

National NAACP office to review Jan. 9 elections

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Sentinel-Voice

The NAACP's national board will form a special subcommittee to review the local branch's Jan. 9 elections. The decision came after disenchanted Las Vegas NAACP members appealed the election results to national board members at the civil right group's annual national board meeting in Washington, D.C. on Feb. 20. Louis Overstreet, Andonia Harrison and Linda Howard lobbied members of the Committee on Branches. Overstreet still thinks that

Tri-State Conference President Edward Lewis and former branch secretary Tarsha Crockett, among others, will continue to press to keep him from participating with the Las Vegas branch.

"I priority-mailed background information to nationals..." Overstreet said, "But the staff didn't distribute the material before the meeting and even listed it as 'Las Vegas material not available' on the summaries."

Crockett dismissed Overstreet's claims. "What evidence does he have that I

conspired against him? ... He's acting as if he's a child. He just cannot understand rules."

Crockett said Overstreet failed to qualify as a candidate for the local elections because of the 180-day rule, which requires membership in a specific branch 180 days before an election nomination meeting. Overstreet said that as a life member he only has to join a branch 30 days prior to a nomination meeting.

Lewis also dismissed Overstreet's claims. When asked how he views the Committee's decision, he

said, "I don't care."

"Regardless of what happens or who takes office, the branch reports to me," he said. "I do feel, however, that the people carrying on so much about this have very little comprehension of how the NAACP works."

Lewis said that if the election results are overturned, the branch's charter will be pulled and a committee would be formed in the interim. The committee would wait for all existing memberships in the chapter to expire before reforming the branch.

Membership fees to rise

NAACP membership fees will increase on March 1, 1999. In a letter to members, National Board Chairman, Julian Bond wrote, "Our fees have to rise because costs have risen," later saying that membership monies dropped from making up 25 percent of the total budget in 1990, to 14 percent in 1997.

The basic annual cost for an adult membership will rise from \$10 to \$30. Young adults, ages 18 to 21, will be charged \$15 per year. Youth, 17 and younger, will soon have to pay \$10 per year for membership.

There will also be new categories for life members: Junior life memberships are \$100 for those 13-years-old and younger. Bronze life memberships are \$400 and are extended to youngsters between the ages of 13 and 21. Silver life will be the designation for those who spend \$750; gold for people who pay \$1,500 and diamond status for contributions of \$2,500 or more. Life memberships

(See Membership, Page 16)

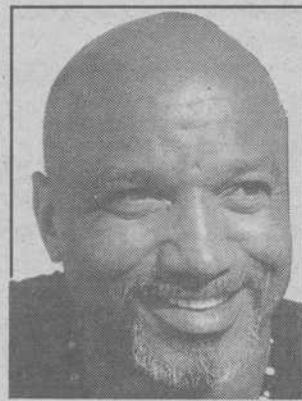
California Prosecutor: Virtually impossible to retry Pratt

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - A controversial murder case of the turbulent 1960s ended last week when prosecutors said they would not retry a Black Panther leader who spent 27 years behind bars for a crime he swore he did not commit.

Los Angeles District Attorney Gil Garcetti announced he would drop murder charges against Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt because "it would be virtually impossible to retry the case."

"In our professional judgment, there would be no reasonable likelihood of conviction," Garcetti said.

His move came a day after a California state appeals court dealt his office an



Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt embarrassing blow by ruling that a lower court judge had acted correctly when he ordered Pratt released on bail in 1997 because he had not received a fair trial.

Garcetti had appealed the 1997 decision and could have challenged the appeals court

verdict in the state's supreme court—a move legal experts said would have had little chance of success.

Pratt, who now calls himself Geronimo ji Jaga, was arrested in 1970 and convicted two years later of the 1968 robbery and murder of a Santa Monica schoolteacher, Caroline Olsen, and the attempted murder of her husband, Kenneth. The robbery netted \$18. Pratt, now living in Louisiana, said he had been in Oakland, California, at the time, hundreds of miles from the scene of the crime, and was singled out for prosecution because he was a leader of the Black Panther Party, an African-American

organization advocating violent revolution.

But the argument that won Pratt release from prison was his lawyers' claim that prosecutors had covered up evidence that the key witness against him was a police and FBI informer who had infiltrated the Black Panthers and was a convicted felon himself.

It took seven years before the witness's background came to light—thanks to the forced release of documents under the Freedom of Information Act—and the case was appealed six times.

Pratt's former lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, who won international fame successfully defending O.J. Simpson against murder charges, said "the government has played fast and loose with (Pratt's) case. It is outrageous."

The case became a cause celebre in Hollywood, and Pratt drew support from such celebrities as Sean Penn and Marlon Brando.

The state appeals court was careful not to deliver an opinion on whether Pratt was guilty or innocent of the attack on the Olsens, noting that

"issue is not before us."

The 2nd District Court of Appeals in Los Angeles said Orange County Superior Court Judge Everett Dickey had been right to overturn Pratt's murder conviction and free him in June 1997 because prosecutors had suppressed evidence. If Pratt's lawyers had known about witness Julius Butler's role as a police informant, they could have devastated his credibility in the eyes of the jurors, Dickey said in his ruling.

Butler gave police a letter saying Pratt had confessed to shooting Caroline Olsen.

Jasper

(Continued from Page 1) that's exactly what there was that night," prosecutor Pat Hardy said in closing arguments Tuesday.

"After they dragged that poor man and tore his body to pieces, they dropped it right in front a church and a cemetery, to show their defiance to God, to show their defiance of Christianity and everything most people in this county stand for."

The evidence against King included a lighter engraved with a Klan symbol and King's prison name, "Possum," that was found along with cigarette butts at the scene; clothes stained with Byrd's blood; letters in which King wrote about organizing a racist gang; and King's tattoos of a black man hanging from a tree, cartoon characters in Klan garb, Nazi-type SS lightning bolts and Aryan power proclamations.

According to testimony, King talked with a fellow inmate a few years ago about "taking a black out" to prove himself as a white supremacist. After his release in 1997, King tried to start a racist group, the Texas Rebel Soldiers, and was looking for

an opportunity to make a name for himself, prosecutors said.

King's lawyers called only three witnesses who testified for less than an hour. King did not take the stand.

His attorneys appeared to have conceded the conviction and planned to try to save his life in the punishment phase.

They insisted that the racist writings did not prove the case against King and that the convicted burglar covered himself in racist tattoos as protection from blacks in prison. "I don't deny he made some racial slurs," attorney Haden "Sonny" Cribbs said. "Not that I agree with that. But that is his right."

King's alleged accomplices, Shawn Berry, 24 and Lawrence Russell Brewer, 31, are awaiting trial and could also face the death penalty. Byrd, an unemployed 49-year-old man known for his singing voice—and also his affection for alcohol—was on his way home from a party when he crossed paths with King in the early hours of June 7.

According to prosecutors, King, Berry and Brewer were riding around in Berry's

pickup truck, drinking and looking for women, when Berry spotted Byrd walking. Berry knew Byrd and asked if he needed a lift. Byrd climbed into the back.

According to Berry's statement to police, King got behind the wheel and drove it to a dirt logging trail east of Jasper, where Byrd was beaten and chained to the vehicle.

Dr. Tommy Brown, a pathologist, testified that Byrd was alive for two miles of the journey along the bumpy county road. He tried to endure the excruciating pain by propping himself on his elbows to spare his head, the pathologist said.

When the pickup swerved to the left, Byrd's bouncing body swung to the right, and his head was torn off by a concrete drain pipe.

The pathologist said he could not determine whether Byrd was conscious up to the end.

After the verdict, Sheriff Billy Rowles blew a kiss to Byrd's family and gave a thumbs-up to Clara Taylor, Byrd's sister. Several of Byrd's family members cried, as did King's father, Ronald.

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