; how he became involved in the movement. Met the husband of someone teaching at an alternative school; went to see it and loved it. BA ended up becoming the director of the school, the Children's Community School.
- 00:41:12 *Question:* The school was interracial? *Answer:* It was a conscious attempt by the parents to reflect a culture more consistent with their values that was not competitive, racist, or directed towards a single-minded hierarchy of success. It was consciously a counter to their society/culture.
- 00:42:43 *Question:* Why did the school fold? *Answer:* Partially BA's own incompetence, partially because of licensure and money issues, difficulty in sustaining school, especially after they lost their space and couldn't find a licensable space to start up again. Education chose him. As a radical, what could he do as work that isn't destructive?
- 00:45:03 *Question:* What better way/place to make a contribution to the community than teaching? [rhetorical question] *Answer:* Most of his students wouldn't call themselves radicals, but wanted to be teachers to change lives, which is a radical idea. A very typical motivation for why people teach, so his story is not unique in that aspect.
- 00:45:45 *Question:* What you learned at that school is still useful today? *Answer:* Absolutely. BA talks about the teaching fads and buzzwords. He and his colleagues were trying

- to build a school system with its own buzzwords and did many good things.
- 00:47:17 *Question:* You wear the badge of radicalism proudly? *Answer:* Yes, very proud. BA talks about being a small “c” communist. The ethics of communism appeal to him. Henry David Thoreau, Mother Jones, Jane Addams are people who articulate a fair and just world. BA doesn’t know how society will survive if it continues not raising the issue of justice.
- 00:49:27 *Question:* You got into SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) late? *Answer:* No, was early on the SDS scene. Went to a conservative preparatory school for wealthy families. 4 of 39 in his graduating class ended up in SDS. BA was taken by the Civil Rights Movement and read all from James Baldwin.
- 00:51:37 *Question:* What kind of activities were you involved in with SDS? *Answer:* He was initially just a member. BA eventually helped take over the administration building on his college campus. Al Haber was a close friend.
- 00:53:28 **[no question, missing audio]** BA and Chepesiuk talked about “idiot book” and biographies and difficulty in judging other people.
- 00:54:27 *Question:* We were talking about Tom Hayden’s legacy? *Answer:* BA thinks Hayden made an enormous contribution with his militancy and he was brilliant. Hayden had the vision and resolve to make the movement work and move forward.
- 00:56:17 *Question:* You became increasingly militant—is that because of frustration with the government? *Answer:* BA thought that it was frustration and his sense of responsibility to the radicals he was in charge of. The anti-war movement decided to cut its losses.
- 01:01:09 *Question:* BA reiterates the question about frustration. *Answer:* There was frustration that the government would continue to escalate its war, but the movement was proud of gathering such a large group of people. Radicals asked themselves how to disrupt the war. Militancy for the new Left: defining factors-let the people decide and act on your beliefs.
- 01:04:22 *Question:* The alternative was to go underground? *Answer:* That wasn’t exactly when it happened, but they were moving towards going underground. Continued to speak on militancy of the movement before moving underground. Going underground just happened. Spoke about being terrorized by the government and police.
- 01:08:08 *Question:* Did the disintegration of the SDS have anything to do with the direction that you went in? *Answer:* The disintegration created a more barricaded community and the SDS suffered. SDS was one thing, but there were other organizations and

- none of them survived the two year period, so it was nothing that the SDS did. The movement was not the same after the Civil Rights Movement transformed and when the war went into Vietnamization. No one wants a repeat of Vietnam.
- 01:11:25 *Question:* You mentioned the townhouse bombing? How did that impact you emotionally and psychologically? *Answer:* BA lost his best friend and girlfriend at 24. He was numb, disoriented, grieving, and confused, but he had support from the people of the movement. BA felt responsible for their deaths; felt like it was his fault. Spent the next year disarming members of the movement.
- 01:14:53 *Question:* How did you manage to stay elusive for 11 years? *Answer:* They wanted to be an embarrassment to the government and police by cleverly staying hidden from them. Going underground was a conscious decision, partially. It was easy staying hidden because they had support and help all over.
- 01:18:32 *Question:* It must have been empty after the end of the war? *Answer:* Yes, the organization only held together for the war. They thought they united for other common goals, but that appeared to be untrue. Very predictable and typical of such a movement.
- 01:20:24 *Question:* Do you give yourself (the organization) credit for any of the war? *Answer:* Yes, the movement made an impact on the government's decisions. The contribution of the American anti-war movement was meant to stop the American government from escalating the war. The American anti-war movement was a peripheral group. There were also other factors, like the European anti-war movement and the Vietnamese had the biggest contribution by beating the Americans on the ground.
- 01:25:20 *Question:* Have you read the [David] Horowitz chapter on you? *Answer:* Not really.
- 01:25:43 *Question:* Why was the chapter so vicious? *Answer:* David broke with the Left very intensely and became a radical Reagan supporter and is now staunchly anti-Left. He was reacting to his and his parents' experience in being on the Left.
- 01:28:50 *Question:* How did you assess the experience after emerging from the underground? Did you think it was a waste? *Answer:* No, BA didn't think the 11 years were a waste. They were for a purpose and he didn't think any of his life had ever been wasted. Felt like he was doing productive work, learning, teaching, and growing while underground.
- 01:31:44 *Question:* Do you ever get nostalgic about that period? *Answer:* No, but he described the period as being a touchstone for his own thinking. It was a decisive moment in his life.

- 01:33:42 *Question:* A graduate student said that the only reason you were hired at the University of Illinois because the people who felt guilty over the 60s are stronger than the people who hate you. What do you think of that? *Answer:* Didn't find that to be true; got along with everyone. Ayers struggled with institutions to get them to hire and recruit African Americans. Never found people to be bitter.
- 01:38:34 *Question:* When is the book review coming out? *Answer:* It could be as long as six weeks. Conversation on "The Nation" and Stalinists.
- 00:40:54 *End of interview*