

Clearing the Ayers

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GAIL COLLINS

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Finally this week, the two men did meet in a town-hall showdown, which turned out to be like all other debates, except with much less excitement and much more pacing around. It seems unlikely that many people switched off their TV sets and said: "Gee, I could sit through a dozen of these."

McCain may feel compelled to go back to his guilt-by-association theme. And this has me feeling very guilty about my associates.

The McCain folks have been obsessed with William Ayers, a neighbor of Obama's who is a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Back in the 1960s, Ayers and his wife, Bernardine Dohrn, were leaders of the Weather Underground, an antiwar group whose penchant for violence was exceeded only by its haplessness. Ayers has since become an education expert and was named Chicago's Citizen of the Year in 1997. He gave Obama a house party when Obama was running for the State Senate.

In my experience, most State Senate hopefuls are so thrilled at any sign of interest that they would happily attend a reception given by a homeless couple in their cardboard box. But even though Obama was 8 years old at the time the Weathermen were in the news, that house party puts all their misdeeds on his platter. Sarah Palin has been telling her increasingly scary rallies that he is somebody "who sees America as imperfect enough to pal around with terrorists."

Fox News, in a one-hour special on Obama's associates hosted by Sean Hannity, came up with an "Internet journalist" named Andy Martin who has spent his life running bizarre political campaigns with occasional detours into the clink and filing lawsuits laced with paranoia and anti-Semitism. Based on this expertise, Martin deduced that Ayers was the puppet master of Obama's rise in politics and that Obama's community-organizer gig was actually training for "a radical overthrow of the government."

Before we go any further, I have a confession to make. When I was a college student, I believe I attended a party with Bernardine Dohrn. This was pre-Weather, when Dohrn was a leader of the Students for a Democratic Society, better known as S.D.S. Some of my friends wanted to meet her because they were interested in establishing an S.D.S. chapter at our campus. I was opposed, under the presumption that S.D.S. meant Students for Decent Styles, a group that had been active in fighting spaghetti-strap dresses at my high school.

Still, under the new rules, I believe I may now be held partly responsible for all of Dohrn's misdeeds, including aggravated battery, bail jumping, the Days of Rage and unreadable political tracts.

McCain's favorite supporter, Senator Joseph Lieberman, recently called the Obama-Ayers connection "fair game." This reminded me that Lieberman once came to a party at my house. It was years ago, when he was still a Connecticut state senator, and we have already established that state senators will go to anything. Still, I can't help but feel that I am not only a potential victim of the new guilt-by-association standard, I am also somewhat complicit in establishing it.

Obama's retaliation for the Ayers assault has been to remind voters that many years ago McCain was censured in the Senate for his relationship with Charles Keating, the rogue banker whose failed Lincoln Savings and Loan cost the taxpayers \$2.6 billion at a time when \$2.6 billion was really worth something.

When I was a teenager, Keating came to my Catholic girls high school in Cincinnati in his capacity as the founder of Citizens for Decent Literature, an anti-pornography group. His theme was the evil of wearing shorts in the summertime.

Keating said he knew a young mother who took her child for a walk while wearing Bermuda shorts. A motorist,

overwhelmed with lust at the sight of the back of her uncovered calves, lost control of his car and slammed into them. Everybody was killed, and it was all her fault. We were then asked to sign pledge cards promising to conform to standards of modesty that would have satisfied the Taliban.

True, none of this really proves that I was responsible for the banking scandals of the 1980s. But if Barack Obama is responsible for the Weather Underground, and if the mother in Bermuda shorts was responsible for the car crash, I am pretty sure that I am on the hook as well.

Gail Collins joined the New York Times in 1995 as a member of the editorial board and later as an op-ed columnist. In 2001 she became the first woman ever appointed editor of the Times editorial page.