



Protest on Trial: The Seattle 7 Conspiracy

Kit Bakke

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Americans who were of age in 1969–70 will remember the Chicago 7 trial of high-profile antiwar dissidents. Less familiar are the Seattle 7.

In Seattle, a rally in support of the Chicago 7 defendants by the activist group SLF (the Seattle Liberation Front) became violent and led to federal charges against eight members, one of whom went underground. The raucous trial ended with an “unexpected judicial bang” and with repercussions and implications for the role of dissent in a modern democracy.

Bakke, a Seattle native and former activist, draws from interviews, court documents, and published materials and provides many photographs, documents, and courtroom drawings. She profiles the defendants, attorneys, law enforcement personnel, and other relevant citizens, and renders and interprets events in and out of the courtroom.

Her research shows that the SLF, called “as dangerous as Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Davis” by the FBI’s prosecuting attorney, was little more than a loosely organized service organization that gathered petitions and circulated antiestablishment materials. She contrasts their methods with the violent aggression of the Weathermen Underground.

While arguing the SLF’s democratic leanings, Bakke exposes the weaknesses in the FBI’s case and its often-illegal tactics of “attrition and distraction” in the attempt to “dismantle the group’s forward progress” by, among other things, arresting its leaders. At the same time, she acknowledges that the unconventional appearance, outspokenness, and disruptive courtroom antics of the Seattle 7 defendants and their supporters “created antagonism” in judge and jury.

Although progress never comes in leaps and bounds, dissenters are “a necessary minority,” says Bakke. Her study of the errors and ideals of Vietnam-era dissent should be informative to those who are calling attention to today’s injustices.

JOE TAYLOR (March/April 2018)

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