

Biography of John William King highlights brutalization of American society

Racist killer sentenced to death in Texas murder

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26 February 1999

The gruesome details surrounding the racist murder of James Byrd Jr. have evoked widespread anger and an understandable popular revulsion towards John William King, the young white man convicted earlier this week for the dragging death of the 49-year-old black man last June in Jasper, Texas. On Tuesday the jury, made up of 11 whites and one black, convicted King, 24, after deliberating little more than two hours. Two days later the same jury sentenced him to death.

The fact that a largely white Southern jury would swiftly convict a racist killer is a measure of the change in social attitudes in America. Thirty years ago those who lynched a black man in the South had little fear of being convicted, or even facing trial. This change in thinking among layers of the population is due largely to the great social struggles against segregation and for civil rights, from the 1950s on, which have taken deep root among working people.

This was reflected in the attitude of the jury, which elected its lone black member as foreman, and of King's father, a retired sawmill worker, who apologized to the Byrd family again after the conviction. Byrd's relatives welcomed his gesture and acknowledged that King had not raised his son as a racist.

The question gripping both families, and the black and white residents of Jasper, many of whom have demonstratively expressed their opposition to racism, was how did this happen? The efforts of the prosecutors, law enforcement officers and news commentators to portray King as simply a bad individual, the embodiment of evil, does not provide a serious answer to this question. Furthermore, to suggest that this matter will be resolved by executing King means to sweep under the rug the more profound and, indeed, disturbing questions raised by this crime.

There is no doubt that King and his accomplices need to be jailed, perhaps for the rest of their lives. More fundamental, however, is the need to examine the social, ideological and political conditions that gave rise to King's white supremacist views and this crime.

The convicted killer's father, who suffers from emphysema

and lost two fingers in a sawmill, told the *Dallas Morning News*, "The way he was raised, I don't see how he could have that kind of hate in him." The elder King said with his encouragement his son had grown up with black friends, and that he, Ronald King, has good friends and two goddaughters who are black. As the father heard witnesses testify last week about his son's participation in racist prison gangs and his role in the dragging death of Byrd, Ronald King said, "That ain't the boy I knew."

It is worthwhile to examine John William King's transformation, if only in brief. Born in Mississippi, the poorest state in the US, he was adopted when he was three months old. Shortly afterwards Ronald King and his wife moved their son and two daughters to east Texas, an impoverished rural area. They settled in Jasper, a racially mixed town of 8,000 dependent on timber, light manufacturing and bass fishing.

When King was 15 his mother died and the father raised three children on his income from a plywood mill. At the age of 17 King was arrested for burglary and dropped out of Jasper High School. Soon afterwards he was in trouble again when he and another 17-year-old drop-out (Shawn Berry, who has also been charged in the murder of James Byrd Jr.) were caught stealing beer and pool cues from a local vending machine company.

The two young men were first sent to a correctional boot camp, one of the more recent innovations of the US juvenile justice system where youth are subjected to military-style discipline. After King was released he drifted, mostly without a job, and a few months later was back in court over a conflict with his probation officer. This time the judge revoked King's probation and sentenced him to an eight-year prison sentence. In 1995 the 20-year-old King found himself in the Beto I Unit, a 3,200-inmate penitentiary in Tennessee County, Texas.

In America the very idea that youthful offenders can or should be rehabilitated has come to be derided. Instead judges impose ever-harsher sentences, and once inside the "correctional system" these young people are subjected to dehumanizing punishment by sadistic authorities. The US

incarcerates the highest percentage of its population of any country in the industrialized world.

America's overflowing prisons are a breeding ground for the white supremacist elements with whom King began to associate. As one former inmate from a Huntsville, Texas prison said, "The problem is the huge influx of young convicts with unimaginably long sentences, who are angry and afraid and all too willing to band together in groups with racial or geographical bonds. They cloak their despair in rage, and they act out that rage on anyone not of their group."

Prison guards and officials encourage a brutal struggle for survival between white, black and Hispanic prisoners and do little to stop even the most murderous confrontations. At the same time, as the correctional system has focused on warehousing prisoners instead of rehabilitation, funding has been slashed for higher learning and other programs in prisons. But as another inmate commented, "The human mind needs to be occupied to overcome ignorance."

In prison King met Lawrence Brewer, the third suspect in the murder of Byrd. They both became associated with a small circle of inmates using the name of the North Carolina-based Ku Klux Klan faction, the Confederate Knights of America. They were involved in a racial conflict between white and Hispanic prisoners in 1995. Soon King was sending out letters proclaiming racist views and his allegiance to the Aryan Brotherhood, a white supremacist gang founded in California's San Quentin prison in the 1960s, which is affiliated to the paramilitary Aryan Nations.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, many white supremacist and anti-Semitic groups provide prisoners free or heavily discounted copies of their publications, and other readers of these racist magazines are encouraged to write to these "prisoners of war." Many of these publications espouse the racist theology of the Christian Identity movement, a church which maintains that Anglo-Saxons, not Jews, are the biblical "chosen people," that non-whites are "mud people" on the level of animals and that Jews are the "children of Satan."

A fellow inmate testified that King, who adorned his body with racist tattoos in prison, had vowed to kidnap and kill a black man when he got free as part of a gang initiation rite, known behind bars as a "blood tie." Prosecutors say King wanted to attract attention and recruits to a racist group he planned to start in Jasper.

It takes a great deal to condition a human being to be able to chain a man to the back of a truck, drag him behind the vehicle for miles, then leave his dismembered and decapitated body outside a black cemetery. The systematic dehumanization King experienced in prison, along with the racial poison to which he was introduced, were essential psychological components in the motivation of this heinous crime. But they were not the only factors.

Prison life is, perhaps, only the most concentrated form of the brutal society that exists in America. Human compassion and

empathy are denounced as weakness and every aspect of life is dominated by a struggle of the individual against all others.

In the workplace, thousands are thrown out of their jobs for the good of wealthy stockholders. Political authorities utilize the most violent methods to deal with intractable social problems. In Texas, a death row population overwhelmingly comprised of the poor, minorities and the mentally impaired is systematically executed. In New York City policemen fire 41 bullets into the body of a frightened, unarmed African immigrant. And, finally, the nightly news brings the latest reports of US "air strikes" in a distant country.

Perhaps the most explosive ingredients in this mixture are the worsening social and economic conditions affecting large sections of the population. Despite the repeated claims by the Clinton White House and the news media of America's booming economy, tens of millions in towns like Jasper are enduring a desperate situation.

King, Brewer and Berry--like many young workers, black and white--drifted from one low-paying job to another with no future. They became the raw material for racist organizations which blame these economic problems on blacks and Hispanics.

Such political tendencies are deliberately cultivated by sections of the American ruling class. Indeed, having abandoned any efforts at reform, both big business parties have increasingly turned to law-and-order demagogery and attacks on welfare recipients and immigrants, which encourage the revival and spread of race prejudice.

This holds true particularly for the Republican Party, which has actively courted right-wing militia groups and has close ties with racist organizations such as the Council of Conservative Citizens. In the state of Mississippi, John William King's birthplace, one third of the state legislators, both Democrats and Republicans, are affiliated with this racist organization, as well as the state's most powerful politician, Trent Lott, the Majority Leader of the US Senate.

Trent Lott may not speak to the John William Kings of this world. The Southern aristocracy generally keeps its distance from those it regards as "white trash." But he speaks to the CCC (the "respectable" version of the KKK), and the CCC stokes up the Kings and turns their social anger in the most reactionary direction. These are the real connections, never discussed in the mass media, between the horrible events in Jasper and the social antagonisms in America.



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