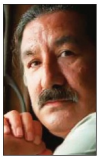

Over the years, individuals and groups have emerged and faded in efforts to persuade the U.S. justice system to parole or grant amnesty to Leonard Peltier, convicted of the deaths of two FBI agents, Jack Coler and Ron Williams, in South Dakota in 1975.

Peltier, now 68, has been in prison for 35 years. Since 1977, petitions and pleas on his behalf have been ignored; appeals by the Arhbshiop of Canterbury, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, 55 U.S. Congressmen, and Canadian Parliamentarians, and members of the European Parliament Union.

For six consecutive years, Peltier has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, and is the recipient of over a dozen international human rights awards -- all because of the apparent injustice done to him.

The FBI and retired FBI agents have adamantly opposed anything resembling clemency for Peltier, even though his trial and conviction stunk like rotting fish, based as it was on fabricated evidence and perjury -- since admitted by many involved in his conviction. He's due for release around 2040, when he will be 106 years old.

The closest Peltier came to getting executive clemency was from Bill Clinton, but FBI opposition dissuaded Clinton, who had his own troubles at the time, especially with Monica Lewinsky. Clinton reneged on a previous commitment to Peltier's defense team.

Today, Peltier is in failing health; time is running out for possible freedom.

This year a new champion has emerged to urge executive clemency -- a group that is harder to ignore politically, but which the FBI association will oppose.

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) represents all tribes across the U.S. and Alaska -- including the American Indian Movement (AIM) to which Peltier once belonged, and which was once a more radical rival to the NCAI.

Under the signature of its president, Jefferson Keel, the NCAI resolution notes that "appellate courts have repeatedly acknowledged evidence of U.S. government misconduct -- including knowingly presenting false statements to a Canadian court to extradite Mr. Peltier...forcing witnesses to lie at trial, and hiding ballistic evidence reflecting Mr. Peltier's innocence..."

Further: "The United States prosecutor [Lynn Crooks]" twice admitted that "no one knows who fired the fatal shots." And an appeal court judge, Gerald Heaney, wrote the president urging amnesty as a gesture to restore decent relations with Indians.

The NCAI has requested a meeting with President Barack Obama to "secure a grant of Executive Clemency to Leonard Peltier on constitutional, and overriding human rights and compassionate grounds."

America's Indians have psychological power in the U.S., if not political influence. When the two FBI agents were killed in 1975 on the Pine Ridge Reservation, it was a time of political turmoil with the Indians. The FBI erroneously branded AIM as a Soviet-backed communist subversive group when, in fact, it was an Indian-rights group.

During the Pine Ridge troubles, 60 Indians were murdered -- with no arrests or convictions made by the FBI. Paramilitary groups ran amok. The same day Coler and Williams were shot, another Indian, Joe Stuntz, was shot and killed -- again, no FBI investigation.

At Peltier's extradition from Canada, Myrtle Poor Bear testified she witnessed Peltier shooting the argents when, in fact, she was nowhere near Pine Ridge and had never met Peltier. The FBI wrote her script -- and at Peltier's trial, the defense was denied the chance to cross examine her, by which time she had recanted, and was deemed mentally incapable.

Not generally realized is that despite declining crime rates, the U.S. prison population is said to have grown six-fold. The number of older prisoners is growing at a faster rate than the total federal prison population. Between 2000 and 2009 the number of prisoners over age 51 grew from 14,275 to 25,160 -- a 76 per cent increase.

With age comes increased medical problems -- with no increase in the budget to address these problems. So by necessity, aging prisoners get sub-standard care.

As for Peltier, he's in failing health, has been for years. He's endured a stroke which left him nearly blind in one eye. He's had a serious debilitating jaw condition for years, that leaves him unable to chew. An offer of free corrective surgery by the Mayo clinic was rejected by prison authorities.

In addition, Peltier has diabetes, high blood pressure and a heart condition. He is susceptible to kidney failure. Yet repeatedly, he's been denied adequate medical care. This has earned the U.S. a rebuke from the UN for inhuman conditions.

It is undeniable that the FBI want Peltier to die in prison -- not necessarily because they believe he is guilty of murdering two agents, but because they want someone, anyone, identified as responsible for the deaths of two agents.

Often forgotten is that two Indians initially charged and put on trial for the murder of the two FBI agents -- Bob Robideau (since deceased) and Dino Butler -- were found not guilty, but acting in self-defense. The FBI made sure Peltier was denied any defence.

I visited him three time when he was in Leavenworth. I had initially written editorials in the Sun supporting the FBI, until deeper examination of the case revealed their deceit.

When I first met Peltier, I confessed that I had supported the FBI, not wanting him to be under any misconception. I was startled when he laughed: "My own mother believed the FBI would never lie, so how can I blame you for believing them?"

We got on fine after that. Being a model prisoner was no help. He was constantly harassed. I recall at one meeting in prison he was agitated because he'd been sharing a cell with a recently admitted inmate, whom he found to be pleasant fellow -- and then discovered he was a serial killer. Peltier was genuinely shocked that he'd have to share a cell with someone who was a dangerous criminal.

It reinforced the view that whatever Leonard Peltier was, or might have been, he was not a criminal, not a murderer, but an activist for Indian welfare and rights who got caught up in the politics of the times and has been a scapegoat ever since.

Peltier does not belong in prison -- never did, because all evidence against him was tainted, corrupted, falsified, invented, fabricated on non-existent claims.

That's the way it is with scapegoats. The Leonard Peltier Defense Offense Committee has since moved from Kansas and Missouri when he was in Leavenworth, to Fargo, North Dakota. Those interested can check www.whoisleonardpeltier.info.