

The Unabomber Judge

**A Black Track Star Who Hung Up His Cleats to Pursue a
Legal Education**

January, 1998



Garland Burrell Jr.

Inspired by his readings of Malcolm X, a young promising track star at the University of Nevada at Reno decided to go for education rather than sports. After earning a bachelor's, a master's, and a law degree, he became a federal judge. This past winter Garland Burrell Jr. presided over the legal proceedings which led to the guilty plea by Unabomber Theodore J. Kaczynski.

Born on Independence Day in 1947, Garland Burrell Jr. grew up as an inner-city kid in South Central Los Angeles, a community plagued by poverty and gang violence. His father owned a neighborhood liquor store. Guided by his grandmother Lucille Burrell, now 97 years old, the young Garland took a number of odd jobs. He helped out at his aunt's beauty salon, worked for a bricklayer, and served as a delivery boy for Chicken Delight. But his first love was sports. A champion high hurdler in high school, Burrell won an athletic scholarship to the University of Nevada at Reno. It was there that Burrell read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a book that caused him to rearrange his priorities. Burrell read the story of how Malcolm X had educated himself while in prison. Burrell concluded that if Malcolm had become educated in jail, he certainly should be able to educate himself in school.

As a result, Burrell turned away from sports and gave up his athletic scholarship. He returned home and enrolled at California State University in Los Angeles. After graduating with a degree in sociology, Burrell earned a master's degree in social work from the prestigious Washington University in St. Louis. He then went on to study law at the California Western School of Law in San Diego. He earned his law degree in 1976.

After law school Burrell took a position with the district attorney's office in San Diego and later worked as an assistant U.S. attorney. In 1992 he was appointed to the federal bench by President Bush. Today he is the only African-American federal judge in the eastern district of California.

Now 50 years old, Burrell is said to be a meticulous and cautious jurist. Some critics say he is too slow in his rulings. But everyone agrees that Judge Burrell exudes dignity and decorum. He is always in control of his courtroom. Burrell is married with four children. He enjoys chess and practices the Korean martial art taekwondo.

This past winter Judge Burrell presided over the trial of Unabomber Theodore J. Kaczynski. Two of Judge Burrell's rulings were crucial. First, he decided that Kaczynski was competent to stand trial. He then ruled that Kaczynski would not be permitted to defend himself during the criminal proceeding. Denied a forum to showcase his political views, Kaczynski immediately decided to plead guilty. Lawyers on both sides and the jurors who had been seated to hear the case praised Burrell's handling of the proceedings.

Judge Burrell's conservative leanings show in a recent ruling. A month after Kaczynski's guilty plea, Judge Burrell refused to overturn a Sacramento city ordinance which forbids the operation of a strip club within 1,000 feet of a day-care facility.

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