

Panthers Climb In Influence

By Richard Harwood

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OAKLAND, Calif. — Early each morning in Oakland, San Francisco, Chicago and other cities across the land, cadres of the Black Panther party take up the humdrum chores of revolution.

They serve breakfast and propaganda to school children. They collect and distribute old clothes. They stand on street corners hawking the weekly Panther newspaper with its gory tales of "fascist oppression" and its revolutionary catechisms. They read and memorize the works of Communist China's Mao Tse-tung and North Korea's Kim Il Sung. They make speeches, harangue the mass media and go out into suburbia to explain themselves and "scientific socialism" to nervous white liberals. Now and then, they pick up guns to kill people and to be killed in return.

They are lionized by the white radicals of the New Left, feared by the black middle class, harassed by police and regarded by the FBI as a grave threat to the internal security of the United States—a judgment enthusiastically shared by the chief of staff of the Black Panther Party, David Hilliard.

"It is not rhetoric," he declares, "to say that this government is oppressive and that it will be overthrown. They should take these words very seriously.

"The oppressed have always outnumbered the oppressors and these are not just words and metaphors. We have history on our side. This system could be overthrown without a shot being fired. But I think the revolution will be violent because the people in power do not want it peaceful. It may take 20 years but the revolution will win."

Hilliard and the Panthers already have gone a long way down the revolutionary road. Three years ago, they were an obscure handful of young men

dressed up like commandos for an ingenious publicity stunt—a march on the California State Capitol to test their right to bear arms. They called themselves the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense but it was a "party" in name only. They had no money, no organization and no popular following.

Today, like Vice President Spiro Agnew, the Panthers are a household word. They have chapters and branches in 22 cities and in three of the boroughs of New York. They have produced, in their brief existence, a constellation of folk heroes and martyrs whose names are known throughout the world—Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, Fred Hampton, Li'l Bobby Hutton. They have introduced new images and words into the common language of the young American masses—"pig" (for policeman), "right on," "all power to the people."

They dominate, whenever they choose, the caucuses of the Left. They have provoked police departments to violence in major cities across the



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An unidentified guard in a Detroit Black Panther headquarters into which newsmen were invited after an abortive police raid.

country. They have entered into personal diplomacy with revolutionary parties and governments around the world—in Cuba, Algeria, North Korea, China and North Vietnam, the Arab guerrillas of Al Fatah in the Middle East.

"We are," Hilliard says, "a part of the world revolution. Our struggle is merely one link in the worldwide revolution. The enemies of U.S. imperialism are our friends."

Death, Prison or Exile

IT HAS NOT BEEN EASY for the Panthers. Their difficulties are symbolized by Hilliard, a slender, intense man of 27 who eats and sleeps irregularly and who carries around a lot of burdens these days.

He has been indicted by the federal government for threatening the life of President Nixon in the course of a speech at a San Francisco peace rally on Nov. 15: "We will kill Richard Nixon, we will kill any that stands in the way of our freedom."

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His corevolutionists are similarly afflicted. Huey P. Newton, the party's minister of defense, is in prison in California for killing an Oakland policeman. The minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, is in self-exile in Algeria to avoid prosecution for parole violation. The party chairman, Bobby Seale, has been sentenced to four years in prison for contempt of a federal court and awaits trial in New Haven, Conn., for allegedly ordering the murder of a Panther from New York. The list of dead Panthers is even longer. Of the 11 positions in the party's ruling Central Committee, only four are presently filled by Panthers still in circulation.

There also have been difficulties in recent months with the party's rank and file, which is thought to have never numbered more than 3,000 or 4,000. Substantial numbers of Panthers (Hilliard won't say how many) have been expelled for unacceptable behavior—drug use, "petty banditry" and other violations of the party's 26 rules of conduct.

In addition, infiltration of the party by criminals and police informers became so widespread, Hilliard said, that new members are no longer being accepted. The party's treasury — fed by donations and sales of newspapers, records and posters — has been depleted by the drain of legal fees and bail bonds.

Finally, the party has had serious image problems. Its identification in the popular mind as an organization set up, as one writer put it, "explicitly for the murder of policemen" has been hurtful. Its support of the Arab states against Israel in the Middle East has turned off potential Jewish sympathizers. Its harsh and violent rhetoric, its contempt for "peaceful demonstrations" have alienated segments of the white peace movement.

"People don't relate to us as much as we want," Hilliard says, "but we have 400 years of whitewash to overcome."

To speed this process, the Panthers have adopted the technique of education by exposure.

Hilliard explains that the killing of Panthers in shootouts with police is a valuable if unfortunate "example" for the American masses. It demonstrates, he says, the "repressive" character of the police and the "fascist" character of the American state. (Thus far, between a dozen and 30 Panthers have been killed in these confrontations; the exact number is in dispute. The police toll, according to the FBI, has been seven killed and 120 injured.)

Influence on Community

THE GAGGING of Bobby Seale (for disruptions) at his federal conspiracy trial in Chicago demonstrates, Hilliard says, the "repressive" nature of the courts and their unwillingness to give justice to black men.

The free breakfast program of the Panthers — involving small but symbolically important numbers of school children — is designed to "expose a capitalist system that sends satellites to the moon but doesn't solve the problems of hunger."

"The one thing this system can't stand," says Hilliard, "is exposure. And that is what we are doing by our examples."

Even art is used as "example" in the Panther design for revolution. Emory Douglas, the party's minister of culture and cartoonist for the Panther newspaper, has written: "We, the Black Panther artists, draw deadly pictures of the enemy — pictures that show him at his death door or dead — his bridges are blown up in our pictures — his institutions are destroyed — and in the end he is lifeless. We try to create an atmosphere for the vast

majority of black people — who aren't readers but activists — through their observation of our work, they feel they have the right to destroy the enemy."

The success of the Panthers in creating community support through "example" has never been accurately explored. Hilliard maintains that they have achieved the status of a "mass party. The most clear-cut indication of that is our continued existence."

Percy Moore, the black director of the federal community action programs in Oakland, finds evidence to support Hilliard's judgment. "Their major strength," he says, "is as a community influence. They are able to identify issues and rally support from both black and white . . . Obviously, they are able to raise money . . ."

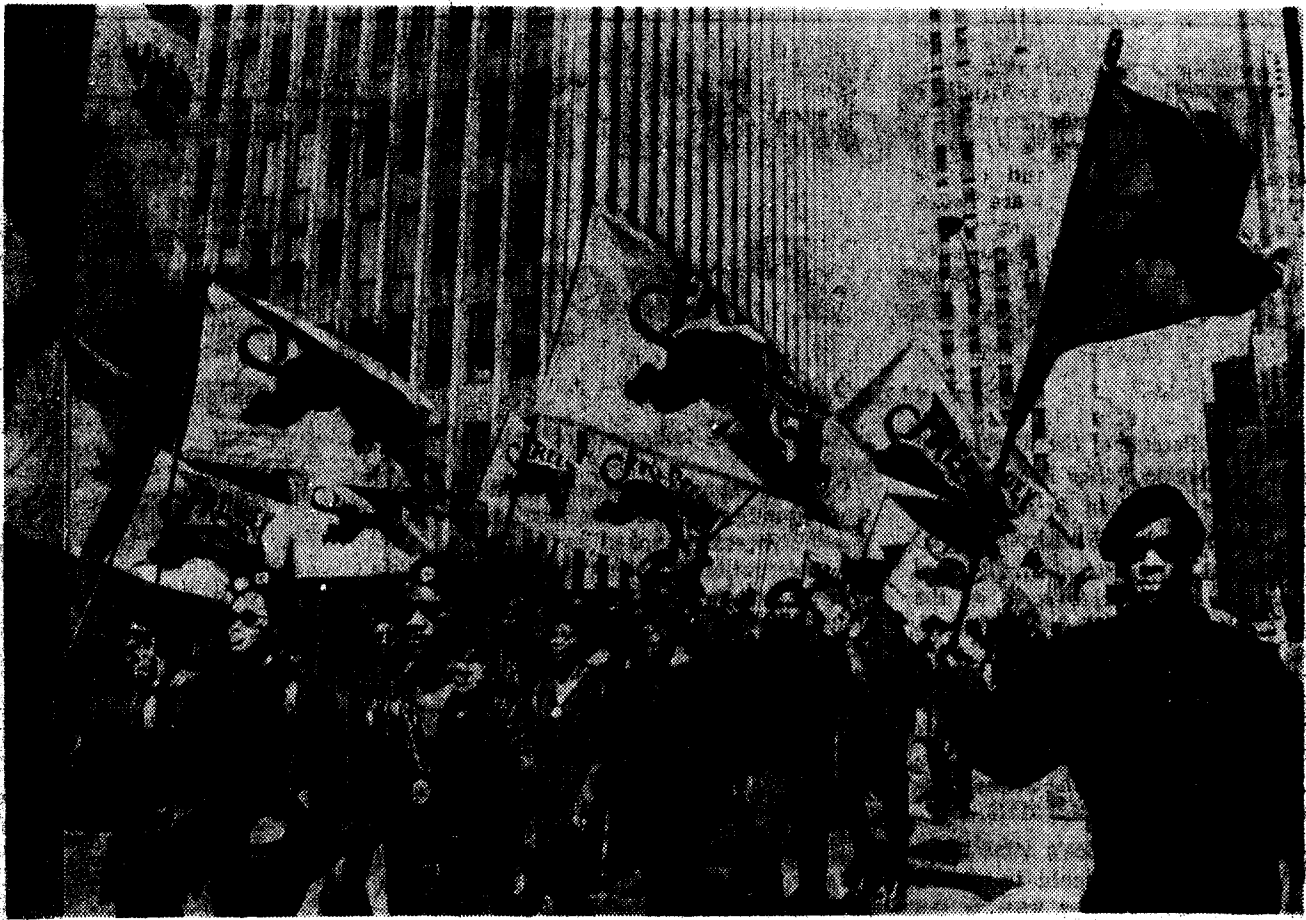
"A lot of their influence is through propaganda. A lot of the young people articulate the Panther rhetoric. The impact population is of high school age or a couple of years older. Whether they understand the rhetoric, I don't know. But it has become a part of their language."

Revolutionary Fervor

POLICE WITNESSES summoned to a Senate investigation of Panther activities last year told of "thousands of Panther sympathizers" in several cities.

"The Panthers," said a New York detective, "have a charisma about them which has lent them surprising success and popularity. It is exciting, attractive, and basically masculine, with strong paramilitary qualities . . . It is their revolutionary fervor which seems to retain (their) momentum . . ."

A recent Wall Street Journal survey of attitudes in the black communities of four cities turned up substantial sympathy and support for the Panthers. And Hilliard says that the mas-



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New York Black Panthers marching down 42d Street in July, 1968, on their way to the United Nations to

protest the Oakland murder trial of Huey P. Newton, their party's defense minister.

sive police raids on Panther headquarters in Chicago and Los Angeles were carried out in the predawn hours to avoid community uprisings. (In both cases, police have said the timing resulted from their desire to minimize the risk of injury to passersby.) When Los Angeles police began a search for a child allegedly kidnaped by the Panthers this month, they waited in the streets while community representatives made a search of Panther headquarters.

Hilliard and other Panthers claim that the signs of public support are a result of the powerful "examples" they have set in the ghettos. "We are educating the people," he says, "to show them what they are fighting for . . . We have not gained the strength we would like. But we have withstood the repression. After each pig attack, we gain members and support. One of our most powerful weapons is the idiocy of these pigs and their oppression."

The most dramatic evidence of Hilliard's point was the public sympathy for the Panthers following the police raids last month in Los Angeles and in Chicago, where two Panther leaders were killed. Condemnation of the police action was immediate and widespread. "The mere fact that the black congressmen came out in support of our party for the first time," Hilliard said, "shows the support we have won."

It is shown in other ways. The Panthers, says community action director Moore (a teacher at the University of California), have introduced new social concepts that have gained wide acceptance—the concept, for example, that black communities in central cities are "colonies" systematically exploited by the capitalist system.

The Panthers have given meaning, he said, to the concepts of "oppression" and "community control." More-

over, they have made progress in ridding themselves of the "racist" label by welcoming white support and seeking out coalitions with white groups through such subsidiary organizations as the National Committee to Combat Fascism. (The violence-prone Weatherman faction of Students for a Democratic Society has won Hilliard's explicit approval.)

The Panthers have, in short, come a long way since 1966, despite the bloody tactics they have sometimes employed and despite the violent Marxist solutions they preach.

An Absence of Hope

ONE MAN WHO is not overly concerned by all this is, surprisingly, the Oakland Chief of Police, E. R. Gain. He has lived with the Panther problem since the party was formed. His men have shot it out with Panthers on more than one occasion; one of them was killed by Huey Newton.

Yet he feels that the Panthers are almost irrelevant to the great social problems of the American city today. He is convinced, first of all, that they are an insignificant social force: "They have no leadership, no organization, no adherents." The proof, he says, is that the most highly publicized and highly organized demonstration for Huey Newton in the San Francisco-Oakland area attracted only 3,000 people, "most of them white." Another indicator cited is the hooting and booing of Hilliard during his militant ("kill Richard Nixon") speech at the San Francisco peace rally on Nov. 15.

More than that, however, Gain regards the Panthers as mere symptoms of a social condition that "white America" has refused to correct.

"The American people," he says, "should recognize that the phenome-

non of the Black Panther Party is not at all unique, given the violence of our society, given the divisions in our country, given the plight of the poor blacks in our cities . . . The Black Panther Party is a retrogressive, irrational, ambiguous movement . . . It could not survive were it not for the underlying conditions under which black people are forced to live.

"If the poor black man in this country could only have hope. If he could see a national government where a President would speak up and see their plight and promise a national commitment to change it. If they could sense that hope, they would end the Black Panther Party and its present platform. The Black Panthers feed upon the justified grievances of black people . . .

"But they have not been given that hope. President Johnson refused to endorse the Kerner Commission report, maybe because his pride was hurt because it didn't praise him enough. President Nixon hasn't endorsed the Eisenhower Commission report (on the Causes and Prevention of Violence). These reports just sit there on the shelf. There is no national commitment to do something about creating jobs and housing and hope. So you have Panthers and you have crime which is caused by poverty.

"We can deal with it for the short run with more and more policemen, and you may wind up with a police state. Or we can make the kind of commitment that has to be made to correct these conditions. It's up to us, and the Panthers have very little to do with it."

Gain waves his hand and shakes his head. "Don't get me started on this," he says, "because I find it hard to stop."