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**Attention, MOVE: This is America!
- At the 24th anniversary of the May 13 massacre,
MOVE organizes for 2009 Parole Hearings
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"Attention, MOVE: This Is America! You must abide by the laws of the United States!" Philadelphia Police Commissioner Sambor declared through a loudspeaker, minutes before the May 13, 1985 police assault on the revolutionary MOVE organization's home. This assault killed 5 children and 6 adults, including MOVE founder John Africa. That morning police shot over 10,000 rounds of bullets into their West Philadelphia home, and detonated explosives on the front, and both sides of their house. Following an afternoon standstill, a State Police helicopter dropped a C-4 bomb, illegally supplied by the FBI, on MOVE's roof. The bomb started a fire that eventually destroyed 60 homes: the entire block of a middle-class black neighborhood. 13-year old Birdie Africa and 30-year old Ramona Africa were the only survivors, after they dodged police gunfire and escaped from the fire with permanent burn scars. ([watch video](#))

Today, Ramona recalls being in the basement with the children when the assault began. "Water started pouring in from the hoses. Then the tear gas came after explosives blew the whole front of the house off. After hearing a lot of gunfire, things became pretty quiet. It was then that they dropped the bomb without any warning."

"At first, those of us in the basement didn't realize that the house was on fire because there was so much tear gas that it was hard to recognize smoke. We opened the door and started to yell that we were coming out with the kids. The kids were hollering too. We know they heard us but the instant we were visible in the doorway, they opened fire. You could hear the bullets hitting all around the garage area. They deliberately took aim and shot at us. Anybody can see that their aim, very simply, was to kill MOVE people—not to arrest anybody."

After surviving the bombing, Ramona was charged with conspiracy, riot, and multiple counts of simple and aggravated assault. Her sentence was 16 months to 7 years, but she served the full 7 years when she was denied parole for not renouncing MOVE. In

court, all charges listed on the May 11 arrest warrant, used to justify the assault, were dismissed by the judge. Says Ramona, "This means that they had no valid reason to even be out there, but they did not dismiss the charges placed on me as a result of what happened after they came out."

Concluding Ramona's 1986 trial, Judge Stiles explicitly told the jurors not to consider any wrongdoing by police and other government officials, because they would be held accountable in "other" proceedings. This would never happen, as Ramona explains: "not one single official, police officer, or anybody else has ever been held accountable for the murder of my family."

"People should not be fooled by this government using words like 'justice.' My family members, who were parents of most of those children that were murdered on May 13, have been in prison for almost 30 years to this day, for the accusation of a murder that they didn't commit, that nobody saw them commit. Meanwhile, the people who murdered their babies are still collecting paychecks, still seen as respectable, and never did a day in jail."

Origins of the Confrontation

The 1985 police bombing was the culmination of many years of political repression by Philadelphia authorities. Much has already been written about the events of May 13, 1985, but less is told of the "MOVE 9": Janine, Debbie, Janet, Merle, Delbert, Mike, Phil, Eddie, and Chuck Africa. These nine MOVE members were jointly sentenced in the 1978 killing of Officer James Ramp after a year-long police stakeout of MOVE's Powelton Village home. Their parole hearings come up in 2008. Ramona Africa explains, "The government came out to Powelton Village in 1978 not to arrest, but to kill. Having failed to do that, my family was unjustly convicted of a murder that the government knows they didn't commit, and imprisoned them with 30-100 year sentences. Later, when we as a family dared to speak up against this, they came out to our home again and dropped a bomb on us, burned babies alive."

First, some history:

Founded in the early 70's by John Africa, MOVE sought to expose and challenge all injustice and abuse of all forms of life, including animals and nature. Along with neighborhood activism, MOVE also organized nonviolent protests at zoos, animal testing facilities, public forums, corporate media outlets, and other places.

MOVE's first conflicts with police began at these nonviolent protests when Mayor Frank Rizzo's police reacted in their typical brutal fashion. From the very beginning, MOVE acted on the principle of self-defense and "met fist with fist." Defending this today, Ramona Africa explains "I'm sure the police were outraged that these 'niggers' had stood up to them, telling them that they couldn't come and beat on our men, women, and babies without us defending themselves. What are people supposed to do? Sit back and take that shit?"

Given Rizzo's iron-fist rule, confrontation with MOVE was inevitable. Infamous for his racist brutality as Police Commissioner from 1968-71, Rizzo once publicly boasted that his police force would be so repressive that he'd "make Attila the Hun look like a faggot." He was elected mayor in 1972 and by 1979, his police force was indicted by the federal government, when the Justice Dept, for the first time ever, brought suit against civil authorities--not just police officials. The suit named Rizzo and 20 other top city officials (inclusive of police command) for aiding and abetting police brutality.

Police attacks on MOVE escalated on May 9, 1974 when two pregnant MOVE women, Janet and Leasing, miscarried after being beaten by police and jailed overnight without food or water. On April 29, 1975, Alberta Africa lost her baby after she was arrested, dragged from a holding cell, held down, and beaten in the stomach and vagina.

On the night of March 18, 1976, seven MOVE prisoners had just been released and were greeting their family in front of their Powelton Village home in West Philadelphia, when police arrived and set upon the crowd. Six MOVE men were arrested and beaten so badly that they suffered fractured skulls, concussions and chipped bones. Janine Africa was thrown to the ground and stomped on while holding her 3-week old Life Africa. The baby's skull was crushed and Life was dead.

After MOVE notified the media of the attack and baby's death, the police publicly claimed that because there was no birth certificate, there was no baby and that MOVE was lying. In response, MOVE invited journalists and political figures to their home to view the corpse. Shortly after the attack, renowned Philadelphia journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal (now on death row) interviewed an eyewitness who had watched from a window directly across the street. "I saw that baby fall," the old man said. "They were clubbing the mother. I knew the baby was going to get hurt. I even reached for the phone to call the police, before I realized that it was the police. You know what I mean?" The District Attorney's office declined to prosecute the murder.

The Standoff Begins

In response to the escalated police violence, MOVE staged a major demonstration on May 20, 1977. They took to a large platform in front of their house, with several members holding what appeared to be rifles. MOVE explains that: "We told the cops there wasn't gonna be any more undercover deaths. This time they better be prepared to murder us in full public view 'cause if they came at us with fists, we were gonna come back at them with fists. If they came at us with clubs, we'd come back at them with clubs, and if they came at us with guns, we'd use guns too. We don't believe in death-dealing guns. We believe in life, but we knew the cops wouldn't be too quick to attack us if they had to face the same stuff they dished out so casually on unarmed defenseless folk."

Speaking through megaphones on the platform, MOVE demanded a release of their political prisoners and an end to violent harassment from the city. Heavily armed police surrounded the house, and a likely police attack was averted when a crowd from the community broke through the police line and stood in front of MOVE's home to shield the residents from gunfire.

Days later, Judge Lynn Abraham responded by issuing warrants for 11 MOVE members on riot charges and "possession of an instrument of crime." Police then set up a 24-hour watch around MOVE's house to arrest members leaving the property, a standoff that lasted for almost a year.

Mayor Rizzo escalated the conflict on March 16, 1978, when police sealed off a four-block perimeter around MOVE headquarters, blocking food and shutting of the water supply. Rizzo boasted the blockade "was so tight, a fly couldn't get through." Numerous community residents were beaten and arrested when they attempted to deliver food and water to the pregnant women, nursing babies, and children inside.

After the two-month starvation blockade, MOVE and the City came to a disputed agreement under pressure from the federal government and a very sophisticated

campaign mounted by a Philly-based community coalition. On May 8, 1978, MOVE prisoners were released, and the police searched MOVE's house for weapons. Police were shocked to find only inoperable dummy firearms and road flares made to look like dynamite. In the agreement, the DA agreed to drop all charges against MOVE and effectively purge MOVE from the court system within 4-6 weeks. In return, MOVE would move out of their home within a 90-day period, while the city assisted them in finding a new location.

After searching the MOVE home and finding only inoperable dummy weapons, police began to modify terms of the agreement, focusing on the alleged 90-day "deadline," for MOVE to leave their home. MOVE says that the 90-day time period had been described to them as "a workable timetable for us to relocate," but "was misrepresented to the media as an absolute deadline. MOVE made it clear to officials that we'd move to other houses but we were keeping our headquarters open as a school."

At an August 2, 1978 hearing, Judge Fred DiBona ruled that MOVE had violated the deadline and signed arrest warrants that would justify the police siege the following week.

The morning of August 8, hundreds of riot police moved in, bulldozers toppled their fence & outdoor platform, and cranes smashed their home's windows. Forty-five armed police searched the house and found that MOVE was barricaded in the basement. Police began to flood them out with high-pressure hoses.

Suddenly gunshots fired, likely from a house across the street. Police opened fire on MOVE's house—using over 1,000 rounds of ammunition. The police and most of the mainstream media would later report that MOVE had fired these first shots. However, KYW Radio reporters John McCullough and Larry Rosen both recalled hearing the first shot come from a house diagonally across the street, where they saw an arm holding a gun out of a third floor window.

The subsequent gunfire was chaotic and mostly directed at the flooded basement. Officer James Ramp was fatally wounded in the melee. Three other policemen and several firemen were also hit. A stake-out officer admitted later, under oath, that he had emptied his carbine shooting into the basement, where he heard screaming women and crying children. At a staff meeting days later, a police captain noted "an excessive amount of unnecessary firing on the part of police personnel when there were no targets per se to shoot at."

When MOVE eventually surrendered and came out of the house, their children were taken and the adults were viciously beaten. Chuck and Mike Africa had been shot in the basement. Live television documented the violent arrest of Delbert Africa. He was smashed in the head with a rifle butt and metal helmet. While on the ground, he was brutally stomped. Twelve MOVE adults were arrested.

At a press conference that afternoon, asked whether this was the last Philadelphia would see of MOVE, Rizzo proclaimed "the only way we're going to end them is, get that death penalty back, put them in the electric chair, and I'll pull the switch."

Destruction of Evidence

The subsequent case against the "MOVE 9," was plagued by factual inconsistencies and illegal police manipulation of evidence. In a recent [interview with the author](#), Temple University professor and Philadelphia journalist Linn Washington elaborated on what he said in the 2004 documentary [MOVE](#), narrated by Howard Zinn, that "the police

department knows who killed Officer Ramp. It was another police officer, who inadvertently shot the guy. They have fairly substantial evidence that it was a mistake, but again they'll never admit it. I got this from a number of different sources in the police department, including sources on the SWAT team and sources in ballistics."

Manipulation of evidence began immediately after the MOVE adults were arrested and Mayor Rizzo ordered the police to bulldoze MOVE's home by 1:30pm that day. Police did nothing to preserve the crime scene, inscribe chalk marks, or measure ballistics angles. A few days before, a Philadelphia judge had signed an order barring the city from destroying the house, but this order was explicitly violated. In a preliminary hearing on a Motion to Dismiss, MOVE unsuccessfully argued that destroying their home had prevented them from proving that it was physically impossible for MOVE to have shot Ramp. MOVE cited [the case of Illinois Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark](#) where the preservation of the crime scene enabled investigators to prove that all the bullet holes in the walls and doors were the result of police gunfire.

The photographic evidence presented in court was also incomplete. Before demolishing MOVE's house, police did take photos of empty shelves and claimed they had been used to store their guns. However, there were no photos of MOVE pointing or shooting guns from the basement windows, of police removing weapons from the house, or supporting the claim that police removed guns from the mud of the basement floor. To the contrary, a police video viewed in court actually shows then police commissioner Joseph O'Neill passing guns into MOVE's front basement window.

Strongly suggesting the deliberate destruction of evidence, police video footage was also blanked out at the point where Ramp was shot on all three police videotapes presented in court.

Ballistics evidence presented about Officer Ramp's death is also inconsistent. In the documentary film MOVE, Linn Washington recalls the treatment of evidence at the trial. "They had a big problem with the authenticity and thus the validity of the medical examiner's report. The prosecutor took out a pencil and erased items in the report that he didn't like. Now MOVE was objecting and the judge was saying 'sit down and shut up' and allowed the guy to do that."

On Aug.8, The Philadelphia Bulletin reported that Ramp had been "shot in the back of the head according to the police log." The next day, the Daily News instead reported that the bullet head entered his throat at a downward trajectory in the direction towards his heart. Later, in court, the prosecution's medical examiner, Dr. Marvin Aronson testified that the bullet entered his "chest from in front and coursed horizontally without deviation up or down."

In a recent newsletter, MOVE argues that if they had shot from the basement, the bullet would have been coming at an "upward" trajectory instead of the "horizontal" and "downward" accounts that had been presented. This crucial point aside, it would have been essentially impossible to take a clean shot at that time. The water in the basement, estimated more than 7 feet deep, forced the adults to hold up children and animals to prevent them from drowning. "The water pressure was so powerful it was picking up 6 foot long railroad ties (beams that were part of our fence) and throwing them through the basement windows in on us. There's no way anybody could have stood up against this type of water pressure, debris, and shoot a gun, or aim to kill somebody."

On May 4, 1980, Janine, Debbie, Janet, Merle, Delbert, Mike, Phil, Eddie, and Chuck Africa were convicted of 3rd degree murder, conspiracy, and multiple counts of

attempted murder and aggravated assault. Each was given a sentence of 30-100 years. Two other people denounced MOVE and were released. Consuela Africa was tried separately because the prosecutor found no evidence that she was a MOVE member.

Mumia Abu-Jamal writes that the MOVE 9 "were convicted of being united, not in crime, but in rebellion against the system and in resistance to the armed assaults of the state. They were convicted of being MOVE members."

When Judge Malmed was a guest a few days later on a talk radio show, Abu-Jamal called in and asked him who killed Ramp. The Judge admitted, "I have absolutely no idea" and explained that since MOVE called itself a family, he sentenced them as such.

The 2009 Parole Hearing

Mike Africa, Jr. wants his parents to come home. The son of MOVE 9 prisoners Mike and Debbie, Mike Jr. was born in prison just weeks after his mother withstood police gunfire and a vicious beating on Aug. 8, 1978. Today, Mike Jr. explains that growing up without parents is "very hard. It's like missing part of yourself. The system separated MOVE people like they did because they know it's hard to deal with being separated from your family."

After the May 13, 1985 bombing, Mike Jr's grandmother decided to leave MOVE, and brought him and his sister with her. "Not being in MOVE and not having parents was especially hard because I didn't understand why my parents were in prison I was ashamed. It was never really explained to me until Ramona brought me back to MOVE following her 1992 release." Since returning to MOVE, Mike Jr. has traveled around the world publicizing the struggle to release his parents and the other MOVE 9 prisoners.

MOVE 9 member Merle Africa tragically died behind bars in 1998 under circumstances MOVE feels were suspicious. 2008 marked the 30th year of the remaining eight's imprisonment, and they were all eligible for parole for the first time. Supporters mobilized for the parole hearings and initiated an [online video series](#), [online petition](#), and a [telephone & letter campaign](#) contacting the parole board. Despite this pressure, all eight were [denied parole](#), even though the women never even faced weapons charges.

With the 2009 parole hearings now underway, MOVE and supporters are [organizing for their release](#) by contacting the parole board and organizing demonstrations in Philadelphia marking the 24th anniversary of the May 13, 1985 massacre.

[Ramona Africa](#) is particularly concerned about the parole board utilizing two possible clauses that were implemented to deny parole in 2008.

First is the "taking responsibility" clause, which basically demands a prisoner admit guilt in order to be granted parole. "That is not acceptable, because it is patently illegal. If a person was convicted in court, to then demand that they admit guilt -- even when they are maintaining their innocence, as the MOVE 9 are -- is ridiculous. The only issue for parole should be issues of misconduct in prison that could indicate one's not ready for parole. Other than that, an inmate should be paroled," explains Ramona.

Second is the "serious nature of offense" clause. "This is patently illegal too because the judge took this into consideration and when the sentence was issued, it meant that barring any misconduct, problems, new charges, etc. this prisoner was to be released on their minimum. To deny that is basically a re-sentence. We're dealing with these issues because when our family comes up for parole, we don't want to hear this

nonsense.”

Ramona also urges to people to support [Mumia Abu-Jamal](#), who was [just denied](#) a new guilt-phase trial by the US Supreme Court, and supporters are urging President Obama and Attorney General Holder to [initiate a civil-rights investigation](#). “This brother’s life is on the line here. He became a target of the government because he was the only journalist that consistently reported on the truth about what was going on with MOVE. Mumia gave us his support uncompromisingly throughout the years and that is why we give him our support and loyalty now.”

Mumia Abu-Jamal writes today, “The muted public response to the mass murder of MOVE members has set the stage for acceptable state violence against radicals, against blacks, and against all deemed socially unacceptable. ... The twisted mentalities at work here are akin to those of Nazi Germany, or perhaps more appropriately, of My Lai, of Vietnam, of Baghdad, the spirit behind the mindlessly murderous mantra that echoed out of Da Nang: ‘We had to destroy the village in order to save it.’ ”

Over the years, MOVE has never been left in peace. The 1978 and 1985 police destruction of MOVE’s homes; the arrest and capital sentence of reporter Mumia Abu-Jamal, who covered the MOVE conflicts; the 1998 death of Merle Africa in prison; and the 2002 custody battle over Zachary Gilbride Africa are only a few examples of MOVE’s long history of confronting the system. This tradition is best summed up by MOVE founder John Africa in his 1981 speech to the jury before he was acquitted of federal weapons charges in the famous criminal trial, “John Africa vs. The System”:

“It is past time for all poor people to release themselves from the deceptive strangulation of society...This system has failed you yesterday, failed you today, and has created conditions for failure tomorrow, for society is wrong, the system is reeling, the courts of this complex are filled with imbalance. Cops are insane, the judges enslaving, the lawyers are just as the judges they confront. ... trained by the system to be as the system, to do for the system, exploit with the system, and MOVE ain’t gonna close our eyes to this monster.”

--For more information, please visit www.onamove.com or www.move9parole.blogspot.com

--Watch the 2008 [MOVE 9 Parole Video Series](#) featuring interviews with Mike and Ramona Africa, [Confrontation in Philadelphia](#), and the 2004 film [MOVE](#), narrated by Howard Zinn.


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