

Huey Newton: An Imprisoned Legend

THE WASHINGTON POST Saturday, June 6, 1970 A3

Legend Remains Defiant

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SAN DIEGO
Calif., June 5—“Time has passed very fast for me, too fast, even here,” Huey Newton, a founder and minister of defense of the Black Panther Party, spoke softly, with the slight Southern tones of the Louisiana-born.

“It goes slowly for the other prisoners. It’s very boring. But their agony is different than mine. They feel if only they can get out, have a house and a car and children, live with some dignity. But that’s because they are not socially conscious, they don’t realize that even if you have those things the system really controls it all.”

Newton, now 28, is the party’s theoretician and its inspiration. More than that, in the years of his incarceration, he has become a kind of national legend, a mystical shadowy figure whose image was forged by others in the party and largely by the famous poster showing Newton, looking ferocious, seated in an African chair with a zebra skin, a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other. The image persisted and Newton, who was jailed almost as soon as he rose to prominence, was not around to confirm or dispute it.

‘Just a Transfer’

“My Gettin’ out,” Newton continued, “is just a transfer for institutional convenience. Since America is a prison of a sort, I’m just going from maximum to medium security.”

Newton was interviewed at the California Men’s Colony, a 3,800-inmate, barrack-like prison in the beautiful hilly countryside some 200 miles northwest of Los Angeles where he has been for more than two years. Before that, he spent nearly a year in Alameda County jail before and during his trial on a charge of killing an Oakland policeman.

Now, it appears that Newton may be freed. Last week the California Court of Appeals reversed his conviction for voluntary manslaughter on the grounds that the trial judge had failed to instruct the jury on the defense position that Newton was unconscious during the shooting. Newton’s attorney says the appeal will take 30 days, but that he will appeal the ruling.

A Rebirth

“If Huey gets out, it will be a rebirth,” said David Hilliard, Panther chief of staff, in Oakland. “It will give our party new life.” Most of the Panther Party



Associated Press

Huey Newton, with shotgun and handfull of ammunition, stands in front of Panther office before imprisonment.

are either dead, in exile or in prison.

It is hard, being out of prison to Newton for more than an hour, to reconcile the legend with the man. (One is shocked, for example, to learn he studied to be a concert pianist for five years.) Dressed in a freshly starched prison dungaree uniform, his hair in a moderate Afro, Newton comes across as a gentle figure. He is warm and open, self-possessed.

It is not that nearly three years of prison have softened him. On the contrary, they seem to have clarified his thoughts and strengthened his resolve.

He will say things like, "If I had a written guarantee that this system could not be changed, I would still do

the same thing. I would hurt my body at the oppressor with contempt, hurt my life in his face, because I refuse to live under the present conditions."

But there is in it none of the abrasive hyperbole that made many fear the Panthers in the early years. Or, one wonders, perhaps the difference is that the times have caught up to what the Panthers were saying years ago: that there had been riots against the Panthers, that there was such a thing as the Chicago Panther killings.

In any case, Newton is concerned with image problems and personality cults—one of the things he hopes to correct if and when he gets out. Already, he has ordered that the chair pos-

ter no longer be distributed, or the picture printed in the Panther paper.

"I'm partially at fault for that," he said, "I was at Eldridge Cleaver's pad and he told me about this great idea for a poster. He had this chair and the vebra skin and so forth. At the time I didn't think too much about it. Then the picture comes out and I'm sort of embarrassed."

"I don't mind the ferocious part, but this bloody kind of thing I don't like. . . . I'm going to have to live this down. It usurps the importance of the movement."

Newton's first effort on the outside would be to organize the movement to free other Panthers and black prisoners, such as the Soledad brothers, accused of killing a prison guard here in California. Mass political pressure can work in this respect, he believes.

'Power of the People'

"I'm being released not through any court leniency but because of the influence and power of the people," he said. "The people are definitely responsible and I want to put it out that they are responsible and that they can do it again by freeing Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, George Jackson, and other comrades."

Newton plans to ask the United Nations to sponsor Eldridge Cleaver's return to the United States under U.N. immunity as a political exile. Clearly, Newton wants to piece back together the fragmented structure of the Panther Party.

There is also a plan, already in the works, for a new national constitutional convention—"the first revolutionary conference since the original one," Newton calls it.

His vision of a new American system melds a form of pure socialism with the realities of American life as he sees it. There would be national ownership of industry and community control of institutions—both designed to benefit ethnic and racial segments of the population along proportional lines.

Proportional Shares

Thus, the profits of the oil industry, for example, would be shared by the blacks in accordance with their percentage of the total population; similarly with the Indians, and so forth. Also, the authority in local communities would be distributed along the same lines.

Newton argued that this is not a form of separatism or cultural nationalism, but merely recognizes the reali-

ties of racism in the country.

"We would be fooling ourselves to think that all of a sudden a few hundred years of racism will die," he said. "We can't be blind and spout ideologies and not recognize the objective facts. Ethnic proportionalism will ultimately die out as poverty and racism dies out, but it will take time."

In the meantime, while waiting the decision on his release, Newton occupies himself with writing (he is writing a book) and doing exercises in his 10-by-7-foot cell, where he spends 21 hours a day (except for meals and for visits, which are frequent). Because he has to work without wages, he has

been denied privileges such as a radio, and except for the San Francisco Chronicle, he may read only materials relating to his case.

Newton offered to pay room and board, if the prison would pay him \$1.65 an hour for the work they wanted him to do as a mess cook. Since the prison does a profitable business with other government agencies for products made by inmates, Newton insisted the 3 to 10 cents an hour the prisoners received amounted to exploitation.

He has been up for parole twice and denied it both times.

He has only three books—an autobiography of W.E.B. Dubois, a book on the Scottsboro case and "Rebellion or Revolution," by Harold Cruse. His contact with the



United Press International

Huey Newton pensively smokes a cigarette at men's prison in California.

outside world is limited to the one newspaper and what he gets from his attorneys and visitors.

"I feel I'm in touch, for some strange reason," he

said. "I have visitors fairly often. They are my gazette."

He is a trim 160 pounds, after dieting away 30 additional pounds he had picked up from eating starchy prison food.

When and if he gets out, he will return to Oakland, where he was raised and where his parents live. He is unmarried and expects to remain that way.

"In order to marry I have to compromise. I have to have children who will be infected with racism as soon as they take the first breath. I have to have a house that costs \$15,000 but for which I pay \$30,000 for 50 years. I refuse to have the kind of family they want me to have. I refuse to take any kind of profession" (Newton has a degree in social science from Merritt College, plus a year of law school. The words are spoken without anger, but quietly, almost as if describing someone else.

"Most of my personality is crushed. All I have is a love for the people and what could be, and hate for the system that has destroyed my personality and people like me.

"But the crushing also causes a redemption. I realize the value of love. Everything else has been taken away."