

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

1968

July 23, 1968 will have to go down in the history of the black revolutionary struggle as a day of even more importance than July 25, 1967 (Detroit) and August 11, 1965 (Watts). It was on Tuesday night, July 23, that a small group of black men set up an ambush for the police in the streets of Cleveland, Ohio. They set it well and carefully: "... there were telephone complaints about an abandoned, stripped white Cadillac left on Beulah St.," wrote the *New York Post's* Jimmy Breslin. "The police tow truck came up to the Cadillac, shots came from three directions. The driver was a civilian employee. He was not hit. He was doing what they wanted him to do, radio for help. They would use their aim later."

The police responded to the call for help, "and the first three cars pulled in and stopped. There was no shooting. The cops jumped out. Right away, heavy firing started. Louis Golonka sprang up and started running. Running in his black cop's shoes to make the corner, and he was in the middle of a stride when they got him and he went down on his face. Willard Wolff came away from the wall and ran toward Golonka. He was almost to Golonka and he was holding his hands out to grab for Golonka when he was hit and went down. He did not move. Leroy Jones, a lieutenant, came after the two of them and people were yelling at him, but Jones couldn't hear them in the noise and he was running when he was shot in the head and he fell on his face and died alongside a mailbox."

In fifteen minutes it was all over. Three cops were dead and fourteen wounded. Seven blacks died and one was wounded. Of those blacks killed, four were believed to have been guerrillas. The other three were fair game for the cops who killed them.

In military terms, it was a clear victory for the guerrillas. The police suffered 17 casualties. The black community, seven. Mayor Carl Stokes quickly rounded up some of the best-known black nationalists in town. He was in trouble and had to arrest somebody in a hurry. One of the nationalists, Fred Ahmed Evans, claims that he was the organizer of the group who carried out the ambush. That may be. But then again, it may not. There was no political need for Evans to volunteer any information to the police. The deed had been done and it spoke eloquently for itself. Politically, it would've been wiser for Evans to yell, "Frameup!" But maybe the brother's on an ego trip.

Carl Stokes handled the overall situation very well. His purpose for being in office was to keep "those people" in line and in circumstances which would have sent a white mayor into a panic, Stokes showed that he could keep "those people" in line. Although he'd had the Governor call up the National Guard; he decided against immediately putting the Guard in the black community. Instead he called together every Negro who had ever applied the name leader to himself and put upon them and the Negro policeman the responsibility of keeping the ghetto quiet. It was a gamble, and it-worked to a greater degree than Stokes' white bosses had anticipated. Although there were some burnings and liberating of stores (looting) the night following the ambush, the People did not take to the streets as they would have had the Guard been in the community.

This ploy of Stokes' is likely to be picked up rapidly by mayors from coast to coast. Instead of the colonial power using its own troops to police the native quarters, how much better it is to let the natives police themselves. And, it is a move which the ideology of the black movement has laid the groundwork for. It is a move which takes advantage of the weaknesses of the "everybody-black-is-a-brother" position. It is a move which takes advantage of the calls for

unity based on blackness rather than unity based on class and ideology. A black cop firing his gun at black people cannot be considered a brother. A black nationalist, a black minister or black political figure who walks the streets of the community and tells the people that fighting back is not the way is not a brother. A brother has one message and one message only—the best way to fight.

Under the guise of black unity, the black community is being divided. Under the guise of brotherhood and togetherness, one segment of the community is going to be used to police and oppress the other segment. And the ideological framework for this was laid by those who follow the Carmichael line, “Every Negro is a potential black man.” How much more true is Rap Brown’s statement, “Every Negro is a potential traitor. Every black man is a potential revolutionary.”

It is to be hoped that the cadre which planned and carried out the ambush have also done their political homework and are carrying it into the community. In an urban situation, a guerrilla unit cannot survive unless it is simultaneously educating the people politically and thereby gaining their material support. The battle is not against cops. It is against a system which has created political and economic institutions whose sole aims are the oppression, degradation and exploitation of everyone. Cops are only an instrument of that system and have to be fought as long as they continue to be instruments. They are not the target, however. They are merely there to guard the target.

That there is a basis within the people for understanding the necessity and dynamics of revolution, there can be no doubt. The *New York Post* (July 24) reports an incident where the police were trying to chase some small boys off the street so they wouldn’t get hit by any stray bullets from the guns of the guerrillas. One of the boys told the cops, “they’re (the guerrillas) not after us. They’re after you. They want you, not us.” On that kind of understanding, a great and lasting revolutionary movement can be built, provided that we know what we want to build and what the necessary tools are for the building.

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