

Who wants to free Mumia now?

by Debra_J_Saunders

Last week, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected an appeal seeking a new trial for death-row inmate and former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, who was convicted in the 1981 shooting of Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner. Earlier, a lower court rescinded Abu-Jamal's death penalty, which prosecutors have asked to be reinstated. Meanwhile, as the Philadelphia Inquirer reported, last week's ruling "virtually guarantees that the internationally known death-row inmate will never be freed."

Perhaps there were tears shed in Paris, where he is an honorary citizen and where the suburb of St. Denis named a one-way street "Rue Mumia Abu-Jamal" in 2006. But I see it as a sign of healthy change that in America the ruling went largely unprotested.

Call it progress. Being convicted for killing a police officer has lost the cachet it once had for the far left — especially since Oakland just buried slain police officers Sgts. Mark Dunakin, Ervin Romans and Daniel Sakai, and Officer John Hege.

Consider that Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, introduced a House resolution honoring the four Oakland officers. She once signed a letter against Abu-Jamal's execution. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution naming a day in Abu-Jamal's honor. Ditto the European Parliament. The anti-Iraq war group Not in Our Name proudly advertised Abu-Jamal's endorsement as one of its celebrity signatories — unbothered by the prospect of dubbing a cop-killer as a committed peacenik. Writer Alice Walker likened Abu-Jamal to South African leader Nelson Mandela.

Oakland schools scheduled a Mumia teach-in for January 1999 — although it was mostly derailed after a sniper shot Oakland officer James Williams Jr., whose funeral was held on the same day. The teach-in lesson plan had referred to Abu-Jamal not as a cop killer, but as a "political prisoner."

Be it noted, the letter signed by Lee and others argued against Abu-Jamal's execution because "he well may be innocent." The usual Hollywood stars — Ed Asner, Mike Farrell — were happy to impugn the motives and behavior of Philly police and prosecutors. Devotees desperately clung to the notion that Abu-Jamal, formerly Wesley Cook, was a victim of racism. Indeed, they so wanted to believe that Abu-Jamal was unfairly convicted that they overlooked the gratuitous execution of Faulkner.

But the evidence was overwhelming. A jury — and not all the members were white, as it included two African-Americans — convicted Abu-Jamal and sentenced him to death.

After police pulled over Abu-Jamal's brother for driving the wrong way on a one-way street, a battle

followed. Faulkner was shot five times, once between the eyes. Authorities found Abu-Jamal near the mortally wounded Faulkner because he could not run away, as his brother did; Faulkner had shot Abu-Jamal in the chest. Also, four eyewitnesses identified Abu-Jamal. Two witnesses heard Abu-Jamal admit to shooting Faulkner and that he hoped Faulkner dies.

What is more, Abu-Jamal has never explicitly stated that he did not shoot Faulkner. He did not testify at his own trial before his conviction. He served as his own lawyer "with professional backup counsel" yet failed to produce his brother as a witness. Guilty.

But he knows how to play to a certain crowd swayed more by race-laden rhetoric than fact. So from death row, he keeps cranking out books, radio commentaries and self-congratulatory hype about how the racist system put him in prison. As in his latest self-homage, "This is the story of law learned, not in the ivory towers of multibillion-dollar endowed universities (but) in the bowels of the slave-ship, in the hidden, dank dungeons of America."

I suppose it is possible that if the Supreme Court reinstates Abu-Jamal's justly deserved death sentence, apologists will again clamor for TV time to rail against the injustice of Abu-Jamal's conviction. But if his followers really believe he is innocent, they should remain committed to the cause, whether he faces execution or not.

Their rallying cry is, after all, "Free Mumia." I would like to think that the Hollywood and Bay Area left have become wiser and now understand that the murder of a cop is not justifiable and cannot be overlooked because good liberals are too busy being righteous and denouncing the racist criminal justice system. Sure, there were a few left-wing loons who lionized Oakland cop-killer Lovelle Mixon, but local politicians knew which funeral to attend and whom not to defend.

Maybe the difference is that Dunakin, Romans, Sakai and Hege fell close to home.

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