

Up From Another Kind of Slavery

by Mike Billington

Life After Life: A Story of Rage and Redemption

by Evans D. Hopkins

New York: Free Press, 2005
287 pages, hardbound, \$25

Early in 1994, about four years into the ten-year stretch I served as a political prisoner in Federal and Virginia detention facilities, I met a young man named Evans Derrell Hopkins, known as “Hop” to all his fellow inmates. Hop was serving a life sentence for an armed robbery, in which no one was hurt. He believed he’d been given the draconian sentence because he had shown contempt for the all-white jury “of his peers,” who viewed this former member of the Black Panther Party as an enemy of society.

When I met Hop, he had already become an established commentator, with articles published in the *Washington Post* and several other leading newspapers and magazines, mostly on issues of black culture in America and the prison system, with a special insight on matters related to the death penalty. At the time, he had begun to do research on the question of innocence among convicted felons, a condition which had exploded into public consciousness thanks to the introduction of DNA tests on evidence from otherwise closed cases, discrediting the “finality” of jury convictions, especially in capital cases.

My case had a certain notoriety, as I had been given a 77-year sentence, the most severe of the numerous prosecutions of LaRouche associates, ostensibly for borrowing money from supporters for use in our political campaigns, but actually (as was obvious to nearly everyone worldwide) as a warning to the population to stay away from LaRouche. Hop sought me out when he heard I had arrived at Nottoway Correctional Center, as a possible subject for his own “innocence project.”

Fast Friends, Critics, Editors

We became fast friends, spending three years living in the same cellblock. We were both making our first efforts at writing a book during those years, and we ended up serving as each other’s critics, editors, and, to some extent,

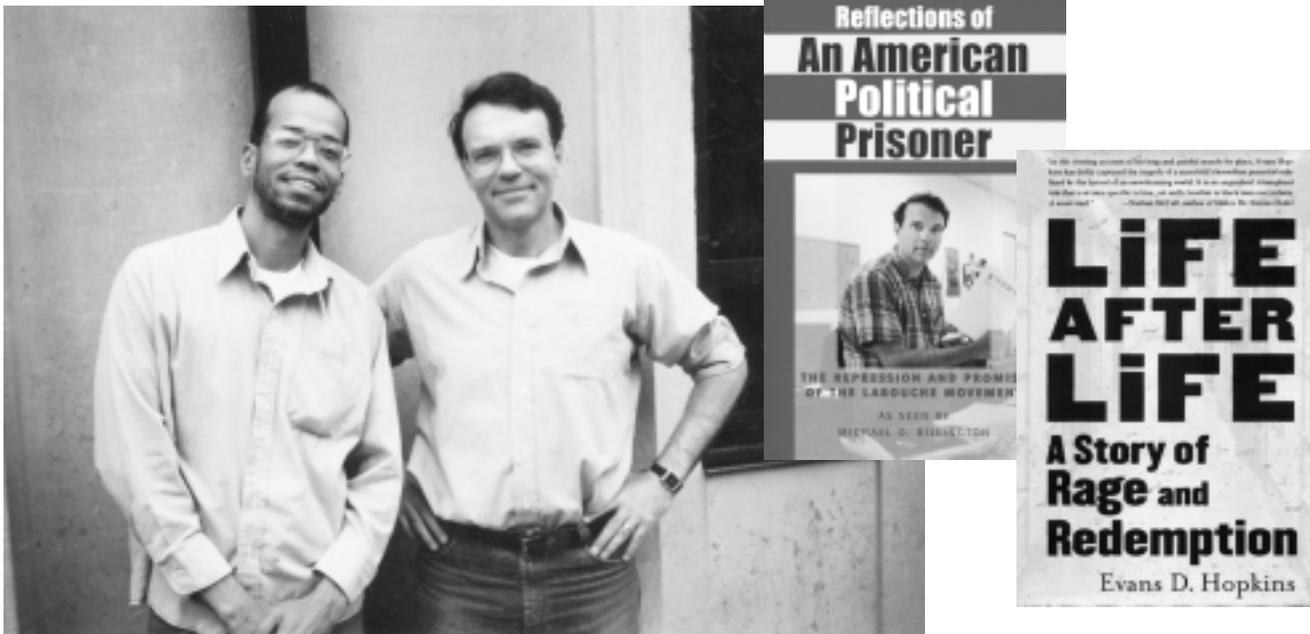
co-thinkers. My book, eventually published as *Reflections of an American Political Prisoner: The Repression and Promise of the LaRouche Movement*, was intended to convey a personal perspective on the history of the movement led by Lyndon LaRouche, especially to younger people who would come in touch with LaRouche in the future, drawing on my 25 years of collaboration with him and his associates. Hop’s book, which has now been published as *Life After Life: A Story of Rage and Redemption*, was also intended to address the youth—those young black men on the street, who, he hoped, could be influenced by his work to find a way to avoid becoming one of the tens of thousands of souls now being herded into the “human warehouses” of the American penal system.

The most poignant moments of Hopkins’ book are his reflections upon these youth. He writes, taking a passage from his own prison notebooks: “There is no true cause, or movement, for the youth of today, just an undefined membership in an amorphous generation of rage. And with the ready availability of all sorts of weaponry, the situation is ten times more lethal. Caught up in an alternative economy based on drugs and vice, while following irrational dreams fostered by the culture of entertainment, they become grist for the criminal justice mill—bodies for the prison-industrial complex, if not the coroner’s wagon.”

Hopkins describes his own experience in the Penitentiary, beginning in 1981, as the “quintessential angry young black male.” He describes his journey from rage to redemption, giving large credit to the college courses prisoners were then offered through Pell Grants, and the numerous classes and workshops made available to him, in poetry, film, literature and writing, from volunteers invited into the prison, which helped him develop his worldview, and change his life, despite the horrendous environment.

By the mid-1990s, Hopkins writes, with parole abolished in Virginia, and with all outside education and special programs abolished, “the focus of the prison system was now on punishment alone. Thousands of young men entering prison, many with long, no-hope sentences (given even to teens as young as 13 and 14), would never get that ‘last chance to change’ I was able to put to good use.”

Ironically, as Hopkins notes in his book, the two of us had been in the same place at the same time as we both set out on our political careers: Oakland, California, in 1971. Hop had joined the Black Panthers in his hometown of Danville, Virginia, where he was an honors student in his high school, and a promising tennis player being trained by the coach of Arthur Ashe. He chose to leave that behind to confront the raging political crisis in America, and soon found himself at Black Panther Party headquarters in Oakland, writing for the Party newspaper. (I had gravitated toward Berkeley after four years in the Peace Corps, in the spirit of opposition to the Vietnam War I had seen close up in Thailand. I came across LaRouche’s work at that time.)



Mike Billington (right) and Evans “Hop” Hopkins, during their incarceration in Virginia’s Nottoway prison. Each was writing a book about his experience, and, Billington writes, “we ended up serving as each other’s critics, editors, and, to some extent, co-thinkers.”

Hopkins’ book includes a painfully honest portrayal of the degeneration of the Black Panther Party into factional strife, drug dealing, and crime. He does not leave out the U.S. government Cointelpro operations aimed at facilitating just such a result, but neither does he exonerate many of the Party leaders, especially Huey Newton, for their culpability. His primary intention, however, is to present his *own* weaknesses in dealing with rage, a rage which essentially negated his adopted mission to challenge the injustice in American society. Again quoting from his prison notebooks, he reflects on that rage, as he sees the same fire burning in the young men entering the prisons: “I tell the young bloods, when I have occasion to talk to them, ‘You start out hating white folks, thinking it’s all right to rob them, kill them if necessary, next thing you know you think it’s all right to kill your brother, if you feel he has wronged you.’ ”

Meeting Marianna Wertz

Hopkins dates his ability to transform his talents into weapons of love, rather than rage, to his association with LaRouche’s Schiller Institute, whose Secretary-Treasurer, the late Marianna Wertz, he met during her and her husband’s frequent visits with me in prison. Hopkins reports that Marianna took up a regular correspondence, “challenging me on many of my set beliefs.” She introduced him to St. Augustine, Gottfried Leibniz, Friedrich Schiller, and “stressed the idea that beauty was a necessary condition of man, that in order to survive and flourish we had to maintain a sense of optimism,

and ‘relish our roles in bringing about a more perfect world.’ ” Hop describes his escape from an existentialist hell: “I was now able to look upon the world as a beneficent place, discarding my long-held view that everything around me was inimical to my existence.” His sense of mission as an artist, he writes, was transformed, beyond race, beyond rage, to be “firmly grounded in *agapē*, a redemptive love for all humanity.”

Hopkins was released on parole in 1997. He describes the difficulties confronted in adjusting to society after 16 years in prison, but he makes clear that his own driving passion to develop his talents, with substantial aid from the prison’s educational programs (which have now been eliminated!), saved him from despair, or the return to drugs and crime, that are the fate of all too many felons after their release.

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics report released in April 2005 shows that the number of men and women incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails is soaring, reaching 2.1 million in 2004—the highest per-capita rate in the world—with 61% of them minorities. Under current laws, many of them will not have the opportunities which Hopkins did. Hopkins’ book is a self-reflective study of the possibility of true redemptive transformation within a prison environment, but it is also a stark warning to American citizens and legislators of the moral depravity, and the potential danger to society, of the present deteriorating correctional system. Hop, I am certain, will persevere as a warrior for positive change in America.