

The Panthers and the Police

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The Black Panthers and the police have been engaged in a kind of urban guerrilla warfare in many cities, with deaths and injuries on both sides. In the wake of shootouts this month in Chicago and Los Angeles, hard feelings have intensified. Questions about police behavior are being raised by moderate black spokesmen who have no use for the revolutionary philosophy of the Panthers or their strident rhetoric. How much of what was done was legitimate law enforcement? How much was an effort by police officers to "get" the Panthers whom they hate with a passion?

The carnage has been terrible. The Panthers claim that 28 of their number have been slain by police in the last two years and charge that they are being systematically exterminated by the authorities with the encouragement of the national administration. The ACLU has released a chronology of incidents in 16 different cities, listing the casualty toll since October 28, 1967 as 12 Panthers killed and 12 wounded and three police killed and 24 injured.

Under the circumstances, there is much to be said for an "orderly, dispassionate inquiry" by a citizens' group headed by former Supreme Court Justice Arthur J. Goldberg. NAACP Director Roy Wilkins and former Attorney General Ramsey Clark. We need to know, for example, whether the police shot first in Chicago to kill two Panther leaders or whether the police were merely responding to a shotgun blast through a door. Examination of the bullet holes suggest that the first shooting came from the outside. In view of that, a Chicago police inquiry will not suffice; nor would an inquiry by the Department of Justice be regarded as sufficiently dispassionate.

One wonders, for instance, why the Chicago police, armed with search warrants as well as guns, and alert to the possibility that a shootout might occur, failed to take tear gas along in case they encountered resistance.

There are also some broad questions that the citizens' group should undertake to answer. What is behind the Panthers' policy of stockpiling guns and barricading their headquarters with sandbags

and steel plates? To what extent—if any—were they driven to take these drastic actions out of fear of the police? Does police hostility around the country give substance to the Panther charge that there is a national campaign under way to eradicate them by any means, legal or extra-legal? One is reluctant to accept such a conspiratorial explanation of what is happening, but recent events have given added currency to the Panther charge and it needs to be examined.

The committee also might want to find out what basis there is for the dramatic statement of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that the Panthers represent "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" among what he calls the "violence-prone black extremist groups." On the basis of that evaluation, he has secured authority from Attorney General John Mitchell to tap Panther telephones and the FBI has infiltrated Panther units.

The Panthers' conviction that the police are out to exterminate them may be one of those self-fulfilling prophecies of doom which inevitably pit police and Panthers against each other in armed shootouts. The Panthers obviously feel threatened by the police, believing that they are "agents" of the established order under instructions to beat, shoot, and kill to protect the system. So the Panthers arm to protect themselves and announce that they are prepared to act in reprisal to kill police. The Panthers become police targets and the shootouts follow. It hardly matters today what touched them off at the beginning of it all. The problem now is how to end it. The existence of hostile armed units of any kind within our midst cannot be tolerated, regardless of their racial or ideological origin.

It is equally important that the police hold the confidence of ordinary citizens, black as well as white. In coping with the Panther threat, police must find effective, but legal means to do their job—and without carnage. The citizens inquiry is sorely needed to provide a clear explanation of what happened, why it happened and how to prevent it from happening again.