

HERMAN BELL'S BIOGRAPHY

My family, three girls and seven boys, were sharecroppers in rural Mississippi. I was born in 1948. My parents separated when I was very young, and in 1955, my father brought me to live with him in New York City. First in Harlem and later in Brooklyn, as I grew up I observed Afrikan-Americans working to gain control of community public schools - to ensure that their children receive quality education - encouraging voter registration so that candidates who serve our best interests could be voted into office - organizing boycotts and demonstrations against notorious slumlords, trigger-happy police, and businesses engaged in biased hiring practices. By the 1960's, Black people were undeniably on the move; with community slogans like "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!" and "Black Is Beautiful!" and "Black Power!." Challenging racism and segregation in the public institutions in the south, political activism in the Black community had become a force: marching, boycotting, and demonstrating, inspired by Malcolm X and Dr. King. Then, to be called "Black" became a political triumph and an act of political self-assertion. In the Fall of 1967, I arrived in Oakland, California, on a football scholarship, and shortly thereafter met the mother of my two sons, Johnas and Keith, who now attend college. I am a 42-year-old Grandpa . . .

America's urban revolutions of the 60's were often eclipsed by the escalating war in Vietnam - where many young Blacks were sent to fight, returning home in bodybags, or as a shell of their former selves - mangled, maimed, and psychologically scarred, which to many Black people was just one more act of genocide among many which the U.S. government committed against Afrikan-Americans. To serve as a warning against further Black dissent, Malcolm and later Dr. King were killed by an assassin's bullet, pouring more salt on the wounds of a bleeding and already deeply divided America.

For me, joining the Black Panther Party was the next logical step. I joined the Black Panther Party - inspired by Malcolm, Dr. King, and legions of Black men and women, unstinting in their

courage and commitment, who often sacrificed their lives in the historical struggle to free Afrikan-Americans from racist attacks and political and economic domination. I felt myself compelled by a "historical mandate" left by those who went before me, who, having done their share, would rest a bit easier in knowing that I am doing mine. I recall reading a statement that says: every generation has an obligation to history; it either opposes it or it betrays it. I felt the BPP would make a difference and lend profound meaning and direction to the fight for our freedom.

But the government's counter-intelligence program, COINTELPRO - whose mission sought to check this growing sense of euphoria and independence - set out to destroy Black political dissent, and to imprison Black leaders. I went underground in 1971, and in 1973, I was captured and extradited to New York to face trumped-up charges of having killed two New York City policemen. The verdict a foregone conclusion, I was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. In an attempt to break the spirit of the political prisoners, to force us to renounce our political beliefs, we are placed in behavioral modification units and in general endure considerable isolation and special treatment more severe than that of the general prison population. I have been in prison for almost twenty years, and in closing, I find it necessary to tell you that we political prisoners get no support from you, nor does the Black Liberation Movement as a whole, because it has been successfully criminalized by the government. Poor organization and feint-hearted leadership are partly responsible for your attitude, but what of your future and that of your children? In the 60's and 70's, our people organized forums to address our problems and then mapped out a plan of action and took to the streets. Today you seem disinclined to be assertive in dealing with the very things that determine the quality of our material existence. Without sacrifice, there can be no victory.

Address: Herman Bell
79C-262
Box 700
Wallkill, NY 12589