

Brent Turner, the story behind 'The Real Activist'

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The hanging chads in the Bush v. Gore 2000 presidential election was the first bell to signal that all was not right with voting systems in the United States. That same election, another bell rang. This was the butterfly ballot, an idea which caused a number of voters in Palm Beach County, Florida, to mistakenly cast their presidential vote for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan rather than their actual choice, Democrat Al Gore. In the 2004 Bush v. Kerry presidential election, voting problems in Ohio included malfunctioning machines, provisional ballot issues, and undertrained poll workers. In regards to the 2016 presidential election, alarm bells are still clanging as the sweep of Russian influence and hacking is examined. In an August 3, 2017 *New York Times* Op-Ed [article](#), former Central Intelligence Agency director R. James Woolsey Jr. and computer programmer Brian J. Fox, discussed the immediate need of open source software – something already used by the "supercomputers of the Defense Department, NASA and the United States Air Force" – to protect and secure U.S. balloting systems from being hacked.



In 2007, Brent stood in front of SF City Hall, cheered on by onlookers, and began the trial of the Diebold T5, Touch Screen voting machine. The Diebold had horribly flawed technology which provided, among other things, multiple avenues for hackers and no paper. The Diebold was given a guilty verdict and executed by sledgehammer. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZqGz9wJrIQ>.)

"I was 38 when Bush v. Gore happened," former heavy metal rocker Brent Turner said. "I wanted to know, why can't we get a proper vote count? What's going on there? Then in 2003, I ran into the foremost experts in the world regarding election system security."

These foremost experts were part of the 2003-formed nonprofit Open Voting Consortium (OVC), an advocacy group dedicated to the development, maintenance, and delivery of trustable and open voting systems for use in public elections. As OVC needed help with communications, Brent served as communications director.

"Open source software, or 'publicly owned' General Public License software, is defined as software available to public inspection without corporate controls, denoting software for which the original source code is made freely available and may be redistributed and modified," Brent explained. "The advantages are heightened security and cost effectiveness."

"When I started helping this group of election system technologists," Brent laughed, "that is when my life became more surreal. This is because of this issue of election system security and just learning how basically corrupt it is at the top when it comes to voting system technology and why we are using voting systems in the United States that are insecure. Why are we using these? Because companies like Microsoft and those who bob in their wake, as my friend Jim Woolsey says, are blocking the replacement systems because the replacement systems are more secure and less expensive. They don't want the better systems putting a spotlight on the open source software that makes the software they are selling look second rate."

"In the space of election systems, you want an environment where if there is a bug, you can see it. And with a Microsoft or a vendor-controlled system, if there is a bug in there, it lives there without detection and that can corrupt the election process – so we can't have that obviously. The fact that there are better systems available, sitting there not being used because of a business interest or a corporation that may be donating to the politicians controlling the decision-making process, this is the number one civil rights issue of our time."

Since those beginning days of open source involvement, Brent became president of Open Voting Foundation and has become the secretary of NAVO and CAVO – the National Association of Voting Officials and the California Association of Voting Officials. CAVO recognizes "the work by predecessor Open Voting Consortium, and continues to work toward creating funding and resources for the certification and implementation of affordable and secure voting systems that are reliable, trustworthy, more easily auditable, and more convenient to use by voters of all abilities." Brent is also credited with moving San Francisco toward their open source election system project.

Brent tells this interviewer, in answer to a question, that as he has walked this open source journey, "Some pretty unpleasant people have crossed my path, to put it mildly."

"The small circle of do-gooders that we have, are not fear-based," Brent noted. "And now that we are so public, that actually provides a little bit of benefit. If ever there was a potentially vulnerable moment it would have been before we were really recognized publically, because then if we would have been, ah 'eliminated' for lack of a better term," the NAVO/CAVO secretary laughed, "maybe no one would care or know why. Now it is all out in the open."

Brent was given his moniker "The Real Activist" by Debra Bowen. Bowen served as Secretary of State (California) from January 8, 2007 through January 4, 2015. She was succeeded by Alex Padilla and preceded by Bruce McPherson.

"When she named me that, I didn't know what it meant because I didn't know there were fake activists. Come to find out that there are activists that are working the system for fundraising purposes and to generate monies through their 501c3s that aren't really as legitimate as they may purport to be. Once I gained more experience as a full-time activist, it dawned on me what she was saying. There are groups of people, specifically in the election reform community, that are faux activists, professing to be righteous, stand-up-for-the-people types. In actuality, they are playing a game called 'place holding.' This means they are filling the space where an unsuspecting citizen would naturally turn to them for information or relief regarding the subject. But when walking through that door, that citizen would be captured and misdirected and sometimes scammed for their money. Law enforcement friends of mine tell me this is not unique to the election reform arena. It happens with big oil, it happens with homelessness, and it happens with all these real emotional issues where people would naturally – if they thought they were in the company of do-gooders – give them their money." (The real activist notes he does not take a nickel off of anything to do with activism.)

On May 25, 2018, the documentary film "The Real Activist," starring Brent Turner and former CIA director R. James Woolsey, with narration by actor, singer, author and political activist Peter Coyote, is scheduled for release. The film is written by Dayla Soul and Brent Turner and directed by Dayla Soul. A member of the Northern California surfing community, Soul's 2016 debut documentary film *It Ain't Pretty* is a multi-award winning documentary, "about the women who surf big waves at San Francisco's Ocean Beach," and "what

women dream for themselves" and then do. "The Real Activist" is described as: "a documentary tracking the efforts of an election reform activist from Northern California." A historic piece, "it exposes the realities of a David vs. Goliath battle to secure the United States election systems."

"I think if we are going to get other major issues addressed in this country, we have to have proper leadership to address them. And if we are not able to elect proper leaders, then the other issues all suffer. That is why I think this is the number one – above healthcare, above homelessness, above the environment, above civil rights, because we have to get democracy secured and then move forward with proper leadership to attack these other issues which are all ranking and absolutely necessary."

"The Real Activist" turns down roads of intrigue and espionage as it follows Brent's path to securing the election system – and the reality of it all is gripping. But where exactly did Brent's path begin? Who is this guy?

Brent Turner, left, with former Central Intelligence Agency director R. James Woolsey Jr. filming "The Real Activist."



Born in Redwood City and a "proud graduate" of Roy Cloud Elementary School, Brent is the son of the late Morley and Janet Turner. His father primarily was a bankruptcy expert and worked in real estate. Their son noted while his parents both participated in the culture, they were also very counterculture and anti-Vietnam War.

"I was raised in a household where there was a lot of politics. My father and my uncle were working with defendants regarding civil rights. These were folks that had been involved in the Black Panther Movement and Native Americans who had taken a stand at Wounded Knee." (In 1973, following the murder of an Oglala Lakota man, members of the American Indian Movement protested at the South Dakota town of Wounded Knee. The 71-day siege demanded that the U.S. government make good on treaties from the 19th and early 20th centuries.)

John Thorne (1921–2002), Brent's uncle by agreement not blood, was a San Jose-based attorney and activist who specialized in civil rights and constitutional law.

"My uncle was a Democratic Party boss as well as a Black Panther murder trial defense attorney. So often the people he represented were around my house – Angela Davis, Huey Newton, the Soledad Brothers. While I didn't realize it at that time, all that talk settled in me." Brent also noted that legendary activist Tom Hayden credited John Thorne as his main mentor.

Brent said his high school education was a bit more sordid than his earlier school days. In his freshman year he went to four Bay Area high schools including Menlo College Preparatory and Drew College Preparatory. His family relocated to San Francisco when he was 14, then they moved to Bakersfield, California. "My last high school was West High in Bakersfield." At 14, he left home.

"I didn't run away from home," he laughed. "I drove illegally away from home. I needed to. My father wasn't happy with me. So he being who he was, I thought I'd mosey. But that's okay. My parents, both gone now, were good parents. My father left home, well his home left him, when he was 13. He came home from school one day and there was a note on the door that said, 'God will provide.' His family had moved away while he was at school. This was in Long Beach. So in that world, 14 was kind of old to be hanging around the house!

As sometimes happens with boys, we were separated for those years that boys are trying to find themselves a little bit."

Brent had picked up acoustic guitar when he was quite young. At 14, he decided he was going to be a professional musician and got right to it. He played rhythm guitar, electric. "As I was a lyricist and a poet, I thought that would be a good way to get my message regarding politics out."

His dad had always told him, from the time he was little: "You know what you'll be good at kid, real estate and politics. Do that and you'll be fine!"

"Of course," Brent laughed, "by then he had taught me to disavow authority so I did not listen."

The 14-year-old guitarist moved in with a heavy metal band and lived in a meatpacking shed in Bakersfield. At 18, Brent headed to Lincoln Law School in the Bay Area.

"I was a rock 'n' roller but I wanted my law degree because I wanted to make sure that I understood the language of law. I didn't want to be at a deficit when it came to people speaking in a way that I didn't understand. My bright idea for after graduating law school was to open a nightclub."

At 22, the heavy metal, hard rock rhythm guitarist graduated from Lincoln Law School, and at 22, he opened his club in San Francisco.

"This was at 435 Broadway, the On Broadway Theater. I hung a banner that said, 'Rock,' on the sign outside that said, 'On Broadway.' Suddenly it became 'The Rock on Broadway.' It was above the Mubuhay Gardens, a famous punk club, and across from the more famous rock club called The Stone."

Did he have fun?

"It was almost too much fun! The Rock on Broadway was famous unto itself in that it was out of control because there were no rules necessarily. I opened it in 1984 and it went on for about a year. It seemed like a decade. We had three bands a night, six nights a week. I played there sometimes as well. Mainly I used it as a rehearsal space for the band. Then when that ended, I went to Hollywood and took my band with me. The band was Mad Reign. It was a good name and it fit in with our political slant on things. We went to Hollywood and I was there for about 10 years."



You can find Mad Reign online, www.madreign.com. You can also catch a listen to one of their songs on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com). The founding member of Mad Reign, Brent's stage name was Turmoil and he was written up in magazines such as *Hit Parader* and *Kerrang!* as: "a master of the darkened pen."

A Hollywood notable, Brent co-authored tunes with the likes of the late West Arkeen of Guns N' Roses fame. "Turmoil" was famous for smashing his Les Pauls, Melody Makers and Gibson SGs on stage.

"When I first moved to Hollywood, I lived in what was known as the Houdini Mansion. I moved in because that's where all my friends were. In retrospect, it turned out to be quite famous as a Hollywood epicenter."

The 2401 Laurel Canyon Blvd. Mansion was never owned by Houdini, but its longtime storied fame is real and it has seen a lineup of legends including: the Red Hot Chili Peppers, System of a Down, and Marilyn Manson.

Brent left Hollywood in 1995.

"It was after the 1992 riots, after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, and after the passing, in a very small window of time, of my manager, singer, drummer, one guitar player and a few of our roadies."

That happened not long after the band, which had changed its name to Zip-Off Cast, had just completed a CD. The loss was devastating.

"We were notable in the scene for having this tragedy strike. At that point I was ready to leave Hollywood and I got the word from a local DJ at KLOS-FM that even though he enjoyed our work, he thought that the band had run its course. When he said that, even though I had been fighting against it it dawned on me, he was telling the truth."

Brent moved to San Diego to be a civilian. No more bands. He had his real estate license. He had gotten that at 18, the same year he started law school. In addition, in those wild 1980s, he had received a degree in international legal studies from Oxford, through the University of San Diego. "That was to fine tune my knowledge on civil rights." So essentially, while it was a new road in 1995, Brent had options.

Briefly and unplanned, he was pulled into a band. But after the murder of a "civilian" by one of his "roadies" at a band concert, he made the final break – "As they say, 'Art who?'" – and devoted himself completely to real estate. "Genetics," he laughed, noting that he had long since rekindled his relationship with his father who had come around the moment his son headed off to law school.

"I started off with some real estate companies in San Diego and they didn't treat me well until I figured out what was really going on behind the curtain with brokers and companies. Once I got through all those trials and tribulations, I ended up starting my own company in 2001 and built it up to about 30 agents."

Brent continues to run Turner Real Estate in San Diego (Carlsbad) and now also in Northern California. He advocates and practices "green" real estate. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes that: "Green, or sustainable, building is the practice of creating and using healthier and more resource-efficient models of construction, renovation, operation, maintenance and demolition." Green real estate carefully considers "social and environmental impacts of development." Brent is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council, is a certified eco-broker, and a member of Build it Green.

"I am a socially conscious realtor, which means standing up for tenant rights and acknowledging the underdog. There is a housing crisis in the Bay Area and people think poorly of realtors here and understandably, because there are realtors here who bully folks like nurses and teachers and wave the flag at them. It's preposterous."

Fifteen years ago, Brent moved back to the Bay Area and bought a home.

"I felt very lucky to be able to afford it. Really, it was almost a miracle, to start all over at that late age from zero and then find success in real estate – it's almost surreal."

Does he still play guitar? Does he even have a guitar given his guitar-smashing days?

"I play a Les Paul. It is my axe of choice. But the ones that I played back then are unfortunately no longer living because I smashed them as part of the show. But I didn't really think that one out because some of my heroes had smashed guitars, but I came to find out, they had other guitars to play! I didn't. So that put me in the position of having to borrow guitars and once I had the reputation of being a person that smashed guitars, other musicians weren't quick to loan me theirs." The musician burst out laughing just thinking of it. "I would tell them, 'I can differentiate between my guitar and your guitar and I won't smash yours!' But sometimes they just wouldn't go for it."

He only plays publically on his birthday.

"I tend to throw a show from a band I put together called Bob Villain. Bob Villain plays angry Bob Dylan songs – maybe they are all angry. Sometimes we mix it with a little John Lennon. Last time the band was Bob Villain and the Lennonistas and the heavy metal crowd that I attract wondered, 'What is he doing?' I subject them to learning about Bob Dylan. I love it. What's funny is there is a little anxiety thrown into the crowd because that is what I do when I play live. I like the crowd to have anxiety, to think. I spoof them a little bit. It is funny to see it all repeat again. It's sort of the same vibe that used to happen when we used to play as a live performing band except we're in a smaller setting."

"When did I activate as an activist? I was born this way. I'm sort of a project. As my mother used to say, when people would complain about me. 'Oh, no that's intentional. That's how we want him.'"

While election reform is Brent's number one issue to devote as much time to as he possibly can, he is additionally an activist for children's health and education, civil rights, environmental issues and working to change homelessness. In regards to the latter he has volunteered locally with Project Homeless Connect and Shelter Network.

"Everything we do is for the sake of children, because we won't be around to do anything and that leads us to the environment. And the environmental stuff I have been particularly involved with has been anti-nuclear, and then within the ranks of real estate – that green building kind of a thing. If you are going to build, don't build the old way. Build the way with the least impact.

"I do whatever I can, though as far as activism, nothing to the extent of the Open Source Voting movement. This is a nonpartisan issue. It affects us all. Every citizen in this country, which includes every politician, should be interested in having a fair election."

His doing "whatever he can," is a long list but it includes: presiding over the demonstration of an open source voting system at San Francisco's LinuxWorld software conference in 2008; talking, a lot, to 2016 Presidential candidates, both sides of the aisle, regarding insecure voting systems; and in January of 2017, speaking to the San Francisco Election Commission regarding civil unrest caused by insecure voting systems.



Brent's "open source" activism has found many well-known names on the same page, including the late social activist and politician Tom Hayden.

"We predicted the election issues that are now being examined. For me, being this canary in a coal mine is analogous to being in a dream state where you see the train coming from five miles away and you are telling the women and children, 'Get out of the train station!' But for some reason, they can't hear you and you just see the train getting closer and closer until it crashes into the station."

How does the individual find the "real" facts?

"You have to pay a tremendous amount of attention and do your own investigation and trace it back to the source. And it's not easy to figure it out. The imitators are masterful and so it is very difficult, even for the government, to figure out who is who. Luckily in the election system reform movement, the OVC, CAVO and NAVO predate all the pretenders, all the imitators. Get on Google and search backwards.

"If we start now with all hands on deck in an emergency setting, we could have open source voting done by 2020. It is absolutely necessary. It will probably be more like 2024, if the country is still around! We've been screaming about this since we first demonstrated these proper systems in 2004.

"I keep fighting the fight. There's no alternative. Somebody's got to do it. I just drew the short straw."



Brent Turner and actor Peter Coyote recording narration for "The Real Activist."