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Ayers' ties to higher education are more troubling than ties to Obama

*By Diether Haenicke
December 03, 2008*

During the last phase of the presidential campaign, the name Bill Ayers loomed large. I avoided writing about him while the campaign raged because I did not want to stir the fires of political rhetoric.

The importance of Bill Ayers' casual friendship with Barack Obama was as vastly exaggerated by the McCain camp as it was woefully understated by Obama's. I consider Bill Ayers a dangerous man. But that has, in my opinion, very little if anything to do with Obama's ability to serve as U.S. president. So I waited to say my piece until the election had been decided.

What I want to say about Bill Ayers has nothing to do with presidential politics. But it has to do with how one deals with the past history of people. It has to do with the questions of regret for past actions, with the power of redemption and the possibility of new beginnings after a life of violence, terrorism and extreme, radical politics.

Bill Ayers was one of the founders of the radical left organization called the Weather Underground. His group, during the 1960s and 1970s, conducted a series of bombings of public buildings as a protest against U.S. foreign policy, particularly the Vietnam War. According to his memoir of those times, titled "Fugitive Days," Ayers participated in placing and exploding bombs in the New York City Police Headquarters in 1970, the U.S. Capitol building in 1971, and the Pentagon in 1972. A book Ayers wrote in 1973 is dedicated to Sirhan Sirhan, the convicted assassin of Robert Kennedy.

After the Weathermen had gained control of Students for a Democratic Society in 1969, Ayers and his wife Bernadine Dohrn, an equally radicalized person, participated in the Days of Rage in Chicago with the goal of bringing the war home to the streets of America. With a touch of nostalgia, Bill Ayers describes the anti-war march in "Fugitive Days":

"The crowd thundered down Clark, every window pane a target, every bit of glass in every business crashing joyously in our wake. With our pace now a dead run, some of us turned to car windows, hotel windows, the windows of the luxury high-rise apartments we streamed by. I swung my billy club into the windshield of a Cadillac and then a Mercedes."

Ayers and Dohrn subsequently went underground and were on the lam for a decade, hiding and running from the FBI. When they finally turned themselves in, their case was dismissed on a mere technicality. Instead of receiving long prison terms, they re-entered respectable society.

Today, the two former fugitives from justice hold important and distinguished positions in the higher education system of our country. Bill Ayers is a celebrated professor of education at the University of Illinois- Chicago, and Bernadine Dohrn teaches law at Northwestern University. How could that happen?

Every admissions committee in professional schools questions a candidate's suitability for the profession. Past known drug use poses a problem for someone who wants to be a pharmacist or a physician. A former wife-beater has a hard time being admitted to the practice of social work. Law schools want to know about the ethical standards of applicants. Accounting departments are careful not to admit shady characters.

How can people who escaped the law, threw bombs, stole, cheated and threatened the government with violence end up as educators of the next generation? And in two such critical areas of education: the law and teaching! Were the proper questions asked? Is someone who advocated unbridled violence and lawlessness suited to train the next generation of judges, prosecutors and attorneys? Is a terrorist who placed bombs in public buildings a good role model for young teachers? Should he be selected to mess with the minds of our young?

I read Ayers' book carefully. Since I believe in the power of forgiveness and redemption, I looked for a statement of remorse, without which forgiveness and redemption cannot occur. There are no clear signs of remorse or moral metamorphosis, only evasive explanations. There is no statement such as: "We were wrong. We are not the same people we once were."

I have grave reservations seeing Ayers and Dohrn on the teaching faculty of two of America's leading universities.

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