

Why Tookie had to die

STANLEY Tookie Williams was the convicted murderer and founder of the notorious Crips street gang. During his 26 years in prison, he transformed himself into a five-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, a prolific author of children's books, and an anti-gang-violence activist. The State of California executed him last week for a series of homicides he was convicted of committing in 1979. In signing off on the killing of Williams, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger violently silenced one of the world's most outspoken supporters of nonviolence – all in the name of combating violence.

Right up to his death by lethal injection, "Tookie" Williams maintained his innocence, with supporters citing coerced testimony, evidentiary irregularities, and a racially engineered jury as tainting his trial. New evidence, in the form of four witnesses, raises possible questions to support some of these claims. The fact is, however, that Williams is technically a convicted murderer. Whether or not that conviction was flawed is a separate argument. Murderer or not, as founder of the Crips, Williams was clearly a bad dude in the 1970s. The question that confronted California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger before the execution was whether or not Williams, who spent most of his life in prison, redeemed himself enough to continue living his life a free man. Schwarzenegger decided to go for the kill, rejecting Williams' request for clemency.

What made the Terminator turned Governor's position particularly chilling was his eleventh hour "Statement of Decision," available for all to read at the governor's website.

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Schwarzenegger cites Williams' argument that he is "particularly deserving of clemency because he has reformed and been redeemed for his violent past." The governor goes on, however, to argue that Williams, who never admitted his guilt, had shown no signs of redemption. His main piece of evidence for this claim was Williams' 1998 children's book, *Life in Prison*, a book whose publication profits fund the nonprofit Institute for the Prevention of Youth Violence. Publishers Weekly recommends the book for children aged eight years old and older. The School Library Journal recommends it for grades six and up, pointing out that the "Black and white photos of Williams and fellow San Quentin prisoners are painful reminders of the life he is trying to steer kids away from."

Schwarzenegger's problem is with the book's dedication, which the governor argues, "casts significant doubt on his [Williams'] personal redemption." Why? Schwarzenegger goes on to explain, "Specifically, the book is dedicated to Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt, Ramona Africa, John Africa, Leonard Peltier, Dhoruba Al-Mujahid, George Jackson, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and the countless other men, women, and youths who have to endure the hellish oppression of living behind bars." The governor continues, writing, "The mix of individuals on this list is curious. Most have violent pasts and some have been convicted of committing heinous murders, including the killing of law enforcement." According to Schwarzenegger, the list indicates that Williams "still sees violence and lawlessness as a legitimate means to address social problems."

By citing *Life in Prison* and basing his decision to execute Williams on his writings, the Austrian-born governor launched an assault on the Bill of Rights – particularly on the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech. Let's make no mistake about this. Williams was imprisoned for murder, but in the end, after years of international accolades for his public service and anti-violence activism, he was executed for his beliefs. As an American and a political columnist, I find this particularly chilling.

Let's revisit the list of names that cost Williams his life. First off, everyone on the list is a person of color – either African, African-American or Native American. And they're all publicly recognized political activists. They all spent time in jail and were all internationally recognized to varying degrees as "political prisoners."

Schwarzenegger made a particular point of singling out George Jackson for special attention, writing that that name in particular was evidence of Williams' failed reformation. Jackson, like Williams, and everyone else on Williams' list with the exception of John Africa, was a published author. Originally convicted of robbing seventy dollars from a gas station, Jackson was sentenced to serve one year to life. He gained notoriety after his younger brother shot up a court room in a failed attempt to free him. Eleven years later, after writing two critically acclaimed books and establishing himself as a self

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proclaimed Black Nationalist and "revolutionary," Jackson, still serving time for the gas station heist, was shot to death by prison guards who alleged he was trying to escape. According to the Library Journal, Jackson's best-selling book, *Soledad Brother*, "remains 'recommended for most libraries' and is a solid title for Black History Month." Similar praise of Jackson's work seems to have cost Stanley Tookie Williams his life.

Let's look at some of the other names from Williams' dedication that the governor cites, and let's also examine the theme that seems to be tying them all together. How about Assata Shakur? Her autobiography is described by the Library Journal as a "compelling tale of white racism on a sensitive and powerful young black woman." Then there's Geronimo Pratt, the decorated Vietnam vet who became a Black Panther Party leader. Publishers Weekly describes his biography, written by Jack Olsen, as "One part Kafka and one part Orwell," explaining how "the story of Geronimo Pratt's conviction and imprisonment, for a murder committed while he was 350 miles away from the crime scene and under FBI surveillance, is a textbook case of abuse of the American criminal justice system for political ends." After serving 26 years in prison, like Tookie Williams, Pratt's conviction was overturned and he was set free.

How about Angela Davis? Governor Schwarzenegger should have recognized her name. Davis, an internationally acclaimed scholar and author, works for the state of California as the Presidential Chair and Chair of the Women's Studies Department at the University of California's Santa Cruz campus. If uttering her name warrants an execution, most of the United States' Women's Studies scholars as well as a whole bunch of Sociologists had better hightail it to the Canadian border – pronto.

Then there's Leonard Peltier, the American Indian Movement activist imprisoned for 29 years for a murder that ample public evidence clearly demonstrates he did not commit. Mary Robinson, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights, petitioned the United States for his release five years ago. Notable human rights activists such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Sister Helen Prejean, Rigoberta Menchu and Coretta Scott King, along with Amnesty International, the National Lawyers Guild, seventeen U.S. Congressional Representatives and the European Union Parliament have all called for Peltier's release. If this is grounds for execution, then Schwarzenegger's killing field is going to get pretty crowded. It's no wonder that a growing number of Austrian politicians now want to strip him of his Austrian citizenship, with some calling to change the name of Austria's Arnold Schwarzenegger Stadium to Stanley Tookie Williams Stadium.

And let's not forget about Nelson Mandela, who is recognized the world over as an idol in the universal struggle for basic human rights. Or Malcolm X, whose name now graces parks and boulevards across California and America. Schwarzenegger's mention of these

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icons in the global civil rights movement as part of his justification for killing Tookie Williams is nothing short of grossly obscene and un-American. So is executing someone for exercising their freedom of speech and standing in solidarity with notable political dissidents.