

GERONIMO PRATT: FRAME-UP EXPOSED

By U.S. Congressman Ronald V. Dellums

Geronimo Pratt is a political prisoner fighting for his freedom. His story shows how far government agencies have been willing to go to stop movements for social change, particularly the Black struggle. The campaign to free him is an example of our ability to fight back and win.

The full weight of my office is behind Geronimo's struggle. I call on all of you to join us.

In 1969, Geronimo Pratt, a UCLA law student, rose to national prominence as a leader of the Black Panther Party. Documents recently uncovered by his lawyers show the FBI gave "constant consideration" during those years to "counterintelligence measures toward neutralizing Pratt as an effective BPP functionary." After failing several times to stop his work and discredit him, the FBI and police finally framed Geronimo for a crime they knew he did not commit.

Not content with imprisoning Geronimo, these same agencies worked with the California Department of Corrections to keep him in solitary confinement. For seven straight years Geronimo was locked in a dingy 4' x 8' cell 23 1/2 hours a day. He was forced to visit his family and friends in handcuffs and shackles; his contact with the outside world was from behind a glass screen. But Geronimo fought back with a federal lawsuit which forced his release into the general population at San Quentin.

In February, 1978, a board headed by Ray Brown, who had worked against the Panthers as head of the Oakland Police red squad, refused to set any parole date for Geronimo. This flagrant abuse only strengthened Geronimo's determination and built broader support for the fight to vindicate him through unconditional release.

Geronimo and his lawyers and supporters are now winning this fight. If public support continues to grow, Geronimo will be free this year.

Like so many Black people, Pratt's roots are in the Deep South. He grew up

"separate and unequal" in rural Morgan City, Louisiana, the youngest of eight children in a close-knit, hard-working religious family. Determined to see their children educated, his parents managed to put all his brothers and sisters through college.

When his father became too sick to work, Pratt, then 17, enlisted in the Army to earn money to support his family. He did two battle tours in Viet Nam, rising to the rank of Staff Sergeant. His ability as a scout and his mix of American Indian and Afro-Haitian ancestry led to a nickname that stuck--"Geronimo".

Along with two purple hearts, two air medals and many other decorations, Geronimo returned in 1968 with serious criticism of U.S. treatment of Third World people. He started UCLA, where he met Bunchy Carter, a leader of the Black Panther Party. Geronimo studied Black History, joined the Party, and determined to dedicate his life to our continuing struggle for freedom.

"These were the years" when Black people were increasingly active in fighting their oppression. Throughout the country programs emerged to combat the wretched conditions people are forced to live under, programs ranging from free breakfasts and health care to new educational and cultural activities.

From the community, from the prisons, from the campus...came the demand for the right of Black People to determine our own destiny. A movement grew for Black Pride, Black Power, and Black Liberation.

Because of the Black Panther Party's role in this struggle, J. Edgar Hoover named it "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" and the main target of the FBI Counterintelligence Program -- COINTELPRO. The stated purpose of this infamous program was to stop the Black movement by "discrediting" and "neutralizing" its leaders. Previous Black targets of the FBI included Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Andrew Young and Dick Gregory.

Hoover had his FBI agents come up with "hard-hitting proposals aimed at crippling the BPP." They forged letters and used other dirty tricks to turn local

Black groups against the Party, until their rivalry exploded into violent conflict that cost many Panthers' lives, including Bunchy Carter's. After Bunchy was killed in January, 1969, Geronimo took his close friend's place as head of the Party in Los Angeles.

In 1969, police raided and wrecked Panther offices across the country

On December 4, 1969, Chicago police murdered Panther leader Fred Hampton in his sleep. An FBI informer who had been head of security for the Chicago Panthers provided a floor plan of Hampton's apartment, showing where he slept.

In the pre-dawn hours of December 8, 1969, 350 heavily armed police attacked three Panther offices in Los Angeles. At one location the Panthers held the police off for five hours until people from the community came forward to protect them. At another, Geronimo narrowly escaped death.

Following the raid, Geronimo and 17 others were charged with conspiracy to murder the police. But when the case came to trial, the jury found that the Panthers had acted in self-defense and acquitted them of all major charges.

Alarmed by the massive public outcry against the murder of Fred Hampton and other police attacks on the Panthers, government officials feared that another attempt to kill Geronimo or jail him on political charges would only create one more revolutionary martyr. So they moved against him in a way which would thoroughly discredit him as a leader of his people.

In the fall of 1970, they suddenly brought forth an informer who claimed that two years earlier Geronimo had confessed to a senseless murder committed in the course of a \$30 robbery on a Santa Monica tennis court. This agent was a former L.A. deputy sheriff, now believed to have had ties to the FBI.

The FBI and police knew through informers and wiretaps that Geronimo had actually been in Oakland at Panther meetings at the time of the murder. But they hid the evidence.

They also concealed the documents which show that Geronimo was a target of

COINTELPRO and the coordinated covert operations which all levels of government mounted against the Panthers. These programs did not become public knowledge until Congress investigated the FBI and CIA several years later in the aftermath of Watergate. The jury in Geronimo's case, which took 11 days to reach its verdict, might well have acquitted him had it known the truth about COINTELPRO.

The lawsuits which Geronimo initiated from the hole at San Quentin have started to expose a massive official attempt to hide the truth about how these programs were used against him. In one suit U.S. District Judge Samuel Conti held a California Deputy Attorney General in contempt of court for lying about the existence of the state's political intelligence files on Geronimo. The judge called it "a scenario of deceit, deception and cover-up."

Geronimo has been joined in his legal battles by a team of lawyers from the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the National Lawyers Guild, and the National Task Force on Cointelpro Litigation and Research. They are preparing to petition the state court in Los Angeles for a writ which would overturn Geronimo's earlier conviction. The lawyers work for free, but need money for expenses to keep going.

Geronimo and his wife Ashaki are the proud parents of a baby girl, Shona Pratt, born August 12, 1979. Geronimo is making bold plans now for the future of his family and his people.

Geronimo is a strong leader for a strong people. We need him beside us in the 1980's as we renew our struggle for full liberation.