

## **“A law student was pushed down, a radical rose up” – on the death of Michael Ratner**

*Wolfgang Kaleck, 23 May 2016*

The global student movement of 1968 fostered a generation of determined, political lawyers in Germany (as described in the last blog) as well as to a greater extent in the United States. One of the major figures in this scene, [Michael Ratner](#), longstanding president of the US civil rights group the Center for Constitutional Rights ([CCR](#)), passed away on 11 May 2016 in New York.

Ratner’s story is a fascinating one in many respects, partly because it illustrates the different layers of leftwing social movements since the 1970s. As with many of his generation, the war crimes committed on a massive scale by the US army in Vietnam and the resultant protests were a formative part of Ratner’s political and professional career. As a law student at Columbia University he took part in the anti-war protests on campus in 1968. Like many other protesters he was brutally beaten by the police and driven off campus. “A law student was pushed down, a radical rose up,” says Vince Warren, current director of CCR. Ratner had just qualified as a lawyer when he started representing inmates at the Attica prison in New York state, victims of the brutal repression of a 1971 prison uprising – of predominantly black inmates – during which 43 people died.

Ratner could be found not only on the side of black, Puerto Rican and other protest movements in the USA. Together with his colleagues he also sought to use legal tools to stop the US military interventions in Central America.

His finest hour, perhaps, came after 11 September 2001. Like so many New Yorkers, the attacks of that day brought a huge emotional shock. He lived in Greenwich Village and was out jogging when he saw the planes hit the Twin Towers. But unlike many of his compatriots he kept a clear head in the months that followed as the Bush administration declared its “war on terror” and started making use of various illegal practices.

Ratner was one of the first lawyers to respond to the establishment of the US detention center at Guantánamo in early 2002. He was already familiar with Guantánamo from his work in the 1990s fighting the internment at the base of Haitian refugees suspected of being HIV positive. Ratner organized legal representation for the “worst of the worst”, what the Bush administration claimed were the “most dangerous terrorists in the world.” Holding firm to the

principles of the rule of law brought Ratner and CCR plenty of enemies: there were several folders full of hate-mail filed away in his office.

Over a few years CCR was able to organize teams of civil rights attorneys, established law firms and many young lawyers to defend the several hundred Guantánamo detainees. Together they had a victory in [Rasul v. Bush](#), the first of four historic Supreme Court decisions, in which the Court agreed that people suspected of terrorism are entitled to civil and procedural rights. But these judgments have still not been fully implemented. Ratner saw the continued existence of the detention center at Guantánamo as one of his greatest defeats.

The responses to his death make it clear that Ratner's impact went far beyond the courtroom. He mobilized and inspired generations of lawyers, including this author. I was lucky enough to meet Ratner in 2004 and we were colleagues and friends ever since. Another one of Ratner's mentees, David Cole, described him as a "one-man force multiplier" in an [article for the New York Review of Books](#). By involving so many colleagues in his work Ratner inspired many to follow in his footsteps, all the more so since he always steered clear of the egocentric and macho behavior of so many other "star lawyers".