



Photographs by George T. Kruse

Eldridge Cleaver

The Black Panthers scared the hell out of America in the 1960s. Emerging from the ghettos of Oakland, they scorned the establishment black leadership as Uncle Toms and took to the streets demanding "total liberty for black people or total destruction for America," in the words of Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver.

In and out of reform schools and prisons since the age of 13 and an avowed "insurrectionary" rapist, Cleaver discovered radical politics and a flair for writing in Folsom Prison. Upon his release in 1966 he joined the fledgling Black Panther Party and started writing for the monthly *Ramparts*.

Cleaver burst upon the national scene in 1968 with the publication of *Soul on Ice*, a collection of his prison writings. Hip, revolutionary, and teeming with hatred for "everything American—including baseball and hot dogs," *Soul on Ice* became the Bible of Black Power and Eldridge Cleaver the intellectuals' favorite black radical.

The Black Panthers' early rhetoric had been decentralist, but the organization soon degenerated into Maoist politics and senseless violence. On April 6, 1968, Cleaver participated in a shootout with Oakland police—'60s legend has it that three carloads of Panthers were ambushed while Cleaver was urinating in a side street—in which 17-year-old

Black Panther Bobby Hutton was killed. (Cleaver offers a different version of these events below.)

To avoid being sent back to prison for his part in the Hutton shootout, Cleaver skipped the country, taking refuge in Cuba. He spent the next seven years wandering through the communist world, with sojourns in Algeria, North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union before finally settling in France. But in 1975, homesick and deeply disillusioned with revolutionary politics, Eldridge Cleaver came home. "Pig power in America was infuriating," he wrote upon his return. "But pig power in the communist framework was awesome and unaccountable."

The repatriated Cleaver was denounced by his former comrades as an apostate, a turncoat, even an FBI informer. His conversion to Christianity and anticommunist pronouncements combined to give him a right-wing reputation—a reputation, as this interview makes clear, that is a far cry from the truth.

Eldridge Cleaver lives today in a modest apartment in Berkeley, California, where he is hard at work writing a history of the '60s. A large American flag flies from his front porch. His wife, Kathleen, his partner in exile, is a student at Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut, where she lives with the couple's children, Joju and Maceo.

Eldridge Cleaver was interviewed

at his Berkeley apartment by REASON editors Bill Kauffman and Lynn Scarlett.

Reason: What do you think is the legacy of the 1960s? Was it a positive period?

Cleaver: Well, overall, I would have to say there is a lot of positive. There is a lot of negative, also. You have three things going on—a cultural revolution, the antiwar movement, and also the black liberation movement—and they were a mix, but America has been completely transformed because of them. We've gotten rid of the system of segregation, and that's a plus for America. We've gone down the road to completely demolishing that whole mentality. And the war is no longer with us in Vietnam. So I think there are some pluses.

The minuses that I see—I think we went overboard ideologically. I live here in Berkeley where my old comrades are now in power, and I find myself struggling against them. And this is the legacy, that the left became so ideologically attached to anti-Americanism and pro-communism and Third Worldism that I believe that we have a problem on our hands.

Reason: How do you look back on your Black Panther days?

Cleaver: With amazement. I am writing a history of what I call "the domestic wars." It's a history of the whole movement that we've been talking about. And I am impressed by certain things, such as the small number of people who were killed in that transformation that took place starting with the civil-rights deci-

sion by the Supreme Court in 1954. It was a very economical process in terms of blood being spilled.

I learned during the period in the Black Panther Party that in America one bullet fired really has the impact that large-scale battles have abroad. It has to do with the diffusion of information; magnified through the media, one bullet is like a whole fusillade. So an incident can take place where there is a little shooting, and it was as though the whole country participated, and people drew lessons or reacted or made decisions not only in the locality where the shooting took place but throughout the country.

The process was confrontational, it was frightening, it was terrible; but in the final analysis I think it is amazing that America had that ability to jettison structures that were demonstrably untenable and, you know, to walk away from some of those traditions.

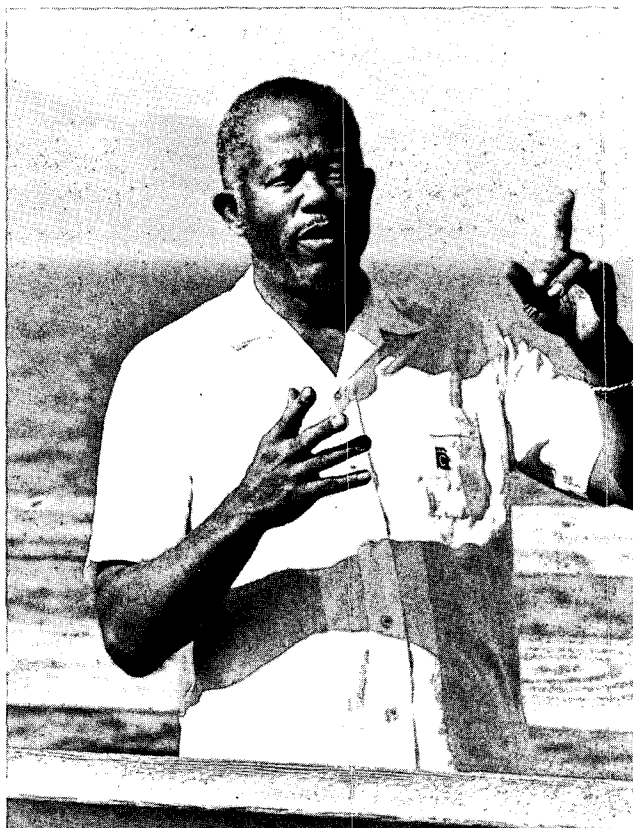
I myself really used to be obsessed with—I used to really plan on how to kill Ronald Reagan. I'm talking about hatred, hatred that was blind to any other influence. I don't have that hatred any more. I've had opportunities to kill Ronald Reagan going around the country, and it never occurred to me to do that. And knowing my own heart and how I've walked away from hatred, I think other people have done the same thing. This is the hopeful thing, and I think that people all over the world can do the same thing.

Reason: Did the Panthers try to provoke violence? Was that part of the strategy?

Cleaver: Sure it was part of the strategy. It was using the theories of revolutionary violence. A lot of people don't like to give us credit, but in America you had some of the best-educated revolutionaries in the world—even better-educated than some successful revolutionaries in other countries. We studied the experiences of these other countries and we knew the theories of guerrilla warfare and Marxism and Leninism and people's war, and we definitely were not sitting back waiting for the authorities to attack us. We used to lie about it, because the information was a weapon also. We would go out and ambush cops, but if we got caught we would blame it on them and claim innocence. I did that personally in the case I was involved in.

Reason: The Bobby Hutton case?

Cleaver: Yes. We went after the cops that night, but when we got caught we said they came after us. We always did that. When you talk about the legacy of the '60s, that's one legacy. That's what I



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try to address, because it helped to distort the image of the police, but I've come to the point where I realize that our police department is necessary.

Reason: I just read *Soul on Fire*, your 1978 book, and the police seemed terribly abusive and violent nonetheless. I mean, even if they were...

Cleaver: Sure they were abusive and violent. They were murderers. And they still are. But policemen are like dogs on a leash. I'm not saying this to put them down, but you take the leash off a dog and it sics you, and that dog is going to bite if it is an obedient dog. The police function under political direction. They go after whoever they are sent after, and that's where the problem comes in.

Now we had a situation where we are dealing with a tradition—black people were moving out of their traditional position in America. Nobody knew what to do about it. The white politicians were confused, the blacks were confused. We didn't know exactly how to go about it. And the police were told to go out, stop those civil-rights marches, scare those people, terrorize them, beat them, use cattle prods, use this and that, and they went out and did that. When you talk to police now who participated in that, you find out that they were in the same position we were in—just trying to find the right formula.

Reason: So are you saying that in a sense their position vis-à-vis the Black Panthers was justified?

Cleaver: I'm not saying justified. I'm just saying that part of the attitude was traditional—"Keep these niggers in their place." They were functioning under orders, they were also humans. You can condemn the tradition, you can condemn the excesses. But when we have no axe to grind, we are just trying to understand, we are looking at human beings.

Reason: The nation's top cop, J. Edgar Hoover, seemed to be obsessed with the threat the Panthers posed to law and order. Do you understand him in the same way?

Cleaver: Sure I can understand J. Edgar Hoover, because he wasn't inaccurate. We were the most militant black organization, and we were serious in what we were going about. He said that we were the main threat. We were *trying* to be the main threat. We were trying to be the vanguard organization. J. Edgar Hoover was an adversary, but he had good information. We were plugged in to all of the revolutionary groups in America, plus those abroad. We were working hand-in-hand with communist parties here and around the world, and he knew that. So from his position, he had to try to stop us.

Reason: A lot of the Panthers seem to

be, personally, pretty strong individualists, like you, and yet you espoused revolutionary socialism, collectivism. Did you notice the inconsistencies?

Cleaver: At the time I didn't notice it. It's one thing to study Marxism on paper, living in a capitalistic country where you have individual freedoms and so forth—you don't really see the relationship between the ideology and the form of government that comes out of that ideology. Now, when I had a chance to go and live in communist countries, this individualism came into conflict with the state apparatus, and that's when I recoiled against it. But when I was here, I was looking at Marxism-Leninism as a weapon, as a tool, to fight against the status quo, and you know, it's just a quality of human beings that when they are trying to tear something down they don't pay enough attention.

Just like in South Africa right now. They went to visit Nelson Mandela, and they asked him, "Would you prefer apartheid to communism?" And his attitude was, Communism is better than apartheid. Because apartheid has him in prison and has had him in prison for 20 years. Well, you get a guy in a communist country who has been in prison *there* for 20 years, and he will tell you, "I would rather live under apartheid," because he could leave. But the truth is that any form of constraint on our freedoms is not acceptable.

Reason: There is an interesting debate going on today, with economists and social scientists like Thomas Sowell, Charles Murray, and Walter Williams arguing that government welfare programs actually hurt the people they're intended to help. What do you think?

Cleaver: I've come to basically those same conclusions. My life, I think, spans the whole era of the welfare state. I was born in 1935. I remember when people were ashamed to be on welfare and to receive state aid and all that, but we've developed a situation where black people to a large degree and a lot of other groups such as elderly people, children, and a lot of poor white people ended up being harnessed by political forces, particularly the Democratic Party. In return for the federal appropriations that we are now dependent upon, our leaders were obligated to get out the black vote for the Democratic Party. So this put us in a negative relationship with the economic system. We were dependent upon the federal budget—a very precarious situation, because when the political winds change, we get our living cut off.

Reason: How do you break that dependence? Something like 90 percent of blacks voted for Mondale.

Cleaver: Ninety percent of *voting* blacks. A majority of the black people didn't participate in the election and never have. But I think that the only way to break the cycle is to give—not give, but make it possible for black people to have a stake in the economic system, where they earn wages, salaries, interest, and dividends. This is the only way you can break that. You're not going to pull your living out of the air. If you can't get your living through participation in the production process, then you are going into dependency on the consumption process. I would like to see black people flood into the productive process.

Reason: Are problems of poverty things that the government can solve, or do they have answers elsewhere, through different institutions or the private sector?

Cleaver: It would have to be the private sector. But at the point where we are right now, the government can't just bow out. This is one of the problems Reagan had. He scared the hell out of people because he started cutting programs, but he didn't spend enough time talking to people about how to replace them. So people had this idea that he was just throwing them aside.

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What we have to do is organize people in free institutions that can put them to work, and then they can draw their living out of our economy, not out of the federal treasury. Because the federal treasury doesn't produce anything. It gets what it has out of the private sector.

We need entities where people could belong to organizations that are not controlled by government. The organizations could come up with projects that would benefit society and then they could earn money that would come out of that national product and not filter through the state. If we do it through the state like, say, President Roosevelt did it with the New Deal, you augment the power of the state. But if you do it through decentralized structures that are controlled by the people, then we maintain our freedom, within a free institution. I don't want to see the government get control of the economic system as a whole and the livelihood of all the people, because I have seen that, and it's a no-no.

Reason: Aren't private ventures of this sort what people like Muslim dissident leader Louis Farrakhan are after? What do you think of Farrakhan?

Cleaver: I know Farrakhan. You know, he taps a deep chord among the people because people want to be involved in some enterprise, they want to have money that they can control and get some benefit out of, something that the government doesn't control. The same activity that Farrakhan is talking about doing could be funded in other ways. But because we don't have any provision for that, he goes to Qaddafi. The problem with that is that Qaddafi is not giving away anything. He has some strings attached.

Reason: Is Farrakhan a dangerous man because of his Qaddafi connection?

Cleaver: Certainly he's a dangerous man, because he will do things for them—intelligence things, but also military things.

Reason: When you were living in exile in Cuba and Algeria, what was it that started to make you rethink your view of them and their government?

Cleaver: I had a great burning desire to help enlarge human freedom and no desire at all to increase human misery or totalitarianism, so I stood up in America to fight against what I saw as the evils of our system. Then to go to a country like Cuba or Algeria or the Soviet Union and see the nature of control that those state apparatuses had over the people—it was shocking to me. I didn't want to believe it, because it meant that the politics that I



was espousing was wrong and was leading toward a very bad situation. So, I tried to figure out what was wrong.

You know, the communists teach you that the dictatorship is a transient phase—that once capitalism is eliminated, then the state will wither away and you will have freedom. Well, when you look at those governments up close and see how they treat their own people, you can't believe in that. You see that people are using that preachment of the withering away of the state as their excuse to justify their own dictatorial power. The way that the goods and services of the economy are distributed, the way that the power mechanism is organized and the monopoly on power by the Communist Party, the control of the Communist Party apparatus by an elite—these things struck me as dangerous. And then when I had a chance to get to know people and see what the experiences had been in these countries since their revolutions, it made me realize that a new form, a worse form, of totalitarianism was creeping into the world and that it was necessary to sound an alarm against it, stand up and protest it—without sugar-coating anything that's wrong over here.

That's been the mistake made by a lot of people in assessing what I have said. I have never intended to say that we can rest on our laurels or we can stay right where we are. But I wanted to point out that we had better be careful where we jump when we jump out of the frying pan.

Reason: A lot of American intellectuals have gone, say, to the Soviet Union or China and come back full of praises. What you saw in Cuba, Algeria, China,

or the Soviet Union, somehow they just overlooked. Do you think it's because usually these things are short, they just scurry right through? Or what was it that made you able to perceive...

Cleaver: It was exactly that—the shortness of it, the duration of their experience and the depth and quality of it. See, I *lived* in those kinds of places and I got to know people and made friends. I got to know the governments, the people in the military, people in the Communist Party or whatever they called it. That gives you a different perspective.

When I first went to those countries, boy was I impressed. If you would read some of the things I wrote then! I was full of praise, because I got that standard tour that they give people to impress them. I took the same tour that Barbara Walters took in Cuba, and Senator

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[George] McGovern, but after the tour I had a chance to meet other people and have a different experience. If I had gone only on the basis of how the governments treated *me*, I would have continued praising them, because really they did treat me well. They gave me a red-carpet treatment in those countries. But when you get off the red carpet and step down in the mud where the people are, you get a chance to talk to them and hear the stories that they have to tell, over and over again.

I lived out there for eight years. I lived in Cuba, I lived in Algeria; and I lived in France. I traveled throughout Africa, throughout the Communist world, and I had a chance to be a part of different cliques, and I got all of their criticisms of the other groups. When you get a chance to see behind the scenes, behind the

rhetoric of international solidarity and world revolution and all of that, there is naked national self-interest. You see the Soviet Union jockeying for power against China. You see the Koreans and Vietnamese trying to stay out of the clutches of both of them. And you begin to develop a little realism or cynicism.

Reason: In your book *Soul on Fire* you say that of all the communist groups you associated with, it was the North Vietnamese that you most liked and felt were more akin to what the ideology seemed like it should be.

Cleaver: Yes. You could sympathize with them, because they were struggling against the Soviet Union and China trying to dominate them, and they were also struggling against Chinese racism. So they had an antiracist attitude, and they had an anti-big-power attitude. When we went to Hanoi and started talking about their problems, they started with the Chinese. They regarded America as a small interlude—they had been struggling against the Chinese for thousands of years. They would ask us to say things in international forums, things that they couldn't say. They would ask us to criticize the Soviet Union and the Chinese because they have tried to control them. So there was a real sympathetic vibration that I felt. If you could eliminate the war against America you still could sympathize with them, because of the other plight that they were in. People called them the niggers of Asia.

Reason: Many conservatives now call the Vietnam war a noble cause. You opposed it then. In retrospect do you feel it was a noble cause?

Cleaver: I think the idea of stopping communism is a noble cause. However, I





don't agree with the way we go about doing it. The old thing that Lenin said about communists being able to buy their ropes from the capitalists with which to hang the capitalists—this is something I have thought about for a long time. Conservatives often talk about this and try to have boycotts and cut off trade. But the way to destroy communism is through our technology and through open trade. It is hopeless to try to get businessmen to stop trading and not make a buck. If they can't do it legally, they are going to do it illegally. It's just like the drug traffic. So my disappointment and my disagreement with conservatives is that they are forced into a position of hypocrisy.

Reason: What do you think about intervention abroad—for example, in Central America? Do you think intervention in other people's civil wars and struggles can stop the march of communism, or is that wasted energy and also perhaps wrong?

Cleaver: The way we do it is wrong, because from Chiang Kai-shek down to Somoza we have been losing. How is it that such a powerful country can be defeated like this? It has to do with a mixture of motivation. No one talks, say, about the real ideological basis of the Monroe Doctrine. It was not meant as a bully doctrine to keep these guys under our boot heel. The Monroe Doctrine in its inception grew out of a vision of the unity of the Western Hemisphere, and we didn't want these other powers coming in because they would frustrate that unity. Simón Bolívar and all these people, too, wanted to unite Latin America or South America, and on that basis the Monroe Doctrine made sense. But it turned into a bully doctrine.

We need to revive that attitude of uniting the Western Hemisphere and keeping other powers out. The Soviet Union has penetrated this hemisphere, and as long as we deal with it as we are now dealing with it, we are delivering it to them. So I am not for intervention with the same old mix, because it just gets a lot of people killed. I think that ideology is primary. The armies of communism are the instruments of the ideology and not vice versa.

Reason: Are you saying that we should use the ideology of freedom, always intervening in support of people who are fighting against totalitarianism but with the voice of liberty and freedom and human rights?

Cleaver: *Sincere* freedom—not to try to replace Somoza with another culprit, you see, but to really help those people de-

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velop their lives and their economy and their political and institutional freedom.

Reason: The way they choose?

Cleaver: They would choose to do it in the classical model of free institutions. Nobody *chooses* slavery. But they get pushed into these positions, because here we are offering the status quo and the communists are offering guns. If you are being oppressed and you can't feed your children, you get so angry that you want to kill whoever is in power, and what you don't see is that the guy giving you the gun is also putting a chain around your leg. You will see it later, but then it will be too late.

We are in a position where everything gets filtered through this confrontation that we have with the communists. And what happens is the communists are able

to get the best of all the arguments. Right now in South Africa they get the best of the argument because they stand up and support the people. I am incensed with Jessie Jackson and Jerry Falwell. This shouldn't be a black versus white issue—not for the American people. We should have an *American* attitude toward that situation, and then I think we would come down on the side of freedom. But to be arguing in favor of the South African government leaves the Soviet Union to support the people over there, and they win the favor not only of the majority of the people of South Africa but of all of Africa, all of the Third World, and even the majority of the American people. It is really very blind and ignorant.

Reason: You spent a number of years in prison in the United States, and in *Soul on Fire* you mention how tormenting that experience is. Does prison have any useful function?

Cleaver: Prisons are necessary because we have to be able to isolate certain kinds of behavior. If we can't get people to behave in a social manner, we can't let them run amok and harm other people. But I think what we have in this country right now is a total breakdown in the whole concept of penology. It has to do with the death penalty. Now imprisonment, first of all, is isolation. It's increasingly severe measures of isolation, all the way down to solitary confinement, death row, and the ultimate isolation, death. So the death penalty is a spearhead of this whole thing. But what we have done is lop off the spearhead, you see, by getting rid of the death penalty, and so the tension in the whole penal code is removed. Because people don't fear it.



Reason: You said in one of your books that in order to be rehabilitated in prison, your personality has to be destroyed. Was your personality destroyed? Why don't you commit crimes any more?

Cleaver: It's a process of education. I think no one should be let out of prison if they don't admit what they did. Because that's where the process of rehabilitation starts, with the person recognizing what they did was wrong. I used to do things and never would admit that it was wrong. I always thought I was justified in doing these things. As long as I felt that way, nothing could penetrate me. But what I did, those rapes—okay, I didn't get sent to prison for that, I beat it in court. But it was in my own heart of hearts, when I confronted my own behavior, that I admitted that that's not right. That's the beginning of rehabilitation.

Reason: Do you look at the Eldridge Cleaver who committed rapes as a different person?

Cleaver: Not really. I can't say a different person, because there is a continuity. I could even say I committed worse crimes against women after getting out of prison than before I went in. Not that I raped them, but I became more skillful in manipulating them. I think what changed me was getting married and having children. That may be the best rehabilitation of all, yet there are married people with children in prison, too, so it's the individual case. You've got to transform that person's value system and that person's attitude toward other human beings.

Reason: The prisons are largely filled with people jailed for drug-related crimes. Should those laws exist?

Cleaver: There's no doubt in my mind that our present attitude toward drugs is wrong—it's self-defeating, and it's not going to solve the problem. I would like to see the profit taken out of the drug trafficking. Otherwise we're going to be overwhelmed. We already are overwhelmed. The DEA, the Drug Enforcement Agency, already has admitted that stopping drugs at their source or in transit is a failure. So now we've adopted a catastrophic tactic in urging corporations and business entities to adopt random mandatory testing, which lets Big Brother in through the back door. We are giving the government the right to test our body fluids—it's inevitable. The government is going to have to take it over just to ensure fairness, because of the 14th Amendment. And so the same way that we got J. Edgar Hoover and the

FBI out of Prohibition, we're getting what I call the Piss Police out of this whole drug situation. It's absolutely catastrophic in terms of our freedom.

Reason: Do you think that by legalizing it . . .

Cleaver: Where people could get it in drug stores and pharmacies, okay.

Reason: So it comes down to its real cost?

Cleaver: Yes, because its inflated cost is feeding a criminal culture. And because, frankly, I don't see drugs as being as bad for the individual as we make them out to be. So I would take the profit out of drugs and educate people to show them what they are doing to themselves. I started smoking weed when I was 13 years old. It's not because of the cops that I don't smoke it now. It's because I don't want to be unproductive. It's not out of fear of the cops that I don't go around snorting cocaine. It's because I don't want to be living like that. I know a lot of people who have done drugs in their life and who have quit because of the quality of their life.

Reason: What are you involved with these days?

Cleaver: Mostly writing. I was involved in political campaigns around here, but my main thrust at this time is writing, and I have been doing screenplays.

Reason: Any success yet?

Cleaver: I'm waiting. I got a winner, but I haven't sold it yet. I'm looking for a good agent who can help me.

Reason: Do you see any of the other Black Panthers or contact any of them?

Cleaver: I see Huey Newton. He used to walk down this street every day at 3:45 when he was in the hospital here in one



of those dry-out programs. But if you sit around up on College Avenue you can see Huey Newton every once on a while.

Reason: But you don't really . . .

Cleaver: He won't talk to me.

Reason: How about Bobby Seale?

Cleaver: I talk to Bobby Seale over the phone. And a lot of the other people who were in the Black Panther Party are all over the place, and I talk to them. We had a split in the party. People on my side of the split, I'm on good terms with. People on the other side, I'm not on good terms with, and they've gone on to other things. The Black Panther Party doesn't exist anymore—there's nobody running around talking about the Black Panther Party. But they're in other political activities. In the governments in Oakland, Los Angeles, and here in Berkeley there are a lot of ex-Black Panthers.

Reason: Have they generally pursued a socialist or leftist . . . ?

Cleaver: Anti-American kind of leftist, I call it. Really a hodgepodge ideology, because a lot of people haven't rethought it. Like Tom Hayden—when he comes up here and talks on the campus, you'd think he was still back in the '60s, yet he's on the public payroll. I did what a lot of people didn't want to do, and that is to back away from the whole mix and let the chips fall where they fall. When I first came back to America, Huey Newton was in Cuba, Bernardine Dohrn and those people were still fugitives, and they all denounced my coming back. Then, when they saw me working out my own legal problems, Huey Newton came back. The other people like Bernardine Dohrn and many others came back, but they still made the same kind of statements. Bernardine Dohrn is waiting to be admitted to the New York Bar, but you ask her what she thinks about America and she'll say nya, nya, nya. I think that's an unfortunate attitude.

Reason: In exile, you rued the fact that your son didn't play football. Does he play now?

Cleaver: He's a hell of a football player! I brainwashed him from the time he was a baby. I had a pair of football shoes that I always kept hanging in my den. These football shoes were mine at Abraham Lincoln High School in Los Angeles. I never had a chance to use them, because I got busted. But I always kept them. My son has them now, and from the time that he was first born I always talked to him about football. I think it worked. He loves football. [F]

by Marvin N. Olasky

Hornswoggled!

How Ma Bell and Chicago Ed conned our grandparents and stuck us with the bill.

Everybody loves to hate the phone company. And the electric company. And the gas company. And any other company that can act with unresponsive arrogance just because it has the government's protection as a legal monopoly. But when angry consumers and other critics call for an end to these monopolies, choruses of utility PR people and government regulators recite the same old story—once upon a time there was competition among utilities, but “the public” got fed up and demanded regulation. Again and again comes the tale: Free enterprise in utilities lost in a fair fight.

It makes a good story. But it's not true. The real story of how public-utility monopolies came to be goes like this: Early in this century, two utility executives, Theodore Vail of AT&T and Samuel Insull of Chicago Edison, saw that competition was threatening their businesses. The solution to their problems, they decided independent of one another, was to get government to guarantee their markets and protect them from competitors. To succeed, they would have to manipulate public opinion to create the impression of popular dissatisfaction with competition among utilities. Then they could persuade government to step in and set their companies up as monopolies.

Evidence of the real story behind the origin of utility regulation largely comes from hearings of the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission conducted during the late 1920s and 1930s, which revealed the comprehensive public-relations strategies that Vail and Insull used to support

their great con games. Few scholars, it appears, have looked closely at this evidence. Yet what the actual records reveal is a fascinating tale of immense greed, masterful propaganda, and sleazy politics.

LIGHTS OUT FOR COMPETITION

Samuel Insull came to the United States from England in 1881 to be Thomas Edison's secretary, then Edison's key manager and strategic planner. Edison's inventions turned dozens of industries upside down. Insull learned from him how quickly new inventions could radically alter existing patterns of commerce under conditions of free competition—and Insull was resolved not to allow competition to disrupt his plans, once he was in power.

Insull came to the city he would dominate for four decades when he took control of Chicago Edison in 1892. In his biography of Insull, historian Forrest McDonald describes how the young executive learned to play political hardball in one of the nation's major leagues, the Chicago City Council. By 1905, after merging Chicago Edison with Commonwealth Electric, Insull had gained

monopoly power in the electric lighting and power business in Chicago.

Before 1905, the electricity industry was “one of full and free competition,” economist Burton Behling noted in a 1938 monograph. Municipalities reserved the right to assign franchises, but “the common policy was to grant franchises to all who applied.” In 1887, for instance, a single New York City Council resolution granted competitive franchises to six different electric companies. Low prices and innovative developments resulted, along with some bankruptcies and occasional disruption of service.

Once Chicago Ed was dominant, Insull increasingly emphasized the importance of avoiding disruption of electrical service and how competition supposedly contributed to the problem. Through frequent speeches, many collected in the 1915 book *Central-Station Electric Service*, he popularized anti-competition arguments. And as president of the National Electric Light Association (NELA), a major utility trade group, Insull argued that utility monopoly and “franchise security” could best be secured by the establishment of government commissions, *which would present the appearance of popular control*.

The way to sell such a plan to the public, Insull suggested, would be to emphasize the commissions' power to fix rates. He told utility owners not to worry about regulation—regulated rates might be slightly lower than those utility owners would prefer to charge, but they would be higher than what would prevail under full competition.

Insull's theory that regulation by com-