

## **Judi Bari Survives Character Assassination**

By Kelpie Wilson

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**Some women are so strong you have to kill them three times to make sure they stay dead.** I remember the first time they tried to kill Judi Bari in 1990:

I was sitting on the deck enjoying the spring sunshine on the first morning of leisure I'd had in months - we had just wrapped up the signature campaign to get the Forests Forever sustainable logging initiative on the California ballot - when the phone rang. It was Betty Ball from the Mendocino Environmental Center in Ukiah telling me that Judi's car had been bombed and she was in the hospital in Oakland.

My first call was to the Seeds of Peace collective house. A stranger answered the phone. "Do you know what happened to Judi and Darryl?" I asked. "Yeah, I heard they blew themselves up," he replied, and that's when I knew I was talking to a cop who was in the middle of ransacking my friends' home.

I had been at the Seeds house the night before along with Judi and a dozen other people, finalizing our schedule for the Redwood Summer action campaign. We planned to host several thousand activists from all over the country in a summer of non-violent protest actions against the logging of ancient redwoods.

The bomb had been placed under the driver's seat of Judi's car and went off when she hit the brakes in the middle of an Oakland traffic jam. Over the next few weeks, while Judi lay in the hospital with a fractured pelvis and ruptured nerves, the FBI and Oakland police charged her with transporting a bomb and began to investigate her and her associates for possession of bomb-making materials. No evidence was found, and eventually the charges were dropped, but the FBI never broadened their investigation to include real suspects like the timber industry and an anti-abortion fanatic who sent a letter claiming responsibility (the "Lord's Avenger" letter).

Judi survived the bombing, famously quipping: "They blew up the wrong end of me," meaning her pelvis and not her mouth.

Judi continued her work as a leader in both the ecology and labor movements, but she was in constant and excruciating pain. Still, she wanted very much to live, to see her children grow up, to win more battles for the redwoods and to prevail in the lawsuit she was bringing against the FBI for falsely accusing her of carrying a bomb.

Judi died in 1997 of a sudden and aggressive cancer. A dedicated team of friends and supporters carried on the lawsuit and in 2002 they won an historic judgment of \$4.4 million against the FBI and Oakland police for violating the civil rights of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney. The bulk of the jury's damage award was for the First Amendment violation of framing the pair as violent terrorists, effectively silencing their free speech and political organizing in defense of the forests.

**The latest attempt to smear and silence the voice of Judi Bari** comes in the form of a supposed biography by neocon writer Kate Coleman titled *The Secret Wars of Judi Bari*.

The Judi Bari that Kate Coleman creates in the pages of her book is not a person whom I recognize. The book has plenty of color and detail that rings true, but that's because so much has been written about Judi and by Judi herself that documents the Earth First! movement and Judi's role in it. Coleman had mountains of already published material to lift from and she used it to construct a myth based on a template provided by her publisher, the right-wing Encounter Books headed by neocons Peter Collier and David Horowitz.

Encounter Books is a project of Encounter for Culture and Education, a tax exempt, non-profit corporation that is part of that well-funded conservative intellectual think tank establishment we are always hearing about. According to the Center for Media and Democracy, the Encounter for Culture Foundation received over \$4.6 million from right wing funders like the Bradley Foundation between 1991 and 2002. Its books include an attack on Title IX funding for women's sports and a hit piece on Hillary Clinton called *The Hillary Trap*, where pundit Laura Ingraham warns that Hillary is a pathetic victim and a terrible women's role model because she did not leave her husband over his adultery. One Amazon.com reviewer called the book "character assassination."

**Character assassination is the best description of Coleman's work on Judi Bari.** To call Coleman Judi Bari's "biographer" is an insult to any genuine biographer. You could call her a collage artist because that is what she does, snipping and ripping bits out of Judi's life and pasting them into a new picture, adding ugly embroidery of her own design. The palette of colors is there, but the portrait is defaced.

Coleman has morphed a funny, smart, loving, creative and sometimes temperamental and egotistical activist into a pathetic victim of domestic violence who attempted to take out a contract on her ex-husband's life and whose rigid ideology inclined her toward violence. This is an utterly false picture and it is suspiciously similar to the picture that the FBI tried to paint of her as an eco-terrorist.

Coleman never met Judi Bari. She never contacted or spoke to most of Bari's close associates. Instead, as primary sources, she chose to publish a number of outright lies from four avowed enemies of Judi Bari, a boatload of not-so-swift-veterans of the Mendocino Timber Wars.

One of these persons, source of the allegation that Judi sought to kill her ex-husband, is Irv Sutley, an unstable character who, also without evidence, accused the same ex-husband of planting the bomb in Judi's car. Both Judi and journalist Steve Talbot were convinced that Sutley was a police agent, possibly working for the FBI. The other three are profiled on a web site ([www.colemanhoax.com](http://www.colemanhoax.com)) that friends and associates have set up to document the lies and errors in the Coleman book.

Judi's long time friend Betty Ball said: "It's absurd that such a lie-filled book could be published when there's so much information readily available to expose it."

**When not promoting outright lies, Coleman turns to distortion and innuendo.** Here's an example of her method:

"Potential violence against Bari and Cherney was implied in the threats they were now receiving in letters and in flyers, about which they complained loudly, but without ever acknowledging that their provocative utterances and publications only intensified the climate of hostility. In fact, Cherney had put out his own not-so-veiled death warrant against Maxxam's Charles Hurwitz." (The Secret Wars of Judi Bari, p 137-8)

This paragraph accomplishes three things. First it lies about Darryl Cherney's Charles Hurwitz poster. The poster offered a "\$50,000 reward for information leading to the arrest, conviction and jailing of corporate raider Charles Hurwitz." Veiled or unveiled, this is not a death threat.

Second, it trivializes the real death threats that Judi was receiving that included things like a picture of her in crosshair sights, a dead cat on her doorstep and numerous letters promising to kill or rape her.

Third, it says that the death threats were justified because of Bari and Cherney's "provocative utterances." These provocative words, Coleman implies, were tit-for-tat threats of violence, which is untrue. Bari and Cherney had real critiques of corporate crime and government policies. They delighted in their lampoons but never threatened anyone with physical harm. To say they deserved it or brought it upon themselves is to say that free speech deserves no protection when it provokes and annoys.

Fortunately, a real biography of Judi Bari is forthcoming from Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Susan Faludi. Judi's own book, *Timber Wars*, is available from Common Courage Press.

**Judi Bari's reputation will survive this latest assassination attempt**, but it's important to ask why she is still being targeted. The answer is because, like Hillary Clinton, she was and still is a powerful role model for women.

Judi was articulate and smart. She was extremely effective as an organizer and pioneered the effort to bring labor unions and environmentalists together. She was outspokenly pro-choice. But the number one reason to target her is because she showed no fear and never backed down an inch. That is also the reason why she won the admiration of activists all over the world.

As activists we need and deserve our heroes. As realists we know that they have feet of clay, but that only endears them to us more because we recognize that the real hero is the community and we are all a part of it.

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