

Would CIA Whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling Be in Prison If He Were White?

By [Norman Solomon](#)

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Last week CIA whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling went to prison. If he were white, he probably wouldn't be there.

Sterling was one of the CIA's few African-American case officers, and he became the first to file a racial discrimination lawsuit against the agency. That happened shortly before the CIA fired him in late 2001. The official in Langley who did the firing face-to-face was John Brennan, now the CIA's director and a close adviser to President Obama.

Five months ago, in court, prosecutors kept claiming that Sterling's pursuit of the racial-bias lawsuit showed a key "motive" for providing classified information to journalist James Risen. The government's case at [the highly problematic trial](#) was built entirely on circumstantial evidence. Lacking anything more, the prosecution hammered on ostensible motives, telling the jury that Sterling's "anger," "bitterness" and "selfishness" had caused him to reveal CIA secrets.

But [the history of Sterling's conflicts with the CIA](#) has involved a pattern of top-down retaliation. Sterling became a problem for high-ranking officials, who surely did not like the bad publicity that his unprecedented lawsuit generated. And Sterling caused further hostility in high places when, in the spring of 2003, he went through channels to tell Senate Intelligence Committee staffers of his concerns about the CIA's reckless Operation Merlin, which had given Iran some flawed design information for a nuclear weapons component.

Among the U.S. government's advantages at the trial last winter was the fact that the jury did not include a single African-American. And it was drawn from a jury pool imbued with the CIA-friendly [company town atmosphere](#) of Northern Virginia.

Sterling's [long struggle against institutionalized racism](#) is far from over. It continues as he pursues a legal appeal. He's in a prison near Denver, nearly 900 miles from his home in the St. Louis area, making it very difficult for his wife Holly to visit.

Last week, as Sterling headed to Colorado, journalist Kevin Gosztola wrote an [illuminating piece](#) that indicated the federal Bureau of Prisons has engaged in retaliation by placing Sterling in a prison so far from home. Gosztola concluded: "There really is no accountability for BOP officials who inappropriately designate inmates for prisons far away from their families."

With the government eager to isolate Jeffrey Sterling, it's important for him to hear from people who wish him well. Before going to prison, Sterling could see many warmly supportive comments online, posted by contributors to the [Sterling Family Fund](#) and signers

of the [petition](#) that urged the Justice Department to drop all charges against him. Now he can get postal mail at: Jeffrey Sterling, 38338-044, FCI Englewood, Federal Correctional Institution, 9595 West Quincy Ave., Littleton, CO 80123.

(Sterling can receive only letters and cards. "All incoming correspondence is reviewed," the Sterling Family Fund notes. "It is important that all content is of an uplifting nature as any disparaging comments about the government, the trial or any peoples involved will have negative consequences for Jeffrey.")

While it's vital that Sterling hear from well-wishers, it's also crucial that the public hear from him. "[The Invisible Man: CIA Whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling](#)," released the day after he was sentenced in mid-May, made it possible for the public to hear his voice. The short documentary (which I produced for ExposeFacts) was directed by Oscar nominee Judith Ehrlich.

More recently, journalist Peter Maass did a fine job with an extensive article, "[How Jeffrey Sterling Took on the CIA — and Lost Everything](#)."

It should be unacceptable that racism helped the government to put Jeffrey Sterling in prison.

***Norman Solomon** is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, where he coordinates [ExposeFacts](#). Solomon is a co-founder of [RootsAction.org](#), which has encouraged donations to the [Sterling Family Fund](#). Disclosure: After the guilty verdict five months ago, Solomon used his frequent-flyer miles to get plane tickets for Holly and Jeffrey Sterling so they would be able to go home to St. Louis.*

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