

Ramblings

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Making a Hero of a Cop-Killer

A crusade is now under way on behalf of Mumia Abu-Jamal, who has spent the last eighteen years on Pennsylvania's death row after being found guilty of the murder of a police officer.

Those who have embraced this cause—claiming that, somehow, Abu-Jamal is a “political prisoner” rather than a murderer—are some of the nation's leading academicians. A full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* (May 7, 2000) demanding a new trial included such names as Toni Morrison, Noam Chomsky, Frances Fox Piven, Cornel West, Howard Zinn—and hundreds of others.

So popular is Abu-Jamal that he has been named a commencement speaker at Evergreen State College in Washington and, this year, at Antioch College in Ohio. His speeches were taped from Pennsylvania's death row.

In May, supporters of Abu-Jamal rallied by the thousands at Madison Square Garden to demand a new trial. Former New York Mayor David Dinkins addressed the crowd, demanding “a new trial, and unbiased judge and a competent lawyer.” He said: “If they come for me in the morning, they can come for you in the afternoon.”

Kent State University Professor Walter Davis declares that, “Mumia is the United States' Nelson Mandela” and charges that he was “wrongly tried” for his “political views.” Academics for Mumia Abu-Jamal boasts six hundred members, including Alice Walker, Jacques Derrida and Ramsay Clark. A host of Hollywood stars—Susan Sarandon, Woody Harrelson, Whoopi Goldberg, Ed Asner and Ossie Davis among others—have lent their support to Mumia's cause. Jesse Jackson has embraced him. San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown named August 16, 1997 “Justice for Mumia Abu-Jamal” day. Earlier that year, the City Council of Santa Cruz, California, passed a resolution that called for a new trial declaring “widespread evidence” and “illegal suppression of evidence of pressure on witnesses to falsely testify.” Similar resolutions have been passed in Detroit, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Madison, Wisconsin.

All of this seems reminiscent of the campaigns launched for the Rosenbergs, when they were convicted of espionage for the Soviet Union, and for others accused of betraying their country. Any relationship between the real facts of the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal and the campaign on his behalf is difficult to discover.

Consider the real facts of the case. On 4:00 a.m. on December 9, 1981, Philadelphia Police Officer Daniel Faulkner pulled over a 1963 blue Volkswagen traveling the wrong way down a one-way street. A scuffle broke out between

Faulkner and the car's driver, William Cook, a younger brother of Mumia Abu-Jamal. Soon gunshots rang out. The 25-year-old policeman was shot in the back and then in the face. Before being hit by the fatal bullet between his eyes, Faulkner was able to expend one round that hit Mumia Abu-Jamal in the chest. Within minutes, police reinforcements arrived on the scene and arrested Abu-Jamal.

Five eyewitnesses implicated Abu-Jamal in the murder. His .38 caliber gun containing five spent shell casings was found at the scene. Five bullets were fired at the officer. The shell casings and the fatal round retrieved from the officer's brain all matched; all were .38 caliber "Plus P" ammunition.

Six months later, Abu-Jamal, a former radio reporter who lost his job because of his radical views and his inability to be objective in his work, was put on trial, found guilty of the murder and sentenced to death. For a decade, little interest was shown in the case. Then in the 1990s, Abu-Jamal obtained a new, more political and media-savvy defense team. By this time, National Public Radio was running commentaries by Abu-Jamal, and his 1995 book, *Live from Death Row*, was making money and was required reading in many college courses. It has been translated into at least eight languages.

Since the facts of the case are clear, the defense team launched a political crusade defining Abu Jamal as a "political prisoner" rather than a murderer.

The facts, however, would not go away. The sworn statements of five people who witnessed portions, or the entirety, of the chain of events leading to the death of Officer Faulkner point clearly to Abu-Jamal as the killer. Witness number one, for example, was cabdriver Robert Chobert. He identified Mumia Abu-Jamal as Faulkner's murderer at the scene of the crime, in his police statements, and during his testimony. "Well, I let my fare out and I'm marking down on my pad how much it was, and then I heard a shot," Chobert testified in court. "I looked up, I saw a cop fall to the ground and then I saw Jamal standing over him and firing some more shots into him." He says that Abu-Jamal then attempted to flee but soon collapsed near the curbside.

Later, at the hospital, a witness heard Abu-Jamal defiantly speak out, "I shot the Motherf-----. I hope the motherf----- dies. I'm glad. If you let me out, I will kill all you cops."

In the summer of 1999, Philip Bloch, an anti-death penalty activist who befriended Abu-Jamal while working with a prison outreach group, revealed a startling conversation he had had with the celebrated inmate. Bloch says he asked Abu-Jamal several years earlier if he regretted killing Faulkner. Abu-Jamal responded by simply saying "Yes." "There was a long pause," Bloch told *Vanity Fair*. "I think we probably realized what he had just done."

The calls for a new trial are based not upon any real question about Abu-Jamal's guilt but upon fanciful assertions about the facts of the case. Speaking at a University of Wisconsin rally, anti-death penalty activist Rebecca Kirkland proclaimed that the police "didn't tell the jurors that the caliber of the gun used (to kill Faulkner) was a .38 caliber bullet, and it didn't fit Mumia's gun." In fact, of course, it did fit Mumia's own .38 caliber pistol.

In 1997, the defense team placed Pamela Jenkins on the witness stand, Jenkins

claimed that Cynthia White, a key prosecution witness during the 1982 trial, had recanted her entire testimony to her and had confessed that she had been forced to lie by the police fifteen years earlier. These private conversations between the two, Jenkins announced, were as recent as two months prior to Jenkins taking the witness stand in 1997. This quickly proved to be a total hoax as Cynthia White had been dead for many years during the time that Jenkins said she had talked with her. According to the Abu-Jamal defense team, White's 1992 death certificate was fabricated by authorities in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Another charge made is that racism was involved. "It was a racist situation," declared a speaker at a benefit rally. "There were no blacks on the jury." In fact, the jury seated for the trial included nine whites and three blacks. Ultimately, two blacks found the accused guilty and joined in handing down a death sentence. Among the defense allegations at a 1997 appeal was that the dismissal of one of the three original black jurors during the 1982 trial was designed to add more whites to the jury. The court pointed out the real reason for the dismissal:

This particular juror openly expressed a dislike for Abu-Jamal. Appellant now relies on that discussion to argue that the court actually "engineered" the removal of the juror. His claim is devoid of merit.

In his study, *Cop, Killer: How Mumia Abu-Jamal Conned Millions into Believing He Was Framed*. Dan Flynn, executive director of Accuracy in Academia, writes:

Quite clearly, the government didn't imprison Mumia Abu-Jamal for his political stances. It is equally clear that supporters of Abu-Jamal seek his release, not because of the evidence, but because he harbors left-wing views. In the very same breath that they condemn the supposed jailing of a man for his beliefs, they point to those same beliefs as the reason that he should be released. Unless one believes that murdering a policeman is a political statement, Mumia Abu-Jamal could not be considered a political prisoner.

The campaign in behalf of this convicted murderer tells us far more about the academicians and show business personalities who have embraced him than it does about his guilt or innocence. Rick Costello, President of the Fraternal Order of Police in Philadelphia says: "It disgusts me. A cop is the last identifiable minority it is OK to kill."

Maureen Faulkner, widow of the victim, declares:

. . . in the end, his attorneys and his supporters will still be haunted by the facts. Try as they might to wish that it wasn't so, Jamal was apprehended just forty seconds after the final shot was fired, sitting on the curb roughly ten feet from my dead husband's body, with a gun registered in his name at his side. The five spent shells will always be the same caliber (.38), brand (Federal Arms), and unique type (Plus P with a hollow base, which was only manufactured by Federal Arms) of ammunition as the bullet

removed from my husband's brain. . . . Despite all the cheering and applause, the testimony of the eyewitnesses to my husband's murder . . . will still be there.

The Failure to Teach U.S. History Is a Threat to the Future of Our Free Society

The American society is undergoing dramatic change as we enter the twenty-first century. In 1997, almost 10 percent of the population was foreign born, double the level of 1970 (4.7 percent) and the highest since 1930 (11.6 percent).

Today's immigrants come mainly from Latin America (51 percent in 1997) and Asia (27 percent), a huge change from 1970, when most came from Europe (62 percent) and Canada (9 percent).

Yet at the very moment when our population is rapidly changing, and we depend upon our public schools to transmit our history and the values of a free and democratic society to a population that is largely unfamiliar with such concepts, the failure to do so is becoming abundantly clear.

Consider the results of a survey of 800 students at the State University of New York (SUNY) conducted in January. Forty-five percent of the students could not correctly answer at least 7 of 10 basic American history questions. To become citizens, immigrants must answer at least seven of the 10 questions correctly. SUNY students fared even worse when asked 10 multiple-choice questions drawn from U.S. history Regents high school exams and 10 other general American-history questions.

For instance, 93.6 percent of those surveyed knew that Leonardo DeCaprio starred in the movie "Titanic." But 84 percent could not name New York's two U.S. senators. Many SUNY students couldn't list the order of major U.S. military initiatives in the twentieth century or name America's three World War II enemies.

The survey was commissioned by the Center for Excellence in Higher Education, an Albany-based think tank. "The center's survey reveals a shocking lack of knowledge about American history among State University students," said executive director Rom Carroll.

A survey of students at the nation's top 55 colleges and universities found a similar lack of historical knowledge. While nearly 100 percent of the soon-to-graduate students could identify cartoon characters Beavis and Butthead and the rapper Snoop Dogg, only 34 percent knew that George Washington was the American general at the Battle of Yorktown, the culminating battle of the American Revolution. A majority of the college seniors—who were asked questions from a high school achievement test—also could not identify Valley Forge, words from the Gettysburg Address or even basic principles of the U.S. Constitution.

It was found that students at 100 percent of these elite universities can go through four years of classes and graduate without taking a single American history course. "History is a discipline in decline," said Oscar Handlin, professor emeritus at the Harvard University. "There is a profound ignorance not only among students but among their teachers as well."

The survey, "Losing America's Memory, Historical Illiteracy in the 21st

Century,” was conducted in December 1999 at 55 colleges ranked by U.S. News and World Report as top research universities and liberal arts colleges. It was compiled by the Roper Organization at the University of Connecticut’s Center for Survey Research and Analysis.

The findings do not surprise James C. Rees, director of George Washington’s Mount Vernon. He states:

This report explains why visitors to Mount Vernon seem to know next to nothing about the real George Washington, and why they appear to be almost starved for American history. Our own studies have determined that history is being shortchanged in elementary schools, where even our greatest hero, George Washington, receives so little time and attention. Yet why should we be surprised, if these college graduates teaching these children have learned so little history themselves.

Historian David McCullough expressed concern over the study, which discovered that at 78 percent of the schools, students were not required to take any history courses at all.

The place given to history in our schools is a disgrace, and the dreadful truth is very few of those responsible for curriculum seem to care, even at the highest levels of education.

Mr. McCullough won the Pulitzer Prize for his recent biography of President Harry S. Truman.

Sean Lay, a professor of history at Coker College in South Carolina, used to give a quiz in historical literacy each semester to gauge his new students’ knowledge. Nearly all of them had no idea what decade the constitution was written in, says Mr. Lay, who has since given the quiz up. “I just assume the students are coming in, as John Locke put it, ‘tabula rasa,’” Mr. Lay said, invoking the Latin phrase for “blank slate.”

Some, in our era of “political correctness,” seem to believe that teaching the history of our country is, somehow, wrong. Winfield J. C. Myers, an editor at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute who has taught history at the University of Michigan and the University of Georgia, notes that

Americans rightly see themselves as part of Western culture, but many professors today maintain the posture that privileging American history is ethnocentric or Eurocentric, and the study of that field has declined. It’s a strange form of self-immolation: Many U.S. historians are afraid to speak out against the anti-Western ethos that reigns on so many campuses lest they be labeled “conservative” or “reactionary.” Yet the importance of their own profession has suffered from their intellectual cowardice. They’re burying themselves.

These trends are nothing new. A 1975 report by the Organization of American

Historians noted that the primary trend of recent decades has been the replacement of history in the high school curriculum with multicultural and ethnic studies, current events, consumer affairs, ecology, sociology and psychology. The report also found a sharp decline in the study of civics and government.

In the early 1980s, when 111 ninth graders in a Honolulu school were asked to write the Pledge of Allegiance, no one could do it correctly. One response described the United States as a nation “under guard” and dedicated “for richest stand.” A teacher, who asked not to be identified so her students would not be embarrassed, called the results frightening. She said all the students had spelling problems and had little grasp of what the pledge words meant. The word “indivisible,” for example, came out as “in the visible.” The teacher said that twelve students had trouble spelling the word “America.” The word appeared in some papers as “Americain,” “Americai,” “Amereca,” “Amicra,” and “Amica.” The teacher said, “I’m sick. I don’t know what to do or where to turn.”

These negative trends have accelerated at the present time. The latest round of scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that many of the Nation’s fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students failed to post even “proficient” scores on a test about civic knowledge and skills. About a fourth, the 1999 NAEP report said, failed to demonstrate a “basic” understanding of political institutions and practices.

Charles S. White, president of the Social Science Education Consortium, says that these results should serve as “a canary in a coal mine for the nation.” In his view,

Democracy in America cannot be sustained indefinitely if citizens lack fundamental civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. How ironic it is that while countries of the former Soviet bloc are struggling to hold on to a nascent democracy movement, America should allow its own democracy to slip out of its grasp.

Bill Galston, director of the University of Maryland’s Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, declares that,

Numerous recent surveys point to a common conclusion: Americans believe that we are economically prosperous but civically impoverished. If our young people are disengaged from public life, it is not they who are failing our country, it is we who are failing them by not providing suitable opportunities for civic learning and practice and by not sending clear messages about its importance. . . . It is time to end a generation of neglect and to give civic education its rightful place of honor in our national life.

The combination on increasing immigration and a decline in the teaching of our history and the values need to maintain a free society is a prescription for disaster. The schools are now receiving a needed wake-up call. Whether or not they will heed it, however, remains to be seen.

U.S. Is Increasingly Vulnerable to Terrorism, Which Has Changed Its Address and Its Goals

Early in June, a new congressionally mandated report on the changing threat of global terrorism warned that U.S. policies are “seriously deficient” in the face of a foe that is increasingly more dangerous and difficult to counter.

The National Commission on Terrorism report specifically faults the CIA for being “overly risk-averse” and criticizes the FBI for various “bureaucratic and cultural obstacles.”

The commission argues that the federal government has yet to adequately prepare for a “catastrophic terrorist threat or attack” involving biological agents, deadly chemicals or nuclear weapons. “We need to take better steps to get ahead of the curve on biological terrorism,” said L. Paul Bremer III, a former career diplomat who is chairman of the commission. “We need to be ready. And we’re not.”

This report follows one issued in May by the Department of State which says that the home base of world terrorism has shifted from the Middle East to South Asia, where Afghanistan serves as the primary safe haven for terrorists and Pakistan has supported violence in Kashmir.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that, “We are seeing an eastward shift in terrorism’s center of gravity, from the Middle East to South Asia, particularly Afghanistan.”

There has been a shift in the way terrorism works, the State Department reports. Aside from moving east to Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is breaking down into small networks of transnational groups not directly sponsored by states and now fueled by religion and ideology rather than politics.

Osama bin Laden, the fugitive Saudi extremist who allegedly masterminded the 1998 bombing of two U.S. embassies in East Africa, has sent terrorist trainers to at least seven countries, according to the State Department. Bin Laden was the only individual singled out for a page-long profile in the 107-page report. His organization has sent terrorist trainers throughout Afghanistan, where he has been given sanctuary by the ruling Taliban, as well as in Tajikistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and the separatist Chechen republic in Russia.

The group has also trained fighters from other countries, the report said, including the Philippines, Egypt, Libya, Pakistan and Eritrea. As a result, “Bin Laden believes he can call upon individuals and groups worldwide to conduct terrorist attacks,” the report warned.

The U.S. wants to try Bin Laden on charges of planning the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 224 people, but Afghanistan has resisted pressure to turn him over. Bin Laden first drew notice in the early 1980s when he helped finance, recruit transport and train Arab volunteers in the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. He founded Al Qaida, or “The Base,” as his operational organization for “like-minded extremists” during the war. His primary goals now are to drive U.S. forces from the Arabian Peninsula, to remove the Saudi ruling family from power and to “liberate Palestine.” His secondary goals are to

remove Western military forces and to overthrow what he calls corrupt Western-oriented governments in predominantly Moslem countries. Al Qaida has become a far-flung network with supporters around the world.

Bin Laden's operations in Afghanistan, including terrorist training camps, were largely responsible for the report's broader conclusion that the nexus of global terrorism is moving from its traditional base in the Middle East to remote regions of South Asia. The eastward shift became increasingly pronounced last year as several Middle Eastern nations, including Egypt and Jordan, cracked down on terrorist groups. For the first time in years, neither country suffered a major terrorist attack.

"Throughout the Middle East, I can report, there's improved cooperation in disrupting cells and extraditing terrorists back for trial, and this has paid dividends in the last year," said Ambassador Michael Sheehan, the State Department's director of counter-terrorism.

With less financial support from rogue governments, the new terrorist groups increasingly turn to Bin Laden and other individuals, as well as raise money from blackmail, drug trafficking and other forms of crime.

Events in the Philippines show the reach of the new terrorism. A secret military document links the Muslim separatists who have held tourists hostage in the southern Philippines with terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Osama bin Laden's organization, and the Pakistanis who hijacked an Indian Airlines jet last year. By working with foreign extremists, Philippine Muslim rebels receive "training, logistics, expertise and access to the international terrorist network," according to the military briefing paper, which was leaked to Asian media early in May.

The Philippine military believes Bin Laden is a primary financial backer of the Islamic extremist group Abu Sayyaf, which wants to create a "pure Islamic state" in the southern Philippines. It was also accused of plotting to assassinate the pope during a visit to the Philippines in January 1995. It has been linked to the deaths of more than 200 people in southern Philippines in the past five years.

Southeast Asian leaders worry that Abu Sayyaf and other Philippine rebels are not only importing foreign material but also exporting fundamentalist Islam to Indonesia, Malaysia and the West. "It's like everyone catching cold in the same room with central air-conditioning," Philippine Foreign Secretary Siazon declared, referring to the spread of militant Islam in Southeast Asia.

In the future, experts point out, terrorism cannot be effectively fought with methods that have worked in the past. In South Asia, unlike the Middle East, peacemaking between states does not offer the prospect of ameliorating underlying inequities that fuel terrorism.

Late in May, Secretary of Defense William Cohen warned that the U.S. faces a "quite real" threat of a terrorist nuclear, chemical or biological weapon attack on national soil within ten years. "We know that there are many nuclear weapons, small nuclear weapons that can be transported," he declared, arguing that the U.S. should prepare itself for an attack, which would involve such weapons of mass destruction.

The June report of the National Commission of Terrorism recommends a series of changes in the law. The panel suggests that the military, rather than the FBI or Federal Emergency Management Agency, lead the response to domestic terrorist attacks. Other recommendations include closely monitoring foreign students in the U.S., loosening restrictions on investigating terrorist suspects, and requiring visas for visitors from countries that do not cooperate fully in battling terrorism. The panel also proposed possible sanctions against Greece and Pakistan to guard against terrorism directed at the U.S.

Congress created this commission to evaluate U.S. laws, policies and practices for preventing and punishing terrorism aimed at U.S. citizens. While some of the proposals are indeed controversial, and it is essential that the civil liberties of Americans, as well as foreign students in the U.S., be protected, it is also clear that our unpreparedness to respond to a terrorist attack is a serious failure of public policy.

Recently, Michael Osterholm, a physician who runs the Infection Control Advisory Network, pointed out that doctors, not the military or police, will have to protect the public after a bioterrorist attack, but no hospital in the country is prepared. Anthrax bacteria released in a small shopping mall could cause a crisis requiring 2,600 intensive-care beds, a number “not available anywhere in the country,” according to Osterholm.

In addition, the government has only a few million doses of smallpox vaccine on hand, and at best enough antibiotics stockpiled for five million anthrax treatments. Even worse, says Osterholm, if doctors detected a contagious outbreak, such as smallpox, in most states they wouldn’t have the authority to quarantine a patient without a court order, allowing a sick person to spread disease to others.

We are far more likely to be victimized by a terrorist attack, for which we are unprepared, than any assault by an enemy nation, for which we are well prepared. This represents a serious failing on the part of our policy planners. Ω