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From Academic to Activist: Reviewing the Life of Bill Zimmerman

Introduction

Any chapter in Bill Zimmerman's book *Troublemaker* would be enough for average people to consider themselves impactful. Zimmerman, however, is not an average person. He tells the stories of numerous encounters with protests, activism, the government, and many influential people. His experiences were not just limited to the United States; he traveled abroad on multiple occasions and even came an inch away from death while doing so. Zimmerman's memoir is over 400 pages of inspiring stories that depict how he began his career and then became a radical activist.

Part I

While working on his dissertation to earn his doctorate, Zimmerman struggled to balance his life as an academic and his desire to be involved politically. During this time, he learned of forms of antiwar protests including performing citizen arrests on military commanders, holding sit-ins at draft boards, and the burning of the first draft card to protest the war effort in Vietnam (Zimmerman 80). Zimmerman wanted to be involved, despite deadlines approaching for his dissertation, because he believed the United States was guilty of war crimes. When the Selective Service announced it was ending draft

deferments for males enrolled in a university, Zimmerman started a protest to call on the University of Chicago to refuse to cooperate and not send the Selective Service any names of its students (Zimmerman 84). Students occupied the administration building at UC and continued to reappear day after day despite orders to leave by the police. Although Zimmerman recognized he was jeopardizing his research and therefore his status at UC, he did not fear and continued on with the protest. As the movement went on, the group of students started calling themselves Students Against the Rank (Zimmerman 87). The administration finally conceded, offering to hold a conference on campus where both sides of the war effort could speak. Zimmerman's efforts in the protest had been successful and he was satisfied with the result.

This event was significant in Zimmerman's life because it was the first example of activism he participated in. Not only did he participate, but he took a leadership role and met personally with the UC administration. He served as the liaison between the students protesting and the administration, delivering demands and concessions between the two groups. Zimmerman had stayed away from leadership roles in the past, but after the events at UC, he decided it was time for that to change (Zimmerman 90). His experience dealing with those in power will benefit him later when he starts his own organization to protest the war and has to deal with much larger opposition than what he faced at UC.

Part II

As Zimmerman became more interested and involved in political activism, his views also started to change. In the tumultuous year that was 1968, Zimmerman watched, like many Americans, several events that would start to radicalize him as an

activist and change his perceptions on the war and American foreign policy. The first of these events was the Tet Offensive, a series of attacks carried out by the North Vietnamese Army on South Vietnam during the Vietnam New Year holiday (Zimmerman 126). The army attacked more than 100 cities in South Vietnam. Zimmerman and many other Americans were influenced by these attacks because they were broadcast live on television due to the film crews scattered across Vietnam (Zimmerman 127). Americans stopped believing the war could be won, starting to see that the North Vietnamese would not give up fighting to protect their land. Zimmerman became more wary of the war as well and this began his radicalization.

Another event that shaped Zimmerman's views was the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Zimmerman, despite originally being critical of Dr. King's actions, grew to admire his role in the movement and was inspired by him. Zimmerman saw King as having made a more radical critique in the two years preceding his death, which can be compared to Zimmerman's own shift to a more radical ideology (Zimmerman 131). The assassination of King meant the one man who could bridge the race gap and provide the leadership America needed was gone (Zimmerman 131). As a result of King's death, blacks across the country reacted with anger and violence. Zimmerman, while counseling students at Brooklyn College where he taught at the time, was drawn to their point of view and their revolution as well (Zimmerman 132). He came to see capitalism as a system that required one person to have less in order for someone else to have more. He did not think elections were going to be the answer to solving America's problems and began to side with black power advocates that radical change could not be won

within the system (Zimmerman 133). He would use this new ideology of radicalism to shape his actions in the future.

Zimmerman's new radical beliefs would influence his actions and choices in nearly every event to come. He was convinced that America needed more than reform. He believed stopping the Vietnam War was not enough, but needed to start over and build a new and equitable society in America (Zimmerman 152). He had gone from an antiwar activist to a revolutionary, largely due to the events in 1968. His idea of a revolutionary was also notable, saying that the job of a revolutionary was to make a revolution and not simply to join a debate club (Zimmerman 153). As a result of this shift to radicalism, he, along with others who shared his beliefs, held more contempt for liberals than conservatives. He said conservatives at least maintained their values but liberals were all talk and too afraid to actually act (Zimmerman 153). The results of 1968, including the presidential election, gave birth to the age of American conservatism which would shadow the country for decades to come.

Part III

Throughout the next few years, Zimmerman would have the opportunity to practice his radical ideology in multiple ways; including traveling to Vietnam and starting his own aid organization for the victims there. Zimmerman, staying true to his belief that stopping the war alone was not enough, also took up activism at home. In 1973, conflict sparked on the Native American reservation of Wounded Knee when Native American protesters seized the village and demanded the United States return their land (Zimmerman 312). Zimmerman, still working with his aid organization "Medical Aid for

Indochina,” received an invitation to help support the Native Americans there that needed food (Zimmerman 314).

He knew exactly why he was being called, since he was a licensed pilot and could provide air support without too much risk of being caught. If he was caught, however, he would face incarceration or potentially even death (Zimmerman 314). Zimmerman contemplated the offer, but did not get a chance to respond because a truce had been reached and his services were no longer needed. It was not long, however, until conflict fired up again and Zimmerman would once again be asked to help. This time he said yes (Zimmerman 317). Providing the food to the Indians would put them in a commanding position and providing it via air support would minimize the risk to Zimmerman. He also knew Americans would support the humanitarian cause, making it difficult for the government to prosecute him (Zimmerman 317). There was enough going on his side for Zimmerman to once again not fear arrest or personal harm.

Zimmerman built support, drew in other pilots who were willing to fly as well, and came up with a working plan. The support event for Wounded Knee was a large-scale effort that combined all of Zimmerman’s past experiences to successfully provide food for Native American protesters and publicly stand in the way of the American government. The acts of the U.S. government at Wounded Knee were eerily similar to the acts of the U.S. government in Vietnam. They were starving out the Native Americans, treating them like they were less than human, and the same was being done overseas to the Vietnamese. This is what drew Zimmerman to participate in the airlift support. He had long ago realized that there was work to do at home just as there was

work to do abroad. While the events at Wounded Knee did not directly connect to the war in Vietnam, Zimmerman believed the two were correlated.

Part IV

A final event Zimmerman describes in the last few chapters of *Troublemaker* culminates his previous antiwar efforts, similarly to how Wounded Knee combined all of his past activist experience. The Vietnam War was dragging on and support for the war was dropping. Seeing the decline in public opinion, Zimmerman recognized that Congress – which represents the public opinion – was the entry into stopping the war. American ground combat had already ended but the United States was still sending support financially to the South Vietnamese. Congress, through the power of the purse, could cut off President Nixon's war power with a single bill (Zimmerman 358). The path to doing that meant abandoning the idea of a revolution and moving to working within the system as political lobbyists.

It would not be easy to take a movement based on revolution and defiance and turn it into a Congressional lobby machine, which Zimmerman realized. He also realized, however, that his team was not amateurs and had many years of experience with the antiwar movement. They created three goals to lobby in Congress: first, stop the bombing in Cambodia; second, release the prisoners in Vietnam; and third, bring down the corrupt regime in South Vietnam (Zimmerman 359). One by one, these goals were achieved through active lobbying and mounds of pressure applied by Zimmerman's team of former revolutionaries turned lobbyists. The pressure already on the Nixon administration due to the Watergate scandal helped and meant Congress was more willingly to respond positively to the lobbying to spite Nixon (Zimmerman 360).

Zimmerman's work with Congressional lobbying was significant in that it changed his views once again. He had previously shifted his views to a more radical ideology but was now shifting back to a more conventional approach within the system. He won victories in the antiwar movement not with protests and defiance but with focused work in the established system (Zimmerman 369). Zimmerman continued to believe that revolutionary change for social or political ideas could not be achieved through lobbying within the system, but also now believed that there was no strategy that could succeed in creating that transformation (Zimmerman 370). The movement, thanks in large part to Zimmerman's own efforts, had won great battles and ended the war.

Conclusion

The antiwar movement and more specifically Zimmerman's role in it brought down two presidents – Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. One chose to not seek reelection and one resigned while in office. For years, the movement fought against Vietnam while the activists, including Zimmerman, dedicated a large part of their lives to the cause. Zimmerman gave up a career in academia to be a full time activist, despite spending years on his doctorate and making important scientific discoveries. Since the Sixties and Seventies, Zimmerman has continued to be an activist for causes he supports and uses his experiences in the past to improve his support today. He has spent a lifetime, as he would say, causing trouble but he has also made a real impact on American history.

References

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