

WHO IS HERMAN BELL?

I was born in rural Mississippi on 14 January 1948. My folks were sharecroppers, which is an economic relationship whereby white people own the land and black people work the land. It's a legacy of the U.S. Civil War of 1861, at the end of which northern industrialists re-enfranchised the ex-slave-owning rebellious south, but took no steps to safeguard the freedoms and rights of the ex-slaves. This oversight, intentional or otherwise, paved the way for former slave owners and white racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan to maim, murder, and terrorize black people with impunity. The result is that from 1871-1964, black people could not vote in the south or do much of anything else without white people's permission. Blacks produced this wealth in the south, and white landowners reaped the benefits. Whites controlled the instruments of political power: the legislature, the courts, and the police. Such were the social and economic conditions into which I was born.

In July 1955, I went to live with my father in Brooklyn, New York. As the rural-to-urban cultural shock diminished, I discovered the world through new eyes. Obviously, the vision of a seven-year-old child, as I was then, lacked the clarity and understanding that I later acquired. Yet even then, the Negro community was abuzz with concerted activity centered on uplift and improvement in Negro life in America, and regarded education as the chief means by

which advancement could be made. I became a talented football star and won a scholarship to play football in the Bay Area.

I arrived in Oakland, California, to play football in the fall of 1967. And the place - Vietnam - where many young black men and young white men were sent to die fighting a people they knew nothing about, had become a household name. Malcolm X and Dr. King had been assassinated. Medgar Evers, Fred Hampton, and Mark Clark had been assassinated.

For me and many other young, impressionable, and idealistic black men and women, joining the Black Panther Party was the most logical thing to do; through its survival programs, it sought to educate, protect, and organize the Black community.

The U.S. FBI's counter-intelligence program, called COINTELPRO (a continuation of this suppression campaign to stifle black political aspirations), sought to destroy all black political organizations in the U.S. by any means necessary. Its operation is largely responsible for the deaths and imprisonment of a significant number of young black leaders of the stormy '60s and '70s. By initiating search-and-destroy missions under the guise of "criminal" investigations, the FBI attempted to criminalize all forms of movements for social change. State and local police agencies were covertly recruited in the suppression of black political aspirations. This further exacerbated what had already been perceived as an unambiguous racist policy of police malevolence: willful

brutality, excessive use of deadly force, and general disrespect of Black people's rights. The result is that scores of policemen, at that time, were seriously injured or fatally shot in the Black community. People were killed on both sides, families and lives were destroyed, and it's regrettable, because this could have been avoided.

THE CASE

I was part of the black struggle for self-determination movement. It's now widely known from documents revealed by the Congressional 1976 Church Committee Report (which was not admitted as evidence during my trial) that a secret U.S. domestic repression campaign to stifle black political aspirations for self-determination - called Cointelpro - existed to neutralize and discredit black organizations and black leaders; the Black Panther Party was high on this list of targeted black organizations. Because of relentless covertly-joint FBI and local police attacks on the BPP, I went underground in 1971. Under Cointelpro, "frame-ups," secret deals, coercion, threats, intimidations, and planted news articles were all part of its strategy to criminalize the Black Liberation Movement. Given these daunting circumstances, one either went underground or left the country - I chose to stay.

On 2 September 1973, I was captured

and illegally extradited to New York City on charges of having killed two NYC policemen. Along with four co-defendants, we pled not guilty. No eyewitness identified me as one of the assailants, and the prosecutor produced no eyewitnesses. I was not even put in a "lineup." The jury was unable to reach a verdict during the first trial. Torture by law enforcement personnel, coerced witnesses, perjured testimony, manufactured and circumstantial material evidence in conjunction with prosecutorial and judicial misconduct are what persuaded the jury to convict 3 out of the 5 of us at the end of our second trial. (We were sentenced to 25-years-to-life.) Years of state and federal appeals have been unsuccessful, and I am writing this not to make light of the charges against me or of the conviction. Rather, I am writing to explain the conditions as I knew them then. The decades of the '60s and '70s were turbulent, and I regret that there was loss of life resulting from those turbulent times. One can object strongly to the tactics employed back then (and that cuts both ways) without denying that the motivation was not self-interest, but was a political will to counter state misconduct and bring about political change. Many people from those days have moved on, have been forgiven, have been allowed to go on and live productive lives (while others were sent to prison and are still carrying that burden). The past is behind me now, and I wish to move on.

Write Herman Bell:

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Related information:

freehermanbell.org

Local group supporting Herman Bell:

NYC Anarchist Black Cross

NYC Anarchist Black Cross is a collective focused on supporting US-held political prisoners and prisoners of war and opposing state repression against revolutionary social justice movements.

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