

# The “Terrorist” Label And The Criminalization of Revolutionary Black Movements in The USA



Former Black Liberation Army field secretary and 19 year political prisoner Dhoruba Bin-Wahad on the limitations of claims of 'innocence' for political prisoners.

*Americans live at a time when the history of those who have been cheated, murdered or excluded is being destroyed. Eliminated from this history are the collective narratives of struggle, resistance and rebellion against various forms of authoritarianism.*

*Henry Giroux [The Ghost of Authoritarianism in the Age of the Shutdown]*

At a press conference in May 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] announced that it was designating Assata Shakur, s/n Joanne Chesimard, as one of its top ten wanted “terrorists.” Assata escaped from a New Jersey jail in 1979 and thereafter surfaced in Cuba where she was granted political asylum. This designation, and the media hoopla surrounding it, has significant historical and political implications. While numerous progressive individuals and organizations correctly denounced that designation recognizing that it was, in part, an attack on Cuba, far too many progressive and Civil Rights advocates have missed the greater and more pernicious historical revisionism and racist political implications behind Assata Shakur’s rebranding as a “terrorist.”

Many people fighting for human rights, who oppose Obama’s policies of “Rendition,” torture, (which is euphemistically termed Enhanced Interrogation Technique), indefinite detention, State sponsored murder by RCV’s (drones) have simultaneously called upon President Barack Obama to remove the Shakur’s “terrorist” designation, arguing that Assata is “innocent” of the murder charges that resulted from her 1973 arrest. Unlike their opposition to Obama’s illegally conducted “war on terror” the same people who oppose the murder and detention of so called “militant” and “jihadists” without according them legal due process nonetheless implicitly recognize that those targeted by the US are in fact members of “movements” targeted by the U.S. government and would not be otherwise targeted were they not. Yet notably missing from most public statements decrying Assata’s designation as a “terrorist” were attempts to place Assata’s case, and the “terrorist” designation, in the political and cultural context of the Black Liberation Movement in the United States. Instead Officials at the highest level of government have little trouble placing the movements of the sixties in context. President Obama during his speech commemorating the March On Washington, recounted his version of the sixties claiming Black people lost

their way when “legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse-making for criminal behavior.” What was Obama talking about? Who was he referring to? What Blacks used police brutality to somehow mask criminal activity? He never said but clearly Obama is referring to the Black Panther Party, but he won’t say so. But his comments when juxtaposed next to the actions of his Justice Department speak volumes. In an effort to appease domestic Law Enforcement he sanctioned his Justice Department’s targeting of a former Black Panther in exile, Assata Shakur, designating her and her movement as terrorists. Rather than open up a discussion on the excesses of the sixties and seventies to discern who were the real criminals and assassins, the architects of COINTELPRO or the movements they illegally infiltrated and destroyed, both supporters and detractors of Assata distort, exclude, and ignore the movement from which she emerged. This essay is an attempt to place the “terrorist” designation and Assata’s case, in a historical and political context, a context that also significantly impacts the status of Black Political prisoners in the United States.

### **The Black Liberation (nationalist), Civil Right (Integrationist) and Pan-African Movements circa 1960 – 1975**

To begin, it is necessary to step into a time capsule and head back to the 1960’s. The following history is not intended to be definitive or complete. But this is a history that is relatively unknown, or if known, deliberately twisted and some who may have benefited from the distortion of Black 60’s activism. That is why it is important to review the era now defined as a watershed period in American racial and political history – the tumultuous Sixties.

The 1960’s and early 1970’s was a period of significant social upheaval. Globally former European colonial powers (all members of North Atlantic Treaty Organization) were locked in the false dichotomy of the Cold War and the struggle to reassert their control over the resources of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The “cold war” geopolitically divided the world into two hostile camps: the Euro-Russian and Sino-Communist East (led by Moscow and Peking) versus the West led by the USA and its NATO allies. The front line of this global contest after the Korean War (1950 – 1954) and the French expulsion from its colonial position in Southeast Asia was Vietnam. The US pursuing a policy of “containment of communism” took on the “white man’s burden” of the French in Vietnam and introduced a massive military presence into Vietnam to thwart the Vietnamese Independence movement. By 1965 the Vietnamese people were winning a war of liberation against the most powerful military force in history. (We note the recent passing of the liberation movement’s great leader Vo Nguyen Giap.) Movements within the United States – Black, Native American, Puerto Rican, Mexican – were waging similar struggles that, over time, took on an increasingly anti-imperialist character. This inspired masses of white people, primarily youth, to question the very foundations of United States’ society. The Women’s Liberation and LGBT movements also grew in this context. Indeed, it was militant nationalist organizations such as the RNA, BPP, SNCC, who vocally opposed U.S. militarism abroad and the Vietnam war, prior to Dr. Martin Luther King’s denunciation of American involvement in Vietnam as amoral and capitalism as exploitive. These were the forces and events that, by 1966 defined the historical and geopolitical conditions that shaped the great civil and human rights movements of middle 20th century.

Inspired by the example of the martyred El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X), Robert Williams, and the original Black Panthers of Lowndes County Alabama, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in October 1966 in Oakland, California by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. In just a few months after its inception the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense emerged as a significant influence on “New Left” and radical politics in America and one of the most popular organizations and (romanticized) groups in the Black community. The BPP developed a ten-point political program based on the conditions of African American and poor people in the Bay Area of San Francisco California and across the nation. However, the BPP’s emphasis on community control of institutions within the Black community, including education, health care and housing, resonated with urban Blacks everywhere because institutional racism lay at the very basis of racial and political inequality nationally, not only in the Bay Area. Blacks in

Oakland and its adjacent communities had migrated from the South and Southwest, to serve as labor battalions during WW II. The Naval base adjacent to Oakland and Port Of San Francisco played a primary logistical role in the US war effort against Imperial Japan during WWII the (1941-45). Black workers, arriving from the South to work as laborers for the war effort were redlined into specific residential areas. These Black worker communities were policed by racist and brutal police officers, themselves recent migrants from the deep South, mainly from Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. It should surprise no one then that the BPP 10 Point Program and Platform addressed the existential reality of Black people as workers, as “cannon fodder” for U.S. militarism. One point of the BPP program called for the end to the military draft of all Black men. Another point called for a plebiscite in the Black community to determine whether Black people wished to remain part of the United States. This point directly addressed the conditional and ambivalent nature of African American perennial second class “citizenship” that seems up for review every decade or so whenever the pressure of civil and economic reforms place undue pressure on white skin privilege. Challenging the conventional dichotomy of race relations in the U.S. the BPP reasoned that if Black people must struggle to reaffirm their “Civil Rights” every decade and constantly secure new legislation protecting their right to vote, then maybe “citizenship,” e.g. integration, is not synonymous with freedom or empowerment – and Nationalist self-determination (community control/decentralization of institutional controls) does in fact mean empowerment. This essentially was the reasoning for proposing a UN supervised plebiscite in the BPP ten-point platform of what we want and what we believe. Understanding that the Right of Self-determination for all peoples is part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (the USA is a non-signatory) as well as articles condemning racial repression and genocide, the BPP proclaimed its internationalist tendency from its very inception.

Nonetheless the most controversial, vilified and misrepresented point of the BPP’s 10-point program was its recognition of Black People’s inherent right to self-defense, including armed self-defense against racist attack, by civilians or the police. In Oakland, Calif. armed BPP members engaged in the original of “cop-watch,” establishing regular armed patrols that followed the police, intervening, at a legal distance, when the police violated someone’s rights. Fully appreciating how short lived their right to bear arms in public would last, and instinctively sensing how the power structure of white supremacy would attempt to disconnect the Rights of Black self-defense from non-violent movements for broader civil rights and assimilation – the bread and butter of “responsible Negro leaders”—the BPP embarked on a publicity campaign to emphasize the racist political character and purpose of law enforcement and the legislative process. The BPP’s instincts were verified when in 1967, in direct response to the BPP, the State of California sought to amend its gun laws to eliminate the right to carry a firearm in open view. (Ironically, the bill was supported by gun rights advocates, the NRA and then Governor Ronald Reagan. After all, it was about taking firearms from Black people!). Indeed the Bill was called the “Black Panther” Bill. Racially motivated Reform from the Right threatened to eat its own! On May 2, 1967, the BPP responded by sending an armed delegation to Legislative Office Building in Sacramento debating the new gun law.

The image of armed young Black women and men marching in formation on a State Capitol circulated like wild-fire around the world. Dozens of Black community activists, mainly from the Black and Brown Ghettos, and off the Streets across America were galvanized by the BPP’s response to the perceived denial of Black Peoples right to openly carry arms. Those who were the daily victims of police harassment, violence, and intimidation were attracted to the BPP. These were not just “criminal minded” or sociopaths as the media and later Blaxploitation movies would portray, but in most cases serious activists and organizers in their respective communities. It is not generally understood that the membership and leadership of BPP in cities across the US was comprised of local activists who were active in their community before 1967. The organizational character of the BPP was also shaped by its ideological and organizational structure. A creation of its era, the BPP was not a “faith-based” messianic movement, or mass-based organization like Garvey’s UNIA, but a Cadre based Revolutionary formation that introduced a disparate membership to principles of revolutionary Nationalism, and Internationalism. These characteristics permitted the BPP to become the first Black organization to establish functional

relations with liberation movements in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. It is the legacy of those fraternal relationships that serves to protect Assata Shakur in Cuba today. This is one of the reasons why the FBI publicity stunt classifying Assata as a terrorist blatantly attempts to rewrite this history and denigrate legitimate movements.

When BPP Chapters sprang up throughout the country, the FBI, State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies realized that unless the ideas of Black self-defense were completely discredited, demonized, and rejected by the African American populace it could lead to a sustained uprising of America's most marginalized and maligned national minority – Africans in America. Barely ten months old, in August, 1967, the BPP became the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) major target in its expanding counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) against the Black Liberation movement. The stated purpose of the program according to an August 25, 1967 document was to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" Black organizations and their leadership. In March 1968, the program was further expanded to 43 FBI field offices. Those offices were ordered to develop counterintelligence operations designed to prevent the "coalition" of black groups as well as the rise of a "messiah" that would unify the movement.

The FBI was also very concerned about the spread of revolutionary ideology among youth. As candidly put by in April 1968 by the FBI's San Francisco field office, COINTELPRO must convince youth to buy into the system:

The Negro youth and moderate must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries. Is it not better to be a sports hero, a well-paid professional athlete or entertainer or a regularly paid white or blue collar worker, a peaceful human being with a family, or a person who is at least being accepted than a Negro who may have gotten even with the Establishment by burning it down, but who along with this, burned down his own home and gained for him and all his people the hatred and distrust of the whites for years to come?

What started out as a general repressive and surveillance program in 1967, by mid-1968, became a campaign to destroy the BPP and its ideology of armed resistance to racist violence. The Black Panther Party was the chief target of COINTELPRO.

According to a 1976 Senate Report (The Church Committee), the Black Panther Party was targeted in 90% of all COINTELPRO actions directed at the Black liberation movement. Some of the actions included forcing churches and schools to evict the breakfast program, sending spurious notes to contributors threatening violence, placing false stories in newspapers, manipulating fund raising, using informants to spread false rumors, and other disinformation machinations. BPP members were arrested on the street for selling the newspaper. Police conducted interrogations with no legal basis. In all of this, local police played an integral role.

As noted in an FBI Airtel on December 2, 1968 "every effort is being made to misdirect the activities of the BPP on a daily basis." Apartments and offices were regularly subjected to search. There were spurious arrests. All BPP offices, and many homes, were subjected to warrantless (and illegal) wiretaps. The organization was flooded with informants and police agents who worked as provocateurs by the FBI informant. A few days later the BPP office in Los Angeles was attacked by police.

False criminal charges were also lodged against BPP local and regional leaders. In April, 1969, 21 leading Cadre members of the New York City Chapter of the Black Panther Party (author included) were indicted and arrested on conspiracy charges. The so-called "Panther 21" case was based solely on the allegations of three undercover NYPD officers who posed as Panther members. One of these undercover Black "BOSSI" operative, Detective Gene Roberts, had years earlier infiltrated Malcolm X's organization the

OAAU and was on Malcolm's security detail at the Audubon Ballroom when Malcolm was gunned down and killed. The entire Harlem, New York, Chapter leadership, and its Regional Field Secretary, Dhoruba Bin-Wahad, were incarcerated. It was at this juncture in the covert and overt repression of the BPP that Assata Shakur, then a student at City College of New York, became active in BPP programs as an NCCF medical cadre in Harlem's Washington Heights.

Despite escalating state repression and attacks by various Black groups and Black intelligentsia the BPP's influence continued to grow with each police and reactionary attack on its members and programs. What was once a local BPP newsletter became the "Black Community News Service" and the voice as well as the revolutionary image of the BPP. Sales of the BPP newspaper skyrocketed becoming primary funding source for BPP operations.

After the Sacramento BPP armed demonstration, the Party dropped the hyphenated "for self-defense." The BPP began national organizing efforts to unify the Radical Left in America in a common "front" against Police brutality in early 1968.

Despite the Race and Class analysis that drove BPP activities, the organization and the Black Liberation movements were ill-prepared to cope with the historic moment. The BPP's strategic vision by late 1968 became increasingly focused on the burgeoning Corporate Police state and what its leading members saw as the precipitous consolidation of Corporate, Military, and Police power that would criminalize and crush future civil unrest, and politically redirect popular anti-war sentiment into more "institutional" avenues reforms. The slogan and war cry of the BPP, "Power to the People, Black Power to Black People" had distilled in a few words, accompanied by a clinched fist, the sentiments of millions of people who felt controlled and exploited by the white supremacist state, culture, and political system. But slogans only reflect not change reality. The BPP and all progressive movements of the period were living on the cusp of the historic reformation of two systems of Economic and Political control: Corporate/Capitalist Democracy and Authoritarian State Socialism. Both systems, fundamentally hierarchal and elitist, would ultimately coalesce into variations of National-Security State Model that typify both so called "democratic" and "authoritarian" states today.

## **CREATING A NEW GENERATION OF BLACK REFORM**

Before stepping down as President, Lyndon B. Johnson (after consultation with "Black Leaders" businessmen, and politicians) launched his "War on Poverty" opening up the coffers of the government to anyone who could calm the Ghetto Fires (rebellions) that each year consumed urban America and tarnished the image of the US as a democracy. Employing government and corporate largess to capital-starved Black inner city communities had immediate political consequences. Radical change was out – and liberal reformism was in. The class nature of many Black institutions became the determining factor in race politics. The dividing of the Black Liberation and Civil Rights movement along class lines would mean that the Panther's faced immediate and imminent class opposition from newly minted "anti-poverty pimps," and apolitical organizations eager for government funding –the launching of the War on Poverty, significantly affected the grassroots Black narrative of Black Power versus integration politics and African American subservience to the Two Party system. The money and "access" to White Corporate America provided under War On Poverty was just what the doctor ordered to wean marginal Black middle-class Blacks off any radical notions of collective empowerment rather than selfish individualism. But the BPP was not reformist. Alongside its reformist community programs were calls for a revolution and advocacy of radical transformation of U.S. society. But unlike many leading "Civil Rights" organizations of the time, the BPP believed only with a Revolution of values and radical change of political power in the dominant White society could Black political self-determination occur. In the politically expedient embrace of Johnson's : "Great Society" and Civil Rights legislation, Richard Nixon ascended to the U.S. Presidency and immediately pushed through a compliant Congress the 1968 Omnibus Crime Bill, thereby providing Law

Enforcement with additional tools for containment of racial unrest under the pretext of the “war on crime.”

There was also police murder and violence. For example, on December 4, 1969, Chicago police, aided by information provided by an FBI informant, fired hundreds of rounds into the BPP office killing Chairman Fred Hampton and BPP member Mark Clark. Fred Hampton was killed as he lay in his bed, drugged from the second secretly given to him. The US government understood that the Panthers, unlike the majority of African American Civil and Human Rights organizations, clearly understood the crucial and pivotal issue of racist violence in America and its deep connection to the State and its “Criminal Justice System.” Consequently the Panther’s perception of organized armed resistance to state repression, terrorism, and criminalization of Black Youth as essentially a strategy of “imposition of political consequences” for state sponsored terrorism, as necessary to any people’s struggle for freedom from a powerfully entrenched and violent adversary as non-violent mass protests. History supported the Panther’s perception, whenever people, the lower classes, exploited and disenfranchised rise up against their rulers inevitably the police/military apparatus of the State violently repress any popular uprising, movement, civil disobedience that threatens the existing order.

The attempt by the California to execute the leader of the BPP marked the beginning of coordinated national police campaign to eliminate the Panther’s local and regional leadership. By 1969 the popularity of the BPP extended far beyond inner city neighborhoods. Functional alliances were formed that were based on professed principles derived from anti-imperialist and Afrocentric Liberation Movements (the latter an ongoing radicalization of Malcolm X’s internationalist concepts) accompanied with a class analysis oriented in African American experience. This led to other “national minorities” forming “cadre” like Community Defense formations along the lines of the BPP: The Brown Berets (Chicano/Mexicano), The Young Lords Party, (Puerto Rican), The Young Patriot Party (Working Class/Student White Youth), are most commonly known. By mid sixty-nine, the BPP, put out a national call for a “United Front Against Fascism” that challenged the Radical Left in general and the Black Nationalist Movement in particular to build in their communities democratic and institutional frameworks to combat the militarization of police and state repression.

But the BPP had to respond to the infiltration, police raids on its offices, targeted assassination of its leaders, prosecution of its leaders, and suppression of its major source of income, the Black Panther Newspaper. Its first response to state repression was to “close the Party” to new membership. This would be organizational anathema for a “mass-based political party” – but the BPP was no ordinary “mass political party” or Left Radical Formation. The BPP, circa 1966-1971 was a paramilitary political as well as socio-cultural formation that by default represented the historical armed resistance to violent white supremacy in America. Understood in these terms, it’s self-evident that the BPP was not armed for revolutionary theatre, macho posturing, or for publicity, but to assert in the most direct terms possible Black people’s right to resist racist attack and/or police repression. Given the huge disparity between the power of the state and a small civilian organization, the BPP’s survival required and generated an underground component; a clandestine capability to achieve and underscore the political and strategic objectives of the Party. Although the BPP was popular it could be physically eradicated and isolated if it did not expand its influence and support base. As it were, from the BPP’s call for radical unity against the burgeoning power of the police/militarized state emerged Radical Left and Black Militant coalitions designated the “National Committees to Combat Fascism.” NCCF chapters blossomed across the U.S. in places where BPP chapters had either been depleted by police attack, or none had existed. The timeliness of the call to political arms against rising police state style repression was evident by the fact that radical Whites, progressive students, organized their own NCCF chapters where they struggled and lived. This BPP strategy to build a broader radical “United Front Against Fascism” and consolidate the prevailing anti-establishment Youth culture behind their leadership, e.g., Black Liberation movement, and a

politically insurgent “Black Power” movement was only partially successful but nonetheless alarmed Law Enforcement and discomfited their Black collaborators.

The NYPD, in particular, noted with alarm, the BPP/NCCF-led effort to decentralize police departments in major cities.

The FBI’s fear index of the BPP increased geometrically in proportion to the effectiveness of the BPP’s political influence over a broad spectrum of Americas anti-war New Left and the public adulation by a significant segment of African American people. BPP international solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, Palestinian People’s Struggle for Self-determination, and direct relations with anti-imperialist Liberation movements on the African continent were equally alarming, and the Party’s penetration of the US military as well as its connection to European Left and Student movements, sounded the alarm and drew the scrutiny of agencies outside of domestic law enforcement. U.S. Military Intelligence Units, the CIA, U.S. State Department all targeted and monitored BPP international activities.

#### Achieving Legal and Moral Legitimacy by Rewriting and Ignoring the Conditions and History of Racial Repression and Black Self-defense

By May of 1971, despite the considerable amount of funds and support cases such as the Panther 21 trial had raised for the Party, and the International success of the Free Huey Campaign that resulted in Newton’s acquittal and release from jail, BPP resources were depleted and programs cut back due to the relentless overt and covert Police attacks and prosecutions. COINTELPRO operations continued and escalated. Exacerbating regional, personal and political differences, the FBI had embarked upon a plan, an eventually successful one, to split the Black Panther Party into two factions, one on the west coast commonly called the “Newton” faction and one of the east coast commonly called the “Cleaver” faction after Eldridge Cleaver.

While many debate whether the split would have occurred even without FBI instigation, it is beyond dispute that the FBI and local law enforcement played a central role in making the split a violent one. Using information gleaned from their wiretaps and using informants, the FBI created a mindset within the BPP that leaders of one faction were intent on killing the other. As one FBI document noted

It appears that [Huey P.] Newton responds violently to any question of his actions or policies or reluctance to do his bidding. He obviously responds hastily without getting all the facts or consulting with others.

The Bureau feels that this near hysterical reaction by the egotistical Newton is triggered by any criticism of his activity, policies or leadership qualities and some of this criticism undoubtedly is result of our counterintelligence projects now in operation. This present chaotic situation within the BPP must be exploited and recipients must maintain the present high level of counterintelligence activity.

Those operations did result in deaths. Fred Bennett, Robert Webb and Sam Napier were three of those victims. In an April 5, 1971 FBI memorandum, the New York office gleefully reported that the “dichotomy” in the BPP created by COINTELPRO had resulted in the death of Webb, apparently by Newton supporters. But the FBI lamented that with the confusion in the BPP and many east coast members choosing to go underground, it was now difficult to engage in COINTELPRO-like activities. They noted that it would obviously be “detrimental to the continuing efforts of [COINTELPRO]” should the two factions reach a détente.

The BPP’s principled stand on the right of Blacks to defend themselves had responded to legalized racist repression by deepening and resourcing the BPP’s clandestine organization. Self-defense in face of violent

state repression could not remain reactionary, passive. Self-Defense had become proactive, retaliatory, a political consequence “illegal” resistance to “legal injustice.” Armed struggle against State and Rightwing racist violence and Criminal elements that profited from the debilitation of the Black community, e.g., Heroin, Cocaine, Dealers and Street-sets terrorizing Black neighborhoods developed as the distinct adaptation of East Coast Panthers to COINTELPRO targeting the New York 21, Geronimo Pratt, and the International Section of the BPP led by Eldridge Cleaver. The Black Liberation Army (BLA) was the conscious response of those targeted by COINTELPRO for police style assassination, or imprisonment. Some BPP members fled underground to avoid the COINTELPRO-inspired violence, two examples were Zayd Malik Shakur, former NY Chapter Deputy Minister of Information and Sundiata Acoli, a Panther 21 member. Both Shakur (who was killed) and Sundiata (captured) were with Assata Shakur when she was shot and wounded on the NJ Turnpike. Others chose to go underground to further revolutionary activity; many current Political Prisoners with their activism rooted in the BPP/BLA are of this category.

### **Black Liberation Army – Striking Back**

In the spring of 1971, there was a series of shootings of police in New York City. Other armed attacks occurred in California and elsewhere. In communiqués received by the media, the “Black Liberation Army” claimed responsibility for those attacks. In response, President Richard Nixon ordered a “full-out” law enforcement effort to capture former BPP members who might have been involved in the attacks. The initial investigation, called “Newkill” was a joint FBI-NYPD effort that became a model for later incarnations such as the “Joint Terrorism Taskforce.”

FBI agents who were involved in COINTELPRO became part of Newkill. BPP members who were then underground – and many who were not – were considered “logical suspects and targeted for arrest. The Director ordered the New York FBI Office to

Review appropriate files of black extremist organizations, including those of so-called Third World groups to develop logical suspects. Include those organizations and their leaders in target assignments given to sources. Consider the possibility that both attacks may be result of revenge taken against New York City Police by the Black Panther Party as a result of its arrest of BPP members in April, 1969....

Assata Shakur aligned herself with East Coast “Cleaver” faction and though never a formally a COINTELPRO target, she became a primary target of the FBI’s post- COINTELPRO anti urban-terrorism investigations collectively labeled under her name (Joanne Chesimard) as “Chesrob.” Chesrob became a national anti-urban guerilla investigation aimed directly at destroying BLA soldiers and their clandestine infrastructure. By early 1972, the media labeled her the “soul” on the Black Liberation Army. She was labeled a suspect in virtually every New York City bank robbery where a woman was thought to have participated. Although “Chesrob” was denominated an FBI bank robbery investigation, it was really another coordinated NYPD-FBI effort to capture or kill underground BPP members and BLA members.

In a few short years, former BPP members and BLA soldiers Harold Russell, Woody Green, Anthony Kimu White and Twyman Meyers were killed during armed confrontations with the police. Others were arrested, tried and convicted for incidents claimed by or thought to be committed by the BLA.

It mattered not to prosecuting agencies whether those arrested were legally “guilty” or “not guilty.” What was important was the counter-insurgency effort that was begun under COINTELPRO and continued under programs such as Newkill and Chesrob could cover their racist repression of former BPP members and their supporters with criminal charges and prosecutions and avoid emotional and cumbersome conspiracy trials the lend themselves to acquittal of the defendants.

It is in this context that Assata Shakur’s May 2, 1973 arrest on the New Jersey Turnpike must be viewed. Along with BPP members Zayd Malik Shakur and Sundiata Acoli (an acquitted Panther 21 defendant,

former NASA employee and computer genius) she was stopped on the New Jersey Turnpike for “driving while Black.” It is likely that the troopers learned the identities of those in the car shortly after it was stopped. In any event, a shootout erupted. Zayd Malik Shakur and one trooper were killed. Assata was shot while her hands were in the air attempting to surrender. She was arrested. Sundiata Acoli, though injured, managed to escape but was caught a few days later.

Assata was then tried for the numerous acts where she was suspected. All resulted in acquittals or dismissals. It was the May 2, 1973 incident that gave rise to her only conviction and life sentence. Sundiata Acoli was also convicted in a separate trial and sentenced to life. She was liberated from her New Jersey prison in November 1979 and eventually surfaced in Cuba where she was granted political asylum.

Assata and her legal advisors can and should use any available means and arguments to keep her safe and free. But everyone else, supporters, and those only interested in justice and an end to racist and political repression should, as a matter of principle, place her case, and the “terrorist” designation placed on her by the FBI in its proper context: as the continuation of criminalization and demonization of the Black Liberation Movement. Assata’s guilt or innocence of the actual charges is totally and absolutely irrelevant. Assata was part of a movement that sustained and suffered massive police and state repression under COINTELPRO, Newkill and Chesrob. This movement for Black Self-determination, the right to control institutions within the Black community and the Right to self-defense,” was declared “terrorist” by the U.S. Government’s Law Enforcement agencies charged with executing its racist and political destruction. With its recent posting of Assata Shakur on America’s top ten most wanted terrorists list, U.S. Law Enforcement and the U.S. Justice department are reaffirming their past illegal policies of domestic repression of political dissent, racial and religious demonization of minority and immigrant populations, This is the political message that this labeling carries. It is our job to flatly reject that argument and to re-affirm the right of Black people and all people of color to self- determination. While it is true Assata Shakur is the victim of an injustice but that injustice is not administered from state, but by her so-called supporters, progressive Civil Libertarians, and Black cultural figures who proclaim her “innocence” and dismiss the movement from which she emerged as a mere “Law Enforcement” fantasy propounded to rationalize their illegal police actions under the color of law. Assata Shakur, in a so-called post-racial era is made into a Black Madonna of abstract resistance –disconnected as an activist, freedom fighter, and soldier of a legitimate anti-racist and anti-imperialist movement. Clearly such disconnect is in the political eye of the beholders and not derived from the actual history of a radical movement. Progressives and Civil Libertarian must understand that what happened to Asaata was but a series of episodes during a systemic and coordinated campaign to crush a domestic revolutionary movement. A state of war existed between the state and that movement. The State succeeded in smashing the movement and its absence today should not serve as a license for political opportunism, to exploit and misinterpret the past to suit individual agendas or characterize one’s politics. Most of the Political Prisoners in American jails come from the BPP/BLA and Black Nationalist movement. The System of visible and hidden racist control of African Americans that brought that movement into existence still persists, and because it persists who the Black Political Prisoners are not an unprincipled issue up for reinterpretation. All Black Political Prisoners should be supported, not based on their guilt or innocence, but based on the historical reality that their actions and current conditions of confinement were, and are, premised on their past relationship to a movement targeted by law enforcement and various agencies of the state, and that targeting was illegal, violent, and permanent.

It is for this reason that we cannot get mired in a debate over legal “guilt” or “innocence.” Was Nelson Mandela less a Political Prisoner worthy of freedom because he engaged in armed actions? In this country, the successful campaign to free the Puerto Rican political prisoners who were granted clemency by Bill Clinton provides an example. The campaign to free them did not admit or deny that they were

“guilty” of seditious conspiracy or committed the acts attributed to them. Rather it emphasized that they are not “criminals” or “terrorists” but one part of the struggle over Puerto Rico’s destiny.

Although there are differences the political characterization of Assata’s as a terrorist and the cases of the Black political prisoners (her comrades) still in jail must be the same: they were/are part of a legitimate political movement for human rights and self-determination. Many of the BPP political prisoners from the era remain in jail. Marshall Eddie Conway: 43 years; Anthony Jalil Bottom: 42 years; Sundiata Acoli: 40 years; Robert Seth Hayes: 41 years; Herman Bell: 40 years, Russell Maroon Shoatz: 40 years; Sekou Odinga: 32 years and Abdul Majid: 31 years. Albert Nuh Washington, Teddy Jah Heath, and Basheer Hameed died in prison after serving decades. Many of the arrested BPP/BLA members had trials characterized by gross violations of due process and that took place at a time when COINTELPRO disclosures had yet been made. But only two, Dhoruba Bin-Wahad (the author) and Geronimo Pratt were able to secure reversals and secure their freedom from imprisonment.

But once again, the issue after 40 or more years is not guilt or innocence or whether the trials were fair. These prisoners were and are part of a movement and, after all of this time, should be freed irrespective of their legal guilt or innocence. To achieve this, the “terrorist” label must be challenged not on an individual basis but politically and in correct historical context. Reconciling the so called “excesses” of the past with the reality of Post Patriot Act America is a specious proposition at best. But to forthrightly declare that all Political Prisoners must be set free as one of many democratic principles of a mass campaign to curtail the political power of law enforcement would seem more likely to succeed in Freeing all political prisoners and changing Assata’s status as a Refugee from American racial repression.

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