



Ron Brown's Body

WAS THE COMMERCE
SECRETARY SHOT?
NOW LEFT-WING NUTS
HAVE A CLINTON MURDER
MYSTERY OF THEIR
VERY OWN. BY BYRON YORK

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Mark Thompson didn't quite know what to do. It was Christmas Eve, and Thompson, dressed in black with short-cropped dreadlocks, Malcolm X glasses, and a gilt-edged Bible, had come to the entrance of Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington to protest the government cover-up of the "assassination" of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown. But the man who was supposed to lead the demonstration, activist, diet-peddler, and former comedian Dick Gregory, hadn't shown up. And the Army public relations man was telling Thompson he was in the wrong place. The hospital doesn't have anything to do with this, the PR man said. You want the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology—which is up Georgia Avenue, over one street, and then down Alaska Avenue.

Thompson, a former student activist who founded the District of Columbia Umoja Party—the name means "unity" in Swahili—stalled for a while. Gregory probably has a plan, he told the Army flack. He knows what he's doing. Meanwhile, more protesters were showing up. A few Umoja Party members. A couple of representatives from the Nation of Islam. Kufi-hatted followers of the Reverend Willie Wilson (best known as Mayor Marion Barry's spiritual guru and substance abuse adviser). At least one official of the Lyndon LaRouche organization. And a woman who talked about nuclear disarmament. All had gathered to demand the truth about Ron Brown's death. And all were waiting for Dick Gregory.

Finally Gregory walked up, looking gaunt and disheveled in baggy sweatpants and a rumpled overcoat. His publicist tagged along, carrying a folder full of press releases. Thompson walked over to meet them and confer on the location mix-up. A few minutes later, Gregory addressed the crowd.

It appears we're in the wrong place, he said. So we're going to stage an impromptu march to the pathology institute. But first,

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Gregory wanted to say a few words about their mission. Last year the government claimed Ron Brown died when his plane crashed into a hillside in Croatia. But now there's word Brown had a .45 caliber bullet hole in the top of his head. And it wasn't just a rumor; it was coming from sources inside the government. "We didn't dream up some misinformation," Gregory said, as people in the crowd responded with murmurs of "that's right" and "yes sir." "We were told by people with the government that there might have been reasons for an autopsy or an investigation." *That's right.*

Now, Gregory said, the time has come to demand action. "We don't know what will come out of this—*that's right*—but we know one thing. We asking for an independent investigation." *Yes sir, yes sir.* "And it's not gonna stop here," Gregory continued. *No, no.* "We want the government to know that this is just one day." *Mm-hmm, yes.* And the marchers, Gregory continued, were already making their presence known. "Them thugs in there—*yes sir*—all the way down to the Pentagon—*that's right*—don't you think they don't know we here." *Mm-hmm.* "Don't you think for one minute that the president, he might be out shopping with Chelsea, but he know. Trust me." *Amen.* "So as we march, understand today is our day to shop for truth and justice." *That's right. Truth for Christmas.*

With that, the little group fell into line for the march up Georgia Avenue. While Thompson recruited volunteers to carry a banner calling for a Brown investigation, a faint voice began to sing. *Go tell it on the mountain.* It was the nuclear disarmament woman. A couple of people joined in. *Over the hills and everywhere.* Then the booming voice of Mark Thompson picked up the tune. *Go tell it on the mountain. We want the truth to be told.*

THE NEW VINCE FOSTER

From April 3, 1996, the day that Ron Brown's jet slammed into a mountainside in Croatia, there have been rumors that the Secretary of Commerce—the highest-ranking African-American in the Clinton administration—might have been murdered.

The talk was largely confined to black radio until early December, when the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, the newspaper owned by Richard Mellon Scaife, published a story headlined "Experts Differ on Ron Brown's Head Wound." Free-lance reporter Christopher Ruddy quoted an Air Force pathologist who said there was a perfectly round .45 inch hole in the top of Brown's skull. The pathologist, Lt. Col. Steve Cogswell, had not seen Brown's body, but provided Ruddy with photos and X-rays he said pointed to the possibility that the hole was a gunshot wound.

A few days later, Ruddy published a second story quoting another pathologist, one who had actually glimpsed the Commerce Secretary's body. That doctor, Army Lt. Col. David Hause, said he was working on a body a short distance away from Brown's when he heard people talking about the circular hole in the skull. Hause told Ruddy he went over to Brown's body and took a

look. "Sure enough," he told Ruddy, "it looks like a gunshot wound to me, too."

There were several problems with the story. First, the pathologist who actually examined Brown's body, Air Force Col. William Gormley, said the hole was not actually a hole; that is, it did not fully penetrate the skull. It was, rather, a circular indentation in the top of the skull. In addition, full-body x-rays did not reveal the presence of a bullet in the body. And Gormley found no exit wound to suggest that a bullet had passed through the body. To top it off, Ruddy's story paid scant attention to Brown's other injuries, which included a broken pelvis, burns, and severe head lacerations.

Beyond that, Ruddy did not suggest any scenario in which Brown might have been shot. Did a suicide killer—perhaps a stowaway, or maybe even someone who was authorized to be on the plane—shoot Brown during the flight and then somehow cause the crash in order to cover the crime? Was Brown shot before the flight and his body loaded onto the plane—without the knowledge of the 34 staffers and business figures who accompanied him—and then the plane crashed accidentally? Did Brown survive an accidental or intentional crash, only to be finished off by someone at the crash site? To even outline such scenarios would seem a bit crazy, so Ruddy simply laid out a suspicious-sounding set of assertions and let his readers fill in the blanks.

And fill in the blanks they did. The story took off in the black press, talk radio, and TV. Within days after the articles appeared, Ruddy was invited to appear on Black Entertainment Television's "Tonight" show. He also made the rounds of black talk radio, appearing on Joe Madison's syndicated program and on WOL radio in Washington, the station that has become a clearinghouse for Brown conspiracy information. The story took on a bi-partisan cast when another black radio host, former Republican presidential candidate Alan Keyes, joined the group calling for an investigation. "The perception that a possible assassination of a cabinet officer does not merit the vigorous attention of Con-

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gress because that cabinet officer is black," Keyes said, "reinforces lingering suspicions...that, even at the highest levels, black life is cheap in America."

Dick Gregory jumped in at the very beginning. "I've always felt that Ron Brown's death was a murder," he said during an interview with Ruddy on WOL. "My shock is the story got out." Gregory's words got wider play a few days later when Louis Farrakhan's *Final Call* newspaper quoted him extensively in a story headlined "Was Ron Brown Murdered?" In New York, the *Amsterdam News* ran a Brown story on the front page. About the same time, former mayoral candidate and Tawana Brawley adviser Al Sharpton got in the act, suggesting that Brown's death was treated like those of others who have been "marginalized by society." By December 20, the *Washington Afro-American* was also on the case.

The media exposure brought quick political reaction. Rep. Maxine Waters, chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, wrote a letter to Attorney General Janet Reno saying the Brown allegations had "sparked a firestorm of inquiries" to her office. Waters asked for a Justice Department investigation; she also wrote to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff requesting a military briefing for members of the caucus. A few days later, the NAACP weighed in when president Kweisi Mfume called for an investigation. "The NAACP is very concerned about the ramifications of these allegations," Mfume wrote in a letter to Reno. "Left unanswered and unresolved, they raise serious questions."

The quick spread of the Brown allegations began to resemble another story that had raced through black media just a year earlier: accusations, first published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, that the CIA had introduced crack into black neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Indeed, nearly all of the people who are now fanning the flames on the Brown story were also involved in promoting the CIA/crack theory. Joe Madison, for example, devoted thousands of hours of air time to the drug allegations—and still stands behind them, despite the lack of any solid evidence to support his case. The same goes for Waters, who has said she has no doubt that the crack rumor is true. And for Mfume, who called the allegations a "cancer" on the CIA.

What went virtually unnoticed amid all the investigation talk was the issue of Ruddy's credibility. Before writing about Brown, Ruddy spent three years trying to promote the theory that deputy White House counsel Vincent Foster was murdered. His reporting was devastatingly refuted last fall with the release of Whitewater independent counsel Kenneth Starr's final report, which laid out an extensive body of evidence showing conclusively that Foster killed himself. Undaunted, Ruddy accused Starr of a cover-up. But at the same time, he turned his attention to Ron Brown.

The Brown conspiracy theorists don't seem to want to hear anything about Ruddy's questionable reporting. During a recent program on WOL, a caller challenged Ruddy's work, saying he was a "right-winger" who had pushed false conspiracy theories about Foster's death. The radio host nearly shouted the man down and moved on to the next believer.

ROUSING THE RABBLE

After their Christmas Eve protest got off to a shaky start, Gregory and his group of about 50 supporters finally made their way to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, a windowless, coffin-like structure on the western side of the Walter Reed grounds. Local TV crews had assembled a makeshift microphone stand, and Mark Thompson introduced the speakers.

Joe Madison was there. So was Walter Fauntroy, a local civil-rights figure who struck a slightly jarring note when he thanked God "that technology and science make it possible to exhume bodies and to examine them for the truth." Willie Wilson compared the Brown questions to Biblical times when, he said, the public was "being deluded, and lied to, and lied on, and lied about and deceived." Then Gregory took the microphone.

"Two thousand years ago, there was a bright light in the sky, followed by some wise folks," he began. *Oh yeah.* "We thank God for another bright light in the form of Lt. Col. Cogswell, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, Christopher Ruddy, and the black press." Yes, yes. But some people, Gregory said, particularly those in high office, don't seem to want to know the truth about Ron Brown. "We wonder why the president have been so silent." *All right.* "We wonder why the major white press have



been so silent." Yes. "I know dern good and well, had this institution here said they found enough cocaine in Ron Brown's blood and those two pilots to destroy a town, every paper would have reported it and the president would have made a statement." *That's right. Make it plain, make it plain.*

Gregory told his followers to beware a government plot to cover up the true circumstances of Brown's death. "I know they somewhere now planning a trick investigation," he said. "It's not going to work because we've got us a committee, of ya'll all." *That's right. Mm-hmm. "We're gonna get the truth out of this one." Mm-hmm.*

It seemed the little rally was coming to a close when Gregory reached into his coat pocket. "We see this in the ghetto," he said, pulling out a roll of yellow police tape. *All right. Mm-hmm. "We don't know if a crime been committed, but we're gonna tie this around the gate and declare this a crime scene." All right. Yes. "We're gonna shut this street down." That's right.*

Gregory tied the tape to the gate of the Institute, then slowly walked across the road and looped it around a telephone pole. He walked back to the gate, then back across the street, until he had run three loops across Alaska Avenue. A couple of protesters brought the banner to the center of the street. Gregory then slowly sat down on the pavement in front of the banner. He said nothing. Mark Thompson opened his Bible. "This will be a sign to you," he read. "You will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger..."

A couple of cars coming up the street came to a halt, the drivers looking a bit quizzical. The crowd began to sing. *Go tell it on the mountain.* Gregory stared at the asphalt. Thompson kept reading. Then the disarmament woman barged in on the scene. "No more arms sales by United States profiteers," she chanted. "No more hypocrisy. No more American dead in Bosnia. No more liar Clinton." Gregory sat perfectly still.

A DC police officer walked over to Gregory and warned he would be arrested if he did not leave the street. Camera crews moved in closer, but Gregory did not acknowledge them. A few minutes later, the officer came back with a second warning; still no reaction. Finally, a third warning. "At this time, you are under arrest," the officer said, slipping handcuffs on Gregory while the cameras rolled. The army flack watched from inside the gates.

As Gregory was led to a police car, Mark Thompson told the crowd it was time to go home. He wished everyone a merry

Christmas and walked over to chat with Gregory's publicist. Thompson seemed worried that Gregory's jailers at the Fourth Police District might not hold Gregory as long as he hoped. "He's gonna try to spend Christmas there," Thompson said, "but I don't know if they're gonna keep him or not." As it turned out, Gregory did manage to stay in jail through Christmas (by refusing to post a \$25 bond). When he got out, he began a Ron Brown hunger strike.

WHAT'S A WHITE HOUSE TO DO?

On December 17, White House spokesman Mike McCurry was asked whether he gave any credence to the Brown-was-shot stories:

Absolutely none. And credence is only given to those reports by entities associated with Richard Mellon Scaife. And we are right back into another one of these chasing a story that's been ginned up by people who no doubt for whatever reason hate the President of the United States....It's time to knock this stuff off. And I'm not going to talk about this further or take any further questions on the subject.

McCurry's words were familiar to anyone who has followed the White House's smear-the-accuser response to allegations of Clinton wrongdoing. While the tactic has been enormously successful against legitimate questions about issues from Travelgate to Filegate to Whitewater to campaign finance, it probably won't work against the baseless accusations of the Ron Brown story. Because now, there is a powerful racial element in play: It is one thing for the president to call his Whitewater critics right-wing nuts, but quite another for him to cavalierly dismiss the concerns of black supporters. Already, the Brown conspiracy leaders are saying they take the White House response as a sign of disrespect. "This is absolutely an insult," Joe Madison said of McCurry's comments. "Not only to the Brown family, but an insult to all of us."

And instead of being portrayed as Clinton-hating kooks, the accusers will likely receive sympathetic treatment in the mainstream press. At the height of the CIA/crack controversy, for example, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page account of the most wild-eyed speculation with the headline "Conspiracy Theories Can Often Ring True; History Feeds Blacks' Mistrust." A short time later, the *Los Angeles Times* ran its own page-one story entitled "History Fuels Outrage Over Crack Allegations; Many Blacks Are More Likely Than Whites To Believe CIA Had Role In L.A.'s Drug Epidemic."

So the administration will almost certainly be forced to begin an investigation. And not just any investigation—remember what Gregory said about a "trick" inquiry. And whatever kind of probe the White House conducts, it will surely be denounced as inadequate, which will result in calls for a more extensive second investigation. And even then, Gregory, Madison, and their followers will maintain that a massive cover-up has taken place.

It's a no-win situation. Bill Clinton may find it's tougher dealing with his conspiracy-minded friends than with his enemies. ❧

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