Patty Hearst’s bizarre kidnapping is a window into the politics of the 1970s, writes Matthew Lesh.
First person puts up his hand,’ a woman screamed at frightened bank customers, ‘I’ll blow his motherf--king head off!’ So began perhaps one of the most infamous bank robberies in American history. The case is not particularly interesting for the size of the robbery, nor for the violence of the attack. What made the 90-second heist on April 15, 1974, so unique was the starring character.

Patty Hearst was a 19-year-old Berkeley student from a wealthy, famous and powerful Californian family. To this day the Hearsts own an empire of newspapers, magazines, and television stations worth billions of dollars. This made Patty the heir to an enormous fortune—an ideal kidnapping target for an obscure terrorist group, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA).

Jeffrey Toobin’s American Heiress chronicles the bizarre events of Patty’s kidnapping and swift conversion to the extremist cause in meticulous detail. The Hearst case featured the key emerging features of the modern world—media intrigue, celebrity shenanigans, and questions of appropriate justice. In particular, the story gripped the press. It provided visuals for television, recordings for radio, and perfect fodder for tabloids. Newsweek alone put Patty on the front cover seven times. The SLA provided tapes to radio stations and written statements to newspapers, which they demanded be printed in full. The initial focus was less political. It was more of a dramatic story of celebrity—an heiress in captivity.

However, the Hearst kidnapping also had substantial political meaning. It directly involved three American presidents—Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and later Bill Clinton. Toobin presents the events as the tale of 1970s America, a society simmering at the brink of economic downturn and shaken by the Nixon revelations, ideological tensions, and a growing counterculture movement. The level of political protest, which often turned violent, was extraordinary. In 1972 there were 1962 actual or attempted bombings in the US. In 1973, there were 1955, and in 1974 there were 2044.

Much of this political protest was centred on the Bay Area and Berkeley, a traditional centre for hippy activity and drugs in the 1960s, and violence in the early 1970s. The SLA, which included criminals and student radicals, was one of many radical militaristic groups. The SLA
was known for the murder of Marcus Foster, a controversial African American school superintendent. This particular act was condemned by much of the radical community, including the socialist black nationalist Black Panthers, despite their dislike for Foster.

The SLA borrowed their rhetoric from the fashionable leftist sources of the era. Obsessed with public relations stunts and impassioned rhetoric, they signed off their communiques by calling for the destruction of the ‘fascist insect who preys upon the life of the people’. However, as Toobin explains, they lacked a coherent agenda or ideology. Nevertheless, they did have an animal spirit that in particular focused on performance, or ‘guerrilla theatre’.

The SLA was full of contradictions. They claimed to be an army, but in reality were a group of just seven people. Their ‘General Field Marshal’ Donald DeFreeze, an escaped criminal, fancied himself a leader of all African Americans, but he led a group of white, mostly middle class students who left home to become radicalised by the counterculture.

The initial kidnapping, a response to the arrest of two SLA members for the murder of Foster, took place on February 4, 1974. The SLA stormed Hearst Berkley apartment and her fiancé Steven Weed ran away screaming ‘take whatever you want’. They did. They took Patty. She became the first major political kidnapping in American history.

Patty was initially held blindfolded in a closet. The SLA did not actually have a plan to brainwash her - it was the unintentional result of their lack of strategy. They didn’t know what they were doing. They were threatening to her, but also made an effort to be friendly. They spent countless hours talking to her, justifying their actions, painting the FBI and her parents as the bourgeois evil, and giving her radical reading material. Patty was a strange mixture of captive and comrade.

Their initial demands, for the Hearsts to give food worth hundreds of millions of dollars to all Californians played to the SLA’s superior sense of self. The Hearst family, desperate for the safe return of Patty, controversially attempted to succumb to their demands. However, within a month of the kidnapping, Patty declared in a recorded message delivered to a radio station that she was ‘starting to understand what he means when he talks about fascism in America’ and that she realised that ‘it is the FBI who want to murder me’ in a raid.

A few weeks later Patty was offered a choice: Stay and join the SLA, or go home. She responded ‘I want to join you’ and expressed her willingness to ‘fight for the people’. The SLA subsequently released a recording announcing her defection, and her new name, Tania.

She took the infamous photograph clutching a semi-automatic weapon in front of an SLA flag, became intimately involved with her fellow SLA members and took part in the aforementioned bank robbery – which was particularly chosen for the new CCTV technology that could capture her wielding an M1 carbine. A few months later she fired her gun, though didn’t kill anyone, to help defend one of her comrades during a shopping trip turned disaster. She flees east, and refuses copious opportunities to escape, insisting she must stay and fight.

Patty’s initial public image reflected larger cultural divisions. For some on the left, she was a renegade who gave up life as an aristocrat for the cause in the war against the ‘fascist corporate state’. The more support she received from the counterculture, the more the establishment turned against her. She became an enemy of the establishment, a particularly distressing situation for her parents who were part of the establishment and friendly with then-Californian Governor Ronald Reagan.

Nevertheless, the complexities of her case, an early example of Stockholm syndrome, have left many confused and divided. Did
Patty Hearst have free will, and believe in the righteousness of her actions, or, as she claimed in her trial, was she brainwashed? Her version of events diverges substantially from that of her surviving SLA captors. Patty came to claim that she was a victim, fearful that if she didn’t follow the SLA’s commands she would be in mortal danger. The other surviving members of the SLA posit the opposite, that she was truly passionate about the cause and a willing participant in her deeds. They point to occasions when she was asked to go home but refused.

Toobin attempts to sift fact from fiction in the hotly contested historic claims by presenting a detailed account of her kidnapping, indoctrination, criminal activities, and eventual trial. He is careful to ensure all participants get a fair hearing. This is enabled by the depth of his research—tens of thousands of documents including SLA records, legal documents from her trial, FBI files, transcripts and evidence, as well as more than 100 interviews.

Two perspectives have developed on Patty. Her defenders largely used a left-wing view of the world, in which individuals are plastic and malleable—a product of their environment. Her critics represented a more right-wing view that individuals are ultimately accountable for their own actions and choices in life.

Toobin largely comes down against Patty, presenting her as understanding and passionately supporting her actions though easily manipulable – first by the SLA and then later by her parents and trial lawyers. He is also critical of her use of her family’s star power, unavailable to most Americans. However, ultimately, the reader is able to decide for themselves who is right and who is wrong.

American Heiress is a work of non-fiction that reads like fiction. It is a well-constructed and engaging piece of detailed historic work. This intriguing look at the growth of the counterculture and simmering tensions in the 1970s is also an extraordinary tale of how one human responds to extraordinary circumstances and pressures.