

Enemy of the State: The Story of Daniel McGowan

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Growing up in New York City, Daniel McGowan saw first-hand how pollution fogged the air and fouled the beaches in some of the city's poorest communities, setting him on a lifelong path of environmental and social justice. But how he ended up drenched in gasoline and setting fire to Oregon's Jefferson Poplar Farms in 2001 and was later targeted as a "domestic terrorist" is the story of someone who cared too much and didn't know what else to do.

Born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens' Rockaway Beach, Daniel McGowan grew up sandwiched between asphalt and the sky, in a forest of buildings and buzzing streets. Until Dec. 7, 2005, the 33-year-old with a round face and a chipmunk smile was mostly known in local circles for his involvement in a variety of activist projects. Today, after a nearly two-year legal battle that saw him labeled an "eco-terrorist" by the U.S. government, McGowan is serving a seven-year sentence at a federal prison in Minnesota on 15 counts of arson, attempted arson and conspiracy to commit arson against two private companies in Oregon in 2001.

McGowan, whose arrest shocked his family and friends, and his case was lumped together with nine others as part of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Operation Backfire, which produced 65 indictments for actions at 17 targets, including private companies, universities and government facilities across five states from 1996-2001, in what the FBI called a "campaign of domestic terrorism." The actions were all claimed by the Environmental Liberation Front (ELF) or the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), an underground, decentralized movement of radical environmentalists, which McGowan participated in between 1999 and 2001 while living in Eugene, Oregon.

"At a certain point, I got involved in the ELF," McGowan told The Independent at his Brooklyn home in June, a few weeks before reporting to prison. "At the time it seemed like a natural progression, but it also coincided with my increasing grief and rage I was feeling about the environmental destruction I saw. I went to Oregon and I couldn't believe how okay people were with what was going on. We'd drive to the edge of town and you saw the logging mills, or you went into the forest and stumbled upon a clear cut. It just blew me away. I had to find a way to channel that grief and rage." The dilemma McGowan faced has troubled activists for generations. When you try every form of "acceptable" advocacy to make change with little success, what do you do?

"A Campaign of Domestic Terrorism" In the middle of the night on May 21, 2001, McGowan found himself in the vehicle shop of Jefferson Poplar Farms in Clatskanie, a small town in northwest Oregon on the Columbia River. He had just finished laying out soaked gasoline sheets and towels connected to a homemade incendiary device, designed to set fire to a fleet of SUVs and the company office. The privately owned facility had been selected as an ELF target because McGowan and his accomplices believed it was involved in genetic research by growing a hybrid variety of poplar-cottonwood trees that would help timber companies replace the region's old-growth forests with commercial tree farms.

“We torched Jefferson Poplar because hybrid poplars are an ecological nightmare threatening native biodiversity in the ecosystem,” the saboteurs wrote in a communique that was released after the action. “Our forests are being liquidated and replaced with mono-cultured tree farms so greedy, earth-raping corporations can make more money.”

“At some level, I thought it [ELF actions] was effective,” McGowan said. “If I would have written a statement that I think genetic-engineered trees are bad and oldgrowth logging is bad and sent it to every media outlet in the country, it wouldn’t have been paid attention to,” he explained. “There is something really strange about when you attach a statement to an arson it suddenly becomes newsworthy ... it is like propaganda with teeth.”

For McGowan, the actions were part of his search for the right mix of tactics to make positive change.

“For me, the actions were not grotesque or not about destroying things. I had a hard time getting into the mind set to destroy other people’s stuff or even living [genetically modified] organisms,” he said. “I would get sick before actions, get nervous — it was really difficult. But I did it because I felt that the other things weren’t working, and that while there was a preponderance of other tactics being tried, these tactics weren’t being tried and I thought that maybe there is something we can do to help the issue.”

Between 1996 and 2001, an underground cell of activists based in Eugene, Oregon, called “the Family” in government documents, targeted federal and university research facilities, meat and lumber companies, a car dealership, wild horse corrals and other “earth rapers,” as described by communiqués released at the time.

According to the FBI, the string of highprofile actions that hit 17 targets in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1990s caused nearly \$80 million in property damage. These actions are only a few of the more than 600 incidents claimed by the ELF and ALF nationwide since 1996. “I think that’s really what all these actions are about — is really getting public attention to some of these issues,” said Jim Flynn, a Eugene-based environmentalist in a July 2007 USA Today article. “If we were able to affect policy change through more legal means, then certainly that’s the way these people would go. Nobody enjoys being underground, and that lifestyle.”

Growing Up in Queens

McGowan’s understanding of environmental injustice began long before he left New York for the Pacific Northwest.

“I grew up on a peninsula so I had a beach and a bay and could do a lot more exploring and surfing,” said McGowan, the youngest of four children. “I remember as a kid they tested the hair of the surfers. They were telling us to get out of the water and stop surfing because of the contamination.” McGowan remembers how his favorite surfing spots were contaminated with green slime from algae blooms and by the offshore dumping of medical waste. “There were hypodermic needles showing up on

the water in Rockaway. It left a really big impression on me how poor neighborhoods get the lion's share of pollution. I didn't need an environmental textbook to tell me that."

Within months of graduating from SUNY-Buffalo in 1996, the 23-year-old McGowan went to work with a variety of environmental organizations in New York on issues related to national forest protection, rainforest conservation, the rights of indigenous people and genetically modified organism research. "I engaged in the 'representative democracy' kind of activism, but my heart was never in it," McGowan said.

Journey to the West Coast

In the mid-1990s on the other side of the country, forms of more radical environmental direct action were surging. In 1995, a group of environmental activists began a year-long-occupation in Oregon's Willamette National Forest, setting up tree-sits, road blockades and declaring the forests of the Pacific Northwest an independent "bio-region," which they called Cascadia Free State. At a time when the anti-corporate globalization movement was reaching its zenith, the environmental movement attracted anarchists and ecowarriors, including McGowan, who moved to the Pacific Northwest in 1998 and eventually ended up in Eugene, where he would meet eco-activists who were already engaged in acts of sabotage.

Over the course of several years in the late 1990s, McGowan participated in dozens of direct actions and acts of property destruction against genetically modified research facilities in California and Oregon with several underground groups, many of which had remained secret until his plea agreement.

"I thought, 'Here I am, a college-educated white guy in my early 20s who has a lot of skills and a lot to offer. If anyone should be doing these types of more militant actions, it should be me,'" McGowan said. "At the very least, I thought, 'What if our actions give a brief reprieve for the forest, what if it slows down logging for a month. Is that worth while?'"

Inside the Dagnet

On Dec. 7, 2005, when the six initial Operation Backfire arrests took place, McGowan was taken in to custody at his job at Women's Law, a Brooklyn non-profit that helps victims of domestic abuse. "When I was arrested, I was absolutely petrified. I was sitting at work, it was close to Christmas time and we were sending out our holiday cards," McGowan recalled. "I had just shot an email to a friend and looked up and there were three guys there with my co-worker. They asked, 'Are you Daniel McGowan?' as they closed the gap between me and them really fast. Then they said,

‘You’re under arrest and you’re going back to Oregon.’ And before I knew it I was cuffed.”

While McGowan awaited a bail hearing in Oregon’s Lane County Jail on Jan. 20, 2006, the gravity of his situation sunk in when he saw Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales and FBI Director Robert Mueller on the news touting the arrests as a major victory against “eco-terrorism,” which the government called the leading domestic terrorist threat.

“The indictment tells a story of four and-a-half years of arson, vandalism, violence, and destruction claimed to have been executed on behalf of the Animal Liberation Front or Earth Liberation Front — extremist movements known to support acts of domestic terrorism,” Attorney General Gonzales said.

Upon his arrest, the government threatened McGowan with a maximum 335-year sentence. After much legal maneuvering, McGowan and three other co-defendants accepted a guilty pleas last November in which they took responsibility for their own crimes but were not required to inform on anyone else. Although not formally charged with “terrorism,” McGowan eventually would receive a “terrorism enhancement” in May 2007, a tool judges can use to increase the defendant’s sentence. The government argued for the enhancement on the grounds that the Jefferson Poplar arson was an attempt by the defendants “to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion.”

McGowan’s Double Existence His brief interaction with flame and fury at Jefferson Poplar Farms was a defining moment for McGowan. “I don’t know if it was the gasoline fumes that overwhelmed me or just the gravity of the situation, but I was standing there going, ‘Whoa. What am I doing? I am drenched in gasoline and we are about to burn 13 huge SUVs. I thought, this isn’t right, this is not it.’ But I finished what I was doing and went back to Eugene. I felt that I needed to think about what I just did.”

After the arsons, McGowan was beset by doubts about his “double existence.” “It was like torching a candle on both ends,” he said. “The strain of living two lives, of having people involved in your life that didn’t know things, having to live with the secrecy and having to compartmentalize your life ... was just too much.” Later, he visited friends in British Columbia who were working with the indigenous Nuxalk Nation on environmental justice issues.

“It became very obvious to me that there were better ways of doing things and engaging that do not involve destruction,” he said of his four-month visit. After briefly returning to Eugene in 2002, McGowan visited New York for his sister Lisa’s 35th birthday, where he met his future wife Jenny Synan. Upon permanently returning to New York soon after, McGowan’s double life continued in a different form as new friends and acquaintances who organized with him came to know him as “Jamie Moran.”

Transformed by his experiences, McGowan participated in a number of above-ground efforts including running one of the main protest websites in the run-up to the 2004 Republican National Convention and helping to organize neighborhood military counter-recruiting protests, computer recycling and “Really, Really Free Markets,”

the open-air equivalent of a flea market without pricetags where participants offer everything they bring for free.

“We don’t draw lines between our friendship and our activism,” said Sean Flaherty, a good friend of McGowan who is active with his prisoner support. “Daniel has an endless stream of energy when he feels compassionate about something and he puts his entire heart was in to it. He is motivated by love, even if his tactics can be easily misunderstood.”

Looking Ahead

After doing seven years of prisoner support for his friend Jeff Luers, who was sentenced to 22 years and 8 months for setting fire to three SUVs in Eugene in 2000, McGowan finds himself the recipient of similar aid as he begins his sentence.

“I’m pretty convinced at this point, nearly 20 months after my arrest, that I am incredibly lucky to have the best support network I have ever seen,” McGowan wrote from prison July 23. “That intense support — moral, legal, financial and otherwise — has made all the difference to me and it’s why I write today with acceptance of my current situation and with clear conscience.” From behind bars, McGowan plans to complete a two-year self-created master’s program in Environmental Sociology from Antioch University.

“It’s hard breaking through the perception of prison,” said Synan, after watering her backyard garden, a chore McGowan used to do.

“People watch Law and Order and see that bad guys go to prison. But I would like people to know that there are a lot of good people in prison. That does not make you a bad or worthless person. And it shouldn’t silence your voice.”

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