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RHETORIC OF THE GUN
An Analysis of the Rhetorical Modifications of the Black Panther Party

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Have you ever stood
In the darkness of night
screaming silently you're a man
Have you even hoped
That a time would come
When your voice could be heard
In the noonday sun?
Have you waited so long
Till your unheard song
Has stripped away your very soul
Well then believe it my friends
That the silence will end
We'll just have to get guns and be men.

—Elaine Brown

From its creation in the Oakland ghetto in 1966, the Black Panther Party has attempted to follow the guidelines outlined in the above poem by arming themselves and using their guns to declare their manhood and freedom from the "white capitalist oppressors." This emphasis upon arming for self-defense has brought many repercussions upon the Panthers,
and prompted FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (1970) to call them "the most active and dangerous [black extremist organization] from an internal security standpoint." The reaction of the power structure of this country has been extremely swift and many observers have called it unnecessarily violent. As *Nation* (1969: 684) remarked in an editorial, "It is becoming increasingly apparent that a campaign of repression and assassination is being carried out against the Black Panthers, and that a continuance of this course will see the entire leadership behind bars or dead."

A similar opinion is held by Kermit Coleman (Palmer, 1969), head of the ACLU's ghetto project:

It would seem to me that it would be irrational to assume that the Black Panther Party and each of its members is deliberately setting out to get arrested. And yet it seems that every member has been arrested, with the leaders being arrested many times. This raises in my mind a belief that there is a concerted effort among law-enforcement agencies and political forces in this city and throughout the country to wipe out the Panthers.

Whether a conspiracy exists to annihilate the Black Panther Party is not the question to be explored in this study. The previous quotations were included in order to establish the fact that the Panthers have been subjected to constant scrutiny by many law enforcement agencies. My purpose is to investigate the modifications that this scrutiny has forced the Black Panther Party to make; especially changes in the militant rhetoric which characterized the Party from its inception.

The precipitating factor in undertaking this study was an Associated Press (1972) "special article." This article entitled "The New Panthers?" maintains that the Panthers have adopted a new and different rhetorical style—one that is in keeping with "its promise to roll back its militaristic profile." The article continues by enumerating the exact changes that the Black Panther Party has initiated in altering its profile, and
quotes the Party’s Supreme Servant Huey Newton as saying, “We’ve rejected the rhetoric of the gun; it got about forty of us killed and sent hundreds of us to prison.” Newton, however, makes it very clear that from his point of view only the rhetoric has changed:

Armed struggle is my belief and always will be. We have tried to get it to that point. We’re building and organizing an army to finally get people to the point where we’ll fight, because we believe that the only way we will resolve the final contradiction is through armed struggle [Associated Press, 1972: 6].

Using the main premise of this article as a touchstone, I will analyze one embodiment of the Panthers’ rhetoric, its weekly newspaper, The Black Panther Inter-Communal Newsletter. The purpose of this analysis is to determine if this publicly stated change in rhetorical style has actually occurred, and if so, to what extent its presence is detectable. Furthermore, this analysis will serve as a factual basis for the presentation of some theoretical interpretation of the modifications the Panthers have undertaken. That is, the analysis will determine if an alteration in rhetorical strategy has been made, and the theories of Ted Robert Gurr (1970) and Herbert Simons (1970) will be used to explain why these alterations were necessary and what consequences are likely to follow.

Our Father, (says white america)
which are in heaven
how I love this game.
Of all the blessings
you’ve given me—
this game of pain
is closest to my heart.
I said I’d pray and pray
you gave me the U.S.A.
I joined the Trustee Board
You let me kill the Injuns, Lord.
You blessed me with the slaves
You blessed me with the fools—
Then the niggers started going to schools.
Integration! Freedom!
Now its revolution!
But I know
the lord is good.
Your grace is sufficient to silence niggers—
for good
AMEN!
—Eve Pearson

Formation of the Black Panther Party began in the fall of 1966, with two young militant blacks—Huey P. Newton and Bobby G. Seale—as its leaders. Newton and Seale originally met on the campus of Merritt Junior College, and it was at Merritt that the Black Panther Party was founded. Although Black organizations were already in existence at the college, Newton and Seale were dissatisfied with their emphasis on black nationalism, and especially their middle-class composition. The two young men, therefore, left the groups at Merritt early in 1966, and made a conscious effort to become more than "classroom theoreticians" (Foner, 1970: xv).

Beginning their work in the ghetto of Oakland, California, Seale and Newton went door to door asking the residents of the black community exactly what they wanted and needed for a better life. From the replies they received, and from their own personal knowledge of the conditions in the ghetto, they drew up a ten-point platform, which was to become the basis for all of the Panthers' programs in the future.

While conducting this door-to-door questioning, Newton and Seale were constantly reading, especially those works which had a bearing upon the radical social programs that they were hoping to bring to the Oakland black community. The works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh were read with high hopes of useful application.
The writings of Malcolm X were also relied upon heavily, and it was Malcolm’s emphasis on self-defense and the concept of gaining freedom “by any means necessary” that set the tone of the Panthers’ policy (Foner, 1970: xvi). *The Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon, however, was the work that was most influential in the early formation of the Black Panther Party. The single most important statement by Fanon was “Violence is cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (Anthony, 1970: 2). As Earl Anthony (1970: 2), one of the original members of the Black Panthers, observes:

He [Fanon] was to us the apostle of violence. For us *The Wretched of the Earth* was like a road map to revolution, and if you were honest and intelligent enough not to misinterpret what you read, you could look on the road map and locate the distance you had traveled on the journey. But at the end you know there was armed struggle. This was the classical way. And this is what we were at least talking about in the fall of 1966.

Having laid this philosophical background, the organizers of the Black Panther Party began their task of freeing the black community from the white oppressor. In accordance with point seven of their ten point program (“We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people”), the main thrust of their attention was directed at the Oakland Police. In an attempt to discourage what was called harassment of the black community, the Panthers conspicuously armed themselves with rifles, shotguns, and other visible weapons (possession of nonconcealed weapons was then legal in California) and organized armed patrols throughout the ghetto. Whenever a black resident was stopped by the police, a Panther patrol would arrive on the scene, brandishing their weapons and carrying a law book from which to cite specific violations that the police might make.
Several observers of the Black Panther Party have suggested that the patrols were successful in discouraging harassment of black citizens. As one writer states (Foner, 1970: xxvii), “The brutality and harassment directed against black men and women tapered off.” It might be more correct, however, to say that the police harassment shifted its focus. Whereas individual black citizens of the Oakland community were generally left alone by the police, the incidence of harassment of members of the Panthers definitely increased.

As the Black Panther Party became increasingly stronger in the Oakland ghetto, new branches sprang up in other major metropolitan areas. Chapters were organized in Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., Des Moines, and other areas where high concentrations of blacks were located. In many black communities in this country, therefore, the Black Panther Party was omnipresent, attempting to implement their ten point program, and constantly advocating picking up the gun for self-defense. While this policy of expansion and armed self-defense was attractive to many black ghetto youth, it also increased the attention of the political establishment, law enforcement agencies, and the public. Philip S. Foner (1970: xxii), editor of The Black Panthers Speak, writes,

As the Party’s community activities increased and its success grew, so did the intensity of police harassment. Police bulletin boards featured descriptions of Party members and their cars. On foot or driving around, Panthers would be stopped and arrested on charges ranging from petty traffic violations to spitting on the sidewalk. Newton was stopped almost daily by the police intent on arresting him.

With these constant incidents of police harassment as a catalyst, it was predictable that violent confrontations between Panthers and the police would occur. As the frequency of police raids on Panther headquarters increased, the number of Panther members who were killed or wounded
rose dramatically. For example, a young black named Denzil Dowell was the first Party member killed by the police, and his death became the first rallying cause for members of the Panthers (Black Panther Inter-Communal Newsletter, 1967). Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Hutton were shot in a raid on a Panther building in Oakland. In another fracas, Chairman Huey Newton was seriously wounded by the police and charged with the “voluntary manslaughter” of an Oakland policeman. Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were two more Panthers who died from a raid the Chicago police made on the building they were occupying. Bobby Seale, though still alive, has also been in several skirmishes with the police—the most recent being the Chicagc conspiracy trial

Although these are some of the most notable examples of the clashes between the Panthers and the police, it certainly is not a complete listing—the ACLU released a list of 48 major Panther-police “incidents” (Foner, 1970: xxvi). Returning momentarily to Newton’s statement as reported in the AP article, there can be little doubt that these are exactly the types of incidents to which Newton referred. They must be considered, therefore, as major precipitating factors in the Panthers’ decision to modify their militant rhetorical style.

But the main thing we want to get across, I want to get across, to the people is that the Party is based on Survival Programs to serve the people.

—Bobby Seale, Black Panther, April 3, 1971

In order to identify the ongoing changes in the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party, a content analysis was done on the organization’s weekly publication, The Black Panther Inter-Communal Newsletter. The publication, which averages sixteen pages in length, is usually released on Saturday. For this particular analysis, the units which were counted were the sentences containing the idea of nonaccidental harm to another person or object. The word “nonaccidental” is of
extreme importance in this working definition of the type of sentences which were counted, for this study is focused upon the Panthers' militant stance, and any sentence which connoted accidental violence would not be relevant to this investigation.

Furthermore, I included in my count sentences which carried the idea of harm toward the Black Panther Party as well as those which connoted harm from the Panthers to other individuals or objects. This inclusion was made because violence perceived by the Panthers as directed toward them would certainly affect the type and amount of violent response they showed in return. Obviously, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine the exact nature of this effect. Nevertheless, by consistently including both types of sentences, any cause and effect relationship will be accounted for in my analysis.

This analysis was conducted by selecting sample issues of the *Black Panther Newsletter* from the periods before, during, and after the rhetorical change was suspected to have taken place. In an effort to obtain an unbiased sample, I decided to analyze only the second page of the first issue of the months that were chosen for sampling. Also, only prose writing was used for this analysis, and all cartoons, pictures, or poems were excluded—regardless of their subject matter or amount of violent content.

I first made a preliminary test of the hypothesis by analyzing issues at one-year intervals beginning with that of October 5, 1968. The issue of October 3, 1970, revealed a drastic reduction in the number of units. I then worked backward and forward from this date to determine the exact point at which the shift occurred and its longevity. The results of this analysis are presented graphically in Figure 1. This presentation gives the reader a comprehensive view of this rhetorical shift.

Perhaps it would also be helpful to the reader's understanding of this analysis if I included some examples of the
Figure 1.
types of sentences which were included. An example of a sentence which carried the idea of violence from the Panthers is, “If the racist oppressors dare stand in your way, arm yourselves and shoot to kill” (Black Panther Inter-Communal Newsletter, 1970). An example of the type of sentence which connoted violence toward the Panthers is, “The fascist madmen have refused to let him [Newton] see a doctor, and it is obvious that they intend murdering the Chairman by any means necessary” (Black Panther Inter-Communal Newsletter, 1969).

This analysis clearly shows that the use of violent rhetoric, as exemplified by the preceding sentences, has declined in this publication of the Black Panther Party. The final section of this study will present a theoretical rationale. For the sake of clarification, it should be mentioned that in this last section the term “aggressive symbols” will be considered synonymous with the term violent or militant rhetoric. The change is made so as to bring my terminology into conformity with that of the theoretical system I am employing.

The most fundamental human response to the use of force is the use of counterforce.

—Ted Robert Gurr, 1970

In the final section, some theoretical background will be presented in order to explain the change in the rhetorical strategy of the Black Panther Party. In this explanation, elements of several different theories will be employed so as to give the reader the greatest possible understanding of the social forces that made this shift necessary.

The format for presenting these theoretical justifications is divided into three parts. First, I will use the theories of Herbert Simons to explain in what manner a significant shift has taken place in the Panther rhetoric. Second, I will utilize
Ted Robert Gurr’s system, as presented in *Why Men Rebel*, as the theory which will show that the Black Panther Party originally possessed intense normative and utilitarian justifications for the use of violence. Also using Gurr, I will explain how an intervening variable (the group’s lack of success with political violence) has affected the utilitarian justifications and hence the density of aggressive political symbols in their rhetoric. Finally, in the concluding section of this study, I will present some predictions concerning the Black Panther Party’s use of militant concepts in the future.

The two most useful concepts for this study, which Simons (1970: 7-8) develops are those in which he defines militant and moderate strategies by the type of rhetoric they employ. Simons defines a militant as using rhetoric as an act of force, with his goal being behavior change as a precondition to a change in attitude. His tools in this behavior change are threats, disruptions, and harassment of all types. The moderate, on the other hand, generally follows the textbook advice of adapting his rhetoric to the needs, wants, and values of his audience. He is careful to keep his appeals directed toward attitude change, and he is always attempting to reduce the psychological distance between those in the movement and those outside of it.

Having made this distinction, Simons (1970: 9) maintains that militant rhetoric is most useful for influencing “power vulnerables.” These are members of the establishment who are in positions in which they must be responsive to the general public. For example, the president of a university is responsible for keeping his campus quiet and free from violent demonstration. His failure to fulfill this responsibility might possibly cost him his position, as well as depriving him of other personal values—social status, respect of his colleagues, and so forth. Therefore, he must try to conciliate (or suppress) militant groups and keep them from performing violent acts.

Moderate statements, however, have much more influence
on what Simons (1970: 9) calls "power invulnerables." This class is composed of the general public who would have little or no personal involvement if an isolated incident of violence should break out. Therefore, they can openly reveal their prejudices and act solely in their own personal interests. Obviously, the best method of persuasion for this group is attitude change and not the behavior change of the militant.

If one looks closely at the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party before the shift of June 1970, we can see that it fits squarely into Simons' militant category. The Party's repeated appeals to the black community to "pick up the gun" would seem to fulfill the requirement of advocating behavior change before attitude change. After June 1970, however, the Party's rhetoric changes and follows the definition that Simons has given for moderate strategy. The constant espousing of "survival programs" is their effort to adapt to the needs and wants of their audience. Furthermore, this latter rhetorical style fulfills Simons's second condition in that it is now directed toward the plight of the black community and not toward those political figures which might be responsible for these conditions.

Finally, we see that this type of rhetoric is working on the power invulnerables. The survival programs of the Black Panther Party have recently been supported by many merchants (both black and white) in the black community of Oakland (Associated Press, 1972: 6). Of course, these merchants would have a considerable amount to lose if a riot were to erupt such as the one in Watts, but the Black Panther Party has shown that it does not (at this time) believe in such tactics and therefore the threat of open riot and looting is minimal. This lack of an immediate personal involvement on the part of the merchants leads one to believe that they have been persuaded by the moderate rhetoric of the Party and are willing to help in the effort to improve the black community of Oakland.
Now that it has been established that the Panthers have indeed made a rhetorical shift and have lowered the density of aggressive symbols in their rhetoric, the next logical question that must be answered is, why? That is, what act or actor forced the Black Panther Party to modify its militant rhetorical stance? In an attempt to answer these questions satisfactorily, the theory of political violence as proposed by Gurr (1970) will be employed. For the purposes of this study, it would be impractical to list all of the hypotheses which Gurr has formulated. For that reason, I will state and explicate only those hypotheses which bear a direct relationship to the Panthers' shift in rhetorical strategies.

Gurr's (1970: 125) theory maintains that men have "two related but distinguishable perspectives on political violence that influence their decisions to resort to it." First of all, men hold certain norms or mores about what time, place, and under what conditions the use of violence is proper to achieve a goal—political or otherwise. Furthermore, they also hold certain perceptions about whether political violence will be successful in achieving their desired goal, or as Gurr (1970: 156) states it, "about the relative utility of violence as a means for value attainment." As was stated earlier, these two perceptions are related; however, they will be treated separately. As shall be seen later in the analysis of the Panther rhetoric, they not only have separate social and psychological origins, but their intensity can (and does) vary independently.

Normative justifications for political violence are defined by Gurr (1970: 157) as "the attitudes and beliefs men hold about the intrinsic desirability of taking or threatening such action [political violence]." In other words, if men believe that violence and force are acceptable means of achieving a goal, the likelihood of violence is increased. Of course, many psychological and cultural forces must combine in order to give any individual or collectivity this particular view. A few of these forces are individual aggressiveness, cultural aggres-
siveness, and a history of political violence in the culture or country. When these and other forces are combined in the proper ratio, and are sanctioned by the norms of a culture, violence is likely to occur.

There are other, equally important factors which play a large role in determining whether violence will take place. These are the utilitarian justifications for political violence. Gurr (1970: 157) defines them as “the beliefs men hold about the extent to which the threat or use of violence will enhance their overall value position and that of the community with which they identify.” Stated differently, men are more likely to use violence to gain a goal if they perceive that they will be successful in their attempt. For the purpose of this study, the two most important forces in determining the utility of violence are the group’s past success (or lack of it) with political violence, and other groups’ successes or failures with violence. Obviously, if the group has attempted political violence and has failed, the chance that they would try it again are decreased. As was stated earlier, these factors might vary independently from normative justifications for violence. A group may believe that violence is acceptable but still not resort to it if they think their attempt will end in failure (Gurr, 1970: 201-202).

Turning first to the utilitarian justifications for political violence, it has been mentioned that several forces affect the intensity of this particular dimension. Because of my interest in how the Panthers’ communication strategies were affected by the actions and reactions of the “establishment,” only a few of these forces will be discussed in detail. In his treatment of the relationship between communication and the intensity of utilitarian justifications for violence, Gurr (1970: 218) formulates two hypotheses:

The intensity of utilitarian justifications for political violence varies moderately with the degree to which new symbolic appeals prescribe political violence as an effective value opportunity for increasing value positions.
In this hypothesis, Gurr is saying that new symbolic appeals have a moderate effect on utilitarian justifications for violence. That is, appeals which prescribe violence as being effective in achieving the goals of the group will increase the intensity with which the utility of violence is believed.

The second hypothesis treats the relationship between aggressive political symbols (or militant rhetoric) and the intensity of utilitarian justifications for violence. Hypothesis J.V. 10 (Gurr, 1970: 225) states:

The intensity of normative and utilitarian justifications for political violence varies moderately with the density of aggressive political symbols in communications content.

Returning momentarily to my original terminology, this hypothesis predicts that the more violent or militant statements a medium (or media) contains, the stronger the belief that violence will be effective in achieving a goal. The content analysis section of this study has clearly shown that prior to June 1970 the density of aggressive symbols in the Black Panther Inter-Communal Newsletter was much higher than after this date. Furthermore, the examples I have presented show that these aggressive symbols portray violence as the only effective method of achieving the Panthers' goals. Therefore, following this relationship, as established in hypothesis J.V. 10, it may be said that the intensity of utilitarian justifications for political violence was much higher before June 1970.

As the initial section of this study has shown, however, reactions of several law enforcement agencies have caused the Black Panther Party to lose their intense feelings that violence would achieve these goals. Gurr (1970: 221) offers a theoretical explanation for this modification of intensity in hypothesis J.V. 8. This hypothesis predicts:

The intensity and scope of utilitarian justifications for political violence vary strongly with the extent to which a collectivity has
increased its average value position in the past through political violence.

This hypothesis, then, tends to fill in the theoretical picture. The Panthers' lack of success with violence strongly affected the intensity of their feelings toward violence as a pragmatic means of reaching their goals. Granted, for awhile, the density of aggressive symbols still kept this intensity relatively high. It must be remembered, however, that the density of aggressive symbols only affects this intensity "moderately." Success with violence, on the other hand, affects this intensity "strongly." Hence, as the police continued to thin the ranks of the Black Panther Party, the intensity of utilitarian justifications for political violence decreased dramatically. As Gurr (1970: 218) observes, "Probably the most potent determinant of the perceived utility of political violence is people's previous success in attaining their goals by such means." Therefore, it may be concluded that the Panthers' lack of success with violent-militant rhetoric decreased the intensity of their feelings about its utility. Once the utility of political violence had decreased, there was no reason for the Panthers to present themselves as a militant or violent organization. For this reason, the density of aggressive symbols in their media also declined.

As I have shown, the theoretical formulations of Gurr and Simons, adequately explain the shift in rhetorical strategy of the Black Panther Party. Equally important is the fact that the statements and actions of party leaders lend strong support to the accuracy of these theories. In a sense, each aids the understanding and explanation of the other.

The true test for any theory, however, is its predictive power. Gurr has formulated his theory so that it is capable of making predictions about the future actions of a social movement. For the Black Panther Party, the key to predicting their future lies in two different hypotheses. The first of these statements establishes a relationship between the
intensity of utilitarian justifications for violence and normative justifications for violence. Thus, corollary V. 3.1 (Gurr, 1970: 160) states:

The intensity and scope of normative justifications for political violence vary strongly with the intensity and scope of utilitarian justifications for political violence in a collectivity.

It should be noted, however, that this effect operates in both directions. Thus, if normative justifications are high, a group will look for new and different utilitarian justifications. However, if this utility is perceived to be very low (as in the case of the Panthers), this will have a reverse effect on the normative justifications. It also needs to be mentioned that the density of aggressive symbols will have an effect upon the normative justifications for violence (Gurr, 1970: 225). Hence, if high density of aggressive symbols will have a positive effect on normative justifications, a decrease in this density will affect these justifications in the opposite direction. Both of these variables, then, have had negative effects upon the normative justifications for political violence of the Black Panthers.

Finally, hypothesis J.V. 6 draws another link between communication, utility of violence, and normative justifications for violence (Gurr, 1970: 201-202):

The intensity of normative justifications for political violence varies strongly with the extent to which symbolic appeals offer plausible explanations of the sources of relative deprivation, identify political targets for violence, and provide symbols for group identification.

It has been shown that the Black Panther Party has decreased its use of this type of symbolic or rhetorical appeal. Hence, this variable will also exert a negative force on the Panthers’ normative justifications for violence. The combination of these forces (hypotheses J.V. 10, J.V. 6, and corollary V.
3.1) should work, albeit slowly, to decrease these normative justifications for violence, and make the Panthers a more moderate and less militant group.

Although it is not mentioned by Gurr, an alternative explanation of these forces may be found in the concept of socialization. That is, any group that is without the aggressive symbolic appeals needed to socialize its members into its framework of violence will soon find its membership lacking the normative justifications necessary for the maintenance of a militant ideology. Obviously, an organization’s communication channels (i.e., its newspapers, pamphlets, and so forth) are among the means for gaining this desired socialization. A decrease in the density of aggressive symbols cannot help but modify the manner in which socialization occurs.

The above discussion of the effect of these negative forces on the Panthers’ normative and utilitarian justifications for violence has formed a clear prediction of the future of the Black Panther Party. Gurr, using his theoretical framework, would make this same prediction through the use of the following hypotheses (Gurr, 1970: 156):

V.2—The potential for political violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of normative justifications for political violence among members of a collectivity.

V.3—The potential for political violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of utilitarian justifications for political violence among members of a collectivity.

From these two hypotheses it is evident that if the normative and utilitarian justifications decrease, the likelihood for political violence will also decrease. They reinforce the opinion that in the future the Black Panther Party will be characterized by nonviolence and nonmilitancy. It is likely that: (1) they will continue to see the lack of utility in violent behavior; (2) they will continue to keep the density of aggressive symbols at a low rate in their communications;
and (3) they will slowly (and probably unconsciously) lower their normative justifications for political violence. Therefore, despite claims by their leaders to the contrary, it is unlikely that the Black Panther Party will ever regain its position as the most militant of black organizations.

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