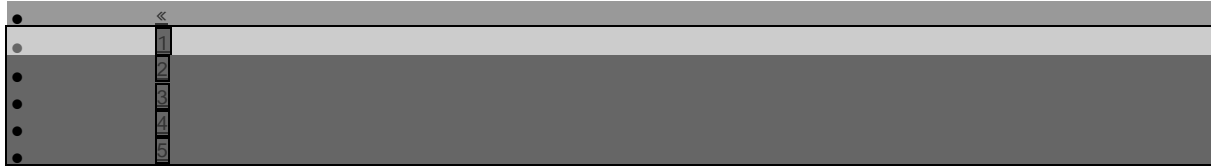


By Martin G. Reynolds  
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PHOTO: Geronimo Pratt [970607 CA 3B 2] 3Bmo 6/7 Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, ex-Black Panther...



Elmer Geronimo "Ji Jaga" Pratt, the former Black Panther Party leader who was released from prison in 1997 after serving 27 years for a murder conviction that was later overturned, died of natural causes June 2 in a small village in Tanzania where he has lived part time for many years. He was 63.

Pratt's death may have been brought on by a bout of malaria, which worked against his existing high blood pressure, his close friend and longtime attorney Stuart Hanlon said Friday by phone from his office in San Francisco.

Hanlon was informed of Pratt's death by friends of the former Panther who were with him at his home in Tanzania, an East African country bordered by Kenya and Uganda.

Pratt was convicted in 1972 in connection with the 1970 robbery and slaying of schoolteacher Caroline Olsen, 27, in Santa Monica. Pratt maintained he was in Oakland at a Black Panther Party meeting when the shooting occurred and that FBI agents and police hid and possibly destroyed wiretap evidence that would prove it.

His lawyers, which included now-deceased defense attorney Johnnie Cochran, blamed his arrest on the politically motivated COINTELPRO campaign by J. Edgar

Hoover's FBI against the Black Panthers and other perceived enemies of the U.S. government.

The break Pratt's case needed came with the disclosure that a key prosecution witness hid the fact he was an ex-felon and police informant.

Orange County Superior Court Judge Everett Dickey granted Pratt a new trial in June 1997, saying the credibility of prosecution witness Julius Butler -- who testified that Pratt had confessed to him -- could have been undermined if the jury had known of his relationship with law enforcement. Pratt was freed later that month.

After his release from Mule Creek State Prison in Amador County, a federal judge later approved a \$4.5 million settlement in Pratt's false-imprisonment and civil rights lawsuit.

During his lengthy incarceration, Pratt became a symbol of the turbulent 1960s, and he gained the support of activists and politicians including former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, then-Rep. Ron Dellums (D-Oakland), the NAACP, Amnesty International and many others.

"What happened to him is the horror story of the United States," Hanlon said Friday. "This became a microcosm of when the government decides what's politically right or wrong. The COINTELPRO program was awful. He became a symbol for what they did."

Pratt was born Sept. 13, 1947, in Morgan City, La., a small town about two hours from New Orleans. The youngest of seven children, Pratt was raised as a Roman Catholic by his mother and his father, who operated a small scrap-metal business.

"He had Southern, rural roots, hardworking parents who sent all of their kids to college," Hanlon said. "He goes to the military, fights and is a decorated soldier in Vietnam, comes back, becomes a football star in college.

"That would be an American hero," Hanlon said of Pratt's life up to that point. "It was different because he was black and he became a Panther and then the road went the wrong way."

Hanlon said Pratt had been spending half his time in the small Tanzanian village of Imbaseni and the other half in Louisiana. When asked why he chose to spend so much of his time on another continent, Hanlon said, "I think he felt he had tasted the worst America could give and it wasn't very good."

Hanlon described Pratt as "one of my two or three closest friends in the world." And that his case "defined me as a lawyer."

David Hilliard, former Black Panther Party chief of staff who recruited Pratt into the party to help provide leadership to the Los Angeles chapter, said there are former Panther exiles still in Tanzania, and that Pratt likely felt comfortable there. He had helped to get an irrigation system installed in the village he adopted as his part-time home.

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Oakland) at the time of his imprisonment was in the state Legislature. She said she remembers using her position as the chairwoman of the state's Black Caucus as a way to bring Pratt's case to greater prominence. She said much can be derived from a man who held his head high despite the injustices he endured.

"I'm really sad," Lee said when reached by phone. "This is a tremendous loss. His life was about seeking justice for those who had no justice. All the work that was done, by many, that ultimately proved he was unjustly incarcerated, he finally achieved the justice for himself that he so deserved."

Lee said she sees troubling similarities with the forces at work during the COINTELPRO era and now, and said the nation should look to Pratt's legacy with caution and concern.

While the government must have the tools in place to protect the nation's security, Lee said -- referencing the Patriot Act that provides broad powers to authorities for gathering information on potential threats -- there must be a balance with civil liberties.

"We have to be vigilant now and very concerned about unwarranted government intrusion. We don't want us to go back there."

Hilliard said Pratt "symbolized the best of human spirit. His spirit of endurance, his strength, his service to his people. He's very positive and a real example for young people who want to look into the direction of Che Guevara, Malcolm X and the leader of our party, Huey P. Newton. He is one of the true heroes of our era. He dedicated his life to service of his people. There is nothing more honorable than that."

The Associated Press and Los Angeles Times contributed to this report.