Real, Real Comrades: What 43+ Years of Prison Mean to Eddie Conway and Paul Coates

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Marshall Eddie Conway and Paul Coates talk about how they met in Baltimore's Black Panther Party and maintained solidarity and friendship for 43 years after Conway was framed, convicted and jailed for murder.

Marshall Eddie Conway was born in 1946, grew up in the low-income racial segregation of West Baltimore, and joined the US Army at 18. Paul Coates, "a little bit older," grew up in a similar neighborhood in West Philadelphia, also enlisting in the Army as a youth. Sometime in the late 1960s, they met in the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party. Although both men yearned for racial justice, neither could have known at the time the dimensions of injustice they were to face.

It's well known that J. Edgar Hoover directed his FBI to "disrupt, misdirect, discredit and otherwise neutralize" African-American organizations and leaders in general. But the FBI unleashed its worst on the Black Panther Party, which, from its 1966 start in Oakland, California, Hoover saw as "the single greatest threat to the internal security of the country."[1] By 1968, when activists in Baltimore began to form a Panther chapter, there wasn't much that the feds didn't know about them or couldn't "neutralize." The FBI often worked with the local police force to do it.

So in 1970, when a Baltimore police officer was killed, it was important to indict a Panther, preferably a highly able, well-liked one. The state charged Eddie Conway - who unceasingly maintained his innocence - and, in 1971, convicted him of murder. Thus began over 43 years of work by activists, attorneys, family and friends to return Eddie Conway to the community he loves. This is where Paul Coates comes in.

For over four decades, Paul - founder of the Black Classic Press - never stopped working on Eddie's case, never stopped being Eddie's friend. On March 4, 2014, when Eddie Conway finally walked out of prison, Paul was there. Today, they still work together. In fact, for two men who've worried and suffered over so many years, they sure do laugh a lot. I know because I interviewed them recently at Paul's office in Baltimore. I started by asking them how they met.

Eddie Conway: Paul, you'll have to do this; you're mentally sharper than I am.

Paul Coates: That may be true, but I really don't remember. It would have been at Panther headquarters.

EC: What we probably started doing together was going out to the airport and picking up Panther Party newspapers. Because there was a delivery problem; the newspapers were getting lost and misplaced.

PC: The government was losing and misplacing them.

EC: It wasn't accidental. We were trying to resolve those kinds of problems so we could get the newspapers on the streets every week.

Susie Day for Truthout: Did you see a friendship forming at that point?

PC: Since I'm so magnetic, he may have seen a friendship forming. You can tell how rough this guy is (*laughter*).

I came to the party, must've been the fall of '69. I would do breakfast programs and stuff, but we really did not have many interactions, as I recall. Eddie was much more experienced in the party. He was a Panther; I was at best a community worker, so he was Big Stuff, you know?

You were already deputy minister of defense, Eddie?

EC: There was no such thing. Probably at the time, I was lieutenant of security. But people confuse those titles over the years, and just make up all kinds of stuff. Most states did not have a deputy minister of defense.

PC: People came and went so much; the titles were kind of meaningless. After Eddie went to jail, we had functionary titles, but only about two or three of those.

EC: Like, you're the lieutenant of communications because that's what you already do. You make the phone calls, you write the articles or deal with the PR, and that makes you a "lieutenant" in that area.

But you were Big Stuff in the Party?

EC: I don't think I was Big Stuff. Unlike Paul, I was kind of quiet. Seriously, I did a little traveling, but basically I was just a low-level organizer, is how I see it. I went places and interacted with people.

PC: But you'd been in the Panther Party for a while. I mean Big Stuff in that sense. He wasn't one of the ones that came and went. I recognized him as a Panther.

Did you finally join the Panthers formally, Paul?

PC: Not really. When I came, the Panther Party was closed (*chuckling*). Even though those idiots gave me an application to fill out. I filled it out, but the ranks of the Panther Party had been closed in what, '68?

EC: Yeah, because they didn't want any more people saying they were Panthers in the midst of a flood of government attacks.

PC: However, people became Panthers largely through their practice. George Jackson said in *Blood in My Eye* [2]: "You Don't Join Us; We Join You." So if people were acceptable, they were pulled in. But technically, from Oakland, they closed that stuff down.

This is actually how I became a Panther. It was after John Clark, who was in charge of the Baltimore chapter, was arrested, and Eddie and them all were in jail. I was still a community worker. I went to New York to report to the leadership there, and they basically said, "OK, John is gone. That means you're in charge."

I said, "I can't be in charge, I'm not a Panther." And they said, "Well, you're a Panther now." That was it. It wasn't a case of joining.

Locked into a Cage

Eddie, how did your case change you?

EC: I had already spent a lot of time taking people in the community down to the Eastern District Court in Baltimore. We would set in the back and watch the proceedings during the course of a day. So I knew the criminal justice system wasn't working for us – was working, in fact, against us. By the time of my arrest, I understood that there was no justice in the system. Once I got locked into a cage, I had more time to study and analyze, but I don't think the case changed me that much. What changed was my ability to move around.

How did Eddie's case affect you, Paul?

PC: His case affected me immediately. There was the shooting that went down [3]. The two folks arrested were Jackie Powell and Jack Johnson. (To Eddie) Were you arrested the next night?

EC: Yeah, when I was at work.

PC: The next morning at 6 o'clock, I get a call from the defense captain. He said, "Eddie's been arrested; get your ass down here. We got TE to move."

EC: (Laughing) That's technical equipment. Which stands for weapons.

PC: Yeah. Now, this defense captain, I have to tell you, was certifiably crazy. I mean he said this over the phone. I'm the only one with a car, so I picked him up and a couple of other folks, and we went over to the house where the guns are.

There are no cops, no traffic - nothing around. We had to kick in the cellar window to get in the house, 'cause they hadn't brought the key. So we kick in the window, and we start taking guns out. On the third load of guns, the police are there. We're arrested. I get 15 attempted murder charges. I don't know if you know that -

EC: No, I did not know that.

PC: Yeah, 15 attempted murder charges. Because I was the last person out of the house

EC: With an armful of guns -

PC: No, I had one rifle. I come out and I'm surrounded by police shotguns. This was 1970, after Fred [Hampton] and them got killed [4]. So I'm scared shitless. I'm thinking, "They're going to take me out." They probably would have, but they had me surrounded. If they'd started shooting, they would have shot each other, too. So that's why I got 15 attempted murder charges, cause of all the cops.

At that time, I worked for United Airlines. That job was gone after I got arrested. So Eddie's arrest immediately changed my life. I went from a nice, middle-class, union man raising a family - to jail. That accelerated my politicization.

Did you get out on bail?

PC: Yeah. Then we did a demonstration of support around the jail, and we were arrested again.

How did your case resolve, Paul? Were you convicted of anything?

PC: No. They dropped all those charges. None of those guys that had the guns were convicted - the police just kept the guns. That was a classic case of draining the Panther bail fund. Classic case. No charges came out of that for anybody.

Half the Damn Time Making It Up

When did you and Eddie start working together politically?

PC: I think Eddie and I really began working together after that crazy defense captain was kidnapped.

EC: Yeah, bounty hunters kidnapped the defense captain and snatched him away to California.

PC: And the Baltimore police actually assisted them. They put a wall of police officers around him, and the bail bondsman steps in and says, "You're under arrest. I'm taking you back to California."

It's total bullshit. And the defense captain says, "Oh, they got me." (*Big laughter from Eddie and Paul)*

What was his California case?

EC: I have no idea, but he had jumped bail on it, and they used that to bust up the Panthers.

PC: Once they kidnapped the defense captain, I became the person in charge of Baltimore. At that point, we had to work together and depend on each other.

You became the point person for Eddie's case?

PC: Yeah. Eddie and I had to trust each other. I mean I'm communicating instructions half the time from California. The other half of the damn time, him and I are making it up. Because California was, for the largest part, nonresponsive. Just nonresponsive.

EC: I think they were overwhelmed.

PC: He's being kind.

EC: I might be. But there was stuff in New Haven going on at the time [5]. There was the Panther 21 case in New York [6]; stuff down in New Orleans [7]; Geronimo was being run to ground [8]; Huey was hiding up in the penthouse [9]. It was really a system overload. And when Des Moines blew up, it was just too much [10].

Was your object getting Eddie out, or did you see the trial as part of the revolution?

PC: We wanted Eddie out, but our thing at the time was pointing out contradictions in the system. We saw him coming out; the people rising up - there'd be revolution, you know what I mean?

Initially, there was a lawyer on the case, Nelson Kandel, who felt that Eddie could beat the criminal charges. But our instructions from California were that this is a political case, so they were going to send a political lawyer to try it. That's the shit we went for.

You were both behind that?

EC: Yeah. For one thing, it was clear that it was a political case. It was a frame-up. If we played by the regular rules, we were going to end up hanging - I mean literally, they were attempting to kill me. So we thought, "If we have to fight, at least let's fight with people whose political perspective we trust."

Go with the Political

PC: That's pretty much how we approached it. When Kandel wanted to deal with it as a criminal case, it was me that communicated with these Panthers in California, and it was me who brought back, "No, we're not going with Kandel. We're going to wait for political lawyers."

The Oakland Panthers called me to California. So I went, thinking that we were going to discuss the political prisoners. But they didn't give a shit about these guys in jail. In fact, they wouldn't even discuss it. That's the

saddest - it's hard to say this. When I got to California, what I encountered - from the same person who put me in charge of the Baltimore chapter - was, "Coates, now we got your ass here, we're going to break you."

That's the kind of time they were on; they were focused on breaking my attachment to Baltimore, which was the people in jail. We still had at least three people inside, and we must have had about 15 people still under charges at that time. And nary a conversation. I reached a point where I said, "I don't know what's going to happen, but I got to go."

When did you two realize that you had a committed friendship?

PC: Probably after I got back from California - because they had expelled me from the party. When you're expelled, you can't have any contact with party people. So for Eddie to have contact with me would mean that he risked expulsion, you see? That was a choice he had to make. So I went to see him and I said that I was out of the party.

My commitment was to come back to Baltimore - because I clearly wasn't leaving him. I wasn't leaving any of them in jail. I think Eddie's and my long-term commitment began with deciding that we were cool - and basically fuck what they say. We began working immediately. Immediately.

Did the Oakland Panthers want you to enact some program?

PC: What Huey had come up with was this plan to politically take over Oakland. Bobby was going to run for mayor. It made no sense to me, and many other people, that you would close down the Panther Party and move the Panthers to Oakland. But it made sense to them because they were California-centric.

EC: And Chinese-centric. Where that came from is Mao, the Long March. Back to a liberated base area, you gain control of that area and then move back out strategically to the next area and the next. That was part of the Red Book and Huey's trip to China. Like, "We're under attack all over, let's do the Long March!" And the Long March was taking Paul and those people to California, taking other chapters back to California.

Life and 30

What was your sentence, Eddie?

EC: It was life and 30 years

Were you outraged? Depressed?

EC: I had already decided I wasn't going to get a fair trial, that I was going to be convicted and executed. So I basically did not participate in the trial. When the verdict came back with life and 30, and not the execution part, I was relieved. But I had already given up on the criminal justice system; I'd been there and beyond.

PC: We never thought Eddie was going to be convicted.

That was a surprise?

PC: Oh, yeah. Total surprise. Especially because Kandel felt it was a weak case and the information was shaky. The prosecution had a forced testimony [11] they weren't even sure they were going to use, and we felt that we could demolish that. They had this guy, a jail cell informant, [12] who was their strongest evidence - who's going to believe that shit? I knew there was a possibility of him getting convicted, but I thought the case was good. I still feel that way.

I remember, Paul, your son Ta-Nehisi wrote in his memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*, [13] that you felt responsible in some way?

PC: I've always carried guilt. Because I'm the person who carried the message from Central that this was a political case. It was like I was one of those plastic tubes that conveys poison to the person laying on the gurney. I wanted to say, "I don't want to be used for this."

So I was naïve. And the guilt is based in that. If he had asked me in that moment - which he probably did - what he should do, I would have said, "Go with the political."

Did you blame Paul, Eddie?

EC: No, because we made that mistake based on our ideology, our belief that we would fight to the death. I was as supportive of a political trial as California was. But perhaps the entire movement of that period made a critical error in thinking this was our time. We'd fight and die if we needed to, but - bring it - you know?

You were all so young. Where were the elders to go to about this?

PC: I don't know that we would have listened.

EC: Yeah, unfortunately, we had written the elders off. Either they were from the civil rights movement, or the more radical communist movement. But they were over 30. Their advice wouldn't have resonated with us.

PC: But inside of that guilt thing, I am not guilty. There's no way I could have known at the time.

Sucked In from Day One

Eddie, how did you face the next four-plus decades in prison?

EC: My initial reaction was, "I'm not getting caught up in prison politics and prison organizing." I needed to focus on how to get back outside, because I felt separated from the community. But when I got into the prison system, there were a hundred potential revolutionaries there, all of them clamoring, "Help, help, we've been waiting. Why did it take you so long to get here?"

At first, I resisted. But some of them were so sincere that it made me say, "OK, I have some ideas, some skills; let me help." So I got sucked into the prison movement pretty much from Day One. Before I know it, we were working to make changes. And it turned out I never was separated from the community because the work we did in the prison system kept us attached to the community. We brought the community, the support base, into the prison environment.

What did you see there that needed to be done?

EC: God. The first thing when I walked in the place was birds flying overhead inside the building. We're ducking bird crap; the windows are broke out; there's draconian behavior with the guards. They'd just snatch somebody and start beating them and drag them through the whole shop, take them out front and dump them in the parking lot. Then they'd look back at us and say, "Yeah. So what?" That hit my nerves. Right away I said, "OK we're going to change that."

Did you form a Panther group inside?

EC: We couldn't because the Panther leadership had banned new chapters. So we started something called the Maryland Penitentiary Inter-Communal Survival Collective [14]. Initially, we organized and forced them to put in plastic windows - we couldn't do anything about the birds until the windows got in. Then we got the place de-birded, for want of a better word. Sanitized, you know?

The overall thing was, "We need black guards in here. Because y'all can't communicate. This is part of what the frustration and the violence is about." We also started pushing for creature comforts. Like we realized we did not have a library, so we pushed for that. There was like two TVs for 400 people. That was the source of all kinds of violence, because you've got a hundred people sitting there watching something, and Joe might come up with 10 people and say, "We want to watch the fight," or "We want to watch Judy shake her booty." So we needed to get peoples their own TVs.

Then we created a survival program for people on lockup (solitary). In fact, Rap Brown [15] took advantage of that when he got locked up there. We developed the ability to look out for people that got snatched up arbitrarily and didn't have anything, no soap, no toothpaste, that kind of stuff.

Finally we produced a newspaper, which was our newsletter inside. Matter of fact, that was one of the things the prison reacted to. They ended up starting an official newspaper to stop us from publishing ours.

On Revolutionary Time

How did you survive, psychologically?

EC: I think my world shrunk down to the prison system. I used to see myself as national and international - all of a sudden, I become "Prisoner." So prison became my whole world. And living in that world probably allowed me to survive, but it cut me off from family and relations. I had to shut all that stuff down to stay alive in that box.

Did you get mad at people on the outside for not understanding what you were going through?

EC: I never got mad with people. There was times when maybe people didn't step up the way I felt they should, but almost anybody was willing to help, however they could. In some cases, maybe it was hot air, or they failed to reach their commitments. But there was always that support from a wide range of people. But I do realize that I tend to ignore negativity. So I focused on the people that wanted to help. I tried to dismiss the people who I felt had let me down.

For instance, I worked with one particular guy in prison for six or seven years. He was George Jackson, reincarnated: Black belt; martial artist; jungle fatigues - in fact, he was our karate instructor. Read all the books, you know; knife in his mouth, the whole nine yards. Then he gets released.

They opened the door - this actually happened - he walked out, took off his jungle fatigues; threw the Red Book on the penitentiary steps. The next time we seen him, two weeks later, he had a Jheri curl, a maxi leather coat, two sex workers and a pimpmobile.

Him and I had been in the trenches - in real life and death situations. And in the space of a door, he just changed. That was devastating. So I said, "OK, I can't be attached to people." Because there'll be some who are going to fail, and if I get caught up like that, I'm going to fail. My life had been in his hands, and his life was in my hands for years. And there he is, pimping.

Did you and Paul ever feel divided through all this?

EC: Paul and I, we just always understood each other. I don't know if he knew what I was going through, but he was always there. He's like the brother I didn't have. But in my romantic relationships, I was standoffish and shut down and -

Repressed?

EC: Probably I was. Because we were on Revolutionary Time. I know this is corny; it's Che Guevara's thing: "Revolutionaries are guided by true feelings of love for the people."

At the risk of sounding ridiculous?

EC: Yeah. And the deal was, nothing else was important. I could overlook people's faults. I was so in love with the people that I didn't really have any love for the individual.

You think that was a mistake?

EC: I don't know that it was a mistake, but it certainly stole something from me. At the time, I think it was probably what motivated all of us, the entire movement, to make change for the future.

You were soldiers for the revolution. You didn't have a right to a personal life?

EC: But every generation produces that; every generation needs to produce that. We would still be enslaved if there weren't those people saying, "No, we're going to change this, whatever the cost."

No More Going Down to Jessup

How is it, now - being able to work together in the same room, as opposed to prison phone calls and visits?

PC: It's overpowering, sometimes. I'll see Eddie and and I get present to, "There's NO more going down to Jessup Prison."

EC: Yeah.

PC: There's no more driving by that road and saying, "Eddie's down there; shouldn't I stop?" You know, I talked about Eddie to someone on the phone last night. I said, "This man's been in jail for 43, almost 44 years." When I really got present to that, I started crying. Because I realized: All those years - we're done with that, you know? That stuff is gone. But to live with that for four decades . . .

EC: For me, it's a night and day difference. For instance, I catch myself now timing my phone calls to 30 minutes. I was talking to my friend Dominque, and I was watching the watch, because that's what you do when you're on a prison call. So around 29 minutes, I said, "OK, time's almost up."

And she said, "What are you talking about?"

It's like: OK, I am not in jail. I don't have a timer on this phone. So it's getting used to that stuff. For me, this is like a second life.

Do you feel grief about leaving people back in prison?

EC: I have left so many people inside that I can't afford to grieve about them. But every time I get to speak, or get to direct support toward them, I do that. There's too many for me to go back and get. So if I can send help back, I do. And because I do that, each and every time for every audience, I don't have any grief.

Eddie, what did you think in the 1970s when Paul started the Black Classic Press?

EC: We needed books in prison - in fact, that's where the Press comes from.

PC: At first it was the George Jackson Prison Movement. [16]

EC: We had no library, you know? So Paul started a bookstore and filtered books in to us, so we'd have a library. We actually took over two people's cells.

You got to appreciate this - we made bookshelves. We actually had a librarian who would come and check out the books. But the basis of it was Paul's bookstore. That was our first real collaboration beyond the Party structure.

Do you like where Black Classic Press has gone, Eddie?

EC: I'm impressed and proud. It's a tremendous feat in terms of marketing positive black ideas. It's like the work I did with young people over the years, where we touched so many lives. Paul did that same kind of work through the books. From that first little pack of books he sent in, to a major business - that's the work that everybody should have done. Paul and I spent 40 years reaching people. I think that's part of the bond we have. So I really feel good about that.

PC: He and I argue sometimes. Like about organizing events: Whether there should be a fried chicken dinner, or whether the coffee is being brewed correctly. (*Laughter)*

We bump heads, because we're both strong personalities. It doesn't matter; Eddie's just crazy. But we're brothers in the sense that you can have an argument, and your brother's still your brother. In our case, comrades. Real, real comrades.

Notes:

1. FBI's program against black groups, specifically Panthers:

". . . disrupt, misdirect, discredit and otherwise neutralize"

". . . the single greatest threat to the internal security of the country."

2. George Jackson (1941 - 1971). Sentenced at age 18 to one-year-to-life for stealing $70 from a gas station, Jackson became a revolutionary activist and author inside San Quentin Prison. *Blood in My Eye* is his second book, completed only days before Jackson was killed by corrections officers during an alleged escape attempt. Originally published by Random House, 1972, republished by Black Classic Press, 1990.

3. On April 24, 1970, two Baltimore City police officers, Donald Sager and Stanley Sierakowski were called to the scene of a domestic disturbance. Returning to their cars, they encountered gunfire that killed Officer Sager

and wounded Sierakowski. Jack Ivory Johnson and Jackie Powell were arrested near the scene about an hour later. Later that night, two officers spotted a man who, when asked to stop, allegedly fled and fired back at them. Although it was dark, these officers identified the man as Marshall Eddie Conway. Concluding that the Black Panther Party, led by Conway, had set up the attack, police arrested Conway at work one day later.

Conway vs. State

4. Fred Hampton, beloved Chicago community activist and Panther leader, was shot to death, along with party member Mark Clark, during a police raid shortly before 5 AM, December 4, 1969. Although the press initially described the incident as a "shootout," it was later learned that the Panthers had fired only one shot, while the police fired at least 82, and that Hampton had been drugged by a government informant who had infiltrated the BPP.

5. Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins were accused of orchestrating the killing of alleged informant Alex Rackley. After over a year of a "media circus" and trial, Seale and Huggins were released when the jury failed to reach a verdict.

6. In April 1969, 21 members of the New York City Black Panther Party were indicted on outlandish charges of conspiring to bomb five department stores, a police station, railroad tracks and the Bronx Botanical Gardens. Held for two years without bail, they were acquitted, after 45 minutes of jury deliberation.

7. In November 1970, 250 fifty police officers attempted to evict Panther members from an apartment in the Desire public housing project, where the party had established tutoring and children's food programs. Twelve Panther members were later acquitted of attempted murder charges incurred while resisting eviction.

8. Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt, Los Angeles Panther leader, was framed by the FBI for the murder of Caroline Olsen, an elementary school teacher. After 27 years in prison, Pratt's conviction was vacated after evidence emerged showing that the FBI, through its wiretaps, knew Pratt was in another city at the time of the murder. He died of a heart attack in Tanzania in 2011.

9. Huey Newton (with Bobby Seale and David Hilliard) in Oakland, Calif., was recognized as the founder of the Black Panther Party. He spent time in prison for voluntary manslaughter in the 1967 killing of a police officer. However, the conviction was later reversed following appeal. After two subsequent mistrials, the state declined to pursue the case.

10. In April 1969, the Black Panther Party headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa, was bombed. Police arrived on the scene about 30 seconds later and began confiscating documents.

11. Jack Ivory Johnson, claimed his testimony against Conway was coerced.

12. Charles Reynolds, a known informant, was put in a cell with Eddie Conway after his arrest. He testified that Conway confessed to him about the killing.

13. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood*, (Spiegel & Grau, New York, 2009).

14. Maryland Penitentiary Inter-Communal Survival Collective:

"All of my organizing in the early years was in league with MPISC members . . . " *Marshall Eddie Conway, The Life & Times of a Baltimore Black Panther*, (Oakland, CA, AK Press, 2011):

15. H. Rap Brown, chair of the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee and later Panther Party Minister of Justice. He converted to Islam in prison during the 1970s, and became Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. He is serving a life sentence in the Florence, CO, ADX prison for the killing of two police officers in 2000, although another man later confessed to the killings.

16.Black Classic Press, started as the George Jackson Prison Movement to get books into Eddie Conway's prison, but soon started publishing obscure literary treasures written by and about African Americans over their centuries in North America. BCP has since included such authors as Walter Mosley and Amiri Baraka.

Susie Day

Susie Day is a writer who specializes in prison issues and political satire. A collection of her work will be published late in 2014 by Abington Square Publishing.

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Freedom Archives 522 Valencia Street San Francisco, CA 94110 415 863.9977 www.freedomarchives.org

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FYI!

BJ {William M. Johnson}
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