

## Speech by Nancy Kurshan at Celebration of William Kunstler, Chicago Illinois, November 5, 1995

I first met Bill Kunstler because i was an organizer of the 1968 protest demonstrations at the Chicago Democratic Convention, and he became the lead attorney in the celebrated Chicago 8 Conspiracy trial. I worked on the defense efforts and was also personal friends with the yippie defendants, so I saw a great deal of Bill during that five months or so of the trial.

I love Bill Kunstler because he identified one hundred percent with the defendants. Not the state, not the government. He identified with those struggling against racism and capitalism. He was a lawyer, but he was also a part of the movements he was defending. After the conviction in the Conspiracy case, while the defendants were awaiting bond, i had the pleasure of sharing speaking platforms with Bill around the country. Among other places, we spoke one afternoon at the University of California, Santa Barbara and it was an emotional, passionate gathering. Our rallying cry was "if we can't get justice in the court, we'll get it in the street." That evening the good citizens of that town burned down the Bank of America. Bill was as excited as anyone and did not waste more than one moment considering his own vulnerability and the legal implications for himself.

Since those days over 25 years ago I have encountered and worked with Bill in many arenas, almost always in the context of prisons and racist repression. Bill was the first person the prisoners at [Attica](#) asked to be an observer when they took over the yard in the historic rebellion of September, 1971. The last time i saw Bill was couple of years ago when he was in Chicago speaking on behalf of a national effort to free political prisoners. And Bill remains highly respected today by many of the current political prisoners. My friend [Sundiata Acoli](#) was a member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army and has been in prison well over 20 years. He recently sent me a letter which said, and I quote, "Bill had his faults, like all of us, but he was always there when the state planned a lynching and no one else would defend the 'victim'. When Kunstler died, a whole era died with him that will be very hard for anyone else to duplicate", end quote.

Sundiata's words strike home. Just when we have lost Bill, an important warrior in the battle against racist repression, that repression is rearing its ugly head more intensely than any time in recent memory. Events of just the past few weeks clearly illustrate all of this. The Million Man March and the OJ Simpson trial showed how deeply black people distrust the criminal justice system and how worlds apart are white and Black consciousness. One out of every 3 Black men is now under the control of the criminal justice system. More Black men are in prison than in higher education, and prisons are becoming increasingly repressive institutions; in fact they are the new concentration camps. This past week [rebellion and resistance](#) racked the federal prison system, as in prison after prison people reacted to the fact that Congress refused the recommendation of the U.S. Sentencing Commission to make more equitable the sentencing for powder versus crack cocaine. This congressional decision has no justification but white privilege. And as the prisoners rebelled, the entire federal prison system -- all 80 prisons, all 100,000 prisoners -- were put on lockdown.

Probably the most important question we could ask ourselves today is, how do we properly honor Bill Kunstler? And the answer I would suggest is intimately connected with these recent events that I just mentioned. I think Bill would want us to do more than hold gatherings like this. I believe that the real tribute to Bill will be in those who carry it on. As I mentioned, prisoners all across the United States rebelled last week, in a series of events that was unprecedented in US history. The question is, are there those of us who have the courage to walk into those prisons as Kunstler walked into Attica? Do we, lawyers and non-lawyers, have the determination to work day in and day out, year after year, as Bill did, to free political prisoners -- many of them left over from Bill's time? Do we have the committment to fight against torture and human rights abuses in control unit prisons? Are those of us who are White willing to stand side by side with Black people and fight against a racist criminal justice system? These are the questions I would pose. Those who can answer affirmatively are the ones who will walk in Bill's path.

When I heard of Bill's death, I truly felt a part of me had died. But I also know that a part of Bill Kunstler lives on. He lives on in people like Len Weinglass and thousands of others, lawyers and non-lawyers, who

are fighting to free [Mumia Abu-Jamal](#). And I hope he lives on in many of us in this room today.

The Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara once asked for "one, two, three, many Viet Nams." Well, hopefully we will see one, two, three, many Bill Kunstlers, responding to his absence and trying to fill the enormous gap that his passing has left us with. But the next Kunstlers can only arise if they have qualities similar to Bill's: dedication, courage, and an undying loyalty to the oppressed. Let's carry it on.

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