

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE

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WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF J. HERMAN BLAKE

Writers and Readers 

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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.

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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

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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-

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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.