

The Great Panther Hunt

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

We Americans are mixed up in so many killings, it's not easy to separate out the routine hits from the important ones. Anybody with half a brain, however, can see the offing of Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party by the forces of law and order was the most significant rub-out of 1969, a year that is making a late calendar effort to equal the carnage of 1968.

Until the gunsels gave it to Hampton in his bed, there had been two liberation movements in the black American world. There had been the one we liberal white people called "responsible" and "moderate" and the other which we spoke of as "militant," "radical" and "irresponsible." That's over.

Once Ralph David Abernathy wouldn't have been caught within miles of a Black Panther. The other day he went to Fred Hampton's funeral and spoke words of consolation over the man's body. Black Congressmen of the stripe who'd fidget and look quiet when Rap Brown's name came up are demanding the Great Panther Hunt be called off.

This is going to confuse white people who've been told that the Panther is a predatory carnivore in a land of herbivorous ungulates. To us whites, Panthers are gangsters, Communists, murderers and racists; we believe Panthers are very dangerous people who must be disarmed immediately at all costs.

But the situation created by the latest shooting and killing in Chicago and Los Angeles is so bad we must make an effort to drop our ethnocentrism and try to imagine how a black person might look at what's happening. We look at each of these police attacks as a unique case, just as we look at Mylai as an "isolated incident." It doesn't occur to us that a black man might see a pattern in what's going on.

He will remember the Marcus Garvey liberation movement of the 1920s and the Black Muslim movement of the 1950s, both important and promising efforts at the political organization of the urban black poor by blacks themselves without hidden white financial support and control. Both movements were smashed by the white government.

We whites buy the Los Angeles police department's explanation of the attack the other day on the grounds the Panthers in the apartment had guns and fought back. A black person might remember the infantry attack launched by the L.A.P.D. in 1965 against The Honorable Elijah Muhammad's temple there. The assault, also near dawn, included firing nobody knows how many rounds of machine gun ammunition in the place. When it was over no guns were found.

You don't have to be a fanatic or a Communist or an irresponsible militant to conclude that, if the police are going to attack you with machine guns when you're unarmed, you'd do as well to try to defend yourself. In

fact, a nonwhite person might decide, after comparing Chicago with Los Angeles, that it was the guns that saved the people's lives.

Consider that in Chicago there is serious reason to doubt that Hampton was armed or ready to shoot back. (The police contend he was, but police testimony about killing black radicals ought not to be given too much weight.) So Hampton—possibly unarmed—may have been burst in on and slaughtered in his bed, while in Los Angeles, where the Panthers fought, that battle went on till daylight and enough people had gathered to see and be witnesses to any murdering of unarmed men.

Some people will read this and say the writer is encouraging people to pick up guns and shoot policemen. He is not. He is as absolutely against citizens murdering policemen as he is against policemen murdering citizens. It's wrong, unlawful, insane and tragic. What we are discussing here is how it can come to pass that men would do such things.

We well-to-do white people, when we're in a serious jam, we get ourselves a lawyer, we go to court and we sue. Black people don't have money for that and if they did, getting justice or protection from these white courts is a very iffy proposition. The white-controlled mechanisms of protection have been notably ineffective in keeping lower-class black leaders alive and well: Dr. Martin Luther King (murdered), Medgar Evers (murdered), Malcolm X (murdered), Eldridge Cleaver

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(exiled), Stokely Carmichael (exiled), Robert Williams (exiled, returned and now jailed), Bobby Seale (jailed). The Panthers alone claim that 28 of their top people have been murdered in the last couple of years and there's no strong prima facie reason to disbelieve them, but these are the big famous names or the members of relatively large and well-known organizations. There are countless episodes of repression and violence that either go unreported or only get a couple of lines in the back of the paper. For example in September in Camden, N. J., the cops raided a garment factory run by the Black People's Unity Movement, smashed their sewing machines and put their leader in jail.

The best thing that could happen is that Attorney General Mitchell would get his mojo going and do what he's paid for instead of the opposite. Fat chance. So how are black politicals going to get protection? Perhaps the best thing would be for rich, white kids to be bed down in every Panther apartment and headquarters so that the cops will have to shoot through them to get at the black cats. This was what was done in the South during the Civil Rights Movement era and it unquestionably saved a lot of black lives. Even a cracker from the Justice Department is going to think a little before he messes with a young Dupont or Rockefeller.

If this killing and jailing and beating doesn't stop, the blacks are going to shoot back. If their lower-class political organizations are smashed, they'll do it under the guise of conventional crime. This is already happening. The urban crime that the government is unable to prevent is actually an individualized, unorganized form of guerilla warfare conducted by people with little political consciousness but an overwhelming hatred for the circumstances under which they must live.

Hundreds of thousands of young black men are grow-

ing up in the cities without the Southern tradition of subservience which bred a self-hatred that caused black men to kill each other. They will fight lawnmorder and they will be joined by a certain number of whites. The results will be catastrophic for everyone. Such will surely happen unless we white men learn that how we see ourselves isn't necessarily how we are. We've been told the truth about ourselves often enough but we never listen. Nearly a hundred years ago, Sitting Bull, the great Indian chief, said it right and said it straight at the Powder River Council:

"Behold, my brothers, the spring has come; the earth has received the embraces of the sun and we shall soon see the results of that love.

"Every seed is awakened and so has all animal life. It is through this mysterious power that we too have our being, and therefore we yield to our neighbors, even our animal neighbors, the same right as ourselves, to inhabit this land.

"Yet, hear me, people, we have now to deal with another race—small and feeble when our fathers first met them but now great and overbearing. Strangely enough they have a mind to till the soil and the love of possession is a disease with them. These people have made many rules that the rich may break but the poor may not. They take tithes from the poor and weak to support the rich and those who rule. They claim this mother of ours, the earth, for their own and fence their neighbors away; they deface her with their buildings and their refuse. That nation is like a spring freshet that overruns its banks and destroys all who are in its path.

"We cannot dwell side by side. Only seven years ago we made a treaty by which we were assured that the buffalo country should be left to us forever. Now they threaten to take that away from us. My brothers, shall we submit or shall we say to them: 'First kill me before you take possession of my Fatherland . . .'"