



Black Panthers co-founder Huey P. Newton: a mortarboard and a mask of menace.

UPI/Bettmann Newsphoto

The wrong thing in Oakland and Brooklyn

By Salim Muwakkil

As the rose-colored haze of the Reagan years begins to lift, the perplexing plight of African-Americans is again attracting the nation's attention. Several recent studies and news documentaries have detailed the continuing problem of racism in this country. But none of those reports illustrates the situation better than two incidents on two successive days last month.

In the early morning of August 22, police found the lifeless body of Huey P. Newton laying in a pool of blood in the same Oakland neighborhood where in 1966 he co-founded the Black Panther Party. The 47-year-old Newton allegedly was murdered by a member of the prison-born drug gang called the Black Guerrilla Family. Few specifics are available about the killer's motives, but most accounts suggest the slaying was drug-related. According to many people familiar with Newton's lifestyle, he was a drug abuser and may have been addicted to crack.

One day later, in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, a 16-year-old African-American named Yusuf K. Hawkins was shot to death in a racial attack by a gang of white youths. He and three friends had wandered into the predominantly white neighborhood reportedly to check out a used car one of them was interested in buying. The quartet was attacked by a gang of whites who were laying in wait to ambush black or Hispanic youths they thought were romantically involved with a neighborhood girl.

Hawkins was shot twice in the chest.

These two unrelated murders, perpetrated on opposite coasts, are vivid emblems of these turbulent times. They are also near-perfect allegories for the wrenching plight of the African-American male in the latter part of the 20th century.

Off the pigs: When Newton and Bobby Seale conceived of the Black Panther Party in 1966, they hit upon an idea as old as history itself: self-defense. For black Americans, it was a new idea. Many white Americans considered the idea downright subversive. Considering the divergent histories of blacks and whites in America, that white antipathy to black self-defense or any expression of separate self-interest is understandable. If enslaved Africans had been able to express their self-interest, they probably would have opted not to be enslaved, and those who understood the importance of slave labor to the entire American enterprise naturally were opposed to all assertions of black self-interest. That traditional hostility remains strong within a certain segment of the white population.

The Panthers were created to put a check on the rampant brutality that had become standard operating procedure for many urban police departments. Most African-American males reared in such neighborhoods could have readily recounted tales of racist police officers who routinely harassed, brutalized, even killed with impunity. For them, Newton and Seale represented a heroic divergence from the timid leadership of other black groups.

The issue of police brutality, in fact, remains a recurrent problem for African-Americans. Virtually every one of the "long hot summer" riots of the '60s was precipitated by incidents of police brutality. The riots in Miami's predominantly black Liberty City neighborhood in 1985 and again in 1987 also were sparked by reports of police brutality. Black filmmaker Spike Lee raised the issue anew this summer in his brilliant film, *Do the Right Thing*, and *New York* magazine political writer Joe Klein, expressing white America's traditional uneasiness with assertions of black self-interest, took him to task for it.

Panther idolatry: When about 30 Black Panthers marched into the California State Assembly at Sacramento in 1967, armed with rifles and wearing black leather and berets, they also marched into the hearts of millions of black baby-boomers who were discomfited by the non-violent pacifism of Rev. Martin Luther King and still traumatized by the assassination of the charismatic Malcolm X. Like nothing else, the Panthers symbolized the spirit of the times, and the organization spread like wildfire. Soon there were Panther chapters in most major cities, and college campuses everywhere echoed the rhetoric of misunderstood Marxism that they popularized. During the Panther's most active growth period, Newton himself was in jail for the murder of a police officer—the perfect revolutionary act—for which the charges were later dropped. From 1974 to 1977 he lived in Cuba, hiding from charges of assault and murder that also were dismissed.

Newton's charismatic persona attracted devotees of all races, and some of the Panther's initiatives, like the programs of screening for sickle-cell anemia and of providing preschool breakfasts for children, were later adopted by more mainstream organizations. The Panthers started a newspaper that, next to *Muhammad Speaks*, was the most widely circulated black newspaper in the country.

But the Panthers were, at best, symbols of black outrage that accidentally sprung to life. The group's reckless rhetoric was at first a bracing kind of shock therapy for a nation indifferent to the brutal tactics of the police, but the practice soon degenerated into pointless provocation. In an audacious but failed attempt to provide an ideological justification for their existence, the Panthers grafted a political philosophy out of Marxism, elements of Frantz Fanon and Mao Zedong, and a little this and that thrown in at Newton's whim. The party's lack of doctrinal rigor soon became apparent, and ideological fissures became commonplace. By the time of the Panther's decline, the group already had split into several factions.

Newton was never able to transcend completely the street-life sensibilities that so defined his youth. Although he spoke gently and articulately, he could effortlessly slip on the mask of menace required by life on the street; in fact, that vague sense of danger was an important part of his allure. Those street-life sensibilities eventually proved to be more dangerous to Newton than the "pigs" he urged us to "off."

Indeed, police brutality remains problematical, but

INSIDE STORY

homicide is the leading cause of death for black males. And since crack has appeared on the scene, the black-on-black murder rate has accelerated. African-American males have become their own worst enemies, and the commanders of the drug wars are enlisting increasing numbers to help do the dirty work. Newton earned a doctorate degree from the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1980, but even a Ph.D. couldn't ward off three bullets from a drug dealer's 9mm automatic.

Yusuf's story: Just when a cautionary tale like Newton's story of self-destruction makes the case that African-Americans should turn inward and concentrate on exculpating the scourge of crack and self-hatred rather than obsessing about white racism, just when the Al Sharptons of the world begin losing all credibility in the black community for ceaselessly pointing their fingers at white racism and blaming it for all the ills of African-Americans, along comes an incident like the murder of Yusuf Hawkins and its disquieting aftermath.

Although New York City's major media is straining mightily to provide motives other than racism for the Hawkins murder—for example, many publications have reported that his slaying was a case of mistaken identity—there seems little doubt that the teenager was killed because he was black and happened to be in Bensonhurst. According to those who marched in demonstration through the neighborhood where the incident occurred, the residents seem unrepentant. "I saw some of the most intense hatred on the faces of that crowd than I've seen anywhere," said Rev. Herbert Daughtry, a Brooklyn organizer who has participated in many similar demonstrations. "Some of them said that if we dared enter their neighborhood again, they'd shoot us on sight. And I believed them." Daughtry said he was surprised by the age of some of the hecklers. The angriest slurs were coming from some of the youngest people, he said.

The dismaying realities underlying these two stories of murder offer a glimpse into the complexities and almost unbearable pressures facing many of today's black youth, particularly males. Under assault from within and without, African-American males need a sanctuary that can be provided only through the dedication and resources of those who understand the depth of the problem and are ready to act.

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(ISSN 0160-5992)

Published 41 times a year: weekly except the first week of January, first week of March, last week of November, last week of December; bi-weekly in June through the first week in September by Institute for Public Affairs, 2040 N. Milwaukee, Chicago, IL 60647, (312) 772-0100. The entire contents of *In These Times* are copyright ©1989 by Institute for Public Affairs, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without permission of the publisher. Second-class postage paid at Chicago, IL, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *In These Times*, 1912 Debs Ave., Mt. Morris, IL 61054. This issue (Vol. 13, No. 33) published Sept. 6, 1989, for newsstand sales Sept. 6-12, 1989.

By Daniel Lazare

NEW YORK

ON A RECENT SATURDAY, 2,500 PEOPLE gathered in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village to listen to music and speeches and, in a few instances, to light up joints. However, instead of heading for the nearest doughnut stand—the usual denouement for smoke-ins in the '60s—the crowd then marched five miles uptown to the very different political landscape of East Harlem.

There, while a reggae band played and curious residents leaned out their windows, speaker after speaker accused Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), the hard-line chairman of the House subcommittee on narcotics, of making the drug problem worse. By waging a high-tech war against an array of illegal substances, Rangel and others in the federal government have succeeded in putting a serious dent in the marijuana trade. But instead of reducing drugs generally, their efforts have backfired by opening up a vast new market for ultraprofitable substances that are more potent and portable. As a result, whereas marijuana was once cheap while cocaine was reserved for swank Hollywood parties, today, after close to two decades of stepped-up border interdiction, the relationship has reversed. Marijuana prices have soared, while the ultracheap, ultrapotent cocaine derivative known as crack has emerged as the drug of choice of the urban underclass.

"Pot is the only thing that works against crack," said Dana Beal, a stalwart of the '60s Yuppies who is now the prime force behind the Coalition for 100-Percent Drug Reform, the organizer of the Aug. 26 rally. "It competes head-to-head with it on the street. A fair number of people have completely quit coke because they've gone back to pot, while others have quit pot because they've gone back to coke."

Unfortunately, Beal adds, due to the inverted price ratio, a mild intoxicant like marijuana is steadily losing on the retail level.

As Beal and other drug activists point out, marijuana provides an interesting perspective for viewing the efforts of federal anti-drug warriors over the last 20 years. Despite official disapproval, marijuana's fortunes back in the comparatively mellow '70s seemed unstoppable. As former radicals made their way into the mainstream, it seemed that their favorite recreational drug would as well. Grass was cheap and safe, and therefore a growing segment of the population seemed to believe that it should be as freely available as beer. Eleven states decriminalized simple possession, while one—Alaska—legalized cultivation for personal use. The idea seemed to be gaining ground at the federal level as well. Jimmy Carter indicated support, while a decriminalization bill introduced by the late Sen. Jacob Javits and a once-liberal congressman from New York named Ed Koch got as far as legislative hearings. NORML—the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws—reached a peak of 20,000 members.

Noxious weed: Then came the Big Chill. While Carter White House drug adviser Dr. Peter Bourne was advocating decriminalization and Hamilton Jordan was rumored to be snorting coke, plans were underway for a major U.S.-sponsored eradication effort in Mexico using the notorious herbicide called

The drug trade obeys the laws of commerce



paraquat. It was an example of political incoherence all too typical of the Carter administration. The fear of being poisoned by paraquat residue on their weed sent a shiver through the ranks of pot smokers and put a crimp on Mexican exports. But instead of eliminating the trade, it shifted it south to Colombia. Since Colombia was also a traditional processing and distribution center for coca paste from the Andes, newly glamorous cocaine began finding its way north alongside bales of Colombian Gold.

Thus the pattern was set. Instead of beating back drugs, the feds wound up distorting the market. In 1981, the Reagan administration, which regarded drugs as one element in a vast narco-terrorist-commie conspiracy to undermine the West, organized something called the South Florida Task Force to halt the flow of marijuana into places like the Everglades. Vice President Bush was placed

in charge, while Associate Attorney General Rudolph Giuliani—who would later advise an interviewer, "Talk to drug addicts and they will tell you they started with marijuana"—was given control of operations. Although skeptics joked that the task

In today's market, the most potent and dangerous drugs, like crack, have become the cheapest, while the least harmful, like marijuana, have vastly increased in price.

force specialized mainly in churning out press releases, it was actually highly effective. Interdiction, backed up by high-speed Coast Guard interception boats, high-tech radar, etc., worked. The drone of marijuana planes in remote areas ceased. Four years later, the Reagan administration launched a domestic eradication effort in areas like California's Humboldt County with similar results. Marijuana cultivation, at least outdoors, dropped significantly.

The results were soon apparent on the drug market. "Bud Bogart," as the author of *High Times* magazine's highly touted price quotes in the late '70s and early '80 was known, recently estimated that the wholesale price of medium-grade marijuana rose from \$90 to \$175 per pound in 1968-70 to \$1,100 to \$1,400 today, an increase of upwards of 200 percent even when inflation is taken into account. On the retail level, the increase was even more pronounced—from \$20 an ounce to upwards of \$200. Cocaine prices, on the other hand, followed a reverse trajectory, plummeting from approximately \$50,000 a kilo in the late '70s to \$10,000 today. By radically enhancing the mind-altering qualities of coke, crack brought prices down even more. Today, a vial of crack retails for about \$5, which is approximately the same as a loose joint. Yet there is no doubt as to which delivers more bang for the buck, which is why crack consistently beats out marijuana in street-corner sales.

Keeping up with the Joneses: "Prices used to reflect the dangers," observed Bud Bogart. "Heroin and cocaine used to be very expensive, while the cheapest thing was always pot. If you wanted to have an expensive jones, you had to have the money to pay for it. It was like a stairway where if you stayed on the lowest level, you knew you'd be all right. There was a kind of built-in protection."

In today's distorted market, however, drug prices are sending the opposite signals. The more dangerous and potent substances are also the most attractively priced. The reason is bound up in the economics of drug importation. As interdiction has grown more and more sophisticated in the '80s, smugglers' costs have risen, which is why they've been forced to recoup by switching to compact, odorless, ultraprofitable cocaine. Instead of messing with mother ships, cigarette boats, and bales of herb, they long ago realized that they could make far more money from a single suitcase filled with cocaine. By comparison, marijuana has become as profitable as beer during Prohibition.

Indeed, in this respect as in so many others, the '80s are the '20s redux. Anti-drug prohibition is fostering a binge-style consumption and a tendency toward ever-more-potent intoxicants, just as it did when the target was booze. The story is the same; the only things that have changed are the names of the controlled substances.

Prior to 1920, for instance, the U.S. was primarily a beer-drinking nation. Distilled spirits were drunk, of course, but usually straight, which for most people acted as a brake on consumption. With Prohibition, however, habits quickly changed. The highly potent cocktail, previously the exclusive province of the fashionable set, found its way into the middle class as well. One reason was that it was chic, but another was its usefulness in masking the taste of incredibly

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