

Section 16

Letters to the President from...

16. Concerned scholars
 - 16.1. Dr. J. Gordon Melton, Institute for the Study of American Religion
 - 16.2. Dr. John R. Hall, Univ. of California at Davis
 - 16.3. Rev. Dr. Mary Maaga, Sergeantsville United Methodist Church
 - 16.4. Dr. Mary Sawyer, Iowa State University
 - 16.5. Dr. Timothy Miller, University of Kansas
 - 16.6. Dr. Catherine Wessinger, Loyola University, New Orleans
 - 16.7. Dr. Robert Ellwood, University of Southern California
 - ✓ 16.8. Fran Peavey, Radcliffe College
 - ✓ 16.9. John Hanrahan, Private Investigator
 - 16.10. Dr. Thomas Robbins, Ph.D.
 - ✓ 16.11. Wilburn L. Brown, former Assessor, Mendocino County, CA

These letters supporting Larry's commutation petition come from scholars who have personal experience with Peoples Temple, who study cults and religious movements, or who know of the case through their association with former Temple members or their families. Several express the belief that Larry is being punished more for the sins of others than for his own. All hold that the Jonestown saga should now be ended with Larry's release.

The Institute for the Study of American Religion

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J. Gordon Melton, Director

January 30, 1997

President William J. Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As the director of the Institute for American Religion, I have monitored religious groups for the last quarter century. In that capacity, I followed the rise and fall of the Peoples Temple and have actively taken a role in the debates concerning its significance. On a more personal level, I have continued a concern with the plight of those most affected by the tragedy that brought it to an end. During the legal proceedings in the years after Congressman Ryan's death, I met Deborah Layton and was initially introduced to the personal trauma that she and her family were going through.

This appeal on behalf of Mr. Larry Layton, currently a resident of the Federal Correctional Institute, is written in the spirit of healing between those whose life trajectory goes back into the temple and those caught up in its violence as outsiders. I urge you to use your executive powers to grant him clemency. It is my firm conviction that Mr. Layton was a relative minor person caught up in the events leading to Congressman Ryan's death and that he has more than paid his debt both to society and the family of those who died. I am among those who feel that the Parole Commission who reviewed his case should have followed the recommendation of the judge in the case and granted him parole after his serving five years.

You are aware of the schism in the land following the Vietnam War. The people whose lives were touched (both directly and indirectly) by the deaths at Jonestown have lived with a similar division on a smaller scale. However, in my opinion, most involved in the rather emotional debates about Jonestown over the past years are now in agreement on at least one point—that Mr. Layton should no longer personally bear the burden for the Jonestown deaths through continued incarceration.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Respectfully



J. Gordon Melton, Ph.D.

The International Religions Directory Project
The Encyclopedia of American Religions

January 20, 1997

President Bill Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: executive clemency for Larry Layton

Dear President Clinton:

I write to urge you to give serious consideration to granting Larry Layton executive clemency, so that he may be released from prison, and go on to make something of the time in life that he still has left.

I am a sociologist of religion who has done primary research on religious sects that have ended up in confrontations with the State, including both Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians. I authored what is almost certainly the most detailed historical scholarly monograph on the Jonestown tragedy, Gone From the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History (Transaction Books, 1987). Thus, I know the history of Peoples Temple and the murders and mass suicide all too well. I have come to my support of clemency not only on the basis of the historical facts of the case, but also on grounds of equal justice under the law, and a moral and humanitarian concern that prison serve the purposes of society, rather than simply be an instrument of vengeance. On all three grounds separately and together, I have concluded that Larry Layton ought to be released from prison at the earliest practicable date.

First, let me be quite clear: I do not believe that people who commit crimes under any kind of "religious" auspices should be treated any differently from other people who commit crimes. Larry Layton shot and wounded two people (albeit in the jurisdiction of Guyana, not the United States), and this was a criminal act that deserves punishment. However, the principle of equity cuts both ways, since it means that "religious" crimes should not be punished any *more* severely than equivalent crimes. Larry Layton, it seems evident to me, was not tried strictly for his own specific acts, but for the broader debacle that resulted in the murder of Congressman Ryan, when those directly responsible for that act were already dead, and thus, beyond the reach of the law. Layton already has been in prison, in both Guyana and the U.S., for approximately fourteen years, including a period of solitary confinement in Guyana. I would be very surprised if, by principles of equal protection under the law, he had not served considerably more time than the average person in the U.S. convicted of such a crime.

Second, it seems evident that Larry Layton has come to regret his actions deeply. He was always a religiously sensitive person with a social conscience, and I am informed that he has continued to develop spiritually and in his social testament while in prison. In short, not only is he absolutely no threat to society, to the contrary, we may reasonably expect that this man, who made a profound mistake in his life, will have something to contribute to society. For humanitarian reasons and in the name of God, I believe that no societal purpose is served by further incarceration, and that, to the contrary, if incarceration is not to become an abuse of state power, true rehabilitation after a lengthy sentence has been served should be recognized as a reasonable basis for release.

Third, there are the matters of historical detail and scholarly analysis. I already have alluded to Layton's special status as a survivor, when because other perpetrators were dead, they could not be subjected to the rule of law. In a specifically sociological sense of the term, it seems to me that Mr. Layton became a scapegoat. He was tried not only for his own acts, but forced to bear the burden of the acts of others. Frankly, I do not know what Larry Layton thought he was doing or why he thought he was doing it when he shot and wounded two people. I do know that his mother had died of cancer only days before he committed the crime, and it is not unreasonable to believe that he was in a state of extreme bereavement and unstable emotionality when he fired the shots. These conditions do not excuse his acts, but they do need to be taken into account as conditions that might easily influenced his capacity to act rationally, and led him into a course of action that he might not otherwise have taken. In the context of his remorse, they suggest that his actions were an aberration, not the core nature of Larry Layton as a person.

I do not suggest that the granting of executive clemency in this case is anything to be undertaken casually. I have considered the matter carefully, with no prejudice one way or the other when I began, and I have reached the conclusion that I support clemency, and I hope that you will find the courage, the spirit and the humanity to use the power of the Presidency for a positive good, by granting executive clemency to Larry Layton.

Finally, I should make it clear that I write as an individual, and not on behalf of any organization with which I am affiliated. Should you or your staff wish to correspond with me further on this matter, I would be most happy to do so. I can be reached by email at JRHall@UCDavis.edu, at the above address and fax, or by phone at +33 01 42 77 1703, through June 15, 1997. After then, I will return to the Department of Sociology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616.

Sincerely,



John R. Hall
Visiting Research Fellow
Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologiques
École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Professor of Sociology
University of California - Davis

January 30, 1997

President William Jefferson Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Clinton,

This letter is in reference to the request to commute the sentence of Larry Layton, who was convicted of conspiracy to kill a Congressman in connection with the deaths of Leo Ryan and four others at the Port Kaituma airstrip near Jonestown. I am a sociologist and anthropologist of religion who specializes in new religious movements. My PhD is from Drew University Graduate School and I have taught religion at the University of Stirling, Scotland. I am also a United Methodist minister and am currently serving three Churches in Northern New Jersey.

As a scholar, I have been studying the Peoples Temple and the deaths at Jonestown for nearly ten years and it is clear from the research I have done that the tragedy that took place at Jonestown, Guyana is far too complex to be placed at the doorstep of any one human being. Larry Layton's long sentence has, in my expert opinion, been an attempt to place blame and demand a penalty from a person who was not centrally responsible for what happened. I am not arguing that Layton was not involved, for he clearly was, only that the extreme length of his sentence does not accurately reflect the level and depth of his involvement in the deaths. It is my view that Layton has been scapegoated for a terrible set of circumstances which resulted in the deaths of many innocent people. His serving more time will not undo the injustice of the lives that were taken, only perpetuate it.

My work has suggested that at the heart of Peoples Temple was a desire to make the world a better place; a desire that ultimately, through a series of complex psychological and sociological factors, was twisted into ugly and defeatist acts of violence. My research into Peoples Temple became my PhD dissertation, which will be published by Syracuse University Press early in 1998. I would be happy to send you a copy of my manuscript if you think that reading it would help you and the Pardon Board to make a just decision about Larry Layton.

Yours sincerely,

Mary McCormick Maaga

Dr. Mary McCormick Maaga

P.O. Box 51
Sergeantsville, New Jersey 08357

609-397-3506

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College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Religious Studies Program
402 Catt Hall
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515 294-2566
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The Honorable Bill Clinton
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear President Clinton:

I am writing in support of the Layton family's petition for the commutation of Larry Layton's sentence.

I am presently an associate professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa where I teach courses in the sociology of religious movements, religion and politics, and the African American religious experience. I have come to this position by a rather circuitous route.

In the mid- to late- 1970s I was living in Northern California, working for then Lieutenant Governor Mervyn M. Dymally (subsequently Congressman Dymally), a former California Senate colleague of Congressman Leo Ryan. As his speech writer and liaison with social justice movements, I came to know many of the staff and members of Peoples Temple in San Francisco.

I came to know them as exceptionally caring and justice-committed people. What others and I did not know was the extent to which the movement had unraveled, particularly following the pilgrimage to Guyana. The shock of what transpired in Jonestown--the loss of individual friends and community--was traumatizing to say the least. While this tragedy occurred in 1978, it is only in the last five or six years that my own grieving has been able to occur.

I view this effort to free Larry as an important part of that delayed healing process--for myself and for countless others. Larry was not guiltless in the events that transpired. But he killed no one; he was clearly himself a victim of extraordinary circumstances; he has paid for the crimes he committed--and many of us feel, for the crimes others committed as well. He has now served nine years beyond what the judge and jury declared they believed would be a just sentence.

By all accounts Larry Layton is a gentle, responsible, caring individual. I urge you to respond affirmatively to this petition and to commute his sentence to time served. We can none of us restore the lives of the many who died in Jonestown. But you have the power to restore the life of this one who is loved by many and long since forgiven by the rest.

May you find it in your heart to also forgive.

Sincerely,



Mary R. Sawyer
Associate Professor of Religious Studies

The University of Kansas

Religious Studies

February 6, 1997

President Bill Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D. C.

Dear President Clinton:

I endorse the effort to persuade you to grant clemency to Larry Layton. I do not of course endorse crime, whether committed in some relationship with an aberrant religious group or otherwise, but the history of the Peoples Temple really has little bearing on the situation before us today.

Larry Layton, who did not kill anyone, has served more time than the average murderer does in my state. It is hard to imagine that he would be incarcerated today were it not for the vast publicity surrounding the larger Jonestown situation; one whose crime entailed the wounding of two innocent persons would normally have been out of prison long ago.

As one who has studied the Jonestown phenomenon and its relationship to the larger American alternative religious scene in some detail, I believe that Larry Layton has been punished enough and should be granted clemency. I appreciate your attention to this request.

Sincerely,



Timothy Miller
Associate Professor and Chair-elect



DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

January 17, 1997

President Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Larry Layton

Dear President Clinton:

I am writing in support of the petition to release Larry Layton from prison. I do not condone the crime committed by Mr. Layton. He committed a crime and therefore deserved punishment. It appears to me, however, that Mr. Layton has been punished for his crime and now deserves to be released. Mr. Layton's exemplary behavior earlier in his life and throughout his imprisonment indicate that his criminal action was an aberration, and that Mr. Layton is not a menace to society.

I am particularly impressed by the fact that Mr. Layton's shooting victims wrote letters supporting a lenient sentence, and that the judge who presided at his trial, the U.S. Probation Officer examining his case, and four members of the jury have all written letters urging a lenient sentence.

Mr. Layton committed a crime. He has been punished. The federal system should not compound the tragedy of this case by an unreasonably long imprisonment of Mr. Layton. I hope you will grant the petition to release Larry Layton from prison.

Sincerely,

Catherine Wessinger
Associate Professor



January 8, 1997

College of Letters, Arts
and Sciences

School of Religion

William Jefferson Clinton
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear President Clinton:

I would like to add my voice to those urging clemency for LARRY LAYTON, incarcerated in connection with the People's Temple tragedy of 1978. All the information I have indicates that Mr. Layton's background, sincerity of remorse, and subsequent conduct warrant such compassionate action at this time. Please look into his case and act accordingly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Robert Ellwood". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "R".

Robert Ellwood
Professor of Religion

RADCLIFFE COLLEGE



*The Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute
Radcliffe Research and Study Center
34 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138 (617) 495-8212*

January 24, 1997

President Bill Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Clinton,

I am writing to request that you commute the sentence of Larry Layton. I am familiar with the circumstances of his crime and feel that it is time to release him. This is not only a matter involving compassion but I believe that it also responds to justice in the life of Larry.

Thank you for the consideration I know you will give to this matter. I pray that you will find it within your judgment to allow this man to return to the community where he may make a contribution.

Sincerely,

Fran Peavey
Fran Peavey
Bunting Peace Fellow

1505 Q Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009

President Bill Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Clinton:

I am writing to ask you to grant clemency to Larry Layton, who has been incarcerated in federal prison since 1986 after being convicted of crimes relating to the 1978 Jonestown tragedy and receiving a mandatory life sentence. In both Guyana and the United States, Layton has served 14 years behind bars -- an amount of time certainly disproportionate to the crimes for which he was convicted.

My own knowledge of Jonestown came after the tragedy occurred. I am a journalist and legal investigator, and was retained by the family of sisters Carolyn Moore Layton and Annie Moore (both of whom had died at Jonestown), to investigate certain events that preceded and followed the mass deaths. Carolyn had been married to Larry Layton.

Through my investigative work for the Moore family, I came to be very familiar with the events involved in the Jonestown tragedy. So, I was quite startled to hear recently from Layton's relatives that Layton is still in prison; I had assumed he had been released some time ago, since he did not kill anyone, had had no role in the mass deaths at Jonestown, had been acquitted in his trial in Guyana, and had almost been acquitted in his first U.S. trial before being found guilty at the retrial.

Please note that Layton was not found guilty of killing anyone, but rather of conspiracy to kill a congressman, and aiding and abetting the murder of U.S. Representative Leo Ryan. Believing the government had not proved its case, Layton's lawyer put up no defense to the charge. We will never know for certain, but had the defense adopted a different strategy, Layton might have been acquitted (given that the jury at his first trial had split 11-1 for acquittal before a hung jury was declared).

Be that as it may, even those participating in the process that found Layton guilty called for leniency to be shown to him. The two individuals whom Layton wounded had themselves asked for leniency in his sentencing; four members of the jury that convicted him had likewise asked for leniency in sentencing; and the presiding judge himself -- bound by the mandatory life sentence that the conviction carried -- had recommended that

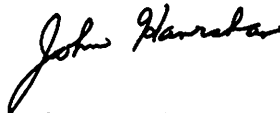
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President Bill Clinton
January 31, 1997

the Parole Commission show leniency when Layton came up for parole in 1991. Tragically, the commission did not follow this advice and set his parole date for 2004.

I do not know Larry Layton personally, so I leave it to others to tell you of his admirable, gentle character both before and after the nightmare of Jonestown -- and how his actions at Jonestown were uncharacteristic of him. But I do think it is clear that Larry Layton has paid for his crimes many times over, that he has atoned for what he did, and that he could not in any way be considered a danger to the community. Having Layton serve seven more years in prison will provide no benefits to society, but will continue to punish unnecessarily someone who merits immediate forgiveness.

I hope that you, too, will reach such a conclusion after you review the record, and that you will free Larry Layton. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Hanrahan".

John Hanrahan

THOMAS ROBBINS, Ph.D.

427 4th Street SW, Apt. A-8
Rochester, MN 55902
(507) 285-9555

January 9, 1997

President Clinton
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President,

Mr. Larry Layton, currently in prison, wounded two innocent persons in 1978. His action commenced a quick sequence of events which led to the mass murder-suicide of over 900 persons at Jonestown in Guyana. Though clearly guilty of serious criminal behavior, Mr. Layton seems to have become a scapegoat for the total, horrendous massacre at Jonestown (Jim Jones being beyond earthly sanctions). Many persons, who adhere to a variety of interpretations of the Jonestown tragedy, feel that Mr. Layton, who is presently not eligible for parole until the year 2004, should have an earlier release. I support this view, and I urge a commutation of his sentence.

Sincerely,



TR:jp

W. L. "WEBB" BROWN
14000 POWER HOUSE ROAD
POTTER VALLEY, CALIFORNIA 95462

January 28, 1997

Honorable President Clinton
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20500

Dear President Clinton:

I join with the family of Larry Layton in requesting that you, as our President with the authority; commute Larry Layton's sentence.

For twenty years I was the elected assessor of Mendocino County, a Pacific coast county in Northern California. It was during this time that Jim Jones established his church on the outskirts of the city of Ukiah. As a public official I did get to know some of those individuals that were involved in the church leadership. I can say that I was amazed that Jim Jones, the pastor of the church, could exercise the authority over people to the extent that he did. It was this unexplainable authority that resulted in the tragedy at Jonestown, Guyana.

Yes, Larry Layton was involved and he has paid the price and suffered for his involvement. Through all of this he has been a model prisoner who truly deserves clemency. So I request that as President you give this matter your most serious consideration.

Thank you and I remain,

Sincerely,

Wilburn L. Brown
Wilburn L. Brown