



**For Immediate Release**  
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## **NAACP Legal Defense Fund Statement on the Florida State Legislature's Resolution Exonerating the "Groveland Four"**

On Tuesday, April 18, the Florida State Legislature unanimously passed a resolution apologizing to the families of the "Groveland Four" and officially clearing their names posthumously. NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF) founding Director-Counsel Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg represented one of the four, Walter Irvin, in his appeal up to the Supreme Court. Current President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill issued the following statement in response to the action taken by Florida's legislature:

"The injustice suffered by the Groveland Four nearly 70 years ago can never be fully undone. Nevertheless, as the organization that represented Walter Irvin, LDF commends the Florida State Legislature for making this powerful gesture of reconciliation. We can only address the racial problems of the present if we reckon honestly with the injustices of our past. By apologizing to the families of the Groveland Four and rightly exonerating them of their crimes, the legislature has sent a powerful message of healing and understanding."

In 1949, four Black men from the city of Groveland, Florida – Charles Greenlee, Samuel Shepherd, Walter Irvin, and Ernest Thomas – were falsely accused of raping a white woman. Shortly after the accusation, Thomas was killed by a mob led by the local sheriff, Willis McCall; a local jury sentenced Greenlee, who was just 16, to life in prison, and it condemned Shepherd and Irvin to death.

Gilbert King wrote about the case in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Devil In the Grove*, which included research derived from the LDF archives. As his book details, Shepherd and Irvin appealed their cases all the way to the Supreme Court, which vacated their sentences and ordered a retrial. LDF lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg, took up Irvin's case, despite the pressures of the *Brown v. Board* litigation, which was then underway. (Shepherd was murdered by Sheriff McCall before the retrial could begin.) Irvin's sentence was reduced to life in prison. He was released from prison in 1968 and died two years later.

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*Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation's first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.*