



THE WEB OF DEATH & STRUGGLE:  
THE GENESIS OF CALIFORNIA'S POLITICAL TRIALS

CREDIT: KAREN WALD / ALTERNATIVE FEATURES SERVICE

"If you put men in cages, and treat them like animals, how do you expect them to behave?" a prisoner once asked. In the California prison system it seems clear that most of the prisoners have retained the essential characteristics of their humanity far better than have their jailers, but injustice heaped upon injustice inevitably produces rage, and then retaliation by the prisoners--followed by charges against other prisoners, more often motivated by vengeance than justice, more often singling out militant prisoners than those who may have been guilty. Most often, the weapon used in this deadly game was racism.

Of the many recent and ongoing political trials relating to prisoners in California, almost all can be traced to January 13, 1970, when three unarmed black prisoners were shot to death in Soledad Prison, or to February 25, of the same year, when another black prisoner was gassed to death in his cell in San Quentin. What followed was a series of retaliatory attacks on guards, and reprisals against prisoners who had dared to protest the original killings, or had the audacity to support and defend those accused of exacting justice upon the guards.

A chronology of the prison struggle--omitting food and work strikes, and other mass organizing and resistance--helps put some of the current political trials in perspective.

*January 13, 1970.* Soledad. Guard O.J. Miller shoots and kills W.L.

Nolan, Alvin Miller and Cleveland Edwards, three unarmed black prisoners.

*January 16, 1970.* Soledad. Guard John Mills is killed. George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo and John Cluchette are indicted. The three become known as the Soledad Brothers. (Hugo Pinell, a black latino, is among those who sign affidavits and write letters describing the killing of Nolan, Edwards and A. Miller.)

*February 25, 1970.* San Quentin. Black prisoner Fred Billingslea is tear-gassed to death in San Quentin. Willie Tate, who witnessed the killing, and two other black prisoners, Ruchell Magee and David Johnson, file affidavits in a suit protesting Billingslea's death.

*March 2, 1970.* San Quentin. A guard is assaulted, reportedly in retaliation for Billingslea. James McClain is accused of the assault.

*July, 1970.* Soledad. Another guard is killed. Prison officials say they find a note saying, "Two down, one to go." Jackson, Drumgo and Clutchette were in another location. Seven other blacks charged.

*August 7, 1970.* Marin. James McClain defends himself in a retrial on charges of assaulting San Quentin guard in retaliation for Billingslea. (His first trial ended in a hung jury.) Ruchell Magee and William Christmas are defense witnesses.

Jonathan Jackson attempts to free all three prisoners. All except Magee are killed as police and guards open fire when they leave with hostages.

Angela Davis is accused of providing the guns Jonathan Jackson used. Jonathan reportedly demanded that the Soledad Brothers be freed in exchange for the hostages, although he didn't specify how or where. Angela was active in the defense of the Soledad Brothers.

*May, 1971.* Soledad. Charges against four of the Soledad Seven are dropped; the case against three others dismissed when an inmate witness admits in their trial that he was lying for the prosecution because Captain of the Guards Charles Moody (Moody has since been made a Special Investigator for the Monterey district attorney in charge of prosecuting the Soledad Brothers) held a gun to his head.

*July, 1971.* San Quentin. An inmate informer ("snitch") against the Soledad Seven is stabbed. While he is in the prison hospital, Guard Leo Davis is stabbed trying to protect him. Larry Justice and Earl Gibson are accused of the killing.

*August 21, 1971.* San Quentin. George Jackson is shot to death by a prison guard in San Quentin. Two other prisoners and three guards are also killed. Attorney Stephen Bingham and six prisoners are accused of "conspiring" with George, and of murder. The six prisoners are:

Fleeta Drumgo (See above January 13 and 16, 1970)

Willie Tate (See February 25, 1970)

David Johnson (See February 25, 1970)

Hugo Pinell (See Jan-

uary 13 and 16, 1970)  
Luis Talamantez  
Johnny Larry Spain.

The last two prisoners have been active in reducing interracial tensions among prisoners and in organizing interracial hunger strikes and work stoppages. The others were all involved in some way with rebelling against, or protesting, the deaths of other black prisoners, or they are being accused of retaliation against guards for these deaths. The San Quentin Six case, Angela Davis, Ruchell Magee, Gibson and Justice--all grow out of the killing of black prisoners in Soledad and San Quentin in the first two months of 1970, when prison guards or officials apparently decided that race-baiting was no longer working to keep the prisoners divided and under control, and began selective assassination. The cycle still goes on today.

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# SOLEDAD

JAN 13, 1970

Prisoners **NOLAN, EDWARDS & MILLER** shot to death by guard

(□) **HUGO PINELL** filed affidavit against prison

(\*) **ANGELA DAVIS** works for SOLEDAD defense

(△) **WILLIE TATE**  
 (\*) **DAVID JOHNSON**  
 (□) **RUCHELL HAGEE** file affidavits against prison

# SAN QUENTIN

FEB 26, 1970

Prisoner **FRED BILLINGSLEA** gassed to death by guard

JAN 16, 1970

(+) **GEORGE JACKSON**  
 (○) **FLEETA DRUMGO**  
**JOHN CLUCHETTE** accused of killing guard in retaliation

Soledad Brothers

MARCH 2, 1970

**JAMES McCLAIN** accused of assaulting guard in retaliation

JULY, 1970

**SOLEDAD 7** accused of killing second guard in retaliation (charges eventually dismissed - may '71)

AUGUST 7, 1970

**JONATHAN JACKSON** attempts to free **McCLAIN, HAGEE & WILLIAM CHRISTMAS** from Marin Courtroom & take hostages to exchange for **SOLEDAD BROTHERS**

JULY, 1971

**GIBSON & JUSTICE** accused of stabbing guard protecting snitch against Soledad 7 (awaiting trial)

(\*) **ANGELA DAVIS & (□) RUCHELL HAGEE** accused on murder & conspiracy  
 (\*) on trial  
 (□) awaiting trial

# SQ AUGUST 21, 1971

(+) **GEORGE JACKSON** shot to death by San Quentin prison guard

(○) **F. DRUMGO** (△) **WILLIE TATE**  
 (□) **H. PINELL** (\*) **DAVID JOHNSON**

**L. TALAHANTEZ** **J.L. SPAIN**  
 (active in interracial organizing)

& **STEVE BINGHAM** - not captured  
 accused of murder & conspiracy (awaiting trial)

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