

# From Tree-Hugger to Terrorist

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Critter glares at me across an empty table. “I’m sorry you’ve come all this way,” he says. Critter, whose legal name is Craig Marshall, is an intense young man with short-trimmed hair, a scraggly beard and flared side chops that give him the look of a singer in a rockabilly band. He is a vegetarian anarchist who spent several months living nearly 200 feet up a Douglas fir to prevent it from being cut down. Now he sits in an interview room at the Snake River Correctional Institution in the eastern Oregon desert. I’ve come to talk to him about crossing lines. If he’ll talk.

“Corporate media protects corporate interests,” he tells me. “You’ll probably use inflammatory quotes and say I’m some crazy son of a bitch,” he says.

Critter isn’t crazy, but he is a rare specimen. Using the F.B.I.’s definition of the term, Critter is a domestic terrorist. Almost two years ago, he and an accomplice were caught after they firebombed a Chevrolet dealership in Eugene, Ore. He says he did it to punish carmakers and consumers for their love affair with the gas-hogging S.U.V. Although the pair never claimed the bombing on behalf of the Earth Liberation Front (E.L.F.) — the eco-terror group that has inflicted, along with its ally the Animal Liberation Front (A.L.F.), more than \$43 million in damage on farmers, scientists, foresters, universities, housing developers and business owners — their crime fit the profile of a classic E.L.F. action. Critter, 28, pleaded guilty and got five and a half years. His accomplice, a quiet 22-year-old forest advocate named Jeffrey Luers, aka Free, went to trial and was rewarded with 22 years and 8 months, the longest sentence ever handed down in an eco-terror case.

Much of America’s political conversation since Sept. 11 has focused on the definition of borders, of lines crossed. At what point does a devoted student of Islam volunteer to become a mass murderer? When does legal political protest become terrorism? As one of the few environmental advocates convicted of an eco-terror crime, Critter knows what it is to move across the boundary that separates the peaceful tree-sitter from the violent firebomber.

Once he agrees to talk, Critter settles into a discussion of the revolution necessary to save a doomed planet. He describes the radical environmental circles in which he traveled as a tight-lipped culture that recognizes arson as a legitimate act of political protest. “It takes all the tools in the toolbox to dismantle the master’s machine,” he says. “More passive people do tree-sits. More active people are comfortable risking their well-being. There’s a line a lot of people are not willing to cross. I was willing to cross it.”

But why — and why now? In some respects, we live in a golden age of ecological awareness. More Americans identify themselves as environmentalists now than at any time in the nation’s history. Recycling programs, a radical notion 30 years ago, have become commonplace. Organic grocers thrive.

We also find ourselves in a singularly bad time to be a terrorist in America. And yet the E.L.F. remains one of the nation’s most active and destructive domestic terrorist organizations. In the weeks after Sept. 11, worldwide revulsion over the terrorist attacks inspired surprising gestures of peace. The Irish Republican Army announced

that it would dismantle its weapons arsenal; Basque separatists made peace overtures. No such pause disrupted the calendar of the E.L.F. On Sept. 16, E.L.F. members ripped up oil-exploration survey markers near Moab, Utah, and left a note telling the company to “drill in hell.” On Oct. 15, an E.L.F. firebomb leveled a United States Bureau of Land Management wild-horse corral 80 miles north of Reno, Nev. On Nov. 6, the police discovered crude E.L.F.-style firebombs set next to two forestry buildings on the Houghton, Mich., campus of Michigan Technical University. The attacks have continued in 2002. On Jan. 26, an E.L.F.-claimed fire damaged a construction site at the University of Minnesota, where a plant-genetics research center was being built.

The audacious timing of the E.L.F.’s crime spree surprised terrorism scholars, who worry that the forest monkey-wrenchers may be growing into a classic revolutionary organization.

“I’m afraid these people might be the real anarchists,” says Gary R. Perlstein, a Portland State University criminologist who has tracked the E.L.F. since its inception. “Not just the talkers, but the bomb throwers and assassins.”

There are now Web sites, videotapes and quarterly zines dedicated to the E.L.F.’s increasingly violent actions. F.B.I. agents and federal prosecutors have been able to arrest only a few of its members. And as the group widens its targets and increases the violence of its attacks, experts are wondering what further boundaries the group’s supporters are willing to cross. What happens when the E.L.F. realizes that firebombs aren’t getting the job done?

The E.L.F. is actually a British export. In 1992, a handful of environmental advocates in Brighton, England, broke away from Earth First! to form a more radical splinter group, the Earth Liberation Front. The E.L.F.’s members, who referred to themselves as elves, abandoned aboveground politics in favor of direct action. This decoupling allowed Earth First! to concentrate on legitimate mainstream campaigns while the E.L.F. carried out the dirty work of tree spiking, sabotage and arson.

Two years later, Judi Bari, the Northern California Earth First! leader, called for a similar move in the United States. “It’s time,” she wrote in *Earth First! Journal*, “to leave the night work to the elves in the woods.”

The American version of the E.L.F. announced its existence in October 1996 by torching a United States Forest Service truck in Oregon’s heavily logged Willamette National Forest. A few months later, the group declared its alliance with the A.L.F., which had been attacking mink farms and research laboratories since the early 1980’s. “Leave the forests alone,” warned one communiqué, “and no one gets hurt.”

For the next year, the E.L.F. limited its attacks to traditional anti-logging and animal rights targets, burning horse corrals, a meat-packing plant and federal agriculture buildings. In 1998, the group began going after bigger game. E.L.F.-set fires did \$12 million worth of damage to a ski resort in Vail, Colo., and E.L.F. members destroyed the Medford, Ore., office of U.S. Forest Industries, a private timber company.

Into this drama stepped Craig Marshall and Jeffrey Luers. Luers, a child of the Southern California suburbs, became politically active as a teenager when he saw that the

American government was spending billions of dollars on military projects while homeless people went hungry. He wrote to politicians but got form-letter replies. He became a door-to-door canvasser for the Sierra Club but grew disillusioned with the group. In the spring of 1998, at age 19, he hopped a freight train to Eugene and found kinship in the town's thriving anarchist community. One night at Out of the Fog, a funky downtown organic teahouse that serves as the watering hole for Eugene's circle-A crowd, Luers watched a slide show about Warner Creek, a section of the nearby Willamette National Forest that environmental advocates saved from logging by occupying the trees in 1995 and 1996.

"I was like, Wow — here's people that are getting out there, and they're actually stopping logging, they're not lobbying about stopping logging, which is what I'd just been doing for the last seven months," Luers told a reporter for *The Portland Oregonian*. (Luers, who is appealing his sentence, declined to be interviewed for this article.)

A new tree-sit was born that spring. In March 1998, the Forest Service sold the logging rights for a 96-acre section along Fall Creek in the Willamette National Forest, about 35 miles southeast of Eugene, to a local timber company. Critics of the sale charged that the Forest Service had shirked its duty to complete the wildlife surveys that are required under the Northwest Forest Plan. The old-growth and second-growth Douglas firs along Fall Creek are home to the red tree vole, a fir-needle-eating rodent that's a dietary staple of the northern spotted owl, which is still threatened. While mainstream environmental groups sued the Forest Service, a small band of forest advocates blocked the logging road and camped on high-canopy platforms to stop the cut. Luers was among them.

A tree-sit is a cold, harsh, lonely way to save a forest. At Fall Creek, Luers and fellow advocates built plywood-and-tarp dwellings 200 feet up trees they gave names like Happy and Fanghorn. A bucket hanging beneath the platform served as the bathroom.

Craig Marshall joined the sit that fall. An Easterner reared in a small Massachusetts town, Marshall held political beliefs that weren't so much pro-environment as anti-authority. "I never had much use for people telling me what to do," he recalls. "Back in the fifth grade, I was already questioning the Pledge of Allegiance." After hitchhiking to Eugene, Marshall heard about the Fall Creek sit at Out of the Fog and immediately volunteered.

During the warm months, idealistic advocates flocked to Fall Creek from all over the country, drawn to their generation's version of Freedom Summer. Come November, the cold Pacific storms drove away all but a handful of advocates, including Marshall and Luers. Marshall changed his name to Critter. Luers became Free. The two became friends.

When you're living in a tree-sit, there's a lot of time to swap stories of the horrors of industrial forestry in action. And in truth, it's not a pretty sight. The romantic vision of a chain-saw-toting lumberjack bears as much resemblance to mechanized forestry as a pioneer hog farmer to an industrial slaughterhouse. A hydraulic feller buncher, which

looks like a power shovel with claws and saws, can grasp, cut and delimb a Douglas fir in one terrifyingly swift motion.

There's also a lot of time in a tree-sit to consider the great chasm that exists between mainstream eco-consciousness and the dire situation faced by the planet. In the past few years, scientists have issued ever more gloomy warnings about global warming. Biologists tell us we have entered a period of catastrophic species extinction. And when you're out there living as one with the wind, rain, mud, mushrooms and squirrels, it occurs to you that recycling our beer cans just ain't gonna get the job done. So you start to look for ways to shock humanity into action.

"If one in 10 people care about the planet," Marshall says, "that one person has to do 10 times as much as those other 9."

At this point, Marshall and Luers may have begun talking about taking things a step further, but they probably kept their conversations to themselves. "Veteran activists only allow a select few to know about their involvement with the E.L.F./A.L.F.," instructs a security primer posted on several forest-advocacy Web sites. "And those few consist of the cell members who they do the actions with AND NO ONE ELSE!"

The E.L.F. is made up of a series of small cells that remain mostly unaware of one another's identities and plans. In "Igniting the Revolution: An Introduction to the Earth Liberation Front," a \$10 video sold in Portland's counterculture bookshops, Craig Rosebraugh, then the E.L.F.'s spokesman, urges volunteers to start their own units rather than try to join one. "There's no realistic chance of becoming active in an already existing cell," he says. "Take initiative; form your own cell."

Other groups, including the I.R.A., Al Qaeda and right-wing patriot factions, were organized around this leaderless resistance model but never were truly leaderless. Their imagined world ultimately requires a hierarchy. The E.L.F., rooted in a philosophy of anarchist primitivism, dreams of peaceful leaderless tribes living in robust ecosystems. "In a tribe, you take care of each other," Critter says. "There's no need for Big Brother to take care of you."

This is the conundrum of the E.L.F., and the reason the group is so difficult to track or to stop: there is no membership; there are only acts. Anyone can join — tonight — by torching a science lab. Existing cells may applaud your crime but will not contact you. And so law enforcement agencies have found the group impossible to infiltrate. "They know each other and don't tolerate strangers," says Bob Holland, a Eugene, Ore., police detective who has been investigating eco-terror crimes since 1997. "It's not like infiltrating the Mafia, where you can go to Joe Bonanno and say, 'The goodfellas down the street recommended me.' These people are hanging with people they've known for years, and when they decide to do a direct action, they're the only ones talking about it."

Beginning in December 1999, the E.L.F. began directing its firebombs against an array of new and sometimes puzzling targets. Arson fires burned the laboratory offices of researchers studying plant genetics at Michigan State University and the Univer-

sity of Washington. More E.L.F. fires destroyed houses under construction on Long Island and in Bloomington, Ind. E.L.F. members smashed windows at an Old Navy store in Huntington, N.Y., and tried to burn down a Nike outlet in Albertville, Minn. The Republican Party Committee headquarters in Monroe County, Ind., was burned because, according to an E.L.F. communiqué, the party supported the extension of an interstate highway.

What happened? In a word, Seattle. When the antiglobalization movement exploded at the November 1999 World Trade Organization meeting, E.L.F. advocates realized two things. First, violence gets attention. Second, their targets were too limited. After Seattle, the E.L.F. realized that its beef wasn't merely with the Forest Service; the problem was global capitalism itself. Any symbol of that system — a new subdivision, a botany lab, a political clubhouse, a car dealership — became a target.

A year into the Fall Creek sit, Critter began to question the effectiveness of his own limited campaign. While he was saving the tree beneath him, he says, he watched a section of forest across the valley fall to the saw. At the same time, government prosecutors began to squeeze some of the region's prominent radicals. In February 2000, the home and office of Rosebraugh, the E.L.F. spokesman, were raided.

It's difficult to mark the exact moment when a radical advocate chooses to cross the line separating civil disobedience from violent crime. But sometime in May or June 2000, Jeffrey Luers and Craig Marshall decided to take that step. Behind them trailed years of political frustration and legal hassles. Within them burned the conviction that greedy humans were annihilating the natural world. Ahead of them lay Chaos Days 2000.

In the late spring of 2000, a local advocacy group called Eugene Active Existence organized the Seven Week Revolt, a smash-the-state festival to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the city's June 18, 1999, anarchist riot. The days leading up to June 18 were dubbed Chaos Days, and it was during that week that Luers and Marshall came down from the trees to join in the parties and protests. Chanting slogans wasn't enough for them, though.

"I realized that the only way to hurt a corporation is in the wallet," Marshall says. "If you do it hard enough and long enough, they'll go out of business."

They chose a target: Joe Romania Chevrolet, a car dealership at the edge of the University of Oregon campus. To the tree dwellers, Romania's blocklong lineup of \$25,000 trucks and S.U.V.'s symbolized consumer decadence at its worst. "They're gas-guzzling monsters, destroying everything they encounter," Marshall later explained. "They're a status symbol for rich American consumers, who are killing more people on this planet than anyone else."

The elves' weapon of choice remains the firebomb, schematics for which can be downloaded from the E.L.F. Web site. "On a pound-for-pound basis," the anonymous authors explain, "incendiaries can do more damage than explosives against many type [sic] targets if properly used." The 20-page pamphlet includes instructions on creating flake aluminum-sulfur igniters, thermate incendiary devices and homemade napalm. Critter

and Free's devices were crude but effective: gallon milk jugs filled with fuel and stopped with sponge wicks.

Marshall and Luers did their due diligence, observing the rounds of the night watchman. "Precautions were taken to make sure nobody was hurt," Marshall later said. Soon after midnight on June 16, Luers and Marshall parked a borrowed car across the busy boulevard from Joe Romania Chevrolet. They nervously passed a cigarette back and forth. Carrying their sloshing milk jugs, they crossed the street and followed a dark bicycle path to the crowded lot, where they placed the devices under two new Chevy pickups and sparked a Bic lighter to the wicks.

"Down under the truck, my heart is pounding," Luers later recalled in an account written for *Earth First! Journal*. "Wow! I'm really doing this. Why? Then I remember being a kid growing up in Los Angeles, having to stay inside some days because the smog was too bad to go outside. I was 6 [expletive] years old, and I couldn't play outside because the air was hazardous to my health. It has gotten worse since!"

As the fire raged, Marshall and Luers drove to the neighboring town of Springfield. E.L.F. actions are sometimes claimed with spray paint at the scene of the crime or via an anonymous encrypted e-mail message sent to the E.L.F. spokesperson or posted on the E.L.F. Web site, but the truck burners were ambivalent about claiming their action. "I don't know if we would or wouldn't have gotten a communiqué out," Marshall later said. "The point isn't to let people know. The point is to stop it then and there."

What Luers and Marshall didn't know was that undercover cops from the Eugene Police Department had been tailing them all day. Rumors of a big anarchist party had spread through Eugene, and the police were hoping Luers and Marshall would lead them to the clandestine kegger. Although they didn't actually see them set the fires, the police observed them acting suspicious around the dealership. After a dispatcher put out a call about a fire at Joe Romania Chevrolet, the police arrested Luers and Marshall. They never made it to the party.

Marshall pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit arson and unlawful possession of a destructive device and received a five-and-a-half-year sentence. Luers might have gotten a similar sentence, but a police search turned up evidence linking him to an earlier attempted arson. Though Luers denied any connection to the earlier case, he was found guilty of that crime, too, and was sentenced to 22 years and 8 months in state prison.

The story of Critter and Free illustrates the local political and psychological forces that help inspire a single act of eco-terrorism, but there may be larger historical influences at work as well. Consider the idea that eco-terrorists are at least partly driven by the rising and falling fortunes of their cause. Forty years ago, James C. Davies, a political scientist, proposed the J-curve theory of revolution. Uprisings are most likely to occur, Davies said, when a prolonged period of economic and social progress is followed by a short period of sharp reversal.

Christopher Hewitt, a University of Maryland, Baltimore County sociologist who is writing a book about terrorism in America, makes a compelling case for adapting

the J-curve theory to domestic terrorism. “When your hopes have been raised and you feel there’s a chance for victory through legitimate political means, you’d be foolish to resort to terrorism,” Hewitt says. “Terrorism is a high-cost option, a weapon of the weak, a tool of last resort. But if your movement suddenly collapses or suffers political reversals, then some activists will be tempted to go for terrorism.”

Two examples: Many antiwar advocates believed that President Johnson’s decision not to seek a second term in 1968 signaled the end of the Vietnam conflict. When his successor, Richard Nixon, expanded the war, the most radical activists gravitated to the Weather Underground, a group responsible for several high-profile bombings during the 1970’s. Similarly, Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election led anti-abortion advocates to expect the demise of *Roe v. Wade*. But by decade’s end, abortion remained legal, and the tactics of radical activists had escalated from pickets to blockades to bombings. With the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, the hopes raised by Reagan were finally crushed. That’s when abortion doctors started getting assassinated.

The emergence of the E.L.F. fits a disturbingly similar pattern. Environmentalists saw Clinton’s election as the harbinger of a wave of ecological reform. Eight years of a Democratic administration did bring progress: federal agencies were greened up, air and water standards improved and great swaths of wilderness were saved from development. But eco-advocates were so embittered by Clinton’s failure to bring about sweeping change that Al Gore had to fight for the Sierra Club’s endorsement in the 2000 election.

The E.L.F. set off its first major firebomb, in fact, the year after Clinton’s 1995 timber-salvage-rider dispute. The salvage rider made it easy for logging companies to harvest trees they claimed were diseased or damaged. It was a sweet deal for the timber industry, a setback for environmentalists. For hardcore greens it was Clinton’s Judas moment.

Following the slow disenchantment of the Clinton era, radical environmentalists are now faced with George W. Bush, the Texas oilman who wants to pump crude out of the Arctic National Wildlife Preserve, rejects the Kyoto global-warming protocols and offers environmentalists three more years of pro-industry rollbacks. Radical greens find themselves in the same situation abortion foes faced in 1993.

Although the protection of all life remains one of the E.L.F.’s major tenets, some observers wonder if that line will soon be crossed. “Up until now, they haven’t harmed the people they’re trying to harm,” says Gary Perlstein, the domestic-terrorism expert. “When they destroy a tree farm in Clatskanie, Ore., they’re not hurting the Weyerhaeusers of the world. I worry that they’re going to eventually see that. And then the true believers among them may say, ‘Well, maybe we have to assassinate the president of Weyerhaeuser.’”

The E.L.F.’s rhetoric hasn’t gone that far yet, but its supporters describe the war they’re waging in increasingly dire terms. “If someone had their hands around your throat strangling you, would you gather petition signatures to present to them, politely asking them to stop?” asks a recent issue of *Resistance*, a quarterly E.L.F. zine. “Would



you go limp as a symbolic gesture of your noncooperation? Hopefully you would defend yourself by any means necessary.”

I put the question to Craig Marshall: In a perfect world, what would we do to save the earth? “First, knock down all the concrete,” he says. Thinking further, he adds: “The problem is, we’ve gone too far already. There’s no easy solution. For life to survive as we know it, millions of people are going to have to die. It’s sad to say that, but it’s true. Millions of people are already dying — it’s just gonna have to start happening here.”

That’s a pretty chilling statement, I tell him.

“I’m not saying anybody needs to be executed,” he says. “But there’s a need for decreasing the population. Look, I don’t take life. I fight to protect it. I’m doing the best I can to make sure life survives. Not only human life — all the other life that humans are extinguishing.”

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The New York Times, Section 6, Page 56 of the National edition.  
<[nytimes.com/2002/04/07/magazine/from-tree-hugger-to-terrorist.html](http://nytimes.com/2002/04/07/magazine/from-tree-hugger-to-terrorist.html)>

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