

Three decades on death row

Glenn Ford: An American tragedy

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Glenn Ford died on June 29 at the age 65 at his home in New Orleans, Louisiana. He succumbed to lung cancer just 15 months after being released from the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola, where he spent 29 years 3 months and 5 days on death row.

Ford had been wrongfully convicted of murder in 1984 and sentenced to die in the electric chair. During his nearly three decades on death row, Ford was confined to solitary confinement for 23 hours a day. According to a census of US prisoners in the year 2000, at that time Ford was just one of more than 80,000 prisoners languishing in some form of solitary confinement.

Ford was convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of Isadore Rozeman, the owner of a small jewelry and watch store in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1983. Ford and three other men were initially suspected of the murder and the robbery. Of the four, only Ford stood trial, singled out since he had previously been employed by Rozeman to do yard work and had been seen in the area of the jewelry store on the day of the murder.

Ford was convicted on the basis of the testimony of a witness and a girlfriend of one of the three other suspects, who later admitted that she had lied during the trial. Circumstantial evidence included testimony by a forensic pathologist that the gun was fired by someone who was left handed. Ford was left handed, but prosecutors never produced a murder weapon or an eyewitness to the shooting to corroborate the pathologist's testimony.

There was little chance that Ford would be found innocent, since the court had appointed a completely inexperienced team of defense attorneys who had never before argued a case. Racism also played a role in the

death penalty conviction. Ford, an African American, was tried before an all-white jury after the state prosecutor consciously culled any potential black jurors.

Ford and his attorneys maintained his innocence in repeated appeals to overturn his conviction over the last three decades. The appeals were routinely denied until last year when one of the three other suspects, Jake Robinson, confessed to Rozeman's murder. A confidential informant, being questioned on an unrelated matter in 2013, had fingered Robinson as the killer.

At the time of his release on March 10, 2014, Ford had been one of the longest serving prisoners on death row in the United States. He spent the prime years of his life locked in a cage with limited human contact with only the prospect of a painful execution in front of him. "I've been locked up almost 30 years for something I didn't do," Ford said after his release. "I can't go back and do anything I should have been doing when I was 35, 38, 40."

The short time he spent outside the walls of the penitentiary was not easy for Ford. He was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer shortly after his release, living with home hospice care provided by the non-profit organization Resurrection after Incarceration. In April, Ford went missing for 14 hours. He apparently wandered away from his home after suffering from delirium caused by the cancer that had by that point spread throughout his body.

Unable to work after his release, Ford was left completely destitute. While he was eligible for possible total restitution of \$330,000 from a fund set up by the state of Louisiana for exonerated prisoners, Ford never received a single cent. A state judge denied his petition for compensation on the spurious legal grounds that,

despite his exoneration and release from prison, Ford had not proven he was “factually innocent.”

Attorney A.M. “Marty” Stroud III, who was the lead prosecutor in Ford’s murder trial, wrote a letter in March to the *Shreveport Times* attesting to his role in attaining the false conviction and insisted on Ford’s innocence saying, “Glenn Ford was an innocent man. He was released from the hell hole he had endured for the last three decades.”

According to Stroud, in the course of exonerating Ford investigators had uncovered evidence “so strong that had it been disclosed during of the investigation there would not have been sufficient evidence to even arrest Mr. Ford!” The attorney confessed that he neglected to investigate “rumors” of three other men’s involvement in the crime and deliberately struck blacks from the jury pool, directly contributing to an outcome Stroud acknowledged was a miscarriage of justice.

Despite this remarkable admission of guilt, neither Stroud, nor anyone else involved in sending Ford to death row, are expected to be subject to criminal prosecution. Attorneys responsible for wrongful convictions are rarely held to account for their role in destroying the life of an innocent person.

In a rare instance, former Texas prosecutor Ken Anderson accepted a plea deal in 2013 in which he was disbarred and sentenced to 10 days in prison plus 500 hours of community service. Anderson admitted that he withheld evidence from the murder trial of Michael Morton that pointed to his innocence, resulting in a wrongful conviction. Morton, innocent of any crime, spent 25 years in prison until his release in 2011.

It is now an increasingly common occurrence for wrongfully convicted prisoners to be set free after serving decades of sentences or on death row. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, since 1973, there have been at least 154 individuals freed from death row.

The latest innocent person on death row to be exonerated, Michelle Byrom, was released from a Mississippi prison on June 26. She had been on course to be the first woman executed by the state in 70 years until earlier this year, when the State Supreme Court overturned her conviction and ordered a new trial at which she was found innocent. Byrom had been convicted of hiring a hit-man to kill her husband. Evidence that was not produced at her initial trial

revealed that her son had confessed to his father’s murder.

The notorious Angola prison where Ford was incarcerated holds other well-known inmates who have served long sentences on death row and in solitary confinement.

Last month, a federal appeals court ruled that Albert Woodfox, the last of the “Angola Three” still behind bars, would remain in prison despite a district court judge’s ruling that he be set free. Woodfox, along with Robert Hillary King and Herman Wallace, all three members of the Black Panther Party, were confined for decades to solitary confinement after the murder of a prison guard. They were targeted by prison officials for their political beliefs and vocal opposition to conditions in the prison.

Gary Tyler, the victim of a racially and politically motivated frame-up, has spent the entirety of his adult life locked up in Angola. Though only 17 years old at the time of his arrest, Tyler was tried as an adult and sentenced to die in the electric chair in 1975. His life was spared when the US Supreme Court ruled the Louisiana’s death penalty unconstitutional in 1977. Despite documented inconsistencies in his trial, repeated appeals for his release have been denied.

The horrors inflicted upon Ford, Tyler, Byrom, Woodfox and many others are not aberrations in an otherwise healthy process. Rather they are the product of a diseased and corrupted “criminal justice” system, in which the accused, particularly the poor, are denied the most basic democratic rights.

The American ruling class presides over a massive prison system, housing more than 2 million people. For the past four decades, the political establishment, under both Republicans and Democrats, has responded to the immense growth of social inequality, and the social disaster created by the devastation of cities throughout the country, by throwing an ever greater portion of the population behind bars.



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