

The Last SLA Statement

anon.

1977

The Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) undertook a series of urban guerrilla actions in 1973 and 1974 that made world-wide headlines. The assassination of a reactionary school official, the kidnapping of a wealthy heiress and a bank appropriation set off a massive search for the small band. Of the original ten SLA members, six were executed by the Los Angeles Police and the remaining four were captured and sentenced to multiple life imprisonments. The latter—Russ Little, Joe Remiro, Bill Harris and Emily Harris—were interviewed last year by the Bay Area Research Collective (BARC, P.O. Box 4344, Berkeley CA 94704) and related their experiences and assessments of the SLA experience. The Fifth Estate has excerpted sections of that interview and although the full text is not presented, we hope that the major thrust of their feelings and ideas is maintained. The entire interview is available from BARC or Ammunition Books for 75 cents.

Introduction

Russ: Everyone with a radio, a TV, or a newspaper subscription has been flooded with stories about the SLA for more than two years now. With the exception of a few small non-sectarian radical publications, the SLA has been consciously distorted and misrepresented by those writing about it, in an effort to reinforce whatever version of reality they wanted to impose on their audience.

For the capitalist class, the SLA was a gang of deranged terrorists, escaped convicts, and drug-crazed freaks bent on mindless violence. For most of the Marxist left, the SLA was either a CIA plot to discredit revolutionaries in the eyes of the “masses” or a gang of gun-toting, bomb-throwing anarchists; and for many anarchists, the SLA was a group of Stalinists gone berserk. The reasons that we, as members of the SLA, failed to straighten out some of this mess are many and varied, but hopefully this pamphlet will help destroy the myths that have previously surrounded the SLA.

The four of us have been through very different experiences since Joe’s and my capture on Jan. 10. 1974. From that point on, Joe and I were locked-down in isolation cells with nothing but Hearst newspapers to keep us informed of the SLA’s subsequent actions and Emily and Bill were forced into assuming new identi-



On May 17, 1974, an SLA hide-out in Los Angeles was attacked by 500 police and a SWAT assault team. After several hours the house was set ablaze and raked with automatic weapons fire. All six SLAers inside perished.

ties, living as hunted fugitives, while still continuing to function as active revolutionaries.

After Bill and Emily were captured on Sept. 18, 1975, we were able to see each other in Los Angeles County Jail where Joe and I were being tried on the original shoot-out charges stemming from our capture and Where they are being tried on numerous charges arising from a shooting incident at Mel's Sporting Goods store on May 16, 1974.

Some people thought we were admitting defeat or letting down our six fallen comrades by publicly announcing the end of the SLA as a functional guerrilla organization, but that is definitely not the case. It is important that people deal with reality, not myths and images.

To continue the SLA would be misleading. Such would hinder rather than help all progressive struggles. We are proud of the SLA and our role in it. The SLA was seen by those of us in it as a means of fighting back—social revolution was and is our ultimate goal. We are engaged in the same struggles today that we and our comrades were engaged in as members of the SLA—trying to learn from our successes and mistakes and to continue moving forward.

Origins of the SLA

Emily: The SLA didn't take the classical Marxist-Leninist approach to revolutionary struggle. The people who made up the SLA were influenced by the interplay between Marxism, revolutionary nationalism and revolutionary feminism.

The SLA was based on the need to develop a guerrilla front with the idea that armed actions along with above-ground political organizing educates and mobilizes people in support of revolution, and on the belief that we don't need to wait for a vanguard party to lead us. The SLA saw the idea of federation among many diverse, autonomous groups as an alternative form of organizing to the party.

Implicit within the concept of federation is a type of flexibility that doesn't exist in the democratic-centralist structure of a Leninist party. That is the area of selective participation. If one or more elements within the federation do not support a particular action, they are not forced to participate. And, of course, one of the principles of federation is the freedom to totally withdraw from it.

Russ: The idea was that when a new combat cell federated with the SLA, it would function independently except in the case of mutually agreed joint action. The War Council was envisioned as consisting of two representatives from each combat unit who would be responsible for coordinating joint operations. New units would receive material support if it was needed but would be encouraged to develop their own support infrastructure.

Bill: The long run aim of the SLA was to work toward the annihilation of U.S. imperialism and the culture and institutions that support it. The building of a people's army wasn't seen as an end, but as a means to achieve-popular freedom to build a society that was free of racism, sexism and classism; a society where there were no elites, no oppressive bureaucracy.

We never had the sense that the SLA was "the vanguard" of revolutionary struggle of this country. Ain't no way that a handful of people are going to make a revolution by themselves. But we had a strong feeling that the SLA and groups like it were contributing to the process of revolution, trying to put ideas into practice so that people (including ourselves) could learn from the process, criticize and evaluate it so it could be better in the future.

Emily: A lot of people in the left feel that the underground is premature—that there are still legal options open to people and that an underground isn't necessary until all these options have been subverted. But we have seen that people's options are being continually undermined and that when their efforts become a threat to the status quo then they're wiped out, locked up, neutralized and/or bought off the way the early women's movement was after the turn of the century, the way the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement and the Black Panthers were in the '60s.

We feel that the underground needs to be developed as a force—to be building its skills and refining its political perspective so that as legal methods for change are cut off, we won't be caught off guard and unprepared.

Violence in this country isn't unique to the revolutionary underground. There's been state initiated and sanctioned violence against people in the United States ever since this country was first colonized, and people have been forced to turn to their own forms of violence to counter that. Revolutionary violence is simply a response—an extreme measure to counter extreme conditions. But I don't think that people will fully accept the use of violence until they've seen, through their own experience, the nature of the forces against them, and realize there's something we can do about it.

The Slaying of Marcus Foster

The conviction of Joe Remiro and Russell Little for the killing of Marcus Foster was a total frame-up. Neither Joe, Russ, Angela, Bill nor I was even in the SLA at the time of the Foster assassination. We first heard of the Foster shooting from reading daily newspaper accounts, but after Joe and Russ' capture, members of the SLA told us what had happened. It was the first public action by the SLA.

Marcus Foster and Robert Blackburn were chosen as targets because they were the main proponents of a Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) pilot program to link up educational institutions with police agencies. It involved police units patrolling the Oakland schools with shotguns; a photo ID program where students would be required to present their ID's on request and could be detained for questioning if they refused; and a biographical-dossier program where information on students could be fed into national computer banks in an attempt to predict, categorize and remove any "troublemakers."

The lives and well-being of the students were at stake—the program was really a means of herding "problem kids" out of the schools and into the prisons. No matter how you look at it, an armed presence in the schools is just the beginning in teaching conditioned acceptance to the occupation of whole communities.

Russ: The program was supposed to be implemented by setting up an extensive spy system at each of seven pilot schools under the command of a former police sergeant. The system was to be coordinated with a probation department, youth authority (youth prison), juvenile hall and the Oakland Police Department—all of which had a hand in training these informants (they called them monitors) at each school and in sharing and contributing to the bio-dossiers (composite files) of each student.

In the LEAA documents that we saw at our trial, these agencies, along with the schools themselves, are euphemistically called "youth-serving agencies" and it was explained that "centralization and coordination is necessary" in order to maintain control.

The SLA should have explained specifically what LEAA-funding of the program implied. It should have been pointed out that the LEAA is part of the "Justice" Department, as is the FBI, and was set up to provide funding for local police agencies with the intention of generating a nationally centralized police force. The Foster program was actually a LEAA pilot program that was initiated simultaneously in many other urban areas while appearing to be locally generated.

Bill: I found out much later that Nancy, Mizmoon and Cin were the ones who carried out the action. They had to station themselves in a position where Foster and Blackburn would pass them going to their car after the school board meeting on November 6. Cin stationed himself off to the side in some bushes as backup in case they needed help.

Both Nancy and Mizmoon had cyanide bullets in their guns, and as soon as Foster and Blackburn walked by, they fired at them. Mizmoon shot Foster, but Nancy missed Blackburn almost completely and hit him in the arm. As he ran out of the range of their handguns, Cin seriously wounded him with a shotgun blast.

Emily: We first learned about the Foster assassination in the Oakland Tribune. When we heard it was done by revolutionaries, we were really excited. We felt that it was a broadening of revolutionary tactics in this country. That night we went out and bought all the Tribunes we could get our hands on to send the communique to our friends. It was only a lot later, after we saw the community's overwhelmingly negative reaction, that we stopped to seriously analyze it. It became pretty obvious that the SLA had made a serious error in using the tactic of assassination at all around the Foster program, and they definitely misjudged the way the community would respond to it.

Joe: At first I felt very supportive about the whole thing, and from what I found out during Russ' and my trial, the Foster program was far more vicious than the SLA had even indicated in their communique. Killing Foster put a quick stop to the intended program, but, in effect, it subverted the spontaneous opposition of students, parents and teachers to the program. There had been student strikes, petitions, leaflets and a lot of hell-raising at school board meetings.

At our trial, there was testimony that the program was being pushed through regardless of all the community opposition. Even though the action taken by the SLA temporarily stopped the program, it didn't aid in building more opposition or in drawing more attention to what was coming down; the action scared people away.

People were not ready to support something like that. Those who had been publicly calling Foster a fascist pig started making statements about what a good guy he had been, not because they believed it but because they were afraid of being identified with the people who shot him.

Before and during our trial, neither Russ nor I wanted to publicly criticize the action. The SLA was being attacked by people on the Left who saw a chance to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the state. We didn't care to legitimize ourselves or in any way be identified with those fools on the Left—we certainly didn't want to be used by them to attack the SLA.

No one was making any objective criticisms of the action at the time. We threw people out of the visiting room at the jail who wanted us to denounce the assassination as a condition for supporting our defense. We knew that we could have filled the courtroom with these jive leftists if we were willing to mimic their opportunist politics, but we were much happier with guerrilla support and a few strong folks in the courtroom. We were innocent of the charges without attacking the SLA and only accepted support on that basis.

It is important to point out that although we have criticisms of the Foster assassination, we in no way intend for this to be interpreted as a denunciation of political assassinations as a valid revolutionary tactic. We are primarily criticizing the timing of the Foster action, but we can see many other situations where such an action would be both necessary and correct.

The Patty Hearst Kidnapping

Emily: There hadn't really been a revolutionary kidnapping in the United States so the SLA couldn't predict how much bargaining power that action would give them. The main demand—the food program—was conceived as a way to involve a lot of people in a guerrilla action—to have them take part in the results of that action so that revolutionaries could begin to be seen as a valid part of their everyday lives.

Also, the food program was a test to see how the Hearst family would comply with demands—to give the SLA a basis for judging whether to demand Russ and Joe's release. That's why it was called a good-faith gesture. When the SLA saw the Hearsts' reluctance to even minimally comply with the \$6 million food demand, they knew getting Russ and Joe out was unrealistic, and they felt it was important not to destroy the momentum created by issuing a further demand that the Hearsts would refuse to meet.

The third objective was to force a family that owned or controlled vast segments of the mass media to print revolutionary communiques and documents in full. As one of the main sources of information for people in this country, newspapers usually only give selected snatches of news unless they are catering to government needs. Revolutionary communiques are chopped up and printed with reactionary and distorted editorial analysis. The SLA wanted them to demonstrate that if the pressure was right the media could be forced to represent revolutionary actions in such a way that people could judge for themselves.

Bill: Also there was a parallel being drawn—Patricia Hearst was seen as a POW just as Russ and Joe were POW's, and warnings were put out that her condition was going to correspond to their conditions of incarceration. The implication, of course, was that if the goons at San Quentin messed with Russ and Joe then Patricia Hearst's safety would be endangered.

Russ: At first we were surprised that they would do anything like the kidnapping because we figured they would just be trying to survive and regroup. Sure, we were high off the action. The dudes we were with in San Quentin's

Adjustment Center got off on it. They stayed up all that night celebrating—singing and yelling and beating on the walls and bars.

Emily: Members of the SLA stood in the food lines to find out the reaction and effects of the program. Most people there were amazed at how many other folks actually needed food. Even though they needed it themselves, they hadn't realized how many others were in a similar situation—they weren't alone in their problems. It really emphasized certain contradictions; that in this society, which is supposed to be so plentiful, thousands of people are hungry enough that they'll stand in long lines for only small amounts of food.

They couldn't even be sure they would get the food 'cause a lot of times the food ran out. Everybody there was hip to the contradiction that at the drop of a hat this rich family could feed all of them, but wouldn't do it unless they were forced.

Bill: People were angry at the quality of the food they were getting. One woman had a can of food that said "hominy" or something on the outside; when she opened it up, it was like dog food. They were bugged about the media, too, seeing the guys with the TV cameras. They'd say stuff like: "If those fools come up here, I'm gonna break that goddamn thing—the SLA said they didn't want no damned cameras around here."

Emily: There was a high level of consciousness and solidarity among the folks standing in the food lines. They didn't see it as charity or "blood money." They were proud, and they felt like they deserved that food. I think it's unfortunate that a lot of white people seemed embarrassed to go. A lot of the initial food distribution centers were in predominantly black communities and the Hearst propaganda tried to develop a racist pride in white people that they were "too good to go get that food" or to admit that they were poor and hungry too.

There were just as many white people as any other race that needed the food. The SLA thought it was important that there be food distribution centers in a wide variety of places so that people wouldn't have to leave the community they lived in and felt comfortable in; that they should be able to stand in line with people from their community.

Bill: Patricia Hearst heard about the food distribution on the radio and it gave her the most positive sense of what the kidnapping meant. She could see concretely that there are people who are too poor to be able to afford sufficient food and her dad had a lot of money and he could be forced to help feed them.

Patty Hearst Joins the SLA

Emily: "Conversion" is really a bad word. It's been used so many times, I catch myself using it. It wasn't an overnight process because change just doesn't happen like that. With Patty, the process began, I'm convinced, even before the kidnap. She had been very dissatisfied with her life.

Bill: Let's face it—so many people; no matter what their class position, are demoralized by the quality of their life based on the myth of true happiness—their projection of the American Dream. I think it's clear that Patty was a very unhappy person. Within a few days after her kidnapping she started to raise questions about the SLA's perspective on her family as a ruling-class enemy.

Emily: After the first few days she had the opportunity to talk with anyone she wanted to, if they weren't busy with something else. Willie would read a lot to her and rap about his experiences with revolutionary prisoners. She heard all the news on TV and radio and when the SLA realized how disturbing and demoralizing it was for her, they tried to explain what was happening and why. The event that terrified her most was a raid on a house in Oakland.

The police suspected that they had found the SLA hideout so they surrounded it and rushed it with a SWAT team. Patty began to feel that her life was in danger because of the irresponsibility of the police and wondered why her parents were taking so long to comply with the demands. It was clear to her that her father had the resources to meet the SLA's demand for \$6 million worth of food, but it was a real shock for her to consider that there were corporate interests that were far more important to him than the safe return of his daughter. She was amazed that he would risk her safety just so he could keep the American people in the dark about the extent of wealth at his fingertips.

She heard Randolph on TV saying he just couldn't do any more, like he was helpless or something. She'd say, "That's not like him, someone else is writing it for him—it just doesn't sound like him." She was more hip than anyone to the whole propaganda campaign.

Bill: These experiences produced some changes in Patty. Cin was actually more sensitive than anyone else about what she was going through. He began to see the difficulties she'd have in returning to a life that had held very little meaning for her before—and that had even less now. He talked to her about this and then mentioned to the rest of the folks that they should consider the possibility that Patricia might want to remain with the SLA.

At first everyone laughed; then when they realized Cin was serious, most people were against it. I think that those of us in the SLA that were from more middle class backgrounds were a lot less impressed with what Patricia did. But for Cin it was a very heavy thing—he had a lot of love for her based on that.

You might think that a committed revolutionary who had been in prison for such a long time would take the hardest line against a woman like Patricia.

But Cin felt that her renunciation of her family and her candid awareness of their role were really monumental changes—especially when this rich young woman decided to give it all up to become a guerrilla.

Ultimately the others began to understand that she seriously wanted to "stay" and they felt that to send her back to her family would be to turn her over to the wolves. They also realized what an inspiration it would be to other people when they learned that Patricia Hearst had decided to remain with the revolutionaries who had kidnapped her. It would represent the potential in everyone to change.

It's like she didn't become part of the SLA just because someone thought it was a good idea. I don't think anyone wanted to have some deadweight hanging around for nothing more than some good propaganda. Each of the members questioned her relentlessly to try to catch any weakness or romanticism in her decision—and tried to shake the confidence of her decision because the strength of the group would depend on her as an individual as much as anyone else.

She chose the name Tania herself. The SLA had a copy of that book Tania, the diary and letters of the woman who was killed with Che in Bolivia and Patty was reading it. The charge that Patty was intimidated into joining the SLA is ridiculous. It was her own decision—not the result of any coercion or some mystical event or magic penis. Patricia thought it was disgusting how the media hypothesized that Cin had lured her into the SLA based on the enticement of black sexuality. I'll tell you, Cin never showed her anything but kindness—he was more like a big brother.

Emily: Of course the process that Patricia went through in the year and a half prior to her arrest has to be seen now in the context of subsequent events. Looking back on it, the SLA made an error in accepting her decision to stay with the group and not return to her family. Even though this was a terrific inspiration to many people in the short-term sense, the SLA should have had more foresight into the potential problems. Everyone got too caught up in sentimentality—their growing attachment and love for Patricia—and did not objectively consider the added burden that Patricia's presence would create.

Joe: Letting Hearst stay was an example of the media effect taking precedence over more important considerations.

The Los Angeles Shootout

Bill: None of us came into the SLA with delusions that we were indestructible or that the pigs would be anything less than brutal if any of us got surrounded, What I'm trying to say is that making the decision had, within it, some understanding of what the consequences are. And knowing that the pigs aren't gonna show people like the SLA any kind of mercy on the field of battle is no different than us knowing that they're going to railroad us in a court of law.

I mean we weren't surprised that they mobilized an army of 500 to kill six people without even giving them a chance to surrender. It don't take 500 pigs to insure a surrender. Let's face it—the SWAT team wouldn't know a surrender if they saw one.

That was a search and destroy operation—any Vietnam vet who saw it knows that's what it was—we saw it a thousand times in Vietnam—and the folks in that house knew it too. That fire wasn't a fluke. It's standard practice—the scorched earth policy brought home.

Emily: In terms of numbers, I don't think we broke it down so we expected 500 police to surround our house. But in terms of them going all-out to kill members of the SLA—we knew that they had done that right from the very beginning.

There was even a working phone-in that house and there was never any attempt made to communicate with the folks inside. In fact, it's possible that Nancy and Camilla were trying to surrender after the fire caught in the house. They were both shot by snipers as soon as they came out of the house.

I know all of them were afraid, but I feel a lot of pride for the courage they showed. Cin could have even walked away from the whole thing—police interviews of witnesses in the neighborhood show that he had drifted unnoticed through the crowds that afternoon when the police started surrounding the house. He could have just kept walking—he knew what was happening but he didn't want to split on his comrades.

One of the main criticisms that I have was how the SLA got caught up in a sensationalized portrayal of the organization through the media. Revolutionaries can't do that—they have to keep their ideas and their actions grounded in reality. I think in some ways the drama of the whole thing even discouraged people. They began to see the SLA as such a fantasy that the group lost its potential for motivating other people to act and participate in some form of revolutionary struggle.

The SLA put out this image of themselves as much more sophisticated, much more powerful than they actually were. There was a serious discussion of all this within the group because of a communique that Joe and Russ put out from prison. It said that they thought the whole idea of Nancy calling Cinque a prophet was really ridiculous and that the SLA was getting too arrogant. That initiated a lot of self-criticism within the SLA. But the SLA never gave other people a sense that they were learning anything from these errors.

Looking Back

Joe: We were principled and comradely, but we had to point out that although we loved them, we were revolutionaries before we were members of the SLA. What we saw bothered us because it was leading in a direction that we had seen destroy other groups in the past. What was maybe the most self-destructive error made by the SLA was that although they initially meant to use the media for revolutionary ends, they underestimated its controlling power and eventually became so completely tied up by it that they lost all contact with reality outside of an artificially staged media context.

Working within the context of the corporate media can be as overpowering and destructive as working within the system. The media subtly turned the SLA into a performing act that could be depended upon for regular bits of sensationalism. They got to the point of performing with less and less regard for political content or personal safety.

Russ: The SLA wanted to project what a relatively small group of people can do—that we are not as powerless as we are led to believe. The impact of SLA actions proved this point, but it would have been driven home even more if the whole mystique of the SLA had been dealt with. The SLA was not an army, but they chose that name because they anticipated the need to build the nucleus of a future people's army. Things like that should have been explained and put into perspective. The SLA should have placed the underground in its proper context as one facet of a protracted struggle waged on many levels, legal and illegal, where all forms of struggle are developed harmoniously around the axis of armed struggle.

I think it's fair to say that the SLA generated more spontaneous support because of the Hearst kidnapping/food giveaway—propaganda of the deed—than any aboveground revolutionary organization in this country now has. They obviously learned from the mistakes of the Foster action, which had seemed sound theoretically but didn't work out in practice, and translated their revolutionary politics into the most significant single guerrilla action yet to take place in the U.S. The demand for free food underlined the polarization between the rich and the poor and drew over 30,000 people into the action.)

Poor and hungry people everywhere identified with the SLA. Millions of people read and heard what the SLA had to say and were politicized in varying degrees. They also forced most of the “movement heavies” to once again expose themselves as nothing more than liberal reformists and opportunists who constantly try to defuse the revolutionary struggle when it goes beyond their own personal control. These fools turn more people off to revolution than they ever inspire.

When thinking about what the SLA accomplished, we’ve also got to remember that it was only 10 guerrillas—10 people who took the most powerful state in the world to task. What if it had been 100 guerrillas or 1000? The fact that our six comrades were killed and the four of us are captives is not due to the invincibility of the state, but to our own mistakes and impatience. There’s no doubt in my mind that’ the SLA proved the validity of urban guerrilla warfare as a military/political strategy for furthering the revolutionary struggle.

Joe: When Russ and I joined the SLA we were going through some political changes based on our observations and experiences while working with different factions of the left. We had become as alienated from party centralism as from the state control we experienced in our everyday lives and we were beginning to identify both as manifestations of the same authoritarian impulse. These feelings were only beginning to change our entire political perspective as we still had not yet completely grasped the revolutionary alternative that we were moving toward. In reviewing the internal political documents of the SLA the contradictory tendencies of being in the process of moving from an authoritarian to an anti-authoritarian perspective can be seen.

Russ: During the two years since the LA shootout, Joe and I have had an opportunity to get back in touch with the subjective reasons behind our decisions to become conscious revolutionaries. We were originally attracted to the revolutionary struggle because of our alienation from this society and our desire for a truly classless society where people manage all aspects of their Own lives and where “from each according to their abilities, to all according to their needs” is a reality on all levels—socially, sexually, culturally as well as economically.

Before joining the SLA, we were fully disillusioned with the Marxist parties and their sectarian political lines but had never been exposed to anarchist theory and practice. For the past year, we have been reading everything on anarchism we could get past the prison censors. We are presently trying to rid ourselves of the vanguardist attitudes we developed during our association with Marxist politics.

Joe: We now feel that all forms of revolutionary organization should act as a catalyst within the popular movement and should be structured in such a way that eventually they will be completely absorbed by it. We not only believe that people have the ability to create a new society but also that they have the ability to lead themselves.

The idea of a “new” dictatorship or of using an assembly line as the model for a “new” society doesn’t come close to what we are fighting for; actually it bears more than a slight resemblance to the kind of oppressive society we intend to change. We want a revolutionary change—not just a shift of power—our struggle is for social revolution.



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