

review

POLICE forces as political instruments of extermination—accepting the role of judge, jury, and executioner to excrete from the system those whose politics differ from the norm... it comes as a jolt to the solar plexus when you all of a sudden realize that it could be true.

That nice man who you always called your friend, the one who helped little girls across the street — a murderer. It's such a shock that at first you dismiss it from your mind.

Birmingham was an aberration, just the last dying gasps of racism which exists only in the south. Then came Chicago, but that also was not the norm. Even reporters and middle class kids were getting their heads beat in during the Democratic Convention. But then it was Chicago again — December, 1969 — and Fred Hampton, a black Panther leader was murdered.

No, that's not exactly what the Chicago police called it. They said he was shot in a gun battle when the police came to search a Panther home. They said the Panthers opened fire first. Yet, Hampton was found dead in a pool of blood on the bed in a position where it was impossible for him to have been firing at the police. The inescapable conclusion, according to the CTV programme W5, was that Fred Hampton had been murdered by the Chicago police.

The Panthers claimed it was more than just an isolated incident — they said the police were out to exterminate them.

In the light of Chicago, Birmingham, and a little book called simply "The Black Panthers", the conclusion does not seem all that far-fetched. The book is interesting and important in the light of recent events — in order to understand the police repression of the Panthers, it is necessary to first comprehend what the Panthers are all about.

"The Black Panthers" is a little paperback by a Ramparts reporter Gene Marine, which helps to allay one's almost instinctive fear of a black organization such as the Panthers. The explanation is all the more necessary in the light of the constant references to the group in the white press as a "militant anti-white organization hellbent on destroying American society."

Marine is a white reporter and he freely admits his own racism built into his conceptions by the objective racism of American society. It is a hangup which, to my mind, he successfully overcomes in his book.

THE Panthers are not anti-white in the sense of reverse racism as the newspapers would have us believe — they were heavily influenced by the work of Franz Fanon and see themselves in much the same light as the Algerians — a colonized people. It is therefore necessary for them to wage a war of national liberation. While white radicals can and do form valuable allies at times, they are seen essentially as involved in another kind of revolutionary struggle. Whites, traditionally, even well-intentioned white radicals, have attempted to ensconce themselves in positions of power in black movements. It is a struggle against this forced white leadership that blacks must also wage.

Another aspect of the Panthers, also much discussed but little understood is their pre-occupation with guns. Panthers carry guns, but for self protection rather than as an offensive weapon. It is worthy of note that they only carry guns within the context of the law. If it is illegal to carry a pistol in a particular state, they don't carry pistols. Yet they feel they must defend themselves against the oppression of the police.

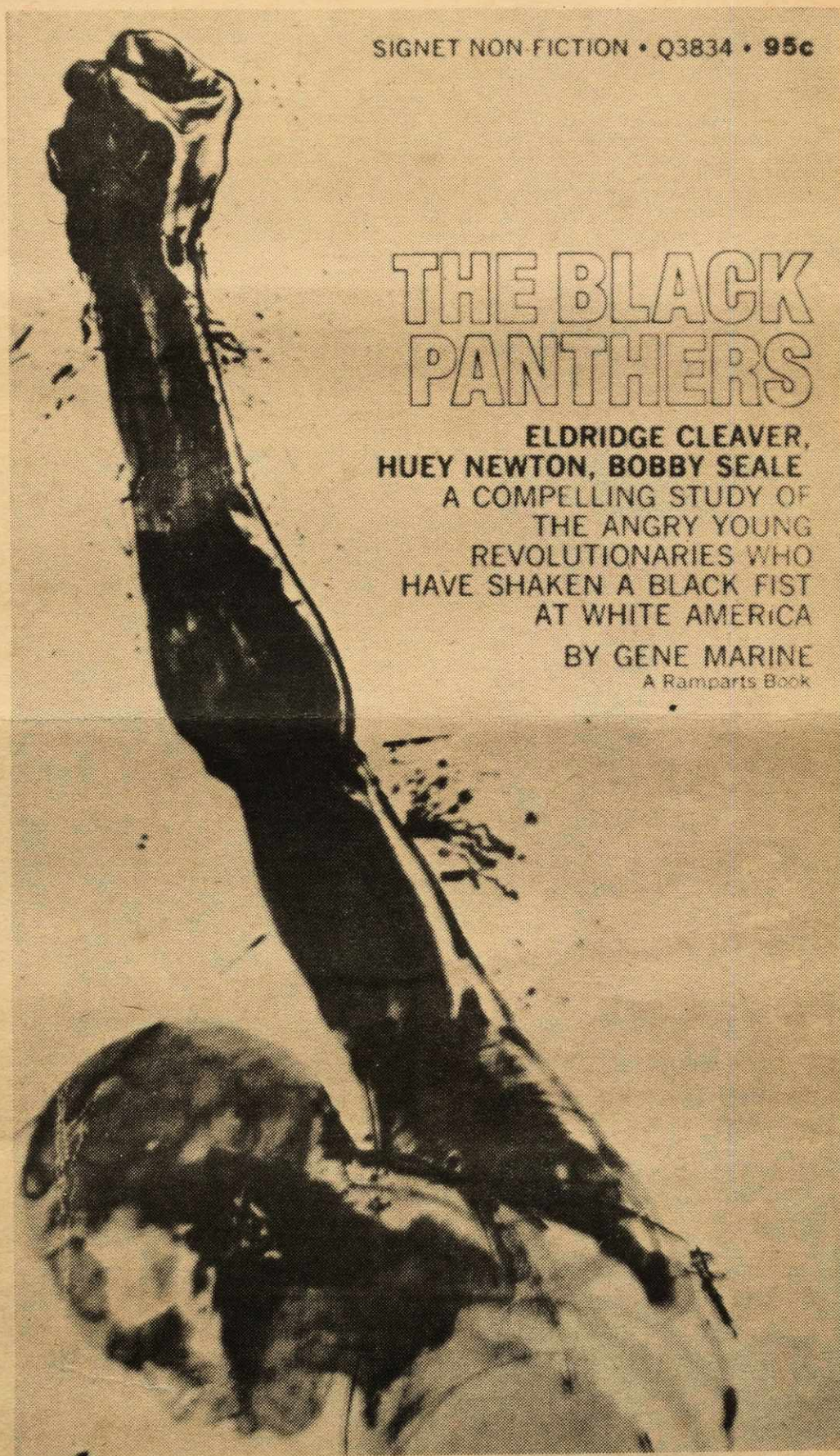
When we tag the Panthers as militants, we conjure up images of armed revolutionaries. The connotation is fair as far as it goes, but there is another side to the Black Panthers. They are opposed to the spontaneous sort of riot that often seems to be a favorite tactic of white radicals. The Panthers see it as a way of dissipating their energies in useless and futile activity.

When Martin Luther King was murdered the Panthers went into ghetto schools to calm students. Eldridge Cleaver pleaded for a half an hour with students who had pledged to burn down the school. He finally succeeded in convincing them that such a move would be futile.

The Panthers were never credited by the press with having prevented a riot. The press was only too happy to have the Panthers in the pigeonhole of a militant anti-white group, and such news would upset their easy categorization. They never printed the story of how the Panthers prevented violence in Oakland, California.

If we are to understand the Panthers and their role in the struggle of black liberation, we must look beyond the unsupported innuendo of the press.

"The Black Panthers" is a good start.



by stephen kimber