

Moussaoui: From Death to Slow Death

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Few places held more surprise at the Life verdict for a French citizen and alleged Al-Qaeda soldier, Zacarias Moussaoui, than death row.

Government prosecutors pulled out all the stops to get a death sentence, and their use of the tearful testimony of the families of 9-11 victims was designed to use emotion as a fuel to rocket the Moroccan straight to death row.

That an Alexandria, Va. jury declined the invitation can only be called remarkable. If there is one jurisdiction that can be termed death-prone, Virginia fits the bill. The federal prosecutors, who could've tried Moussaoui almost anywhere, opted for Virginia for precisely that reason. A southern, conservative state, one firmly looped to the American Death Belt (indeed, a state virtually in the shadow of the Pentagon), Virginia was supposed to be Moussaoui's Waterloo.

The jury decided otherwise.

Several jurors apparently concluded that Moussaoui was a minor player in the events of 9-11, and had but "limited" knowledge of them.

The Justice Dept. spent over 4 years bringing the case to trial, and spent millions of dollars in search of a death sentence. Ironically, according to press reports, Moussaoui offered to accept a death sentence, if only he was given better prison conditions.

The government decided to spend the money, and try the case.

Indeed, Moussaoui gave them more than they seemed to need to send him to the gallows, but the jury didn't believe it.

However, although the government lost its objective, that doesn't mean that the 37-year old Frenchman "won" anything substantial. He went from the threat of Death Row to the grim reality of slow-death row. Life in a prison hell of a cell. It is a death sentence in everything but name.

But that reality pales beside the remarkable fact that 12 American jurors, in a case of this enormous magnitude, refused to do the easy thing: decide for death. While it is undoubtedly true that Moussaoui was in jail on 9-11, and therefore played no part in that day's events, his guilty plea opened the door wide for death.

That the jury declined to so sentence him is another matter.

It is tempting (but perhaps too early) to read this verdict as a turning point in the American Death Machine. If a jury rejects it in *this* case, of a dark-skinned, French-speaking foreigner, who openly praises the country's arch-enemies of al-Qaeda, who boasts of his wish to have participated in the harrowing carnage of 9-11, in a courtroom within a stone's throw of the site where a plane plowed into the walls of the Pentagon, it speaks volumes of the apparently growing distaste for the death penalty.

It's hard to surprise guys on Death Row; this case did it.

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Mr. Jamal's new work, WE WANT FREEDOM: A Life in the Black Panther Party, is now available from South End Press, Cambridge, MA. (<http://www.southendpress.org>). Check out Mumia's NEW book: "Faith of Our Fathers: An Examination of the Spiritual Life of African and African-American People": <http://www.africanworld.com>. These are VERY SERIOUS TIMES for political activists in this country and around the world. Get full details and keep updated by reading ACTION ALERTS!! at <http://www.mumia.org> and <http://www.movenet.org>. To download Mp3's of Mumia's commentaries visit <http://www.prisonradio.org> or <http://www.fsrn.org>

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