DEATH ROW

Mumia Abu-Jamal: Cop Killer or Political Prisoner?

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DEATH

Controversy rages as grass-roots support and the spotlight from celebrities focuses on the case of...
By Joe Davidson

a Abu-Jamal, who has been sentenced to death for the 1981 killing of a Philadelphia police officer

who gave contradictory statements to officials, was conveniently "on vacation" during the trial. Discrepancies in reports about the weapon used in the killing and the failure of police to conduct routine tests immediately afterward, have also given some pause.

If fully explored in the original trial by a skilled and sufficiently funded defense, these concerns could have produced reasonable doubt about Abu-Jamal's guilt in the mind of at least one juror — enough to have avoided a conviction.

As it was, jurors in a Philadelphia courtroom apparently had little doubt to overcome. They returned a guilty verdict in five hours.

Those who believe Abu-Jamal was fairly tried, convicted and should be executed have not been silent during the incredible public debate about his case. Maureen Faulkner, the officer's widow, hired a plane to fly over the Massachusetts headquarters of the company that published a book of Abu-Jamal commentaries, pulling a banner that said the firm supports convicted cop killers.

Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell, who was district attorney when Abu-Jamal was prosecuted, told CBS Evening News, "If I were picking a poster child for the death penalty, I wouldn't pick someone who the evidence says overwhelmingly came up behind another human being who happens to be a police officer, shot him in the back and then
Wakshul, who had Abu-Jamal in custody immediately after the shooting until doctors began working on him at the hospital, filed a report that said, “during this time, the negro male made no statements,” according to documents filed by Abu-Jamal’s lawyers. The trial lawyer wanted to call Wakshul but was told he was on vacation and unavailable. Trial Judge Albert Sabo refused to delay the trial until Wakshul could testify.

Joey Grant, former chief of the district attorney’s homicide unit, said White “wasn’t protected by the police while she was prostituting herself.” Furthermore, he added, Greer testified that the two people in the car never prevented him from talking to White and he gletary testified at the hearing that he saw someone else shoot Faulkner. The shooter, according to Singletary, was a passenger with dreadlocks in the car driven by Cook, Abu-Jamal’s brother. Singletary told his story to police after the shooting, but his statements were repeatedly discarded until he signed one dictated by a detective. This one denied that he had seen the shooting.

After Singletary’s testimony this sum-

Large rallies, like this one in Philadelphia, were held across the nation, as well as in England, Italy, South Africa and Brazil.

In addition to their attack on the alleged confession, Abu-Jamal’s new defense lawyers have sought to discredit other prosecution witnesses. One witness, Cynthia White, was a prostitute with three open cases when she testified that Abu-Jamal was the killer. “Without explanation, bench warrants against her were not prosecuted,” says Abu-Jamal’s petition for a new trial. “Police told another prostitute, Veronica Jones, that Ms. Jones would be allowed to work the street with impunity like Ms. White if Ms. Jones would testify against Abu-Jamal.”

Robert Greer, a private investigator who worked for the defense in 1982, said in an affidavit this year, that he was unable to interview White before the trial because “there were always two (2) plainclothes men near where she worked her corner on Locust. I waited in vain for them to leave, but they never did.”

Another witness who said Abu-Jamal shot Faulkner was cabdriver Robert Chobert. Chobert, argues the defense petition, “was clearly susceptible to police pressure” because he was on probation after being convicted of throwing a molotov cocktail at a school for pay. At a recent hearing, however, Chobert again fingered Abu-Jamal. Sabo did not allow the 1982 jury to hear about Chobert’s firebomb conviction, nor Jones’ full description of the deal she said had been offered by the police.

At a hearing this past August, the defense produced a witness who said he was so intimidated by police after Faulkner’s murder that he left town before Abu-Jamal’s trial. William Sin-
A prosecution ballistics expert did testify that the fatal bullet was a "Plus-P" .38 caliber consistent with those fired from Abu-Jamal's gun. Because the bullet's condition prevented a direct match, no connection between Abu-Jamal's gun and the fatal bullet ever was established. Also, no test was done to determine if Abu-Jamal had recently fired a gun. Even the simple test of smelling Abu-Jamal's gun barrel to determine the presence of spent gunpowder was not done.

Through his work as a radio journalist, Abu-Jamal has demonstrated a clear bent for those ignored by the powerful and well-heeled. His writing is vivid. He carries the listener/reader to the scene to feel the joy or pain of the occasion:

She sits in utter stillness. Her coffee-brown features as if set in obsidian; as if a mask. Barely perceptible, the tears threaten to overflow that dark, proud, maternal face, a face held still by rage.

A warm spring day in North Philadelphia saw her on her way home, surrender, after a war waged by bulldozers and ambitious politicians. Mrs. Anthony received no warning before the jaws of the baleful backhoe bit into the bricks of her life, tearing asunder the gatherings and memories of a life well lived. She was served no notice that the City of Brotherly Love intended to grind

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Attorney Leonard I. Weinglass, no stranger to controversy, leads the new defense team.
her home of twenty-three years into dust because they didn't like her neighbors... Another chapter in the tragicomedy called "The Drug War."

This April 1992 commentary, entitled "A house is not a home," by Abu-Jamal, is among those in Live from Death Row. National Public Radio (NPR) had planned to broadcast a series of his commentaries until, Abu-Jamal supporters contend, political pressure organized by the Fraternal Order of Police forced NPR to change its plans. NPR says the decision was not influenced by outsiders.

Publishing the book did get Abu-Jamal in trouble with prison authorities. They said he violated prison regulations by conducting a business while incarcerated. He was put in disciplinary custody and suffered a loss of privileges because he practiced journalism. The book, however, apparently has helped its author provide for his new defense effort. The Sunday Patriot-News in Harrisburg, Pa., estimated Abu-Jamal netted at least $425,000 from the book. Overall, the newspaper said, more than $800,000 has been raised since 1990. Mumia supporters dispute that amount.

Abu-Jamal got his start as a journalist as co-founder and minister of information of the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) when he was 15. It was then that the FBI began collecting data on him. An October 1969 report in his FBI file says: "In spite of the subject's age (15 years), Philadelphia feels that his continued participation in BPP activities [sic] in the Philadelphia Division, his position in the Philadelphia Branch of BPP, and his past inclination to appear and speak at public gatherings, the subject should be included on the Security Index."

During the phase of the trial when the jury decided Abu-Jamal's sentence, the prosecution used his former membership in the Black Panther Party in a way the defense says violated Abu-Jamal's constitutional rights. Prosecutor Joseph McGill asked Abu-Jamal about an article he wrote as a Panther which used the Mao Tse-tung quote: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." The Pennsylvania Supreme Court, however, ruled the Panther evidence admissible.

Whatever the impact of the Panther disclosure on the jury's decision to execute Abu-Jamal, his Panther membership had a significant impact on his craft. Writing for the party's newspaper, he later recalled, "charged my pen with a distinctive anti-authoritarian, and anti-establishment character that survives to this day."