

The Legacy of Lynne Stewart, The People's Lawyer

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"Well, sometimes the impossible takes a little longer", remarked Lynne Stewart, December 31, 2014, on her arrival in New York, released from federal prison in Texas, after a vigorous family and internationally driven campaign on her behalf. (She was suffering from advanced cancer.)

Stewart lived three more years, nearby her family, always with a smile for visitors. This was the woman who dared this mild rebuke to her sentencing judge: "I do not intend to go gentle into that good night" she told him.

Last Saturday, almost 500 friends and admirers of the brave lawyer who had the courage to challenge U.S. Homeland's [chief John Ashcroft fifteen years ago, gathered to celebrate a remarkable and honorable life.](#)

April 22nd, the same day when tens of thousands were gathering in cities across the country to support our scientific community under threat by Trump administration budget cuts, one [is struck by the contrast with those memorializing this "people's lawyer"](#)

(www.lynnestewart.org,

That modest assembly in a quiet corner of New York, the city where she grew up and where Stewart worked all her life, represented a revolutionary era whose very place in U.S. history is dangerously marginal. Moreover, that history is barely recognized by the rather belated post-November 8th arousal—the new liberal movement— now gathering with its multitude of committees, mass parades and lefty celebrity speeches: [part of Bernie Sanders' Our Revolution](#)-. Fine. But a far cry from what Lynne Stewart's celebrants represent.

Unarguably America needs organized massive resistance to threats posed by the current administration; push back is essential on all fronts: healthcare, the arts, environmental protections, bank regulation, civic rights, and on and on. One hopes that the thousands of communities mobilizing nationwide, from villages to city centers and suburbs will— after the committees are settled, the speeches made, the funds raised, the petitions signed— act. They have organizing tools unavailable in past revolutions. Digital platforms flowing into every hand can inform with virtual velocity; Google maps assure you that your small effort is fed into a nationwide net of tens of thousands; you are not alone. Leaders can materialize in weeks with Twitter and Facebook skills at their command, cameras everywhere recording their emergence. Film celebrities join in, drawing even greater numbers to the effort. These are essentially what we have, and they may indeed be what are appropriate at a time when representatives of our police state are more numerous and more heavily armed, endowed with more authority and less tolerance.

Those gathered to remember Lynne Stewart last week were authentic, tried revolutionaries: poets Nat Turner and Amina Baraka; former political prisoners, attorneys who had stepped forward to defend unpopular characters, teachers, organizers in solidarity with Cuba and Palestinian statehood from the 1960s to today; Vietnam war veterans and the unjustly imprisoned; defiant elected representatives from New Jersey and Brooklyn; [the journalist and theologian Chris Hedges who refuses to join the liberal voice](#) that claims it is the rightful alternative to the Republican party.

Each woman and man reminded us what makes a revolution. Each invoked the grass roots experience of Stewart, a librarian and teacher who turned to law in order to fight injustices she witnessed in the lives of her students. Eventually she took on the case of Muslims wrongly accused in the early 1990s when the government was using secret evidence to illegally charge and convict. Where other attorneys shied away from representing terror suspects, Lynne Stewart remained committed. There was some success when the government was eventually prevented from further use of secret evidence.

Then came the 9/11 attacks, and everything changed. Stewart insisted on defending attorney-client privilege (a right the government suspended). She had to be stopped. And they had to put Stewart, at the age of 73, in jail to do so.



As Brooklyn assemblyman Charles Barron reminded us on Saturday, “Lynne was a sweet person.” Even as she presented her cases and spoke to the media, she was always mild and respectful, always witty and bright-eyed. It’s not simply that she’s missed. We need to believe others as courageous and well equipped as Stewart was can come to our aid today.

Barbara Nimri Aziz is an anthropologist and radio producer in New York. She is a longtime associate of Lynne Stewart, interviewing her during her fight against government use of secret evidence against her clients during the 1990s, then during Stewart’s fight against the department of justice attack on lawyer-client privacy rights, and finally in the campaign for Stewart’s release from prison on health grounds.

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