

David DeTurrís

Honors Independent Study

Professor Miller

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Political Existentialism: Carl Schmitt, the Black Panthers, and the Jewish Defense League

Introduction:

¹On May 2, 1967, thirty members of the left-wing, Marxist, black power organization called the Black Panthers marched into the state legislature in Sacramento, California, several of them armed with handguns and shotguns. They had arrived to protest legislation proposed by Assemblyman Donald Mulford which would have outlawed the carrying of firearms in public spaces; this was legislation that was deliberately designed to target the Panthers, who had become infamous throughout Oakland for their armed patrols of the police. The Panthers made a point to aim their weapons away from anyone and to only shoot if they were shot at, but they also made a point to openly brandish their arms. On entering the building, they were harassed by police officers, who quickly realized that they had no grounds to arrest the Panthers. One of the leaders of the Panthers, Bobby Seale, delivered a prewritten speech to the many journalists and news crews who

¹ The following paragraph describing the Black Panthers's march into the California legislature is heavily indebted to *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2013). p. 57 – 60.

gathered to report on the commotion. In the speech, Seale decried the enslavement of black people, the genocide of American Indians, lynchings, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ongoing war in Vietnam. After this, the thirty Panthers got in their cars and left.

²On May 9, 1969, several members of the right-wing, religious-nationalist organization called the Jewish Defense League arrived outside of the Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan, brandishing baseball bats and chains. They had arrived to protest an invitation that had been extended by the rabbi of the Temple, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, to the black civil rights leader James Forman, who was invited to speak on the matter of reparations for slavery owed by American Jews. The JDL were not invited by any of the congregants of the Temple Emanu-El, a Reformist temple with a predominantly liberal congregation. Instead, they arrived independently; their leader, Rabbi Meir Kahane, believed that Forman's belief that American Jews owed any reparations for slavery was ridiculous and threatened to attack him if he showed up. It was successful. Forman never showed up and the group of JDL protestors were dispersed without incident by the NYPD.

The two stories I've mentioned so far about the Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League show a strange sort of similarity between groups on opposing sides of the political spectrum. Typically, when groups on the left-wing and the right-wing engage in similar radical political actions in the way that the Panthers and the JDL do, it's caulked up to horseshoe theory — this idea that at bottom, having radical convictions will always lead to extreme political acts, the ideological justification being secondary. What this does is paint the actors of radical political acts as crazed and irrational, too radical to be considered sensible actors. However, I believe this

² The following paragraph describing the Jewish Defense League's protest outside of the Temple Emanu-El is heavily indebted to Shaul Magid, *Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of An American Jewish Radical* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2021). p. 37 – 38.

to be deeply wrong. In this paper, I want to argue against the ordinary understanding that radical political actors like the Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League are crazed and irrational actors. Instead, I propose that the actions of both the Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League were legitimate reactions to the existential threats — either real or perceived — posed by their enemies, that their reactions show a deep understanding of the stakes of political conflict, and that the two groups excelled in properly distinguishing between their friends and enemies. To do this, I will be borrowing some ideas from the German political philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt. In this paper, I will introduce Schmitt's ideas as they are relevant to my argument, focusing on his work *The Concept of the Political*; I'll then focus on the historical context that produced the Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League, discussing the existential shift that occurred in how Americans conceptualized political identity during the civil rights movement; from here, I'll give a historical overview of the two groups, focusing on instances where the actions of the Panthers and the JDL are under the influence of this sort of existential thinking; finally, I'll discuss the implications of understanding radical political groups on both sides of the political spectrum through this Schmittian lens, concluding with some remarks on what this means for understanding the political struggles of our time.

Part I: Who Is Carl Schmitt (And What Did He Think?)

Carl Schmitt is one of the most insightful political philosophers of the 20th century. By focusing on not only the necessity of the existence of distinctions between friends and enemies for the existence of political thought, but also exposing the existential weight that underlies these distinctions, Schmitt forces us to confront some uncomfortable truths about the political sphere. However, if you were to poll people off the street and ask them who he is, they couldn't tell you.

While Schmitt is incredibly influential and important, and while his ideas are pertinent to our time, he himself is an obscure figure to the world at large. Part of this is due to the lateness of Schmitt's introduction to English-speaking academics and thinkers — though most of his works were written in the 1920s and 1930s, it was not until the mid-eighties that Schmitt's work was translated into English.³ Another part of this is due to Schmitt's political affiliation with the Nazis during the 1930s⁴. Schmitt isn't alone in his association with the Nazis; prominent German thinkers from around the same time such as Martin Heidegger⁵ were also associated with the Nazis, but unlike Heidegger's philosophy, Schmitt's is not only explicitly political in nature, but easily lends itself to a reading which endorses Nazism and fascism — especially concerning when one considers his beliefs about the necessity of political conflict and the sharp distinction that must be drawn between friends and enemies may have influenced his decision to join the Nazi Party.

This part of the paper isn't going to be a reading of Schmitt's ideas into Schmitt's life in a biographical way, since his ideas provoke too rich of a discussion to be limited to the otherwise quiet political life of a jurist and academic. Instead, I am going to proceed by introducing Schmitt's ideas, beginning with the discussion about what it is that is 'political' as defined in his work *The Concept of the Political*. It is in this work that he lays out what he believes to be the essence of the political. It is important to notice that Schmitt uses the phrase 'the political' and not 'politics'. Schmitt objects to the word "politics" because he says that politics is a thing that states do, in the sense that they hold elections, discuss legislature, etc.; it is something that "the state possesses the

³ McCormick, John P. Review of *Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English*, by Carl Schmitt, G. L. Ulmen, George Schwab, Tracy Strong, Leo Strauss, Erna Hilfstein, Heinrich Meier, J. Harvey Lomax, and Shadia B. Drury. *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (1998): 830–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/191997>.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1988/06/16/heidegger-and-the-nazis/?pagination=false>.

monopoly [on]”⁶. It is incorrect to make an equation between the state and politics because, in Schmitt’s understanding, ‘politics’ denotes a sphere of affairs separable from society. Schmitt says that this idea of politics as something separate from society is compromised in those cases where “state and society penetrate each other.”⁷ The aberration that forces the distinction between state and society to collapse is important for Schmitt, as it is the moment where we can see the essence of the political being revealed. This is because the political isn’t a sphere we freely engage or disengage in, but is something we are always involved in, much in the same way that we are always in a moral sphere or aesthetic sphere. For Schmitt, we are forced into the political by the fact “everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men [...] becomes public by virtue of such a relationship.”⁸ It is in this publicity that we can be distinguished as a friend or an enemy. This friend/enemy distinction is the “specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced[.]”⁹

What does it mean to be a friend or an enemy? Defining these terms is a critical point in trying to understand what it is that Schmitt is saying. The terms ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ “denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation”.¹⁰ For Schmitt, the political enemy is “the other [...] in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible”, while the political friend is that who we identify with, who is our brother, who we feel a sort of kinship with.¹¹ Schmitt is clear about what it means to be an enemy — that to the enemy, they who directly oppose us, belongs “the ever present

⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2007). p. 22.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Schmitt, p. 28.

⁹ Schmitt, p. 26.

¹⁰ Schmitt, p. 26.

¹¹ Schmitt, p. 26 – 27.

possibility of combat.”¹² But how do we draw this distinction? Schmitt says that the political distinction can “exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions[,]” or, in other words, that outside the friend being one who we identify with and the enemy being the one who we identify against, the reasons for the distinction are arbitrary.¹³

As we alluded to earlier when we said that the enemy isn’t a mere intellectual enemy in a debate, the enemy is instead always a possible combatant, combat being “the most extreme consequence of enmity[.]”¹⁴ Schmitt is clear about what it means to be an enemy — that to the enemy, they who directly oppose us, belongs “the ever present possibility of combat.”¹⁵ For Schmitt:

The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy.¹⁶

By saying this, Schmitt brings the existential stakes of all political conflicts to the forefront of all political conflicts. By existential, Schmitt does not mean something like Sartrean existentialism, armchair philosophers smoking a pipe and musing on life and death; instead, Schmitt is drawing our attention to the fact that in political conflict, we are allying ourselves with friends to continue the existence of our grouping, whatever that grouping may be, and fighting against enemies who want to see our grouping cease to exist — in essence, real, physical death. However, to add a minor amendment Schmitt’s idea of existential negation, the death of groupings can happen in many ways beyond just physical killings. Forced natural deaths and cultural genocides — such as the

¹² Schmitt, p. 32.

¹³ Schmitt, p. 26 – 27.

¹⁴ Schmitt, p. 33.

¹⁵ Schmitt, p. 32.

¹⁶ Schmitt, p. 32.

cultural genocides enacted by colonial governments against native populations — are other kinds of killings that can lead to the existential negation of groups. Even when politics assumes “parasite- and caricature-like configurations[.]” Schmitt says that they are happening in the “context of a concrete antagonism[.]”¹⁷

I can imagine there being a very good-natured person reading this, one who so totally abhors division and asks that we get along. They might even say that we should make a point of trying to breakdown divisions between friends and enemies. However, this would be unfeasible. Schmitt addresses this point by boldly stating that “[n]othing can escape this logical conclusion of the political.”¹⁸ He demonstrates this with the example of pacifism — if pacifists were so hostile to war that they were driven to fight a war against war, then it shows that they have sufficient political energy since pacifists could group the world into those that are pacifists and those who are not.¹⁹ You may say “well, we cannot totally abolish the possibility of conflict, but is there a way to neutralize and depoliticize certain aspects? Could we try and act as if there were depoliticized spheres of affairs where there were no political conflicts, even if the possibility of them still exists?” Schmitt says that this is something that liberalism does. This is due to how liberalism reifies the importance of individualism, raising the individual want and need above all else. Essentially, it treats the autonomy of the individual as depoliticized. In one of his most lucid paragraphs, Schmitt says:

“the political entity must demand the sacrifice of life. Such a demand is in no way justifiable by the individualism of liberal thoughts. No consistent individualism can entrust to someone other than to the individual himself the right to dispose of the physical life of the individual.”²⁰

¹⁷ Schmitt, p. 30.

¹⁸ Schmitt, p. 36.

¹⁹ summary of a point made by Schmitt, p. 36.

²⁰ Schmitt, p. 71.

This is also part of the reason that liberalism is an unsatisfactory political system. Any system which pretends there are depoliticized spheres — areas where distinctions are not allowed to be made between friends and enemies — will have blind spots and open itself up to its own destruction. Schmitt says that "[t]he world will not become depoliticized with the aid of definitions and constructions[,]” that it’s mistaken to try and make or pretend there are depoliticized spheres, especially when others successfully make those spheres politicized.²¹ All attempts to do this through supposedly depoliticized spheres — Schmitt uses ethics and economics as examples — fail, especially since “[e]conomic [and ethical] antagonisms can become political, and the fact that an economic power position could arise proves that the point of the political may be reached from the economic as well as from any other domain.”²²

Part II: Where Did The Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League Come From?

So far, I have established Schmitt’s thinking, which I’ll be using to say why it is that the Black Panthers and Jewish Defense League were so similar. However, it’s important to also note the milieu that the two groups come out of. While there are plenty of international movements that the Panthers and the JDL were influenced by, it is the national movements that emerged during the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s that are particularly influential.

Whenever anyone mentions the domestic history 1960s, what is immediately called to mind are the events that popular histories of the era like *Forrest Gump* so forcefully associated with the era — the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., protests the war in

²¹ Schmitt, p. 71.

²² *ibid.*

Vietnam, Woodstock. However, what was never lodged into the public memory in the same way was the radical cognitive and intellectual shift in thinking about political life — specifically, the existential weight of political engagement. This begins, most obviously, with the struggle for civil rights by black Americans. It goes without saying that there was always opposition against white racism by black Americans, but the emergence of the national organizations during the civil rights movements in the late '50s and early '60s helped popularize to both black and white Americans the distinction made by white racists; this distinction being between who deserved citizenship and personhood — white Americans — and who was excluded from that — non-white people generally, and black Americans specifically. Civil rights organizations and activists understood their struggle to be a struggle against this racist distinction; against white racists, their distinction was between those who wanted to expand citizenship and personhood for black Americans — black Americans and their white allies — and those who wanted to oppose this — white racists. Civil rights leaders of the 1960s, one the most representative of this period being Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, understood this distinction, though opted for integration with larger American society, nonviolent resistance against racism, and a willingness to cooperate with the American political establishment.

King and his fellow travelers' approach to gaining civil rights wasn't universally popular among civil rights activists. From the very beginning, there were dissenting voices who argued that King's approach was all wrong. Objections were leveled that King treated white racists too kindly by protesting with nonviolence. Many asked why it would make sense to treat kindly those who wished to see black Americans at best treated as second-class citizens and at worst dead. It amounted to an unwillingness to practically distinguish the friends and enemies of black Americans. Another point of contention was King's willingness to cooperate with the American

establishment and respect its rules and laws was controversial, considering that the American establishment were the ones who helped to keep black Americans as second-class citizens. There were lines that King and his associates felt should not be crossed, areas and actions that were treated as if they were depoliticized even if their opponents chose not to see them that way.

Though there is no one figure to whom we could attribute this rejection of King's position to, it would be difficult to not address the importance of Malcolm X on the turn away from King's integrationist position and toward a position that was more oppositional. Malcolm X's most important contribution to the civil rights movement was his specific understanding of the relationship of racists towards black Americans and what ought to be the response of black Americans. Malcolm X insisted on recognizing that white racists would only understand black Americans as their enemies and only offer them hostility and violence. For Malcolm X, people who advocated for integration with larger American society, nonviolent resistance against racism, and displayed a willingness to cooperate with the American political establishment, such as those lead by Martin Luther King Jr., attempted to maintain friendship with the very white people who saw black Americans as their enemy. In failing to make this distinction, Malcolm X argued that black Americans opened themselves up to being destroyed. To protect against this, Malcolm X proposed that black Americans ought to arm themselves so they could protect against white racists and create alternative organizations less willing to integrate with the larger American establishment, ones whose interests were more in line with those of black Americans. After his assassination in 1965, many civil rights groups — such as the Black Panthers — were galvanized by his approach to the issues of race, class, and sex through the lens of his thought. Even those

who were totally opposed to his goals, such as the Jewish Defense League, adopted much of his existential understanding of the political for their own political identities.²³

It is also important to mention the international scope that many adopted during the '60s. Unlike earlier figures like King, who was primarily concerned with the domestic issues, Malcolm X drew attention to world events at the time, such as the many revolutions happening on the continent of Africa in the early '60s or the still-growing conflict in Vietnam. Malcolm X believed that these revolutions were the extension of the battles being waged at home by black Americans against white racism. The struggle for civil rights, Malcolm X would argue, was not limited to being just between black Americans and their allies against white racists in the United States but was just a theatre in the larger campaign for human rights by the non-white people of the world against colonialist white oppressors. He argued that black Americans should promote solidarity with these revolutionaries and make friendly diplomatic in-roads with them; he himself famously did this, meeting leaders of African and Middle Eastern countries when performing his *hajj* to Mecca. Other strands of thought, while not directly associated with the American civil rights movement attributed to this global perspective, such as Mao Zedong Thought, which advocated an international movement of anticolonial liberation from invading colonialist powers, and Marxism, which famously advocated the banning together of the workers of the world against the preying bourgeois classes, added to this internationalist shift in distinguishing between friends and enemies.

²³ As far as I can tell, I doubt Malcolm X ever heard of Schmitt, so the similarities between the two are entirely coincidental. However, I believe that this is an indication of how insightful Schmitt's analysis of the political is.

Part III: Black Panthers and Jewish Panthers

Keeping all of the historical context in mind, we can now talk about the histories of the Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League.

Section A: The Black Panthers

Formed in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party was a left-wing Marxist organization. It's important to note the Marxist and anti-colonialist aspect of the Panther's. Unlike the integrationist civil rights groups who understood themselves as black Americans who could be accepted into American society, the Panthers saw themselves as being black Americans in white America; this meant that they would always be disenfranchised, relegated to second-class citizenship. This position as second-class citizens was maintained by several factors, such as a lack of strong institutions in black communities, and capitalism, which the Panther's saw as a colluding factor in the propagation of the white, racist order. This all combined to pose an existential threat to black Americans; at best, it all was trying to prevent black Americans from progressing; at worst, it was slowly exterminating them. For the Panthers, acceptance in American society — a society that was necessarily white — wasn't possible. None of this was helped by the supposedly depoliticized social institutions and police forces, which acted and were treated as if they were depoliticized but had a bias against black Americans. For the Panthers, the goal was not only for black Americans to live as equal citizens but engage in the political struggle of creating a new Marxist society which addressed the needs of all oppressed peoples. But achieving this society would require the overturning of white racist, colonialist, and imperialist power structures in American society, the creation of new institutions

that would service black Americans and other oppressed Americans, the abolition of capitalism, and the forging of friendly relationships between themselves and other international organizations engaged in anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist conflicts.

Initially, the Panthers's scope was small — they gain notoriety on the state level for their armed patrols in the neighborhood of their native Oakland as well as the neighboring Richmond, monitoring police and protecting their neighbors from police brutality.²⁴ The Panthers, taking their cues from Malcolm X, openly brandished their arms. This was entirely legal; according to California's gun laws at the time, citizens could monitor police officers at a distance openly brandishing arms, so long as they didn't interfere with police activities.²⁵ This was at odds with the nonviolent tactics advocated by King. Even though they rarely used their weapons, it sent a message to the police officers that the Panthers considered them their enemy, that violence against fellow black people would be met with violence; it also saw the Panthers politicizing a space that was supposedly considered depoliticized, a space where police officers were merely the extension of a law that was to be respected at all costs. As mentioned earlier, the Panther's armed patrols of the police is what led to Assemblyman Mulford's legislation proposal banning the carrying of firearms in public spaces. But the Panthers's did more than their policing of the police of Oakland; the black communities in Oakland were so lacking in the institutional resources necessary for life that the Panthers took it upon themselves to create programs in the place of those necessary institutions. Among the programs that they set up were the Free Breakfast for Children Program, the Free Clothing Program, the Free Busing to Prison Program, and liberation schools. All these programs in some way wrapped back around to the Panther's commitment to fighting white racism

²⁴ Janes Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 2017). p. 69.

²⁵ Bloom and Martin, p. 58 – 60.

and capitalism, in some cases very explicitly — lessons about pigs, the Panther’s terms for police officers, and events in Black History were discussed. For the Panthers, the very basic necessities of eating and educating had a political dimension.²⁶

There were instances where the “ever present possibility of combat” between the Panthers and their enemies became real — on April 4, 1968, one of their members, Eldridge Cleaver, “under the fear that there was a plot to destroy [the Panthers] formulated by the Oakland Police Department” took “several carloads of Black Panthers [and] exchanged gunfire with the Oakland police[,]” which wounded Cleaver and killed member, Bobby Hutton.²⁷ After the fighting, Cleaver fled the United States and exiled himself in Cuba for a time, then moved to Algeria.²⁸ Cleaver’s exile was a blessing in disguise for the Party, as it allowed for the Panthers to expand their friendly relationships internationally. Both Cuba and Algeria were countries who positioned themselves as anti-imperial and anti-colonial. They were also very young countries, only recently gaining independence from colonial powers — the United States and France respectively. At a Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria, countries with anti-colonial and anti-capitalist sympathies were impressed by the Panthers, which lead to invitations for the Panthers to tour North Vietnam, North Korea, and China. All these countries had poor and aggressive relationships with the United States — at the time, the United States was fighting a brutal war against North Vietnam, had fought a brutal war against North Korea in the 1950s, and had hostile relationships with China since the end of their civil war. But for the Panthers, it was in their best interest to ally themselves with nations who had shared enemies.²⁹

²⁶ Bloom and Martin, p. 182 - 185.

²⁷ Rhodes, p. 134.

²⁸ Bloom and Martin, p. 314.

²⁹ Bloom and Martin, p. 317 – 321.

As the Panthers's numbers grew throughout the United States and their ambitions became more international, the federal government of the United States became more nervous. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI at the time, famously called the Panthers “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country[.]”³⁰ This led to the FBI's weaponization of an illegal government program called COINTELPRO, which utilized surveillance and harassment “to prevent the rise of a leader [...] who could become a “messiah” ” such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Kwame Ture — then still known as Stokely Carmichael.³¹ The program was extensive, using methods such as “plant[ing] a stream of rumors and innuendos” among collaborators of the Panthers, “[discrediting the Panthers] before the American public”³²and instigating the deaths of prominent leaders, such as the FBI tip that led to the raid and death of the leader of the Chicago Panthers, Fred Hampton.³³ Eventually all these tensions became too much for the Party to handle, and it slowly dissolved throughout the 1970s.

Section B: Jewish Panthers

The Panther's confrontational style and existential understanding of themselves deeply impressed many people both domestically and internationally. However, not all their admirers were people who necessarily agreed with them. One of these unintended admirers was a Rabbi from Brooklyn, New York named Meir Kahane. Kahane, though himself opposed to the Panthers's ideology, “understood the anger that pushed many in the black community toward militancy[.]”³⁴

³⁰ Rhodes, p. 184.

³¹ Rhodes, p. 184 – 185.

³² Rhodes, p. 184 – 185.

³³ Rhodes, p. 292.

³⁴ Magid, p. 83.

This is what led Kahane to appropriate their full political commitment for his organization, the Jewish Defense League, a right-wing organization hoping to combat antisemitism at his home in America and abroad.

Many American Jews had been deeply involved in the fight for civil rights on behalf of black people, which meant that they were as exposed, maybe even more so exposed, to the discussions about the political nature of identity than anyone else. But the issue was that, unlike black Americans, Jewish Americans were understood to be white which, when coupled with the integrationist attitude that many American Jews adopted when immigrating to the United States in the beginning of the 20th century, allowed for a more ready adoption into white American society than black Americans. Jewish nationalists like Kahane were worried by this, especially since it threatened the existence of Jews as a distinct group.³⁵ Outside of America, this existential threat seemed to present itself in a more direct way. Only 25 years earlier, two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population had been decimated in the Holocaust carried out by the Nazis. The total devastation of the event had left a traumatic scar on the Jewish diaspora. This, combined with the Soviet Union's ongoing mistreatment of Jews, as well as the antagonism between Jews and Arabs in Israel and Palestine were major events in favor of the Zionist argument for the independent Jewish state of Israel. If Jews all over the world were existentially threatened, they must band together and fight against their enemies. The JDL, too, understood themselves to be existentially threatened. Taking guidance from the Revisionist Zionism of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, which advocated for aggressive assertion of the right of Jews to the land of Israel as well as Jewish self-defense, the JDL understood that they would have to assert their Judaism culturally, fight against antisemitism both nationally and internationally, and take up defense of their fellow Jews against any and all people

³⁵ Magid, p. 82 – 85.

who threatened them.³⁶ But Kahane needed a way to translate these ideas so they would be understood by both American Jews as well as the antisemites he wanted to fight against. This is why he adopted the style of the Black Panthers.

Before we go any further, I want to address how the JDL's racism. In America, the JDL often discussed the immediate threat by antisemitic black Americans who antagonized Jewish Americans. Black Americans and Jewish Americans have a complicated and contentious history; however, the JDL often misrepresented tensions between black Americans and Jews for media attention. Kahane himself, as the JDL's ideological head, was insistent that black antisemitism was one of the great obstacles that faced American Jews and needed to be stomped out. Paired with this was inflammatory and racist rhetoric. This is why many conflicts between the JDL and their American enemies were often against black Americans.³⁷ Abroad, the JDL saw the Jew's enemies as being Arabs that lived in Israel and Palestine. For Kahane, Arabs posed a totalizing existential threat equivalent to the threat the Nazis posed in the leadup to the Holocaust. If the Jews were going to survive, it was believed that Arabs needed to be totally subdued as a threat to them, by any means necessary.³⁸ The first major action which can be attributed to the JDL occurred during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school strike. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district, a district comprised of mainly black students, was experiencing a strike over the proposed replacement of several of its majority white faculty — many of whom were Jewish — with a more racially diverse faculty. Many of the current faculty felt slighted by this and returned to work. In response to this, the local board closed all the schools. This was then countered by all the teachers in the district going on strike. Tensions between the primarily Jewish faculty and the predominantly black

³⁶ Magid, p. 127 – 128.

³⁷ Magid, p. 79 – 82.

³⁸ Magid, p. 145 – 146.

student-body increased as time went on, with accusations of antisemitism being leveled by the faculty against the student-body and their parents, while the parents continued to complain of the poor quality of education their children were receiving. In response to the accusations of antisemitism, the JDL protested at a Met exhibit featuring poetry from young black people, some of which included antisemitic attacks. It was a major news story, at least in the JDL's native New York. The JDL has established themselves as the voice of radical Judaism.³⁹ Other actions committed by the JDL earlier in its existence were the previously mentioned protest outside of the Temple Emanu-El, and an armed patrol "to the Montefiore Jewish cemetery in the Bronx where in years past black youths had desecrated tombstones[.]"⁴⁰ both of which extended the JDL's notoriety, leading to the opening of chapters outside of New York.

Taking a note from the Panthers, the JDL took interest in not just protesting on behalf of Jews, but also training them in case they were ever attacked by their enemies. Camp Jedel was established in the Catskills to teach young Jewish men and women how to fight in self-defense and use firearms.⁴¹ After these skills were imparted to JDL members, they would employ them in their patrols of integrated neighborhoods in the hope of protecting themselves against the provocation of black and Latino antisemites[.]⁴²

Soon after gaining greater public notoriety, the JDL pivoted their attention towards fighting the enemies of Jews internationally. The JDL were mainly concerned with fighting the antisemitism prevalent in the Soviet Union, where Soviet Jews were systematically discriminated against and prevented from emigrating to Israel, and in Israel, where the conflicts between the

³⁹ Magid, p. 88 – 91.

⁴⁰ Magid, p. 78.

⁴¹ Magid, p. 8.

⁴² Magid, p. 26 – 27.

majority-Jewish population of Israel and the majority-Muslim Palestine — much of whose land was forcibly occupied by Israel at the time — would turn into religious conflict. The JDL brought attention to the plight of the Soviet Jews through rallying in Washington D.C. — where nearly 5,000 supporters attended — and demanding that the United States intervene on the Jews' behalf⁴³ and protesting outside of Soviet Mission in New York City.⁴⁴ One act that caught a particular amount of media attention was Kahane's rushing of the stage at an international conference on Soviet Jewry being held in Brussels. Kahane was denied access to the stage and then arrested.⁴⁵ The JDL also engaged in an illegal bombing campaign against what they considered to be Soviet targets in the United States, attacking the Palestinian Liberation Organization office in Manhattan,⁴⁶ a Soviet cultural building in Washington,⁴⁷ and the offices of the Jewish American talent agent Sol Hurock, who was booking shows with Soviet acts. For the JDL, these targets ceased to be depolitical, became legitimate, and would continue to be, so long as the Soviet Union continued to oppress the Soviet Jews. However, the JDL hadn't considered the bad press this could cause. The Sol Hurock bombing was generating a large amount of bad press, as it caused a fire that injured thirteen people and killed a Jewish-American employee. Three JDL members had been arrested for the bombing.

While the JDL were never subject to the same sort of surveillance from the FBI as the Panthers, their more radical actions cost them a lot of public support and alienated more potential supporters than it gained. The Sol Hurock bombing cost the JDL much of the goodwill it had

⁴³ Magid, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Magid, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Magid, p. 121 – 122.

⁴⁶ Kamins, Toni L., Gabe Friedman, Raffi Wineburg, and Julie Wiener. "PLO Office Wrecked by Bomb; JDL Member Picked up for Questioning." Jewish Telegraphic Agency, March 20, 2015.
<https://www.jta.org/archive/plo-office-wrecked-by-bomb-jdl-member-picked-up-for-questioning>.

⁴⁷ Magid, p. 115 – 116.

accumulated over the years.⁴⁸ Kahane, who was in Israel at the time of the bombing, believed his political career in the United States to be over. He stayed in Israel for nearly the rest of his life, was elected to the Knesset, and was then soon afterwards ejected for trying to pass a law which would have made Arabs second-class citizens. He was then gunned down in 1990 by an Al-Qaeda associate in Brooklyn. The JDL continued to operate without Kahane's direct leadership well into the '90s and is arguably still around today, but in nowhere near the form it was fifty years ago.

Conclusion:

In going through not just the history of the Black Panthers and the Jewish Defense League, but also the historical milieu that they are influenced by as well as specific cases of the actions that they committed, I have demonstrated how it is that an existential view of political conflict caused both the Panthers and the JDL to act in such similar ways. But now I must answer the question, why is this relevant? It's relevant because it shows that the similarities between two ideologically opposed groups are not just accidental, but representative of the way that they choose to understand the political threat that faces them. To understand the extremity of the way that these two groups acted, or any radical group really, we must try and understand how they conceptualize their political conflict on their own terms, not from applying our terms of what is acceptable and unacceptable. If we are to understand political groups only by trying to figure out where they fit on the spectrum of left-wing and right-wing politics, it would be like trying to evaluate a man's intelligence by how well he can do on an exam.

⁴⁸ Magid, p. 121 – 122.

I believe that a study of the Panthers and the JDL is also relevant because these two groups violently disturb our understanding of depoliticized spheres in liberal society. Unlike figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. who respected the confines of the law while actively trying to challenge it, both the Panthers and the JDL respected the law so long as it was tactically beneficial for them to do so; otherwise, when reacting to their perceived existential threats, the Panthers and the JDL acted as people faced with the threat of death; they allied with their friends, they drew attention to the threat, and they committed violence. And this isn't to say that they were entirely unjustified in doing so — though I think the Panthers have a much greater claim to being existentially threatened than the JDL, especially since they avoided the racism of the JDL. But the intensity of both groups' commitment to their political cause cannot be ignored or written off as simply radical.

Finally, it is important to study the Panthers and the JDL since the intensity of their political commitment seems to mirror those in our time. We only need to look to the BLM protest from the summer of 2020 or the January 6th storming of the capitol and we see the same sort of political commitment that made groups like the Panthers and the JDL so radical. Considering the recent legislation against members of the LGBTQ community or the proposed overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, we will probably see an increase in political action by groups who see themselves as existentially threatened.

