

Former MA Governor Michael Dukakis Calls on President Obama to Exonerate Ethel Rosenberg

On July 19, 1977, as Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I issued a proclamation stating that “any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from the names of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, from the names of their families and descendants, and so, from the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; and I hereby call upon all the people of Massachusetts to pause in their daily endeavors to reflect upon these tragic events, and draw from their historic lessons the resolve to prevent the forces of intolerance, fear, and hatred from ever again uniting to overcome the rationality, wisdom, and fairness to which our legal system aspires.”

I took this unprecedented step because “the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti should serve to remind all civilized people of the constant need to guard against our susceptibility to prejudice, our intolerance of unorthodox ideas, and our failure to defend the rights of persons who are looked upon as strangers in our midst.”

Today, I urge President Obama to take similar action; heed the request of Robert and Michael Meeropol, the sons Ethel Rosenberg; acknowledge that Ethel’s conviction was unjust and her execution was wrongful; and issue an appropriate Presidential proclamation to that effect.

Ethel’s execution occurred amidst a climate of intense national fear that cost countless individuals their reputations, livelihoods, and in the case of Ethel Rosenberg, her life itself.

An enormous body of evidence - including U.S. government files, grand jury testimony, and other third-party sources - demonstrates that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy, and that the government knew this at the time of her trial and execution. The charges against Ethel and the threat of the death penalty were meant to intimidate her and use her, in the government’s own words, as “a lever” to force her husband to cooperate with the prosecution.

The Rosenberg case provides a compelling lesson about the denial of justice and due process in times of hysteria, and the abuse of government power against politically unpopular groups – a lesson that remains alarmingly relevant today, with Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and racism still infecting our criminal justice system, electoral politics, and public policy.

A presidential proclamation or other action making this connection would not just provide a measure of justice for Ethel Rosenberg and her family, but would make this important political point at a particularly crucial moment in our history. At a time when there is discussion of using the internment of Japanese-American citizens as a model for a national Muslim registry¹; and when “watchlists” of “academic”² and “political enemies”³ are being publicly touted, the echoes of the McCarthy era are unmistakable, and the dangers of allowing these sentiments to go unchallenged and unchecked are grave.

It is for all these reasons that I join Congressman Jim McGovern (2nd District, MA) and nearly 45,000 other people who have signed a petition in support of Michael and Robert Meeropol’s request. I urge President Obama to act in the interest of justice by exonerating Ethel Rosenberg.

-Michael Dukakis, December 9, 2016

¹ “Japanese American internment is ‘precedent’ for national Muslim registry, prominent Trump backer says.” Washington Post, November 17, 2016: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/17/japanese-internment-is- precedent-for-national-muslim- registry-prominent- trump-backer- says/?utm_term=.771dd06a20ea

² “Professors Targeted by Conservative Watchlist Fire Back: ‘It’s Obviously an Attempt to Silence People.’” Time Magazine, December 1, 2016: <http://time.com/4588165/professor-watchlist- silence-conservative>

³ “Omarosa: Trump campaign keeping 'list' of enemies.” CNN, November 9, 2016: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/omarosa-list- donald-trump/>