

## COMMENTARY

# Death penalty moratorium right course of action

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

As more and more light is focused on the death penalty across this nation, more people are coming to understand how it has been abused over and over again.

More people are understanding that innocent people have, indeed, been executed (just read Lloyd Stephens' book, or talk with those who have been chaplains for death row inmates and they will tell you stories of people they know were innocent who were executed) and that this makes a mockery of our criminal justice system and our claims of justice for all.

Now a Columbia University study just out shows that two thirds of those given the death penalty have their convictions overturned.

In Kentucky and Maryland and Tennessee 100% of the cases have been reversed.

It also found that 75% of the people whose cases were overturned were later given lesser sentences at retrials, in plea bargains or by order of a judge.

Seven percent were found not guilty at all.

Meanwhile, Governor George W. Bush, the self-proclaimed compassionate conservative, has stayed for

30 days the 132nd execution in Texas while he has been governor, granting a DNA test in a case which many feel the convicted man may, indeed, be guilty.

But only a week away is the execution of a man convicted only on the eyewitness testimony of a woman standing 30 or 40 feet away in a darkened parking lot and who was only 17 at the time of his conviction (the U.S. joins only 4 other nations which execute juveniles.)

It seems that with public attention on the assembly-line executions of the state of Texas, Governor Bush is slowing down the pace a bit, despite the fact that last year a magazine caught him making fun of Karla Faye Tucker, the first woman executed in Texas since the Civil War, and that CNN cameras showed him laughing over another case of a Texas death row inmate whose lawyer fell asleep during his trial, but whose appeal was turned down by a judge who claimed the defendant was only promised a lawyer, not one who was awake.

But in a Newsweek interview, Governor Bush, who has allowed more executions than any governor of any state

## Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



since the death penalty was re-instituted, did not know how much the state paid attorneys to represent defendants on appeal.

The DNA test order by Governor Bush is only guaranteed for death row cases in two states, New York and Illinois.

Since its wide availability in the criminal justice system in the early 1980's, more than 70 inmates have been freed, including eight on death row.

Many of those who favor the death penalty no matter what (including, it seems, both Governors Bush) point out that there is no proof that any innocent person has been executed.

That argument becomes specious when one realizes that most of the DNA evidence preserved in such cases is thrown out with the death of the inmate.

But the lack of DNA tests

is only one reason that many Americans, including those who support the death penalty in theory, are calling for a moratorium for this most final of all punishments.

In a study last year, the Chicago Tribune found there were four basic reasons for the large number of reversals in Illinois: defense attorneys were later suspended or disbarred, jailhouse snitches who wanted to get out of prison themselves, questionable "hair analysis" evidence and black defendants convicted by all-white juries.

Others might add one more factor: the race of the defendant and the race of the victim.

Many death row inmates (99% of whom are poor and the majority of whom are African-American or Latino) received very inadequate, sometimes even negligent, defenses.

In addition to lawyers who have slept through trials, there are those who have done no investigatory work, called no witnesses and sometimes never even questioned those of the prosecution.

In Texas one such lawyer, who has more of his clients on death row than any lawyer in the nation, brags that he failed his criminal law classes.

This hand-picked African-American man now drives a Rolls Royce.

Moreover, most states provide very inadequate funds for lawyers who do want to do a good job, with almost nothing for investigators who could turn up other witnesses or evidence.

Indeed, in several of the Illinois cases in which death row inmates were found to be innocent, the investigation was done by college students, who just went out and asked very basic questions and looked for obvious witnesses.

Then there is the race factor. As the NAACP Legal Defense Fund points out, 98% of the prosecutors in death row cases are white and African Americans are more likely to end up on death row than their European American counterparts. But there

is also the factor of the race of the victim.

According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, Death Penalty Sentencing and the Death Penalty Information Center, those who murdered whites were found more likely to be sentenced to death than those who murdered blacks.

Lawrence Marshall, director of the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law, says, "A system that relies on miracles is doomed to commit grievous error."

The Columbia University study concludes that the death penalty system is collapsing under its own weight.

Americans should not need experts to tell us what is moral and what is right. There must be a moratorium on the death penalty in every state.

Only Governor Ryan of Illinois is so far willing to support a moratorium.

(Note: 39 states now have the death penalty. You can write to your own Governor. For more information contact Moratorium Now!, Quixote Center, P.O. Box 5206, Hayattsville, MD 20782 or Death Penalty Information Center at [www.essential.org/dpic](http://www.essential.org/dpic).)

# NBUF alive, well after 21 long years of leading struggle

*Dr. Conrad W. Worrill*

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

The National Black United Front, NBUF, is preparing for the Twenty-first Annual National Convention to be held in Brooklyn, N.Y., from July 13 to July 16.

Time has a way of moving forward. It's hard to believe that NBUF has been in existence 21 years. It is a remarkable achievement that a Black Movement organization made up of committed volunteers, with limited resources, has survived and continues to grow and develop.

NBUF grew out of the spirit of the 1960s and 70s when African people in this country were aggressively organizing around numerous issues. The activism of the Civil Rights Movement, and its challenges against legal segregation, sparked the mass motion of African people in America.

The mobilization and organizing of the Civil Rights Movement transitioned into the Black Power Phase of our movement in the late 1960s, creating the renewed call for Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism.

Through the disruptive tactics of the United States Government and its counterintelligence programs (COINTEL-PRO), the Black Liberation Movement in America suffered serious setbacks. Many leading activists and organizers were arrested and convicted on false charges, and continue to remain locked up, as political prisoners. Others were assassinated, such as Malcolm X, Dr. King, and Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark.

By the late 1970s, the Black Liberation Movement was in serious disarray.

This stimulated numerous leading Black activists, organizers, and leaders to convene a series of meetings. Twice during the latter years of the 1970s (1976-1977), in Brooklyn, several organizations attempted to bridge the gap of ideological disunity among the various forces in the Black Movement and to formulate a United Front formation.

Many of the members of NBUF can remember the all-day meetings held in the East in an attempt at national unity. But the commitment, positions, and images of most forces were fixed. The mistrust and apprehensions of the past years lingered in the memories of most participants. However, a core group of participants, in these meetings, from around the country agreed that it was urgent that a call be made to convene the founding convention of the National Black United Front / NBUF.

The founding convention was held in Brooklyn at the Old Armory in June of 1980. More than 1,000 activists from 34 states and five foreign countries participated in this four-day convention. Rev. Herbert Daughtry was elected interim National Chairman and we approved a draft of the Constitution and bylaws.

At the second national convention, once again, held in Brooklyn in July of 1981, NBUF ratified a permanent constitution, bylaws, and leadership structure. NBUF chapters emerged across the country in Philadel-

phia, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Raleigh, Greensboro, Mississippi, Houston, Dallas, Kansas City, St. Louis, Portland, Seattle, the Bay Area, Muskegon, Lansing, Detroit, New York, New Jersey, Milwaukee, Memphis, and Chicago. Most of these chapters continue to function today-21 years later.

Over this twenty-one year period, NBUF has organized around the following principles:

- To struggle for self-determination, liberation, and power for Black People in the United States.

- To work in common struggle with African liberation movements and African people throughout the world.

- To build a politically conscious, unified, committed, and effective Black mass movement.

- To struggle to eliminate racism (including Zionism and Apartheid), sexism (the oppression, exploitation, and inequality of women), monopoly capitalism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and national oppression.

- To maintain strict political and financial independence of the National Black United Front.

- To build unity and common struggle with oppressed peoples in the United States and throughout the world, as long as the best interests of people of African descent are not contradicted or compromised.

- To continue to struggle to maximize the unity of the Black Liberation Movement and

of people of African descent; to eliminate internal violence, character assassination, and self destruction; to establish a viable process to arbitrate all major conflicts within the Black Liberation Movement and the African community.

- To continue the political/cultural revolution to create a new vision and value system and a new man, woman, and child based on the common struggle around the needs of the African majority.

NBUF believes that in order for Black people in America to become free, liberated, and independent, we must be organized. Therefore, we believe all Black people should join an organization that is working in the interest of our people. We believe that the National Black United Front is such an organization and we urge you to join us and participate in our Twenty-first National Convention. This year's theme is "Revitalization of the African Extended Family Through African-Centered Education." NBUF takes the position that only through our own economic self-sufficiency and self-help will we truly liberate ourselves from the continued devastation of racism and white supremacy in this country.

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