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Bringing Leonard Peltier to Iowa and New Hampshire

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<http://www.freepress.org/>

The Clintons are running for a third term in the White House. As expected, their first eight years in office are being given thorough scrutiny. Everything from NAFTA to Bosnia, from Monica to health care, are going rightfully under the microscope. The disagreements are deep and generally predictable. But it is equally predictable that there is one issue---one man--- being totally ignored by the mainstream media. His case marks the moral low point of the Clinton Era. He deserves to be a part of the primary process.

His name is Leonard Peltier.

There is incontrovertible evidence that Bill Clinton was---and remains---fully aware of the circumstances of the Peltier case. But because of his cowardice, this esteemed Native American activist and spiritual leader was imprisoned not only for every day of Clinton's eight years in office, but now all the way through George W. Bush's.

Clinton infamously ended his second term with a flurry of dubious presidential pardons. Among those freed from the judicial system was Marc Rich, a freewheeling scoundrel whose filthy financial dealings were loathsome to say the least. But he was a key Clinton donor who essentially bought himself a get-out-of-jail card. Even the most corrupt Democratic loyalists found the Rich pardon hard to swallow.

By contrast, Leonard Peltier has spent more than three decades behind bars with his rights being repeatedly denied. In 1977, Leonard was wrongly convicted in the killing of two FBI agents amidst the native rights uprisings at Wounded Knee. His trial record is so laden with fraud and illegalities as to mock the fabric of our entire criminal justice system.

Amnesty International and a host of other independent global observers have long since confirmed that the FBI intimidated witnesses, withheld evidence, falsified affidavits and perpetrated every other dirty trick they could find to slap Peltier behind bars.

To this day, in the name of "national security," the FBI is withholding some 140,000 pages of critical documents, in direct violation of numerous federal statutes. Peltier's sentence has been wrongfully extended. And his repeated requests for a retrial have been routinely denied.

Peltier's effectiveness as an activist has grown through his years in prison. From his jail cells---he has been frequently moved around---around---he's worked hard to bring critical resources to the desperately poor native society from which he came. His deeds have prompted a nomination for a Nobel Prize.

The prison system has retaliated by denying Peltier his religious freedoms---and reasonable medical care. He's been continually thrown into into solitary confinement, and denied the right to communicate fully and fairly with the outside world has been restricted.

Now in his sixties, he has somehow survived more than three decades in prison with his commitments in tact. Bill Clinton was thoroughly and repeatedly briefed on the Peltier case throughout his presidency. Yet eight years came and went, and Leonard Peltier was left to rot. Desperate last-minute pleas as he prepared his final pardon list were to no avail. It would have been easy enough for Clinton to “triangulate” by merely ordering that Peltier get a new trial.

Yet Bill Clinton left the White House fully aware that George W. Bush would do no such thing.

This is not an issue that should go unmentioned in these early primaries. Hillary Clinton is most certainly aware of the case of Leonard Peltier. She should be asked early and often whether she, as president, would have the courage and commitment to justice to at very least grant Leonard Peltier the new trial her husband would not.

All the other candidates on both sides of the aisle should be asked the same thing.

Leonard Peltier now has great-grandchildren he's never met.

As the native American community grows in strength and clarity, so does his stature as a spiritual and political symbol. We cannot save our national soul without bringing justice to bear for Leonard Peltier.

No one should enter the White House without a clear commitment to doing just that. --

To learn more about Leonard Peltier, see <http://www.leonardpeltier.net/>.

Harvey Wasserman is senior editor of <http://www.freepress.org/>, where this article first appeared.

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