

'The blackest white man I know'

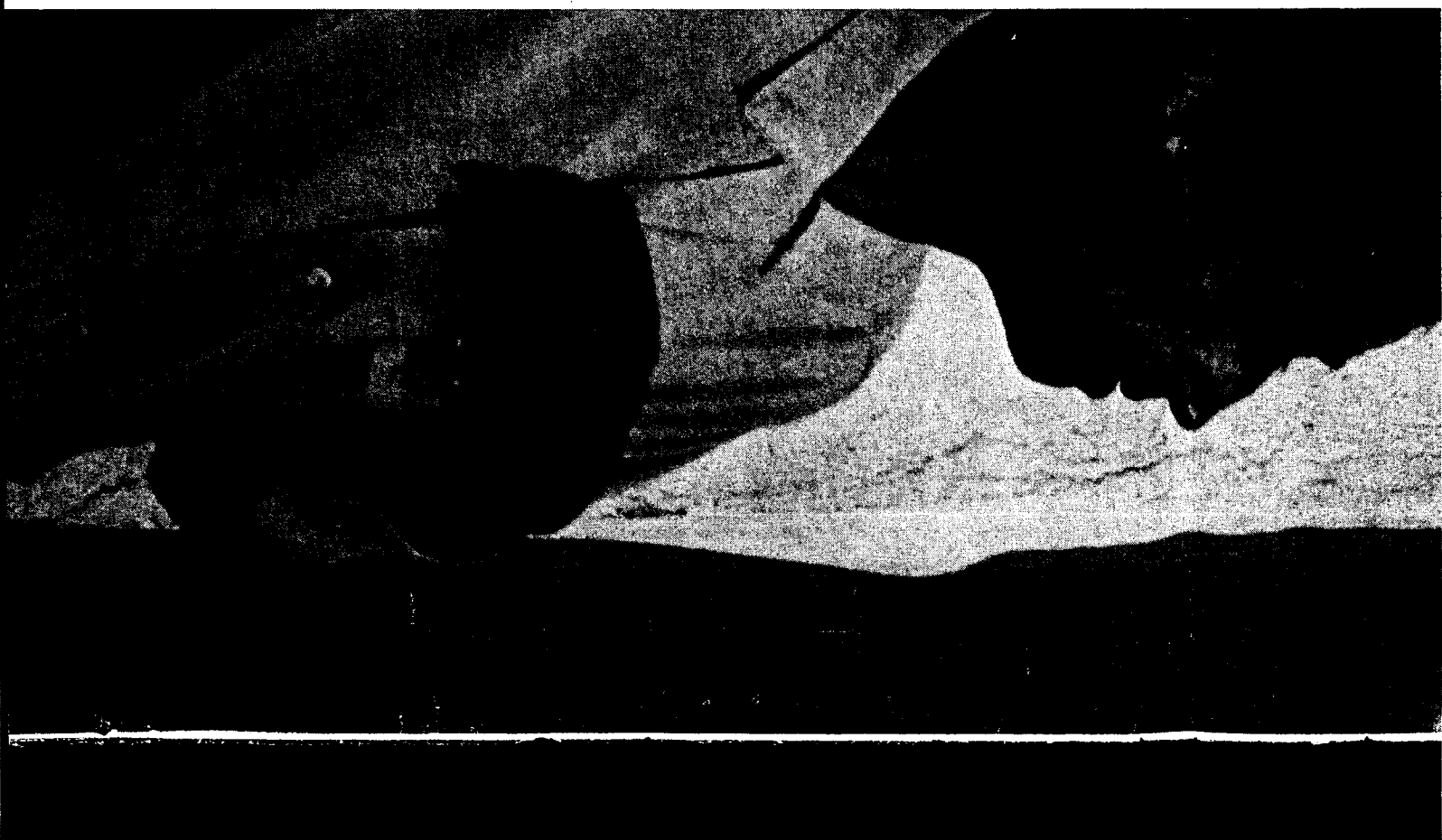
**Civil Rights Lawyer William Kunstler
is soul brother to radicals of many colors**



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In Albuquerque, Lawyer Kunstler (*far right*) listens to a defense witness. In a Newburgh, N.Y. courtroom (*above*), he discusses case with George Fleming (*left*) and fellow students who took over their high school principal's office.





ing had even been held in contempt of court for refusing to speak white man's English on the witness stand—he answered questions in ghetto slang. Yet his lawyer is a white man, age 50, William Moses Kunstler. The reason is, says Fleming, "He's the blackest white man I ever saw. He can be trusted."

This trust has come from nearly 10 years of close involvement with civil rights, from Martin Luther King and the Freedom Riders in the South to Malcolm X and Rap Brown. Today Kunstler's clients include Black Panthers, black school districts in New York, Adam Clayton Powell. His defense of causes as radical as these has made him probably the most sought-after civil rights lawyer in the country.

He receives no fees from most of his clients but is financed by a number of private, anonymous donors. What Kunstler gives to the cases is a fierce personal commitment and a furious work-pace, handling as many as 20 active cases simultaneously. In the courtroom, arguing strenuously in his resonant baritone voice, he often resorts to histrionics. "I am really a frustrated actor," he admits.

He is also a frustrated poet. As a premedical student at Yale, he was less interested in chemistry than in the Dylan Thomas books he sold to pay his way through school. Only after the Army, in which he rose from private to major and was decorated with a Bronze Star, did he finish law school and enter private practice in New York City.

Ever since, his combative, theatrical style, in addition to his undisguised sympathy for radicals in general, has provoked the criticism of some judges and others. But Kunstler refuses to mellow, and even continues to encourage demonstrations outside courthouses.

In conversations with LIFE Reporter Richard Busch, Kunstler on the following pages discusses four of his recent cases, and his philosophy of radicalism in America.



Young black militants want above all to assert their blackness in every way. To prove it, a student like 18-year-old George Fleming has even been held in contempt of court for refusing to speak white man's English on the witness stand—he answered questions in ghetto slang. Yet his lawyer is a white man, age 50, William Moses Kunstler. The reason is, says Fleming, "He's the blackest white man I ever saw. He can be trusted."

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didn't get to the root of the problem in the U.S.—the slow psychological death that was crippling black people everywhere.

Dr. King's nonviolent campaign was basically contradictory, because it was only when violence did occur that he met with any success at all. His three most notable campaigns—Birmingham, St. Augustine and Selma—were victorious mainly because of the violence created by his adversaries. I think he finally realized—at least he expressed himself to me—that he was fast losing his hold on any type of leadership of black people.

Violence seems to be the only thing we understand. The system will not yield without a fight, and it will react only if the people with the power begin to fear those who have nothing to lose.

But who makes the decision as to what is a legal use of force? The czar or the Bolsheviks, the American revolutionaries or the crown? Some segments of the black community have realized this and they are saying, quite openly and frankly, "We are going to stand and fight back, we will defend our community and ourselves."

It's the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Let's never forget those last three words.

NEWBURGH REBELS

On April 23, George Fleming and two friends, students at Newburgh Free Academy in Newburgh, N.Y. took over their principal's office with unloaded BB guns.

All three were given 15 days in jail. In addition, Fleming in court was held in contempt four times for using "black, ghetto American" instead of the white man's language, for walking off the witness stand and for brandishing an exhibit gun at the guards. Says Kunstler:

George Fleming and his friends took over the office because their previous request—for an annual Martin Luther King Day, an annual Malcolm X assembly, and

the figure of an angry black man who was not afraid to stand up and speak his mind until the bullets stopped him. And that's what happened. And it was Malcolm who paved the way for the George Flemings of 1969.

As Malcolm was, George is willing to fight back. He could have taken the witness stand and apologized for what he did and say, "I was wrong and I'll never do it again." But he would have been destroyed as a man. Our society fears most those black people who are George Flemings—who manifest an overt hatred for a system that has produced such a miserable life for so many black people in this country.

George wanted to speak in ghetto language because English is not his native tongue. The black man was brought to this country speaking a multitude of tongues. He was forced to speak English, to adopt other names, to believe in a white religion with a white Christ and a white God and a white heaven.

George wanted to express his own feeling that he was entitled to traditions of his own. And I think he did it beautifully. He paid for it with four contempt of court and an extra 15 days in jail, but I think he was perfectly willing to do that. That's a small price to pay. Other black men are dying or being exiled to obtain this same result. I don't think these actions are going to bring about any great changes overnight, or in one generation or maybe in 10 generations. But it does go a long way toward making a George Fleming—who is the wave of the future—at least feel that he's a man.

THE ALIANZA

Reies Lopez Tijerina is the leader of the Spanish-American political party in New Mexico called Alianza which is claiming areas of land that have been under dispute since the Mexican War. In 1967 he led an armed raid on a small-town courthouse.

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George Fleming and his friends took over the office because their previous request—for an annual Martin Luther King Day, an annual Malcolm X assembly, and in-city busing for ghetto residents—were largely ignored by officials.

This kind of inaction causes people like George to have little faith that the existing system is interested in helping the black man, or even cares about him at all. They have seen their leaders assassinated and they have witnessed the recent treatment of their Panther brothers all across the country.

Malcolm X symbolized for them

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As a result of a recent confrontation between him and the police, his bail on a previous charge was revoked. At the hearing, the judge ruled that Tijerina was a threat to the community and should remain in prison without bail. The case is now on its way to the Supreme Court.

During the revocation hearing a state policeman named Gilliland testified that he had never seen

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