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SPORT

Thursday, May 11, 2000

Truth is swept aside by Hurricane

By George Kimball

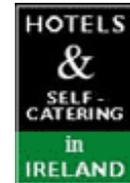
AMERICA AT LARGE: Just when you think you've heard the last of Rubin Carter, he goes out and reinvents himself again. This time around the ex-pug known as "The Hurricane" is apparently trying to cast himself as the black Forrest Gump.

In his latest version of his life story, Carter helped shape history as he crossed paths with virtually every important historical figure of the early 1960s. Martin Luther King. Malcolm X. Steve Biko.

Hounded at every turn by FBI director J Edgar Hoover himself, who "targeted (Carter) for destruction just like the Kennedys, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr and countless other political activists", Carter nonetheless managed a second career on the side, that of smuggling guns to Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress.

As preposterous as these claims might be, all of them appeared, unchallenged, in print this week following a public appearance by Carter in Kansas City. After a lecture-cum-book signing for the most recent version of his "autobiography", Carter invited Kansas City Star columnist Jayson Whitlock up to his hotel suite, where he spun this revision of history. And here's the worst part of it all: Whitlock fell for it - hook, line and sinker.

In the six weeks since the Academy Awards, everyone from



actor Denzel Washington to producer Norman Jewison to Carter himself has blamed, with some justification, the media backlash against the half-truths and fabrications implicit in the cinematic version of *The Hurricane* for the film's (and Washington's) failure to garner an Oscar. Many academy members apparently felt that a vote for the movie, or for Washington's portrayal, would represent an endorsement of its flawed historical perspective.

In any case, Carter has apparently reassessed his position and hit the road with his latest version of his life story.

When one reads a newspaper account of Carter which includes the phrase "wrongfully accused and convicted twice for murders he did not commit", alarm bells ought to go off right away. Rubin Carter might claim he did not kill three people in a Paterson, New Jersey, saloon back in 1965, but people familiar with the particulars of the case believe he did - and that includes the descendants of the victims.

Moreover, Whitlock was toying with the sensibilities of his readers when he wrote that "Carter spent two decades in New Jersey state penitentiaries before his convictions were overturned and he was released in 1985".

It goes beyond mere semantic quibbling to point out that Carter's conviction was never "overturned", but, rather, set aside. There's a big difference. As we have previously taken pains to point out, the prosecution indisputably cut some corners in their efforts to convict him, resulting in a trial that by no standard could have been labelled fair; but not even the federal judge who ordered Carter's release claimed he wasn't guilty of the 1965 crime.

Conveniently overlooked is the fact that Carter would never have been tried a second time had he not rejected a prosecution deal following his first release. After Bob Dylan, et al, managed to secure his release in 1976, New Jersey prosecutors offered to drop the charges if Carter took and passed a lie detector test. He refused. Significantly, Al Bello, the eyewitness who placed Carter at the scene of the murders, did pass a polygraph test.

IN real life, Rubin Carter was a middling middleweight (he won just seven of his last 15 fights), a small-time street criminal and stick-up artist who eventually graduated to multiple homicide, yet Whitlock proclaims his "remarkable journey from exalted boxer to convicted triple murderer to global freedom fighter" without evincing so much as a trace of embarrassment.

"His class and graciousness amazed me," gushed the newsman.




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government" engaged in a systematic persecution that resulted in his eventual imprisonment.

"The FBI followed me everywhere I went," claimed Carter. Strange, isn't it, that his lengthy rap sheet contains not a single federal arrest or conviction. His last transgression preceding the murders was for a street mugging.

Although Carter did have one fight in Transvaal, in 1965, there is no evidence that he ever met Biko, who would have been 18 years old at the time - and don't you suppose that if he had, that little historical titbit would have wound up in the film version of The Hurricane?

Equally ludicrous is Carter's claim that he was actively engaged in smuggling guns to the ANC, although perhaps that would explain the live .32 calibre bullet and shotgun shells - both precisely matching the weapons used in the Paterson killings - found in Carter's car literally minutes after the murders. Presumably the ammunition rolling around under the seat that night was on its way to Nelson Mandela.

Like the Kennedys and J Edgar Hoover, Biko, Malcolm, and Martin Luther King are all conveniently dead and in no better position to dispute Carter's claims than are the decedents in the Lafayette Grille on the night in question.

It strains all credulity that Carter would be making these claims now, and even more outrageous that Jayson Whitlock would so naively represent them as factual, but the real culprit, it seems to us, is the Kansas City Star, the newspaper which willingly printed this fanciful claptrap. Isn't there an ombudsman in the house?

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