Raid in L.A. Gains Panthers Black Moderates' Support

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LOS ANGELES, Dec. 13—William D. Evans is a 70-year-old, neatly dressed, black businessman who owns four stores across the street from the Central Avenue Black Panther Party headquarters that was raided in a massive police assault last Monday. Surveying the damage to his own property from Panther gunfire, Evans said on the morning after the four-hour shootout:

"I'm not a militant, I'm a law-abiding citizen. But you have to admire a man who is not a majority who takes up for himself. This police thing makes people here more militant."

Robert Hall is the 39-year-old executive vice president of "operation bootstrap," a Negro self-help organization that runs a toy factory, stores and training classes in an area north of Watts. Its motto is "Learn, baby, learn." Hall's lines to the police are so good he can and did get a response to a complaint at the department's highest level in five minutes.

'I Think It's Sick'

But he now says:

"I think it's sick that the police department can harass the black community, beat them up and break in doors. There is another way we can make it, but maybe the Panther way is right.

The Panthers will get more support now. People in this community saw some kids stand up and defend themselves. People are saying, 'Maybe they're wrong, but at least they have guts.' Ministers and politicians are jumping on their bandwagon."

Earl E. Raines, 37, is a lawyer and the executive director of the local NAACP. He says:

"It's no secret that a policeman will knock a Negro down and accuse him of assault. Next time it may be me. It's a total, all-out assault on blacks. We're blacks. The fact that it was the Panthers on Monday is only incidental to what's going on. When the Japanese were put in camps out here (in World War II) everybody stood silent. Now we can't be silent."

So, on Thursday there was Raines, his Urban League counterpart and other leading Negro moderates standing in the bright sunshine on the steps of City Hall, protesting "police repression,' alongside the Panthers' Joan Kelley and Angela Davis, the Communist philosophy professor at UCLA.

Police Wounded

Completely ignored was the fact that Panthers stock guns, urge the killing of "pigs" and have wounded five Los Angeles policemen in the past 16 months.

The most significant consequence of Monday's predawn raid is that the Panthers, for the first time, have won backing from a broad spectrum in the big Los Angeles black community. More importantly, that community now feels threatened by both Washington and the local white authorities.

Monday's raid followed by four days the police raid in Chicago where a Panther leader was allegedly shot in bed.

Before then, the Panthers here were in bad odor in Watts and the even larger Avalon ghetto. In Raines' words, they were regarded "as a bunch of nuts with guns." On the Saturday night before the raid here the Panthers had been routed in a rumble with Central Avenue's "Businessmen's Gang," the dominant band of youths in the area.

But the police have now changed the attitude toward the Panthers and some police officials acknowledge it.

30-Year Veteran

Deputy Chief James G. Fisk is a soft-spoken, gray-haired scholarly veteran of almost 30 years on the force and heads the department's community relations program. He shakes his head and says:

"This has been made to appear as if it is policemen against black people, not policemen against revolutionaries. Then you have a bond of blackness and blackness prevails.

"We're really being whipped by a propaganda warfare. We don't really have the level of trust in the black community. I had thought the issue was really s i m p l e, revolutionaries against non-revolutionaries, but it's not that simple."

Propaganda or fact, the perspective in the dreary stretches of the ghetto is vastly different from that in the handsome, downtown cube that houses police headquarters.

The blacks are unimpressed by the 24 firearms, including sub-machine guns and sawed-off shotguns, the sandbags and the homemade grenades found in the Panthers' shattered two-story office. they are skeptical of the police version that the Panthers fired first, wounding three of the officers attempting to serve search warrants.

Harassment Cited

McArthur Osborne, 27, a Negro hospital orderly who was inspecting the shootout scene said last week:

"I wouldn't open my door at 5:30 in the morning for any police. They have been harassing here for weeks."

The notion that an orderly society can't tolerate private arsenals, that police will inevitably react strongly to any group that has taken a toll of its members does not impress most blacks, many of whom keep weapons for protection against the everyday hazards of ghetto life and are convinced that most police are their enemies.

The elements seen in the Monday raid that have angered and frightened the blacks are these:

- It was conducted before dawn when the streets were deserted and the police could not be watched.
- It was made in force—the ghetto believes 300 officers took 13 Panther men and women from the Central Avenue building.
- The police were brutal, a belief supported by the police prodding of the black onlookers who assembled to watch the shootout and the department's belated acknowledgement that two warning shots were fired inside another house a few miles away where police arrested a half dozen sleeping Panther youths.
- Finally, the raid followed what the ghetto believes was a systematic campaign to harass the Panthers. Area residents say police in the past staged dry runs, surrounding the headquarters with armed men; that police picked up Panthers on trivial charges like jaywalking; and that courts have set high bail for those arrested.

Police Argument

For Inspector John Kinsling, white-haired, 28 years a policeman, all this is a bizarre fantasy. "We're not out to exterminate anybody, harass anybody."

He believes that if his men have killed four Panthers since August, 1968, and wounded six more last Monday, it is because officers were protecting themselves against quick-firing suspects. He says any raid on armed suspects should be made in the small hours to minimize danger to bystanders and preserve "the element of surprise." There was no massive invasion of white police in the black community, he says, since no more than 120 men were assigned to pick up suspects at three separate locations

Warning shots are against department policy, he says, since innocent persons could be hurt. But he adds that the police are understandably jumpy. The police simply could not ignore the gun cache on Central Avenue Kinsling insists. "This is not

something you can say will just go away."

The Los Angeles police are far too professional Kinsling declares, to harbor feelings of revenge. "I'm not really fond of the Black Panthers," he says. "All I want is for them to leave me alone and I'll leave them alone. If they're violating the law, I'll take action. I would go out of my way to avoid trouble. But I'm not going to let them browbeat me."

Deputy Chief Fisk, however, says he is convinced that the Panthers are part of "a conspiracy to destroy our government." He takes at face value their revolutionary rhetoric and insists that unnamed white plotters are "providing leadership behind the scenes."

In Fisk's view, it makes no difference how many Panther leaders are jailed because their white masters "won't let it die."

The raids have put away several of the local Panther leaders, notably the local defense minister, Robert Freeman, and Elmer Pratt, who likes to be called "G" and holds a position in the national hierarchy. Joan Kelley is free. So is John Washington, the local field secretary or organizer, and so is Elaine Brown, a talented singer and deputy minister of communications.

Little Difference

It is not clear that there is much difference between leaders and the handful of rank and file, anyway. Miss Kelley, 20, whose hairdo is natural and who wears the black leather coat, black blouse and skirt and black stockings that Panther ladies affect, abruptly descibes her philosophy as "Marxist-Leninist-nigger."

She says that Panthers "aspire to be Communists like Kim Il-sung (North Korea's premier (and Ho Chi-minh." She translates comunism to mean "concern for the people and love." Like other Panthers, she believes that free breakfasts for ghetto children—a Panther project—is "socialistic."

What binds Panthers, literate an dnot, is an almost suicidal wish to demonstrate that police are brutal toward blacks, that blacks can't defend themselves without guns, that even this is defeating and that only community-controlled police can protect the ghetto.

It is this message that is finding receptive ears in the most conservative quarters of the black community. Rightly or wrongly, Monday's raid has badly frightened many of the 600,000 Negroes in Los Angeles County.

They believe—and authoritative sources have confirmed it—that Mayor Sam Yorty, the FBI and the state attorney general's office were all notified in advance of what was coming.

They know that moderate black leaders were not consulted. They now fear that they share a common plight with the Panthers.