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Justice for all: Finding the courage to live our beliefs

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Justice for all

Finding the courage to live our beliefs

On March 16, 2000, a gunfight occurred in the West End neighborhood of Atlanta, Ga. A deputy sheriff fell to the ground, fatally wounded.

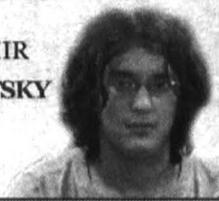
On March 14, 2001, Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin was sentenced to life in prison after being convicted of firing the deadly bullet.

The verdict evoked little surprise from the public. After all, this is a nation where 1.815 out of every 100,000 African-Americans are behind bars, according to the Foundation for National Progress, and the incarceration of yet another African-American is unlikely to affect an audience as desensitized to injustice as ourselves.

The trial itself was riddled with inconsistencies that would have likely exonerated Al-Amin had his defense not rested after just two days of testimony. However, his conviction was not solely a product of shoddy defense. It was the direct consequence of something that, in this country, is even more reviled than murder: the refusal to surrender one's beliefs.

His crime, in a sense, was being alive. You see, in the 1960s, Al-Amin was known as H. Rap Brown, a black power activist known for fiery speeches at a time when being an activist could cost you your life. Back in those days, J. Edgar Hoover was instructing those under his command to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize...black nationalist hate type organizations [sic], their leadership, spokesmen,

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membership and supporters." In Hoover's words, "...to be a black revolutionary is to be a dead revolutionary." The program actively disrupted the lives and work of such noted activists as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, both of whom were eventually gunned down. While the program — known by its infamous acronym COINTELPRO — was eventually ended, its effects were felt for decades afterwards, as Brown discovered the hard way.

In 1971, H. Rap Brown emerged from prison a changed man, with a different faith (Islam) and a different name (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin). Perhaps he didn't realize that being a Muslim, especially an African-American Muslim, in a nation where the words "bombing" and "Muslims" would later be made synonymous by an ignorant media, was akin to painting a bull's-eye on one's back. Since his conversion, he encountered repeated incidents of injustice at the hands of the government, an example of which occurred in 1993, when "immediately after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Imam Al-Amin was arbitrarily hauled in, interrogated and released under heavy and continuous surveillance, all in the absence of any evidence at all con-

necting him to the bombing — at least none the authorities cared to disclose," according to "H. Rap Brown/Jamil Al-Amin: A Profoundly American Story," as seen on The Nation, March 18, 2002. In the end, Al-Amin was unable to escape the forces that just wouldn't forgive him for being who he is — and who he used to be.

What can we learn from this? Well, we can learn that even today, being anything other than white and Christian is a crime. We can also learn that those who choose to walk the path of justice often encounter the fury of a policeman's baton, the butt of his gun, a bullet — or, in the case of Al-Amin, a prison cell. In a nation as intolerant as ours, some beliefs are (still) more free than others.

Yet the unceasing expression of our belief in justice is what will save us. Injustice is an unconscious reflex rather than a conscious conspiracy (as some maintain), but it is a reflex that does not discriminate, sweeping up the just and the guilty alike — which means none of us are safe from it. Despite the obstacles in our way, it is up to us to ensure that the fate of Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin doesn't eventually become our own. This calls for the courage to live our beliefs — even when forces greater than ourselves attempt to beat us into submission.

Vladimir Skaletsky is a sophomore political science major.