"Are These Cats Red?"
The Black Panther Party as a Chapter of the International Communist Revolution

BY
Charles Kopel

Charles Kopel is a senior studying History at Yeshiva University. He wrote this paper for a Fall 2012 American History course, under the guidance of Dr. Ellen Schrecker, the course instructor and a renowned historian of the Cold War era. For his senior honors thesis, Charles continues to examine twentieth-century racial tensions in the history of American social attitudes toward the Native tribes.

In the turbulent latter half of the 1960s, the banner of the Black Power movement did not belong to any one figure or organization. The emerging militant ethos of the civil rights movement became a point of intense struggle between different groups with wildly different ideas and strategies. While the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) contended in the free market of ideas for black activist identity, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, two socially conscious black students in Merritt College of Oakland, California, launched the extraordinary group that eclipsed all the rest.[1] Their "Black Panther Party for Self-Defense" achieved national and international prominence in its lifespan of less than two decades, capturing the hearts and minds of countless friends while provoking countless more foes.

The circumstances of the time period and the erratic personalities of Seale and Newton—though both are undoubtedly essential pieces of this history—do not suffice on their own to account for the importance of the Panthers. Rather, the highly developed Panther ideology authored in Oakland during the late 1960s and early 1970s more fully explains the Panthers' remarkable success. In forming this doctrine, Seale, Newton, and the others were motivated not only by the perceived needs of the black community and the injustices of American society, but also by a very particular interpretation of global history and geopolitical affairs.

This interpretation propelled the Black Panther Party into the orbits of the Third World, Pan-Africanism, the Black Power movement,

[1] See Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "A Party for the People: The Black Freedom Movement and the Rise of the Black Panther Party" in his *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 81.

the White New Left, and global communism, all at once. Panther ideology presented a coherent fusion of all the major grievances of the day couched in a terrifying "politics of rage."[2] The following study will first consider the development of the Panthers' ideological doctrine, with special attention to its internationalist and communist elements, and then proceed to consider the application of this doctrine in the Black Panther Party's worldwide revolutionary program.

To broach the subject of black activist organizations in the 1960s, the following traditional dichotomy proves useful: the pro-integrationist civil rights movement, based in the rural south, was symbolically headed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). This movement also famously involved SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and, in a more limited capacity, the half-century-old National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Important differences separated these groups from one another— the NAACP focused on legal action rather than protests or disobedience, and SNCC and CORE were generally considered more radical than SCLC— but they all shared an affinity for civil, nonviolent activism. Their collective goal was full acceptance for people of color in all sectors of American society.[3]

On the other side of the dichotomy stood the Black Nationalist movement. Based in the urban centers of the North, where black people were generally concentrated in impoverished ghettoes, the Black Nationalists aligned themselves with their racial brethren in Africa and advocated separatism rather than integration. Nationalist leaders like Malcolm X, the electrifying, charismatic NOI advocate, saw black people as naturally superior to whites, struck a tone of militant defiance and self-defense, and disparaged civil disobedience.

In the view of NOI's early SNCC detractors, however, "tone" was, in fact, all the Black Nationalist movement had to offer, and not much by way of concrete action. Paradigms shifted in the mid-1960s, when SNCC members began to grow disillusioned with the ineffectiveness of nonviolent action, and, turning to the separatism and militarism of the Black Nationalists, sought to add action to the NOI's rhetoric. This radical

---

[2] This term was borrowed by David Barber from the title of Dan T. Carter's 1996 work on George Wallace and New Conservatism (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press) to describe the Panthers' image among historians of the New Left, in his "Leading the Vanguard: White New Leftists School the Panthers on Black Revolution" in *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, ed. by Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 223-251.

[3] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 70-71.

impulse precipitated the rise of "Black Power."[4] More particularly, SNCC frustration arose from the realization that no number of marches, sit-ins, and rallies would achieve genuine acceptance and economic parity for black people within the wider American populace. With such victories as the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in the past, activists felt that the challenge that lay ahead – achieving true racial equality in society, not just in the law – could not be met by civil protests alone. Their change of heart set the stage for the bloody riots that tore apart Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Jacksonville, and South Bend in the summer of 1965.[5] As civil disobedience lost its appeal, SNCC went the way of militant separatism in 1966, shattering the traditional dichotomy and dramatically changing the civil rights movement.

Under its new chairman, the fiery Stokely Carmichael (later an admirer and honorary high-ranking member of the Panthers),[6] SNCC formulated the new Black Power doctrine: a militant form of Black Nationalism, more violent than that of the NOI.[7] The commonplace term "negro" was banned in SNCC circles in favor of "black," based on the contention that "negro" was the white oppressors' term and that it was time to declare that to be "black" meant to be independent of white people.[8] The notion of interracial democracy – the prize of the mainstream civil rights movement – was rapidly losing its most ardent advocates.

Independent Black Power activist cells soon arose in cities throughout the North, many adopting the "Black Panther" symbol first popularized by the Lowndes County, Alabama Freedom Organization (LCFO) in 1966.[9] Most of these cells struggled with factionalism and

---

[4] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 73.

[5] John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 363.

[6] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 87-89.

[7] Lewis, *Walking with The Wind*, 384-387. Martin Luther King, Jr., still an iconic figure for much of the civil rights community at that point, became an early and vehement critic of the Black Power idea. He wrote in 1967: "Black Power is a nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that the Negro can't win. It is, at bottom, the view that American society is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within. Although this thinking is understandable as a response to a white power structure that never completely committed itself to true equality for the Negro, and a die-hard mentality that sought to shut all windows and doors against the winds of change, it nonetheless carries the seeds of its own doom." (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here?: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 23.)

[8] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 74.

[9] "Panther" is a generic term used to refer to many large feline species. The LCFO's name selection process has developed a mythology of its own; See Ogbar, "Party for the People," 76 for a detailed description. (Several different explanations for

failed to rise out of obscurity, but one Oakland-based group, toting a particularly extreme and developed ideology, proved exceptional. In October 1966, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton launched their Black Panther group with the publication of a ten-point manifesto: "What We Want, What We Believe"[10] (a title explicitly borrowed from the Nation of Islam's "What the Muslims Want" and "What the Muslims Believe," and likely intended to highlight this manifesto's differences from that of the NOI).[11]

"What We Want, What We Believe" curiously refers to the United States government as a foreign entity, demonstrating forthrightly the Panthers' penchant for militant separatism and disdain for civil disobedience. But unlike other Black Power groups who shared these traits, Newton and Seale's manifesto advances an even more radical idea: the identification of the black people of America as just one of the many groups of "Black and oppressed"[12] peoples around the world suffering from white Western imperialism. For these Panthers, separation from White America meant full identification with the colored peoples of the Third World. At that point in world history, Third World movements around the world expressed themselves prominently and powerfully through communist revolution.

Thus, with one college-student-sized step back from the narrow reality of the American 1960s, Newton and Seale recognized that their position in the developing struggle for black Americans was about something larger than that which SNCC, SCLC, the NOI, or the NAACP had ever conceived, though it incorporated elements from the philosophies of all the above. Rather, they staked their claims against the centuries-old enterprise of white domination of the colored Third World. With such deep-rooted indignation as a basis, it is no wonder that Seale and Newton's demands in the Party program were so bold. They included:

> WE WANT FREEDOM. WE WANT POWER TO DETERMINE THE DESTINY OF OUR BLACK AND OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES … WE WANT FULL EMPLOYMENT FOR OUR PEOPLE … WE WANT DECENT HOUSING … WE WANT COMPLETELY FREE HEALTH

---

the choice of the panther are raised, variously emphasizing the animal's power, its violence, and its indigeneity to the American South. The color choice was obvious.)

[10] Also known as "The Ten Point Plan" (The Black Panther Party, 1966).

[11] See "Muslim Program" on the Nation of Islam webpage, available at: http://www.noi.org/muslim_program.htm.

[12] "The Ten Point Plan."

> CARE … WE WANT AN IMMEDIATE END TO POLICE BRUTALITY.

In support of this doctrine, the Panthers initiated an armed uprising. Seale and Newton were well-versed in the philosophy of Algerian revolutionary Frantz Fanon, and concluded that violence alone could free their black brethren from the white colonizers who still had authority over them.[13] They sought, at least on paper, a full-blown revolutionary confrontation with the enemy forces of the United States, and they were prepared to meet death in the advancement of this end.[14]

Throughout the Party's existence, Panther leaders sought to communicate their ideology to a wide audience, and their momentum was fed by press attention.[15] Generally speaking, the Panther leaders emphasized rigorous argumentation and the intellectual foundations of their worldview. In just the first three pages of Huey Newton's aforementioned autobiography, the Party co-founder references Emile Durkheim, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Che Guevara.[16] This emphasis on ideas lent the Panthers their special power of appeal among black activist groups.

"What We Want, What We Believe" confronts the entire gamut of left-wing grievances – racism, aggressive wars in the Third World, capitalist greed, police brutality, and poverty – and makes sense of all of these problems by casting them in the mold of White Capitalist America's great crime against black history.[17]

A Marxist criticism of American society is crucial to this conclusion. The demands of the ten-point plan therefore also include "AN END TO THE ROBBERY BY THE CAPITALISTS OF OUR BLACK AND OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES," as well as fundamentally socialist views on the functions of government, such as guaranteed personal income, universal healthcare, and government-sponsored housing. The manifesto's most explicit invocation of Marxism, however, comes in Seale and Newton's description of their second demand (universal employment):

---

[13] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 85.

[14] In Newton's own words: "Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions."

[15] For more on the Black Panther Party's relationship with the press, see Jane Rhodes, "Fanning the Flames of Racial Discord: The National Press and the Black Panther Party," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4, 95 (1999), available online at: http://hij.sagepub.com.

[16] Newton and Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide*, ibid.

[17] Jennifer B. Smith, "The Black Panther Party: An International History" in her *An International History of the Black Panther Party* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 66.

> We believe that if the American businessmen will not give full employment, then the technology and 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.

This strain of communist thought, though perhaps not the primary focus of the manifesto – race is referred to much more than class – fits well into the Panthers' self-professed alignment with the Third World. Just as national revolutionary movements over the world were forced to choose sides in the Cold War divide between the communist East and the capitalist West,[18] the Black Panther Party did so as well. However, their choice was made easier by their circumstances**:** struggling to achieve freedom from the oppression of the world's flagship capitalist superpower.

Marxist ideology also stood at the core of the Panthers' rejection of the Nation of Islam. Aside from their general aversion to the Nation's "defiant talk but conciliatory behavior,"[19] Panthers exhibited a traditional Marxist rejection of religion in their understanding of society. Both Seale and Newton admired the charisma and ideas of Nation spokesman Malcolm X, but could not tolerate his Muslim theology. Seale once quipped, "I had had enough of religion and could not bring myself to adopt another one."[20] Newton more thoughtfully explained that, despite the "mesmerized enthusiasm" he experienced in his encounters with Malcolm X and with *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation's periodical, he found their religious doctrine "not scientific" and altogether not compelling.[21] Perhaps even more fundamental, though the Panthers proudly identified as "lumpenproleteriat" (the Marxist term for the rogue underclass), they considered the untamed lumpen lifestyle to be a revolutionary ideal. The Nation's advocacy of strict Islamic conduct was thus too stark a violation of the Panthers' revolutionary sensibilities.[22]

But it was the internationalism of the communist ethos of the day that proved most crucially important to the Panthers' politics and activism. Like its contemporaries around the world, the Black Panther Party saw its communism as part of a global revolutionary movement, not only mirroring the uprisings of the Third World, but also acting in concert with them. With this principle in mind, the Panthers initiated an international

---

[18] See Robert J. McMahon, "A global Cold War" in his *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56-77.

[19] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 73.

[20] Ibid, 82.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

program, inspired and directed by Black Panther Party Minister of Information and Head of International Section (note the connotations of sovereignty), Eldridge Cleaver.[23] Cleaver's foreign affairs efforts generally took a back seat to the more prominent domestic goals of patrolling the police in American cities and feeding poor black communities, but they were just as essential to Panther ideology.[24] Ironically, this strong emphasis on global revolution eventually led the Panthers to soft-pedal their initial racial separatism and cooperate, at least nominally, with white revolutionaries, their ideological allies.

With Cleaver's urging, the Panthers sent a formal delegation to the United Nations in July 1969, advocating five goals:[25] 1) international attention for the plight of Huey Newton, then jailed as a "political prisoner" – his charge was manslaughter for his alleged killing of an Oakland police officer [26] – 2) to apply for non-governmental observer status (akin to that of the Palestine Liberation Organization); 3) to request a United Nations investigation into claims of genocide committed by the United States against its black population; 4) to request UN observers to prevent future American genocide; and 5) to request a UN-supervised plebiscite in which "black colonial subjects"[27] would vote to determine whether they wished to remain American citizens or peacefully form their own independent nation. The Panthers' delegation was not accepted to speak before any UN body.[28]

Still, as in the case of any nation's (or non-nation entity's) foreign policy, bilateral engagement with independent governments proved far more fruitful and relevant to the Panthers' international operations than did UN diplomacy. And for the Party's particular objectives, no foreign partner was more essential to the Panthers' diplomatic efforts, domestic propaganda, and overall imagination than the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" (North Vietnam).

The long, bloody war that US President Lyndon B. Johnson was then waging against Ho Chi Minh's government in Hanoi and its communist "Vietcong" allies in South Vietnam had long been a sore point

---

[23] Smith, *International History*, 68.

[24] Ibid, 66-67.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Newton allegedly killed Officer John Frey in a shootout. His subsequent imprisonment quickly became the cause of a massive propaganda campaign, and he was released in 1970 following a reversed conviction and two mistrials; see Ogbar, 88-89.

[27] This term is used in an addendum to the tenth point of some editions of "What We Want, What We Believe" which affirmed the plebiscite objective; see Smith, *International History*, ibid.

[28] Smith, *International History*, ibid.

for the American black activist movements. Even integrationist civil rights groups like the SCLC and the earlier incarnation of SNCC, which wholeheartedly embraced membership in the American polity, considered the Vietnam issue a tension they simply could not avoid. Black people, throughout the war years constituted 11 percent of the American population, accounted for 12.6 percent of the military force in Vietnam, mostly as infantry troops, and suffered a devastating 14.9 percent fatality rate in combat.[29] And yet, these same black Americans whose sons and brothers and fathers were dying for their country in Vietnam often did not enjoy basic rights or the societal acceptance of their fellow Americans at home. Many civil rights activists noted this painful irony of Selective Service and questioned publicly the American motives for waging war in Vietnam altogether. A popular poster in black activist circles captured this sense concisely and powerfully: "NO VIETNAMESE EVER CALLED ME NIGGER."[30]

Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed this popular frustration in a historic sermon to New York's Riverside Church on April 30, 1967. Calling the war "unjust, evil, and futile," [31] King probed the circumstances under which the United States, for all its promise and its lofty values, had become "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."[32] He revealed that he had no choice but to denounce the war, and made himself eminently clear in doing so:

> We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with a cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same school room. So we watch them in brutal solidarity, burning the huts of a poor village. But we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago or Atlanta. We are presently moving down a

---

[29] John Sibley Butler, "African Americans in the Military" in *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, ed. by John Whiteclay Chambers II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

[30] Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 372.

[31] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," available through the Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project at: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/riversidetranscript.html.

[32] Ibid.

> dead-end road that can lead to national disaster. America has strayed to the far country of racism and militarism.[33]

The Panthers took great offense to the Vietnam War as well, but not, of course, in the same sense as did Dr. King. Most importantly, the Panthers did not characterize American government policy in Vietnam using the pronoun "We," instead professing separation from the federal regime in Washington.[34] The eighth point of "What We Want, What We Believe" demands "AN IMMEDIATE END TO ALL WARS OF AGGRESSION," and elaborates that "the various conflicts which exist around the world stem directly from the aggressive desire of the United States ruling circle and government to force its domination upon the oppressed people of the world." The similarity of the term "oppressed people" with their characterization of black Americans as "Black and oppressed people," is deliberate. The Panthers chose to view and portray their plight in the same light as that of the foreign nations suffering from US militarism, Vietnam among these nations.

More explicitly, Bobby Seale explained that Panthers' armed resistance of police action in American cities, the Party's primary domestic fight, was intimately related to the North Vietnamese cause. In his words, "The Black Panther Party was formed to resist police brutality and the murder of black people in the same manner that the Vietnamese people were resisting U.S. imperialist aggression – by violence if necessary."[35]

The impressive resilience of the Hanoi regime and its allies thousands of miles away influenced the Panthers' ideology and inspired their own militant efforts at home. The Black Panther Party's official publication expressed this poetically in 1969, following the death of North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. The parenthetical comment is from the original text:

> [T]o die for the people; to die for the correct socialistic development of mankind; to die in the midst of socialistic revolutionary change for human survival; to die for your nation

---

[33] King, "Why I am opposed to War in Vietnam."

[34] Significantly, some available editions of "What We Want, What We Believe" include an explicit clause exempting black men from serving in the US military and even implicitly vowing violence against attempts to take blacks for Selective Service, expressing: "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 … who, like black people, are 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." (Smith, *International History*, 72).

[35] Ogbar, "Party for the People," 85.

> and people's right to self-determination in their land, home and community; to die for the freedom of all from oppression that the Black Panther Party has witnessed in the proletarian internationalism practiced by the Vietnamese people's revolutionary representatives that we have met; to die after all the great heroic and dedicated years of sacrifice to bring to the world and its people an end to the murderous, stormy winds of capitalism's fascist, aggressive imperialism; to die because he loved the people of his nation and humans of the world (and Brother Ho Chi Minh had practiced this all the days of his life); to die for all of this is a death heavier than the highest mountain in the world of which no, not any destructive fascist imperialistic storm can blow away at will.[36]

In this passage of unwavering admiration for Ho Chi Minh and his cause, too ideologically and rhetorically loaded for this author to justifiably abridge, the Panthers make clear the extent to which their ideology influenced not only their interpretation of history, but also of current world events as well. In return, the reference to the Vietnamese "revolutionary representatives that we have met" highlights the impact of ongoing interpretation of current events on the development of Panther ideology.

Indeed, there are records of these meetings between Party leaders and North Vietnamese representatives, though they come primarily from Panther sources. First, on Thanksgiving weekend, 1968, Bobby Seale reportedly travelled to Montreal, Quebec, to attend and address the Hemispheric Conference to End the War in Vietnam, a conference that included Hanoi government officials.[37] In early 1969, Bobby Seale and Masi Hewitt interacted with North Vietnamese representatives, during their speaking tour of the Scandinavian countries.[38] Eldridge Cleaver, his wife Kathleen Cleaver, and Elaine Brown visited North Vietnam in August 1970 at the invitation of the Hanoi government, while representing the Panthers on an Asia tour. Eldridge encouraged black American troops to refuse to engage in combat, and Kathleen reported upon her return that the communist government had honored the Panther delegation with a

---

[36] The Black Panther Party, "To the Courageous Vietnamese People, Commemorating the Death of Ho Chi Minh (*The Black Panther*, 13 Sept. 1969)," published in *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. by Philip S. Foner (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1995), 32.

[37] All of the information in this and the following paragraph is drawn from Smith, *International History*, 71-80.

38 "Chairman Bobby Seale and 'Masi' Hewitt Tour Scandinavian Countries," *The Black Panther*, 31 March 1969, 12-14.

celebration of August 18 as "the International Day of Solidarity with the Afro-American People," a date that had already been selected by the Cuban Organization for Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAL) to commemorate the 1965 Los Angeles riots.

Through these interactions (and perhaps others), Hanoi and Oakland developed a working relationship and professed public support for one another. The North Vietnamese lobbied the Algerian government successfully to grant the Black Panther Party diplomatic status in Algiers in 1969, and historian Jennifer Smith reports vaguely that, in addition to the primary source evidence cited here from her study, Hanoi engaged in "helping exiled Panthers." However, Smith also qualifies that "While [North Vietnam and the Black Panther Party] both supported each other, it remains unclear how much fiscal support was provided to the Panthers by the North Vietnamese." In a token show of reciprocal support, Newton contacted the Vietcong on August 29, 1968, pledging Panther troops to their cause. Hanoi understood this to be a symbolic gesture, thanked the Panthers for supporting its allies in South Vietnam, and encouraged them to help the Vietnamese cause by continuing the fight in America.

Unlike many of their left-wing contemporaries, the Panthers' objections to racism and to war in Vietnam formed an ideologically organic worldview. In the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., the cause of black freedom and the cause of ending the war were two separate but related points. His elaborate presentation in Riverside Church, casting the war as a great evil of America that indirectly afflicts the cause of black freedom along with the other causes and unresolved problems of society, attests to this. For the Panthers, however, their activism regarding racism and the Vietnam War reflected two sides of the very same anticolonialist coin. A national political project, the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) emerged within months of King's speech as a radical white leftist attempt to fuse the black movement and the antiwar movement into one united political platform, and, sure enough, the PFP's organizers turned to the Black Panther Party to build the coalition, nominating Eldridge Cleaver as its first presidential candidate in 1968.[39]

The international history of Black Panther engagement with the global communist revolution continued for years beyond that point,

[39] Barber, "Leading the Vanguard," 226. Although this excursion into American politics may seem sacrilegious for a Panther ideologue like Cleaver, rapid changes of heart and lifestyle were not atypical in the life story of a man who had once been a convicted rapist and would later become, in succession, a born-again Christian, a French fashion designer, a baptized Mormon, a conservative Republican activist, and a crack cocaine addict. See John Kifner, "Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Who Became G.O.P. Conservative, Is Dead at 62," *The New York Times*, 2 May, 1998, A1.

playing out especially in Cuba and Algeria. In the final days of 1969, the official Panther publication broadcasted its admiration for the revolution of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara:

> We see the Cuban revolution as a great achievement in the world revolution by establishing an island of socialism in an ocean, the western hemisphere, of capitalist exploitation, imperialist aggression, and fascist suppression. We wish the Cuban people victory in their struggle against the blockade and may the Cuban people achieve their goal of 10,000,000 tons in the 1970 sugar cane harvest.[40]

Flowery admiration and ideological alignment aside, the Panthers' formidable efforts at genuine diplomatic relations with Cuba, their supposed regional ally, were beset by a host of political concerns that the Panthers neither prepared for nor understood.

The Panthers first mission to successfully reach Cuba, traveled from Mexico, included Panther Minister of Education, George Murray, and New York chapter leader, Joudon Ford, and arrived on the island in the summer of 1968. The two reported a friendly reception and much mutual praise, but a more complicated relationship followed. Cuba wanted to cement its role in propagating international communist revolution and made that clear to its black American allies.[41] But politics became trickier when, two months later, Eldridge Cleaver was charged with the attempted murder of two Oakland police officers, and, out of fear of being assassinated in prison, fled to Cuba through Canada.[42]

Cleaver arrived on the island and immediately began to advocate for the creation of an international Panther base on the island, in which guerilla fighters would be trained and dispatched back to the American mainland for revolution. Cleaver's requests were definitively rebuffed and he was forcibly marginalized by a Havana government that feared antagonistic actions which could serve as a pretext for Washington to worsen the already unbearable American blockade. After living in Cuba quietly, Cleaver began to grow disillusioned with the state of affairs in Havana and started openly criticizing Cuban racism and other ills. Needless to say, Havana no longer tolerated Cleaver's presence and asked him to leave in the summer of 1969.[43] In a way, the Panthers'

---

[40] "On Criticism of Cuba" (*The Black Panther*, 27 Dec. 1969) in Foner, 37-38.

[41] Smith, *International History*, 70-71.

[42] Ibid. 73.

[43] Smith, *International History*, 70-71.

disappointment with their Cuba experience is very analogous to Ho Chi Minh's shock at being rebuffed by the United States upon his 1945 request for American support for Vietnamese self-determination;[44] in each case, the idealistic revolutionaries were let down by the great power whose (Cold War) politics obscured the fruition of its ideological rhetoric.

Cleaver then set off for Algeria, seeking support from the black socialist revolutionary regime that had successfully won its independence from French colonial domination seven years earlier.[45] Within months, Cleaver was joined by his wife Kathleen and several other Panther exiles, creating a veritable community abroad and a de-facto international base of operations. By the spring of 1970, the Panthers reported that North Vietnamese intercession prevailed upon the Algiers regime to grant the Party quasi-diplomatic status. It appears, however, that the Algerians did not understand the Panther claims of supposed ideological kinship any more than the exiled Panthers, who were not conversant in French or Arabic, understood Algerian culture and politics. The relationship was fraught and contrived from the beginning, and soured when Algiers grew impatient with the rowdy black Americans and put them under house arrest in their villa in late 1972, allowing them to leave the country one at a time. Cleaver fled to France but was not granted asylum.

The Black Panthers' international program also included, at various points, sporadic contact with the communist entities in China, North Korea, and the European Left, in addition to other Third World revolutionaries in the Congo, Mozambique, Rhodesia, South Africa, Angola, and the PLO. Black Panther support groups emerged throughout Europe, in Japan, and in Israel. Still, the international program never managed to provide much support to the Party's domestic agenda, largely because of a certain ineptitude in realpolitik. In the words of Jennifer Smith, "The Panther leaders and members had a tendency not to examine situations before they commented on and interacted with these circumstances. Their strategic judgment was somewhat lacking."[46] Ultimately, as Cleaver and his team grew further and further removed from the reality on the ground in Oakland and other American cities, the FBI began to actively sow discord between the various Party leaders. Newton and his people in Oakland became unwilling to tolerate Cleaver's (often especially radical) input and banished the entire international section from the Party in 1972.

---

[44] See Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27-28.

[45] All of the information in this and the following paragraph is drawn from Smith, *International History*, 67-81.

[46] Ibid. 71.

A corollary to the international program is the Black Panther's working relationship with the contemporary activists of the white New Left. This relationship was, by all appearances, an impressive statement of ideological consistency: Panther opposition to White America was not about racial purity but about fighting the oppressive "pigs" of colonialism.[47] Despite this, historian David Barber has recently demonstrated that the relationship between the Panthers and the various radical factions of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the flagship New Left group, was generally discordant at best, and consisted mostly of the SDS's militant "Weathermen" mimicking Panther rhetoric and tactics (just as SDS founders had been mimicking SNCC since the early 1960s).[48]

On the ground in the United States, the Panthers were regarded and feared generally as a violent hate group, but they attracted some attention for their communism as well in a Cold War-shaken populace. In 1969, Kent Courtney of the Conservative Society of America published an exhaustive and sensationalist pamphlet about the Panthers, titled "Are These Cats Red?: An exposé of a Communist front which is engaged in Guerilla Warfare against high schools and universities."[49] Courtney illustrates, with palpable fear, the demonstrable belligerence and criminal records of Newton, Seale, Cleaver, and the others, as well as their avowed Marxist leanings, foreign ties, revolutionary aims, and "fifth column tactics." His intention, it seems, was to raise awareness among the populace of the true association of these uncommon criminals with America's greatest enemies. In his worst doomsday scenario, Courtney conceives of the Panthers successfully using their urban staging grounds to engage militarily with National Guard troops, kill massive numbers of policemen, and capture schools. Ultimately, Courtney calls for public support for police suppression and demands that the Panthers be charged with "SEDITION AND TREASON," adding:

> Their goal is not reform, but revolution. The widespread distribution of this pamphlet into the hands of civic officials and education leaders is necessary in order to make them more fully aware of the real nature of the Black Panthers thus helping stop the destruction of American education.

The extent of Courtney's impact appears relatively unknown, though historians have also demonstrated that the Panthers' communist

---

[47] See Barber, "Leading the Vanguard," 222-251.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Kent Courtney, "Are These Cats Red?: The Black Panthers" (pamphlet), *Conservative Society of America* 23 (1969).

leanings and foreign diplomatic relations were a perfect basis for the vehemently anticommunist FBI to justify persistent interference in Black Panther communication and operations.[50]

All considered, it is difficult to define just how important communism was to the Black Panthers leaders. The strong nationalist undertones of Panther literature suggest that, as in the case of many contemporary revolutionary movements, national self-determination was the Party's primary goal. Seale and Newton found themselves in the right place at the right time to see communism as the most suitable mode for such a revolutionary aim, de-emphasizing communism's post-nationalist strains all the while. Perhaps most instructive for this question is the Panthers' initial statement of purpose, its storied Ten-Point Program. Not only does "What We Want, What We Believe" address national freedom more than economic systems; the declaration concludes with an ironic overture to none other than the United States of America:

> 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 of 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 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…

Quoting from the U.S. Declaration of Independence in an effort to appeal to the sensibilities of their "colonizing regime" (and perhaps to allude to Ho Chi Minh's similar overture of twenty-one years before),[51] Bobby Seale and Huey Newton unwittingly reveal that an endgame of pure global communism is quite far from their minds.

---

[50] See Smith, *International History*, 73.
[51] See note 46 above.