

# Political Prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal's Remote Commencement Speech Sparks Police Outrage

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Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

Global Research, October 24, 2014

[Reader Supported News](#)

## How a non-event becomes an “event” that ends in anti-climax

When Mumia Abu-Jamal was the pre-recorded speaker at a Goddard College commencement in Plainfield, Vermont, in 2008, almost no one outside the Goddard community paid any attention. This year, when Goddard announced that students had chosen Mumia to do a return engagement at their graduation, Philadelphia police, politicians, media, and Fox News went crazy with angry rhetoric aimed at curbing free speech.

In the end, this breakdown in civil society resulted in nothing worse than hundreds of police-instigated threats of violence to the Goddard community. For the sake of security, Goddard moved the graduation up three hours, with no public announcement, and the full-house ceremony for 24 students went forward with private security and without incident.

In the week between the announcement and the event, “Mumia Abu-Jamal” the symbol served once again as a triggering Rorschach blot exposing aspects of American character in 2014, reflecting and denying realities decades and centuries past. In a sense what Goddard students provoked with their commencement speaker choice was a weeklong confrontation between the symbolic “Mumia Abu-Jamal” and the actual Mumia Abu-Jamal, without much success in joining them in their single, complex reality.

## What does “Mumia Abu-Jamal” actually mean, or should he just be?

Understanding “Mumia Abu Jamal” in full requires more time and space that is available here. The man and the symbol and those who pillory him all have significant complexity, both real and unreal. There are at least two contexts that are fundamental to understanding the Mumia phenomenon itself and the mini-drama it produced at Goddard:

First, whatever else he is, Mumia is a political prisoner and has been a political target at least since he was 15. Mumia was born in 1954 as Wesley Cook. As he became an articulate member of the Black Panther party (until he was 16) and a representative of black resistance generally, he was targeted for his political expression by police agencies that included the FBI and its illegal COINTELPRO program. On December 9, 1981, radio reporter Mumia was moonlighting as a cab driver. He was on the scene when officer Daniel Faulkner made a traffic stop of Mumia's younger brother, William Cook. In the next few moments, Faulkner was shot and killed and Mumia was shot and disabled. Little else about the event is reliably clear. Anyone who takes the time to look disinterestedly into the record of the investigation and subsequent trials will soon understand that Mumia's conviction for killing officer Faulkner may or may not be a miscarriage of justice in terms of Mumia's actual guilt, which remains unproved. [Mumia denied](#) his guilt at trial and ever since. The investigation

and judicial process are so fundamentally flawed in so many ways, they offer the best evidence that Mumia's conviction is morally and factually insupportable.

Second, and probably more important for context, is the abiding corruption of the Philadelphia legal system, both police and courts. At the time of Mumia's arrest, he had been talking on the radio about [police corruption](#). At the same time, there was a federal investigation going on that would lead to the conviction of 31 Philadelphia police officers. In 1981, Officer Faulkner, 26, was working undercover inside the department, gathering evidence against his fellow officers. Another wave of Philadelphia police corruption and brutality in the 1990s came to be known as the [39<sup>th</sup> District scandal](#). In July 2014, federal prosecutors indicted six officers in "what Philadelphia's police commissioner described as one of the worst cases of corruption," [according to CNN](#). CBS Philly has a special page for [Philadelphia police corruption](#). Currently, after some 20 years of abusing [civil forfeiture laws](#) to pad city budgets (by an average \$6 million a year), Philadelphia faces a [class action lawsuit](#) filed by the [Institute for Justice](#) seeking to end the abuse, which includes an inherently corrupting conflict of interest.

### **When you're under fire, it's useful to have a distracting scapegoat**

One of the epicenters of reflexive Mumia-bashing is the 325,000 member [Fraternal Order of Police](#) (FOP), whose website has no prominent (if any) expressed opposition to police corruption. The Order was instrumental in unscrupulously attacking an Obama administration nominee for U.S. Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Dept. of Justice, who eventually withdrew his name from nomination. Attorney [Debo Adegbile](#), 48, was fully qualified to serve, but the FOP opposed him because he had, as part of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, tangentially participated in Mumia Abu-Jamal's appeals process. None of this was improper, but the FOP used inflammatory guilt-by-association in a McCarthyite campaign that effectively intimidated Democratic Senators into joining their prejudiced Republican colleagues in race-based opposition to a qualified candidate for the "sin" of representing the "wrong" client, an expectation of attorneys actually expressed in the U.S. Constitution. Given its Mumia-obsession, the FOP was quick to join the counter-constitutional attack on personal and institutional free speech at Goddard.

Founded in 1863 as a Universalist seminary in the Green Mountains, [Goddard College](#) has about 600 students, most of whom are not college-age and most whom are not on campus most of the time. [Accredited by](#) the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Goddard offers undergraduate degrees as well as [Masters degrees](#) in fields including Education, Health Sciences, Psychology, and Creative Writing. Mumia Abu-Jamal first came to Goddard in the 1970s, earning his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1996 from prison. In 2008, graduating [students unanimously](#) and "proudly" chose Mumia to give a pre-recorded commencement speech at Goddard. On August 10, 2008, he gave his speech, apparently without incident and without much media or other attention. Having had that experience, Goddard made a routine announcement on a Monday, setting off a chain of events, with these highlights:

### **September 29, 2014.**

Goddard publicized Mumia's October 5 speech in a matter-of-fact [press release](#) with this headline:

## **Mumia Abu-Jamal to Give Commencement Speech at Goddard College**

### **Inmate Journalist and Goddard Graduate to Address Newest Class of Radical Thinkers**

The release noted that Mumia was convicted for the 1981 murder of officer Faulkner and was serving a sentence of life in prison without parole. The release quoted interim college president Bob Kenny saying, almost prophetically: "Choosing Mumia as their commencement speaker, to me, shows how this newest group of Goddard graduates expresses their freedom to engage and think radically and critically in a world that often sets up barriers to do just that."

The same day the [Burlington Free Press](#) picked up the news in a brief, bland item that began: "Goddard College students have chosen a famous alumnus as their fall commencement speaker, but his remarks have been pre-recorded and he won't be at the ceremony on Sunday." The Free Press was apparently alone in this reporting. So far, so calm.

### **September 30, 2014.**

Philadelphia's [CBS local station](#) broke the calm with a story that began: "A small Vermont college is poking a lot of people in the eye by having convicted cop-killer Mumia Abu-Jamal as its commencement speaker next Sunday." Fox News also pushed the story: "A man serving life in prison for killing a Philadelphia police officer in 1981 has been selected as a commencement speaker at his Vermont alma mater."

The spin on the story was inspired by the president of the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police, John Nesby, who is quoted saying: "We have somebody who's a convicted murderer, who's in prison, and they're allowed to be able to have special privileges. It just seems the only one being penalized here is [officer Faulkner's widow] Maureen Faulkner and she's fed up with it." The CBS headline read:

### **Convicted Cop-Killer Mumia Abu-Jamal Selected As Commencement Speaker For College In Vermont**

CBS also reported Corrections Department spokeswoman Sue McNaughton trying to distance the department from controversy, saying that: Mumia is merely making use of his phone privileges. He's done this before in the past. He's made other commencement addresses. They're not live, from what I understand. They're recorded and then played.... the department does not endorse Mumia's speech, but he has the right to talk.

Picking up on the cue from the Philadelphia FOP, the [Vermont Troopers' Association](#) president, Michael O'Neil, wrote a [public letter](#) to the Goddard president, "on behalf of the 280 members of the Vermont Troopers' Association and the families of slain police officers...." O'Neil asked the college to rescind the invitation, writing in part:

"Your invitation to this convicted murderer demonstrates an absolute disregard for the family of Danny Faulkner.... While our nation is searching for solutions to gun violence in our schools and communities, we are outraged that Goddard College is hosting a man who shot and killed a police officer. A college commencement ceremony should be conducted to honor the achievements of graduates, not provide a forum for recognition of a convicted killer."

The Troopers Association did not respond to questions submitted in writing.

### **October 1, 2014.**

Using some language word-for-word from the Philadelphia FOP letter, the national office of the Fraternal Order of Police issued [what it titled](#):

### **STATEMENT OF NATIONAL PRESIDENT CHUCK CANTERBURY ON COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY COP-KILLER ABU-JAMAL**

Canterbury, like McNeil, urged “that Goddard College rescind its invitation to this repugnant murderer.” Despite the police pile-on, the story gained little traction nationally. The [Washington Post](#) played it fairly neutrally, first referring to Mumia as “an infamous American prisoner.”

### **October 2, 2014.**

The Vermont Police Chiefs Association joined the law enforcement chorus against Goddard and Mumia. The head of the association, Vergennes Police Chief George Merkel was [quoted saying](#):

“It is beyond belief that an educational institution would even consider such an act of disrespect to the family of slain Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner and the law enforcement community of Vermont.... It obviously means nothing to the school administration and graduates that Mumia Abu-Jamal murdered Officer Faulkner in cold blood by shooting him five times.

While we support the protection of individual rights in Vermont, we find the choice of this convicted murderer as a commencement speaker offensive, and shows a lack of judgment on behalf of the college and its graduates, as well as a total disrespect for the family of the slain officer, who was sworn also to protect individual rights....”

The only member of Congress to take a public position, apparently, was Republican Sen. [Pat Toomey](#) of Pennsylvania, who wrote an outraged letter to Goddard in which said, among other things:

“Is there any crime so heinous that Goddard would not reward the perpetrator with a spot as commencement speaker? I cannot fathom how anyone could think it appropriate to honor a cold-blooded murderer....”

Earlier in the year, Toomey led the effort to deny the appointment of Debo Adegbile to the Justice Dept., because Adegbile had had the temerity to give meaning to the Constitution’s promise that Mumia should have adequate counsel.

The Pennsylvania [Department of Corrections](#) joined the official outcry against hearing the voice of “a convicted cop killer.” A spokesperson described a proper speaker. Ironically, that description also fits Mumia: “a commencement speaker worthy of their time such as a survivor of crime to impart things like resiliency, courage and strength.”

The [National Review](#) offered a smooth, cleverly argued critique of Goddard’s choice of Mumia, beginning with the G.K. Chesterton warning against being “so open-minded that

your brains fall out.” At the end, the piece sarcastically suggests:

“Perhaps Goddard’s graduating class is not so intellectually atrophied and morally adrift as to actually think that entertaining a cop-killer as its commencement speaker was a bold, revolutionary decision. Perhaps they just invited Goddard’s most distinguished graduate.”

[Vermont Public Radio](#) exaggeratedly reported that “Goddard College is facing a storm of criticism for inviting a man convicted of murdering a police officer to speak....” Vermont Public Radio did not mention that it used to broadcast Mumia’s radio programs when they were carried by National Public Radio (until another political attack drove them off the air).

As a Goddard spokesman pointed out, Mumia speaks from a unique perspective, an “an imprisoned African-American male,... an under-represented and almost invisible population.” Goddard Community Radio, [WGDR-WGDH](#) FM, currently carries Mumia’s syndicated [Prison Radio](#) show, at 7 PM on Sunday.

**“Murder is wrong. Free speech is right.... these exist together.”**

Without responding formally to police demands to cancel Mumia, Goddard pushed back. Goddard communications manager Samantha Kolber sent out two tweets about an hour apart that evening:

10:28 PM - “Free people have a right to decide for themselves what they want to hear.”  
- [@MumiaAbujamal](#)

11:43 PM - “Murder is wrong. Free speech is right. Sometimes these exist together. [#Duality](#) [#truth](#) [#complexity](#)”

In an interview, Kolber had said that the graduating students “chose Mumia because to them, Mumia represents a struggle for freedom of the mind, body, and spirit. Those were values important to this graduating class.”

Late [that same day](#), a North Carolina prison released an ex-police commander to a halfway house, after three and a half years behind bars. The former Chicago police officer was Jon Burge, 66, convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice relating to his participation in using torture to coerce false confessions from men in custody. Although a final count is uncertain, police commander Burge took part in torturing more than 100 black men, sometimes using electro-shock.

A Chicago police pension board has affirmed Burge’s \$4000-a-month police pension. The capture and conviction of Burge, as well as settlements to victims, is estimated to have cost \$120 million to Chicago taxpayers.

The police organizations attacking Goddard College have not objected to the public paying a convicted police torturer some \$48,000 a year in retirement.

**October 3, 2014.**

In great part because of the police protest, Goddard was receiving hundreds of threats of non-specific violence by phone and [social](#)

[media](https://twitter.com/hashtag/supportmumiagraduationspeech?src=hash) (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/supportmumiagraduationspeech?src=hash>)

Twitter was busy, and there was also [Mumia support](#)). Goddard reported these to the Vermont State Police, who said through a spokesperson that they planned to investigate the source of the threats and would keep in touch with the college in case the college needed help. According to [VTDigger](#):

Goddard has received hundreds of phone calls, about one per minute Friday, and letting all of them go to voicemail, Goddard spokesperson Samantha Kolber said. College officials were responding to only the most urgent calls, she said. Some of the calls threatened violence and sexual assault.

### **To Police and Politicians: “Hands Off Goddard College!”**

That was the headline of a piece in [Counterpunch](#), an appeal by two college professors, one from the City College of New York, the other from the Princeton Theological Seminary. They note, in support of both Goddard and Mumi that: “His death sentence was ruled unconstitutional in 2001, and finally vacated in 2011.”

They characterize Mumia as “a political prisoner, who was framed in the courts for his political beliefs and affiliations,” whose supporters include Amnesty International and Bishop Desmond Tutu.

They characterize his current attackers as guardians of “a center that quashes the right to speak of needed voices from among the marginalized and politically repressed, they cease being a center worthy of public respect.

They conclude that:

“The students occupy the moral and intellectual high ground. Let them proceed without intimidation by officials who command guns and prisons. The youth of today, those who must forge tomorrow’s freedom and real democracy, should be neither chained nor intimidated by guardians of the old center.”

### **October 4, 2014.**

The [Fox News](#) program [FOX&friends](#) continued attack on Goddard and Mumia. Officer Faulkner’s widow, Maureen, and Sen. Toomey were guests and the views of the guests and anchor were predictably one-sided and without nuance.

Reinforcing the dominant narrative that requires Mumia to be a one-dimensional Black Panther cop-killer, pictures of Mumia typically show him as a much younger man, with long dreads, and sometimes a threatening appearance. The very pro-Mumia website of [Rachel Wolkenstein](#), one of his attorneys, has a picture from 2012 showing Mumia with his wife and attorney Wolkenstein.

### **October 5, 2014.**

The graduation ceremony went off without reported incident.

The college hired private security to supplement college staff, since relying on Vermont police who had been attacking the college all week didn’t seem rational. As it turned out,



some 20 police were busy [peacefully protesting](#) the graduation. Interesting work all around with the “serve and protect” thing.

There might have been a bigger protest, but Goddard had quietly and privately [changed the time](#) of the ceremony from 4 PM to 1 PM. Mumia’s pre-recorded speech (audio only, though often [reported as video](#)) was [not his best work](#), but adequate to the occasion. One highlight, when he spoke more personally, first of the 1970s:

“Let me say something that I’ve never said before: when I came to Goddard, I was intimidated. Although teachers and adults told me that I could do the work, I rarely believed them. I felt woefully unprepared. But guess what? Goddard gave me confidence, and I never lost that feeling....”

And then he spoke of the 1990s:

“In one of the most repressive environments on earth (Death Row), Goddard allowed me to study and research human liberation and anti-colonial struggles on two continents: Africa and Latin/Central America. I think you for that grand opportunity....”

In Philadelphia, uniformed police there held a 30-minute [silent vigil](#) at the site of a plaque commemorating Officer Faulkner, an event organized by the FOP to honor Maureen Faulkner and her husband and other fallen police officers.

In California, [Maureen Faulkner](#) issued an [angry statement](#) in which she said, in part:

“Once again, my family and I find ourselves being assaulted by the obscenity that is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

On Sunday October 5th, my husband’s killer will once again air his voice from what masquerades as a prison, and spew his thoughts and ideas at another college commencement. Mumia Abu-Jamal will be heard and honored as a victim and a hero by a pack of adolescent sycophants at Goddard College....

Shame on Goddard College and all associated with that school for choosing to honor an arrogant remorseless killer as their commencement speaker. Unfortunately, this is something that I am certain they will be proud of for the rest of their lives.”

She accuses Mumia of hating America, she blames Goddard for hiding behind the First Amendment, she calls that “a convenient way to dodge their responsibility to take a moral position on this situation.” Moments later, she contradicts this and describes the moral position she says they’ve already taken:

“Let’s be honest. The instructors, administrators and graduates at Goddard College embrace having this killer as their commencement speaker not despite the fact that he brutally murdered a cop, **but because he brutally murdered a cop.**” [emphasis added]

If that paranoia is heartfelt and widespread in the FOP and [other police associations](#), police

might consider why anyone would believe such a thing, whether out of rage or guilt. And they might wonder what effect it has, on others and themselves, to demonize supposed cop-killers while giving killer cops a pass.

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