

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE TO RELEASE ELDRIDGE CLEAVER

P.O. Box 2967, Customs House
San Francisco, California 94126

Dear Miss Thompson,

We are writing to you because we believe you share our belief that a government has no right to silence a man for expressing ideas thought to be dangerous to the established order -- and no right to silence a man for organizing politically to translate those ideas into real social changes. Our friend Eldridge Cleaver is in prison today -- after miraculously escaping what appears to have been a deliberate police attempt to take his life -- as a result of precisely that kind of political persecution.

The issue here is not defense of the particular political ideas espoused by Eldridge Cleaver, but defense of any man's right to express unpopular ideas and to act on them politically. We are asking you to put aside any political differences you might have with Mr. Cleaver, and to act as you would have acted when Dreyfus, Eugene Debs, Tom Mooney or Sacco and Vanzetti were similarly persecuted for political reasons and framed by frightened authorities.

We are asking you to add your name to the growing list of Americans and others who are protesting this flagrant abridgement of Mr. Cleaver's constitutional rights, and of his fundamental human rights. And we are asking you to do this now, while your support counts for something, while we still have a chance to win the release of this original thinker and courageous man. Sooner or later, we are confident that you would support the demand for Mr. Cleaver's release. "Sooner or later" would perhaps be soon enough to satisfy one's conscience, but it would be too late to help Eldridge Cleaver.

Eldridge was particularly vulnerable as a political leader because he was also a parolee. He was released on parole in 1966, after a nine-year stretch in prison, got married and took a job as staff writer for Ramparts magazine. (His release that time was a direct result of representations by a handful of prominent persons who had seen his writings and spotted his talent.) McGraw-Hill already had the manuscript of his book, later published as Soul on Ice, which won wide and immediate critical acclaim. Cleaver quickly became active in the Black Panther Party, which was working to organize black people in Oakland, California around a broad political program for social change in the ghetto. He became the party's Minister of Information.

To understand Eldridge Cleaver's short odyssey outside prison walls requires some background knowledge of the hostile environment into which he moved -- hostile to blacks, and hostile especially to black political leaders. Oakland is a town which has forcefully repressed all civil rights activity, even the most modest movements that began in other areas of the country seven or eight years ago. And when the Black Panther Party began to organize around the inhuman treatment accorded black citizens by the Oakland police, the repression escalated. (You will find enclosed a mimeographed sheet which gives some idea of the systematic pattern of police harassment and violence against members of the Black Panther Party.)

Although the Black Panther Party, aware of its vulnerability, took extreme precautions to ensure that its organizing activities were within the law (the party's co-founder, Huey P. Newton, a former law student, often lectured his men on their legal rights and limitations), police regularly harassed and arrested party members without reasonable cause, and on several occasions threatened to kill party leaders. Then, in October 1967, Huey P. Newton was stopped by police on the streets of Oakland and became involved in a shooting in which he was wounded and a policeman was killed. The Grand Jury which indicted Mr. Newton was shown no evidence that Mr. Newton fired a shot, or even that he possessed a weapon at the time of the shooting.

We mention these details not to elicit support for the Black Panther Party or its political program, for this is not our intention here. We mention them because they help explain why removing Eldridge Cleaver from the ghetto became so important to the Oakland Police and the California Adult Authority (parole board). Eldridge had moved swiftly to organize mass public support for Huey Newton, and mass public condemnation of the racist policies and practices of the Oakland police. As the campaign grew in strength, enlisting the support of impressive numbers of white people, Cleaver was threatened by police (they broke into his apartment in San Francisco without a warrant and vainly searched it), and was told by his parole officer that the decision had already been made by the Adult Authority to revoke his parole at the first pretext.