

Cages of Steel



The Politics Of
Imprisonment In
The United States

Edited by
Ward Churchill

and

J. J. Vander Wall

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MAISONNEUVE PRESS

Washington, D.C. 1992

Some of the material in this book was originally published in a special issue of *New Studies on the Left*. Thanks is due to the Saxifrage Publications Group for permission to reprint. Heather Rhoades' article appears courtesy of *The Progressive*, in which it first ran. Kuwasi Balagoon's poem originally appeared in *Breakthrough*. The bio-sketches of Sekou Odinga, Albert "Nuh" Washington, Lucy Berríos Berríos, Alcía Rodríguez, Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, and Carmen Valentín were adapted from items initially published in *Can't Jail the Spirit*. Susan Saxe's "Telling Someone" was first published in *Gay Community News*. Thanks also to *Bulldozer* for permission to use Jim Campbell's piece on Trenton, and to the *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation* for permission to use its transcription of Julio Rosado's talk and Laura Whitehorn's essay on preventive detention.

A number of individuals made significant contributions to the various stages of the project which resulted in *Cages of Steel*. These include, most prominently, Hanif Shabazz-Bey, Cindy Bowden, Bob Brown, "Down Town" Fay Brown, Nilak Butler, Bobby Castillo, Chrystos, Claire Culhane, Paulette D'Auteuil-Robideau, Bruce Ellison, Larry Giddings, Brian Glick, Mariana Guerrero, Stuart Hanlon, Nancy Horgan, Kim Jackson, Ellen Klaver, Bill Kunstler, Winona LaDuke, Pat Levasseur, Ojore N. Lutalo, Dian Million, Ahmed Obafemi, Jim Page, Ellen Ray, Mike Riegle, Bob Robideau, Bill Schapp, Afeni Shakur, Doug Spaulding, David Stonebreaker, Jan Susler, Luis Talamantez, Flint Taylor, John Thorne, and Kwame Turé. Of course, Bob Merrill and the folks at Maisonneuve Press have proven unstinting in their commitment to seeing this book in print. To the others, too numerous to name, who've shared thoughts and writing and their spirit of resistance: you know who you are, and you know our appreciation and gratitude are real.

Cover photo courtesy of the Library of Congress. Frontice page image courtesy of Tasso Stathopoulos, Baltimore, MD.

Ward Churchill and J. J. Vander Wall, *Cages of Steel: The Politics of Imprisonment in the United States*.

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P. O. Box 2980, Washington D.C. 20013

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Printed in the U. S. by BookCrafters, Fredricksburg, VA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cages of steel : the politics of imprisonment in the United States / edited by Ward Churchill and J. J. Vander Wall.

Includes bibliographical references and index

1. Political prisoners--United States. 2. Imprisonment--United States. 3. Criminal justice, Administration of--United States. I. Churchill, Ward. II. Vander Wall, Jim.

HV9471.C22 1992

365'.6'0973--dc20

92-25512

CIP

ISBN 0-944624-17-0 paperback, acid-free paper.

for

George Jackson



“Security” (photo: Ken Sturgeon)

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others who were and are the best of my generation, and the generations before and after my own. I understand the reality and the necessity of the struggle in which I have engaged, am engaged, and will continue to engage until my last breath. I can still laugh, and I continue to love, so the damage is not so great as one might expect (or my enemies might hope). All power to the people.



Black Panthers in New Haven, CT, call the public attention to the imprisonment of their members. (photo: Library of Congress)

Ward Churchill

A Person Who Struggles for Liberation— An Interview with Geronimo Pratt

Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt (s/n: Elmer Gerard Pratt) is one of the longest-held prisoners of war in the United States today, having been incarcerated in California's maximum security facilities for more than 18 years. On July 28, 1972, Pratt—a much-decorated Vietnam veteran and then head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP)—was convicted of the “Tennis Court Murder” of white school teacher Caroline Olsen in Santa Monica on the evening of December 18, 1968. He was sentenced to a seven-year-to-life term under then-prevailing California sentencing guidelines. At the time of his conviction, he had already spent nearly two years in maximum security lockup awaiting trial on a variety of charges (most of which resulted in his acquittal). Since being imprisoned, he has served more time in solitary confinement than any other prisoner of the U.S., a total of eight years. The average time served in California on a murder conviction is four years. At Pratt's last parole hearing, in November 1987, LA Deputy District Attorney Dianne Visanni made clear that he was being kept in prison, not because he is thought by the state to be a “murderer,” but because he is “still a revolutionary man.”

Through it all Pratt has consistently maintained he was some 350 miles north of Santa Monica—in Oakland, attending a national leadership meeting of the BPP—on the night of the Olsen murder. He also maintains the FBI has always been aware of his innocence, given that the Bureau electronically surveilled the meeting in question. At trial, the FBI denied the existence of such taps and bugs. It was later forced to admit that it had indeed electronically monitored the meeting, but then claimed to have “lost” the logs which would have served to exonerate the defendant. The Bureau also initially denied having infiltrated Pratt's defense team or having placed undercover operatives on the stand to testify against him; in fact, the FBI was later forced to reveal that it had done both. Finally, the FBI denied at trial that it had a “particular interest” in Pratt, but it was later established that he had been listed in the Bureau's “National Security Index” and his

picture included in its “Black Nationalist Photo Album” of individuals the FBI considered prime targets for what it termed “neutralization.”

Since Geronimo Pratt’s trial, more than 100,000 pages of FBI documents released under provision of the Freedom of Information Act with regard to his case prove beyond doubt that he was a principle focus of the illegal COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) campaign conducted by the Bureau against the Panthers during the late 1960s and early ’70s. The documented scope of FBI operations during this exercise in political repression included the massive infiltration of agents provocateurs into the BPP and the use of these provocateurs to systematically spread rumors within the party and the black community, a tactic designed to sow discord in both quarters. Cartoons and other bogus “literature” were also produced and distributed by agents in the party’s name, another ploy aimed to drive wedges between the Panthers and their base of community support. This placed the FBI in a perfect position to foster “shooting wars” between the Panthers and other organizations such as the Black P. Stone Nation in Chicago and Ron Karenga’s United Slaves in southern California, a strategy which resulted in numerous fatalities. In the midst of all this, the Bureau’s COINTELPRO operatives excelled at forging letters and other internal BPP documents in order to disrupt BPP communications and foment factional fighting within the group. This in turn caused the isolation of what the FBI termed “key party leaders,” a situation that allowed the successful fabrication of cases through which to bring about the lengthy imprisonment of targets or, in some instances, their selective assassination by police. All of this was covered by a mantle of official secrecy as well as a wholesale anti-BPP disinformation surfaced through the mass media in order to misrepresent and “justify” what was being done to the Panthers before the public.

By the mid-70s at the latest it was clear that the BPP and other progressive organizations in the U.S.—as well as scores of the individuals who had participated in them—had been destroyed by a pattern of FBI activity which a senate investigating committee described as being “lawless” and “little more than a sophisticated vigilante operation” violating “even the most minimal standards of official conduct within a democratic society.” Still, no FBI agent was ever punished for what had happened, and the courts have consistently demonstrated a willingness to leave COINTELPRO victims languishing in prison for “crimes” invented by the Bureau solely to bring about their elimination from the political movements of which they were a part. Pratt’s appeals have been repeatedly denied over the past two decades, often on the narrowest of technical grounds, while former Los Angeles FBI office COINTELPRO specialists such as Richard Wallace Held (currently

Special Agent in Charge of the Bureau's San Francisco office) have been allowed to take the stand and profess not to recall even the rudiments of the operations they directed against him.

At present, the only real hope for justice ever being done in the case of Geronimo Pratt appears to lie in a dramatic increase in public consciousness and concern regarding his circumstances, and in pursuit of remedies outside the U.S. legal system. Much the same can be said for many others—several of whom are represented in this volume—currently residing in the country's penal institutions, who have been victimized by COINTELPRO and its successor forms of political persecution. Toward the end of generating some portion of the necessary awareness, the following text derives from a series of conversations with Pratt undertaken in San Quentin over a period of two years, most recently in July 1989. It is bolstered by excerpts from material contained in an interview conducted by the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and published under the title "I can't see myself being anything but a person who struggles for liberation."

Churchill: Let's begin with your trial. How is it you came to be convicted of the so-called Tennis Court Murder?

Pratt: I was convicted on the testimony of a man named Julio [Julius C.] Butler, who was secretly an undercover operative of the FBI. We didn't know this at the time he was on the stand, but he was on the FBI payroll. At trial, we asked whether he'd ever worked for the FBI or any other police agency, and he got all rocks in his jaw, saying: "I resent that question. I've never worked with any police organization," and all that sort of thing. It was very convincing to the jury, and it wasn't until six or seven years later that we got the documents proving he worked for the FBI. Now that's perjury, and the FBI officials who testified that the Bureau had no informers among the witnesses committed perjury, but nothing happened to them. What's more, given that Butler—who was, after all, the key witness—was shown to have perjured himself, my case should have been automatically dismissed. I should have had a retrial right then and there, but, as you can see, it didn't happen.

Churchill: What exactly was the nature of Julio Butler's testimony against you?

Pratt: Well, for starters, he stated that I had confessed the killing of Mrs. Olsen to him. He also solved the ballistics problem in the state's case. You see, they claimed I'd killed the woman with a .45 automatic. And they had a .45 they had taken from the Panther pad in a roust at Ericka Huggins' house the night her husband, Jon, and Bunchy

[Alprentice] Carter were assassinated.¹ The problem for the prosecution was that slugs from the .45 attributed to me didn't match the slugs recovered from the Olsen murder scene. Butler fixed this right up by testifying he'd seen me change the barrel of the gun or some such nonsense. It wasn't particularly plausible, but the jury believed it.

Churchill: Was there other evidence against you?

Pratt: Yes. Kenneth Olsen, husband of the dead woman, who was with her the night she was murdered and who was wounded in the attack, testified that I was the man who'd shot both of them. This was reinforced by the testimony of a shopkeeper named Barbara Redd, whose business was near the tennis court, who also claimed to be able to identify me as the man. What the prosecutors forgot to mention during the trial was that Mr. Olsen had positively identified another man, who doesn't look a thing like me, during a line-up very shortly after the murder. When he identified me over a year later, he was emphatic about it. It took LAPD detectives months of coaching, using photo spreads with my picture in them, to bring the witness around to being "sure" I was the guy who'd pulled the trigger. And both Mr. Olsen and Mrs. Redd originally insisted the killer had been cleanshaven. Everybody knows I've always worn this goatee and mustache, ever since I got out of the army.

Churchill: What happened to the guy who was originally identified as the killer? Did you know him?

Pratt: No, I never knew the man. And as far as I know nothing ever happened to him. They just let him slide. I'm not saying this particular guy did the crime, it might have been somebody else entirely. But I *am* sure it wasn't me. Somewhere along the line the decision was made to let the real murderer walk in order to be able to hang it on me. It's funny in a way, but I've heard they were a little confused as to exactly what they wanted to charge me with. I mean, they seem to have actually held a little strategy meeting and tried to figure out which murder, out of a bunch of unsolved homicides, would be the best one to stick me with. And they settled on the murder of Mrs. Olsen. Kind of like eenie-meanie-minie-mo. But that's "law enforcement" for you.

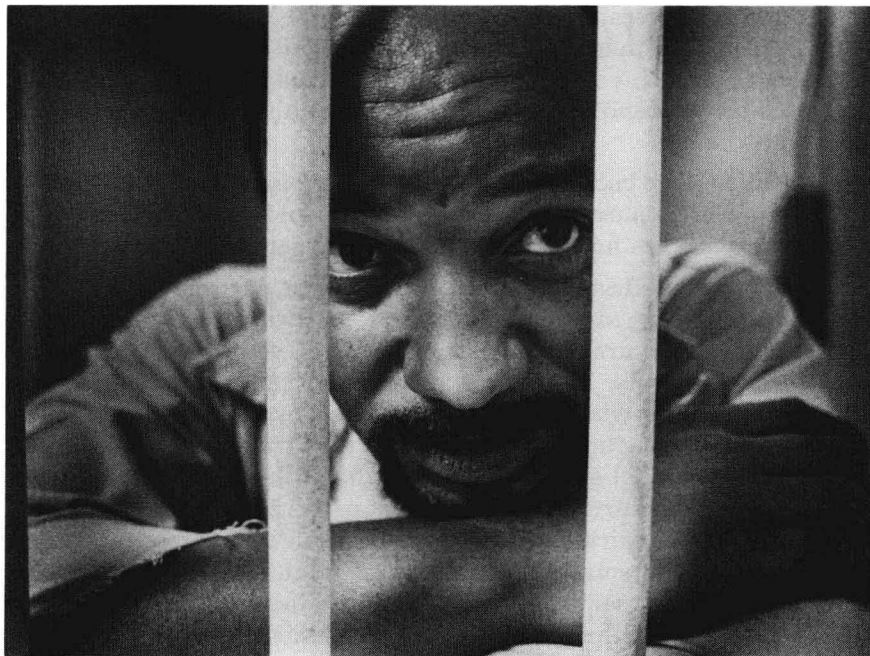
Churchill: When you say "they" held a meeting to decide which murder would be best to charge you with, do you mean the FBI?

Pratt: Oh yeah, the FBI. But not just the FBI. In those days, the LAPD had something they called CCS, the Criminal Conspiracy Section, which was really the cover name of the local red squad, and it was very tightly interlocked with the FBI's COINTELPRO section. There were three FBI agents named Richard Held, Brendan Cleary and Richard Bloeser,

and a couple of CCS detectives named Ray Callahan and Daniel P. Mahoney. There were others, of course, but these guys seem to have been the core of the anti-Panther action in L.A. Callahan was the one who eventually brought my murder case forward. We had them all on the stand in a hearing in 1985, and they all pretended not to remember much of anything about what they did for a living back in the early '70s. But we know pretty much how it went down; a couple of their infiltrators later spilled the beans, and at least one former FBI agent—a guy named [M. Wesley] Swearingen—has corroborated a good deal of it.

Churchill: What did the witnesses get out of mis-identifying you?

Pratt: Well, with Mr. Olsen, I think you have to look at it as a matter of grief. I mean, the man's wife had been brutally murdered right before his eyes. He himself had been shot. From his point of view, it's natural that *somebody* had to pay for what had happened. Right? And the police used this honest emotion of his to just really do a number on him, to convince him that not only was I the somebody who should pay, but that I was the *right* somebody. It's all pretty akin to brainwashing. Same with Mrs. Redd. She was trying to be helpful to the police, and the police



Geronimo Pratt in San Quentin, 1987. (photo: Kathy Raddatz)

were making it pretty clear what they wanted. And you have to remember that this was all happening toward the end of a sustained national campaign on the part of the government to convince people that the Black Panther Party was an extremely violent bunch of hoodlums, a “hate group” out to get white people and all of that nonsense. The whole propaganda effort was designed to bring people around to the point of view that Panthers were something to be destroyed by any possible means, regardless of whether they’d personally done anything at all which could be called criminal. Being a Panther, or thinking like a Panther, or identifying with the Panthers were matters treated as being criminal acts. And here I was, projected as this big, bad Black Panther. You can see how the racism works. At some level or another, I think a lot of people—including some witnesses—*knew I’d had nothing to do with this murder of a white woman by a black man, but they still* held me responsible for it, simply because of who I was projected to be. So when I was sent up, I suppose they derived a certain satisfaction from it.

Churchill: How about Julio Butler?

Pratt: Butler’s a different story. They took real good care of him. They let him walk on several felony convictions, and they paid his way through law school, and I understand he eventually got a job with municipal government in the LA area. They’ve also protected him from ever having to go back on the stand with regard to my case. Julio definitely benefited from what he did.

Churchill: Let’s go back a little bit. Before you joined the Black Panther Party, you were a paratrooper in Vietnam. Could you talk about your military experience and how it affected your political consciousness?

Pratt: First things first, here. I’m from the South, from rural Louisiana. I grew up in a very segregated situation, and within a long tradition of armed struggle, armed self-defense. This is, you know, the area of the Maroons—people, like me, of mixed black and American Indian heritage—the area which produced the Deacons [for Defense], and so on. As I was growing up, as I was absorbing the tradition of my people’s struggle, Emmett Til got killed. Four little black children were blown up in a church in Birmingham. You know the history.

So, yeah, I went airborne in the army, became a paratrooper, learned light weapons and small unit tactics and volunteered for training in long range reconnaissance operations. Contrary to some false information that’s been put out there, I was never in Special Forces, I was never a Green Beret. I was in the brigade of the 82nd Airborne [Division] they sent to Vietnam. Spent my whole year doing recon, mostly in the high-land region in the central and northern parts of the country, but also

across the border into Laos and Cambodia sometimes. I got wounded, was awarded a bunch of combat medals, made sergeant and came back to the States. I barely got adjusted to being here when the Tet Offensive happened [January-February of 1968], and they shipped me right back. I did my last six months in the military on a mandatory second tour in Nam, doing the same ugly shit I'd done the first time. More long range patrols, more killing, more wounds, more medals.² I got out and came home as soon as my time was up.

So I come back and the war is on here, too. I was in Chicago during the summer of '68, and the police had pulled some brothers over and had them lying on the ground. Guns drawn all over the place. One cop had his foot on top of this guy. And there was a helicopter hovering overhead with a searchlight shining down. This is going on and I'm flashing back, thinking this shit is identical to what's going on in, say, Cheo Reo or Dalat. A whole lot of our people were being killed, gunned down. And the police were pulling people in, calling them "detainees" instead of prisoners because they weren't even bothering to go through the motions of arresting them. And I'm flashing on Nam; same terminology, same situation. Guys are getting killed in shootouts staged by the police, they're getting shot with handcuffs on. The police are just blowing them away. So here I am with the knowledge to teach them to adequately defend themselves. This is my role, I'm going to do this, you see. This was one of the things I consciously saw I could help with, teaching the brothers how to defend themselves against physical attack, helping them learn the things a nation should know.

Churchill: Do you ever feel guilty about what you did in Vietnam?

Pratt: Do *you*? We had pretty much the same experience, as near as I can tell.³ I think you already know the answer. But let me say this: I'm not proud of having been part of an army used to try and colonize another people. That's a fact. But I *am* proud of the skills I developed, the knowledge I gained, the level of attainment I achieved. I wasn't involved in the My Lai sort of thing; I fought other soldiers, out in the bush, a long way from civilians. I find no shame in combat. And that's also a fact, even if I was on the side that was in the wrong. I think most combat veterans understand what I'm saying because there's a unity among combat veterans on this even when we can't agree on other things. Our loyalty is to each other, not to the government that sent us to fight. It's an irony. You can ask the most self-conscious right-wing, racist combat vet and he'll say exactly the same thing I just said. There are some *non*-combat vets, of course—a lot of 'em making careers off being veterans these days—who sing a different tune, but that's another story and I don't want to get into it just now.

Anyway, I inherited no burden of guilt from my experience in Vietnam. Instead, I inherited a burden of responsibility to use what I'd learned there to respond to the Nixon-Mitchell regime that was continuing the genocidal war both abroad and at home. That's a different thing entirely, and the government certainly knows it. A lot of combat vets felt this way. That's why so many of us either are or have been in prisons since the war. The government used us for its own purposes while we were there, and then set out to kill us or lock us up so we couldn't bring what we'd learned to bear against them when we came back. In my own case, the Assistant DA from Los Angeles [Dianne Visanni] said at my 1987 parole hearing—she actually just came right out and said it!—that a major reason I shouldn't be released from prison is the effect Vietnam is supposed to have had on me. And the parole board treated her statement as if it were the most reasonable sentiment in the world. So, what does that say? The pay-off for all those medals is a life stretch in the joint. It seems to me this adds up to a very eloquent statement about how the U.S. government *really* feels about its combat veterans.

Churchill: After you got out of the army in '68, you enrolled at UCLA and hooked up with the Black Panther Party. In fact, you became head of the LA chapter of the party. Could you tell us something of how that came to be, the sorts of programs you were into developing, that sort of thing?

Pratt: Actually, I went to Louisiana first, visited with my family. Then I went to UCLA and enrolled through the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program], signed up for the GI Bill and everything. I more or less immediately became involved in the black student organization on campus, and through that I came in contact with Bunchy Carter, one of the most beautiful brothers I ever met in my life. Bunchy was head of the LA Panthers, and he sort of took me under his wing, brought me along politically. Once I became involved with the party, they cut off my GI Bill, which was totally illegal, but they did it anyway. When Bunchy was assassinated, we found he'd left a tape behind stating that if anything happened to him, I was to succeed him as head of the chapter. I was still a UCLA student. The sorts of programs we developed are fairly well known: the Free Breakfast for Children Program, the Free Clothing Giveaway Program, medical clinics in the black community, legal education and assistance, teaching the people what to do if the police stopped them on the street or arrested them. We were developing a comprehensive political education program and did a lot of legal defense work, not only for party members who got busted, but for community people as well. Our overall objective was to gradually develop a base