

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW:

# ELDRIDGE CLEAVER

*a candid conversation with the revolutionary leader of the black panthers*

Eldridge Cleaver has been called the first black leader since Malcolm X with the potential to organize a militant mass movement of "black liberation." Whether he will succeed in forging it, whether he will remain free—or even alive—to lead it and whether, if he does, it will be a force for racial reconciliation or division remains to be seen. But there is no denying that Cleaver, like Malcolm X, has great impact on the young in the ghettos: They know his own ghetto origins; they identify with his defiance of the establishment and with his advocacy of self-defense; and, unlike SNCC's fiery former chieftain Stokely Carmichael, Cleaver offers them a growing organization to join—the Black Panther Party, of which he is minister of information. Carmichael, in fact, has recently joined the group himself. From their base in Oakland, California, the Panthers have established chapters in New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cleveland and San Diego, with a membership estimated at anywhere between 1000 and 5000.

Immediately identifiable by their black berets, black jackets and the empty .50-caliber shell worn on a rawhide thong around the neck, the Panthers are increasingly evident at community meetings, in churches, on the streets—every place they can manifest their concern for organizing masses of black people. Police departments, along with many white citizens, consider them highly dangerous, but some civic officials disagree. New York City Human Rights Commissioner William Booth, for exam-

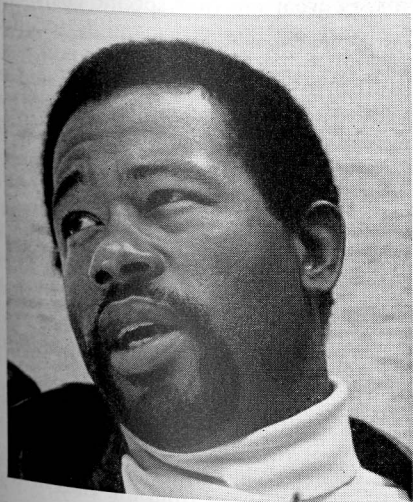
ple, credits members of the Black Panther Party with helping "relieve tensions in the community." In any case, they are a force, and their leaders—Cleaver and Huey Newton, the Black Panthers' jailed minister of defense—enjoy rising support among radical young whites as well as in the black ghetto. But Cleaver, even more than Newton, generates the kind of magnetism that creates converts as well as enemies. As Jeff Shero, editor of *Rat*, a New York underground newspaper, puts it: "The heroes aren't Tim Leary and Allen Ginsberg anymore; they're Che Guevara and Eldridge Cleaver."

But not to everyone. Among opponents of his program and philosophy—in addition to those expectable proponents of the code phrase "law and order"—are many deeply concerned intellectuals, honest liberals and anti-violence workers for racial peace. Cleaver is accused of advocating justice via violence, which these people see as a tragic and dangerous contradiction. More importantly, perhaps, they have charged him with intensifying racial hostilities to the detriment of black Americans by alienating white sympathy and support for the cause of black equality; and with providing racists—in and out of uniform—with precisely the provocation that can lend legal legitimacy to suppression. That he has also alienated many dedicated integrationists is a fact he would be among the last to deny.

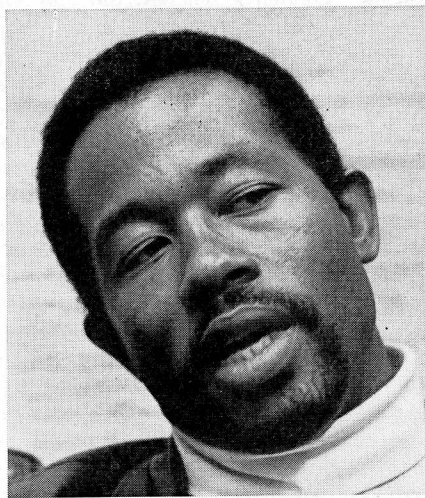
There are many, however—integrationists and otherwise—who regard Cleaver as far more than a revolutionary gang

leader. By many in the intellectual community, he is considered a writer and theoretician of major dimensions. This past fall, he was invited to give a series of lectures at the University of California in Berkeley—precipitating a fierce conflict about his "moral character" between the university on the one hand and its board of regents, Governor Reagan and the state legislature on the other. The chief reasons for this brouhaha: Cleaver's leadership of the Panthers and his 1968 book of explosive essays on the American racial dilemma, "Soul on Ice," which has sold more than 56,000 copies. Among the many laudatory reviews was that of Richard Gilman in *The New Republic*, who called it "a spiritual and intellectual autobiography that stands at the exact resonant center of the new Negro writing . . . a book for which we have to make room—but not on the shelves we have already built."

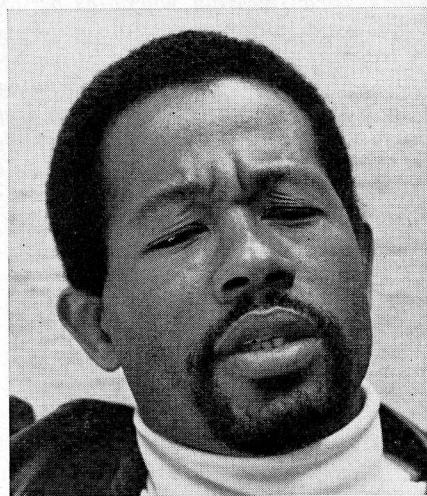
This sudden thrust to national prominence has been achieved by a man of 33 who has spent most of his adult life in jail. Born in Little Rock, Cleaver grew up in the Los Angeles ghetto. After several convictions for possession of marijuana, he was sentenced in 1958 to a 14-year term for assault with intent to kill and rape. By the time he was paroled in December 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had formed the Black Panther Party in Oakland. Cleaver soon joined them. Since then, he has taken time out to write not only his book but several articles in *Ramparts*, of which he is a senior editor, and to campaign this



"If we don't get justice in the courts, we'll get it in the streets. If atrocities against us continue unpunished, if police aggression is not stopped, more and more blacks may have to fight gunfire with gunfire."



"Our basic demand is for proportionate participation in the real power that runs this country—decision-making power concerning all legislation, all appropriations, foreign policy—every area of life."



"What can whites do? Be Americans. Stand up for liberty. Stand up for justice. Stand up for the underdog; that's supposed to be the American way. Make this really the home of the free."

summer and fall for the Presidency as the nominee of the largely white Peace and Freedom Party. The leading supporter, among black militants, of coalition with white radical groups, he propounded his racial credo in "Soul on Ice": "If a man like Malcolm X could change and repudiate racism, if I myself and other former Muslims can change, if young whites can change, then there is hope for America. . . . The sins of the fathers are visited upon the heads of the children—but only if the children continue in the evil deeds of the fathers."

Aside from his unequivocal call, as the candidate of the Peace and Freedom Party, for immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and immediate reform of American social institutions that perpetuate the disenfranchisement of much of its nonwhite population, Cleaver has also become the most articulate and controversial spokesman for the Black Panthers—and the only one free to talk, as we go to press. Bobby Seale is on restrictive probation after conviction on a gun-law violation, and Huey Newton has been in jail since October 1967, when an encounter between him and two Oakland policemen resulted in the death of one of them. In September 1968, Newton was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and given a two-to-fifteen-year sentence. The case is being appealed.

Cleaver, too, has been back in jail. A gun battle between Panthers and the Oakland police in April of last year ended with the death of Panther Bobby Hutton and the wounding of Cleaver, whose parole was immediately revoked. But after two months in jail—and backed with demands for his release by such influential supporters as James Baldwin, Ossie Davis, Marlon Brando, Jules Feiffer, Tom Hayden, LeRoi Jones, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag and the widow of Malcolm X—he was set free at a habeas corpus hearing, where the presiding judge accused the state of California of having rescinded Cleaver's parole because of his political views. Still pending against Cleaver, however, are charges of assault on a police officer and assault with intent to kill. When the California Adult Authority announced its intention of having Cleaver's parole revoked again, PLAYBOY dispatched Nat Hentoff to interview the embattled activist in San Francisco before he was once again incarcerated behind bars.

When he returned to New York with the longest and most searching interview Cleaver has ever granted, Hentoff wrote of his subject: "Having corresponded briefly with him while he was in prison a few years ago and having read 'Soul on Ice,' I was aware of the probing, resourceful quality of Cleaver's mind. But I wondered if some of the flumboyant rhetoric of his public statements since he'd become prominent indicated

a change in the man—his constant use of the word 'pigs' to describe police, for example; the incendiary tone of a recent Yippie-Panther manifesto, signed by Cleaver and three leaders of the white student group, which in effect declared war on the establishment; and statements like: 'The cities of America have tasted the first flames of revolution. But a hotter fire rages in the hearts of black people today: total liberty for black people or total destruction for America.' Was he turning into a demagog? Did he still believe in the possibility of alliances with whites?"

"We met in the office of his white attorney, Charles Garry. Present were two Panthers and Cleaver's wife, Kathleen, also active in the Black Panther Party. The 23-year-old daughter of a college professor who is now deputy director of the Foreign Service Mission to the Philippines, Kathleen is as militant and as radical as her husband. The bearded Cleaver, in black-leather jacket, black pants and an open shirt, was initially reserved and preoccupied. There was legal strategy to discuss with Garry about both Huey Newton's and his own cases, and he was also weighing a number of lucrative offers from publishers for an advance on his next book.

"Leaving the office, he and Kathleen drove me through the black Fillmore district of San Francisco, where he was frequently recognized and waved at—particularly by the young. Dropping Kathleen off, Cleaver and I went on to a white friend's house overlooking San Francisco Bay. 'I need a place to get away from the phones,' he told me. 'Nobody's got the number here.' Nonetheless, our conversation was occasionally interrupted by calls for him. 'Damn,' he said, 'you can never get away.'

"We started talking in the afternoon and continued late into the night. Cleaver gradually relaxed, but not entirely. A tautness remained, a reflection of the constant tension under which he works. He speaks softly and deliberately, taking time to think before answering. Physically, he projects strength; he has a boxer's build and there's the clear impression that he could handle himself in any reasonably equal encounter. But he is also very much an intellectual. I remembered, as we talked, the conversations I'd had with Malcolm X; both were intrigued with ideas and their ramifications, but both were impatient with theoretical formulations that did not have application to immediate reality.

"As the interview went on, I was more and more impressed with Eldridge Cleaver—with the quality of his mind, with the depth of his determination, with the totality of his commitment to his role as a leader in the new stage of the black movement for liberation. It was on the question of this new stage and

the new kind of leadership he's convinced it requires that our interview began."

**PLAYBOY:** You have written that "a new black leadership with its own distinct style and philosophy will now come into its own, to center stage. Nothing can stop this leadership from taking over, because it is based on charisma, has the allegiance and support of the black masses, is conscious of its self and its position and is prepared to shoot its way to power if the need arises." As one who is increasingly regarded as among the pivotal figures in this new black leadership, how do you distinguish the new breed from those—such as Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young—most Americans consider the established Negro spokesmen?

**CLEAVER:** The so-called leaders you name have been willing to work within the framework of the rules laid down by the white establishment. They have tried to bring change within the system as it now is—without violence. Although Martin Luther King was the leader-spokesman for the nonviolent theme, all the rest condemn violence, too. Furthermore, all are careful to remind everybody that they're Americans as well as "Negroes," that the prestige of this country is as important to them as it is to whites. By contrast, the new black leadership identifies first and foremost with the best interests of the masses of black people, and we don't care about preserving the dignity of a country that has no regard for ours. We don't give a damn about any embarrassments we may cause the United States on an international level. And remember, I said the masses of black people. That's why we oppose Adam Clayton Powell. He's not militant enough and he represents only the black middle class, not the masses.

**PLAYBOY:** Since you consider yourself one of these new leaders representing the masses, what are your specific goals?

**CLEAVER:** Our basic demand is for proportionate participation in the real power that runs this country. This means that black people must have part of the decision-making power concerning all legislation, all appropriations of money, foreign policy—every area of life. We cannot accept anything less than that black people, like white people, have the best lives technology is able to offer at the present time. Black people know what's going on. They're aware of this country's productivity and they want in on the good life.

**PLAYBOY:** So far—apart from your willingness to resort to violence in achieving that goal—you haven't proposed anything specific, or different from the aims of the traditional Negro leadership.

**CLEAVER:** OK, the best way to be specific is to list the ten points of the Black Panther Party. They make clear that we are not willing to accept the rules of the

white establishment. One: We want freedom; we want power to determine the destiny of our black communities. Two: We want full employment for our people. Three: We want housing fit for the shelter of human beings. Four: We want all black men to be exempt from military service. Five: We want decent education for black people—education that teaches us the true nature of this decadent, racist society and that teaches young black brothers and sisters their rightful place in society; for if they don't know their place in society and the world, they can't relate to anything else. Six: We want an end to the robbery of black people in their own community by white-racist businessmen. Seven: We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people. Eight: We want all black men held in city, county, state and Federal jails to be released, because they haven't had fair trials; they've been tried by all-white juries, and that's like being a Jew tried in Nazi Germany. Nine: We want black people accused of crimes to be tried by members of their peer group—a peer being one who comes from the same economic, social, religious, historical and racial community. Black people, in other words, would have to compose the jury in any trial of a black person. And ten: We want land, we want money, we want housing, we want clothing, we want education, we want justice, we want peace.

**PLAYBOY:** Peace? But you've written that "the genie of black revolutionary violence is here."

**CLEAVER:** Yes, but put that into context. I've said that war will come only if these basic demands are not met. Not just a race war, which in itself would destroy this country, but a guerrilla resistance movement that will amount to a second Civil War, with thousands of white John Browns fighting on the side of the blacks, plunging America into the depths of its most desperate nightmare on the way to realizing the American Dream.

**PLAYBOY:** How much time is there for these demands to be met before this takes place?

**CLEAVER:** What will happen—and when—will depend on the dynamics of the revolutionary struggle in the black and white communities; people are going to do what they feel they have to do as the movement takes shape and gathers strength. But how long do you expect black people, who are already fed up, to endure the continued indifference of the Federal Government to their needs? How long will they endure the continued escalation of police force and brutality? I can't give you an exact answer, but surely they will not wait indefinitely if their demands are not met—particularly since we think that the United States has already decided where its next campaign is going to be after

the war in Vietnam is over. We think the Government has already picked this new target area, and it's black America. A lot of black people are very up tight about what they see in terms of preparations for the suppression of the black-liberation struggle in this country. We don't work on a timetable, but we do say that the situation is deteriorating rapidly. There have been more and more armed clashes and violent encounters with the police departments that occupy black communities. Who can tell at which point any one of the dozens of incidents that take place every day will just boil over and break out into an irrevocable war? Let me make myself clear. I don't dig violence. Guns are ugly. People are what's beautiful; and when you use a gun to kill someone, you're doing something ugly. But there are two forms of violence: violence directed at you to keep you in your place and violence to defend yourself against that suppression and to win your freedom. If our demands are not met, we will sooner or later have to make a choice between continuing to be victims or deciding to seize our freedom.

**PLAYBOY:** Hasn't there been at least a modicum of real progress toward meeting some of your demands? Isn't there more involvement in the ghetto by private industry, as in the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation set up in 1966 by the late Senator Kennedy, and similar projects around the country? And aren't a growing number of city administrations, like those in New York and San Francisco, trying to get more community participation in building up ghetto institutions?

**CLEAVER:** We think this is essentially just surface appeasement. The establishment believes that if it can keep a certain number of the most militant black people in each community pacified, large-scale disorders they think they can deal with. But we consider this a deceitful approach that will not buy off the masses of black people as they become fully awakened to the fact that these programs are palliatives—though there's no denying that some have already been bought off. In San Francisco, one of the potentially strongest chapters of the Black Panther Party was growing in Hunters Point. But the mayor, Joseph Alioto, went in and started buying gas stations and giving some of the leaders there little handouts. He virtually destroyed the revolutionary morale of the people in Hunters Point by pumping small amounts of money into the area and by promises of more. Hell, Alioto even offered the Oakland Panthers some money and me a television show, if we'd soften our demands. We turned him down.

**PLAYBOY:** But other black militants, such as the leaders of CORE, are working now for black capitalism. They even helped

draft a bill introduced in Congress last summer to set up neighborhood-controlled corporations. Federal funds would be channeled through those corporations and private firms would be given tax incentives to set up businesses in black neighborhoods—businesses that would eventually be turned over to ghetto residents through the corporations.

**CLEAVER:** I know. It's all part of a big move across the country to convince black people that this way, they can finally get into the economic system. But we don't feel it's going to work, because it won't go far enough and deep enough to give the masses of black people real community control of all their institutions. Remember how the War on Poverty looked on paper and how it worked out? You may recall that of all the organizations around then, it was CORE that rushed in most enthusiastically to embrace that delusion; in some cities, they formed a large part of the staff. But they didn't have the decisive control, and that's where it's at. They can call these new devices "community" corporations, but those private firms from the outside can always pull out and Congress can always cut down on the Federal funds they put in, just as happened in the War on Poverty.

Fewer and fewer black people are allowing themselves now to be sucked in by all of these games. A man finally reaches a point where he sees he's been tricked over and over again, and then he moves for ultimate liberation. But for the masses to achieve that, they will have to be organized so that they can make their collective weight felt, so that they themselves make the final decisions in their communities—from control of the police department to command over all social and economic programs that have to do with them. The struggle we're in now is on two levels—getting people together locally to implement our demands and organizing black people nationally into a unified body. We want black people to be represented by leaders of their choice who, with the power of the masses behind them, will be able to go into the political arena, set forth the desires and needs of black people and have those desires and needs acted upon.

**PLAYBOY:** But we repeat—isn't this already happening—at least on a small scale? There's a black mayor of Cleveland, Carl Stokes, and a black mayor of Gary, Richard Hatcher.

**CLEAVER:** You're talking about black personalities, not about basic changes in the system. There is a large and deepening layer of black people in this country who cannot be tricked anymore by having a few black faces put up front. Let me make this very clear. We are demanding structural changes in society, and that means a real redistribution of power, so that we have control over our own lives. Having a black mayor in the

present situation doesn't begin to accomplish that. And this is a question of more than breaking out of poverty. I know there are a lot of people in this country, particularly in urban ghettos, who are going hungry, who are deprived on all levels; but, obviously, it's not a matter of rampant famine. The people we deal with in the Black Panther Party are not literally dying of hunger; they're not going around in rags. But they are people who are tired of having their lives controlled and manipulated by outsiders and by people hostile to them. They're moving into a psychological and spiritual awareness of oppression, and they won't sit still for any more of it. Where we are now is in the final stages of a process with all our cards on the table. We've learned how to play cards; we know the game and we're just not going to be tricked anymore. That's what seems so difficult to get across to people.

**PLAYBOY:** Is it a trick, however, when Senator Eugene McCarthy, among others, says that since more and more industry and, therefore, jobs, are moving out to the suburbs, more blacks will have to move there, too, with accompanying desegregation of housing in the suburbs and massive funds for improved transportation facilities? Isn't that a sincere analysis of a current trend?

**CLEAVER:** We feel that a lot of these attempts to relocate black people are essentially hostile moves to break up the concentration of blacks, because in that concentration of numbers, we have potential political power. We didn't choose to be packed into ghettos, but since that's where we are, we're not going to get any real power over our lives unless we use what we have—our strength as a bloc. A lot of people in the Republican and Democratic Parties are worried about all this potential black voting power in the cities; that's why, under the guise of bettering the conditions of black people, they're trying to break us up.

**PLAYBOY:** But wouldn't many blacks have higher incomes and live better if they could be integrated into the suburbs?

**CLEAVER:** I emphasize again that until black people as a whole gain power, it's not a question of where you are geographically if you're black; it's a question of where you are psychologically. No matter where you place black people under present conditions, they'll still be powerless, still subject to the whims and decisions of the white political and economic apparatus. That's why we've got to get together and stay together—especially with the country and the Congress getting more conservative politically every day, with police forces amassing more and more arms—arms on a scale to fit an army. That's why I say the situation is deteriorating rapidly—and why I'm also far from certain that the conflict between us and those who run the

system can be solved short of a civil and guerrilla war.

**PLAYBOY:** If this civil and guerrilla war does take place, on what do you base your assertion that there will be "thousands of white John Browns fighting on the side of the blacks"?

**CLEAVER:** Because we recognize that there are a lot of white people in this country who want to see virtually a new world dawn here in North America. In the Bay Area alone, there are thousands of whites who have taken fundamental stands on certain issues, particularly on our demand to free Huey Newton. A person who can relate to that, who can move himself to understand the issues involved, is a person who has begun on a path of essential commitment. Many of these people have broken with the establishment by confronting the establishment. As a situation develops in which hostilities may increase to the point of war, they will have to make a decision on which way they want to move. A certain number of them can be expected to draw back and throw their hand in; but we think there is a hard core of whites, particularly young whites, who are very alarmed at the course this country is taking. They recognize that more than freedom for blacks is at issue; their *own* freedom is at stake. They've learned this at the hands of brutal police in many, many demonstrations, including what happened at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. They've been beaten, Maced, tear-gassed. They themselves have now experienced what's been happening to black people for so long, and they are prepared to draw the line. Previously, they recognized abstractly that this kind of suppression takes place in black communities, but they never thought it could be done to them. They are turning into a revolutionary force, and that's why we believe the Black Panthers can enter into coalitions with them as equal partners.

**PLAYBOY:** When and if it comes to the possibility of large-scale violence, won't most of these essentially middle-class whites—even those you call the hard core—retreat?

**CLEAVER:** You have to realize how deep the radicalization of young whites can become as the agents of repression against both them and us intensify their efforts. It's inevitable that the police, in order to suppress black militants, will also have to try to destroy the base of their support in the white community. When they arrest a black leader of the liberation struggle, they will also have to deal with the protests and the exposure of what they've done in certain white communities; and as they do, they will radicalize more whites. The forces of repression can no longer move just against black people. They cannot, let us say, put black people in concentration camps and simultaneously allow

whites who are just as passionately involved in the liberation struggle to run around loose. There are already a lot of whites who will go to any lengths to aid their black comrades. We know this. Certainly, they must be a minority at this time; but the police, the pigs, are our best organizers for additional allies. Unwittingly, by their brutality against whites as well as blacks, they are going to keep helping us recruit more white allies who will not retreat; and that's why I don't have any doubts that we'll have thousands of new white John Browns in the future, if it comes to the point of mass revolt.

You see, whites in America really love this country. Especially young white idealists. They've always been taught that they're living in the freest country in the world, the fairest country in the world, a country that will always move to support the underdog. So when they see their Government murdering people in Vietnam, the outrage flowing from that realization is immeasurable. They don't storm the Pentagon immediately; but at a distance, they begin to focus on what's really going on. People go through various stages of shock after a first awareness; they get angry, then they get up tight and finally they want to do something to change what's going on. A lot of whites have already made a correct analysis of the situation: They're aware that the Government of their country has been usurped and is in the hands of a clique, what Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex, which manages the political system for the protection of the large corporations. Having made that analysis, there are enough people right now, I believe, who are so outraged at the way things are going that they would move against this usurpation if they knew how.

**PLAYBOY:** And how is that?

**CLEAVER:** That's the issue and the dilemma—how to find a revolutionary mode of moving in this most complicated of all situations. The people who supported McCarthy found out *that* wasn't the way. I'm not saying we, the Black Panthers, have the answer, either, but we're trying to find the way. One thing we do know is that we have to bring a lot of these loosely connected elements of opposition into an organizational framework. You can't have an amorphous thing pulling in all directions and realistically call it a "revolutionary movement." That's why we're organizing among blacks and intend the Panthers to be *the* black-national movement. At the same time, it makes no sense to holler for freedom for the black community and have no interconnection with white groups who also recognize the need for fundamental change. It's by coalition that we intend to bring together

all the elements for liberation—by force, if all the alternatives are exhausted.

**PLAYBOY:** Are they exhausted, in your opinion?

**CLEAVER:** Not yet, but time is running out. It may still be possible, barely possible, to revolutionize this society—to get fundamental structural changes—without resorting to civil war, but only if we get enough power before it's too late.

**PLAYBOY:** If you fail in this last effort to effect wholesale social reform without violence, what makes you think you'll have any more success in an armed insurrection? Considering the enormously superior force and firepower of police and troops—and their apparent massive support among whites—is it realistic to believe that you can sustain a guerrilla war?

**CLEAVER:** Guerrilla warfare has traditionally been conceived and developed to deal with exactly this kind of situation—the presence of massive occupying forces on the one hand and the existence, on the other hand, of sizable numbers of people who are not going to confront those forces full-face but will strike swiftly at times and places of their own choosing. Works on guerrilla warfare have been widely circulated, and a lot of people understand that it doesn't take millions of people to undermine the stability of the American economic system in that way. That's what's at stake—the stability of the system. Of course, there will be tragedies, if it comes to guerrilla warfare. On the individual level, people will suffer, people will be killed. But on the mass level, more and more will be educated. It is the Government itself that will become the chief agent of this kind of education, for the thrust now is unmistakably toward increasing repression. That creates an endless chain of suspicion; everyone in dissent, black or white, becomes suspect. And if the Government intensifies the suppression of dissent, it cannot help but eventually become totalitarian. It creates and implements its own domino theory to the point where there won't even be lip service paid anymore to individual civil liberties for black or white.

**PLAYBOY:** Police and Federal agencies have shown great skill in infiltrating radical movements—including the Panthers. If conditions became such that you decided guerrilla warfare was the only alternative, isn't it likely that your group and all its potential allies—with or without the help of black veterans—would be instantly neutralized from within, because the Government would know every move you planned?

**CLEAVER:** As for the Panthers, we have always worked on the assumption that we're under constant surveillance and have long been infiltrated. But we figure this is something you just have to live with. In any case, the destruction of a particular organization will not destroy the will to freedom among any op-

pressed people. Nor will it destroy the certainty that they'll act to win it. Sure, we try to take precautions to make sure we're not including hostile elements in our organization, but we don't spend all our time worrying about it. If we go under—and that could easily be done with police frame-ups right now—there'll be others to take our place.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you considered the possibility that you could be wrong about the chances of waging a successful guerrilla war? Don't you run the risk that all your efforts toward that end—even if they don't escalate beyond rhetoric—could invite a massive wave of repression that would result in a black blood-bath and turn the country's ghettos into concentration camps?

**CLEAVER:** It seems to me a strange assumption that black people could just be killed or cooped up into concentration camps and that would be the end of it. This isn't the 1930s. We're not going to play Jews. The whole world is different now from what it was then. Not only would black people resist, with the help of white people, but we would also have the help of those around the world who are just waiting for some kind of extreme crisis within this country so that they can move for their own liberation from American repression abroad. This Government does not have unlimited forces of repression; it can't hold the whole world down—not at home and abroad. Eventually, it will be able to control the racial situation here only by ignoring its military "commitments" overseas. That might stop our movement for a while, but think what would be happening in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In that event, there would be a net gain for freedom in the world. We see our struggle as inextricably bound up with the struggle of all oppressed peoples, and there is no telling what sacrifices we in this country may have to make before that struggle is won.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think you have any real chance of winning that struggle—even without Government repression—as long as the majority of white Americans, who outnumber blacks ten to one, remain hostile or indifferent to black aspirations? According to the indications of recent public-opinion surveys, they deplore even *nonviolent* demonstrations on behalf of civil rights.

**CLEAVER:** At the present stage, the majority of white people are indifferent and complacent simply because their own lives have remained more or less intact and as remote from the lives of most blacks as the old French aristocracy was from "the great unwashed." It's disturbing to them to hear about Hough burning, Watts burning, the black community in Newark burning. But they don't really understand why it's happening, and they don't really care, as long as

their homes and their places of work—or the schools to which they send their children—aren't burning, too. So for most whites, what's happened up to now has been something like a spectator sport. There may be a lot more of them than there are of us, but they're not really involved; and there are millions and millions of black people in this country who *are*—more than the census shows. Maybe 30,000,000, maybe more. A lot of black people never get counted in the census. It's not going to be easy to deal with that large a number, and it won't be possible to indefinitely limit the burning to black neighborhoods—even with all the tanks, tear gas, riot guns, paddy wagons and fire trucks in this country. But if it does come to massive repression of blacks, I don't think the majority of whites are going to either approve it or remain silent. If a situation breaks out in which soldiers are hunting down and killing black people obviously and openly, we don't think the majority will accept that for long. It could go on for a while, but at some point, we think large numbers of whites would become so revolted that leaders would arise in the white community and offer other solutions. So we don't accept the analysis that we're doomed because we're in a minority. We don't believe that the majority in this country would permit concentration camps and genocide.

**PLAYBOY:** Not even in the midst of large-scale violence in which white neighborhoods were being burned and looted, white children being endangered?

**CLEAVER:** Under those circumstances, it might be very possible for the power structure to capitalize sufficiently on white fear and anger to justify such atrocities even against those not involved in the violence. But there would still be elements in the white community that would resist massive and indiscriminate repression of all blacks; and once the immediate causes of fear and anger were over, I believe the majority would begin to protest and eventually move against mass imprisonment and genocide. I'm not saying most white people don't have racist attitudes. They do, because the values taught in this country inevitably result in whites' having racist attitudes. But I think a lot of whites are made racists against their essential humanity and without their conscious knowledge. And they get very uncomfortable when their actions are identified as racist, even by their own Kerner Commission. They would really be put on the spot if a large-scale confrontation took place between black people as a whole and white people as a whole. In that event, a lot of white people could not endure seeing themselves as part of the totalitarian apparatus. They would make it very clear that they opposed it and they would work to stop it—not only because of their

essential humanity but because it would be in their own self-interest. The United States has huge interests to safeguard around the world, and most whites would recognize how seriously those interests would be jeopardized if there was total suppression of blacks domestically. That's another reason why the fact of our numerical minority doesn't mean we're destined to lose in our struggle for freedom. It doesn't take into account the international context of the black-liberation movement here. If this country's power structure was really free to totally, brutally and openly suppress black people at home, it would have done so a long time ago. So we have more going for us than our numbers; and our numbers are getting larger.

**PLAYBOY:** Suppose you're right in claiming that most whites, for whatever reason, would not support massive repression of blacks in this country. These same whites, however, don't want black violence, either—but as you point out, most don't fully grasp the dimensions of the injustices against which that violence is a rebellion, nor do they understand why it continues in the wake of several milestone civil rights laws and Supreme Court decisions. The familiar question is: "What more do they want?" How would you answer it?

**CLEAVER:** I can only answer with what Malcolm X said. If you've had a knife in my back for 400 years, am I supposed to thank you for pulling it out? Because that's all those laws and decisions have accomplished. The very least of your responsibility now is to compensate me, however inadequately, for centuries of degradation and disenfranchisement by granting peacefully—before I take them forcefully—the same rights and opportunities for a decent life that you've taken for granted as an American birthright. This isn't a request but a *demand*, and the ten points of that demand are set down with crystal clarity in the Black Panther Party platform.

**PLAYBOY:** Many would doubt that you're serious about some of them. Point four, for instance: "We want all black men to be exempt from military service."

**CLEAVER:** We couldn't be *more* serious about that point. As a colonized people, we consider it absurd to fight the wars of the mother country against other colonized peoples, as in Vietnam right now. The conviction that no black man should be forced to fight for the system that's suppressing him is growing among more and more black people, outside the Black Panther Party as well as in it. And as we can organize masses of black people behind that demand for exemption, it will have to be taken seriously.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you equally serious about point eight, which demands that all black prisoners held in city, county, state and Federal jails be released because they

haven't had fair trials; and about point nine, which demands that black defendants be tried by all-black juries?

**CLEAVER:** We think the day will come when these demands, too, will receive serious attention, because they deserve it. Take point eight. All the social sciences—criminology, sociology, psychology, economics—point out that if you subject people to deprivation and inhuman living conditions, you can predict that they will rebel against those conditions. What we have in this country is a system organized against black people in such a way that many are forced to rebel and turn to forms of behavior that are called criminal, in order to get the things they need to survive. Consider the basic contradiction here. You subject people to conditions that make rebellion inevitable and then you punish them for rebelling. Now, under those circumstances, does the black convict owe a debt to society or does society owe a debt to the black convict? Since the social, economic and political system is so rigged against black people, we feel the burden of the indictment should rest on the system and not on us. Therefore, black people should not be confined in jails and prisons for rebelling against that system—even though the rebellion might express itself in some unfortunate ways. And this idea can be taken further, to apply also to those white people who have been subjected to a disgusting system for so long that they resort to disgusting forms of behavior. This is part of our fundamental critique of the way this society, under its present system of organization, molds the character of its second-class citizens.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you considered the consequences to society of opening the prisons and setting all the inmates free? Their behavior may in one sense be society's fault, but they're still criminals.

**CLEAVER:** We don't feel that there's any black man or any white man in any prison in this country who could be compared in terms of criminality with Lyndon Johnson. No mass murderer in any penitentiary in America or in any other country comes anywhere close to the thousands and thousands of deaths for which Johnson is responsible.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think that analogy is valid? After all, Johnson has been waging a war, however misguided, in the belief that his cause is just.

**CLEAVER:** Many murderers feel exactly the same way about *their* crimes. But let me give you another example: Compare the thieves in our prisons with the big-businessmen of this country, who are in control of a system that is depriving millions of people of a decent life. These people—the men who run the Government and the corporations—are much more dangerous than the guy who walks into a store with a pistol and robs somebody of a few dollars. The men in

control are robbing the entire world of billions and billions of dollars.

**PLAYBOY:** All the men in control?

**CLEAVER:** That's what I said; and they're not only stealing money, they're robbing people of life itself. When you talk about criminals, you have to recognize the vastly different degrees of criminality.

**PLAYBOY:** Surely no criminality, proved in a court of law, should go unpunished.

**CLEAVER:** As you know, the poor and the black in this country don't seem to make out as well as the rich and the white in our courts of "justice." I wonder why.

**PLAYBOY:** You still haven't answered our question about the social consequences of releasing all those now behind bars.

**CLEAVER:** Those who are now in prison could be put through a process of real rehabilitation before their release—not caged like animals, as they are now, thus guaranteeing that they'll be hardened criminals when they get out if they weren't when they went in. By rehabilitation I mean they would be trained for jobs that would not be an insult to their dignity, that would give them some sense of security, that would allow them to achieve some brotherly connection with their fellow man. But for this kind of rehabilitation to happen on a large scale would entail the complete reorganization of society, not to mention the prison system. It would call for the teaching of a new set of ethics, based on the principle of cooperation, as opposed to the presently dominating principle of competition. It would require the transformation of the entire moral fabric of this country into a way of being that would make these former criminals feel more obligated to their fellow man than they do now. The way things are today, however, what reasons do these victims of society have for feeling an obligation to their fellow man? I look with respect on a guy who has walked the streets because he's been unable to find a job in a system that's rigged against him, but doesn't go around begging and instead walks into a store and says, "Stick 'em up, motherfucker!" I prefer that man to the Uncle Tom who does nothing but just shrink into himself and accept any shit that's thrown into his face.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you feel that way if it were *your* store that got held up?

**CLEAVER:** That's inconceivable; I wouldn't own a store. But for the sake of argument, let's say I did. I'd still respect the guy who came in and robbed me more than the panhandler who mooched a dime from me in the street.

**PLAYBOY:** But would you feel he was *justified* in robbing you because of his disadvantaged social background?

**CLEAVER:** Yes, I would—and this form of social rebellion is on the rise. When I went to San Quentin in 1958, black people constituted about 30 percent of the prison population. Recently, I was back at San Quentin, and the blacks are

now in the majority. There's an incredible number of black people coming in with each new load of prisoners. Moreover, I've talked to a lot of other people who've been in different prisons, and the percentage of black inmates there, too, is indisputably climbing. And within that growing number, the percentage of young black prisoners is increasing most of all. Youngsters from the ages of 18 to 23 are clearly in the majority of the new people who come to prison. The reason is that for a lot of black people, including the young, jobs are almost nonexistent, and the feeling of rebellion is particularly powerful among the young. Take a guy who was four years old in 1954, when the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation was handed down, a decision that was supposed to herald a whole new era. Obviously, it didn't, but it did accelerate agitation and unrest. So this guy, who was four then, has had a lifetime of hearing grievances articulated very sharply but of seeing nothing changed. By the time he's 18 or 19, he's very, very up tight. He's very turned off to the system and he has it in his mind that he's justified in moving against so unjust a system in any way he sees fit.

**PLAYBOY:** Can that be the whole explanation for the growing number of young black prisoners? Are they all in conscious rebellion against the white power structure?

**CLEAVER:** That's not the whole explanation, of course, but it would be a mistake to underestimate that rising mood of rebellion. Whatever their conscious motivation, though, every one of them is in prison because of the injustice of society itself. White people are able to get away with a lot of things black people can't begin to get away with; cops are much quicker to make busts in black neighborhoods. And even when they're arrested, whites are ahead because more of them can afford attorneys. A lot of black cats end up in prison solely because they didn't have someone to really present their case in court. They're left with the public defenders, whom prison inmates quite accurately call "penitentiary deliverers." I'll tell you what usually happens. It's the common practice of the police to file ten or so charges on you, and then the public defender comes and says, "Look, we can't beat them all, so the best thing you can do is plead guilty on one count. If you do that, I can get the others dropped." So a black cat is sitting there without real legal help, without any money, and he knows that if he's convicted of all ten counts, he'll get a thousand years. He's in a stupor of confusion and winds up taking the advice of the public defender. He doesn't know the law. He doesn't know how to make legal motions. He doesn't really know what's going on in that courtroom. So

he goes along, wakes up in the penitentiary, starts exchanging experiences with other guys who have been through the same mill; and if he wasn't a rebel when he went in, he'll be a revolutionary by the time he gets out.

**PLAYBOY:** What about your own problems with the law? If you weren't the author of *Soul on Ice*, is it likely that you'd still be in prison?

**CLEAVER:** Certainly. If I had been just another black man, I wouldn't have had a chance in the world of getting out before my maximum sentence was served—especially not me, because I was involved in a lot of the prison politics. You know, the prison authorities consciously create and maintain a certain level of hostility among the various racial groups in prison. There is, for example, a preferential order on jobs; white prisoners get the best ones. And white prisoners do less time than black inmates for similar crimes; in the California prisons, the preferential order is whites, Mexican-Americans and then blacks. There's always been a lot of agitation within the prisons to change that. I was involved in that agitation and, as a result, I was told by members of the Probation Authority that I could just forget about getting out of prison until my entire 14-year term was up. It wasn't until I smuggled the manuscript of *Soul on Ice* out of prison and got it into the hands of people who had the book published that the attitude of the prison officials toward me started changing. And even then, it took a whole mobilization of prominent literary figures writing letters to get me out. But now that I'm out, it's starting to work the other way. Because of all the attention that's been focused on me both because of the book and because of my involvement with the Panthers, the state is trying to put me back in prison. You know, I used to think, I really did, that the Probation Authority would be proud of a man who had gone through their system, had gained a few skills while in prison and wasn't following the path of crime and violence he'd been on before he went in. But because I'm engaged in political activity, the Probation Authority would like nothing better than to lock me up again. The only reason they haven't been able to so far is that I'm not entirely powerless now.

**PLAYBOY:** What happens to the ordinary black inmate who has no special talent that earns him a reputation—and influential supporters—outside of prison?

**CLEAVER:** When I was in the guidance center at San Quentin last spring, I saw a lot of people like that—people I've known for years. Two of them had been in Los Angeles Juvenile Hall with me the first time I was ever arrested—some 18 years ago. Since then, they had done some time and been paroled,

and here they were back in San Quentin on bullshit charges of parole violation. That's a device used all the time to keep sending people back to prison. These guys had done nothing more than have personality clashes with their parole officers, who were empowered to send them back up on their own arbitrary decision. This would never have happened if these guys had had any decent legal help. But neither had anybody outside but their mothers and fathers. And they were just two among hundreds of kids in that guidance center who'd been sent back on parole violations, for no better reason. They hadn't committed felonies; they hadn't done anything that would get the average white man hauled into court. The only conclusion one can draw is that the parole system is a procedure devised primarily for the purpose of running people in and out of jail—most of them black—in order to create and maintain a lot of jobs for the white prison system. In California, which I know best—and I'm sure it's the same in other states—there are thousands and thousands of people who draw their living directly or indirectly from the prison system: all the clerks, all the guards, all the bailiffs, all the people who sell goods to the prisons. They regard the inmates as a sort of product from which they all draw their livelihood, and the part of the crop they keep exploiting most are the black inmates.

**PLAYBOY:** And one of the ways you propose to solve this problem is by demanding not only that all black people in prisons be released but that all future trials of blacks be judged by all-black juries. Wouldn't the selection of a jury on the basis of color—whatever the motivation—be at variance with the U.S. Constitution?

**CLEAVER:** The Constitution says very little explicitly; it has to be interpreted. Given the racism in this country and the inability of white people to understand what's going on with black people, the only truly just way for a black man to be tried by his peers is for him to have a jury of people who have been victims of the same socioeconomic and political situations he has experienced.

**PLAYBOY:** By the same process of reasoning, wouldn't it follow that a member of the Ku Klux Klan accused of murdering a civil rights worker should be tried only by an all-white jury of Southern segregationists because only they would have backgrounds similar enough to understand his motivations?

**CLEAVER:** That's pretty much the way it happens, as a matter of fact. But I don't think the majority of whites will be content for too long with that kind of Ku Klux Klan subversion of justice. My primary concern, in any case, is justice for black people by black people; if we can achieve that, then we might be ready to talk about whether blacks and

whites could get together in accomplishing real justice across the board. But in our *present* society, the only way the Constitution can mean anything to blacks in terms of justice is for black people to be tried by their black peers. **PLAYBOY:** Some might question whether it's fair to talk of justice for blacks, when you write of another kind of justice for whites: "Those savages who perpetrate atrocities against black people are going to be hunted down like the dogs they are and will receive the *justice* that Adolf Eichmann got, the same *justice* that they gave to their innocent victims." If you actually resort to this kind of vigilante violence, won't you be morally indistinguishable from K. K. K. night riders who lynch blacks and bomb black churches? **CLEAVER:** No, because there is such a thing as justifiable homicide; and I would include in that category every lyncher and church bomber who ever got exonerated by a white-racist jury. If we don't get justice in the courts—for blacks as well as for those who brutalize them—then we'll get it in the streets. If atrocities against us continue not only unpunished but unprevented, if the campaign of aggression by the police and other government forces against us is not stopped, more and more blacks may have to respond as some in Cleveland did last summer—by fighting gunfire with gunfire. One way or another, we are going to have to get justice. It was Thomas Jefferson, after all, who maintained that when society's institutions no longer serve the needs of the people, they must be changed by constitutional means or by revolution. That's at the base of the so-called American tradition; if the people are tyrannized by their Government and that Government answers their demands for justice by intensifying that tyranny, it is not only their right but their duty to abolish that Government and set up another that will extend justice impartially and humanely to all its citizens. This applies even on the local level, and especially to those agencies of the establishment that are charged with the protection of the public. If the police department, for example, has abdicated its function of providing public safety to black people as well as to white, then we feel we have the right to provide for our own safety, even\* if that means confronting the police department. And if crimes are committed against us by the police, we have the right to defend ourselves and take whatever measures are necessary to prevent further atrocities from being committed against us. And we have the right to insist that perpetrators of past crimes against black people be punished. **PLAYBOY:** You've said that the black community is keeping a "death list" of those who are guilty of crimes against black people. Is this true?

**CLEAVER:** The names of murderers, including police officers—pigs—who have gotten off without any penalty after killing black people are all on record. People in each local area know who they are. I myself have a long list of people who I know have done these things. These crimes are so atrocious and have been so well publicized and documented that even if a complete list doesn't exist, it will be a simple matter of research to go back, dig them up and deal with the murderers—if the law doesn't do it for us. **PLAYBOY:** You seem to alternate between advocating revolutionary violence and allowing for the possibility of social reform without violence. Which is it going to be? **CLEAVER:** What happens, as I've said, will depend on the continuing dynamics of the situation. What we're doing now is telling the Government that if it does not do its duty, then we will see to it ourselves that justice is done. Again, I can't tell you when we may have to start defending ourselves by violence from continued violence against us. That will depend on what is done against us and on whether real change can be accomplished nonviolently within the system. We'd much rather do it that way, because we don't feel it would be a healthy situation to have even black revolutionaries going around distributing justice. I'd much prefer a society in which we wouldn't have to use—or even carry—guns, but that means the pigs would have to be disarmed, too. In the meantime, as long as this remains an unjust and unsafe society for black people, we're faced with a situation in which our survival is at stake. We will do whatever we must to protect our lives and to redeem the lives of our people—without too much concern for the niceties of a system that is rigged against us. **PLAYBOY:** Some black militants say there is an alternative to revolution or capitulation: the formation of a separate black nation within the United States. At a meeting in Detroit last March, a group of black nationalists proposed the creation of a state called New Africa, encompassing all the territory now occupied by Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Do you think that's a viable plan? **CLEAVER:** I don't have any sympathy with that approach, but the Black Panthers feel that it's a proposal black people should be polled on. There have been too many people and too many organizations in the past who claimed to speak for the ultimate destiny of black people. Some call for a new state; some have insisted that black people should go back to Africa. We Black Panthers, on the other hand, don't feel we should speak for all black people. We say that black people deserve an opportunity to record their own national will. **PLAYBOY:** Black people have already had

a chance to record their will on this subject, according to CBS. A network survey last September revealed that in a poll of black Americans, five percent favored formation of a separate black state. **CLEAVER:** Fuck CBS. I don't trust any polls of black people by whites who are part of the system of oppression. The kind of poll we want to see—the only kind of poll that would have any international legitimacy—is a UN-supervised plebiscite throughout the black communities of this country on the question of whether black people want to be integrated into this nation or whether they want to be separated from it; and, if the latter, whether in a separate state or by controlling the communities where they live now. **PLAYBOY:** Do you have any reason to believe that the United Nations would consider holding such a plebiscite? **CLEAVER:** We already know there are a lot of countries in the world that sympathize with the black cause in America and would be willing to support us on this question. As the political situation worsens—as it inevitably must—both domestically and internationally, we feel we will be able to persuade enough nations to place the idea of a plebiscite on the agenda of the General Assembly, just as so many colonized peoples in other parts of the world have been able to do. After all, we're dealing with a black population in this country that outnumbers that of many UN member nations. We don't see why we have to remain powerless indefinitely when other formerly colonized peoples have won their freedom and their independence. Another plan we have is to invite UN observers to station themselves in the large urban areas so that they can witness the activities of police departments that to us are nothing but occupying armies. We ask this as a colonized people within the mother country. **PLAYBOY:** Few, if any, colonized peoples have the support of a contingent of the colonizing power; yet the Black Panthers have formed a working coalition with the Peace and Freedom Party in California—a group that is predominantly white. Isn't there an ideological inconsistency in such a coalition—despite what you've said about the good will and dedication of many sympathetic young whites—at a time when other militant black organizations, such as SNCC, pointedly reject all white allies as agents of the white power structure? **CLEAVER:** There is no inconsistency if you don't confuse coalitions with mergers. We believe black people should be in full control of their organizations; the Black Panthers have always been. You may remember that Stokely Carmichael, when he came out for an all-black SNCC, also said that the role of whites was to go into their own communities and organize, so that there could be a basis for eventual coalitions. We've now

reached a point where many white people have, in fact, organized in their own communities; therefore, we see no reason to maintain an alienated posture and to refuse to work with such groups.

**PLAYBOY:** One of the passages in *Soul on Ice* had particular impact on many young white people who felt they had been drummed out of "the movement." You wrote: "There is in America today a generation of white youth that is truly worthy of a black man's respect, and this is a rare event in the foul annals of American history." Having since worked in collaboration with the Peace and Freedom Party, do you still think as highly of the new generation of white youth?

**CLEAVER:** I'm even more convinced it's true than when I wrote those lines. We work with these young people all the time, and we've had nothing but encouraging experiences with them. These young white people aren't hung up battling to maintain the *status quo* like some of the older people who think they'll become extinct if the system changes. They're adventurous; they're willing to experiment with new forms; they're willing to confront life. And I don't mean only those on college campuses. A lot who aren't in college share with their college counterparts an ability to welcome and work for change.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you agree with those who feel that this generation of youth is going to "sell out" to the *status quo* as it moves into middle age?

**CLEAVER:** I expect all of us will become somewhat less resilient as we get into our 40s and 50s—if we live that long—and I'm sure that those who come after us will look back on us as being conservative. Even us Panthers. But I don't think this generation will become as rigid as the ones before; and, for that matter, I don't write off all older people right now. There are a lot of older whites and blacks who keep working for change. So there are people over 30 I trust. *I'm over 30, and I trust me.*

**PLAYBOY:** You speak of trust, and yet there are many young whites—despite what you've said—who wonder if black people are really willing to trust them and to work with them on a basis of mutual respect. Bobby Seale, a Black Panther leader, for instance, told an audience of young whites in New York last spring: "We hate you white people! And the next time one of you paddies comes up here and accuses me of hating you because of the color of your skin, I will kick you in your ass. We started out hating you because of the color of your skin. . . . In school, when a little white liberal walked by, I used to come up with my knife and say, 'Give me your lunch money or I'll cut your guts out.' And he'd give me his lunch money. Pretty soon, I'd say, 'Tomorrow you bring me two dollars.' And the next day he'd bring me two dollars. Because that

two dollars was mine. Mine because of 400 years of racism and oppression. When I take two dollars from you, pig, don't you say nothing." What kind of white person, unless he's a masochist, could form a coalition with black people on this basis?

**CLEAVER:** I heard about that speech. There's been a lot of reaction to it, and it's unfortunate. As I understand it, Bobby had been preceded on that program by LeRoi Jones and a lot of that kind of thing, and maybe Bobby was turned on by all that. I don't know. But I do know Bobby; and if that quote is correct, it does not represent how he really feels—not deep inside. You have to remember that Bobby Seale, with Huey Newton, laid the foundation for the Black Panthers; and it was because of their attitudes that the party has been able to steer clear of getting involved in any of these dead-end racist positions. If you go around and talk to the white people in the Bay Area who have worked with Bobby, you'll find that they know the real Bobby Seale and are not disturbed by what he might have said on one particular occasion. It's even fair to say that a lot of them love Bobby. When that particular speech was made, I was in jail; but I've talked with Bobby about it since, and I don't condemn him for it.

**PLAYBOY:** As you know, however, there are many who do and who believe he really meant what he said that night. In reaction to his and Jones' remarks, one young white radical wrote in *Rat Subterranean News*, the underground New York biweekly: "You are denying my humanity and my individuality. Though I am in deepest empathy with you and with all blacks—all people—in their struggle to be free, you are in danger of becoming my enemy. I must revolt against your racism, your scorn of everything white, just as I revolt against the racism of white America. I will not let you put me in a bag. Your enemies and my enemies are the same people, the same institutions. . . . I feel no special loyalty to White, but only Self. I feel no love for the leaders or institutions or culture of this country, but only for individual people, in an ever-growing number, with whom I share love and trust. I deny my whiteness; I affirm my humanity. You are urging your black brothers to see me only as White, in just the same way as we have been raised to see you only as Negro. . . . I don't feel white enough or guilty enough to die joyfully by a bullet from a black man's gun, crying 'Absolved at last!' And I know that soon you, by denying me my me-ness, will become for me just as much an oppressor, just as much an enemy, as the white culture we are both fighting. . . . To remain free, and to transform society, I have to maintain my hard-won

differentiation from the mass of white people, and I won't let even a black person, no matter how hard-bent he be on black liberation, squeeze me back into honkiedom. If I have to shoot a black racist one of these days, well, baby, that's part of the struggle." This rejection of racism has been echoed by many young whites. What's your reaction to it?

**CLEAVER:** I think it's a commendable statement. But there are many whites who do deny the humanity of black people, and I think LeRoi and Bobby were talking about them. If you're white and you don't fall into that bag, though, there is no reason why you should accept that analysis as applying to you. You have to judge people by what they do. Those white people who are still functioning as part of the juggernaut of oppression are, indeed, guilty. But those who place themselves outside the system of oppression, those who struggle against that system, ought not to consider that judgment applied against them. I think when a person has reached the kind of awareness expressed by this cat, he is totally justified in rebelling against the honkie tag. But he ought not to expect some kind of instant recognition by black people that he's "different." You cannot expect black people to make immediate distinctions while blacks themselves are still involved in the total fabric of oppression. Those whites who have freed themselves of the system know who they are; and, by what they do, we will get to know who they are.

**PLAYBOY:** Specifically, what can they do, what must they do, to earn your respect and trust?

**CLEAVER:** There are a whole lot of things they can do. They can organize white people so that together we can go into the halls of Government, demand our rights—and get them. They can organize politically and get rid of all the clods and racists in the legislatures around the country. They can help keep the police from rioting. They can help make public servants recognize that they are public servants, that the public—black and white—pays their salaries and that they don't own the people and must be responsive to them. What can whites do? Just be Americans, as the rhetoric claims. Americans are supposed to be. Just stand up for liberty everywhere. Stand up for justice everywhere—especially right here in their own country. Stand up for the underdog; that's supposed to be the American way. Make this *really* the home of the free. But that will never happen unless they help us conduct a thorough housecleaning of the political and economic arenas. Now is the time for whites to help us get the machinery together, to organize themselves and then form coalitions with black groups and Mexican and Puerto Rican groups

that also want to bring about social change—and then act to do just that.

**PLAYBOY:** What about whites—undoubtedly a much larger number—who are just not revolutionaries but still want to work for positive change?

**CLEAVER:** That's simple, too. Find out which white organizations are for real and join them. Many whites can help educate other whites about the true nature of the system. And they can help black people—in the courts, in the social clubs, in the Congress, in the city councils, in the board rooms—win their demands for justice. The number-one problem right now, as we see it, is that of repression by the police. Whites should become aware of what the police are doing and why the Black Panther Party, to name only one group, has gotten so hung up over this crucial question. It's not only just police brutality and crimes; it's police intimidation of black communities. When we started, it became very clear to us that the reason black people don't come out to meetings, don't join organizations working for real change, is that they're afraid of various forms of retaliation from the police. They're afraid of being identified as members of a militant organization. So we recognized that the first thing we had to do was to expose and deal with the Gestapo power of the police. Once we've done that, we can move to mobilize people who will then be free to come out and start discussing and articulating their grievances, as well as proposing various changes and solutions. We are doing that in the Bay Area and in other areas where the Black Panther Party is now active. But there are many places where the police continue to intimidate, and it would be a great help for white people to start their own local organizations or to form local chapters of the Peace and Freedom Party. They could then focus community attention on what the police actually do—as opposed to what the police and the city administrations *claim* they do—and work with black people who are trying to break free. That kind of organized activity is really the only hope for this country.

**PLAYBOY:** If whites were to do this, wouldn't they have a lot to lose, even if they themselves don't become the victims of police repression? Radicals keep telling them that if they're really going to join in the struggle, they can't go on living as they do now; that they can't expect to continue enjoying the material comforts of a system they intend to confront; that anyone who "breaks free" is going to have to change his entire style of life. Do you agree?

**CLEAVER:** Well, they're certainly going to have to give up those privileges that are based on the oppression and exploitation of other people. Most whites today are in the position of being the

recipients of stolen property. This country was *built*, in large part, on the sweat of slaves. The standard of living most white people enjoy today is a direct result of the historical exploitation of blacks, and of the third world, by the imperialist nations, of which America is now the leader. But thanks to technological advances, even if that exploitation were stopped and there were just distribution of wealth abroad and at home, whites wouldn't really have to suffer materially. If the money now used for bombs and airplanes were redirected to build more houses and better schools—as even the white man's Kerner Commission recommended—I can't see how white people would have to make any sacrifices at all. And think of how much more wholesome—and peaceful—a social environment there'd be for everybody. It seems to me the only whites who would be losing anything are those irretrievably committed, emotionally or economically, to the continued subordination of non-whites. But those whites who are not wedded to exploitation and oppression can only benefit if basic change comes.

**PLAYBOY:** There are whites who would say that black people have not indicated that they have the determination, the discipline or even the good will to work toward such a goal. As you know, many privately feel that black people, with some exceptions, are lazy, irresponsible, destructive rather than constructive, unable to hold onto jobs, etc., etc. How do you think this problem of noncomprehension and lingering prejudice can be overcome?

**CLEAVER:** Well, insofar as any of these stereotypes seem to have some basis in fact, they're the result of *strategic* forms of behavior by black people. Think about that. I don't see any reason, for instance, why black people should have been knocking themselves out on the plantations. Under slavery, the black man who could find ways to get out of work was really a very wise man. It's no different under the present system of exploitation, a system rigged against black people straight across the board. Why should any black man strive to excel, to better himself, when the system is set up to keep him "in his place"? I think anyone who can beat that system and draw a living from it with the least expenditure of energy is doing the best thing he can do for himself. It's stupid to be a dedicated, hardworking and loyal victim. But if black people were in a situation where their labor had meaning and dignity, where they were really building good lives for themselves and their children, then all this strategic behavior would cease to be functional.

**PLAYBOY:** That answer might help convince some potential white allies of the viability of a black-white coalition for change. But how do you reconcile such

expressions of hope with a statement you wrote for *Ramparts* shortly after the murder of Martin Luther King? "There is a holocaust coming . . . the war has begun. The violent phase of the black liberation struggle is here, and it will spread. From that shot, from that blood, America will be painted red. Dead bodies will litter the streets and the scenes will be reminiscent of the disgusting, terrifying, nightmarish news reports coming out of Algeria during the height of the general violence right before the final breakdown of the French colonial regime." If you really believe that, what's the point of talking about black-white coalitions?

**CLEAVER:** Let me emphasize again that I try to be realistic. I keep working for change, in the hope that violence will not be necessary; but I cannot pretend, in the face of the currently deteriorating situation, that a holocaust is not very possible, even likely. Perhaps if enough people recognize how possible it is, they'll work all the harder for the basic changes that can prevent it. Obviously, there have already been dead bodies on the streets since the murder of King; and at some point, there can occur an eruption that will escalate beyond control. But let me also make clear that I do not justify shooting the wrong people. If the holocaust comes, the bodies on the streets would be those of the oppressors: those who control the corporations that profiteer off the poor, that oil the war machine, that traffic with racist nations like South Africa; those who use the economic and military power of the U.S. to exploit and exterminate the disenfranchised in this country and around the world; and, above all, those politicians who use their public trust to kill social reform and perpetuate injustice. The rest are just part of the machinery. They're not making decisions. They're not manipulating the masses. They're being manipulated themselves by the criminals who run the country.

**PLAYBOY:** And these "criminals" are to be killed if there's a violent revolution?

**CLEAVER:** It seems to be a hallmark of any revolutionary war that the worst culprits are stood up against the wall and executed. There are a lot of people in the category of active oppressor for whom I think execution would be a mild punishment. However, given an ideal situation, it might be possible to incarcerate these people, re-educate them and then allow them back into society, if they're not actually guilty of willful murder. But in the heat of a violent day-to-day struggle, one might not have time to be so fastidious with these people; in that event, anything that's done to them would be all right with me.

**PLAYBOY:** In everything you say, there are the intertwining themes of vengeance



and forgiveness, of violent revolution and nonviolent social reform; and that leads to a good deal of confusion among many whites as to what the Black Panthers are really for. On the one hand, you write of the coming holocaust and of bodies littering the streets. And yet the day before you wrote that article, you were at a junior high school in Oakland, where the black kids had decided to burn down the school in anger at the murder of Dr. King, and you talked them out of it. Similarly, you and other Panthers speak of a black revolutionary generation that has the courage to kill; yet when a group of seventh and eighth graders at another Oakland school tried to emulate what they thought the Panthers stood for by turning into a gang and beating up other kids, several Panther leaders went to the school at the invitation of the principal and told the kids they were in the wrong bag. The Panthers' advice was for black youngsters to study hard, so that they could be in a better position to help their brothers. They also told them not to hate whites but to learn to work with them. Which is the *real* Black Panther philosophy?

**CLEAVER:** There is no contradiction between what we say and what we do. We are for responsible action. That's why we don't advocate people going around inventing hostilities and burning down schools and thereby depriving youngsters of a place to learn. What we do advocate is that hostilities in the black community be focused on specific targets. The police are a specific target. As I said before, we are engaged in organizing black communities so that they will have the power to stop the police from wanton harassment and killing of black people. And that also means self-defense, if necessary. Beyond that, it means getting enough power so that we can have autonomous black departments of safety in black communities. We have the courage—and the good sense—to defend ourselves, but we are not about to engage in the kind of random violence that will give the pigs an opportunity to destroy us. We are revolutionary, but that means we're disciplined, that we're working out programs, that we intend to create a radical political machinery in coalition with whites that will uproot this decadent society, transform its politics and economics and build a structure fit to exist on a civilized planet inhabited by *humanized* beings.

**PLAYBOY:** You say the police are a prime target for Panther hostility. Is this, perhaps, because the reverse is also true? Police departments in all the cities in which the Panthers have organized claim that your group is a public menace—engaged in beatings, shakedowns, thefts, shootings, fire bombings and other criminal activities.

**CLEAVER:** Who are the criminals? I know

about these rumors of what Panthers are supposed to be doing, but that's all they are—false reports spread by racist cops. They'd like the public to forget that it was Black Panthers in Brooklyn who were attacked by off-duty *police* outside a courtroom last September. Who were the criminals there? And who shot up the Black Panther office in Oakland in a drunken orgy, riddling pictures of Huey Newton and me—and a picture of Bobby Hutton, whom they had already killed? Two pigs from the Oakland Police Department. Of course, they're going to spread these false rumors about us; it's one of the ways they're trying to destroy us before we destroy them with the truth about their own lawlessness.

**PLAYBOY:** Granted there have been conflicts between the Panthers and the police; but aren't you exaggerating their intent when you claim, as you did recently, that they're out to "systematically eliminate our leadership"?

**CLEAVER:** Not in the least. We are a great threat to the police and to the whole white power structure in Alameda County and in Oakland, where the Panthers were born. The police are the agents of the power structure, in trying to destroy us. Let me give you the background. When Bobby Seale and Huey Newton organized the Black Panther Party in October 1966, they initiated armed black patrols. Each car, which had four men, would follow the police around, observing them. When police accosted a citizen on the street and started doing something wrong to him, the patrol would be there as witnesses and to tell the person being mistreated what his rights were. In this way, the Panthers focused community attention on the police and the people learned they didn't have to submit to the kind of oppressive, arbitrary brutality that had been directed against the black people in Oakland for a long time.

When the Panthers started to educate the community, those in power were afraid that blacks would go on to organize and exercise real political power. And the police were told to prevent this. They tried to do this first by multiple arrests. Anyone known to be a Panther would be rousted on ridiculous charges that couldn't stand up in court but that led to our having to spend a lot of money on bail and legal fees. That didn't work. They couldn't intimidate us. Then in October 1967, they finally got Huey Newton into a position where a shoot-out occurred. Huey was wounded, a cop was killed and another was wounded. Murder charges were filed against Huey; he was eventually convicted and sentenced to two to fifteen years, and that case is now on appeal. After the shoot-out and the arrest of Huey, the whole Black Panther Party became involved in mobilizing community aware-

ness of the political aspects of that case.

We had such great effect in that effort that the police tried even harder to stifle us. They moved against just about everyone who had taken an active part in speaking and mobilizing for Huey. To give you some examples, on January 15 of this year, our national captain, David Hilliard, was arrested while passing out leaflets at Oakland Tech. The next day, police broke down the door of my apartment and searched it without a warrant. On February 5, a Panther and his girlfriend were arrested for "disturbing the peace" after a rally at which Dr. Spock had spoken. They were beaten in jail. On February 24, Panther Jimmy Charley approached a policeman who was assaulting a black person. He questioned the officer and was immediately arrested and charged with "resisting arrest." On February 25, at 3:30 in the morning, police broke down the door of Bobby Seale's home. Again, there was no warrant. During the third and fourth weeks of February, there was a rash of arrests of black men either in the Panthers or identified with them. And on and on. None of the charges ever made it to court.

**PLAYBOY:** What about the widely publicized shooting of April sixth, in which 17-year-old Black Panther Bobby Hutton was killed and two others, including yourself, were wounded? The official version has been circulated in the daily newspapers. Can you give your account of what happened?

**CLEAVER:** Certain points I can't discuss, because I don't want to alert the prosecution to what we're going to bring out in court, but I'll give you the basic details. April sixth was a Saturday. We were going to have a barbecue picnic the next day—a black-community picnic in Oakland. We'd been leafleting the community and driving around in sound trucks, urging people to attend the picnic. And that night, we were involved in getting the food together—cooking the meat, picking up potatoes for potato salad, and all that. During the preceding days, we'd been having continuous trouble with the Oakland Police Department about the picnic. They tried to prevent our getting a permit to hold it; and although we got it after three or four days, there were severe restrictions on what we could do—no political speeches, no leafleting, things like that. This harassment and interference with our constitutional rights was nothing new. It happened with all the fund-raising events we planned. The police knew about them immediately and always started a mass of arrests, so that whatever money we'd raise would be drained off in bail and legal fees.

Anyway, this picnic was especially important to us, because we badly needed money for the Huey Newton Defense Fund and for political campaigns; Bobby

Seale was running for the state assembly and Huey was running for Congress from jail. We'd come through all the police interference, until that Saturday. That night, I was driving a car that had been lent to us by a white man. It was a white Ford with Florida license plates, and for days before, Panthers who had been driving that car were constantly stopped by cops and questioned. "Are you from Florida?" "Where did you get this car?" All kinds of silly annoyances. Obviously, they were always on the lookout for that car. While driving it that Saturday night on the way to a Panther's apartment, where we were assembling all the food, I had to take a piss, so I pulled over on a dark street and got out of the car. The two other Panther cars in the caravan stopped behind me. Just then, this police car came around the corner. I didn't know at first it was a police car, because it was very dark and the car was some distance away. I was only concerned that somebody was coming, and it would be embarrassing to be caught standing there taking a leak. So I went around to the other side of the car. All of a sudden, the squad car turned a spotlight on me and the cops started yelling, "Come out from behind there!" Well, I was in the middle of taking this leak, so it took me a little time to get my fly zipped up and to get out into the middle of the street. Just as I cleared the front of my car, these cops started shooting.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you know it was the police who started shooting?

**CLEAVER:** Because all the Panthers were behind me and all the shots came from in front of me—where the cops were. And the shots were aimed at me; there's absolutely no question about it. Now I'm tempted to say that they knew who I was and that they were shooting at me specifically, but I don't really know that for sure. I do know, though, that they started shooting without any warning. My reaction was to dive down in front of the car. It wasn't a few seconds before another cop car came around the other corner from the opposite direction and also started shooting. Now, after checking out what happened, it seems pretty clear that some of those in the Panther cars also had guns; I mean, you never know when a Panther has a gun.

**PLAYBOY:** Don't Panthers always carry guns?

**CLEAVER:** No. Panthers are not supposed to carry any arms just for show. Guns are carried only if there is reason to anticipate the need for self-defense or for certain security purposes, such as the protection of Panther leaders under dangerous circumstances. That night, in view of the police harassment of us in Oakland, which had intensified during the preceding week, it would have been logical for some Panthers to have guns.

I don't know who in particular had a gun, but there was some exchange of shots. Meanwhile, we were all scattering, because it was a regular shooting gallery; the cops were coming from everywhere—at least 50 of them. Now the police story is that they were all responding to an emergency call by a cop who had just been shot, but how come so many arrived instantaneously from so many directions? Anyway, we were all running to get away from all that shooting. One cop was shooting at me with a shotgun, and I ended up going over a little shed between two houses. When I got on the other side, Bobby Hutton was already there. All kinds of cops on the street were shooting at us; Bobby had a rifle and he started shooting back, clearing the cops out of the immediate area. As they took cover, we had a chance to find a door into the cellar of this house.

From that point on, I suppose it's kind of flattering to say we had a shoot-out with the cops, but that's not what really happened. We were involved in ducking bullets. For 90 minutes, the cops poured bullets and tear gas into that house, and we got very badly asphyxiated by the gas. I also got shot in the leg, and one of those tear-gas canisters hit me in the chest and knocked the breath out of me. It was very dark in the cellar and Bobby thought I'd been wounded badly; so in the dark, he removed my clothes and tried to pat me down to find out where the blood was. The news reports said I came out naked. It's true, but that wasn't a plan I'd consciously devised so that the cops would be able to see I wasn't carrying a weapon and wouldn't have an excuse to kill me. When we decided to give up, Bobby tossed his rifle outside. Having been shot in the leg, I couldn't walk on my own; and when we went out, Bobby was helping me. There was a kind of step down past the threshold of the cellar door, and we fell down.

The cops surrounded us and about 30 of them hit us with guns and kicked us for a while—I don't know just how long. It ended with their telling us to stand up. Bobby helped me rise, and the cops seemed to resent his helping me. They snatched him away and told us to run down to a police car parked in the street. I couldn't run, so they told Bobby to run and shoved him. When he stumbled a few steps, they opened fire and killed him. Then they turned to me. I'm convinced that the only reason they didn't shoot me, too, was that by that time, a lot of people had been attracted to the scene by all the gunshots; and when they saw the cops shoot Bobby, they started pointing at me and yelling at the police, "Leave him alone!" and calling them murderers and pigs.

A cop, whom I knew from previous encounters, came over and asked where I

was wounded. I told him it was my foot; this bastard kicked me on that foot and then told the other cops to get me out of there. They handcuffed me and put me in one of those big black vans. Two cops came in after me, but before they were all the way in, the cop driving the van told headquarters over the radio that they had a prisoner. Headquarters wanted to know who it was; the driver asked my name; I gave it to him and he radioed it in. That probably saved my life, because everything that comes in over the switchboard of the Oakland Police Department is put on a constantly operating tape. When the two cops from the outside got in, they started hitting me and told the man in front to drive slowly to the hospital. The driver said, "Don't do that, we've already radioed in his name." The two cops cursed him out, but they had to take me to the hospital. That was the end of the physical violence. Within about six hours, they took me to San Quentin. I stayed there three or four hours and then I was taken to Vacaville Prison, where they kept me for about 60 days until a judge released me. I was indicted on three counts of assault with intent to kill and three counts of assault on a police officer. So you see, it's not just my imagination that there's an awful lot of pressure to get rid of Panther spokesmen.

**PLAYBOY:** You've also been a spokesman for the Peace and Freedom Party, of which you were this year's Presidential nominee. How significant do you consider that kind of political activity, in terms of your plans for the growth of the Black Panthers?

**CLEAVER:** Well, I never exactly dreamed of waking up in the White House after the November election, but I took part in that campaign because I think it's necessary to pull a lot of people together, black and white. Certainly, we're concerned with building the Black Panther Party, but we also have to build a national coalition between white activists and black activists. We have to build some machinery so that they can work on a coordinated basis. Right now, you have thousands and thousands of young activists, black and white, who are working at cross purposes, who don't communicate with one another, who are isolated and alienated from one another. But they could be a source of mutual strength and support. I believe that if we can simultaneously move forward the liberation struggle that's going on in the black colonies of this country and the revolutionary struggle that's going on in the mother country, we can amass the strength and numbers needed to change the course of American history.

**PLAYBOY:** There are those who believe that this vision of yours is just another of those fugitive illusions that appear from time to time among radicals, black

and white. Michael Harris, a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, wrote in *The Nation* last July, quoting a law-enforcement agent who had infiltrated the Panthers: "If the Federal Government makes a serious effort to pump lots of money into the ghetto, you can likely kiss the Panthers goodbye. You simply can't agitate happy people." Do you think that's likely to happen?

**CLEAVER:** If the Federal Government moved to honor all the grievances of black people, to not merely alleviate but eliminate oppression, we'd be delighted to fold the whole thing up and call it a day. There are many other—and certainly safer—things we'd prefer to be doing with our lives. But until the Government moves to undo all the injustices—every one of them, every last shadow of colonialism—no amount of bribes, brutality, threats or promises is going to deter us from our cause. There will be no compromise, no surrender and no sell-out; we will accept nothing less than total victory. That's why more and more black people have faith in us—because we offer a totally inflexible program in terms of our demands for black people, yet we have steered clear of doing this in a racist manner, as the Muslims have done. People are turning not to Muslims, not to the NAACP, not to CORE or SNCC but to the Black Panther Party.

**PLAYBOY:** Is this happening more among older people or among the young?

**CLEAVER:** We're getting older people, but we're acquiring particular strength in colleges, high schools, junior high schools, even grammar schools. We count very heavily on the young, in terms of the future. The Black Panther Party is a natural organization for them to join. It was organized by their peers; it understands the world the way they understand it. And for the young black male, the Black Panther Party supplies very badly needed standards of masculinity. The result is that all the young chicks in the black community nowadays relate to young men who are Black Panthers.

**PLAYBOY:** You seem to have undergone quite a change in attitude since you were their age, when you related not to black girls but to white women, and in a decidedly unhealthy way. In *Soul on Ice*, you wrote: "Somehow I arrived at the conclusion that, as a matter of principle, it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women. . . . I had stepped outside of the white man's law, which I repudiated with scorn and self-satisfaction. I became a law unto myself—my own legislature, my own Supreme Court, my own executive. . . . Rape was an insurrectionary act." Were you really being completely honest when you attributed your sexual attacks solely to ideological motives?

**CLEAVER:** Well, at that time, I'd read a smattering of revolutionary works, though not with very much understanding. Passionate things like Lenin's exhortatory writings, and Bakunin, and Nechayev's *Catechism of the Revolutionist*. And Machiavelli. I felt I knew what insurrection was and what rebellion was. So I called rape an insurrectionary act. But basically, it was my delight in violating what I conceived of as white men's laws, and my delight in defiling white women in revenge over the way white men have used black women. I was in a wild frame of mind and rape was simply one of the weird forms my rebellion took at that stage. So it was probably a combination of business and pleasure.

**PLAYBOY:** You went back to prison in 1958 for a 14-year sentence, after being convicted of assault with intent to kill and rape. During the nine years you served, what changed you to the point at which you admitted, in *Soul on Ice*, that you were wrong? "I had gone astray," you wrote, "astray not so much from the white man's law as from being human, civilized—for I could not approve the act of rape. Even though I had some insight into my own motivations, I did not feel justified. I lost my self-respect. My pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered."

**CLEAVER:** I came to realize that the particular women I had victimized had not been involved in actively oppressing me or other black people. I was taking revenge on them for what the whole system was responsible for. And as I thought about it, I felt I had become less than human. I also came to see that the price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less. But this didn't happen all at once; beginning to write was an important part of getting myself together. In fact, looking back, I started writing to save myself.

**PLAYBOY:** In none of your own writing so far have you gone into any detail about your formative years and about whether the pressures on you as a boy in the ghetto were representative, in your view, of the pressures on young black people throughout the society. Were they?

**CLEAVER:** So much so that I realized very soon after getting out of prison how little progress—if any—had been made in the nine years since I was sent up. What struck me more than anything else was the fact that the police still practice a systematic program to limit the opportunities in life for black cats by giving them a police record at an early age. In my own set, we were always being stopped and written up by the cops, even when we hadn't done anything. We'd just be walking down the street and the pigs would stop us and call in to see if we were wanted—all of which would serve to amass a file on us at headquarters. It's a general practice in

this country that a young black gets put through this demeaning routine. But it's only one facet of the institutionalized conspiracy against black men in this country—to tame them, to break their spirit. As soon as he becomes aware of his environment, a black kid has to gauge his conduct and interpret his experiences in the context of his color and he has to orient himself to his environment in terms of how to survive as a black in a racist nation. But at least there's been one improvement in the years since I was a kid: Nowadays, being black—thanks to increasing white oppression—has been turned from a burden into an asset. Out there on the grade school and high school levels, young blacks are no longer up tight about their color. They're proud of it.

**PLAYBOY:** Among the manifestations of that new pride is a decline in social acceptability of the word "Negro" in favor of the terms "Afro-American" and "black." Is that why you don't call yourself or the Panthers "Negroes"?

**CLEAVER:** I accept the analysis the Muslims and particularly Malcolm X have made of the term "Negro." It's a word that whites applied to black people who were kidnaped from Africa. And historically the term came to mean a docile, submissive slave type of person. "Afro-American" and "black," however, signify a rebellious person who finds and takes on his own identity. I use them to identify myself and I apply them to other black people whom I respect. They connote an original place of origin, as well as a pride in color.

**PLAYBOY:** Many of those blacks who frown on the use of the word "Negro" tend to feel the same way about "integration." Why has this term fallen into disrepute among so many black people?

**CLEAVER:** It's become a curse word because it has not only been of no use to black people but has prevented them from realizing the need to control their own institutions and to build their own sources of power. I mean, after all these years of talk about "integration," it hasn't meant a damn thing but more segregation and more powerlessness. "Integration" is a dead word now except insofar as you want to use it to stigmatize somebody—like I would say "Roy Wilkins, the integrationist."

**PLAYBOY:** W. H. Ferry of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions maintains that "integration does not seem likely in the United States now or in the future. Americans are afraid of living with differences." Do you agree?

**CLEAVER:** Well, talking about the future, I'd say that's up to white people. What black people want now is relief from being controlled and manipulated by white people. That could take the form of separation if white people continue  
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to create conditions that make blacks convinced that total separation is the only alternative. If, on the other hand, conditions change sufficiently to end all exploitation and oppression of black people, then there is a possibility of integration in the long run for those who choose it. But we're a very long way from that.

**PLAYBOY:** In which direction would you like to see America go—toward separation or integration?

**CLEAVER:** Keeping in mind that we're talking about the very long view, it seems to me we're living in a world that has become virtually a neighborhood. If the world is not to destroy itself, the concept of people going their totally separate ways is really something that can't continue indefinitely. When you start speaking in ultimate terms, I don't see any way in which the world can be administered for the best interests of mankind without having a form of world government that would be responsive and responsible to *all* the people of the world—a world government that would function so that the welfare of no one segment of the population would be sacrificed for the enrichment of another.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you feel about Roy Wilkins' claim that America's black people really want what the white middle class already has under capitalism—split-level homes and all the accouterments of the affluent life?

**CLEAVER:** There's no question that black people want these things and have a right to them. The question is how to go about getting them. Many feel that they can get these things by entering into the mainstream of American society and becoming black capitalists. But to others, including myself, it's clear that in order for black people to have the best that society and technology are capable of providing, we need a new kind of society and a new kind of economic system. The goal must be to make possible a more equitable distribution of goods and services—but also to have a different set of values, so that things themselves don't become a substitute for life itself. In order to achieve that dual goal, we're going to have to move toward a new form of socialism. As long as there is so much stress on private property, we're going to have a society of competition rather than cooperation; we're going to have the exploited and the exploiters. Consider all these deeds, for example, that give people ownership of the productive and natural resources of this country. If there's going to be any burning, let's burn up these deeds, because everybody comes into this world the same way—naked, crying, without ownership of anything. The earth is here; it's given, like air and water, and

I believe everyone should have equal access to its resources.

I want to see a society purged of Madison Avenue mind-benders who propagandize people into a mad pursuit of gadgets. They've conned people into believing that their lives depend on having an electric toothbrush, two cars and a color-television set in every room. We've got to rid ourselves of this dreadful and all-consuming hunger for *things*, this mindless substitution of the rat-race for a humane life. Only then will people become capable of relating to other people on the basis of individual merit, rather than on the basis of status, property and wealth. The values I'm for are really quite traditional and simple—like respecting your fellow man, respecting your parents, respecting your leaders if they're true leaders. These revolutionary goals are as old as time itself: Let people be. Let them fulfill their capacities.

**PLAYBOY:** The ultimate society you envision, in *Soul on Ice*, is one in which male and female will “realize their true nature,” thereby closing the present “fissure of society into antagonistic classes” and regenerating “a dying culture and civilization alienated from its biology.” But some critics of the book felt that you seemed to reserve this new Garden of Eden for black people, who, you claim, are “the wealth of a nation, an abundant supply of unexhausted, unde-essenced human raw material upon which the future of the society depends and with which, through the implacable march of history to an ever-broader base of democracy and equality, the society will renew and transform itself.”

**CLEAVER:** No, it's not limited to black people. Black or white, the male-female principle is toward unity. Both black and white people have to get out of the bags they're in to be natural again. White people have to disabuse themselves of the illusion that it's their job to rule and that the black man's job is to produce labor. And black men have to use their minds and acquire confidence in the products of their minds. This doesn't mean the white man has to let *his* mind fall into disuse, but he also has to relate to his body again, as the black man does. What I'm saying is that everyone needs a new understanding of his total nature, mental and physical. Only when people, black and white, start seeing themselves and acting as total individuals, with bodies and minds, will they stop assigning exclusive mental roles to one set of people and exclusive physical roles to another. Only then will the primary thrust of life—the fusion of male and female—be freed of sociological obstacles. That's the base of the kind of social system I want to see, a society in which a man and a woman can come as close as possible to total

unity on the basis of natural attraction. In my own life, the more totally I've been able to relate to a particular woman, the more fulfilled I've been.

**PLAYBOY:** Have you ever been tempted to withdraw from the front lines of the revolutionary social struggle to pursue that process of self-fulfillment in private life, by writing and raising a family with your wife Kathleen?

**CLEAVER:** I could do that. I could withdraw. I've gotten enough money from the book so that I could get myself a pad away from all this shit. I could go down to my parole officer and say, “Look, man, I don't want to go back to prison. I'm going to stop talking revolution. I'm going to start writing poetry and fairy tales, the way you want me to and I won't be a problem anymore. So how about re-evaluating my case and leaving me alone? Live and let live.” I know they'd go for that, and I wouldn't need much money to do it, because I'm not hung up on material things. But the fact is that I feel *good* working with my people and with the brothers of the Black Panther Party. I'd feel miserable doing anything else. Hell, most of my life has been involved in conflicts with authority, and now that I've politicized that conflict, I'm very content to be working for black liberation. I couldn't conceive of myself playing any other role—not even if I have to go back to prison for it. I'm going to do everything I can *not* to go back to prison, but I can't compromise my beliefs. I'd rather be dead than do that. And I may have a violent end, anyway. I'm hearing more and more these days from people telling me to be careful, because they feel my life's in danger. They may be right, but I say fuck it.

**PLAYBOY:** If you are imprisoned or killed, how much confidence do you have that the Black Panther Party or any succeeding group in the revolutionary struggle will ultimately prevail?

**CLEAVER:** I have confidence that people learn from the experiences of others. Every time a black man is murdered for speaking out against oppression, his death is fuel for the struggle to continue. When Malcolm was killed, that didn't frighten people; his death created more disciples. I can only hope that if what I'm doing has any constructive value, others will take up the fight and continue it if I'm killed. Che Guevara put it the way I feel, when he said: “Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons.” That's all I ask for.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you rate your chances of survival?

**CLEAVER:** I plan to be around for quite a while.

