

# ELDRIDGE CLEAVER: FROM VIOLENT ANTI-AMERICANISM TO CHRISTIAN CONSERVATISM

*Posted on February 1, 2021 by Richard McDonough*



Eldridge Cleaver (1935-1998) is a name not well known to many Americans today, not even to today's disaffected youth in our universities and the culture at large. This is a surprise, although there are also reasons for it, because Eldridge was, at various times, an admitted criminal and "insurrectionary" rapist (rape as a way of striking back at "white" society), a member of the Black Panther Party, a "Black Muslim," and one of the leading socialist, communist and Marxist revolutionaries of his time.

His book, *Soul on Ice* became the Bible, so to speak, of the Black Power movement. It also led Cleaver to become, for a time, the favorite black radical of American intellectuals. Eldridge was obviously highly intelligent. He was, in fact, a truly remarkable man. He did, it is true, have his demons right up to the end; not surprising, given his brutal start in life. But his life, taken as a whole, is a testament to the ability of a person to learn from his experiences. Indeed, that is precisely why he is out of favor today, when conformity to the script is the most prized quality.

Eldridge Cleaver was born on August 31, 1935 in the tiny town of Wabbaseka, Arkansas. His father, Leroy Cleaver was a nightclub entertainer and a waiter, and his mother an elementary school teacher. His father was reported to be a violent man who beat his wife. Eldridge stated that he wanted to grow up to be tall and strong like his father, but "bigger and stronger," so that he could "beat him to the ground the way he beat my mother."

His father was offered a job in the dining car of a train that ran from Chicago to Los Angeles. During this time Eldridge's family moved to Phoenix Arizona and later, in 1946, to the Watts area in Los Angeles. While a teenager Eldridge got into petty crime and was sent to reform school for stealing a bicycle and selling marijuana. In 1954 he was convicted for marijuana possession, which was a felony at the time, and incarcerated at the California State Prison at Soledad for 2 ½ years. It was at this time he began reading widely and earned his high school diploma.

Despite this promising turn around, a year after his release, he was arrested for rapes, convicted of assault with intent to murder and sent to San Quentin prison first, and later to Folsom for a term of 2 to 14 years. In these years, Cleaver voraciously read the works of Karl Marx, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Vladimir Lenin and [W.E.B. Du Bois](#). For the record, Du Bois (1868-1963) was an American sociologist, historian, author, editor and activist and probably the most important black activist in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. Cleaver also began to engage in serious self-reflection and criticism. In *Soul on Ice*, the product of these self-reflections, Cleaver describes himself at his most

depraved:

*"I became a rapist. To refine my technique and modus operandi, I started out by practicing on black girls in... the black ghetto where dark and vicious deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of the day - and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. I did this consciously, deliberately, willfully, methodically -- though looking back I see that I was in a frantic, wild and completely abandoned frame of mind. Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women -- and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me... I felt I was getting revenge.*

*"There was little doubt... that if I had not been apprehended, I would have slit some white throats.*

*I took a long look at myself and, for the first time in my life, admitted that I was wrong, that I had gone astray - astray, not so much from the white man's law as from being human, civilized -- for I could not approve the act of rape... I lost my self-respect. My pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered."*

After his release from prison, seeking a more moral and disciplined life, Cleaver joined the Black Muslim movement and became friends with [Malcolm X](#). But after the assassination of Malcolm X, he denounced the Muslim faith. He did, however, retain a determination to realize Malcolm X's dream of African Unity.

In 1966 he began writing for the [Ramparts](#) magazine, a glossy expensively produced and illustrated magazine associated with the [New Left](#), and met the leaders of the young Black Panther Party, including [Huey Newton](#) and [Bobby Seale](#). Eldridge joined the Panthers believing that Newton would carry on Malcolm X's dream of African Unity and became the party's Minister of Information and leader of the "Free Huey" movement.

While a member of the Panthers, he called for an armed insurrection to overthrow the United States government and its replacement by a black socialist government.

On April 6th of 1968 Cleaver, with 14 other Black Panthers armed with M16 rifles and shotguns, was

involved in a shootout with police, which the Panthers blamed on the police, and in which the seventeen-year-old Panther, [Bobby Hutton](#) was killed.

Cleaver was charged with attempted murder and ordered back to prison. However, a judge ordered him released from prison two months later, and Cleaver gave a series of lectures at the University of California at Berkeley. The Governor of California at the time, Ronald Reagan, attempted to prevent Cleaver from speaking at Berkeley. In addition to calling Reagan "Mickey Mouse," Cleaver once challenged Reagan to a duel:

*"I challenged Ronald Reagan to a duel and I reiterate that challenge tonight. . . . And I give him his choice of weapons. He can use a gun, a knife, a baseball bat or a marshmallow. And I'll beat him to death with a marshmallow."*

In the [Reason interview](#), Cleaver also admits to plotting to kill Reagan. Cleaver's parole was revoked and he was ordered back to prison. But, on Nov. 24, 1968, three days before he was due to turn himself in to the authorities, Cleaver fled to Cuba. He then spent the next seven years travelling through various socialist and communist countries, including Algeria, North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union, before, finally, settling down for a period in France.

Although Cleaver was initially treated to a life of luxury in Cuba, relations with Castro soured and Cleaver left Cuba for Algeria. [Elaine Klein](#) got him an invitation to attend the Pan-African Cultural Festival, which temporarily rendered him safe from prosecution. His work in the Festival enabled him to meet revolutionaries from all over Africa to discuss the evils of white supremacy and colonialism.

Cleaver again called for violence against the United States and stated his mission to "position the Panthers within the revolutionary nationalist camp inside the United States, and as disciples of Fanon on the world stage".

[Fritz Omar Fanon](#) (1925–1961), born on the island of Martinique under French colonial rule, is difficult to classify. Fanon had an eclectic range of influences, including French Marxist and "Existentialist" Jean-Paul Sartre and French phenomenologist [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#). But it is fair to say that he combined Marxism, black existentialism and critical theory in his struggle against "Atlantic colonialism."

During his travels through various socialist and communist countries, Cleaver even developed a curious alliance with the communist government in North Korea, and his Black Panther Party began publishing excerpts from its strange reclusive leader, [Kim Il Sung](#).

Although Americans were forbidden to visit North Korea at the time, Cleaver and several other Panthers made two visits to the country in 1969-1970 to determine whether North Korea's "[juche model](#)" could be adapted to the cause of black liberation in the United States.

Juche deserves a longer discussion but this is the basics: It was described as a program of national self-reliance, as a means of getting rid of Soviet domination of North Korea, which sounds positive enough, but it was actually used as a justification for the creation of the bizarre North Korean closed-door policy to the outside world and, internally, to justify getting rid of Kim Il Sung's political rivals and achieve total dictatorial control of the country. After being taken on an official tour of North Korea, Cleaver expressed his admiration for North Korea's "*stable crime free society which provided guaranteed food, employment, and housing for all, and... had no economic or social inequalities.*"

By 1975, however, after experiencing the joys of socialism and communism first hand in multiple countries around the world, as opposed to celebrating them in the comfy confines of a Berkeley sociology lecture, or while sitting cross-legged in a circle passing around the "peace pipe," Cleaver had reversed his opinions.

In the interview with *Reason* magazine, he explained that in the United States he had sought to "*fight against what I saw as the evils of our system.*" But when he went "*to a country like Cuba or Algeria or the Soviet Union and the nature of control that those state apparatuses had over the people - it was shocking to me. I didn't want to believe it, because it meant that the politics that I was espousing was wrong.*"

In that same interview, Cleaver also addresses Marx's idea that after the glorious socialist revolution a "dictatorship of the proletariat" will be necessary for some temporary period until the state "withers away" and everyone achieves complete freedom. After his actual, real-world experience of these regimes, Cleaver begged to differ:

*"The communists teach you that the dictatorship is a transient phase—that once capitalism is eliminated, then the state will wither away and you will have freedom. Well, when you look at those governments up*

*close and see how they treat their own people, you can't believe in that. You see that people are using that preachment of the withering away of the state as their excuse to justify their own dictatorial power."*

When asked in the *Reason* interview why so many American "intellectuals," like Barbara Walters or George McGovern, visit these socialist and communist regimes and come away impressed, Cleaver stated that this was because they just "scurry" right though quickly, while getting the red-carpet treatment. That is, they are enormously gullible. By contrast, Cleaver said, *"I lived in those kinds of places and I got to know people and made friends. I got to know the governments, the people in the military, people in the Communist Party or whatever they called it. That gives you a different perspective."* Indeed, this one-time communist told *Reason* magazine that he now thought stopping communism is *"a noble cause."*

Since leftist accusations against the police are once again the most useful *cause du jour* to manipulate the public and get their way, it is significant that in the interview with *Reason* magazine, Cleaver also addressed the gunfight with the police in which Bobby Hutton was killed - but describes those events entirely differently than he had during his days as a Panther:

*"We went after the cops that night, but when we got caught, we said they came after us. We always did that. When you talk about the legacy of the '60's that's one legacy... t helped to distort the image of the police, but I've come to the point where I realize that our police department is necessary."*

Whereas in his days as a Black Panther, Cleaver had accused the police for the gunfight that killed Bobby Hutton, he now admitted that it was his group that provoked the violence so that they could blame it on the police: *"We always did that."*

This duplicitous strategy continues to the present day. "Protestors" still chant the "Hands up, don't shoot!" slogan from the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri even though the Obama-Holder Justice Department, after a thorough investigation and testimony from six black witnesses, cleared the police Officer. Truth is not of major concern to leftists when dictatorial control of a whole country is the goal.

In the *Reason* interview Cleaver also returned to the night while living in France when he had his political and spiritual turnaround. He describes how, sitting with a gun in his hand, he was

contemplating suicide, when he suddenly had a vision, in which his former Marxist heroes disappear in smoke and a blinding light led him to Christianity.

Disillusioned with the socialist and communist worlds, indeed, "shocked" by the way they treated their people, and homesick for the United States, Cleaver returned to America, even though a murder charge and a charge for skipping bail were still hanging over his head.

In 1977 he surrendered to the FBI under a deal in which he pled guilty to the assault charge and was sentenced to 1,200 hours of community service in exchange for dropping the attempted murder charge. Facing a murder charge in the United States is, apparently, preferable, and not by a small margin, to being given the red-carpet treatment in the various socialist and communist paradises around the world.

In a 1998 article in the New York Times titled, "Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Who Became a G.O.P. Conservative, Is Dead at 62," John Kifner describes how Cleaver continued his evolution, after returning to the United States. Having witnessed the devastation wreaked by socialism and communism with his own eyes, he became an entrepreneur (apparently realizing that capitalism, far from being evil, gives individuals the freedom to turn an idea and some hard work into a good, even a great, way of life, creating jobs for others along the way), and marketed a new type of men's trousers called the "[Cleaver Sleeve](#)" featuring a codpiece.

Cleaver became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) for a time, before becoming a Christian conservative, a member of the Republican Party and a supporter of Ronald Reagan, the man he had once plotted to kill. What a difference growing up makes! He even ran for public office as a Republican but lost. Cleaver had come full circle.

As a result of his real education living in socialist and communist countries, he went from being a Marxist revolutionary who called for the assassination of Ronald Reagan to being a Christian conservative Republican Reagan supporter.

At the time of his interview with *Reason* magazine, Cleaver lived in a modest apartment in Berkeley California where he was working on a book on the history of the 1960s. A large American flag, testimony to the fact that some people are actually willing to learn from their experience, flew from his front

porch. With his prominently displayed large American flag, the former Marxist was clearly trying to send a message.

Cleaver's turnabout was not, predictably, appreciated on the Left. The same *New York Times* article describes a case in the 1980s when Cleaver demanded that the Berkeley City Council begin its meetings with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, a practice that they had once followed but had abandoned several years earlier. The Berkeley Mayor Gus Newport responded: "Shut up Eldridge. Shut up or we'll have you removed!"

Cleaver might be forgiven if he thought he was back in one of his other former socialist or communist paradises. Further, at the time of the writing of this article, *Wikipedia*, which is sometimes, perhaps in a poor attempt at humour, described as an "encyclopedia," has a [reasonably sized article](#) of about 630 words, not counting the footnotes, for Cleaver's youthful angry anti-American book, *Soul on Ice*.

Since, however, Cleaver's later book, *Soul on Fire*, which describes his conversion to being a Christian conservative, pro-American Republican is much more positive and hopeful, and most unforgivably, his conversion to support Ronald Reagan, it does not merit a Wikipedia article at all, not even a brief one, and is not even mentioned in the *Wikipedia* article about *Soul on Ice*.

Despite Cleaver's remarkable evolution, it must be admitted that some of his demons remained with him in later life. In 1990 and 1994, he had police issues over the use of crack cocaine. But that is not why he is criticized and rejected by the Left where self-destructive drug use is just a part of life.

Cleaver's mistake, for the Left, is that he had actually allowed himself to learn from his experiences over the years and see through his youthful leftist follies - for the ability to learn from experience is precisely what the Left cannot abide.

*Richard McDonough is the [author](#) of [two books](#), numerous articles, encyclopedia and dictionary entries, and book reviews. He has taught previously at Bates College, the National University of Singapore, the University of Tulsa, the University Putra Malaysia, the Overseas Family College, the PSB Academy, the University of Maryland, the Arium Academy, and James Cook University. In addition to philosophy, he has taught psychology, physics, humanities and writing courses.*



The [featured image](#) shows, "Unite," a color screenprint, by Barbara Jones-Hogu, printed 1969.

