Clinton refuses to pardon Leonard Peltier

Joanne Laurier
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One of Bill Clinton's last presidential acts was to deny executive clemency to Leonard Peltier, the Native American activist who has been imprisoned for 25 years. Clinton said last November that he would review Peltier's case before leaving office.

Peltier, a member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), was convicted of the murder of two FBI agents in 1975 on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota. He has been serving two consecutive life terms at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas.

The Peltier conviction was obtained on the basis of coerced and false testimony from witnesses threatened by the FBI and by the government's suppression of evidence favorable to Peltier's case. The government holds 6,000 documents in whole and another 5,000 in part dealing with the case.

A statement posted on the web site of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, entitled *Day Of Shame,* read: "During the last few days world support for the immediate and unconditional release of Mr. Peltier had reached remarkable levels, with calls and letters arriving from such renowned human rights and religious leaders as Coretta Scott King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Amnesty International, Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchu and the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, amongst many others."

Also posted on the site was a letter from the United Nations High Commissioner for Humans Rights, Mary Robinson, urging Clinton to grant clemency to Peltier.

The possibility of a presidential commutation of Peltier's sentence enraged the FBI, whose director, Louis Freeh, wrote to Clinton in December, describing Peltier as a "vicious murderer." In an officially sanctioned public protest, hundreds of FBI agents marched to the White House on December 15. Commenting on this unprecedented display of insubordination, an attorney for Peltier stated: "It's a sad day for democracy when our armed forces march through the streets to influence a decision for mercy and justice by a civilian president."

A measure of the persecution and injustice suffered by Peltier, whose health is failing, is revealed in a statement by former Congressman Don Edwards, longtime chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, which oversaw the FBI. Edwards, himself once an FBI agent but a forceful advocate of clemency for Peltier, wrote on December 14: "Even the government now admits that the theory it presented against Mr. Peltier at trial was not true. After 24 years in prison, Leonard Peltier has served an inordinate amount of time and deserves the right to consideration of his clemency request on the facts and the merits.

"The FBI continues to deny its improper conduct on Pine Ridge during the 1970's and in the trial of Leonard Peltier. The FBI used Mr. Peltier as a scapegoat and they continue to do so today. At every step of the way, FBI agents and leadership have opposed any admission of wrongdoing by the government, and they have sought to misrepresent and politicize the meaning of clemency for Leonard Peltier. The killing of FBI agents at Pine Ridge was reprehensible, but the government now admits that it cannot prove that Mr. Peltier killed the agents."

So blatant is this injustice that even 8th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Gerald Heaney, who had previously denied an appeal by Peltier, now confirms his support for Peltier's freedom.

Just hours before the end of his presidency, Bill Clinton issued pardons to more than 100 people. Among others, presidential pardons were bestowed on a former director of the CIA, John Deutch, accused of mishandling secret information; former Arizona Governor Fife Symington, whose overturned conviction on charges of bank and wire fraud was being challenged by prosecutors; and Marc Rich, a fugitive

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billionaire indicted on tax evasion, whose ex-wife was a major contributor to Hillary Clinton's senatorial campaign.

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