

Police and Panthers: Urban Conflict in Mutual Fear

OCT 26 1970

By MARTIN ARNOLD

Months of tensions. The police and the blacks jostling each other on the street in the Detroit slums. Then sporadic gunfire, and a nine-hour armed confrontation, ending early yesterday morning.

When it was over one black policeman was dead and another wounded.

It was not an isolated incident.

It was the most recent in a long series of clashes, some of them bloody, between the police and the Black Panthers and their followers in Detroit and Chicago, in New Orleans and Toledo, in several cities in California, and in the slum streets of Philadelphia and New York, of Baltimore and Houston.

What started with shot guns and tough talk has evolved into a conflict with all of the accoutrements of warfare—automatic weapons, mass movement of forces, sandbags, armored cars.

Adding the one dead and one wounded in Detroit, in two years, according to the Justice Department, 11 Black Panthers have been shot dead and so have 10 policemen. Approximately 50 policemen have been wounded and 469 Panthers or their followers have been arrested. The Panthers at least double the Justice Department figures on Panther deaths. And there is no estimate of the Panther wounded.

How did it all start? What causes the police-Panther

clashes that sometimes end in bloody gunfire? How deeply rooted is the mutual fear between the police and Panthers and how justified is that fear?

The beginning of the conflict can be traced to a day in 1966 when the Black Panthers' founder, Huey P. Newton, who now calls himself the Supreme Commander and Minister of Defense, and Bobby Seale, the party chairman, and a few others started hawking copies of "The Red Book," the Quotations of Mao Tse-tung, outside the University of California gates at Berkeley.

They had purchased the books by the boxload, at 30 cents a copy, and were selling them for \$1 apiece to the radical students. With the profits

they bought shotguns, Bobby Seale recalls, "to protect a mother, protect a brother, and protect the [black] community from the racist cops." And once a group of Panthers carried their shotguns into the Statehouse in Sacramento—"a colossal event," Bobby Seale calls it—to give their revolutionary message to the world.

To the Federal authorities, the aggressive peddling of Red Books meant there was a new organization in the country that bore watching. To the local police, the purchase of guns from the proceeds and the Panthers' verbal assaults on policemen amounted to a virtual declaration of war.

And if Bobby Seale's "colossal event" electrified many blacks across the country, it was also noted by police departments far from California in cities and municipalities where small groups of militant blacks were just starting to organize as Panthers.

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Then came the Oakland shootout in April, 1968, in which one Panther, Little Bobby Hutton, was killed. That followed at least a month of rumors in the black community that the police were out to "get" the Panthers. A few months before, a policeman had been killed after stopping a Panther's car.

Thus, within two years of the birth of the Panthers, both sides were caught up in a vicious circle. As the Panthers bought more guns and intensified their renunciations of "the Pigs," the police stepped up their surveillance of the Panthers. The closer the police messed their surveillance, the angrier the Panthers got; the closer the police watched.

Soon, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, branded the party the most dangerous group in the United States, a statement that police agencies around the country felt justified their apprehensions.

Today, the Justice Department maintains a three-man "Panther watching" team, to collect information on the party, although the department estimates that there are only between 500 and 1,000 party members in the country, scattered about in some two dozen chapters, with only about 50 Panthers in New York City.

14,000 Blacks in Ghetto

Nowhere did these mutual fears converge more prophetically than in New Orleans, in the ghetto called Desire, where 14,000 blacks live in two-story brick-barrack type of public housing, an area set off, like a city within a city, by railroad tracks, by a sewage-fouled canal and by superhighways. It is an area of few buses, and no taxis after dark; of few shops; little police protection and minimal sanitation; of not a single newsstand; of two schools so closely fenced with wire that local children cannot play in the schoolyards after school lets out.

In mid-September, amid the tensions of New Orleans both sides played out a casebook example of the drama that had gone before in other cities and was to be enacted again, in Toledo and Detroit.

The National Committee to Combat Fascism, a Panther subsidiary formed last January after the party became worried about inflation, started its operations in New Orleans in the spring. In all, there were 15 to 20 members, nearly all of them from New Orleans. A few had police records, but only for minor charges. They were mostly young teen-agers, or in their early twenties.

One of the first things they did was to sandbag their Desire headquarters and openly purchase guns, which was legal but seemed ominous to the police.

For the most part, the N.C.C.F. members appear to have been accepted by the residents of Desire as part of the landscape, nothing more, and when the members used language such as "off the pigs," many of the older residents of Desire viewed it simply as more "big talk" from kids in the ghetto.

But uptown, in the city's business district, where chapter members sold the party newspaper, The Black Panther, it seemed to many, particularly the police, that a fifth column was at large.

Threats Reported

The police contend that N.C.C.F. members threatened the few Desire shopkeepers into contributing money and food for a free breakfast food program, but most of the blacks in Desire deny this.

Whatever influence the members did have in the black community came not from the breakfast program, which quickly failed, but from its members proclaimed willingness to "stand up" to the police, older members of the black community say. In practice, everyone now agrees, this "standing up" came down to little more than violent rhetoric.

The police, on the other hand, say that they took the N.C.C.F. members seriously from the start. They immediately infiltrated the party. One undercover agent was a young black officer with a year's experience on the force; the other was a young black who for eight months had been employed as a maintenance man in the Police Department motor pool. But who was made a regular policeman after the shootout.

The chapter was "terrorizing" Desire, the police said. Once, when a white girl reporter for an underground newspaper was leaving N.C.C.F. headquarters, two policemen stopped her and searched her and one of them said, "We know you're trying to overthrow the Government and if you get too close, we'll have to kill you." At least that was the story she told and that was the story believed in Desire.

And on other occasions, according to the blacks, plainclothesmen would go up to young blacks selling the party paper uptown and say, "We'll get you." And the more they talked about getting the N.C.C.F., these blacks say, the more the chapter members talked of killing policemen.

So the cycle continued. New Orleans is essentially a small community where many people

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Eldridge B. Cleaver, Black Panther leader, in Algiers yesterday. With him is Timothy F. Leary, who was later reported to have left for Jordan with his wife and three others.

Associated Press

know individual policemen, and it was not uncommon at night, in the city's bars, they say, to hear off-duty policemen talking of "getting" the so-called Panthers.

On one occasion, several weeks before the shootout, police officials met with the editors of the city's various news organizations, including the newspapers, to give them a secret briefing on the activities of the N.C.C.F.

"There was growing a real fear on the part of many people that something was going to happen," was the way George M. Strickler Jr., an attorney for the Lawyers' Constitutional Defense Committee, described the atmosphere in the city.

The rumors of a police raid built to such a point that Mr. Strickler and other young concerned persons, including a number of lawyers, set up a telephone chain warning system, whereby if the police moved on the N.C.C.F., the Panther affiliate would call an attorney, who in turn would call another person, and so on, and tell them to get to Desire. "We wanted to be sure to have as many observers on the scene as possible," Mr. Strickler said.

Could the rush toward confrontation be stopped? No one knows for sure but, looking back, it is clear that, even in this rather lazy and unconcerned city, where the blacks are not so militant as they are in the North, there is still more black militancy than most New Orleans whites like to think.

Restraints Urged

And some, such as Mr. Strickler, suggest that the city should have been more sensitive to its growing black militancy — blacks had, after all, taken part for the first time in antiwar demonstrations in the city.

And they also say in retrospect that if Mayor Moon Landrieu, who was elected with 90 per cent of the black vote, had ordered his policemen simply to ignore the 15 to 20 youthful Panther-followers in the city, what happened the evening of Sept. 14 and the morning of Sept. 15 might not have happened at all.

Mayor Landrieu had conflicting advice, however, and, being responsible for the safety of the city, he could not, he felt, ignore it. He was told, as many other mahors around the country have been told that he could not let the language of violence go unwatched or the threat of violence go unchecked.

So in the end the restraint that was urged by one group did not occur perhaps because tension in New Orleans kept building. The N.C.C.F., for instance, keep issuing angry leaflets, one of which called Patrolman Raymond Reed, a black officer who was injured in the shootout, a traitor and added, "The penalty for treason is death."

Sometime before the evening of Sept. 14 the N.C.C.F. learned that two of its members were police undercover agents. The group decided, in part, to follow the Panther experience in New Haven and Baltimore and try them as traitors.

The police, in their official statement over radio and television, said that on the evening of Sept. 14 the N.C.C.F. "began a systematic reign of terror adjacent to their headquarters." Part of the terror was the beating of two male blacks, the undercover agents who at first were not identified by the police as undercover agents.

Further, the official statement said, the N.C.C.F. wounded two Desire residents, burned an automobile and took up sniper positions around their headquarters.

Agents Flee to Grocery

Black residents of Desire said, however, that the two undercover agents were tried by the committee and then set loose, only to be beaten by N.C.C.F. sympathizers who live in Desire.

The agents fled to a grocery nearby where the owner, a black known to be a police sympathizer, tried to protect them by firing into the crowd. Police Superintendent Clarence Giarrusso said that the department already had felony warrants against many of the

N.C.C.F. members, and that his men would seve them with "every means at our disposla."

The undercover agents, meanwhile, in the words of the police, "managed to summon a strong reserve of energy and escape their tormentors." It turned out later the warrants issued against N.C.C.F. members were in connection with the beating of these agents.

They were to be served at 8:30 A.M. on Sept. 15, a Tuesday. At that moment the winds from a nearby tropical storm, Felice, churned black clouds over New Orleans and dumped heavy rain onto Desire.

Several hundred police descended on the N.C.C.F. headquarters. A shot was fired. The police said it had come from within the office. The battle was on, and the wooden frame building was riddled with gunfire. The N.C.C.F. members returned the fire, but 30 minutes later it was over.

No policemen were shot. Fourteen persons, most of them N.C.C.F. members, were arrested and charged with attempted murder. Others are being sought. Four persons, all blacks, were shot in the gun battle, but none were critically wounded. In the violence, which had started in Desire Monday night and preceded Tuesday morning's shootout, 13 other persons were injured, none seriously, including three hit by gunfire.

Arsenal Captured

When it was over, the police had captured 11 shotguns, two rifles, two handguns and 1,000 rounds of ammunition, including 800 rounds of shotgun shells—all of it purchased legally. As the police saw it, this justified their decision to move against Panther headquarters.

But to the blacks and whites who supported the N.C.C.F., there weer several other points to be made. The chapter members had their arms cache for months and had given no indication that they would use it, they said.

And, perhaps more important: the police, they said, had played into the hands of the N.C.C.F., for after the shootout the people of Desire would stop by the chapter headquarters and donate their quarters and dollars, something they had not done before, and one chapter member said, "God, the pigs are so stupid. We could never get money out of those people before."

Except for the trials of arrested members, the incident in New Orleans is closed, as far as most of the city's residents are concerned.

But each such incident adds to the growing atmosphere of suspicion that is generated in the police and Panthers, an atmosphere that, many authorities believe, makes the next clash almost fated.

For each, on examination, comes at the end of a chain of events that could have been stopped at any moment; each, then, seems almost to have been accidental, like two automobiles headed for each other on a darkened highway. And each, like New Orleans, adds a ripple to the mutual fear and distrust.

Arrears a Confirmation

Each side looks at the reports of the clashes and says it is right. Chicago, where on Dec. 4, 1969, the most famous clash of all occurred—two Panthers, including Fred Hampton, were killed—is a case in point.

A Federal grand jury found that the police had fired between 82 to 99 shots into Mr. Hampton's apartment, while only one shot could be attributed to the Panthers. To Panthers across the nation, this was confirmation of everything they were saying about the police, that they were correct in making the police the symbol of an oppressive society and correct in stockpiling guns.

Meanwhile, the police see the Panthers continue to stockpile arms, as they did in Chicago, in other communities.

So after New Orleans, it seemed inevitable that another clash would occur within a short time. And it did, three days later, in Toledo, Ohio, where, early in the morning, a man walked up to a patrol car,

stuck a gun through the window and shot and killed a policeman, the father of four children.

Minutes after the shooting, which occurred around the corner from the Toledo N.C.C.F. office, the dead man's patrol

partner arrested an N.C.C.F. member and charged him with murder.

Here, too, the incident followed months of rumors that the police would "get" the N.C.C.F. and months during which the N.C.C.F. combined civic action programs with talk of violence against "the pigs."

Like Hut on Battlefield

So within an hour after the arrest, the Toledo police descended on the N.C.C.F. office and started pumping bullets into it, until it resembled a hut on a battlefield that had been shot up by an infantry company. The police said the ag-gun fight.

Several hours later, armed with shotguns and carbines and firing tear gas, 50 policemen dressed in riot gear attacked the N.C.C.F. for a second time. They found the building empty, but confiscated six shotguns and carbines and ammunition.

When it had ended, two N.C.C.F. members were wounded. But on the building across the street, where the police were and where the N.C.C.F. members were allegedly firing at them, there was not a single bullet hole or pock mark to show that an N.C.C.F. bullet had been fired back at the police. Not a window—other than those broken by the police to take better aim at N.C.C.F. office—had been broken by an N.C.C.F. bullet.

In the small, now abandoned apartment units across the street from the N.C.C.F., where the police were firing from, there was not a single bullet hole, as there would have been had the N.C.C.F. returned the fire.

All of Toledo's news media

refer to the night of violence as a gunfight between the Panthers and the police. Not one member of the Toledo news media has asked the police for a single scrap of evidence that N.C.C.F. members fired even one shot at the police.

Several weeks after the violence, Police Chief Anthony A. Bosch was asked, "If the blacks fired at the police, they must have hit some part of some building. Where's the evidence?"

He answered: "There was a deputy chief in charge out there, and he happens to be in Germany, so I can't answer that question."

How, with the shootouts and the police pressure, the Black Panther Party and its subsidiary, the N.C.C.F., have found that nationally its normal turf, the black ghetto streets, has been virtually sealed off from them in many areas.

So, as a corollary to the increase in violence, and also as an antidote to the party's diminishing numbers, there has been a rise in revolutionary rhetoric and in revolutionary tactics on the part of the Panthers.

Thus, when it was learned that the New York Black Panthers had been infiltrated by black police undercover agents—on infiltration that led to the current trial of 13 members on charges of planning to bomb public buildings—the party decided to try to use the courtroom as a platform for action, rather than as an arena in which to directly defend its members against the criminal charges.

One reason for such an approach is that, for the most part, the Panther influence in

the nations black ghettos has been marginal, despite the publicity given the party.

And it seems clear, in interview after interview in black ghettos, that, had it not been for the drama of continual and often violent clashes with the police, the Panther party would not now be the symbol that it is.

The police chief of one large Eastern city recently put it this way: "Our department has tried not to be lured into making Panther raids and busts. The police generally have not been smart in dealing with the Panthers. If the party was ignored, in most places it would collapse."

From the beginning the party took as its ideologists Mao and Kim Il Sung of North Korea. As a result of police pressure, it has more recently included the teachings of the Brazilian revolutionary, Carlos Marighella, an apostle of urban guerrilla warfare.

The basis for the recent prison riots in the Tombs and for the party's work on the West Coast in support of prisoners comes in large part, some authorities believe, from Marighella's writings calling for "mutinies within houses of correction and penal colonies."

If these are the writings that influence the Panthers, the party's training film has become, as it has for white radical groups, "The Battle of Algiers," which Panthers and would-be Panthers are encouraged to see and study.

For on one level the party remains an organization committed to a rather simplified version of Marxism, in which

the Panthers, as poor blacks, or "lumpens," find an explanation of the ghetto conditions they know.

How successful are the Panthers as a revolutionary party? In terms of accomplishment, even to running a small thing such as a free breakfast program for children for a sustained period, the answer is that the party is not very successful.

As a symbol, the party seems clearly to be not only successful but also important. It has become a rallying point for the radical whites, and has forced many white liberal Americans, who abhor its philosophy, to insist at least that Panthers and other radicals be treated fairly by the courts.

It has added "right on" and "power to the people" to the American idiom. It has made the word "pig" synonymous with "policeman" to much of America's youth.

Many black intellectuals believe that the black literature and theater and art of the near future will grow largely out of the Panther experience.

The Panthers are, to many blacks, merely a transition between the traditional civil rights movement and the less theatrical but more effective black revolutionaries of the future, the revolutionaries like Freeman, the character in Sam Greenlee's "The Spook Who Sat by the Door," who in a Brooks Brother suit tried to blow up America.

For now the party continues, small in number, but highly publicized, beleaguered by the police, but still swaggering.