

# America's Black Guerrillas



“The racist dog policemen must withdraw immediately from our communities, cease their wanton murder and brutality and torture of black people, or face the wrath of the armed people.”—*Huey P. Newton, Minister of Defence of the Black Panther Party for Self Defence.*

“We are already at war . . . The racist dog police must withdraw from the black community. . . .”

The speaker was Huey P. Newton, the 25-year-old leader of the Black Panthers of California. It was two months ago, before Newark and Detroit, before the Black Revolution in this country had taken its latest and most fateful turn into urban guerrilla warfare.

I thought about those words two months later as I watched the Battle of Detroit on television. All the talk about guerrilla warfare which had seemed so unreal became vivid as I watched tanks and armored cars move through the streets of Detroit, rattling their machine-guns against tenement buildings. It was like some phantasmagorical historical dream in which an American city was reenacting the Warsaw Ghetto 1943, Budapest 1956, Santo Domingo 1965. If such an analogy is objectively inappropriate, if the National Guard and paratroopers were not the Wehrmacht or the Red Army, the important fact, the fact that most whites fail to perceive, is that the cops were considered a foreign occupying army by the black men who were willing to pit their rifles against tanks. The snipers thus turned themselves in the eyes of many of their black comrades into “freedom fighters.”

If Newark and Detroit did nothing else, they at least forced a more accurate vocabulary upon the press and public officials. What had merely been “riots” in Harlem and Watts, what had been traditionally analyzed as primitive reactions to heat and frustration, was now in Detroit clearly recognizable as an uprising with revolutionary overtones. (Governor Hughes of New Jersey set the precedent by referring to Newark as an “insurrection.” A newspaperman in Newark told me that the real explanation for the governor’s enlightenment lies in the fact that the Prudential Insurance Company is Newark’s biggest industry, and the insurance companies are off the hook for liabilities if the damage is caused by an insurrection.)

Still, much nonsense was written by way of explanation of the insurrections; a new, crude version of economic determinism takes the place of the vaguer explanations of “heat” and “frustration.” Negroes riot, the press and the urban sociologists now almost unanimously agree, because they lack housing or education or jobs. Thus a new riot prevention mystique grows, abetted even by “moderate” civil rights leaders, which suggests that a little more poverty money spent, a police review board, better schools, an extra swimming pool, will have a direct effect on the propensity to loot and snipe in the ghetto. It is a dangerous liberal myth, not because it is not well-intentioned, but because it is already outdated and ignores the real, new factor in the Black Revolution—the black urban guerrilla.

“The black guerrilla will not come down off his sniper’s perch or stop making molotov cocktails because of a little more welfare money in the ghetto, since he has probably already rejected a job with the poverty program—or perhaps he has a job with the poverty program by day and still wants to burn down City Hall by night. His hatred of the system will not be affected by a better school in the ghetto, since he has probably been through the best schools and rejected their values. He takes part in insurrections in Detroit and Newark not because of a sudden incident that sets off a smoldering frustration,

but because he has long-range plans to disrupt and wreak havoc on the system that he feels produced the ghetto in this country and oppression all over the world—even if those plans mean the loss of his life. He is like Samson among the Philistines, bound and alone among many, but hopefully strong enough to pull the whole house down.

The secret and anonymous interview with some of the Newark snipers published in *Life* magazine shows that they are middle class young men who organized themselves after doing civil rights work in Mississippi in 1965. One of them was reported to be a law student in an eastern university. Perhaps there was a bit of *Life* hyperbole hidden in the interview, but it had the ring of authenticity. For it is not the poorest, least-educated blacks, but a better-educated, indeed almost middle class, radical black intelligentsia that forms the vanguard of America’s black guerrillas.

The *Life* interview was couched in familiar language. I had first heard this vernacular from the Black Panthers in the relaxed atmosphere of a San Francisco living room. The Panthers, a group of armed Negroes who make their home in the San Francisco Bay Area, consider themselves a political party, and their official name is the Black Panther Party for Self Defence. They first made local headlines when they appeared in public, in groups of about 20, armed with loaded shotguns and pistols, escorting the widow of Malcolm X around the city. Local cops were dumbfounded to discover that there was no law which prohibited the Panthers from carrying loaded weapons so long as they were unconcealed, a legal fact which the Panthers had carefully researched and briefed themselves on. That situation produced some dramatic confrontations between the cops and the Panthers, like one scene I witnessed: A cop approached a Panther and asked him to hand over his gun. The Panther asked, “Am I under arrest?” The cop answered, “No.” The Panther replied, “Then get your . . . hands off my gun.”

IT WAS A DANGEROUS ACT OF BRAVADO, but it typified the embattled mentality of the new black guerrillas. Behind it was a deadly serious purpose. The Panthers’ public display of guns had both a real and a symbolic meaning—real because they believe that they will have to use the guns eventually against the power structure, yet symbolic because of the political effect on the black community of a few blacks openly carrying guns.

“Ninety per cent of the reason we carried guns in the first place,” says Panther leader Huey P. Newton, “was educational. We set the example. We made black people aware that they have the right to carry guns.”

Newton and his co-leader, 30-year-old Bobby Seale, quietly tried to explain to me why the black people have to have guns

and what they must do with them. They see the United States as the center of an imperialist system which suppresses the world-wide revolution of colored people, of which American Negroes are only one part. But, says Huey Newton, "We can stop the machinery. We can stop the imperialists from using it against black people all over the world. We are in a strategic position in this country, and we won't be the only group rebelling against the oppressor here."

The Panthers are only a small cadre in the Negro community. Their membership figures are hard to come by. When you ask them, they answer by quoting Malcolm X: "Those who know don't say and those who say don't know." Nevertheless, it has not affected their revolutionary fervor or their confidence. Theirs is a vision of an American apocalypse in which all of the blacks are forced to unite for survival against the white oppressors. Huey Newton puts it this way: "At the height of the resistance they are going to be slaughtering black people indiscriminately. We are sure that at that time Martin Luther King will be a member of the Black Panthers through necessity. He and others like him will have to band together with us just to save themselves."

There has always been something of the rhetoric of Armageddon among Negro militants, but it has never had such a serious ring. Once it was more a matter of literary allusion and wish-fulfillment of revenge, as in the plays of LeRoi Jones or the essays of James Baldwin. But Detroit has made it suddenly a very real business.

In Detroit on the Tuesday night of the outbreak, the most modern symbol of counter-insurgency, the helicopter, went into action. The Pentagon sent in 25 Army choppers to assist the soldiers in ferreting out the guerrillas from the tangled jungle of tenement buildings. One resident of the ghetto said, "They came flying in low just over the rooftops, shining their big searchlights up and down the building. Once I saw one of them open fire. A soldier riding in front used an automatic weapon—he was firing at one of the rooftops."

But the guerrillas, according to reporters on the scene, struck back like Viet Cong by "laying siege to four separate police and fire stations." The only thing missing in the script were the satchel charges.

Detroit was a revolutionary battlefield. It was treated by the authorities not like a mere outbreak of criminal lawlessness, answerable by measured justice, but like a revolution that had to be suppressed by anti-population measures. Days after the fighting had ceased, 5000 men, women and children languished in Michigan's overcrowded jails. The injured never had their wounds treated. No one had been released on his own recognizance. Bail was set at an average of \$5000. Even when it was possible for families and friends to raise the money to release a prisoner, they usually could not find him, for there was no central record of where each prisoner was being kept.

There is something of Detroit in the street corner rallies held by the Black Panthers in the black communities of the Bay Area. At these rallies small groups of young bloods gather to hear Bobby Seale and Newton tell them how, when the time comes, they can "take care of business" in groups of threes and fours. The "business" they are talking about is "executing white racist cops" or dropping molotov cocktails into strategic industrial installations. It is all suddenly very real and serious when you ask Huey Newton, who looks younger than his 25 years, why they talk of killing a couple

of cops, and he tells you confidently that when the time comes, it won't be just the killing of a couple of cops but part of a whole nationally coordinated effort aimed at the entire "white occupying army." And it is, finally, very serious when you ask him what he thinks will happen to him and he answers, "I am going to be killed."

**W**HERE DO THEY COME FROM, these articulate and well-educated young men who have become black Kamikazes? And why have they become revolutionaries in the most unlikely place for revolution in the world? Huey Newton graduated from the excellent and integrated Berkeley High School, went to a two-year college, eventually spent a year in law school. Stokely Carmichael went to Bronx Science High School, probably the best prep-school for success in the U.S. Somewhere in the recent history of the country they, along with countless other young black men, decided that it was no use trying to liberate their people by appealing to the good sense and conscience of their white neighbors; instead, they became convinced that their freedom could only be wrested through force and turmoil.

It is all somehow summed up by the answer Stokely Carmichael gave at a conference in London to the young hippies who asked him how they could help the Black Revolution. His sardonic answer was, "Well, I'll tell you what, when the police come into the ghettos to shoot us down in the streets, you can help us fight the police by throwing flowers at them."

Perhaps back in the early days of the movement Carmichael did believe in the power of flowers. If he now stands in Havana, surrounded by the veterans of the international revolution, publicly welcoming the emergence of guerrilla warfare in the United States, it is neither because he has been subverted by Peking propaganda or because he has flipped his lid. He has simply come to believe that America can only be regenerated as part of a world revolutionary process.

**I**T IS EASY TO BEMOAN the change in Carmichael and SNCC, as many liberals have been doing lately, and nostalgically recall the days when SNCC and the civil rights movement seemed to be a community of love. But one must remember that SNCC moved in its current direction as a result of careful, often anguished, deliberation by intelligent and dedicated young men and women who had tested their ideas in the crucibles of Southern and Northern jails.

In an exclusive interview with a Ramparts reporter recently, Rap Brown mused about the changing mood in SNCC. "That whole nonviolence thing was nothing but a preparation for genocide," he said. "At one point, not so long ago, the man could have sent a message to black people, saying meet me at such and such a concentration camp, and black people would have been there—on time!"

Asked about SNCC's attitude toward the rebellions, Brown answered that he was satisfied that they "were becoming more sophisticated on their own." He mentioned with pleasure the fact that in Tampa, for example, the police could not contain the actions in the ghetto area and that sniper fire against police was on the increase. He said this trend would continue, putting it, simply, that "people in the black community are coming to accept that tactic [guerrilla warfare], and as counter-revolutionary violence escalates against black people, revolutionary violence will rise to meet it."

On second thought, Brown said, "The trouble with black folks is that they wanna loot—they don't want to shoot! [But that was before Detroit.] But black folks are not looting—they have a right to everything they take . . . this country has looted everything it has, beginning with black people."

Asked what exactly SNCC did when a rebellion broke out, Brown replied, "We do then what we always do—help the people get organized, tell them how to get the most out of it. We tell them they got the man by the balls, now the thing is to get the most out of it. You see how they got the hunkies promising them jobs now."

The turning point for Brown, as with so many others of his generation in SNCC, the point at which they began to understand that the system wasn't worth integrating into, came at the 1964 Democratic National Convention—when the Convention refused to seat the delegation from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Brown recalled this bitterly and was particularly vituperous about the hatchet job performed on the MFDP by Hubert Humphrey.

And so SNCC and Rap Brown have left the comfortable traditions of loyal opposition and gone their own way. They have moved toward an exclusive concern with black people. They are not racists, only pro-black, and very pessimistic about what they see coming out of the white community. "The only encouraging thing that has happened with white people," said Brown, "is when those white people in Los Angeles got beat up by the cops and started hollering about police brutality—hell, we told them that years ago, but they had to get their heads whipped before they could see it." The only other encouraging thing in the white community, he said chuckling, is that Lurleen Wallace has cancer.

It is not their own aberration but society's that this generation of young Negroes, who came to maturity in an organization founded on the principles of Ghandi, have come out sounding like Robert Williams. Williams is the American Negro who has lived as a political exile for the last half dozen years—first in Cuba, then in China—where he directed messages via a newsletter to American Negroes urging them to take up armed guerrilla warfare in the cities. In the late 1950's, Williams had been president of the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of the NAACP. He set off a furor in the national civil rights movement and turned himself into a pariah by suggesting that Negroes shoot back when armed bands of white rednecks start shooting up the Negro section of town. That was just a short time ago; black America has lived through much since the simple proposal of armed self-defense could provoke so much tumult.

**T**ODAY BANDS OF YOUNG NEGROES around the country are preparing themselves for guerrilla warfare in the cities. The theory is chillingly simple. The ghetto is a vast sea in which the guerrilla can swim. He can venture forth to sabotage the installations of the government, or, hidden in the ghetto, he can hold down a whole company of infantry and then disappear into the crowded city. The guerrilla knows that he can never hope to overturn the government by such tactics, but his perspective is a world-wide one. America, the suppressor of world revolution, becomes over-extended. Every soldier that must be garrisoned at home to keep the lid on the ghetto is one less that can be sent overseas to suppress another colored revolution. As the pressure on

America mounts, it must either come to terms with the revolution both overseas and at home or turn itself into a fascist garrison state and thus at least show the world its true color.

Whether or not the guerrilla warfare in Detroit was actively planned beforehand, the results of that warfare must have confirmed many a black revolutionary's belief in the potential of such tactics. He could not fail to have noticed the symbolic fact that two brigades of the 101st Airborne had to be dispatched to Detroit. The 101st third brigade was off in Vietnam fighting the Viet Cong. All together over 10,000 troops, plus 2000 police officers, were tied up by the four-day incident. At one point, over 140 square blocks of the city were under the complete control of the rioters and snipers. The police and the National Guardsmen had been completely routed, and only when they came back with tanks and .50 caliber machine-guns blazing were they able to reestablish control. And yet there were probably never more than a handful of snipers.

The spirit of Detroit is the spirit of the Black Panthers, of Rap Brown, of Stokely Carmichael—not because they participated in the Detroit revolution or planned it, or even knew about it, but because there is a new revolutionary consensus among militant blacks that is producing guerrilla fighters. It is wild and suicidal and romantic and very irrational. It is the spirit of revolution, and since America has shown very little capacity for understanding or coping with the forces of revolution abroad, it is unlikely that it will show much understanding of the new revolutionary spirit at home. When Ronald Reagan called the guerrillas of Detroit "mad dogs" he was at least reacting honestly—expressing a sentiment that was shared by the average white American. One deals with "mad dogs" by shooting them down quickly and peremptorily and America will be tempted to do just that with the blacks, thus sparing itself the necessity of trying to find out *why* young men become guerrillas in the most "successful" country in the world. When a few more jobs are created, and a few swimming pools built in the ghettos and the rebellion does not cease, Americans will be even more furious at the "mad dogs."

America will also be tempted to find scapegoats. Last year it was Stokely Carmichael. This year it is Rap Brown. Next year it may well be Mao Tse-tung. Some enterprising newspaperman or congressman with help from J. Edgar Hoover will probably discover that some of the captured guerrillas have been reading Mao or once belonged to a political group that defended the Chinese Revolution.

But then America will be deceiving itself further. If Rap Brown is jailed, SNCC will find another leader who will sound the same tones, not because he will have taken his cue from some foreign ideology, but because he has gone through an American experience and come out of it a revolutionary. The black guerrillas have become convinced that it is impossible to achieve decent human values within this system and that it must therefore be overthrown. If America in its arrogance refuses to confront this elemental fact, then the revolutionaries will have had the last laugh. For if it merely tries to purge itself of what it considers a foreign element in its midst, America will have lost its last chance to understand the horrors of ghetto life that produce black revolutionaries. And it is that failure of understanding which produces the Detroit in the first place.

# 1984

## [I. SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS]

**T**HERE WERE TWO main movements toward rural reconstruction in the early '70s. The first was the social decision to stop harassing the radical young, and rather to treat them kindly like Indians and underwrite their reservations. This humane policy—instead of raids of Treasury agents on the colleges, horrendous sentences for draft card burning, cracking children's skulls on the Sunset Strip—was the idea of social engineer Donald Michael, of the Institute for Policy Studies. Michael argued that, if the serious aim of society was to increase the GNP, it was more efficient to treat the non-conformists like Indians. Naturally, this was difficult when their reservations were in the middle of metropolitan areas, like the Haight-Ashbury or East Greenwich Village, or on the big university campuses. But this plan became much more feasible when an inventive tribe, the Diggers, suddenly remembered the peasant and Taoist origins of their ideology and began to forage in the country.

The second wave of ruralism was the amazing multiplication of hermits and monks who began to set up places in the depopulated areas for their meditations and services to mankind. There had always been individuals who felt that the mechanized urban areas were ugly and unhygienic and who therefore fled to the country, at first only for the summers. (I remember a nest of these in the '50s around Wardsboro, members of the Congress for Cultural Freedom supported by the CIA.) But it was not until the early '70s that humanists began to realize that society had indeed reverted to Byzantine or Late Imperial times, and who therefore withdrew to save their souls.

These two kinds of emigration sufficiently explain, I think, the present patchquilt of settlement in Vermont. On the one hand, where the Diggers settled, there are square-dance communes with their unauthentic mountain music and the extraordinary effort to develop a late-frost hemp, something like the inept taro culture in Micronesia. The Diggers have been called lawless, but their simple code—(1) Live and Let Live, and (2) the Golden Rule—is probably adequate for their simple lives. Except for the ceremonial hemp, their agriculture is strictly for subsistence; many of them live like pigs anyway. On the other hand, the hermits and the religious, with their synods according to Roberts' "Rules of Order" and their Finnish-style wooden architecture, perform social services by running Summerhill-type schools and rest homes for the retired. And their beautiful intensive and glasshouse farming, copied from the Dutch, provides the only tasty urban food now available. Besides these, there are the gurus like Goodman, who lives across the Connecticut and is terribly old.

The two distinct types coexist peaceably and of course are peaceable people. Indeed, it was during the Vietnam troubles that society first began to encourage their exodus, to get them out of the Pentagon's hair. It happened this way: Diggers and many other youths were burning draft cards in embarrassing numbers. In desperation, to get them away from settled places, the *agents provocateurs* began to schedule the be-ins and T-groups further and further out in the sticks, with transporta-

tion paid by the CIA. To the government's surprise, this caught on. The urban young suddenly decided it was groovy to dig up carrots right from the ground, to shake down apples, and to fuck the sheep; they began to camp out, and then to squat and settle. They also imagined they would grow hemp. Many professors, meantime, after signing several hundred anti-war protests in the Times (for which, by some slip-up, they could *not* get a CIA subsidy), finally became conscience-stricken about working for M.I.T., Columbia and Berkeley, and quit and set up little colleges in the hills. The rest is history. But it was not until the Kennedy-Wallace administration that the official policy of land grants and rural subsidies began. (As we shall see, this was after the Seven Plagues.)

At present there is plenty of mixing between Digger types and professor types, though at the beginning they hardly communicated. When some authentic music comes to Vermont, from Tanzania or Cambodia, it is common to find beatniks with their matted hair and lice sprawled on a professor's maple floor; and there is intermarriage. I do not mean to imply that Diggers are unattractive. Some are unkempt in a becoming way, some are diamonds in the rough, a few are real barbaric dandies. On the whole, they are sweet and serviceable people, are glad to serve as school aides, pull weeds, etc. The professors, in turn, are democratic and would like to teach them something, but unfortunately there was the break in the cultural tradition that occurred at the time of "Don't trust anybody over 30." Since the young wouldn't trust anybody—justifiably—they couldn't learn anything. And now their own children have an unbreakable apperceptive block, impervious to Head Start programs.

Common elements in the Vermont culture are fresh food, good hi-fi and much playing of musical instruments, jalopies of all vintages, disregard of moral legislation and low taxes. At some level, all are good citizens. Public services are cheap, roads are good enough, because everybody pitches in. It is touching to see Diggers who won't wash their faces carefully depositing their beer cans in litterbaskets. Another common element is, of course, Senator Aiken, who is now 100.

## [II. ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS]

**G**ENERALLY SPEAKING, emigration and rural reconstruction were unexpected consequences of the Great Enclosure policy which was supposed to get most people *off* the land and speed up urbanization. This is another example of the rule that, if people survive, inept social engineering will produce a contrary effect.

The American Enclosure of the 20th century consisted of subsidizing chain grocers and agrindustrial plantations, giving high profits to processors and packagers, befuddling the public with brand names, destroying fertile land for suburban sprawl and aircraft companies, destroying water supplies and importing expensive water, preventing rural cooperation by monopoly tactics, destroying country schools, farmers' markets and small food stores by urban renewal, destroying villages by highways and supermarkets. By the '60s only six per cent of the population was rural. Vast beautiful areas had been depopulated and were returning to swamp, as in the later Roman empire.

Meantime there were obvious signs of urban over-population. Urban costs mounted geometrically, for utilities, sanitation, policing, housing, schooling, welfare, transit, etc. To live in

by Paul Goodman