May 16 and June 29, 1971

An Interview with George Jackson

Rembering the Red Dragon

Karen Wald with Ward Churchill
in the western world can produce—they take them and they ball them up and they throw them right back in the face of these imperialist fools. Cuba and now Vietnam; these things catch my attention. I try to learn the lessons from other peoples’ success. Now, in that sense I’m sure the Cuban revolution had significance for Jonathan, too.

Wald: I see our time is almost up. Do you have any last remarks you’d like to make?

Jackson: Yes. I’d like to say POWER TO THE PEOPLE! And I’d like to say that by that I mean all power, not just the token sort of power the establishment is prepared to give us for its own purposes. I’d like to say that the only way we’re ever going to have change is to have the real power necessary to bring the changes we want into being. I’d like to say that the establishment is never going to be persuaded into giving us real power, it’s never going to be tricked into, it’s never going to feel guilty and change its ways. The only way we’re ever going to get the power we need to change things is by taking it, over the open, brutal, physical opposition of the establishment. I’d like to say we must use, as Malcolm X put it, any means necessary to take power. I’d like to say that we really have no alternative in the matter, and that it’s ridiculous or worse to think that we do. That’s what I’d like to say.

Notes

1. Editor’s note: True to Jackson’s prediction, the Chilean military—in combination with the CIA, Kissinger’s State Department, and transnational corporations (notably ITT and Anaconda)—brought down the Allende government in September of 1973. More than 30,000 progressives and Allende himself were killed during the coup and the following three years. Many thousands more were driven into permanent exile. The Chilean people have been saddled with the neo-fascist regime of Colonel Augusto Pinochet ever since. Although demonstrations and elections did take place in 1989, Pinochet still remains in charge of the military.

2. Editor’s note: This was the period before he totally sold out.

3. Editor’s note: Actually, it took a bit longer; the Reagan administration of the 80s was required to validate Jackson’s prediction.

nationalism, as well as the revolutionary theories of Marx, Lenin and Fanon; by the time of his death, several hundred volumes of difficult material—all well used—were to be stacked beneath the bunk in his cell. He also began a well-disciplined regimen of martial arts training which earned him the sobriquet “Karate Jackson” among at least some prison guards. He was known to perform 1,000 fingertip pushups each day in his cell, and to sleep less than four hours per night as he alternately read and wrote out his thoughts, longhand, in lengthy letters to family and friends. The young prisoner’s anger and rebelliousness rapidly consolidated into consciousness, purpose and ability, a matter which made him even less likely to see parole than mere membership in a prison gang.

On January 13, 1970, W. L. Nolen, along with two other black prisoners—Cleveland Edwards and Alvin “Jug” Miller—were executed by Opie G. Miller, an expert marksman armed with a 30 caliber carbine, placed in a tower above Soledad’s O-Wing courtyard for this purpose. Nolen had been successfully organizing a response to the arbitrary killings of two other black prisoners—Clarence Causey and William A. Powell—by Soledad guards in recent months. The sharpshooter’s carefully placed shots put a stop to this, as all three wounded men were left lying where they fell until they bled to death. The assassinations were so blatant that even Billie D. “Buzzard” Harris, a self-proclaimed racist and head of the prison’s “Aryan Brotherhood,” condemned them as “cold-blooded murder.” Nonetheless, an official Board of Inquiry exonerated Opie Miller approximately two days after the event.

In apparent retaliation for the murders of Nolen, Edwards and Jug Miller, guard John V. Mills was beaten and tossed from a third-story tier on January 18. Accused in the death of Mills were George Jackson, Pelo Drumo and John Chuchette, the so-called Soledad Brothers. Jackson, who was already serving a life sentence, was faced with a mandatory death penalty under California law. All three prisoners were shortly transferred from Soledad to San Quentin, the state’s hardest-core penal facility. It was at about this time that Jackson’s first book, Soledad Brother, was released, calling for a physical response to the systemic violence of the state. Introduced by Jean Genet and containing profound analyses of U.S. colonialism and the role of prisons in society, the volume immediately propelled Jackson to the forefront of international progressive attention. It also moved the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, headed by Angela Y. Davis, to the center of the North American anti-imperialist movement.

In short order, George Jackson—who was already at work on a second book (this became Blood In My Eye, published posthumously)—had been appointed a Field Marshal of the Black Panther Party by Minister of
Defeated Huey P. Newton. Through this medium, he was able to actually begin to organize what he called the People's Army, a force through which he hoped to bring about a positive transformation of the social order he saw as having deformed not only his own life, but those of many people. The very success of his endeavor made him a marked man; not only were the "wheels of justice" grinding along with the objective of putting him in the gas chamber, but there is much evidence that an official conspiracy was hatched to bring about his assassination within San Quentin. Considerations of the latter were not lost on the target or his supporters.

As a result, on the morning of August 7, 1970, Jackson's 17-year-old brother, Jonathan, walked into a courtroom in the Marin County Civic Center (near the prison), pulled a weapon from beneath his raincoat, and freed three San Quentin prisoners—William Christmas, Rachell Magee and James McClain—in court for a hearing. The younger Jackson also took several prisoners of his own, including Judge Harold J. Haley, Assistant District Attorney Gary Thomas and three jurors. Having armed Christmas, Magee and McClain, Jonathan then led the way to a van parked outside. The plan appears to have been to take the officials prisoners to San Francisco International Airport, where they could be bartered for the Soledad Brothers and a jet aircraft capable of taking the entire party to join exiled Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver's International Section in Algeria. The prisoners would then have been released unharmed.

Unbeknownst to Jonathan Jackson, however, was the fact that the plan was well-known to the police. On hand when the group emerged from the civic center were a pair of anti-Panther specialists—Ray Callahan and Daniel P. Mahoney—from the Los Angeles Police Department's Criminal Conspiracy Section (CCS), as well as representatives of the L.A.-FBI office's notorious COINTELPRO section (with which CCS was tightly interlocked) and an entire company of San Quentin riflemen (who "just happened" to be in the area, rifles in hand). The police simply shot the van to pieces, killing young Jackson, Christmas and McClain, as well as Judge Haley. Magee and a juror were badly wounded, while Assistant DA Thomas was paralyzed for life. Exactly what the southern California Red Squad and FBI personnel were doing in this northern California location—especially without informing local authorities—has never been explained, but the whole affair carries the unmistakable aroma of a set-up.

There is considerable evidence—never officially rebutted—that the FBI and CCS had utilized an infiltrator provocateur named Melvin "Cotton" Smith to set the whole thing in motion in hopes that an appreciable number of LA Panthers would participate, and could be revolutionary societies, revolutionary cultures around the world. He was very conscious of what was going on in South America and, well, let's just say that about ninety-nine percent of our conversation was oriented on military things. I knew him well. He understood.

Wald: I was going to ask if the Cuban revolution had significance for you and Jonathan in any concrete ways.

Jackson: Hmmmm ... I don't think it did for Jonathan. But it did for me, because I was in prison. I was just starting my time on this beat right here when Castro, Che and the rest carried the revolution there to a successful conclusion. And the alarm that spread throughout the nation, especially, you know, within the establishment and the police ... well, let's just say that as a newly-made prisoner I enjoyed that a lot. Someone else's liberation at the establishment's expense, it was a vicarious boost at a time when I most needed it. And I've always felt very tenderly toward the Cuban revolution as a result.

Wald: Then you weren't an anti-communist when you came into prison?

Jackson: Oh, I've never been an anti-communist. I suppose you could say I didn't have much understanding of communism when I came in, and so I wasn't pro-communist in any meaningful way. But I was never "anti."

Wald: But didn't you initially find it terrible that Cuba had "gone communist"?

Jackson: No-no-no! That's what I'm trying to tell you. I'm trying to get across that I've always been fundamentally anti-authoritarian. Communism came later. And when the Cuban revolution happened, the very fact that it upset the authorities here so bad made me favor it right off and made me want to investigate it much more. This idea was that if they don't like it, it must be good. You see? And that's what led me to seriously study socialism. I owe much of my own consciousness to the Cuban revolution. But that's ma. It doesn't necessarily pertain to Jonathan. Okay?

Wald: Did the fact that such a tiny country so close to Florida pulled off a successful revolution give you a sense that, "If they can do it, we can do it"?

Jackson: Yes, both then and now. It caused me to consider the myth of invincibility. You know, the idea of U.S. military invincibility was just completely destroyed by the Cuban revolution. The U.S. supported Batista with rockets and planes, everything he needed, and he still lost. He was destroyed by guerrilla warfare, the same thing that's taking place in Vietnam right now. And the U.S. is losing again. The Viet Cong, I mean they take these gadgets—the best things the best military minds
stupidly misleading fashion imaginable that the overt dimension of the movement can bring off revolution on its own. This is the absurd nonsense, and “leaders” who engage in such babble should be discarded without hesitation.

We may advance a simple rule here: the likelihood of significant social change in the United States may be gauged by the extent to which the covert, armed, guerrilla aspect of the struggle is developed and consolidated. If the counterrevolutionaries and fools who parade themselves as leaders while resisting the development of the movement’s armed capacity are overcome—and the struggle is therefore able to proceed in a proper direction—I think we will see revolutionary change in this country rather shortly. If, on the other hand, this leadership is able to successfully do what amounts to the work of the state—that is to say, to convince most people to shy away from armed struggle, and to isolate those who do undertake to act as guerrillas from the mass of support which would rightly be theirs—then the revolution will be forestalled. We will have a situation here much the same as that in Chile, where the establishment allows a certain quantity of apparent social gains to be achieved, but stands ready to strip these “gains” away whenever it’s convenient. You can mark my words on this: unless a real revolution is attained, all that’s been gained during the struggles of the past decade will be lost during the next ten years. It might not even take that long.

At the present time, I see a number of very hopeful signs—very positive indications—that a true revolutionary force is emerging. Most notably, of course, the direction taken by the Black Panther Party is correct. But there are many other examples I could name. Even in the white community, we have seen the development, or at least the beginnings of the development, of what is necessary with the establishment of the Weatherman organization. We clearly have a long way to go, but it’s happening, and that’s what’s important at the moment. The very fact that Tom Hayden, who is of course a white radical himself, was willing to make the statement he made, and before the audience to which he made it, indicates the truth of this. So, yes, I tend to agree with him and hope we are both correct. Clear enough?

Wald: Yes. Do you see a relationship between what happened at the Marin County Civic Center, between what Jonathan and the other brothers did, and the kinds of things that happen in the Third World, say, in Latin America?

Jackson: Well, of course. Jonathan was a student of... he was a military-minded brother. He was a student of Ché Guevarra and Ho, and Giap and Mao, and many others. Tupamaros, Carlos Marighella. He paid close attention to other established guerrillas, other established

approximately” gunned down as a consequence. There is also indication that CCS expected George Jackson to have been killed at the hearing.

by the extent that this is true, what happened in Marin County amounted to the “misguided act” of a black teenager—but a carefully planned ambush by the police entities involved, a line of “counterintelligence” action which caused the murders not only of three black revolutionaries, but of a county judge as well. In fact, as former CCS/FBI operative Louis E. Tackwood has observed, Callahan and Mahoney were genuinely disappointed that the “body count” wasn’t far higher. They had, after all, fully expected George Jackson and a substantial Panther contingent to be caught in their trap.

In any event, in the wake of the civic center bloodshed, the police diverted attention from their own conduct by charging that Angela Davis had masterminded the whole affair. Under such conditions, she was not unnaturally harbored certain doubts as to the quality of justice she was likely to receive, and went promptly underground. There ensued a sensational manhunt, with both J. Edgar Hoover and President Richard M. Nixon proclaiming Davis to be the country’s “number one terrorist.” Before she was captured in New York on October 13, 1970. She was then held in isolation cell before being whisked back to California in direct contravention of extradition laws. After that, she was held without bond—again in isolation—for nearly a year, until being acquitted of any complicity whatsoever in the “Marin County Shoot-Out.”

By then, George Jackson himself was dead, executed by a bullet fired into the top of his skull while he was kneeling in a courtyard at San Quentin, one leg already having been shot out from under him. The official story was that he’d been smuggled a huge Astra 9 mm pistol—an Astra is more than 8 inches long and 5 inches wide, and weighs some two-and-a-half pounds when unloaded—inside a tape recorder by a legal consultant, Stephen Bingham. After receiving the weapon, so the story went, Jackson placed it atop his head, covered it with an Afro wig, underwent a strip search, and then drew the gun on guards upon reaching his cell block. He then supposedly organized several other prisoners to cut the throats of four guards and shot another, before running out into the prison courtyard with a vial of “explosives” with which he intended to blow a hole in the prison wall and escape. It was there that he was shot to death. Jackson was buried next to Jonathan in the family plot in Mt. Vernon, Illinois.

In the aftermath, even so staid and conservative a newspaper as the San Francisco Chronicle found the official story of how the Astra was allegedly smuggled into the prison to be impossible. Then it came out that the weapon in question had been impounded by police in Denver more than a year previously. The supposed explosives turned out to be
forced to spend thousands of thousands of dollars, keeping themselves from spending years and years in prison, _before_ being found innocent. All this to defend themselves against charges for which there was no basis to begin with, and the state knew there was no basis. Some system. You get your punishment before your trial in this country if you happen to be black or brown or political. But they use these things to say the system works—which I guess it does, from their perspective—and to build their credibility for the cases that really count, when they really want to railroad someone into a prison cell. The solution isn’t to learn how to play the system for occasional “victories” of this order, although I’ll admit these sometimes have a tactical advantage. Winning comes only in destroying the system itself. We should never be confused on this point.

Wald: But the alternatives sometimes bear dire consequences. This raises the difficult question of the death of your brother, Jonathan, and whether his life may to a certain extent have been wasted.

Jackson: Well, that’s obviously a tough question for me because, emotionally, I very much wish my little brother was alive and well. But as to whether I think Jonathan’s life may have been wasted? No, I don’t. I think the only mistake he made was thinking that all of the 200 pigs who were there would have, you know, some sort of concern for the life of the judge. Of course, they chose to kill the judge, and to risk killing the DA and the jurors, in order to get at Jonathan and the others. It may have been a technical error. But I doubt it, because I know Jonathan was very conversant with military ideas, and I’m sure it occurred to him that there was a possibility that at least one pig would shoot, and that if one shot, they’d all shoot, and it’d be a massacre. Judge or no judge. It was all a gigantic bluff, you know? Jonathan took a calculated risk. Some people say that makes him a fool. I say his was the sort of courage that cause young men of his age to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in somewhat different settings. The difference is that Jonathan understood very clearly who his real enemy was; the guy who gets the congressional medal usually doesn’t. Now, who’s the fool?

Personally, I bear his loss very badly. It’s a great burden upon my soul. But I think it’s imperative—we owe it to him—never to forget why he did what he did. And that was to stand as a symbol in front of the people—in front of me—and say in effect that we have both the capacity and the obligation to stand up, regardless of the consequences. He was saying that if we all stand up, our collective power will destroy the forces that oppose us. Jonathan lived by these principles, he was true to them, he died by them. This is the most honorable thing imaginable. He achieved a certain deserved immortality insofar as he truly had the

and Bobby [Seale, Chairman of the BPP; at the time they were co-defendants in a murder trial in New Haven, Connecticut, on charges which were subsequently dismissed], the prison movement in general, the movement to prove to the establishment that the concentration camp technique won’t work on us. We don’t have to contrive any importance to our particular movement. It’s a very real, very-reality issue and I’m of the opinion that, right along with the student movement, right along with the old, familiar workers’ movement, the prison movement is central to the process of revolution as a whole.

Wald: Many of the cadres of the revolutionary forces on the outside have been captured and imprisoned. Are you saying that even though they’re in prison, these cadres can still function in a meaningful way for the revolution?

Jackson: Well, we’re all familiar with the function of the prison as an institution serving the needs of the totalitarian state. We’ve got to destroy that function; the function has to be no longer viable, in the end. It’s one of the strongest institutions supporting the totalitarian state. We have to destroy its effectiveness, and that’s what the prison movement is all about. What I’m saying is that they put us in these concentration camps here the same as they put people in tiger cages or “strategic hamlets” in Vietnam. The idea is to isolate, eliminate, liquidate the dynamic sections of the overall movement, the protagonists of the movement. What we’ve got to do is prove this won’t work. We’ve got to organize our resistance once we’re inside, give them no peace, turn the prison into just another front of the struggle, tear it down from the inside. Understand?

Wald: But can such a battle be won?

Jackson: A good deal of this has to do with our ability to communicate to the people on the street. The nature of the function of the prison within the police state has to be continuously explained, elucidated to the people on the street because we can’t fight alone in here. Oh yeah, we can fight, but if we’re isolated, if the state is successful in accomplishing that, the results are usually not constructive in terms of proving our point.

We fight and we die, but that’s not the point, although it may be admirable from some sort of purely moral point of view. The point is, however, in the face of what we confront, to fight and win. That’s the real objective: not just to make statements, no matter how noble, but to destroy the system that oppresses us. By any means available to us. And to do this, we must be connected, in contact and communication with those in struggle on the outside. We must be mutually supporting because we’re all in this together. It’s all one struggle at base.
have often already spent months and months in copies of the argument that the people will be supported to have received the interest of the argument that the people will.

The people will not lose and they will not lose. They are not going to lose the argument. They are not going to lose the argument. No one is going to lose the argument. No one is going to lose the argument.

When the argument is real, it is difficult. We must correct the situation.

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In conclusion, the food drive—George Jackson. 136
Jackson: We’re structured in such a way as to allow us to exist and continue to resist despite the losses we absorb. It was set up that way. We know the enemy operates under the concept of “kill the head and the body will die.” They target those they see as key leaders. We know this, and we’ve set up safeguards to prevent the strategy from working against us. I know I could be killed tomorrow, but the struggle would continue, there would be 200 or 300 people to take my place. As Fred Hampton put it, “You can kill the revolutionary, but you can’t kill the revolution.” Hampton, as you know, was head of the Party in Chicago, and was murdered in his sleep by the police in Chicago, along with Mark Clark, the Party leader from Peoria, Illinois. Their loss is tremendous, but the struggle goes on. Right?

It’s not just a military thing. It’s also an educational thing. The two go hand-in-hand. And it’s also a cyclical thing. Right now, we are in a peak cycle. There’s tremendous energy out there, directed against the state. It’s not all focused, but it’s there, and it’s building. Maybe this will be sufficient to accomplish what we must accomplish over the fairly short run. We’ll see, and we can certainly hope that this is the case. But perhaps not. We must be prepared to wage a long struggle. If this is the case, then we’ll probably see a different cycle, one in which the revolutionary energy of the people seems to have dispersed, run out of steam. But—and this is important—such cycles are deceptive. Things appear to be at low ebb, but actually what’s happening is a period of regroupment, a period in which we step back and learn from the mistakes made during the preceding cycle. We educate ourselves from our experience, and we educate those around us. And all the while, we develop and perfect our core organization. Then the next time a peak cycle comes around, we are far readier than we were during the last time. It’s a combination of military and education, always. Ultimately, we will win. You see?

Wald: Do you see signs of progress on the inside, in prison?

Jackson: Yes, I do. Progress has certainly been made in terms of raising the consciousness of at least some sectors of the prison population. In part, that’s due to the limited victories we’ve achieved over the past few years. They’re token victories perhaps, but things we can and must take advantage of. For example, we’ve struggled hard around the idea of being able to communicate directly with people on the outside. At this point, any person on the street can correspond with any individual inside prison. My suggestion is, now that we have the channels for education secured, at least temporarily, is that people on the outside should begin to bombard the prisons with newspapers, books, journals,
Remembering the Real Dragon

Interview with George Jackson

May 16 - June 29 - 1971

Liberation into schools of house of oppression
Turn the Iron

Judge Jackson: people like me, poor people don't belong in the law. It was constructed with that in mind. This thing that interests peace, the law and every social order, no social law - there is no law - there is no understanding upon thousands of thousands of prisoners, and hundreds of prisoners, and hundreds of prisoners. The law is not the law of the class - an other - distinctively defined sections of the society, which they determine, that prisoners, and American prisoners and...