In December 2005, Daniel McGowan was arrested by four federal agents in a nationwide sweep of radical environmentalists involved with the Earth Liberation Front, or E.L.F. For years, the E.L.F. had launched spectacular acts of arson against dozens of businesses it accused of destroying the environment, including timber companies, S.U.V. dealerships, wild horse slaughterhouses and a $12 million ski lodge in Vail, Colorado. No one had ever been hurt in any of the fires, but the FBI considered the group the “No. 1 domestic terrorism threat” in the United States, and soon after his arrest, McGowan discovered that the arson carried a sentence of life in prison.

Director Marshall Curry, whose Academy Award®-nominated Street Fight aired on PBS’ POV (Point of View) series in 2005, returns to POV in the 2011 season with If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front on Tuesday, Sept. 13, 2011, at 10 p.m. on PBS. Part coming-of-age story, part cops-and-robbers drama, the film is the remarkable account of McGowan’s involvement with the E.L.F. and the consequences that followed.

POV continues on Tuesdays through Sept. 27 and concludes with special broadcasts on Thursday, Nov. 10, 2011 (Where Soldiers Come From) and winter/spring 2012 (Curry’s Racing Dreams, about three tweens who aspire to race in NASCAR). Now in its 24th season, POV is the winner of a Special Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, an IDA Award for Best Continuing Series and NALIP’s 2011 Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity.

Winner of the U.S. Documentary Editing Award at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, If a Tree Falls is a layered narrative that carefully weaves together a variety of clashing points of view using vérité footage, surprisingly candid interviews and a trove of archival material (much of it never before seen). The result is a nuanced story that asks its audience to wrestle with questions intentionally left unresolved.

The film begins with McGowan in his sister Lisa’s Manhattan apartment, where he has been placed on house arrest as he awaits trial for two arsons that he committed against Oregon timber facilities. With an ankle bracelet monitoring his movement, he contemplates his future and reflects on his past.
On the surface, McGowan is an unlikely revolutionary. He went to Catholic school in Queens, was the son of a New York police officer and was a business major in college. “Growing up, he wasn’t the political kid fighting for anything,” his sister says. “He was just a regular kid.”

That was part of his appeal to director Marshall Curry and cinematographer/co-director Sam Cullman. Curry explains, “I’m always intrigued when reality cuts against my expectations or stereotypes. How did this guy — who could be anyone’s little brother, or employee, or next-door neighbor — wind up facing life in prison for ‘eco-terrorism’?”

McGowan recounts how after college, while working at a New York public relations firm, he discovered the widespread environmental destruction going on around him. That moment, he says, “took the blinders off,” and he leapt into the environmental movement, writing letters, petitioning and then engaging in civil disobedience. When those actions seemed ineffective — and non-violent protests were met by force from law enforcement — he moved on to small acts of property destruction and eventually to arson. As a member of the E.L.F., he took part in two multimillion dollar fires in Oregon — one against a timber company engaged in old-growth logging and the other aimed at a tree farm he believed was involved in genetic engineering projects. But after that second fire, McGowan began to question the use of arson as a tactic.

As the film explores McGowan’s case, other dramatic characters fill out his story and sometimes challenge him: Jake Ferguson, the quiet, charismatic “pirate” who started the E.L.F. in the United States; Suzanne Savoie, McGowan’s ex-girlfriend, who took part in two fires with him; Tim Lewis, an activist/filmmaker who lives in a one-room cabin in the mountains of Oregon and captured on film the environmental movement that spawned the E.L.F.; Greg Harvey, a police detective who describes the day he and his partners broke the case as “one of the best days I’ve ever had”; Kirk Engdall, the assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted the case but by the end of the film holds a nuanced view of the group.

McGowan, like many supporters of the E.L.F., feels conflicted about the fires. On one hand, E.L.F. supporters believe that the group’s actions were following the traditions of the Boston Tea Party: symbolic property destruction designed to draw attention to important issues. But they also recognize the danger and unanticipated consequences of arson and question whether the fires helped the E.L.F. achieve its goals.

McGowan does not feel conflicted about whether the arsons should be considered acts of terrorism. Terrorism, he feels, has become a term that people use to win public relations battles against their political opponents. His sister points out that she witnessed the violence and devastation of 9/11 first hand, and it’s hard to see the same word used to characterize both Al Qaeda and her brother, who took care to make sure that no one was hurt by his actions. Still, the victims of his arsons did feel terrorized by the fires, and one prosecutor says, “You don’t have to be Bonnie and Clyde to be a bank robber, and you don’t have to be Al Qaeda to be a terrorist.”

The distinction between a criminal and a terrorist is a serious one. A federal judge must decide whether to apply “terrorism enhancement” to McGowan’s arson charges, which could translate into McGowan’s being assigned to one of the restrictive terrorist prisons in the United States known as “communication management units.”

It has been said (most famously by Ralph Waldo Emerson) that history is biography writ large. If a Tree Falls explores both an intimate personal biography and the larger political history, shining light on the way that each affected the other. “The goal of the film is to help people understand the emotions and
experiences that led people to do what they did,” says Curry. “To me, films are about stretching us to see the world from a different perspective.

“The film has a point of view, but it is a complex point of view that acknowledges the ethical and legal and emotional complexity of the situation,” Curry continues. “Everyone who knows a lot about this topic — from the E.L.F. members to the people who were chasing them — acknowledges that the deeper you go, the murkier the water gets.”

If a Tree Falls has been praised by the participants on all sides. Former E.L.F. spokesman Leslie James Pickering called it “an honest glimpse into drastically conflicting viewpoints,” and the federal prosecutor who put the E.L.F. members in prison called it “incredibly well balanced and thought provoking. . . . The film remained fair and faithful to all the subjects of the film and clearly demonstrated the complexity of the issues.”

If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front is a co-production of Marshall Curry Productions, LLC and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, in association with Lucky Hat Entertainment, American Documentary | POV and the BBC.

About the Filmmaker:
Marshall Curry (Director, Producer)
Marshall Curry’s Emmy and Oscar®-nominated Street Fight, which he directed, produced, shot and edited, aired on POV in 2005. The film chronicles Cory Booker’s first run for mayor of Newark, N.J. against incumbent Sharpe James and won numerous awards, including Audience Awards at the Tribeca Film Festival, AFI/Discovery SilverDocs and Hot Docs. It also received the Jury Prize for Best International Documentary at Hot Docs and was nominated for a Writers Guild of America Award. In 2005, Filmmaker Magazine selected Curry as one of “25 New Faces of Independent Film,” and he was awarded the International Documentary Association’s Jacqueline Donnet Emerging Documentary Filmmaker Award. In 2007, he received an International Trailblazer Award at MIPDOC in Cannes. His most recent film, Racing Dreams, about kids competing in NASCAR’s “little league,” won numerous awards, including Best Documentary Feature at the Tribeca Film Festival, and will air on POV in winter/spring 2012.

Curry has been a guest lecturer at Harvard, Duke, New York University and other colleges, and he has served on juries for the International Documentary Association, Tribeca Film Festival and Hot Docs. Prior to working as a filmmaker, he taught English in Guanajuato, Mexico, worked in public radio and taught government in Washington, D.C. He is a graduate of Swarthmore College and was a Jane Addams Fellow at The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, where he wrote about the history, philosophy and economics of nonprofits. Curry lives with his wife and children in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Credits:
Director: Marshall Curry
Co-director: Sam Cullman
Producers: Marshall Curry, Sam Cullman
Cinematographer: Sam Cullman
Editors/Writers: Matthew Hamachek, Marshall Curry
Music: James Baxter

Running Time: 86:46

(Journalists please note: When listing director credits, please list Marshall Curry as director and Sam Cullman as co-director; the two are not co-directors.)
POV Series Credits:
Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry
Co-Executive Producer: Cynthia López
Vice President, Production and Programming: Chris White
Series Producer: Yance Ford

Awards and Festivals:
- World Premiere, 2011 Sundance Film Festival — U.S. Documentary Editing Award

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POV’s award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education
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4 of 4