

Poster

Why Blacks Shoot Back

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

CHICAGO—Last October the wire services carried a story out of here about how the cops had chased a black robbery suspect into a housing project, killed him, and, in turn, suffered 10 casualties when the occupants opened up on them from their apartments with rifle and shotgun fire. You would have thought that this astounding news item would have been followed by many and long background pieces about why people would throw open their windows and start shooting at policemen.

That didn't happen. The matter quickly dropped out of the news. Even the police appeared to have forgotten it. No snipers were arrested. The reason for this inattention may be that the implications of what happened at Henry Horner Homes are too unsettling.

As far as anyone knows the people who wounded the police weren't Black Panthers or members of some other group whose behavior can be explained away by invoking the mythic and hysterical formulas that we use to explicate the motives of the H. Rap Browns and Eldridge Cleavers of this world. They were just plain people, plain black people, that is, who flew to their guns to drive the police out of their not very beautiful housing project.

The man whose death touched off this small war was named Michael Soto. He was an army enlisted man, home on a 30-day furlough after a tour of duty in Vietnam. Earlier on the day of his death he'd gone to a funeral. It was a funeral of his 16-year-old brother John who, five days earlier, in almost the same spot, had also been killed by the police.

Neither brother had a weapon, but the case of the younger brother is more puzzling yet because even after the boy was killed the authorities didn't allege he was a suspect in a crime, or that they had reason to believe that he was committing a crime, or that he was doing anything illegal. The friends of the dead brothers say they have witnesses who saw what happened, and they say that both of these young black men were murdered. To date there has been no coroner's inquest, no grand jury investigation, no inquiry at all other than a police department determination that both killings were justifiable homicide.

You may read this and say to yourself, "They must have been mixed up in something, things like that don't happen to people who don't get involved in something."

You're right. The Soto brothers were mixed up in something, but not in anything immediately prior to their deaths, they had been involved in a neighborhood campaign to get a traffic light installed at an intersection of a fast street next to the housing project.

Over the years a number of children had been killed on this corner, the most recent death being only a month before the brothers themselves died. In a well run community that stoplight would have been put up years ago, but not in the black slums of Chicago's West Side where the alderman is white and the people are too poor and too unschooled in the technicalities of procedure to have gained political representation. So they did the only thing they could or knew how to do;

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they initiated direct action by blocking Washington Street with their bodies. There were commotions and arrests, but ultimately they got the traffic signal.

The two brothers took part in these demonstrations. One of them was arrested. The people in the project say the brothers took too conspicuous a part, and thereby marked themselves out in the eyes of the police as trouble makers. Be that as it may, since they're dead it's not surprising that the people might think they were murdered for political reasons.

It is of such experiences that Black Panthers are recruited, and that their platform of armed self defense is made to seem prudent and sensible. Viewed on a television set in the suburbs Pantherism may appear extravagant, racist, and dangerous, but not if you live in the same community as the Soto brothers, not if you live in the Henry Horner project and hear the boys' mother scream, as she did, at the cops, "You killed my two sons. How many more are you going to kill?"

What would you think if you lived in that neighborhood and, a month later, there were two more police killings? That's what happened. Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, the Panthers gunned down by the police, were killed in an apartment six blocks from the project. Under these circumstances you might laugh at somebody who told you Panthers are an especially dangerous breed of cats; you'd remember the Soto brothers, and you'd think it's not just Panthers they kill, it's anybody who tries to do anything to help the ghetto, who does any form of organizing, who deviates from white America's prescription for black America of dope smoking, wine drinking and welfare checking.

There are still people in the neighborhood who are trying to get something done in legal ways. They've formed a small organization called The Community to End the Murder of Black People. They have a lawyer, they have the support of a few social agencies and they're trying to get an impartial investigation and determination of the facts before all their witnesses disappear on them.

"The witnesses are being harassed. They get calls threatening their lives. The younger fellas are chased out of the streets, shot at, their houses are raided; they're robbed, beaten up and turned loose," says Wakati Eel, the organization's chairman.

Wakati came to the West Side as a staff worker for Martin Luther King. Even now, however, after King's murder and all the other murders, he retains a strain of hope for cooperation between people with different colored skins, but his view of what's going on is tragic. He talks about the black man in America going the way of the Indians and says, "The way the trend looks, it seems like they're almost looking for a fight, especially with young black males, to annihilate them. They draft them in the army and they put them in the jails. It's like 15 to one male around here. A woman can't get a dance. They're doing genocide on us."

Not genocide, but Wakati Eel's experience and that of the whole community shows that no sane and lawful politics is possible on the West Side; it shows that we have police killing in place of political process.

The police must kill because the whites will not relinquish their power not even when it is obvious that not one white regime in one city has been able to rule the ghetto effectively. The schools, the streets, the housing, the welfare, every white-run, white-controlled service and program is a failure which can only be maintained by the physical presence of the paramilitary force we call the police.

This is the nub of what we loftily delineate as the "urban crisis."

As long as people must lie down and die in the streets to get a traffic light, the multimillion dollar housing projects will be turned into slums and sniper nests. Every program will be resisted as alien and tyrannical. They will continue to miscarry and we, like Wakati, will be able to do nothing more than shiver and ask, "Who's next?"
