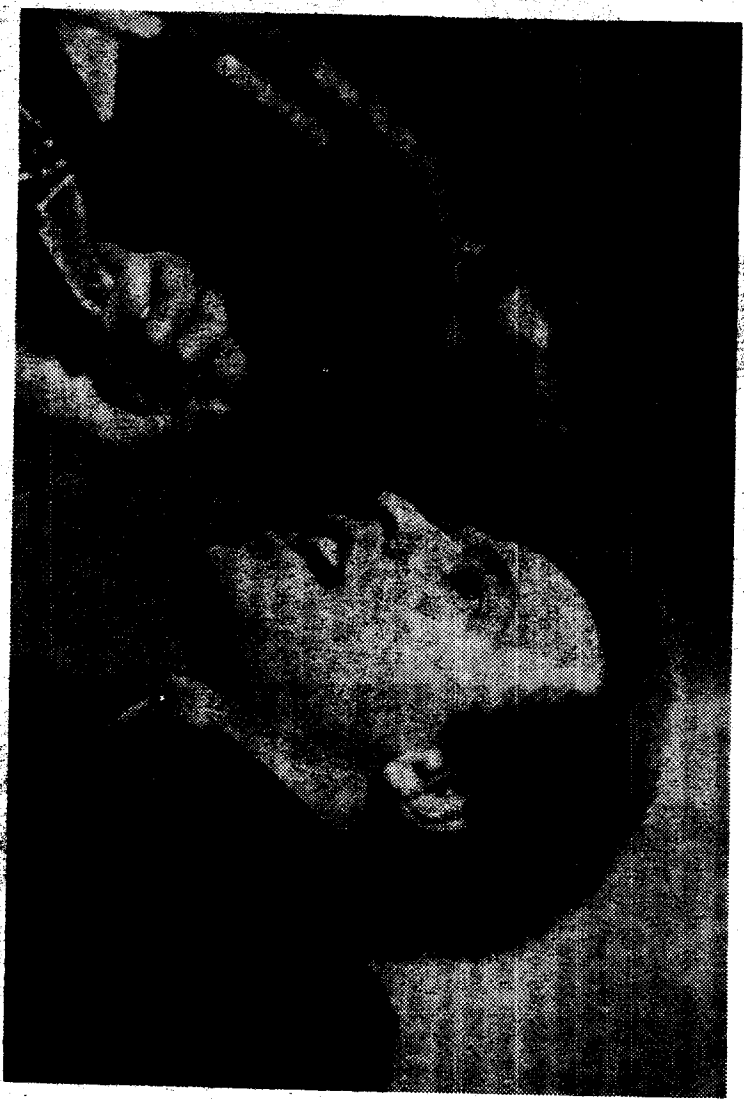


The Changed Panthers

Part 2/3/12



The new Huey: "Once we stepped outside of the church . . . we stepped out of the things that the community was involved in."

Black Press International

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What is even more remarkable, however, is that the Boyette boycott is merely the surface manifestation of a broader shift in the Panther program that finds the Panthers supporting groups and individuals who previously were either ignored or condemned, and downgrading appeals which seemed to be at the heart of the old Panther program.

While the smaller Cleaver faction in the East continues to hammer away at the larger and more abstract issues of war, poverty and imperialism, the Oakland group has swung away completely from these concerns and has embraced two institutions that one would not normally identify as Panther allies: black capitalism and the black church. The Panther position toward both of these institutions recently has been reevaluated. Newton argued in this reassessment that small black capitalists are the victims of the large corporate capitalist structure dominated by whites. He draws an analogy between the role of the black capitalist in the United States and that of the "national bourgeoisie" in the wars of national liberation in Vietnam and China. In a recent issue of the Black Panther, Newton asserted:

"In wars of decolonization the national bourgeoisie support the freedom struggle of the people because they recognize that it is in their own selfish interest. Then when the foreign exploiter has been kicked out, the national bourgeoisie takes his place and continues the exploitation. However, the national bourgeoisie is a weaker group . . . therefore the people are in a better position to wipe this national bourgeoisie away."

Moreover, Newton argues that ghetto blacks perceive the small black businessman in a favorable light—as part of a positive type of local community control of resources which should be encouraged. Calling for support of black capitalism, Newton hopes to cultivate in the black businessman certain affirmative qualities which, he feels, "may be able to bring about a non-antagonistic solution of his contradiction with the community, while at the same time heightening the oppressed community's contradiction with the large corporate capitalist empire." This, he suggests, "will intensify the antagonistic contradiction between the oppressed community and the empire, and by heightening that contradiction there will subsequently be a violent transformation of the corporate empire."

How, then do the Panthers hope to encourage these favorable developments and how do they propose to differentiate between the positive and negative elements among the black

capitalists? It appears that the latter judgment is determined by whether or not a black businessman supports the survival programs. Bill Boyette did not support the programs at a level deemed appropriate by the Panthers. The Panther response to Boyette's recalcitrance was laid down by Bobby Seale, chairman of the Panthers:

"Black people drink 60 per cent to 70 per cent of all the liquor in this country. All those funds going down the drain. And we don't have any of those funds back in the community for the people. And that's what we're going to have; that's why we're going to have black community unity, and we're going to have that black businessman . . . We buy and they don't want to donate back to the black community. If they don't donate back to the black community, then shut them down."

This is the stick to be used on the uncooperative capitalist. There is also a carrot in the form of free advertising for black businessmen who support the community through donations to the survival programs. On Aug. 9, 1971, the Black Panther carried its first advertisement for a car dealer. It called upon the black community to buy cars from Al Ligon's Ford agency at 96th and East 14th in Oakland. The same issue carried advertising for a shoe repair shop in Oakland and a building supply store in Berkeley. All of the ads carried the slogan, "Support the businesses that support our community." Although the embrace of black capitalism may be a tactical, short-term position and the unfolding of the revolutionary process may whisk away these temporary allies, the Panthers nonetheless have become one of the staunchest advocates of "progressive" black capitalism.

Those old enough to remember the Depression years may recall a similar campaign waged in Washington, D.C., by the New Negro Alliance, which put forth the slogan, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work." That effort was aimed at retailers in the ghetto who refused to hire black clerks and were deemed unworthy of patronage. Boycotts of these establishments were a feature of the Washington group's program. The new-found economic nationalism of the Panthers has been copied directly from this model.

Embracing the Church

THE EMBRACE of the black church has been undertaken with equal zeal and perhaps even more readily than the alliance with black businessmen. Huey Newton has confessed that "once we stepped outside of the church . . . we stepped out of the things that the community was involved in."

The major portion of the Dec. 18, 1971, Black Panther was devoted to

an interview with the Rev. Earl A. Neil of Saint Augustine's Episcopal Church in Oakland. In the interview, titled "Hallelujah! The People's Revolutionary Gospel," Father Neil attempts to synthesize the religious-based civil rights activities of the early 1960s with the more radical black secular movement of the latter part of the decade. He also condemns police harassment of the Panthers and various "political trials" of Panther leaders. The same issue contains an accolade to the Rev. Henry Nicholas, pastor of a Methodist church in Philadelphia and a former member of that city's school board. In response to a police attack on black students demonstrating in front of the board of education building and the failure to reappoint him to the school board, Mr. Nicholas and the Black Ministers Association called for a boycott of all white businesses in Philadelphia. The Black Panther Party "heartily" endorsed the boycott.

Why this enthusiastic embrace of an institution by a group whose minister of information once said "F— the Bible?" Part of the reason is, perhaps, that the minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, is no longer part of the Newton-Seale faction of the party. But another and intriguingly plausible explanation was offered by the East Village Other, a New York underground paper. It links the change of attitude toward the church with an incident early in 1971 when Newton was ad-

dressing a meeting of middle-aged blacks who seemed unsympathetic to his stand. At the conclusion of the address, one woman rose to say that Newton and the Panthers had lost their souls and were going to hell. The East Village Other's interpretation is that Newton was shattered by this response, that it pointed out to him the cavernous distance separating the Panthers and a large part of the black community.

This may help explain why the familiar rhetoric has changed, with revolutionary exhortations giving way to encumbrances to survival. It may also help explain the retreat from the symbol of the gun, which, while not at the heart of the Panther program, created in many minds the impression that violence was the meat on which the Panthers fed. The gun frightened not only those who were meant to be intimidated, but a considerable number of potential adherents as well. It also called down upon what was an essentially defensive organization the wrath and retribution of American officialdom.

Elevating Former "Toms"

IN ITS RETREAT from the gun, the most numerically important element of the Panthers has placed itself in the mainstream of traditional black protest. It was probably there all the time, but its rhetoric clouded its essence. Rather than repudiating the traditional black expressions of protest, the Panthers now deliberately

invoke them. The "bootlickers" and "Toms" of the past have been elevated to a new and honored status. But more importantly, the Panther leadership has moved to rectify the history of black protest by bringing the Panthers into line with the mainstream of that movement. Speaking in Chicago on the fourth anniversary of the death of Mark Clark, the Illinois party chairman, Seale said:

"Without all the other revolutionary brothers and sisters in the past, even the NAACP, if it had not been for them, if it had not been for Denmark Vesey, if it had not been for W. E. B. Du Bois, if it had not been for Marcus Garvey, if it had not been for Malcolm X, if it had not been for Martin Luther King, if it had not been for all the other revolutionary brothers, if it had not been for all the other nationalist organizations, the Black Panther Party would not even exist, because we all are together. We've come out of a history . . ."

As the Panthers move to restore their image within the black community, they have sought to attenuate their links with certain elements of the white community. Newton and Seale have vowed that they will no longer allow themselves the patronage of their former "radical-chic" supporters. No longer will Panthers grace the drawing rooms and salons of Park Avenue in their search for funds and support. This may diminish their

charismatic impact, on those willing to bankroll someone else's revolution, but it may also lead to a reconciliation with the people for whom the Panther revolutionary doctrine was originally formulated.

The Panthers have even ventured modestly into the formerly proscribed area of electoral politics by their strong support for Rep. Ronald V. Dellums (D-Calif.).

When all of this unaccustomed activity is viewed as a whole, it is clear that the Panthers are a very different organization from the group they were as recently as a year ago. Huey Newton's emergence late in December from the shadow of a manslaughter charge in connection with the shooting of an Oakland policeman was not attended by the revolutionary manifestations that some had expected. His alienation from the more avowedly revolutionary Cleaver has freed Newton to do what, perhaps, he always wanted to do—pursue a more reformist and modestly expressed program. The revolutionary vision still lies on the periphery of Panther programs, but is no longer at the core.

Historians of the movement have yet to assess the impact of this change in the Panthers, but in the black community the effects have already been felt. As one black college student in Newark put it recently, "The word is out. Huey says, 'Go back to church.'"