

Panthers in Angola, La., in Death Trial

It is rare that a prisoner who has been railroaded manages to get his case belched back into active consideration by the court system. Albert Woodfox who as a Black Panther Party man was framed for the murder of a guard at Louisiana's largest prison in 1972 and has been in prison ever since, recently accomplished this feat. Unfortunately, it seems as if Woodfox is being driven back along those same rusty tracks, the end point of which is the the Louisiana state penitentiary at Angola.

In the early 1970s the state prison at Angola was not much different than seventy-five years ago, when the state bought the land from plantation owners to launch their convict lease program. But militant racial ferment had penetrated Angola, via a group of Black Panther members from New Orleans who had been jailed after a shoot-out with police that left three of their own and two sheriff's deputies dead.

Before their trial-in which they were acquitted-the Panthers took an "each one teach one" approach to the prisoners at the local parish jail. Two convict converts then took the Panthers to Angola. They were Albert Woodfox, originally imprisoned for armed robbery, but in prison after escaping to, then being arrested in and extradited from, New York City; and Herman Wallace, who was also convicted of armed robbery, staged several fantastic escapes, and was repeatedly recaptured.

At Angola, Woodfox and Wallace began organizing against systematic prisoner-on-prisoner rape, and forged links between black and white prisoners so that the administration wouldn't be able to continue playing them off against one another.

But when Brent Miller, a rookie guard (white, as all the guards were) and admired high school football player from a small town near Angola, was killed on April 17, 1972. Murder convictions were hung on Woodfox, Wallace, and two other black convicts. All claim they didn't do it. Hezekiah

Brown, the only witness to the murder, which was perpetrated by men with handkerchiefs over their faces, originally failed to identify the assailants. After several days of pressure from the Warden, Murray Henderson, Brown identified Woodfox, Wallace, and another black man. (A fourth prisoner, also a black activist, was later indicted as well.)

Brown, a convicted rapist, received clemency in 1986 with the help of supportive letters from Henderson. According to papers in the possession of Wallace's attorneys, other prison-

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ers received monthly rations of cigarettes, reduced sentences, and early releases in exchange for incriminating testimony against the Panthers.

Wallace has been in isolation since the original trial in '73. Woodfox received identical treatment until he managed to get his murder conviction overturned in 1992 and was sent to the Amite, LA, jail. But the state continued to hold Woodfox on his underlying armed robbery charge, and soon reindicted him for murder.

Anne Butler sat on the grand jury that re-indicted Woodfox. Though Butler authored *Dying To Tell*, a 1992 book about Angola, with Henderson (the former warden) and Butler's husband, the presiding judge was satisfied that she was appropriately unbiased. *Dying To Tell* has a chapter on Woodfox and Wallace called "Racist Pigs Who Hold Us Captive". The chapter assumes the men's guilt and

erroneously identifies Woodfox's original sentence as aggravated rape. In the grand jury trial the prosecutor, instead of calling witnesses, as is the standard procedure, simply had Butler stand up and explain the case.

Woodfox's retrial is scheduled to take place the week of December 7. There has been a change of venue to Tangipahoe Parish, where Miller, the slain guard, was born.

Julie Cullen, the prosecutor for the state attorney general, desired to present the case as a hate crime but was foiled by Louisiana's lack of any such statutes. Instead, Cullen plans to argue "racial animus" as the motive.

Citing old letters in Woodfox's file in which he spells "America" with a "kkk" and refers to his captors as "fascists" and "pigs," she explains, "I think this is a racially motivated Black Panther murder". Cullen also plans to introduce testimony from another of Woodfox's trials in which he makes "racial anti-white police authority kinds of statements", as she categorizes them.

The prosecution does face some problems. Cullen wanted former warden Henderson to testify, but Henderson was convicted of attempted murder in October: he shot his wife, Butler, and reportedly was watching her bleed to death when a maid walked by, saw the scene through a window, and called the police. Henderson tried to get out of the conviction with a "temporary insanity" plea didn't help matters.

Geronimo Pratt, the Black Panther leader who served nearly three decades on a murder conviction pinned on him in 1968 by the combined forces of the FBI's and LAPD's red squads, knew Woodfox and Wallace from back in those days.

Pratt recently spoke of their integrity from Ghana: "Woodfox and Wallace were some of our most disciplined soldiers. They are the kind of unsung heroes that we must support because they have asked for nothing from us for all the suffering they have suffered." ■

*School of the Americas***7,000 Rally Outside U.S. Death Squad School**

On November 22, this year over 2,370 people from all walks of life stepped forward from an assembly of 7,000, to risk arrest in a funeral procession which trespassed onto the U.S. military base at Fort Benning, Georgia. Overwhelmed by the number of mourners, the army did not take their names and issue citations as it has done in past years. It loaded them onto buses, drove them off base, and passed out form letters temporarily barring them from returning.

Fort Benning is home to the U.S. Army School of the Americas, and the marchers were mourning the victims of SOA alumni. Since 1946, the SOA has trained nearly 60,000 high-and low-ranking officers for the military and police forces that underpin U.S.-friendly regimes in twenty-three countries of the Western Hemisphere. In part, the SOA alumni list reads like a Rolodex of dictators, torturers and mass murderers.

Take the case of El Salvador, whose SOA grads are far from atypical. Between 1978 and 1992 75,000 died in civil war; 85% of the deaths have been attributed to government security forces or right-wing death squads. Roberto D'Aubisson, who attended the SOA in 1972, was a chief organizer of the death squad network and planned the assassination of Archbishop Romero. Major Armando Azmitia Melara, class of '67, commanded the Atlacatl battalion at the 1983 Lake Suchitlan massacre (117 killed), the 1984 Los Llanitos massacre (68 killed, mostly younger than 14), and the 1981 El Mozote massacre (many hundreds slaughtered). Colonel Jose Mario Godinez Castillo, a 1968 SOA pupil, commanded troops who committed 1,051 summary executions, 318 incidents of torture and 610 illegal detentions. Other Salvadoran SOA alumni include Colonel Napoleon Alvarado, implicated in the 1983 Las Hojas massacre; Sergeant Antonio Avalos Vargas, who led the unit that massacred six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in 1989; Colonel Carlos Aviles Buitrago and General Juan Bustillo, who aided in the planning and coverup of the Jesuit massacre. (General Bustillo is also wanted in France in connection with the torture, rape and murder of a 27-year-

old French nurse, Madeleine Lagadec.) The list goes on and on and on.

Last February, the Department of Defense issued a report to Congress "certifying" that the content of SOA instruction is consistent with the training provided to U.S. military students, "particularly with respect to the observance of human rights". A "comprehensive review of the School's training materials" showed "nothing inconsistent with U.S. law or human rights policy", according to the executive summary of the DOD's certification report to Congress. Said review was undertaken by a military agency called

Since 1946, the School has trained nearly 60,000 Latin officers.

TRADOC, which created a Board of Visitors in 1996 to provide civilian input into SOA "policy, curriculum, educational philosophy, effectiveness, and learning resources". The Board's "international human rights attorney" is Steven Schneebaum of Patton Boggs. In 1997, Schneebaum told the rest of the Board he believes that human rights are an integral part of the SOA's curriculum. "Is it perfect?" he asked. "No. But all human endeavors can be improved. For example, the basic course might be improved by including discussion of amnesties for abusers of human rights during previous regimes, an important issue in a number of Latin American countries about which there is considerable political and academic debate."

The DOD report admitted that the Army "does not keep track of the 57,000 School of the Americas graduates." Based on information provided by U.S. embassies, however, the DOD concluded that 1996 SOA graduates are "providing valuable service to their respective countries" in "military, police, government, and humanitarian capacities". The DOD's definition of "valuable service" may not be widely shared by the citizens of Latin America. Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer Suarez (SOA '56), whose repressive meth-

ods of silencing opponents became a model for strongmen throughout Latin America, was inducted into the SOA "Hall of Fame" in 1988 and invited to return as a guest speaker in 1989.

The Pentagon report noted that "demographics of SOA students, like SOA courses, reflect current U.S. foreign policy goals for Latin America." In 1996, half of SOA students came from Mexico, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, reflecting the demise of the Cold War and the emergence of the War on Drugs as the primary excuse for U.S. intervention in the region. Tuition for the School's students is mostly paid by the International Military Education and Training program, funded by Congress, with expanded training funds for civilian School trainees.

A third program that funds the School's students is called International Narcotics Law Enforcement Affairs, created to wage the drug war. At a time when Guatemala was prohibited from receiving U.S. military training funds, Narcotics Law Enforcement paid to send Guatemalan students and a guest instructor to the School. ■

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