

Old emotions distort picture in Pete O'Neal case

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Nearly 40 years have passed since Pete O'Neal rolled the streets of Kansas City, a strident fixture in the black empowerment movement.

For almost four decades he's carried the weighted labels of "Black Panther" and "fugitive." O'Neal fled the U.S. rather than go to jail on a weapons conviction that today seems overblown compared to its long-term impact. The charge was that O'Neal, who had a prior record, carried a gun from Kansas into Missouri. It was a charge police used then in efforts to quash black militancy.

Except for the reality of what time does to the human body, Kansas City might not hear much more of O'Neal. His life is resettled in Tanzania. He runs an orphanage and programs to help educate Africans in computers and other skills. His tone is happy on the phone, even jovial, relishing the African landscape and contemplative lifestyle he leads.

But O'Neal is nearing 70 years old. Steroid shots into an arthritic knee can only do so much to ease pain. Little cartilage remains, so his joints grind "bone on bone," he says. Doctors have advised a knee replacement.

And with that diagnosis, the U.S. government has gotten in another slap. O'Neal has been denied a renewal of his passport, necessary for him to travel to India for surgery.

The rebuke is about four decades too late. For years, O'Neal has been issued a passport. He doesn't travel to the U.S., as that would trigger his arrest for fleeing while awaiting an appeal on his conviction.

If the government had denied his passport years ago, it would have made sense. He is a fugitive. That's not a whimsical label authorities can dismiss without some sort of process.

But coming now, as the man needs surgery, the denial raises humanitarian concerns. If his medical needs were life-threatening, would the answer still be "no"?

For O'Neal, the situation leaves him grateful to stateside supporters who plan to lobby U.S. Rep. Emanuel Cleaver for assistance. And also chafing at how the plea could be misinterpreted.

"I'm not asking favors from people who I have been politically and ideologically opposed to my whole life," O'Neal said.

The passport denial likely is due to stricter enforcement post 9/11, coupled with O'Neal's intention to become a Tanzanian citizen.

But a prudent reply would be for the U.S. to finally resolve O'Neal's fugitive status by looking at his case again. A less-romanticized, far more complex portrait of the Panthers is clearer today, apart from either/or claims of militant thugs or passionate activists.

O'Neal is among those figures so linked to emotions about the Panthers' past that the real man is easily lost in the interpretation of others.

But one simple, accurate reading would be to say Pete O'Neal is a human being who deserves to reach medical care.

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