

# Lunch With 3 Prospective Bombers

By AMITAI ETZIONI

Last Sunday I met three would-be bombers, two young men and a young woman whom I'll call Jim, Dick and Sally. As far as I could tell, they have not participated in any terrorist act nor do they really intend to. Nevertheless, they were full of "hip" talk about "blowing things up," and they professed admiration for the Weathermen's actions.

"If I had my way, I would blow up the bridges and stifle Manhattan," Dick maintained.

Jim showed his expertise: "It would be easy to blow a hole into the T-Z (Tappan Zee Bridge), but it would not stop the traffic for long. On the other hand, it is more difficult to get to the cables of the George Washington Bridge. But if you got to those—you'd bring down the whole thing."

"It's not that difficult," Dick protested, "just four or five feet above the ground."

"Yes," Jim demurred, "but you could work *under* the T-Z and have as much time as you want, while everyone would see you working on the cable."

I interjected at this point. "What about all the people on those bridges?"

"They will be called," Jim explained. "We will tell them that they have 15 minutes to get off. We are after the property system, not the people."

"Well," I wondered aloud, "what about the janitor who was overlooked in the Queens Court House, and the young Ph.D. in the lab in Madison?"

Dick countered, in what seemed a complete non sequitur: "And what about all the death in Vietnam?"

Sally thought "that anyhow the banks will be first to be hit. I was afraid to go cash a check on Friday."

The conversation took place on a suburban lawn. The three young people were all under 30 but close to it. Dick is the son of a top executive of a middle-sized Manhattan firm. Jim is the son of a neighbor, a retired commodity broker. Sally is Dick's girlfriend.

## A Shared Hatred

Both Dick and Jim come from families that are obviously well off but lead quite simple, almost hippie lives. The parents openly share their sons' hatred for "the system" and respond admiringly to most things "the children" come up with. Our hosts, Dick's father and mother, were matching their sons' extremist jargon. "The system is rotten at the core," explained the father in passing.

The youth rebellion is encompassing; it moves beyond politics and fashions in an entire life style. Dick is making films, in the Village, to promote "the cause," an activity that produces little income. Thus, at 28, he is living off his parents, sleeping late, hanging around the house most of the day and staying

out late with one girl or another. Jim went to France to avoid the draft after flunking out of two law schools in the United States. He finally received a law degree from some little-known school, and is now studying law in New York City. He, too, lives at home, getting up at noon and studying at night. All three are surprisingly relaxed human beings. Sally's talk is almost slow. Dick and Jim seem as if they have all the time in the world. Sunday's lunch, which started at 2 p.m., stretched into the early evening hours. Large amounts of Sangria, Edam cheese and Spanish sausages with French bread were consumed. I saw no drugs. The youths wore their hair not much longer than Mayor Lindsay has of late. They were clean and sported no love beads. Without their faded jeans they could easily go unnoticed among any bank's clientele.

They may best be characterized as sympathizers, who far outnumber the actual bomb throwers in each revolutionary movement. They can be drawn into violent action, especially if they believe that the movement has a fair chance of succeeding in the struggle against the Government. On the other hand, as long as bombers are arrested fairly frequently and receive severe punishments, these sympathizers will stay on their lawns. They will still provide the hard-core terrorists with money, information, occasionally shelter and always with sympathy. They constitute the ocean in which the urban guerrillas swim.

## 'Doing Your Own Thing'

"What would you achieve by blowing up some banks or bridges?" I asked when coffee was served.

"Achieve?" Jim was indignant. "Man, this is an old-generation hang-up. Doing your own thing is what counts."

"Yeah," Dick concurred, "Shake it up. Show it up."

Sally surmised, "If people's washing machines would cease to work—power failures, you know—they could not take it, and they would finally rebel."

Here I almost erupted. "What nonsense. Let's forget for the moment the question of whether this country is ripe for, or is in need of, a revolution. What kind of strategy is this? What if you do blow up a few places? What will this amount to, what will it accomplish?"

"You can't tell," Dick replied. "You cannot plan a revolution. Do you think Stalin knew, when he robbed a bank, that it would lead to a revolution? When Lenin studied, did he visualize himself a revolutionary leader? You try things. You blow things up. If this won't work, we will try something else. Anyhow—now it is time to act. We are mad. . . ."

Sally spoke softly, describing her vision. "You get to the banks, which is where their money is. And to the Federal buildings and to the armories and to the bridges. . . . You

blow it all up. . . . The people's confidence in their Government will be shaken and its legitimacy will be undermined."

"Oh, come off it," I said. "Blowing up a few windows, ceilings, and floors will have no such consequence."

This response, all three agreed, was mere rationalization—an excuse for passivity.

Upon leaving, it was clear to me that these youngsters, brought up in an ultra-permissive home, were rather different from the disciplined die-hards in the Old Left who spouted Marxist dogma in response to any or all questions. These youths in the New Left were apparently without a systematic ideology and lacked an overall strategy. They responded emotionally and instinctively to a few "cue" words, rhetoric that has more psychoanalytic connotations than political ones.

## A Selfish Philosophy

To the extent that their philosophy emerged from this encounter, it appeared to be a selfish, indulgent one. There seems to be a willingness to approve of, if not to actually engage in, acts of violence without a clear sense of social purpose or consequence. All as if terror were a mere act of self-expression and spontaneity; planting dynamite, a form of finger painting. Societal processes go unrecognized in what is surely the most individualistic revolutionary talk since anarchism. Ultra-progressive education, hip talk and the use of mind-expanding drugs seem to have left these three unable to carry an argument to its logical conclusion. Moral considerations are brushed aside by pointing to the "evils of the system."

I wish I could conclude by saying that this or that course of action—changing our curricula in schools, subscribing to the latest edition of Speck (which is much less permissive than the earlier ones), hiring more policemen—would help these infantile would-be terrorists to grow up and face the social and moral consequences of the "ego-trips" they endorse so willingly. Granted, our educational system, child rearing practices, and social system and crime prevention techniques all are in need of extensive reform, but this will take time.

Meanwhile, many thousands of youngsters like Jim, Dick and Sally will be with us. One day their parents will cease to finance their games, and responsibility will set in. Then, perhaps, they will tire of playing revolutionaries. For the time being, however, the most we can do, I am afraid, is to make it as clear as possible to these would-be bombers that dynamite theatrics are utterly unimpressive modes of self expression and are of no societal consequence.

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