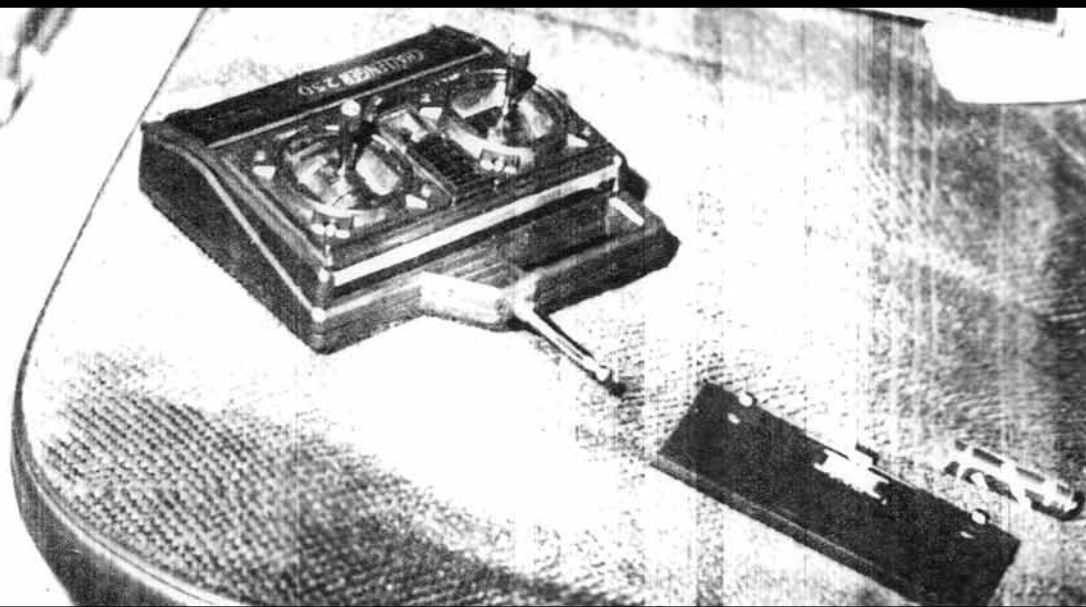




Making an Animal Rights “Terrorist”

Corporate provocateurs turned Fran Trutt into an “animal rights terrorist.” Twenty years later, their tactics haven’t changed.

by Will Potter



Police photo from the time of Fran Trutt’s arrest.

Shortly after midnight on November 11th, 1988, Fran Trutt exited the passenger side of a rented Chevy pickup and approached the headquarters of U.S. Surgical with a package. She still had doubts about the evening. The day before, as she prepared for the trip to Norwalk, Connecticut, from her home in Queens, New York, she called a friend three times. She had cold feet. Could she go through with this? Was it taking things too far? What if someone got hurt? No, no, the voice on the phone reassured her. Remember the dogs.

U.S. Surgical had become the nation’s largest supplier of surgical staplers, a speedier alternative to stitches. The company used about 1,000 dogs each year in training doctors to use the product, stapling dogs and then killing them. Behind the invention of the surgical stapler, the rise of U.S. Surgical to a \$1 billion company, and the deaths of tens of thousands of dogs was the CEO, Leon Hirsch.

To Trutt, Hirsch murdered the only creatures who seemed to understand her. She was a loner and uncomfortable around people, neighbors said. But dogs were different, especially the four she called her “babies.” She felt a special kinship with them. To Trutt, the dogs were unconditionally loving and affectionate. To Trutt, Hirsch was unconditionally evil.

She placed the package in some bushes about ten feet from where Hirsch would park his car the next morning. Inside the package, a foot-long radio controlled pipe bomb had been wrapped in roofing nails. Maybe Trutt still had doubts as she hid the package and then turned back to her waiting driver. By the time she reached the truck, though, it was too late for second thoughts.

Fran Trutt had been set up. U.S. Surgical, the press and most animal rights groups, would soon condemn her as a violent extremist. But over the coming months it would be revealed that the plot—the only act of attempted murder in the history of the U.S. animal rights movement—had not been an organic occurrence.

The money for the bomb, the truck, the logistics, the encouragement—U.S. Surgical and a “counter-terrorism” firm had been orchestrating it all.

Hired Guns

When Trutt returned to the truck, police moved in. They arrested her and found a radio-controlled detonator. They also arrested her driver, 30-year-old Marc Mead.

That afternoon, New York City police and bomb squad searched Trutt’s basement apartment in Queens and found a sawed-off shotgun, another weapon they described as a hybrid of a bazooka and a shotgun, and two more homemade bombs. The bombs were made of M-80s—large firecrackers—wrapped with nails and BB pellets, and stuffed into 3-by-6 inch pieces of standard plumbing

pipes. One had a fuse, and one had a radio. Trutt had few other possessions, not even a telephone, but police also found pictures of tortured animals.

Trutt faced two sets of charges. In New York: federal charges of possessing two bombs. In Connecticut: attempted murder, possession of explosives and manufacturing a bomb. The press called the case a thwarted “terrorist” plot. The FBI announced a “terrorism” investigation. News stories said Trutt “may have been supplied with the explosive device by a terrorist group.”

All this talk of terrorism and murder didn’t sit well with Mead, Trutt’s driver. He had been released without charge, but worried that news reports implicated him. Mead, the owner of a window washing company, felt he had to do something to distance himself from this animal rights terrorist. He walked into the newsroom of the *The Westport News* with a press release he wrote—headlined “WINDOW WIZARD THWARTS ASSASSINATION [sic] ATTEMPT— hoping to clear his name.

The local newspaper’s expose, and the national headlines that followed, revealed a long-term plan by U.S. Surgical to infiltrate and disrupt the animal rights movement. To do his dirty work, Hirsch had hired a counter-terrorism firm called Perceptions International. The firm was the brainchild of Jan Reber, a self-styled “terrorism” expert who had experience demonizing animal rights groups: he also published a newsletter called the *Animal Rights Reporter*, a dossier on the activities of animal activists crafted for the vivisection industry.

Perceptions International had hired a woman named Mary Lou Sapone to infiltrate the movement. Sapone met Trutt at a U.S. Surgical demonstration in 1988, and reported back to Perceptions International and U.S. Surgical that Trutt had made threatening comments against Hirsch.

Keep tabs on Trutt, they said. Talk to her. Befriend her. She did, and Trutt opened up about her anger at Hirsch, her sex life, and, of course, her dogs.

Sapone urged Trutt to take action. The spy had already approached other animal activists, saying someone should bomb U.S. Surgical, but they had written her off as a drunk or a lunatic. With Trutt, she found a more receptive audience.

Two months before the night of the bombing, Perceptions International brought Mead into the operation. The firm paid Mead \$500 a week to befriend Trutt. Following Sapone’s lead, he used dogs to do so. He approached her in a pizza parlor, and



asked for advice on finding homes for puppies.

They became friends, talking about animal rights and U.S. Surgical. Mead soon gave Trutt about \$300, which she said was explicitly to be used for hiring two non-activists in New York to make the bomb. Although Mead denies this, and says the money was to help her pay her rent, he admitted that the president of Perceptions International went so far as to tell him when to bring Trutt and the bomb to the U.S. Surgical office.

When Trutt began to lose her nerve en route, she called her friend Mary Lou Sapone.

No Way Out

With evidence of his covert plans mounting, Hirsch finally acknowledged using paid informants. He told the Associated Press that animal rights “terrorists” had left him no choice. “Many of them are very dangerous organizations,” he said. “They don’t believe in right and wrong as most people in society do. They believe that human beings are on the same par as rats and dogs and they are prepared to take violent actions to enforce their beliefs.”

Trutt maintained she never intended to kill Hirsch; she intended to explode the bomb as he walked into the building. “It would have been purposeless to kill him,” she told *The Advocate* of Stamford. “But to scare him at this time might have affected some change.”

Yet the media circus and aggressive prosecution wore her down. On the New York bomb possession charges, she pled guilty and received time served in prison. On the Connecticut murder charges, she agreed to a plea agreement, and then rescinded upon learning she would not be allowed to visit her dogs. Abruptly, in April 1990, she agreed to plead no contest in exchange for one year in prison followed by three years of probation.

“The sex tapes—I think that’s what did it. It was just disgusting,” said John Williams, her attorney. “I have been fearing this from the first day: How long will Fran be able to stand up to this?”

Prosecutors had threatened to introduce tape recordings between Trutt and Sapone, he said. On the tapes, Trutt rails against Hirsch, and also discusses a sexual relationship with a woman.

Even the federal prosecutor in the New York case opposed using the tapes in court. Assistant U.S. Attorney Leslie Caldwell had written a letter to a U.S. District Judge questioning the handling of the case by Connecticut police.

“Like a sports ‘highlight film’ made for the benefit of home team fans, the tape contains many of Trutt’s most menacing and outrageous remarks,” she wrote. “However, it omits the operatives’ goading, encouragement and offers of money.”

Lessons Unlearned

By giving national exposure to so-called “animal rights terrorism,” the foiled plot marked a turning point in the history of the animal rights movement and in the sustained corporate campaign to surveil, disrupt and demonize activists. Trutt’s case should be a reminder of the dangers of jumping to conclusions. It should also be a reminder of the importance of focusing on true enemies, not placing blame. But for some of the activists involved in this scandal, these lessons of terrorist scare mongering have gone unlearned.

Wayne Pacelle, for example, was executive director of the Fund for Animals, which filed a government complaint against U.S. Surgical's experiments. He is now the head of the Humane Society of the United States, the largest animal protection organization in the country.

"[Sapone] was at every meeting of at least three people, always milking people for information," he told the New York Times in 1989. "She served not only as an informant, but as a provocateur, often suggesting illegal activities."

Despite Pacelle's firsthand experience with provocateurs, and firsthand knowledge of the dangers of jumping to conclusions, he has done exactly that in recent months. When a bomb exploded in California at the home of UC researchers, animal activists issued no communiqué or claim of responsibility. Nevertheless, Pacelle and HSUS not only issued media statements condemning underground activists, but also donated \$2,500 to law enforcement for their "eco-terrorism" witch hunt.

Similarly, Friends of Animals led the demonstrations against U.S. Surgical beginning in 1981. Members recalled that Trutt attended at least one of their protests.

"It's a classic frame case," Priscilla Feral, president of the group, told the New York Times. "This is a concerted effort to discredit a movement that is having an effect."

Despite Feral's firsthand experience with corporate smear campaigns, Friends of Animals has repeatedly focused its efforts on discrediting other animal activists. Instead of placing blame for this "Green Scare" on corporations and government agents, Friends of Animals says underground activists have brought these tactics upon themselves.

As Lee Hall of Friends of Animals has written, "government seizes opportunities provided to them by apparently dangerous activists to begin treating all kinds of dissenters as terrorists."

History Repeats Itself

Time and again, these "dangerous activists" are in fact government and corporate creations, the product of cloak and dagger maneuvers to frame individual activists and discredit entire movements. In a contemporary case eerily reminiscent of Trutt's entrapment, an environmental activist named Eric McDavid was recently sentenced to 20 years in prison for "conspiring" to blow up the Nimbus Dam in California.

His Mary Lou Sapone was a young FBI operative named "Anna." McDavid fell in love with Anna. Anna provided McDavid and friends with bomb-making recipes; at times financed their transportation, food and housing; strung along McDavid, who had hopes of a romantic relationship; and poked and prodded the group into action.

While Trutt was sentenced to about one year in prison for attempted murder and possessing bombs, McDavid, who wasn't accused of either—only "conspiracy"—was sentenced to 20. Post-9/11, the tactics of government and corporations haven't changed, but the stakes for activists have clearly risen.

From Bombs to Boards of Directors

The media coverage of Trutt's case, and the role of Perceptions International, seemingly should have ruined Sapone's career as a mole. Instead, she just switched social movements. A 2008 investigation by Mother Jones magazine revealed that Sapone—going by Mary Lou McFate, her maiden name—had been spying for years on gun control groups. She wasn't orchestrating bomb

schemes or murder plots. This time, on the payroll of the National Rifle Association, she was hired to spy on the upper echelons of the mainstream movement.

She posed as a gun-control activist for more than a decade, even landing positions on two boards of directors. As both a local and national activist, she gained access to the internal deliberations, lobbying strategies, media plans, and internal gossip of the entire movement.

Bryan Miller, the executive director of Ceasefire New Jersey, told Mother Jones that Sapone's story "would confirm for me the way that the gun lobby works, which is no rules no question of fairness or honesty. Anything that they can do they would do to protect the profits of the gun industry."

If one substitutes "animal research" for "gun," the story remains the same.

What is the True Threat

The FBI has labeled the animal rights and environmental movements the "number one domestic terrorism threat." But the true threat posed by these movements is not violence. As we saw in the Trutt case, and recently in the McDavid case, the most serious acts of "violence" in the movement have been the work of provocateurs.

These corporations and politicians are not after the Fran Trutts of the movement. They're not after the Animal Liberation Front, Earth Liberation Front, Revolutionary Cells, or any other underground group. The true target of these terrorist witch hunts is not "violent extremists," but the movements themselves.

It's telling that Mary Lou Sapone's career took a drastic turn, from coercing activists into bombings to infiltrating boards of directors. Sapone and the "terrorism" firms she worked for evolved in their understanding of how to squash and repress social movements. Activists must evolve, too.

These corporations and government agents might single out an individual like Fran Trutt in order to make headlines and demonize the movement. But that's merely a single step, a stop along the way to their bigger goal. Infiltrating and sabotaging the activities of grassroots activists and direct action supporters is simply the low hanging fruit. When grasped, these corporations and government agents become bolder and start trying to hack down the entire tree.

Sapone realized this. U.S. Surgical, Perceptions International and the NRA realized this. And until mainstream animal protection and environmental groups realize this, there will be many more Fran Trutts.

Will Potter is an award-winning independent journalist who focuses on how lawmakers and corporations have labeled animal rights and environmental activists as "eco-terrorists." Will has written for publications including The Chicago Tribune, The Dallas Morning News and Legal Affairs, and has testified before the U.S. Congress about his reporting. He is the creator of GreenIsTheNewRed.com, where he reports on the Green Scare and history repeating itself.