

Poster

Who Are The Panthers?

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

"Soon as the pig jacked that round off, Huey jacked a round off. And the brother next to Huey jacked a round off and another brother jacked a round off, and another. And the only sound the pig heard was, clack-cup, clack-cup, clack-cup, clack-cup, clack-cup, clack-cup, right down the line. The sheriff looked at these Panthers jacking these rounds off, took his shotgun, ejected his round out of the chamber, locked his shotgun back up, got in his car and drove away."

From *Seize The Time*, by Bobby Seale, Random House, 1970.

This is the picture that Bobby Seale most ardently wants to draw, the armed black man defending his community against the porcine might of status quo. Whites have bought the general idea that this is what the Panthers are about, but with certain changes in the design. To most whites, Panthers are armed black men all right, but they're also racist aggressors.

This argument over whether the Panthers are who they say they are or who the whites say they are has sopped up so much attention that no one has energy left to marvel that the Panthers have come into existence, or what they might hold out toward solving our excruciating racial impasse. Against all the odds, without money and with ferocious opposition, the beginnings of a plebeian black political organization has been established.

Even if there are only 2,000 or 1,000 or 500 party members, in the whole nation, the poorest, the semi-criminal of black men have made a useful social instrument for themselves. These are the baddest hard-core black men for whom Moynihan prescribes malign neglect, whom social workers decry as hard to reach, the unemployables, the detached, young, single, black male.

Now they've made the beginnings of an organization for themselves, an organization of importance beyond its actual numbers because it can inspire and direct many, many thousands of young black men and women who have no formal contact with it.

The fact of the Panthers is an accomplishment. Political organizations, even primitive ones, cost large amounts of money to start up and maintain. The reason so many American elections are personality contests between competing reactionaries is that nobody else can afford to play. That's what makes the Panthers remarkable, a political group started by poor, young, black men.

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They did it without religious hocus-pocus which even Malcolm, until close to the end of his life, thought was necessary for organizing in the ghetto. They made it straight political. They were not like some of these black juvenile gangs which get politicized or at least get a political front when they make contact with a sympathetic social worker or clergyman.

Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Panthers, followed the first law of heterodox politics by beginning his movement at the point of his young constituency's greatest concern: the cops.

"At the very beginning of the Party," writes Bobby Seale, the Panther Chairman, "Huey had done a lot of research in law books . . . We were very aware of the laws related to illegal possession of weapons, so that we wouldn't get caught in the snares and traps of the system . . . Huey was running down that the law says that every man has the right to arm himself, by the second Amendment of the jive-ass Constitution of the United States."

This dramatic, frightening, but seemingly legal gimmick of patrolling after the Oakland police, worked. When a police officer would say to Huey Newton, "What are you doing with the guns? Huey would answer back, "What are you doing with *your* gun?"

Eventually, as with all balance of terror strategies, the bellicose stalemate was broken by gunfire. Newton is now in the penitentiary for killing a policeman after a trial that left many unconvinced of his guilt. Elsewhere there is no doubt that police officers and Panthers have been killing each other.

Nevertheless, these acts of defiance and defense inspired many young black people whose growing up

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had taught them they were waste material in the society with so little power that not even rioting, not even burning down whole city blocks would frighten or convince the rich whites it would be prudent to make a few minor adjustments in the social order. (If you doubt that, consider the Attorney General flying to Mississippi after the killing of the two black students at Jackson State and giving a speech to a group of seggy white businessmen.)

The Party's beginning was ad hocish, pragmatic rather than doctrinaire: "When we got all through writing the program, Huey said, 'We've got to have some kind of structure. What do you want to be,' he asked me, 'Chairman or Minister of Defense?'

"Doesn't make any difference to me,' I said. 'I'll be the Minister of Defense,' Huey said, 'and you'll be the Chairman,' and that's just the way that shit came about," writes Bobby Seale in the casual manner in which it probably did take place.

The Party is quasi-military in its organization; that it should be so is explicable by the fact that most young, black men's knowledge of large organizations is confined to the army. They've been kept out of the political parties, the large corporations, the unions, so the military way is the only way they know.

Huey P. Newton, who must be a remarkable man, kept the infant party from going the route of the black cultural nationalists or the anti-white hate crazies. To the one Newton said dashikis and naturals are nice but somewhat beside the central point; to the other his message was that white racists must be destroyed, but not all white men are racists, so where you can work with them, do so. The Panthers did, combining with the California Peace and Freedom Party in several elections.

Much of this direction seems to come from the Panther leadership's growing absorption of Marxism of one sort or another. The mere word—Marxism—sends Americans up the wall; the thought of a Marxist political party is insupportable, and often with good reason when you review the unhappy record of Marxist politics in many countries of Eastern Europe, but there is at least one apparent exception in Yugoslavia, and, in the West, Italy and France have shown that countries Americans consider free and democratic can get along with very large Marxist parties.

Any party that is at all seriously influenced by Marxist thinking can't be a riotous amalgam of race hatred and nihilistic incendiarism. All kinds of Marxism, erroneous or not, represent a rational effort to understand human society and improve on it. Marxists, like capitalists, discipline themselves to further their program. They do this if they are outright revolutionaries or ambiguous, literary ones who use the word revolution in the indefinitely postponed sense that Christians speak of the Second Coming.

These tendencies are seen among the Panther leaders in the last few years. They preach against drugs and drinking; they expel members who hold up delicatessens; they discourage rioting and aimless trashing of downtown business districts and they even talk against using some of those words that set prudes yowling about good taste: "The racism and oppression of black people, from history to this very day, has caused this word 'motherbleeper' to be part of the vernacular of the ghetto . . . But Huey was one not to use it much at all. He says people, especially the older people, won't listen to the real program of the party if we use street language."

The Panthers, as Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton would want them to be, are the best that white rulers of America are going to get, better than they deserve. Here the Panthers are, even willing to clean up their language, but no political party that comes from the black *lumpen proletariat* is going to agree with the two conservative white ones. If the leaders of these two parties mean—when they talk about responsible dissent or however it is they say it—that no other political expression will be tolerated, then we're finished.

Like it or not the Panthers have shown a willingness to work within the political and legal system—not the social and economic one—so now it is up to the system to let them, to encourage them, to help them do so. For the black poor organized by anybody, Marxists, Stalinists, Maoists is infinitely preferable to what we've got now.

You can negotiate with a Communist—Mr. Nixon is doing it at Vienna now, Henry Ford does it—but nobody can reach an agreement with an undirected, suicidally angry, young black man with a Molotov cocktail or the point of a shiv in your gut.