

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE TO RELEASE ELDRIDGE CLEAVER

P.O. Box 2967, Customs House
San Francisco, California 94126

Dear Miss Thompson,

We are writing to you because we believe you share our belief that a government has no right to silence a man for expressing ideas thought to be dangerous to the established order -- and no right to silence a man for organizing politically to translate those ideas into real social changes. Our friend Eldridge Cleaver is in prison today -- after miraculously escaping what appears to have been a deliberate police attempt to take his life -- as a result of precisely that kind of political persecution.

The issue here is not defense of the particular political ideas espoused by Eldridge Cleaver, but defense of any man's right to express unpopular ideas and to act on them politically. We are asking you to put aside any political differences you might have with Mr. Cleaver, and to act as you would have acted when Dreyfus, Eugene Debs, Tom Mooney or Sacco and Vanzetti were similarly persecuted for political reasons and framed by frightened authorities.

We are asking you to add your name to the growing list of Americans and others who are protesting this flagrant abridgement of Mr. Cleaver's constitutional rights, and of his fundamental human rights. And we are asking you do do this now, while your support counts for something, while we still have a chance to win the release of this original thinker and courageous man. Sooner or later, we are confident that you would support the demand for Mr. Cleaver's release. "Sooner or later" would perhaps be soon enough to satisfy one's conscience, but it would be too late to help Eldridge Cleaver.

Eldridge was particularly vulnerable as a political leader because he was also a parolee. He was released on parole in 1966, after a nine-year stretch in prison, got married and took a job as staff writer for Ramparts magazine. (His release that time was a direct result of representations by a handful of prominent persons who had seen his writings and spotted his talent.) McGraw-Hill already had the manuscript of his book, later published as Soul on Ice, which won wide and immediate critical acclaim. Cleaver quickly became active in the Black Panther Party, which was working to organize black people in Oakland, California around a broad political program for social change in the ghetto. He became the party's Minister of Information.

To understand Eldridge Cleaver's short odyssey outside prison walls requires some background knowledge of the hostile environment into which he moved -- hostile to blacks, and hostile especially to black political leaders. Oakland is a town which has forcefully repressed all civil rights activity, even the most modest movements that began in other areas of the country seven or eight years ago. And when the Black Panther Party began to organize around the inhuman treatment accorded black citizens by the Oakland police, the repression escalated. (You will find enclosed a mimeographed sheet which gives some idea of the systematic pattern of police harassment and violence against members of the Black Panther Party.)

Although the Black Panther Party, aware of its vulnerability, took extreme precautions to ensure that its organizing activities were within the law (the party's co-founder, Huey P. Newton, a former law student, often lectured his men on their legal rights and limitations), police regularly harassed and arrested party members without reasonable cause, and on several occasions threatened to kill party leaders. Then, in October 1967, Huey P. Newton was stopped by police on the streets of Oakland and became involved in a shooting in which he was wounded and a policeman was killed. The Grand Jury which indicted Mr. Newton was shown no evidence that Mr. Newton fired a shot, or even that he possessed a weapon at the time of the shooting.

We mention these details not to elicit support for the Black Panther Party or its political program, for this is not our intention here. We mention them because they help explain why removing Eldridge Cleaver from the ghetto became so important to the Oakland Police and the California Adult Authority (parole board). Eldridge had moved swiftly to organize mass public support for Huey Newton, and mass public condemnation of the racist policies and practices of the Oakland police. As the campaign grew in strength, enlisting the support of impressive numbers of white people, Cleaver was threatened by police (they broke into his apartment in San Francisco without a warrant and vainly searched it), and was told by his parole officer that the decision had already been made by the Adult Authority to revoke his parole at the first pretext.

That pretext came on April 6, 1968, two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King. It is noteworthy that of all the big city ghettos that erupted after King's assassination, Oakland, explosive Oakland, was not among them. This can be traced directly to the influence of the Black Panther Party, which has always and publicly opposed spontaneous violence in the ghettos, stressing instead the need for serious political organization. Significantly, the party's efforts in the days following King's death were directed to dissuading black students from burning down a school (something Eldridge himself personally attended to), and to preparing a campaign rally for April 7 on behalf of Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who are running for Congress and State Assembly as candidates of the Peace and Freedom Party. (Eldridge himself is on the state steering committee of the predominantly white Peace and Freedom Party.)

On the evening of April 6, Cleaver and other members of the party were driving around Oakland making preparations for the rally the following day, when they fell victim to a classic police entrapment. The details of the police stakeout of the neighborhood; the ensuing shootout; the killing of Black Panther Treasurer Bobby Hutton; and the wounding and arrest of Eldridge Cleaver, are contained in the enclosed material. What is significant is that the police, who had repeatedly threatened to "get" Eldridge Cleaver, had finally got their man. So, we might add, had the California Adult Authority.

Within hours of the shooting, at 3 a.m., Cleaver's parole was summarily suspended, at the instigation of the Oakland police, without the required hearing to determine the facts. The Adult Authority is an exceptional body, responsible to no one but Governor Ronald Reagan, and vested with immense (and, some lawyers argue, unconstitutional) authority over the lives of prisoners and former prisoners. This time, however, they have acted to deny due process of the law to Eldridge Cleaver with a brazenness unusual even for them, with disregard even for the forms of investigation and full hearing. As a result of the arbitrary parole revocation, Mr. Cleaver is not eligible for bail, and remains in prison at Vacaville, California.

In prison, he has been plagued with petty harassments. For some time he was in solitary confinement, was served cold food, and was forbidden the tools of his writing trade -- typewriter, dictating machine, books and periodicals. His incoming and outgoing mail is still censored, depriving him of essential materials and depriving us, on the outside, of much that Eldridge Cleaver has to tell us. Only a few can visit him, and then only for a short time and by telephone through a glass partition. And there are many who fear that Eldridge may be killed in prison, as happens to inmates every year in California prisons. The best way we can ensure his good treatment, and perhaps even his survival in prison, is by showing mass public support and concern.

Eldridge Cleaver is an exceptional human being, one who regenerated himself after years in prison, who repudiated racism, who spoke out honestly about how America could regenerate herself after years of tolerating injustice. Heralded as a gifted writer, he could have walked out of prison into a comfortable life of royalties and literary cocktail parties. Instead, he chose to accept the dangers of organizing for the Black Panther Party. Everyone who is familiar with Cleaver's work in the Bay Area understands how his tact, diligence and integrity helped to create the sane setting in which black people and white people could work in a cooperative effort held together on the basis of mutual respect.

Faced with what appears to be a concerted effort to destroy the leadership of the black people, and all this means for the waning hope of avoiding serious race conflict in America, we must not allow this important voice to be silenced. We need Eldridge Cleaver on the outside, and we have it within our power to affect his fate. He was paroled once before, in response to public pressure, and he can be paroled again.

We have formed the International Committee to Release Eldridge Cleaver to achieve this objective, and this objective only. We need your support. Please join us as sponsors, and communicate our sense of urgency to your friends and colleagues, that they might also join in this fight -- to save an individual, but also, to save us all from the kind of political persecution which can only lead to tyranny.

James BALDWIN

Kay BOYLE

Ossie DAVIS

Maxwell GEISMAR

Herbert GOLD

Dr. Carlton GOODLETT

Dr. Philip SHAPIRO

Edward M. KEATING

Bay Area Co-Chairmen

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