



KNIGHT RIDDER FILE PHOTO

Shown in a 1995 prison photo, convicted murderer Mumia Abu-Jamal will give a taped commencement address in Washington state today.

Protests brewing over killer's speech

Mumia Abu-Jamal to address grads as free-speech emblem

BY ROBERTO SANCHEZ

Seattle Times

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Evergreen State College is bracing itself for an onslaught of protests and media attention today for including a convicted murderer — in absentia — among its graduation speakers.

About 800 graduating students at the state-supported liberal-arts college are scheduled to hear a 13-minute taped address today from Mumia Abu-Jamal, the former Black Panther and radio journalist sentenced to death for the slaying of a Philadelphia police officer in 1981.

The students' choice of Mumia Abu-Jamal as one of five speakers has caused such public outcry that the college has hired extra police, asked students to behave themselves and begun a review of how the college selects speakers.

Students invited Abu-Jamal to be among the commencement speakers because he has used his free-speech rights "to galvanize an international conversation about the death penalty, the disproportionate number of blacks on death row, and the relationship between poverty and the criminal-justice system," Evergreen President Jane Jervis said in a statement Wednesday.

Criticism widespread

Pennsylvania Attorney General Mike Fisher, in a letter mailed to Jervis on Thursday, asked her to consider canceling Abu-Jamal's speech.

"It is an affront to the memory of officer (Daniel) Faulkner, his family and all victims of violent crime for your institution to glorify this cop-killer," he wrote.

And in Washington, House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas, took to the House floor on Thursday for a moment of silence to protest the invitation, his press secretary said.

"There is no justifiable reason for an institution of higher learning to have a convicted murderer speak to its students," DeLay said earlier.

DeLay said his "heart goes out" to Maureen Faulkner, widow of the slain officer.

Officials are expecting demon-

strations for and against Abu-Jamal by students, police officers and even Faulkner, who said she plans to attend the commencement carrying a picture of her husband. The college already has been the nationwide focus of talk shows, and is expecting news crews from several national networks at today's ceremony.

"We are doing whatever is necessary to make sure this is a safe and sane ceremony," said Steve Hunstberry, director of police services at Evergreen.

Abu-Jamal, who is on death row in Pennsylvania, has become a *cause célèbre* among opponents of capital punishment, who deny that he committed the killing. He has gathered a large following through his jailhouse writings on race and social justice. Supporters, who include actor Ed Asner and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, have called for a retrial.

Several courts have upheld his conviction, and he has appealed his case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

'Over the line'

Abu-Jamal is not the keynote speaker today. Evergreen faculty member and author Stephanie Coontz will have that honor. But Evergreen's choice of Abu-Jamal even as a secondary speaker has drawn thousands of angry e-mails, calls and letters from all over the country.

Faulkner bought newspaper ads in Olympia, urging students and residents to protest Abu-Jamal's speech. She was flying in Thursday from her home in Southern California.

"I think the Evergreen State College has stepped over the line in making the decision to have this murderer speak," Faulkner said.

However, the student groups that worked to bring Abu-Jamal's speech to campus say the ceremony is a proper forum for his speech.

"He's a renowned journalist and an amazing author," said Kassey Baker, a member of the Prison Action Committee. "They felt he'd make a good commencement speaker . . . a different voice, something other than the generic graduation speech."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.