

The Armory and Freedom of Assembly

It is easy enough to understand why the local armory board would like the Black Panther Party to hold its "revolutionary people's constitutional convention" in Saskatchewan or Timbuktu or anywhere other than the national capital. But like so many other political groups, the Black Panthers want to hold their meeting in Washington. They have the same right to do so as any other organization—a right expressly guaranteed by the United States Constitution. To deny them that right, as the armory board has now attempted to do, is to fuel their sense of persecution and give force to their rhetoric about repression. More dangerous still, it is to fly in the face of a basic freedom.

The board's bias has been obvious from the beginning. First it tried to shunt the Panthers aside by saying it had no open dates for leasing the armory to them. And now it has come up with the contention that "any convergence of numbers of people in the nation's capital for the purpose of fostering and/or furthering various causes is, unfortunately, attended with the possibility for the need of the National Guard to support local authorities in the event of an emergency." What this elaborate circumlocution says, if it says anything at all, is that the armory shouldn't be leased to any group at all for any purpose whatever because its "convergence" there might interfere with the Guard's functioning—a policy which would make the armory an insufferable white elephant. It is hard to view the board's argument as anything save a subterfuge.

It is, beyond that, a needless provocation which seems likely, if anything, to increase the possibili-

ties that the Black Panther rally may boil up in angry reprisal and get out of hand. By what right does the armory board assume that violence will necessarily result from a gathering of this particular group and by what evidence? No violence resulted from a similar Panther convention in Philadelphia a few weeks ago. Even if there were a reasonable presumption that violence is possible, or even likely, the Washington police have demonstrated a capacity to maintain order in the face of much larger groups and much more trying circumstances than are now presented by the Panthers.

What remains is the argument advanced by Nixon administration spokesmen—that on the off chance that there is violence, and that the Metropolitan Police cannot handle it, and that the Guard might be needed, then the Guard would wish to have unimpeded access to its armory facilities. There are two things to be said about this contingency: one is that it is both remote and, as a practical matter irrelevant, since in an emergency federal troops could presumably be mustered and deployed without the armory's facilities; and the other is that if this argument had any real force, it would have been advanced at the outset, instead of all that double-talk about conflicting dates.

The simple fact is that there is no good argument to be advanced with respect to the Panthers which would not be as valid for just about any revolutionary, radical, or merely politically contentious group which was prepared to obey the law. Or to put it another way, there is no good argument which accords with the basic freedoms which the Constitution affords to all of us.

The issue of the Armory underlines the issue of the Convention itself. If the basic rights, including the rights of free speech and assembly, do not extend to those most dissatisfied and dispossessed: the young, the poor, Black, Brown, and Red people, Gay people, women, draftees, etc.; what meaning do they have?

THE REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLES CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION WILL BE HELD IF IT HAS TO BE HELD
IN THE STREETS

Food, housing, and transportation are needed. Donations are solicited to cover the costs of the Convention, as well as the legal expenses which have become necessary in order to have it in the first place.

Call: Panther Defense Committee
1724 20th St. NW 20009
462-6789 or 462-6790

Checks to: Panther Defense Committee