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“Time to Step Up”

- Steven King Ainsworth

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During the weeks that followed the July 14, 1998, "Bastille Day" execution of Thomas Thompson, a couple of mainstream media types told me that executions and their attending vigils -- barring a "fresh angle" -- are no longer considered news events. Coverage of executions at San Quentin by the major news media is expected to drop off rapidly and will be limited to San Quentin's immediate environs and the county of commitment.

This point was underscored in a recent "This Week in Northern California" program on KQED, the Bay Area PBS outlet. When asked if he thought death penalty abolitionists had been given due coverage during past executions, a panelist opined that executions are now routine; if the abolitionists want coverage, they should make news.

While many of us on the row appreciate the execution-eve vigils and realize that an execution is a strong focal point, we also realize that it is too little, too late. Ultimately, it is the State that makes the final point of the night, and the vigilists are disheartened.

Perhaps it is time to change the venue of protest and demonstration.

-The purposes of death penalty abolitionists may be better served by taking their protest to the seats of power rather than to the site of extermination. Why not direct demonstrations against those responsible for the process -- local district attorneys, the legislature, state capital offices, department headquarters, and federal, state, and county courthouses -- and do so more often than on execution days?

-Capital crime trials are going on almost everyday somewhere in this state, prosecuted at the whim and caprice of the local district attorney. Capital crime is also discussed endlessly in the state capital building. Why not make these the focal points for protest and demonstrations?

-California has the largest population of condemned on death row in the nation. It also has a significant foreign tourist industry. Hit-and-run demonstrations at local centres of commerce and tourism may prove newsworthy and beneficial to the abolitionist cause. Why not play up the human rights angle and alert tourists that their tourist dollars translate into tax dollars spent on executions that violate international human rights agreements?

The pro-death forces have the upper hand at the moment, and the pace of executions will likely quicken in the coming years. But it is not the time to give up. It is the time to step up. It is the time to make the minority voice on this issue heard. It is the time to point out that a state willing to take a life belittles and endangers all human rights within its boundaries.

Life -- the most basic human right of all -- should not be subjected to judicial termination.

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FREEDOM RAINS ON LITTLE ROCK REED

LITTLE ROCK REED IS FINALLY A FREE MAN. AFTER SPENDING A DECADE IN THE OHIO PRISON SYSTEM FOR TWO 1982 ROBBERIES, HE WAS RELEASED IN 1992 TO SERVE A ONE-YEAR PAROLE TERM. SIX WEEKS PRIOR TO HIS EXPECTED DISCHARGE, HE FLED OHIO AND WAS LATER APPREHENDED IN TAOS, NEW MEXICO. FOLLOWING EXTRADITION PROCEEDINGS IN TAOS, LITTLE ROCK WAS GRANTED REFUGE BY A NEW MEXICO DISTRICT JUDGE WHO RULED THAT LITTLE ROCK FLED OHIO IN FEAR FOR HIS SAFETY AND HIS LIFE AT THE HANDS OF OHIO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, AND THAT OHIO'S DEMAND FOR HIS EXTRADITION WAS PREMISED ON THE DESIRE TO SILENCE HIS CRITICISMS OF THE OHIO PRISON SYSTEM IN GENERAL, AND ITS ABUSE OF NATIVE AMERICAN PRISONERS IN PARTICULAR. IN SEPTEMBER 1997, THE NEW MEXICO SUPREME COURT AFFIRMED THE LOWER COURT'S DECISION, AND SAID THAT THE EVIDENCE CONCLUSIVELY PROVED THAT LITTLE ROCK WAS "NOT A FUGITIVE FROM JUSTICE, BUT A REFUGEE FROM INJUSTICE."

IN JUNE 1998, THE UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT OVERTURNED THE NEW MEXICO SUPREME COURT. WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THAT LITTLE ROCK'S EVIDENCE AND CHARGES AGAINST OHIO WERE CREDIBLE AND SERIOUS, THE NATION'S HIGH COURT NEVERTHELESS DECIDED THAT EVIDENCE OF ANY GOVERNMENT WRONGDOING, REGARDLESS OF THE SUFFICIENCY OR CREDIBILITY OF THE EVIDENCE, IS INADMISSIBLE IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERSTATE EXTRADITION PROCEEDINGS. IN AN *AMICUS* BRIEF PREPARED BY THE OHIO ATTORNEY GENERAL AND SIGNED BY 40 STATES, PUERTO RICO, THE VIRGIN ISLANDS AND

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, THESE OFFICIALS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THIS POLICY VIOLATED INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS, BUT CONTENDED THAT IT IS VITAL TO NATIONAL SECURITY; LITTLE ROCK CALLS THIS "A VERY SINISTER FORM OF 'NATIONAL SECURITY' THAT EVERY FREEDOM-LOVING MAN AND WOMAN SHOULD TAKE A CLOSE LOOK AT." THE HIGH COURT'S DECISION INSTANTANEOUSLY TURNED LITTLE ROCK, ONCE AGAIN, INTO A FUGITIVE. HIS WIFE AND INFANT SON WENT UNDERGROUND WITH HIM, SO THAT THEY COULD STAY TOGETHER AS A FAMILY.

AFTER DRAWING LOCAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION SUFFICIENT TO ENSURE HIS PROTECTION (FOR WHICH LITTLE ROCK CREDITS THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN CENTER IN COLUMBUS, OH), LITTLE ROCK SURRENDERED IN NOVEMBER 1998 IN ALBUQUERQUE. ON DECEMBER 4, HE WAS FLOWN TO OHIO AND PLACED IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT AT THE PRISON RECEPTION CENTER IN ORIENT, OH. ON DECEMBER 17, THE OHIO ADULT PAROLE AUTHORITY REINSTATED THE SIX WEEKS REMAINING ON HIS 1992 PAROLE, AND RELEASED HIM FROM PRISON. AT THE END OF THOSE SIX WEEKS, JANUARY 31, 1999, LITTLE ROCK FLEW TO NEW MEXICO TO REUNITE WITH HIS WIFE, LEANNA AND THEIR 15-MONTH SON, JASPER COLE. "THE PAROLE OFFICIALS ARE BEING REAL NICE TO ME NOW, BUT THAT DOES NOT EXONERATE THEM FOR THEIR PREVIOUS ILLEGAL ACTIONS AGAINST ME. THEY SIMPLY GOT CAUGHT IN MY CASE. BUT THERE ARE OTHER CASES PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT," SAID LITTLE ROCK IN A RECENT INTERVIEW. "JOHN PEROTTI (CURRENTLY IN LUCASVILLE), FOR EXAMPLE, IS IN PRISON TODAY FOR HIS NON-VIOLENT ADVOCACY FOR THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF PRISONERS. I URGE ANYONE WITH A RESOURCE TO SPARE TO SUPPORT JOHN AND THE MANY OTHERS LIKE HIM WHO ARE BEING TORTURED TODAY BECAUSE THEY MADE THE CONSCIOUS CHOICE TO COMMIT THEIR HEARTS, MINDS, SPIRITS, BODIES AND LIVES TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMANITY. THAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE."

LITTLE ROCK CONTINUES TO WORK TOWARD PROMOTING THE SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS OF INCARCERATED NATIVE AMERICAN PEOPLE. AT THIS TIME HE IS COORDINATING AND DEVELOPING THE NATIVE AMERICAN PROGRAM AT THE PRIVATELY OWNED AND OPERATED STATE PRISON IN NEW MEXICO, WHERE THERE ARE 97 NATIVE AMERICANS REPRESENTING VARIOUS TRIBES.