

CRAWDODDAH

CIA LEAVES IT TO CLEAVER

by Stew Albert

A committee of prominent liberals including Bayard Rustin, Julian Bond and Nat Hentoff is rallying to the support of Eldridge Cleaver, former Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, bestselling author, presidential candidate, and clothing designer, who has come back to the land he once called Babylon, no longer a proud revolutionary.

Cleaver was driven into exile because of events which transpired in Oakland on April 6, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King was murdered. He was arrested after a gun-blazing confrontation with the police in which a 17-year-old Panther, Bobby Hutton, lost his life. Cleaver later jumped bail, claiming his innocence, and for a time all letters I received from him were signed "the ghost of Bobby Hutton." Why has Eldridge given up this ghost? After eight years on the lam, he speaks with rabbinic about the wonders of Zionism, declares black people have more freedom in white-dominated Rhodesia than black-ruled Uganda, and writes that Cuba is more treacherously racist than the Republic of South Africa.

Eldridge has been very open about his new political views. He favors a large military budget to protect America against the "dangerous designs of Russia and Cuba" and he's worried because the Watergate crisis dealt an "irreparable blow" to the power and prestige of the American presidency.

Is he crazy? Does he really believe this America Firstism? I think Cleaver is a centrist at heart. He went into Third World exile expecting to be treated like some mixture of head of state and revolutionary general when he received subsidies for food and clothing but no parole or guns. He turned sour. Eldridge came to Cuba, a former Havana associate told me, "expecting to be treated

like Che Guevara and given his own Army. The Cubans wanted time to check him out and see how he acted in their country. This bruised his enormous ego, and he started having loud, all-night parties in his apartment, just to spite the Cubans assigned to him who were paying his rent."

"Eldridge's new liberal establishment friends can't really trust him," opines another old Cleaver watcher. "They know the Cubans and Arabs treated him with real

some visiting Americans just when Cleaver sided with the CIA—before or after his Cuban sojourn.

Is Eldridge cooperating with the police authorities? Or is he now playing a strange double game of counter-intelligence, first to infiltrate and then burn down the plantation? Looking for an answer, I searched out Cleaver's former associates in New York and San Francisco. "Eldridge fired me as his attorney," declared Charles



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generosity and now look how he's badmouthing those countries. So why should the Albert Shakers and Bayard Rustins face any better?"

When I discussed Havana with Eldridge while visiting him in Algeria in 1971, he referred to Cuba as "The Rock" (after Alcatraz Prison) and called a Cuban official "my parole officer" but he never called Cuba "racist" and most of his complaints had to do with the absence of luxury items in Cuban department stores. Not used to ingratitude from well-cared-for guests, the Cubans began asking American radicals if Eldridge was a CIA agent. Fidel Castro recently asked

Garry, the noted San Francisco lawyer. "He did it in writing from Paris. Now he's saying I abandoned him—that's a load of shit." (Except for Garry, nobody wished to be identified, explaining that as much as they disagreed with Cleaver's present political views, they did not wish to harm his legal defense. "Whatever he changes," one declared, "no white jury has a right to try him.")

Several people mentioned corresponding regularly with Cleaver in Paris, during which time he maintained his old political beliefs. (I even received a trans-Atlantic call from him, strongly sup-

porting the SLA); then he broke off all connections, moving to the south of France. Shortly after this, he decided to return voluntarily to an American prison. This was something, he once told me in a letter from Paris. "I will never do. I will never return to America on my knees like Leary. I'm willing to return for a trial but I have to be out on bail before the trial, being a free citizen like everyone else."

Another item in the Eldridge mystery is his friendship with Giscard d'Estaing, the president of the French Republic. It was Giscard (Cleaver informed me in a letter) who arranged for his asylum in France. According to Paris eye-witnesses, Eldridge and Giscard were social friends and on one occasion Cleaver referred to this conservative politician as a "genius." The view publicly circulated of Cleaver's Paris exile being one of lonely and naive desperation doesn't square with what old friends know of his real "French Connection." Cleaver isn't talking about Giscard these days but old friends want to know if the French Prez played any role in negotiating his surrender.

Although the majority of old comrades believe Cleaver is now a political enemy, there are still some who have faith in the man's intentions.

"Eldridge is just another rat," said former Panther brother. "He won't catch—he's just going to hustle his way out of prison and make a lot of easy money from the liberals. As they go by the Machiavellian, he's full with his own damnings, although I've kept desperately hoping his declarations just get what."

In truth, nobody really knows what the man will do once threatened by Richard Nixon's head of state. Perhaps he's charitable, he doesn't even know himself. ■