

OPINION

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Criminal Justice on Trial

BY HUGH B. PRICE

For several years in the 1990s, a gang of African-American alleged drug dealers transformed Tulia, Texas, a small town of 5,000 halfway between Amarillo and Lubbock, into one of America's most prosecuted drug trafficking capitals.

Most of these supposed black drug dealers belonged to families who had lived in Tulia's small black community for decades, and they seemed to be as bereft of money and as modest and sober in their habits as anyone in a town that is often described as "dirt poor."

But this didn't deter one Thomas Coleman, a white law officer hired by the regional narcotics task force and the Tulia sheriff's department to go undercover and root out drug trafficking.

In 1999 Coleman gave his superiors something to crow about—the arrest of 46 people on substantial drug-trafficking charges. Most of those arrested were African-Americans. They made up nearly a tenth of Tulia's black population. The few whites arrested were friends of the blacks.

Trials were soon organized, with Thomas Coleman the sole witness against the defendants. Convictions quickly followed, and the sentences were harsh: 60 years for this defendant, 90 years for that defendant, 434 years for still another defendant. Other defendants, fearful of being sentenced to decades in prison, pleaded guilty and received shorter but still substantial time.

Justice had been served, the local prosecutor's office maintains to this day—even though no drugs were ever found. No money that could be even remotely tied to drug-trafficking was ever found. No weapons of the kind routinely used by drug-traffickers were ever found.

All prosecutors had was the word of Thomas Coleman—a man with a distinctly checkered legal past and a well-known penchant for publicly referring to any African American as "nigger" because he de-

clared the word was no longer "as profane" as it once was.

Coleman's own descriptions of his undercover methods border on farce. He said he worked alone and never tape-recorded his supposed drug buys, instead writing down details on, of all things, his leg.

Some of those Coleman had accused escaped this travesty of justice because they could prove, via a cashed check in one case, and employee time sheets and an employer's testimony in another, that they were innocent of Coleman's claims. But most of the defendants had no such defense against what Bob Herbert, the "New

should.

This glaring injustice is but further evidence that America's criminal justice system is seriously flawed.

Racial bias among police officers, prosecutors, juries and judges; toleration of poorly-prepared defense attorneys for indigent defendants; state legislatures' cynical decisions to build prisons in rural white communities in order to provide jobs and infusions of state funds to ease those areas' economic depressions, not fight crime, are just a few of the problems that deserve attention.

First and foremost, of course, there is the wrong of the death penalty, in which the accumulating



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—Hugh B. Price

York Times" columnist who first wrote about the case, described as "the nightmarish blend of incompetence and malevolence."

Now, thanks to publicity and the legal aid provided the defendants by private attorneys in Texas and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, a judicial hearing is underway in Tulia to determine whether four black men convicted on Coleman's testimony should be freed because his testimony was false.

The hearing has already heard four law officials who had previously worked with Coleman say such things as "I do not believe Tom Coleman is an honest individual," and "You just couldn't depend on what he told you." The real question is why the prosecutor's office in Tulia, Texas ever thought and still thinks it

instances of questionable convictions and convictions proved to have been wrong—that is, of men who were innocent of the crime for which they were charged and convicted—cry out for a national moratorium on the death penalty.

These issues are more than matters of legal precedent and process. They go to the heart of what Americans declare freedom and democracy involves and provides for individual human beings.

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Hugh B. Price is president of the National Urban League, a leading civil rights organization.

Vanport name Welcome Bridge will honor town with African American history

Vanport Bridge was the overwhelming choice by people voting to rename Interstate MAX's Long Bridge in a contest held by TriMet. The bridge will be dedicated as Vanport Bridge in a ceremony on May 30th, the 55th anniversary of a flood that washed away the city of Vanport.

"We've received overwhelming support for Vanport," said Fred Hansen, TriMet general manager. "The name invokes the area's past, while the bridge symbolizes its future."

The 4,000-foot bridge spans from Kenton to Portland International Raceway.

Vanport was located in the area between 1942 and 1948. It was Oregon's second largest city and the country's largest housing project. Men and women, including thousands of African Americans from over 40 states, were drawn to the city by wartime jobs at the Kaiser Shipyards.

At least 15 people lost their lives and 18,000 residents became homeless after a dike burst and waterswept through the city. At the bridge dedication ceremony, a plaque commemorating the city and those who lived there will be unveiled.

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