

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE

HUEY P. NEWTON
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF J. HERMAN BLAKE

Writers and Readers 

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A MANIFESTO

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth, let a people loving freedom come to growth, let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control!

MARGARET WALKER, "For My People"

Revolutionary Suicide: The Way of Liberation

For twenty-two months in the California Men's Colony at San Luis Obispo, after my first trial for the death of Patrolman John Frey, I was almost continually in solitary confinement. There, in a four-by-six cell, except for books and papers relating to my case, I was allowed no reading material. Despite the rigid enforcement of this rule, inmates sometimes slipped magazines under my door when the guards were not looking. One that reached me was the May, 1970, issue of *Ebony* magazine. It contained an article written by Lacy Banko summarizing the work of Dr. Herbert Hendin, who had done a comparative study on suicide among Black people in the major American cities. Dr. Hendin found that the suicide rate among Black men between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five had doubled in the past ten to fifteen years, surpassing the rate for whites in the same age range. The article had—and still has—a profound effect on me. I have thought long and hard about its implications.

The *Ebony* article brought to mind Durkheim's classic study *Suicide*,

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a book I had read earlier while studying sociology at Oakland City College. To Durkheim all types of suicide are related to social conditions. He maintains that the primary cause of suicide is not individual temperament but forces in the social environment. In other words, suicide is caused primarily by external factors, not internal ones. As I thought about the conditions of Black people and about Dr. Hendin's study, I began to develop Durkheim's analysis and apply it to the Black experience in the United States. This eventually led to the concept of "revolutionary suicide."

To understand revolutionary suicide it is first necessary to have an idea of reactionary suicide, for the two are very different. Dr. Hendin was describing reactionary suicide: the reaction of a man who takes his own life in response to social conditions that overwhelm him and condemn him to helplessness. The young Black men in his study had been deprived of human dignity, crushed by oppressive forces, and denied their right to live as proud and free human beings.

A section in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* provides a good analogy. One of the characters, Marmeladov, a very poor man, argues that poverty is not a vice. In poverty, he says, a man can attain the innate nobility of soul that is not possible in beggary; for while society may drive the poor man out with a stick, the beggar will be swept out with a broom. Why? Because the beggar is totally demeaned, his dignity lost. Finally, bereft of self-respect, immobilized by fear and despair, he sinks into self-murder. This is reactionary suicide.

Connected to reactionary suicide, although even more painful and degrading, is a spiritual death that has been the experience of millions of Black people in the United States. This death is found everywhere today in the Black community. Its victims have ceased to fight the forms of oppression that drink their blood. The common attitude has long been: What's the use? If a man rises up against a power as great as the United States, he will not survive. Believing this, many Blacks have been driven to a death of the spirit rather than of the flesh, lapsing into lives of quiet desperation. Yet all the while, in the heart of every Black, there is the hope that life will somehow change in the future.

I do not think that life will change for the better without an assault on the Establishment,* which goes on exploiting the wretched of the

* The power structure, based on the economic infrastructure, propped up and reinforced by the media and all the secondary educational and cultural institutions.

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earth. This belief lies at the heart of the concept of revolutionary suicide. Thus it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions. This possibility is important, because much in human existence is based upon hope without any real understanding of the odds. Indeed, we are all—Black and white alike—ill in the same way, mortally ill. But before we die, how shall we live? I say with hope and dignity; and if premature death is the result, that death has a meaning reactionary suicide can never have. It is the price of self-respect.

Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death. We will have to be driven out with a stick.

Che Guevara said that to a revolutionary death is the reality and victory the dream. Because the revolutionary lives so dangerously, his survival is a miracle. Bakunin, who spoke for the most militant wing of the First International, made a similar statement in his *Revolutionary Catechism*. To him, the first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that he is a doomed man. Unless he understands this, he does not grasp the essential meaning of his life.

When Fidel Castro and his small band were in Mexico preparing for the Cuban Revolution, many of the comrades had little understanding of Bakunin's rule. A few hours before they set sail, Fidel went from man to man asking who should be notified in case of death. Only then did the deadly seriousness of the revolution hit home. Their struggle was no longer romantic. The scene had been exciting and animated; but when the simple, overwhelming question of death arose, everyone fell silent.

Many so-called revolutionaries in this country, Black and white, are not prepared to accept this reality. The Black Panthers are not suicidal; neither do we romanticize the consequences of revolution in our lifetime. Other so-called revolutionaries cling to an illusion that they might have their revolution and die of old age. That cannot be.

I do not expect to live through our revolution, and most serious comrades probably share my realism. Therefore, the expression "rev-

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olution in our lifetime" means something different to me than it does to other people who use it. I think the revolution will grow in my lifetime, but I do not expect to enjoy its fruits. That would be a contradiction. The reality will be grimmer.

I have no doubt that the revolution will triumph. The people of the world will prevail, seize power, seize the means of production, wipe out racism, capitalism, reactionary intercommunalism—reactionary suicide. The people will win a new world. Yet when I think of individuals in the revolution, I cannot predict their survival. Revolutionaries must accept this fact, especially the Black revolutionaries in America, whose lives are in constant danger from the evils of a colonial society. Considering how we must live, it is not hard to accept the concept of revolutionary suicide. In this we are different from white radicals. They are not faced with genocide.

The greater, more immediate problem is the survival of the entire world. If the world does not change, all its people will be threatened by the greed, exploitation, and violence of the power structure in the American empire. The handwriting is on the wall. The United States is jeopardizing its own existence and the existence of all humanity. If Americans knew the disasters that lay ahead, they would transform this society tomorrow for their own preservation. The Black Panther Party is in the vanguard of the revolution that seeks to relieve this country of its crushing burden of guilt. We are determined to establish true equality and the means for creative work.

Some see our struggle as a symbol of the trend toward suicide among Blacks. Scholars and academics, in particular, have been quick to make this accusation. They fail to perceive differences. Jumping off a bridge is not the same as moving to wipe out the overwhelming force of an oppressive army. When scholars call our actions suicidal, they should be logically consistent and describe all historical revolutionary movements in the same way. Thus the American colonists, the French of the late eighteenth century, the Russians of 1917, the Jews of Warsaw, the Cubans, the NLF, the North Vietnamese—any people who struggle against a brutal and powerful force—are suicidal. Also, if the Black Panthers symbolize the suicidal trend among Blacks, then the whole Third World is suicidal, because the Third World fully intends to resist and overcome the ruling class of the United States. If scholars wish to carry their analysis further, they must come to terms with that four-

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fifths of the world which is bent on wiping out the power of the empire. In those terms the Third World would be transformed from suicidal to homicidal, although homicide is the unlawful taking of life, and the Third World is involved only in defense. Is the coin then turned? Is the government of the United States suicidal? I think so.

With this redefinition, the term "revolutionary suicide" is not as simplistic as it might seem initially. In coining the phrase, I took two knowns and combined them to make an unknown, a neoteric phrase in which the word "revolutionary" transforms the word "suicide" into an idea that has different dimensions and meanings, applicable to a new and complex situation.

My prison experience is a good example of revolutionary suicide in action, for prison is a microcosm of the outside world. From the beginning of my sentence I defied the authorities by refusing to cooperate; as a result, I was confined to "lock-up," a solitary cell. As the months passed and I remained steadfast, they came to regard my behavior as suicidal. I was told that I would crack and break under the strain. I did not break, nor did I retreat from my position. I grew strong.

If I had submitted to their exploitation and done their will, it would have killed my spirit and condemned me to a living death. To cooperate in prison meant reactionary suicide to me. While solitary confinement can be physically and mentally destructive, my actions were taken with an understanding of the risk. I had to suffer through a certain situation; by doing so, my resistance told them that I rejected all they stood for. Even though my struggle might have harmed my health, even killed me, I looked upon it as a way of raising the consciousness of the other inmates, as a contribution to the ongoing revolution. Only resistance can destroy the pressures that cause reactionary suicide.

The concept of revolutionary suicide is not defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope—reality because the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death, and hope because it symbolizes a resolute determination to bring about change. Above all, it demands that the revolutionary see his death and his life as one piece. Chairman Mao says that death comes to all of us, but it varies in its significance: to die for the reactionary is lighter than a feather; to die for the revolution is heavier than Mount Tai.

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My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

LANGSTON HUGHES, "The Negro
Speaks of Rivers"

Learning

Life was opening up for me. I was trying to relate to Donald Warden and his program, trying to stay close with my righteous partners on the block, and also attending Oakland City College on a "come-and-go" basis. My motivation had been to prove to my high school teachers that they were wrong about me. To my surprise I found myself enjoying the learning process and tremendously stimulated by ideas I encountered. Since I had studied classical piano for almost seven years, I took music appreciation, music history, music theory, and also art appreciation and art history.

Most semesters I started out with a regular load, but if something came up in class that excited my imagination, I sometimes skipped classes, gathered as many books and materials as I could find on the subject, and stayed in the library or at home in my apartment reading.

While studying psychology, for example, I became fascinated with the principle of stimulus response and the biological behaviorism of John B. Watson. I read a number of books on the subject, works by B. F. Skinner and Pavlov, and read about their studies and theories of personality and human development. By the time I was satiated with stimulus response, or whatever, the class had moved on to another unit that was of no interest to me.

Philosophy was another favorite subject. I still remember some of the issues raised in logic class thirteen years ago. Such points as the

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difference between lexical and stipulative definitions I use in discussions today. Even now I find it difficult to enter into a dialogue on philosophy or Black Panther ideology until there is agreement on basic definitions. This presents problems when I speak on college campuses. I try to lead an audience into rational and logical discussions, but many students are looking for rhetoric and phrasemongering. They either do not want to learn or they do not believe that I can think.

I was also impressed with A. J. Ayer's logical positivism, particularly his distinction between three kinds of statements—the analytical statement, the synthetic statement, and statements of assumption. These ideas have helped me to develop my own thinking and ideology. Ayer once stated, "Nothing can be real if it cannot be conceptualized, articulated, and shared." That notion stuck with me and became very important when I began to use the ideological method of dialectical materialism as a world view. The ideology of the Black Panthers stands on that premise and proceeds on that basis, to conceptualize, articulate, and share. Some key aspects of Black Panther ideology and rhetoric, like "All Power to the People" and the concept "pig," developed out of that. They were not haphazardly introduced into our thinking or vocabulary.

While studying philosophy, I realized that I had been moving for some time toward existentialism. I read Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard and saw that their teachings were similar to lessons I had learned from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. Actually the "Preacher" was the first existentialist:

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.

This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. . . .

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

From then on, I began to engage friends in existentialist discussions. If a brother was hungry, I would say that it is all the same whether you are hungry or full, whether you are cold or warm. It is all the same. They *really* thought I was crazy. Then I began living like an existentialist, hitchhiking to Los Angeles and back, walking into the class dirty, without shoes, and sometimes soaked to the skin from the rain. It was all the same to me. One way or another I kept my reputation going. All the time I was on the streets I read Ecclesiastes at least once a month, until I was sentenced to the penitentiary, where they refused me all reading material.

I was still questioning. Although college work did not give me answers as such, I was beginning to comprehend human beings and the universe, to feel I could develop answers that suited my own experience and my knowledge of the world. Then, too, I was convincing myself that they had been wrong about me in public schools. When that teacher told me to write "business" on the board, she wanted to show the class that I was stupid; when they discouraged me from going to college, it was because they thought I was stupid. As a matter of fact, some of my college teachers thought I was stupid, too, because I never did well on those silly little tests they gave us. One psychology teacher told me that I scored at the level of a "dull normal" on an I.Q. test. Since I really liked this teacher, that hurt me badly. Then he gave another test, which he said "indicated" that I was intelligent. Only I knew what was happening inside of me; only I knew what was happening between me and those books up in my apartment. I was learning, and learning well. I could think, I could read, and I could retain the most difficult ideas. For over twelve years, they had tried to knock me down, but I kept getting up, and now I was advancing on them.

What I learned from Sonny Man also helped me to acquire an education. I was free to pursue my education in my own style, because I could support myself with activities on the block. Most important, I did not have to work. I ran gambling sessions at my apartment, serving as the "houseman." This meant that I set up the games—cards or craps—for everybody else to participate in, and then took a cut of the winnings.

It was my studying and reading in college that led me to become a socialist. The transformation from a nationalist to a socialist was a slow one, although I was around a lot of Marxists. I even attended a few

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meetings of the Progressive Labor Party, but nothing was happening there, just a lot of talk and dogmatism, unrelated to the world I knew. I supported Castro all the way. I even accepted an invitation to visit Cuba and recruited others for the trip, but I never made it. When I presented my solutions to the problems of Black people, or when I expressed my philosophy, people said, "Well, isn't that socialism?" Some of them were using the socialist label to put me down, but I figured that if this was socialism, then socialism must be a correct view. So I read more of the works of the socialists and began to see a strong similarity between my beliefs and theirs. My conversion was complete when I read the four volumes of Mao Tse-tung to learn more about the Chinese Revolution. It was my life plus independent reading that made me a socialist—nothing else.

I became convinced of the benefits of collectivism and a collectivist ideology. I also saw the link between racism and the economics of capitalism, although, despite the link, I recognized that it was necessary to separate the concepts in analyzing the general situation. In psychological terms, racism could continue to exist even after the economic problems that had created racism had been resolved. Never convinced that destroying capitalism would automatically destroy racism, I felt, however, that we could not destroy racism without wiping out its economic foundation. It was necessary to think much more creatively and independently about these complex interconnections.

Even though I liked my lectures and the discussions, I did not identify with the life style on campus. As soon as I finished my classes, I would go down to the block—sometimes to Sacramento Street in Berkeley or over into West or East Oakland—and drink wine, gamble, and fight. More than once I came from the block to class dead drunk. I never minded being drunk in class because the ideas were more intoxicating; but I had instructors who hated having anyone go to the bathroom while they were lecturing. It disturbed them. But when you are full of wine, you just cannot hold your urine.

College was enjoyable, largely because I was not forced to go; this made it different from high school. I could go to school or stay in my apartment and read. Some days I went to a movie or stayed on the block. I started each semester setting my own pace, which often included a trip to Mexico, or to jail, or dropping out, and all along I learned a great deal.

In spite of the learning, I was still searching for answers to other

questions. The Afro-American Association had been a deep disappointment. I had often felt that it was nothing more than a training ground for the Muslims; Warden seemed to have adopted a lot of their styles and rhetoric. I began to investigate them more closely. I had read C. Eric Lincoln's book *Black Muslims in America*, but what attracted me most was Minister Malcolm X.

I first heard Malcolm X speak at McClymonds High School in Oakland, when he attended a conference sponsored by the Afro-American Association on "The Mind of the Ghetto." Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) was with Malcolm, and he told about his conversion to Islam. He was not yet the heavyweight champion. Malcolm X impressed me with his logic and with his disciplined and dedicated mind. Here was a man who combined the world of the streets and the world of the scholar, a man so widely read he could give better lectures and cite more evidence than many college professors. He was also practical. Dressed in the loose-fitting style of a strong prison man, he knew what the street brothers were like, and he knew what had to be done to reach them. Malcolm had a program: armed defense when attacked, and reaching the people with ideas and programs that speak to their condition. At the same time, he identified the causes of their condition instead of blaming the people.

I started going to the Muslim mosques in both Oakland and San Francisco, although not regularly. However, I knew a number of Muslims and talked to them fairly often. I did read their paper regularly to follow the speeches and ideas of Malcolm. I would have joined them, but I could not deal with their religion. By this time, I had had enough of religion and could not bring myself to adopt another one. I needed a more concrete understanding of social conditions. References to God or Allah did not satisfy my stubborn questioning.

Back at the college, Kenny Freeman along with Isaac Moore, Doug Allen, Ernie Allen, Alex Papillon, and some others had begun to organize the West Coast branch of RAM, the Revolutionary Action Movement. They claimed to function as an underground movement, but instead of revolutionary action, they indulged in a lot of revolutionary talk, none of it underground. They were all college students, with bourgeois skills, who wrote a lot. Eventually, they became so infiltrated with agents that when an arrest was made, the police spent all their time showing each other their badges.

Bobby Seale tried to get me into the RAM chapter, but the members

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refused to accept me. They said I lived in the Oakland hills and was too bourgeois, which was an absolute lie. All my life I have lived in the flatlands. Actually, I think I threatened them, because I could use my head but could also "get down" like the street brothers. They claimed to be dedicated to the armed overthrow of the government, when, in reality, most of them were headed for professional occupations within the system. Freeman and the other RAM members eventually excluded Bobby because he lacked bourgeois skills.

RAM formed a front group on campus, the Soul Students Advisory Council, and Kenny Freeman stacked it with his boys. I became very active in it, joining the main thrust to get a course in Negro history into the curriculum. We held street meetings outside the college and met with the administrators, who offered foolish reasons about why Negro history should not be offered; most of them came down to the belief that Black people had no history to teach. We eventually brought about a few changes, not many, and for a short while RAM seemed very engaging to me. I considered it the answer to many things I was searching for and felt fulfilled when I talked with others about the African past and what we had contributed to the world (all the groups I went through had that in common). Everyone—from Warden and the Afro-American Association to Malcolm X and the Muslims to all the other groups active in the Bay Area at that time—believed strongly that the failure to include Black history in the college curriculum was a scandal. We all set out to do something about it.

The Soul Students Advisory Council lacked any real depth, and when we succeeded in getting the Black history class on campus, we had nothing else to do. There were the usual parties and other social activities, but these had no real meaning for me and provided no satisfaction.

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As for the future, the young streetcorner man has a fairly good picture of it. . . . It is a future in which everything is uncertain except the ultimate destruction of his hopes and the eventual realization of his fears. The most he can reasonably look forward to is that these things do not come too soon.

ELLIOT LIEBOW, *Tally's Corner*

The Brothers on the Block

Nothing we had done on the campus related to the conditions of the brothers on the block. Nothing helped them to gain a better understanding of those conditions. As I saw so many of my friends on their way to becoming dropouts from the human family, I wanted to see something good happen to them. They were getting married and beginning to have babies. Ahead of them were the round of jobs and bills my father had gone through. It was almost like being on an urban plantation, a kind of modern-day sharecropping. You worked hard, brought in your crop, and you were always in debt to the landholder. The Oakland brothers worked hard and brought in a salary, but they were still in perpetual debt to the stores that provided them with the necessities of life. The Soul Students Advisory Council, RAM, the Muslims, and the Afro-American Association were not offering these brothers and sisters anything concrete, much less a program to help them move against the system. It was agonizing to watch the brothers move down those dead-end streets.

The street brothers were important to me, and I could not turn away from the life I shared with them. There was in them an intransigent

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hostility toward all those sources of authority that had such a dehumanizing effect on the community. In school the "system" was the teacher, but on the block the system was everything that was not a positive part of the community. My comrades on the block continued to resist that authority, and I felt that I could not let college pull me away, no matter how attractive education was. These brothers had the sense of harmony and communion I needed to maintain that part of myself not totally crushed by the schools and other authorities.

At Oakland City College many of the Blacks were working as hard as they could to become a part of the system; I could not relate to their goals. These brothers still believed in making it in the world. They talked about it loud and long, expressing the desire for families, houses, cars, and so forth. Even at that time I did not want those things. I wanted freedom, and possessions meant nonfreedom to me.

It was a complex scene. Sonny Man was involved only with the brothers who did not go to college. His friends who had gone to college were estranged from him. Some of his closest "running partners" in high school moved away from him after they went to college and he stayed on the block. Now that I was also in college, I did not want to move away from the street brothers, as Walter's friends had done. That is why when I was not studying or in class, I was down on the block with the righteous brothers.

I think one of the reasons why I, in particular, had so many fights was because I weighed only about 130 pounds. You got a lot of prestige from being able to fight the hefty guys, who first gained their reputation by downing lightweights like me. There were not many others as small as I was, who looked the big ones in the eye. I had an added disadvantage: all the way through school my baby face made people think I was younger than I was. I resented being treated like a baby, and to show them I was as "bad" as they were, I would fight at the drop of a hat. As soon as I saw a dude rearing up, I struck him before he struck me, but only when there was going to be a fight anyway. I struck first, because a fight usually did not last very long, and nine times out of ten the winner was the one who got in the first lick.

Sonny Man was very good with his hands, and he taught me how to hit hard in spite of my light weight. Most of the other guys really did not know how to hit, so I always fired first and knocked them out, or at least knocked out a tooth or closed up an eye. Finally, I got a repu-

The Brothers on the Block

tation as a bad dude, and I did not have to fight as much. Every once in a while, however, one of the "tush hogs"—our name for a bad, tough street fighter on the block—would challenge me. After the fight we usually became really good friends, because he would realize that my features were deceiving.

Sometimes I got into teaching on the block, reciting poetry or starting dialogues about philosophical ideas. I talked to the brothers about things that Hume, Peirce, Locke, or William James had said, and in that way I retained ideas and sometimes resolved problems in my own mind.

These thinkers had used the scientific method by applying their ideas to particular formulas. They excluded those things that did not fit into the formulas. I explained this to the brothers, and we talked about such questions as the existence of God, self-determination, and free will. I would ask them, "Do you have free will?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Is your God all-powerful?"

"Yes."

"Is he omniscient?"

"Yes."

Therefore, I told them, their all-powerful God knew everything before it happened. If so, I would ask, "How can you say that you have free will when He knows what you are going to do before you do it? You are predestined to do what you do. If not, then your God has lied or He has made a mistake, and you have already said that your God cannot lie or make a mistake." These dilemmas led to arguments that lasted all day, over a fifth of wine; they cleared my thinking, even though I sometimes went to school drunk.

Some of the brothers thought I was a pedant, putting them down. Fights started occasionally over an imaginary insult, especially with newcomers to the group, who did not know me or my relationship to the brothers. I liked talking about ideas, and street brothers were the only ones I wanted to be with at the time, because I liked the things we were doing—standing on the corner, meeting people, watching the women, and relating to those who struggled for survival on the block.

Rap sessions like this took place all over, in cars parked in front of

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the liquor store on Sacramento Street near Ashby in Berkeley, outside places where parties were being held, and sometimes inside.

I told them about the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, and they enjoyed it. We called it the story of the cave prisoners. In the cave allegory Plato describes the plight of the prisoners in a cave who receive their impression of the outside world from shadows projected on the wall by the fire at the mouth of the cave. One of the prisoners is freed and gets a view of the outside world—objective reality. He returns to the cave to tell the others that the scenes they observe on the wall are not reality but only a distorted reflection of it. The prisoners tell the liberated man he is crazy, and he cannot convince them. He tries to take one of them outside, but the prisoner is terrified at the thought of facing something new. When he is dragged outside the cave anyway, he sees the sun and is blinded by it. The allegory seemed very appropriate to our own situation in society. We, too, were in prison and needed to be liberated in order to distinguish between truth and the falsehoods imposed on us.

The dudes on the block still thought I was "out of sight" and sometimes just plain crazy. One of the reasons for the "crazy" label was because I always did the unexpected, a valuable practice in keeping your adversary off balance. If I knew that some guys wanted to jump on me, I would go where they hung out—just show up by myself and challenge them right on the spot. Many times they were too shocked to do much about it.

This street philosophy also crept into my academic work. The brothers were hostile toward the police because they were always brutalizing and intimidating us. So I began to study police science in school to learn more about the thinking of police and how to outmaneuver them. I learned how they conducted investigations. I also began to study law. My mother had always urged me to do this, even in high school, because I was good at arguing points, and she thought I would be a good lawyer. I studied law, first at City College and later at San Francisco Law School in San Francisco, not so much to become a lawyer but to be able to deal with the police. I was doing the unexpected.

One day, in 1965, as I was walking across Grove Street to the college, I saw a white man sideswipe a brother's car. A motorcycle cop came up, and the two drivers entered into an argument over who was

The Brothers on the Block

wrong. The cop was about to write a ticket for the brother. I had been standing there with the other people watching this incident, and I walked over to the white man and told him that he was wrong. Angry at this, the cop told me to be quiet because I was not involved. I came back at him and told him that I *was* involved because I knew how he treated people on the block. The fact that he had a gun, I said, did not give him the right to intimidate me. The gun did not mean anything, because the people were going to get guns of their own and take away the guns of the police. I ran these things down to him in front of all the people. That was the first time I stood a policeman down.

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE

HUEY P. NEWTON
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF J. HERMAN BLAKE

Writers and Readers 

Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., New York

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16

As a sapling bent low stores energy for a violent back-swing, blacks bent double by oppression have stored energy which will be released in the form of rage—black rage, apocalyptic and final.

WILLIAM GRIER and PRICE COBBS, *Black Rage*

The Founding of the Black Panther Party

All during this time, Bobby and I had no thought of the Black Panther Party, no plan to head up any organization, and the ten-point program was still in the future. We had seen Watts rise up the previous year. We had seen how the police attacked the Watts community after causing the trouble in the first place. We had seen Martin Luther King come to Watts in an effort to calm the people, and we had seen his philosophy of nonviolence rejected. Black people had been taught nonviolence; it was deep in us. What good, however, was nonviolence when the police were determined to rule by force? We had seen the Oakland police and the California Highway Patrol begin to carry their shotguns in full view as another way of striking fear into the community. We had seen all this, and we recognized that the rising consciousness of Black people was almost at the point of explosion. One must relate to the history of one's community and to its future. Everything we had seen convinced us that our time had come.

Out of this need sprang the Black Panther Party. Bobby and I finally had no choice but to form an organization that would involve the lower-class brothers.

The Founding of the Black Panther Party

We worked it out in conversations and discussions. Most of the talk was casual. Bobby lived near the campus, and his living room became a kind of headquarters. Although we were still involved with Soul Students, we attended few meetings, and when we did go, our presence was mostly disruptive; we raised questions that upset people. Our conversations with each other became the important thing. Brothers who had a free hour between classes and others who just hung around the campus drifted in and out of Bobby's house. We drank beer and wine and chewed over the political situation, our social problems, and the merits and shortcomings of the other groups. We also discussed the Black achievements of the past, particularly as they helped us to understand current events.

In a sense, these sessions at Bobby's house were our political education classes, and the Party sort of grew out of them. Even after we formally organized we continued the discussions in our office. By then we had moved on to include not only problems but possible solutions.

We also read. The literature of oppressed people and their struggles for liberation in other countries is very large, and we pored over these books to see how their experiences might help us to understand our plight. We read the work of Frantz Fanon, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*, the four volumes of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*. Che and Mao were veterans of people's wars, and they had worked out successful strategies for liberating their people. We read these men's works because we saw them as kinsmen; the oppressor who had controlled them was controlling us, both directly and indirectly. We believed it was necessary to know how they gained their freedom in order to go about getting ours. However, we did not want merely to import ideas and strategies; we had to transform what we learned into principles and methods acceptable to the brothers on the block.

Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by any philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint. They had suffered a holdup by gangsters, and rape; for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. At bottom, this is a form of self-defense. Although that defense might at times take on characteristics of aggression, in the final analysis the people do not initiate; they simply re-

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spond to what has been inflicted upon them. People respect the expression of strength and dignity displayed by men who refuse to bow to the weapons of oppression. Though it may mean death, these men will fight, because death with dignity is preferable to ignominy. Then, too, there is always the chance that the oppressor will be overwhelmed.

Fanon made a statement during the Algerian war that impressed me; he said it was the "Year of the Boomerang," which is the third phase of violence. At that point, the violence of the aggressor turns on him and strikes a killing blow. Yet the oppressor does not understand the process; he knows no more than he did in the first phase when he launched the violence. The oppressed are always defensive; the oppressor is always aggressive and surprised when the people turn back on him the force he has used against them.

Negroes with Guns by Robert Williams* had a great influence on the kind of party we developed. Williams had been active in Monroe, North Carolina, with a program of armed self-defense that had enlisted many in the community. However, I did not like the way he had called on the federal government for assistance; we viewed the government as an enemy, the agency of a ruling clique that controls the country. We also had some literature about the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Louisiana, the state where I was born. One of their leaders had come through the Bay Area on a speaking and fund-raising tour, and we liked what he said. The Deacons had done a good job of defending civil rights marchers in their area, but they also had a habit of calling upon the federal government to carry out this defense or at least to assist them in defending the people who were upholding the law. The Deacons even went so far as to enlist local sheriffs and police to defend the

* Robert Williams was the president of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, when he recruited its male members into an organization that advocated carrying guns for self-defense, a move made necessary for protection against whites who went on regular shooting sprees into the Black community, terrorizing its residents. Williams was one of the first modern Black advocates of self-defense, and he wrote articles supporting his position. In 1961, he fled from the United States when a federal fugitive warrant was issued against him for kidnaping. Members of Williams's organization said that a white couple from the area, whom they had detained for a short period, had been sent into the Black community at night to give police an official excuse for harassment and violence. Williams went to Cuba, China, and Tanzania, where he continued to write. In 1969, he returned to the United States.

The Founding of the Black Panther Party

marchers, with the threat that if law enforcement agencies would not defend them, the Deacons would. We also viewed the local police, the National Guard, and the regular military as one huge armed group that opposed the will of the people. In a boundary situation people have no real defense except what they provide for themselves.

We read also the works of the freedom fighters who had done so much for Black communities in the United States. Bobby had collected all of Malcolm X's speeches and ideas from papers like *The Militant* and *Muhammad Speaks*. These we studied carefully. Although Malcolm's program for the Organization of Afro-American Unity was never put into operation, he has made it clear that Blacks ought to arm. Malcolm's influence was ever-present. We continue to believe that the Black Panther Party exists in the spirit of Malcolm. Often it is difficult to say exactly how an action or a program has been determined or influenced in a spiritual way. Such intangibles are hard to describe, although they can be more significant than any precise influence. Therefore, the words on this page cannot convey the effect that Malcolm has had on the Black Panther Party, although, as far as I am concerned, the Party is a living testament to his life work. I do not claim that the Party has done what Malcolm would have done. Many others say that their programs are Malcolm's programs. We do not say this, but Malcolm's spirit is in us.

From all of these things—the books, Malcolm's writings and spirit, our analysis of the local situation—the idea of an organization was forming. One day, quite suddenly, almost by chance, we found a name. I had read a pamphlet about voter registration in Mississippi, how the people in Lowndes County had armed themselves against Establishment violence. Their political group, called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, had a black panther for its symbol. A few days later, while Bobby and I were rapping, I suggested that we use the panther as our symbol and call our political vehicle the Black Panther Party. The panther is a fierce animal, but he will not attack until he is backed into a corner; then he will strike out. The image seemed appropriate, and Bobby agreed without discussion. At this point, we knew it was time to stop talking and begin organizing. Although we had always wanted to get away from the intellectualizing and rhetoric characteristic of other groups, at times we were as inactive as they were. The time had come for action.

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17

The only way to police a ghetto is to be oppressive. None of the Police Commissioner's men, even with the best will in the world, have any way of understanding the lives led by the people they swagger about in twos and threes controlling. Their very presence is an insult, and it would be, even if they spent their entire day feeding gumdrops to children. They represent the force of the white world, and that world's real intentions are, simply, for that world's criminal profit and ease, to keep the black man corraled up here, in his place.

JAMES BALDWIN, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown,"
Nobody Knows My Name

Patrolling

It was the spring of 1966. Still without a definite program, we were at the stage of testing ideas that would capture the imagination of the community. We began, as always, by checking around with the street brothers. We asked them if they would be interested in forming the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which would be based upon defending the community against the aggression of the power structure, including the military and the armed might of the police. We informed the brothers of their right to possess weapons; most of them were interested. Then we talked about how the people are constantly intimidated by arrogant, belligerent police officers and exactly what we could do about it. We went to pool halls and bars, all the places where brothers congregate and talk.

I was prepared to give them legal advice. From my law courses at

Oakland City College and San Francisco Law School I was familiar with the California penal code and well versed in the laws relating to weapons. I also had something very important at my disposal—the law library of the North Oakland Service Center, a community-center poverty program where Bobby was working. The Center gave legal advice, and there were many lawbooks on the shelves. Unfortunately, most of them dealt with civil law, since the antipoverty program was not supposed to advise poor people about criminal law. However, I made good use of the books they had to run down the full legal situation to the brothers on the street. We were doing what the poverty program claimed to be doing but never had—giving help and counsel to poor people about the things that crucially affected their lives.

All that summer we circulated in the Black communities of Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. Wherever brothers gathered, we talked with them about their right to arm. In general, they were interested but skeptical about the weapons idea. They could not see anyone walking around with a gun in full view. To recruit any sizable number of street brothers, we would obviously have to do more than *talk*. We needed to give practical applications of our theory, show them that we were not afraid of weapons and not afraid of death. The way we finally won the brothers over was by patrolling the police with arms.

Before we began the patrols, however, Bobby and I set down in writing a practical course of action. We could go no further without a program, and we resolved to drop everything else, even though it might take a while to come up with something viable. One day, we went to the North Oakland Service Center to work it out. The Center was an ideal place because of the books and the fact that we could work undisturbed. First, we pulled together all the books we had been reading and dozens we had only heard about. We discussed Mao's program, Cuba's program, and all the others, but concluded that we could not follow any of them. Our unique situation required a unique program. Although the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is universal, forms of oppression vary. The ideas that mobilized the people of Cuba and China sprang from their own history and political structures. The practical parts of those programs could be carried out only under a certain kind of oppression. Our program had to deal with America.

Revolutionary Suicide

I started rapping off the essential points for the survival of Black and oppressed people in the United States. Bobby wrote them down, and then we separated those ideas into two sections, "What We Want" and "What We Believe." We split them up because the ideas fell naturally into two distinct categories. It was necessary to explain why we wanted certain things. At the same time, our goals were based on beliefs, and we set those out, too. In the section on beliefs, we made it clear that all the objective conditions necessary for attaining our goals were already in existence, but that a number of societal factors stood in our way. This was to help the people understand what was working against them.

All in all, our ten-point program took about twenty minutes to write. Thinking it would take days, we were prepared for a long session, but we never got to the small mountain of books piled up around us. We had come to an important realization: books could only point in a general direction; the rest was up to us. This is the program we wrote down:

OCTOBER 1966

BLACK PANTHER PARTY PLATFORM AND PROGRAM

WHAT WE WANT WHAT WE BELIEVE

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.

We believe that Black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.

2. We want full employment for our people.

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

3. We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black community.

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over fifty million Black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.

We believe that if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our Black community, then the housing and the land should be made into co-operatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.

5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.

We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like Black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.

7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people.

We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for self-defense.

8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.

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We believe that all Black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

9. *We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.*

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that Black people will receive fair trials. The Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical, and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the Black community from which the Black defendant came. We have been and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the Black community.

10. *We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny.*

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it

is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

With the program on paper, we set up the structure of our organization. Bobby became Chairman, and I chose the position of Minister of Defense.* I was very happy with this arrangement; I do not like to lead formally, and the Chairman has to conduct meetings and be involved in administration. We also discussed having an advisory cabinet as an information arm of the Party. We wanted this cabinet to do research on each of the ten points and their relation to the community and to advise the people on how to implement them. It seemed best to weight the political wing of the Party with street brothers and the advisory cabinet with middle-class Blacks who had the necessary knowledge and skills. We were also seeking a functional unity between middle-class Blacks and the street brothers. I asked my brother Melvin to approach a few friends about serving on the advisory cabinet, but when our plan became clear, they all refused, and the cabinet was deferred.

The first member of the Black Panther Party, after Bobby and myself, was Little Bobby Hutton. Little Bobby had met Bobby Seale at the North Oakland Service Center, where both were working, and he immediately became enthusiastic about the nascent organization. Even though he was only about fifteen years old then, he was a responsible and mature person, determined to help the cause of Black people. He became the Party's first treasurer. Little Bobby was the youngest of seven children; his family had come to Oakland from Arkansas when he was three years old. His parents were good, hard-working people, but Bobby had endured the same hardships and humiliations to which so many young Blacks in poor communities are subjected. Like many of the brothers, he had been kicked out of school. Then he had gotten a part-time job at the Service Center. After work he used to come around to Bobby Seale's house to talk and learn to read. At the time of his murder,† he was reading *Black Reconstruction in America* by W. E. B. Du Bois.

* All titles in the Black Panther Party were eventually dropped, in July, 1972.

† On the night of April 6, 1968, two days after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Black Panthers riding in three cars transporting food and supplies for a barbecue picnic to be held in the Black community the next day were ambushed by police. In the shoot-out that followed, Little Bobby Hutton and another Black

Revolutionary Suicide

Bobby was a serious revolutionary, but there was nothing grim about him. He had an infectious smile and a disarming quality that made people love him. He died courageously, the first Black Panther to make the supreme sacrifice for the people. We all attempt to carry on the work he began.

We started now to implement our ten-point program. Interested primarily in educating and revolutionizing the community, we needed to get their attention and give them something to identify with. This is why the seventh point—police action—was the first program we emphasized. Point 7 stated: "We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people." This is a major issue in every Black community. The police have never been our protectors. Instead, they act as the military arm of our oppressors and continually brutalize us. Many communities have tried and failed to get civilian review boards to supervise the behavior of the police. In some places, organized citizen patrols have followed the police and observed them in their community dealings. They take pictures and make tape recordings of the encounters and report misbehavior to the authorities. However, the authorities responsible for overseeing the police are policemen themselves and usually side against the citizens. We recognized that it was ridiculous to report the police to the police, but we hoped that by raising encounters to a higher level, by patrolling the police with arms, we would see a change in their behavior. Further, the community would notice this and become interested in the Party. Thus our armed patrols were also a means of recruiting.

At first, the patrols were a total success. Frightened and confused, the police did not know how to respond, because they had never encountered patrols like this before. They were familiar with the community-alert patrols in other cities, but never before had guns been an integral part of any patrol program. With weapons in our hands, we were no longer their subjects but their equals.

Out on patrol, we stopped whenever we saw the police questioning a brother or a sister. We would walk over with our weapons and ob-

Panther Party member, Eldridge Cleaver, were trapped by the police in the basement of a house on Twenty-eighth Street in Oakland. The police fired upon the house with rifles, pistols, shotguns, tear gas, and fire bombs for ninety minutes, after which Little Bobby came out with his hands in the air. In cold blood, the police shot him dead in the street. He was seventeen years old.

serve them from a "safe" distance so that the police could not say we were interfering with the performance of their duty. We would ask the community members if they were being abused. Most of the time, when a policeman saw us coming, he slipped his book back into his pocket, got into his car, and left in a hurry. The citizens who had been stopped were as amazed as the police at our sudden appearance.

I always carried lawbooks in my car. Sometimes, when a policeman was harassing a citizen, I would stand off a little and read the relevant portions of the penal code in a loud voice to all within hearing distance. In doing this, we were helping to educate those who gathered to observe these incidents. If the policeman arrested the citizen and took him to the station, we would follow and immediately post bail. Many community people could not believe at first that we had only their interest at heart. Nobody had ever given them any support or assistance when the police harassed them, but here we were, proud Black men, armed with guns and a knowledge of the law. Many citizens came right out of jail and into the Party, and the statistics of murder and brutality by policemen in our communities fell sharply.

Each day we went out on our watch. Sometimes we got on a policeman's tail and followed him with our weapons in full view. If he darted around the block or made a U-turn trying to follow us, we let him do it until he got tired of that. Then, we would follow him again. Either way, we took up a good bit of police time that otherwise would have been spent in harassment.

As our forces built up, we doubled the patrols, then tripled them; we began to patrol everywhere—Oakland, Richmond, Berkeley, and San Francisco. Most patrols were a part of our normal movement around the community. We kept them random, however, so that the police could not set a network to anticipate us. They never knew when or where we were going to show up. It might be late at night or early in the morning; some brothers would go on patrol the same time every day, but never in a specific pattern or in the same geographical area. The chief purpose of the patrols was to teach the community security against the police, and we did not need a regular schedule for that. We knew that no particular area could be totally defended; only the community could effectively defend and eventually liberate itself. Our aim was simply to teach them how to go about it. We passed out our literature and ten-point program to the citizens who gathered, dis-

Revolutionary Suicide

cussed community defense, and educated them about their rights concerning weapons. All along, the number of members grew.

The Black Panthers were and are always required to keep their activities within legal bounds. This was emphasized repeatedly in our political education classes and also when we taught weapons care. If we overstepped legal bounds, the police would easily gain the upper hand and be able to continue their intimidation. We also knew the community was somewhat fearful of the gun and of the policeman who had it. So, we studied the law about weapons and kept within our rights. To be arrested for having weapons would be a setback to our program of teaching the people their constitutional right to bear arms. As long as we kept everything legal, the police could do nothing, and the people would see that armed defense was a legitimate, constitutional right. In this way, they would lose their doubts and fears and be able to move against their oppressor.

It was not all observation and penal code reading on those patrols. The police, invariably shocked to meet a cadre of disciplined and armed Black men coming to the support of the community, reacted in strange and unpredictable ways. In their fright, some of them became children, cursing and insulting us. We responded in kind, calling them swine and pigs, but never cursing—this could be cause for arrest—and we took care not to be arrested with our weapons. But we demonstrated their cowardice to the community with our “shock-a-buku.”* It was sometimes hilarious to see their reaction; they had always been cocky and sure of themselves as long as they had weapons to intimidate the unarmed community. When we equalized the situation, their real cowardice was exposed.

Soon they began to retaliate. We expected this—they had to get back at us in some way—and were prepared. The fact that we had conquered our fear of death made it possible to face them under any circumstances. The police began to keep a record of Black Panther vehicles; whenever they spotted one, it would be stopped and investigated for possible violations. This was a childish ploy, but it was the police way. We always made sure our vehicles were clean, without violations, and the police were usually hard-pressed to find any justi-

* “Shock-a-buku” is a term we made up. In the Black community shock-a-buku is a tactic of keeping the enemy off balance through sudden and unexpected maneuvers that push him toward his opponent’s position.

fication for stopping us. Since we were within the law, they soon resorted to illegal tactics. I was stopped and questioned forty or fifty times by police without being arrested or even getting a ticket in most instances. The few times I did end up on the blotter it merely proved how far they were willing to go. A policeman once stopped me and examined my license and the car for any violation of the Motor Vehicle Code. He spent about half an hour going over the vehicle, checking lights, horn, tires, everything. Finally, he shook the rear license plate, and a bolt dropped off, so he wrote out a ticket for a faulty license plate.

Some encounters with the police were more dramatic. At times they drew their guns and we drew ours, until we reached a sort of stand-off. This happened frequently to me. I often felt that someday one of the police would go crazy and pull the trigger. Some of them were so nervous that they looked as if they might shake a bullet out of their pistols. I would rather have a brave man pull a gun on me, since he is less likely to panic; but we were prepared for anything. Sometimes they threatened to shoot, thinking I would lose courage, but I remembered the lessons of solitary confinement and assigned every silly action its proper significance: they were afraid of us. It was as simple as that. Each day we went forth fully aware that we might not come home or see each other ever again. There is no closeness to equal that.

In front of our first Black Panther office, on Fifty-eighth Street in Oakland, a policeman once drew his gun and pointed it at me while I sat in my car. When people gathered to observe, the police told them to clear the area. I ignored the gun, got out of the car, and asked the people to go into the Party office. They had a right to observe the police. Then I called the policeman an ignorant Georgia cracker who had come West to get away from sharecropping. After that, I walked around the car and spoke to the citizens about the police and about every man's right to be armed. I took a chance there, but I figured the policeman would not shoot me with all those eyes on him. He was willing to shoot me without cause, I am sure, but not before so many witnesses.

Another policeman admitted as much during an incident in Richmond. I had stopped to watch a motorcycle cop question a citizen. He was clearly edgy at my presence, but I stood off quietly at a reasonable

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distance with my shotgun in hand. After writing up the citizen, he rode his motorcycle over to me and asked if I wanted to press charges for police brutality. About a dozen people were standing around watching us. "Are you paranoid?" I replied. "Do you think you're important? Do you think I would waste my time going down to the police station to make a report on you? No. You're just a coward anyway." With that, I got into my car. When he tried to hold my door open, I slammed it shut and told him to get his hands off. By now people were laughing at the cop, and rather than suffer further humiliation, he drove off, steaming mad. About halfway down the street, he turned around and came back; he wanted to do something, and he was about fifty shades of red. Pulling up beside me, he stuck his head close and said, "If it was night, you wouldn't do this." "You're right," I replied, "I sure wouldn't, but you're threatening me now, aren't you?" He got a little redder and kicked his machine into gear, and took off.

The police wanted me badly, but they needed to do their dirty work out of view of the community. When a citizen was unarmed, they brutalized him any time, almost casually, but when he was prepared to defend himself, the police became little more than criminals, working at night.

On another occasion I stopped by the Black Panther office after paying some bills for my father. Since I was taking care of family business, I had not carried my shotgun with me—it was at home—but I did have a dagger, fully sheathed, in my belt. In the office were two comrades, Warren Tucker, a captain in the Party, and another member. As we talked, an eleven-year-old boy burst into the office and said, "The police are at my friend's house, and they're tearing up the place." This house was only about three blocks away, so the two Black Panthers and I hurried to the scene. Warren Tucker had a .45 pistol strapped to his hip in full view, but the other two of us had no weapons. We never kept weapons in the office, since we were there only periodically.

When we arrived, we found three policemen in the house, turning over couches and chairs, searching and pushing a little boy around and shouting, "Where's the shotgun?" The boy kept saying, "I don't have a shotgun," but the police went right on looking. I asked the policeman who seemed to be in charge if he had a search warrant, and he answered that he did not need one because he was in "hot pursuit."

Then he told me to leave the house. The little boy asked me to stay, so I continued to question the police, telling them they had no right to be there. The policeman finally turned on me. "You're going to get out of here," he said. "No," I said, "you leave if you don't have a search warrant."

In the middle of this argument the boy's father arrived and also asked the police for a search warrant. When the police admitted they did not have one, he ordered them out. As they started to leave, one of the policemen stopped in the doorway and said to the father, "Why are you telling us to get out? Why don't you get rid of these Panthers? They're the troublemakers." The father replied, "Before this I didn't like the Panthers. I had heard bad things about them, but in the last few minutes I've changed my mind, because they helped my son when you pushed him around."

The police became even more outraged at this. All their hostility now turned toward us. As the whole group went down the steps and out into the yard, more policemen arrived on the scene. The house was directly across the street from Oakland City College, and the dozen or so police cars had attracted a crowd that was milling about. The policeman who had been ordered out of the house took new courage at the sight of reinforcements. Walking over to me in the yard, he came close, saying, "You are always making trouble for us." Coming closer still, he growled at me in a low voice that could not be overheard, "You motherfucker." This was a regular police routine, a transparent strategy. He wanted me to curse him before witnesses; then he could arrest me. But I had learned to be cautious. After he called me a motherfucker, he stood waiting for the explosion, but it did not come in the way he expected. Instead, I called him a swine, a pig, a slimy snake—everything I could think of without using profanity.

By now he was almost apoplectic. "You're talking to me like that and you have a weapon. You're displaying a weapon in a rude and threatening fashion." Then he turned to Warren Tucker—Warren's gun was still in its holster—and said, "And so are you." As if on signal, the fifteen policemen who had been standing around uncertainly stormed the three of us and threw on handcuffs. They did not say they were placing us under arrest. If they had, we would gladly have taken the arrest under the circumstances without any resistance. From the way we went hurtling off in the paddy wagon, with its siren wailing

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and police cars ahead and behind, you might have thought they had bagged a Mafia capo. After we were booked, they searched us and found a penknife in Warren Tucker's pocket, the kind Boy Scouts use. So, they dropped the charge of "displaying a weapon in a rude and threatening manner" and charged him simply with carrying a concealed weapon. Even that charge was eventually dropped.

This was the kind of harassment we went through over and over again, simply because we chose to exercise our constitutional rights to self-defense and stand up for the community. In spite of the fact that we followed the law to the letter, we were arrested and convicted of all sorts of minor trumped-up charges. They sought to frighten us and turn the community against us, but what they did had the opposite effect. For instance, after this encounter, we gained a number of new members from City College students who had watched the incident and had seen how things really were. They had been skeptical about us earlier because of the bad treatment we had received in the press, but seeing is believing.

The policeman who started this particular incident testified against me in 1968 in my trial for killing a policeman. When my attorney, Charles Garry, questioned him under cross-examination, he admitted his fear of the Black Panthers. He is six feet tall and weighs 250 pounds; I am five feet, ten and a half inches, and weigh 150 pounds; yet he said that I "surrounded" him. Straying further from the facts, he testified that he had not said anything to me, that, on the contrary, he was too frightened to open his mouth. The Black Panthers allegedly frightened him by shaking high-powered rifles in his face, calling him a pig, and threatening to kill him. He was fearful, he said, that I would kill him with the dagger, though it was sheathed. He stated that I had come right up to him, that I was "in his face," and, as he put it, "He was all around me." So much for police testimony.

In addition to our patrols and confrontations with the police, I did a lot of recruiting in pool halls and bars, sometimes working twelve to sixteen hours a day. I passed out leaflets with our ten-point program, explaining each point to all who would listen. Going deep into the community like this, I invariably became involved in whatever was happening; this day-to-day contact became an important part of our organizing effort. There is a bar-restaurant in North Oakland known as the "Bosn's Locker"; I used to call it my office because I would some-

times sit in there for twenty hours straight talking with the people who came in. Most of the time, I had my shotgun with me, if the owners of the establishment did not object. If they did, I left it in my car.

At other times I would go to City College or to the Oakland Skills Center—anywhere people gathered. It was hard work, but not in the sense of working at an ordinary job, with its deadly routine and sense of futility in performing empty labor. It was work that had profound significance for me; the very meaning of my life was in it, and it brought me closer to the people.

This recruiting had an interesting ramification in that I tried to transform many of the so-called criminal activities going on in the street into something political, although this had to be done gradually. Instead of trying to eliminate these activities—numbers, hot goods, drugs—I attempted to channel them into significant community actions. Black consciousness had generally reached a point where a man felt guilty about exploiting the Black community. However, if his daily activities for survival could be integrated with actions that undermined the established order, he felt good about it. It gave him a feeling of justification and strengthened his own sense of personal worth. Many of the brothers who were burglarizing and participating in similar pursuits began to contribute weapons and material to community defense. In order to survive they still had to sell their hot goods, but at the same time they would pass some of the cash on to us. That way, ripping off became more than just an individual thing.

Gradually the Black Panthers came to be accepted in the Bay Area community. We had provided a needed example of strength and dignity by showing people how to defend themselves. More important, we lived among them. They could see every day that with us the people came first.

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE

HUEY P. NEWTON
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF J. HERMAN BLAKE

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EPILOGUE

I Am We

There is an old African saying, "I am we." If you met an African in ancient times and asked him who he was, he would reply, "I am we." This is revolutionary suicide: I, we, all of us are the one and the multitude.

So many of my comrades are gone now. Some tight partners, crime partners, and brothers off the block are begging on the street. Others are in asylum, penitentiary, or grave. They are all suicides of one kind or another who had the sensitivity and tragic imagination to see the oppression. Some overcame; they are the revolutionary suicides. Others were reactionary suicides who either overestimated or underestimated the enemy, but in any case were powerless to change their conception of the oppressor.

The difference lies in hope and desire. By hoping and desiring, the revolutionary suicide chooses life; he is, in the words of Nietzsche, "an arrow of longing for another shore." Both suicides despise tyranny, but the revolutionary is both a great despiser and a great adorer who longs for another shore. The reactionary suicide must learn, as his brother the revolutionary has learned, that the desert is not a circle. It is a spiral. When we have passed through the desert, nothing will be the same.

You cannot bare your throat to the murderer. As George Jackson said, you must defend yourself and take the dragon position as in karate and make the front kick and the back kick when you are surrounded. You do not beg because your enemy comes with the butcher

knife in one hand and the hatchet in the other. "He will not become a Buddhist overnight."

The Preacher said that the wise man and the fool have the same end; they go to the grave as a dog. Who sends us to the grave? The unknowable, the force that dictates to all classes, all territories, all ideologies; he is death, the Big Boss. An ambitious man seeks to dethrone the Big Boss, to free himself, to control when and how he will go to the grave.

There is another illuminating story of the wise man and the fool, found in Mao's *Little Red Book*: A foolish old man went to North Mountain and began to dig; a wise old man passed by and said, "Why do you dig, foolish old man? Do you not know that you cannot move the mountain with a little shovel?" But the foolish old man answered resolutely, "While the mountain cannot get any higher, it will get lower with each shovelful. When I pass on, my sons and his sons and his son's sons will go on making the mountain lower. Why can't we move the mountain?" And the foolish old man kept digging, and the generations that followed after him, and the wise old man looked on in disgust. But the resoluteness and the spirit of the generations that followed the foolish old man touched God's heart, and God sent two angels who put the mountain on their backs and moved the mountain.

This is the story Mao told. When he spoke of God he meant the six hundred million who had helped him to move imperialism and bourgeois thinking, the two great mountains.

The reactionary suicide is "wise," and the revolutionary suicide is a "fool," a fool for the revolution in the way that Paul meant when he spoke of being "a fool for Christ." That foolishness can move the mountain of oppression; it is our great leap and our commitment to the dead and the unborn.

We will touch God's heart; we will touch the people's heart, and together we will move the mountain.