



HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE U.S.:

THE UNFINISHED STORY OF POLITICAL PRISONERS/VICTIMS OF COINTELPRO

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INTRODUCTION

The FBI kept its COINTELPRO Program (COunterINTELLIGENCE PROgram), which served to disrupt and destroy the Black liberation movement and many progressive organizations in the U.S., a secret, but Senate investigations exposed it during 1975.

Conducted by the Church Committee, as the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities became known, the hearings led to a final report that was published in 1976. Despite widespread recognition of the limitations of the Church Committee, attempts to have the congressional investigations reopened have been frustrated for decades. However, on September 14, 2000, Representative Cynthia McKinney (D-Georgia), who sits on the Human Rights Subcommittee of the House International Affairs Committee, convened a forum to examine these issues. It was held during the Congressional Black Caucus's Legislative Conference, an annual event that hosts workshops, panel discussions, and other social events to highlight significant concerns among the constituents. The title of the panel McKinney convened was "Human Rights in the United States: The Unfinished Story of Political Prisoners/Victims of COINTELPRO."

Six panelists, all deeply engaged in seeking the release of unfairly imprisoned freedom fighters, presented information on COINTELPRO

and its relevance to the cases of the approximately 100+ political prisoners in U.S. custody at this moment. Some of these men and women have been imprisoned for more than 30 years; all have served excessively long sentences. While the U.S. government denies that it holds any political prisoners, the role COINTELPRO operations have played in the arrests, trials, and convictions of these prisoners indicates otherwise.

Urging an Examination

Several current and past political prisoners, most notably Jalil Muntaqim (Anthony Bottom), Dr. Mutulu Shakur, and released political prisoner Herman Ferguson have consistently urged that the illegalities committed under COINTELPRO be examined further and that compensation be made to the victims of these acts. The panel presentations excerpted below all point to the necessity of such an examination—and of releasing all of the U.S.-held political prisoners in order to redress the crimes committed against progressive political movements under the aegis of COINTELPRO and other FBI counterintelligence programs.

The forum was held in Room 2200 of the Rayburn House Office Building, a room where committee hearings are held. The tremendous crowd that gathered and participated in the discussion following the presentations demonstrated the significance of this human rights problem to the black community. Below, the presentations given at the three hour long program are excerpted.

Rep. Cynthia McKinney introduced the panel by saying:

"This discussion of COINTELPRO and political prisoners in the U.S. is our initial contribution to a long-standing struggle that we will be a part of for as long as we are in Congress. This is not going to be a one-time thing. When we began to plan this panel, I didn't realize the full extent of how important this issue is to individuals, to our community as a whole. Trying to give relevance to my tenure in Congress, I originally chose to dedicate my service to human rights issues around the world. But it became patently clear to me that there is a big, gaping hole in our human rights approach, because we dare not mention human rights at home. And once we begin to talk about this issue, human rights in the United States, a whole lot of folks become uncomfortable. We intend to broaden the definition of human rights to include human rights at home, and this panel discussion is our opening shot."

Nkechi Taifa

The first speaker was Professor Nkechi Taifa, director of the Howard University Law School Equal Justice Program. Taifa served as legislative counsel for the ACLU, policy counsel for the Women's Legal Defense Fund, staff attorney for the National Prison Project, network organizer for the Washington Office on Africa, and teacher at Watoto School in Washington, DC. She has also worked as a criminal defense attorney.

Professor Taifa has worked on issues involving COINTELPRO and political prisoners since 1975.

I am going to give a very brief sketch of what COINTELPRO was and how it worked. In the FBI's own words, "The purpose of this new counterintelligence endeavor [code named COINTELPRO] is to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist organizations and groupings and their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters."

Never meant to be disseminated to the public, millions of pages of FBI internal documents reveal a coordinated national program of war against the movement.

An FBI memorandum described the goals of COINTELPRO. First, "to prevent the coalition of militant black nationalist groups." FBI director J. Edgar Hoover wrote, "An effective coalition of black nationalist groups might be the first step toward a real Mau Mau in America." The second goal was "to prevent the rise of a messiah who could unify and electrify the militant black nationalist movement." On this point, Hoover said:

"Malcolm X might have been such a messiah. Martin Luther King could be a very real contender for this position, should he abandon his supposed obedience to white liberal doctrines, nonviolence, and embrace black nationalism. Stokely Carmichael has the necessary charisma to be a real threat in this way."

Goal three was "to prevent violence on the part of black nationalist groups," and I'll just stop right there, because we have to remember that it was actually the FBI who was fomenting the violence.



Number four: "Prevent militant black nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability." The FBI was very specific. They said, "You must discredit these groups and individuals to, first, the responsible Negro community. Second, they must be discredited to the white community, both the responsible white community and to the 'liberals:' political, religious and civics groups and individuals who have vestiges of sympathy for militant black nationalist groups simply because they are Negroes. Third, these groups are to be discredited in the eyes of the Negro radicals, the followers of the movement."

Another goal was to prevent the long-range growth of militant Black nationalist organizations among the youth. The FBI said that specific tactics were needed for this. And as we look at the drug trade—crack and heroin—I think that they have been very successful with respect to some of these tactics.

According to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which investigated activities of the FBI in the '70s, COINTELPRO was an illegal and unconstitutional abuse of power by the FBI. Now, that is not Kathleen or Geronimo saying this; this was the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Frank Church, in the '70s, that said it was an illegal and unconstitutional abuse of power by the FBI.

The committee said, "COINTELPRO is the FBI acronym for a series of covert programs directed against domestic groups. Many of these techniques would be intolerable in a democratic society even if all the targets had been engaged in violent activity," but COINTELPRO, the Senators said, went far beyond that. The bureau conducted a sophisticated vigilante operation aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association, allegedly to protect the national security and deter violence.

"Neutralization"—A Military (War) Term

One word that comes up again and again in the FBI documents is "neutralization." That is a military term, a war term. They were talking about war against people who were simply trying to exercise rights and stand up for justice. The targets included such groups as the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Deacons for Defense, the Black Panther Party, Students for a Democratic Society, Nation of Islam, Republic of New Africa, and the National Lawyers Guild.

The FBI organized a vast network of political spies who infiltrated thousands of organizations, and trained and coordinated similar operations by other law enforcement agencies at every level of government. The information gathered by informants was augmented by illegal wiretaps, letter openings, burglaries of homes and offices, secret examination of bank records, physical surveillance, and arranged murders.

By 1969 the Black Panther Party had become a primary focus of the program and was ultimately the target of 233 of the total 295 authorized black nationalist COINTELPRO operations. Although the claimed purpose of the bureau's COINTELPRO action was to "prevent violence," many of the FBI's tactics were clearly intended to foster violence. Some of these were assassinations, false imprisonment, and provocateur activities. Such actions demonstrate that the chief investigative branch of the federal government, which was charged by law with investigating crimes and criminal conduct, itself engaged in lawless tactics and responded to deep-seated social problems by fomenting violence and unrest.

Many organizations and individuals did not survive the FBI neutralization program. Some were destroyed, some seriously weakened and destabilized. Many people were unjustly imprisoned; others were driven underground. Some were outright murdered. The only two FBI officials ever convicted for COINTELPRO abuses, Mark Felt and Edward Miller, were pardoned by Ronald Reagan before they even began to serve their sentences.

We need to reopen the Church Committee hearings of the 1970s. Although that congressional committee rightly condemned the FBI's counterintelligence program as an illegal and unconstitutional abuse of power by the FBI, they failed to establish remedies for those who were victims of COINTELPRO.

Kathleen Neal Cleaver

The next speaker was Kathleen Neal Cleaver, who has spent most of her life participating in the human rights struggle. Cleaver dropped out of Barnard College in 1966 to work full time with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC. From 1967 to 1971, Ms. Cleaver served as the communications secretary of the Black Panther Party, the first woman on their Central Committee.

After sharing years of exile with her former husband, Eldridge Cleaver, she returned to the United States and earned her B.A. in history from Yale College and a J.D. from Yale Law School.

Ms. Cleaver has taught at several universities, including the Cardozo School of Law in New York, the Graduate School at Yale University, and Emory University School of Law in Atlanta. She is currently in the process of completing her memoir, "Memories of Love and War," forthcoming from Random House.

Many organizations and individuals did not survive the FBI neutralization program.



Much of what we are talking about today—the United States human rights record, COINTELPRO, political prisoners—has roots in the social uprisings that wracked this country in the wake of the Vietnam War. Most of us were students at that time, and we began to understand how intolerant this country is

toward human rights. That is when we formed our commitment to the human rights struggle.

Nineteen sixty-seven was the year of uprisings—the government called them riots, we called them rebellions. There were 150 across the country, most notably in Detroit and Newark.

The United States Government convened the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission) to study this phenomenon, determine its causes, and decide how to prevent future disorders. The commission stated that the cause of these disturbances was white racism and its attendant ills of unemployment and distress. But when it came to what should be done, one clear conclusion was a call for more sophisticated police tactics to suppress the disorders.

One of the report's recommendations was a training program for intelligence officers, to use undercover police and more reliable informants. And so you can see the genesis of COINTELPRO in this very liberal and supposedly enlightened report on how this country can handle civil disorder.

“We Will Make a Difference”

When it came out, I wasn't reading the Kerner Report. In 1967 I went out to California to join the Black Panther Party. We were reading things like Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Malcolm X*—texts that would help us understand and further what we saw as the revolutionary opportunity to transform this country. That same summer of 1967, J. Edgar Hoover was articulating his counterintelligence program and identifying his targets: Stokely Carmichael, the head of the organization I had been a part of, SNCC; Southern Christian Leadership Council, led by Martin Luther King; Elijah Muhammad; Revolutionary Action Movement, led by Max Stanford, and many others—all parts of the upheaval, the challenge, as we thought, “This is our chance, we will transform this country, we will make a difference.” We all were targets of COINTELPRO.

When I first arrived in California, a man named Earl Anthony came with Eldridge Cleaver, whose car was in the shop, to pick me up at the airport. Earl Anthony was a COINTELPRO agent. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. But from the beginning of my connection with the Black Panther Party in California, COINTELPRO was there.

I moved to California and joined the BPP full-time because Eldridge called me and said, “You've got to come back out and help us. Huey Newton has been arrested. He's charged with murder. He's facing the gas chamber.” Usually in that time we would hear reports, “Black man killed by police. Justifiable homicide.” No one ever heard a report that said, “Policeman killed by black man.” That we never heard. When we did, it was a murder charge.

So my full-time involvement with the Black Panther Party began with working around a prisoner, working around a case. And what we saw in this charge of murder was an effort to destroy our movement, to destroy our leader.

In those years we saw an enormous number of cases arising out of battles in which members of the Black Panther Party became political prisoners. It is my pleasure to be here today with my brother Geronimo. The last time I was at the Congressional Black Caucus Legislative week-end, I was on a panel talking about his case and how he was set up by the FBI, and how to free him. Now he is here.



... But from the beginning of my connection with the Black Panther Party in California, COINTELPRO was there.

The Fight Continues

There are others, like Romaine Fitzgerald, who after 30 years is still serving time in California for killing a policeman—and it is known that he did not do the shooting. He is very ill. We have Mumia Abu-Jamal. We have Eddie Conway in Baltimore. This government says there are no political prisoners, that these are all criminals. But when you look at what the people did, what Mumia, Marilyn Buck, and Mutulu Shakur did, you will know that there was a revolutionary movement. These are people who dedicated their lives to the transformation of this country, who put the benefit of their communities ahead of themselves, who believed that transformation was not only possible but was worth dying for, to end brutality, racism, economic

discrimination, imperialism, war. And when you hear their stories and know who they are, then you know that the sanitized version of the civil rights movement is not the whole story. Fabrication of evidence, perjury, the deceit that was used to put people away—that is another story that you have to know.

This country stands in violation of international treaties that the United States has signed, but when we raise the issue of human rights, we are told, “You are criminals. Your issues are criminal. It has to be handled by the criminal courts.” Mumia Abu-Jamal had absolutely nothing that even begins to resemble a fair trial. When you challenge his conviction and say he was framed and given the death penalty because of his earlier membership in the Black Panther Party, the government comes back with “he’s a criminal.” If you go back through Black history, back to Marcus Garvey or even as far as Nat Turner, you see our history progressing through similar trials. I remember in

my own history when we would say, “Free Angela,” “Free Bobby,” “Free all political prisoners.” We are still trying to free all political prisoners.

Our fight for human rights continues today. This is what was starting back in Alabama, continuing with the Black Panther Party, continuing into the black liberation movement. The issue was always human rights. The government tried to redefine our struggle for us, to minimize the international, broad concept of human rights that motivated us and turn it into something smaller and less threatening.

We have to get this story told, have a clear understanding of where we are, who we are, know our own human rights struggle, and move to bring these prisoners and these freedom fighters out of the dungeons.

Michael Tarif Warren

The third speaker on the panel was Michael Tarif Warren, a criminal defense attorney currently practicing in New York City, specializing in major criminal matters, human rights, and police misconduct



Photo Courtesy:
Universal Publishing and Distribution Corp.

cases. Mr. Warren has been the lead counsel in approximately 60 murder cases and served as the lead prosecutor for the Mumia Abu-Jamal Tribunal in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Warren has served as legislative aide to Congressman Louis Stokes; associate director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers’ Juvenile Defense Project; assistant general counsel for the NAACP Special Contributions Fund; and staff attorney for the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing.

The counterintelligence program involves institutions that interact and relate to each other for one purpose: to oppress communities of color and poor communities in this country and to make sure that a vanguard never succeeds in liberating those people.

A number of institutions carry out counterintelligence. I’m going to talk mostly about the role of courts. The courts take political activists and fighters for justice and criminalize them. They take freedom fighters from our communities and call them criminals. But in many ways the

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most important institution that carries out this process is the so-called private—really state-controlled—media. The media function as a propaganda organ of the state, coloring the political prisoners as criminals, when in fact they are valiant revolutionary soldiers fighting on behalf of oppressed people. It is necessary for the media to paint these people as criminals because political prisoners have the ability to tell the truth and expose this system. It is in the state’s

interest to silence political prisoners, to prevent the public from listening to their words and understanding their actions.

The political prisoner, once arrested, is treated unlike any other prisoner, because the political prisoner is more dangerous to the system than any other type of prisoner. Many of them, even those with no prior arrest record, receive no bail and are held in preventive detention. In many cases, this means that political prisoners who have no prior arrest record are held without bail.



Photo Courtesy:
Friends & Family of Mutulu Shakur

Many political prisoners are thrown into isolation, thrown into the hole right away. Often they stay there for long periods of time with the ultimate purpose of attempting to break their spirits.

Imprisoned in Atlanta, Georgia

Dr. Mutulu Shakur is a political prisoner who is housed in the federal prison in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Shakur is a brilliant acupuncturist,

studied in China, very dedicated to his community. He worked at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx where he helped to develop the use of acupuncture to treat drug addiction. Later he operated a community acupuncture center in Harlem. But once he was arrested and charged with expropriation of funds for revolutionary purposes, as well as participation in the liberation of Assata Shakur from prison, all of Dr. Shakur's activities were portrayed in the media and the court as part of a "criminal enterprise." People involved with the clinic were swooped up, put in jail, and stigmatized for months in the media to ensure that prospective jurors remember these people not as individuals who struggled on behalf of their community,



Photo Courtesy:
Sekou Odinga Defense Committee

but as criminals. So, by the time they reached the trial stage, they didn't have a snowball's chance in hell. And that is the anticipated outcome of the counterintelligence program. Consequently, Dr. Shakur, who was arrested in California back in 1986, stood trial in 1987 and was basically convicted on the testimony of one confidential informant. That is all the government really had, one confidential informant.

In the case of Dr. Shakur and the others charged in this case—his codefendant Marilyn Buck, as well as Sekou Odinga and Silvia Baraldini—much of the counterinsurgency program was implemented by the Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF). The JTTF consists of federal and local law-enforcement agents. One of their primary objectives is to entrap people who struggled on behalf of their communities, and to make sure they are isolated, arrested, prosecuted to the fullest extent, and imprisoned for a very long time. The Joint Terrorist Task Force has repeatedly, in numerous cases, employed all the techniques developed through COINTELPRO.

After Dr. Shakur was sentenced (to 60 years), he was sent immediately to an underground maximum security prison in Marion, Illinois,

where the prisoners have very little contact with each other. They are kept in a cell for 23 hours a day, only getting out one hour for exercise.

So the judiciary becomes a fifth column in this counterintelligence program. It's not just the FBI and the Joint Terrorist Task Force. They are merely the front lines.

The Grand Jury System

One other judicial aspect of counterintelligence is the grand jury system. The government uses the grand jury as a tool of oppression. And I know because I have represented people who were arrested in sweeps.

For example, in Dr. Shakur's case, Fulani Sunni Ali, who is here today, was arrested and separated from her children (and she was pregnant at the time of her arrest) on a subpoena to a federal grand jury. The government used that grand jury to fact-gather, based on their need for more evidence against Dr. Shakur, Sekou Odinga, Marilyn Buck, and Silvia Baraldini. All they had was the word of a snitch; they needed more.

The grand jury serves another purpose, too: it criminalizes all the friends and associates of the people who are on trial in the case in question. Many grand jury resisters are required to spend up to 18 months in prison for contempt, based on their refusal to obey a grand jury subpoena. Consequently the state victimizes these individuals as well and destroys their political organizations.

Bruce Ellison

The fourth speaker, Bruce Ellison, is a South Dakota criminal defense attorney who has represented Leonard Peltier. Ellison has practiced criminal defense work for the last 25 years, beginning in 1975 as an attorney with the Wounded Knee Defense Committee, which served as the legal representation for members of the American Indian Movement, including Leonard Peltier. He continues to work on behalf of Leonard Peltier's freedom.

I will share with you today my continued efforts to expose what the FBI has done out in my part of the country. I was raised to believe in the importance of justice for all people, in the importance of our democracy and our fundamental rights to free speech, freedom of association, and freedom to

"What I have experienced in representing Leonard Peltier and other Native Americans has shocked, amazed, and terrified me as a citizen of this country."

seek redress of grievances. From what I have seen over the last 25 years, Native Americans have many legitimate grievances, as do others in this country, that are never redressed.

Educated as a lawyer, I was taught that our courts exist to promote and preserve justice, our Congress to enact responsible legislation, and our executive branch to enforce the laws of our country. What I have experienced in representing Leonard Peltier and other Native Americans has shocked, amazed, and terrified me as a citizen of this country.

FBI documents and court records in the thousands, together with eyewitness accounts, show clearly that beginning in the late 1960s the FBI began a campaign of disruption of the American Indian Movement. FBI operations were directed toward the destruction of AIM and its grassroots supporters in the urban and reservation communities. Operations began with surveillance of peaceful demonstrations calling for the enforcement of treaty rights, for human rights, for equal opportunities for jobs and housing and medical care, and for justice in America's courts. It soon led to the infiltration of agents provocateurs, to the manipulation of our criminal justice system, and ultimately to state-sponsored terrorism in Indian communities. Particular emphasis was directed toward the descendants of the Lakota, who stopped General George Armstrong Custer and who now reside on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

“Bringing the War Home”

During the antiwar days, we used to talk about “bringing the war home.” I think the FBI thought that was a good idea and tried out many of the tactics they used in Indochina and Central America on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

The FBI acted as if making bridges across barriers of color and ethnicity was terrifying.

Claiming that AIM members were engaging in acts of sedition, the bureau sought to arrest hundreds after the 71-day siege at Wounded Knee in 1973. It soon concluded that this approach was insufficient.

The FBI then began to fund and arm a group of more western-oriented Lakota who called themselves the Guardians of the Oglala Nation, or the “goon squad.” As many as 60 men, women, and children, out of a population of 11,000, were killed in the political violence that followed. These were mostly members of AIM, their families, and supporters. I remember staying in homes in Pine Ridge during this period where men felt compelled to keep loaded weapons nearby while they and their families, including children and elders, slept, fearful of the real and immediate danger of an attack by the goon squad in the night.

One instance I personally witnessed involved FBI agents and a Bureau of Indian Affairs SWAT team escorting carloads of goon squad members and their weapons out of the community after a day and night of armed attacks on the community. This resulted in the ambush murder of a young AIM member, and the burning and shooting up of several homes.

The FBI acted as if making bridges across barriers of color and ethnicity was terrifying. Many of the documents we obtained under the Freedom of Information Act talk about Wounded Knee, and the fire-fight in Oglala, of the connections between the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party.

I represented a young mother and AIM member named Anna Mae Pictou Aquash on weapons charges. She told me after her arrest that the FBI threatened to see her dead within a year unless she cooperated against AIM. In an operation previously used against the Black Panther Party, the FBI began a rumor that she was an informant. Six months later her body was found on the Reservation. The FBI said she died of exposure. They cut off her hands, claiming this was necessary to identify her, and buried her under the name of Jane Doe.

A second, independent autopsy revealed that someone had placed a pistol to the back of her head and pulled the trigger. When I asked for her hands after the second autopsy, because she was originally not buried with her hands, an FBI agent handed me a box, and with a big smile on his face he said, “You want her hands? Here.”

Declared “Most Dangerous”

The fire-fight near Oglala was preceded by FBI documents declaring AIM to be one of the most dangerous organizations in the country and a threat to national security. It followed by two months the issuing of a position paper entitled “FBI Paramilitary Operations in Indian Country,” a how-to plan of dealing with AIM on the battlefield. It used such terms as “neutralization,” which it defined as “shooting to kill.” Leonard Peltier and other AIM members from outside the reservation had come to join local AIM members because the violence on the reservation had gotten so intense. Three young men lost their lives that day, two FBI agents and one AIM member. The FBI considered that only two men died, their own agents. No one has ever been

. . . Amnesty International has called for an independent inquiry into the use of our criminal justice system for political purposes by the FBI and other intelligence agencies in this country.



Photo Courtesy: Leonard Peltier Defense Committee

prosecuted for the killing of AIM member Joe Stuntz.

The FBI eventually charged four AIM members, including Leonard Peltier, with the killing of the agents. Two of Peltier's codefendants were acquitted on self-defense grounds by an all-white jury in the conservative town of Cedar Rapids, Iowa—truly a remarkable thing. The FBI analyzed why these long-haired, militant men were acquitted and at a meeting in Washington, DC, decided to “put the full prosecutive weight of the Federal Government” against Leonard Peltier.

The government argued that Peltier personally shot the agents. The U.S. Attorney's Office has now admitted in court that it had no credible evidence Leonard Peltier killed the agents and speciously claimed it never tried to prove it did. The FBI still withholds thousands of pages in this case, claiming that disclosure would compromise national security. In the absence of such disclosure, no further efforts toward a new trial are possible.

Citing the case of Leonard Peltier as an example, Amnesty International has called for an independent inquiry into the use of our criminal justice system for political purposes by the FBI and other intelligence agencies in this country. Amnesty cited similar concerns for other members of AIM and other victims of COINTELPRO-type operations by the FBI.

Under our system, if there is a reasonable doubt, then Leonard Peltier is not guilty. Yet he has been in prison for nearly 25 years for a crime he did not commit. On behalf of Leonard Peltier, I urge a full congressional investigation and the granting of executive clemency to those activists from the '70s, '80s, and '90s who have yet to gain their freedom.

Geronimo ji Jaga

Geronimo ji Jaga was the fifth panel member. A former leader in the Black Panther Party, he was imprisoned for 27 years as a victim of COINTELPRO tactics. He spent every painful day maintaining that he was framed for a crime he did not commit. Throughout his incarceration,

there was always visible mass support for this political prisoner inside and outside the courtroom.

In 1997 he was released after winning a writ of habeas corpus in an Orange County Superior Court that threw out his conviction. The judge ruled that prosecutors had withheld vital evidence regarding a witness who could have cleared ji Jaga of the charges.

Ever since his release, ji Jaga has been attracting big crowds of activists, new and seasoned, to spread the message about the need to struggle against all forms of racist oppression and to fight for the release of all political prisoners. He has become one of the most vocal supporters of the former Black Panther and award-winning journalist now on death row, Mumia Abu-Jamal.

COINTELPRO didn't stop at the Black liberation movement — we all should study this — but it went into every movement that was involved in liberation.

This panel has established important truths already today, but there is one thing that has been omitted:

the activists of the '60s who were killed by COINTELPRO. What it boils down to is murder. That is something that we have been trying to get established since I have been out of prison. We are trying to get hearings into actual murder cases.

And here's how it would work. When you would have everyone together, like we are all together right here, we all say, “Okay, we are all going to not disrespect each other,” and everybody agrees. But then the FBI sends someone in who stirs things up, tells lies and causes us to begin to disrespect each other. So one may begin to disrespect another one, and then another one stabs him and he is dead, and then you have the murderers in the background boasting and bragging about it.

COINTELPRO came in so many forms. But the first thing I would think of is these murders. When you have beautiful sisters and brothers such as Fred Hampton, who was shot and killed; you have Robert Wells, put in a sleeping bag and thrown off a freeway, killed in New York City, still unsolved. All of these cases I am talking about are clear COINTELPRO murders. Fred Bennett, who was killed in San Francisco. Franco Diggs. John Huggins. Bunchy Carter.

They Were Victims. They Were Murdered.

All of the names I have mentioned are victims of COINTELPRO. They were murdered. Their murderers have never been brought to

justice. So this is where we need to begin. We are dealing with straight-up murderers who turn around and call me a murderer and put me in prison for 27 years, when I murdered no one. These murderers are running around. They still are practicing their art of murder, outright murder.

[Audience begins to call out names] John Clark. Watature Pope.

These brothers and sisters were murdered. Mark Clark. Twyman Meyers.

[Geronimo: Come on with some more.]

John Africa. Kombora. Komboze. Tracy. Kayatta. Ralph Featherstone.

That's very true. There is Malik el Shabazz. And we can continue to call names. This is how important and serious this is to us.

These brothers and sisters we have mentioned, they were family members. They were mothers, they were fathers, they were sisters, they were brothers. And they are dead. They were murdered. It was done by the U.S. government. They have admitted it.

You have brothers like Mutulu — and myself when I was in, and others — call ourselves prisoners of war. We say political prisoners, okay. And you try to understand, what are you talking about? This war continues. It is an actual war against our people. And it should be handled just as they handled the trials in Nuremburg.

So I want to urge everyone to support and put muscle behind this effort that will expose the true murderers and let the victims out. What is Sundiata Acoli doing in prison? Ruchelle McGee. Yogi Pinell. Chip Fitzgerald. There are so many.

We can't allow that to happen. These hearings will make it very clear, and then these brothers and sisters will be released out of these prisons.

COINTELPRO didn't stop at the Black liberation movement — we all should study this — but it went into every movement that was involved in liberation. This is why Laura Whitehorn spent so much time in prison; why Marilyn Buck and Susan Rosenberg and so many who are victims of COINTELPRO continue to languish.

Laura Whitehorn

The final speaker was another political prisoner who has been released. Laura Whitehorn left prison in August 1999 after 14 years. She, too, is working to free all political prisoners and prisoners of war. Since the 1960s Laura has been active in antiracist and anti-imperialist organizing, as well as fighting for women's and gay liberation.

Most political prisoners were born around the same time as me, in the '40s and '50s, and we grew up in the era of national liberation and struggles for human rights.

Aircraft Industry (a zionist corporation), and other similar targets. In federal prison she was active in AIDS support work and, with the other political prisoners, she helped organize political prisoner support for Mumia.

I think these hearings are significant because COINTELPRO continues. Even though that particular FBI program with that particular name was supposedly stopped in '72, it continues in other forms. Until all the political prisoners are out, COINTELPRO continues. About a week ago, the Bureau of Indian Affairs apologized for the genocide against the Native American people—but Leonard Peltier is still in prison. The U.N. definition of genocide includes the destruction of political movements and leadership. So genocide—including COINTELPRO—continues against the Native American peoples.

I was a political prisoner for a little over 14 years, in a case called the Resistance Conspiracy case. The U.S. government said we were guilty of “conspiring to protest, change and oppose policies and practices of the United States government in domestic and international affairs through violent and illegal means.” And we said the domestic and international policies and practices of the United States government were violent and illegal.

[Interrupted by applause.] For example, the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Grenada, in this hemisphere, not coincidentally the first socialist African government in this hemisphere. And the shelling of the people of Beirut, Lebanon, at the same time. And the use of low-intensity counterinsurgency warfare against the liberation struggles in Central America.

An Era of National Liberation

Most political prisoners were born around the same time as me, in the '40s and '50s, and we grew up in the era of national liberation and struggles for human rights. It was going to be the era of internation-

Along with Linda Evans, Marilyn Buck, Susan Rosenberg, and others, she was convicted of attacking the U.S. Capitol, the Navy War College, New York City's Police Benevolent Association (PBA), Israeli

It was a war declared by the FBI and the law enforcement agencies, . . . and if there was going to be justice, we would have to fight for it.



Photo Courtesy: Sudiata Acoli Defense Fund

al law. Nazi Germany wasn't going to happen again. As a child I was taught that there were human rights that were so important that if your government stopped those rights, you had a responsibility to take action against that government. And I believe that to this day.

[Applause] That is what every political prisoner, I believe, stands for.

As a child I was moved by the civil rights movement. The courage of the people who were standing up was inspiring to me and, I think, to a whole generation. I moved to Chicago in 1968 and worked to support the Black Panther Party and got to know Fred Hampton. He was the chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. He was about 20 years old—and a danger to the United States government, if the United States government was afraid of the rise of a Black messiah, because Fred had the ability, like Malcolm X, to articulate the aspirations of an entire people. Anyone who was in Chicago in those days remembers people of all ages coming out to hear Fred.

In 1969 he was murdered, along with another Black Panther Party member, Mark Clark. The Chicago police, who carried out the assassination, claimed there had been a shootout. It took a long time, but it was proven that not a single shot was fired from inside Fred's apartment; every bullet was fired by the police. Eventually it came out that the murder had been well planned by the Illinois State Attorney's Office, the Chicago Police, and the FBI. An FBI informant named William O'Neal was infiltrated into the Panther environment, and he gave the police a map of Fred's apartment, drugged the food of Fred and the rest of the Panthers that night, and then the murder could take place.

That told me that we could not be confined by the laws of this country, because it was a war. It was a war declared by the FBI and the law enforcement agencies, and backed by the U.S. government, against the Black nation, Native American nations, and the colonized nation

of Puerto Rico. And if there was going to be justice, we would have to fight for it.

I wasn't a victim of COINTELPRO. But I took those actions, and did time in prison for them, because COINTELPRO convinced me we had to fight. Eventually, I ended up with 23 years, which was a fortunate sentence.

That might sound like a terrible thing to say, but when you look at Marilyn Buck with 80 years and Mutulu Shakur with 60 years, and Sudiata Acoli having already served nearly 30 years, you realize that 23 years is a very fortunate sentence.

The day I got out of prison was the happiest day of my life — and the saddest, because I left behind Marilyn Buck, Linda Evans, Carmen Valentin, Lucy and Alicia Rodriguez, and Dylcia Pagan. They were in the prison I was in. I have no choice but to fight for their freedom and for the freedom of all political prisoners. A month after my release, Carmen, Lucy, Alicia, and Dylcia were released when President Clinton gave the 11 Puerto Rican political prisoners clemency. I watched from the beginning the campaign for the freedom of the independentistas. When they were arrested in 1980, the slogan was, "They are freedom fighters, not terrorists." And the nation of Puerto Rico took up that slogan and said, "They are our freedom fighters, they are not terrorists."

We need to wage a campaign like that for all of the political prisoners. Otherwise, they will not be free. And that is simply unacceptable. It is a matter of human rights and justice.

Conclusion

To close the discussion, Rep. McKinney commented:

"The testimony here today has deepened my commitment to making sure that we get to the bottom and go all the way up to the top, in order to make sure that we get justice, justice for our people and justice for the survivors of COINTELPRO."

We need to support her efforts and organize many more federal, state and local legislators and politicians to do the same.

Since the panel discussion last September, one more political prisoner has died in prison: Teddy Jah Heath died of cancer in New York State's Coxsackie Prison on January 21, 2001. Jah was a member of the Black Panther Party in New York City in the 1970s, and he never

stopped struggling for human rights. His arrest in 1973 stemmed from his attempt to stop the influx of drugs into the Black community. He had been turned down for parole in 1998, despite a perfect prison record and despite having served 28 years for a case in which there was no injury to any person.

His name joins the long list of those whose lives have been taken as a result of COINTELPRO and political repression.

Clearly, hearings to investigate these damages, and serious campaigns for parole, clemency, and other means of release of political prisoners will be necessary in order to expose and redress COINTELPRO. The political prisoners have spent two and three decades in prison, and many have failing health. The stress and sorrow their families have had to bear are enormous. This makes "getting justice for the survivors of COINTELPRO" all the more urgent.

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The Human Rights Research Fund is dedicated to:

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Release 2001 is a collective group of lawyers, activists, former political prisoners, family members of political prisoners, and paralegals who have devoted years of service to human rights work and politically charged cases. We have volunteered our expertise to political prisoners who seek to obtain executive clemency or amnesty.

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