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Death row inmate Glenn Ford released 30 years after wrongful conviction

Man found guilty of murder by all-white jury in deeply flawed trial had one of America's longest-ever waits for exoneration.

*By Ed Pilkington,
The Guardian*

Glenn Ford has been freed from Angola prison in Louisiana having lived under the shadow of the death sentence for 30 years. He becomes one of the longest-serving death row inmates in US history to be exonerated.

Ford was sentenced to death in 1984 for the murder of Isadore Rozeman, an older white man who ran a Shreveport jewellery and watch repair shop. The defendant had worked as an odd jobs man for Rozeman. In interviews with police Ford said that he had been asked to pawn a .38 revolver and some jewellery similar to that taken from Rozeman's shop at the time of the murder by another man who was among the initial suspects.

Asked as he walked away from the prison gates about his release, Ford told reporters, "It feels good; my mind is going in all kind of directions. It feels good."



Ford said he did harbour some resentment at being wrongly jailed: "Yeah, cause I've been locked up almost 30 years for something I didn't do. I can't go back and do anything I should have been doing when I was 35, 38, 40 stuff like that."

Ford's conviction highlights some of the problems facing the US justice system that are repeatedly found in cases of exoneration.

One of these problems was the make-up of the jury. An African American, Ford was sentenced to death by a jury that had been carefully

selected by prosecutors to be exclusively white.

At Ford's trial his legal representation was very inexperienced. The lead defence counsel was a specialist in the law relating to oil and gas exploration and had never tried a case in front of a jury; the second attorney was two years out of law school and working at the time of the trial on small automobile accident insurance cases.

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During the trial the state was unable to call any eyewitnesses to the crime, nor was it able to produce a murder weapon. Instead Ford was convicted largely on the testimony of a witness who was not a detached observer – she was the girlfriend of another man initially suspected of the murder.

During the court case the witness, Marvella Brown, admitted in front of the jury that she had given false testimony. “I did lie to the court... I lied about it all,” she said.

Evidence given by “expert” witnesses, which also helped to put Ford on death row, was later shown to have been at best inconclusive, at worst wrong.

Ford continued to profess his innocence throughout the 30 years. In the appeal process that ensued, the

Louisiana supreme court, the state’s highest legal panel, acknowledged that the evidence against him was “not overwhelming” and that the prosecution case was open to “serious questions”, yet it decided to keep him on death row.

Ford becomes the 144th death row inmate to be exonerated over the past four decades, underlining the perils of innocent people being sent to their deaths in America’s capital punishment system. Yet despite such warning, several states such as Alabama, California, Florida and Missouri have taken recent steps to speed up the process of executions and reduce the opportunity to appeal.

David Love, executive director of Witness to Innocence, an organisation of exonerated death row survivors and their loved ones, said that attempts to speed up the time from

conviction to death showed that for some politicians “it’s more important to have finality than to have justice. I believe that’s a misguided approach. As we see more and more innocent people like Glenn Ford released from death row, that’s a wake up call that we have to look at our broken system.”

Ford will now go through the long process of trying to rebuild his life on the outside. Under Louisiana law he can apply for compensation of up to \$25,000 for each year lost to detention, but only up to a ceiling of \$250,000.

As for the Isadore Rozeman case, it has now officially reverted to the status of an unsolved murder.