Christopher Boeman Terrorism in History Spring 2003 Research Paper

Black Nationalist Ahmed Evans and the Republic of New Libya

The subject of this report is a shootout on July 23, 1968 between a Black Nationalist group called the Republic of New Libya and officers of the Cleveland Police Department. This shootout took place during one of the most contentious times in America's history and in one of America's most segregated cities. The shootout was at once a high point in black nationalist militancy and the death knell to one of America's most popular African American politicians.

In the study of terrorism in history this episode helps to highlight a number of important issues. The most obvious issue is the old saying that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Secondly, the issue of real and pervasive prejudice and discrimination against minorities, in this case African-Americans, as a contributing factor to terrorism. Thirdly, divisions within the minority group itself on how best to confront and alleviate the negative effects of being subjected to these injustices.

Through out my report I will use italicized quotes from Carlos Marighella's "The Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla" to give context to the narrative. Although in many respects Marighella's vision of the urban guerilla does not match Evans's actions, at other times the similarities are unmistakable.

Fred Evans was born on May 23, 1931 in Greenville, South Carolina. Greenville was a textile town and an absolutely segregated city "where the black man didn't drink from the

white man's fountain or use his toilet." Evans father worked as a cloth dying man at the Union Bleachery. In the late 1930's the Evans family of 14 settled in one of Cleveland's East Side slums. Evans quit school while in junior high and had a number of factory jobs before joining the army, by lying about his age, in 1948. Evans rose to the rank of sergeant and served in Korea as a combat engineer from September 1950 to September 1951. While in Korea he was injured in his back, shoulder and head during a bridge collapse. Years later, one of his brothers would say of him, "His head isn't right. There's something wrong inside his head that makes him act the way he does. I think he got hurt in the service." Before leaving the Army after serving in Korea he received a number of service medals as well as an expert rifleman's badge.¹

The basic question in the technical preparation of the urban guerilla is nevertheless to know how to handle arms.

Back in Cleveland Evans drove a city bus before re-enlisting in February of 1954. In his second tour he was court-martialed for punching a captain, given a dishonorable discharge and sentence to two years confinement. The discharge was later reduced to undesirable and Evans was released after serving 7 months. The sentence was reduced because Evans claimed that since the bridge collapse he suffered severe headaches, partial loss of vision, recurring paralysis in his right side, and blackouts. During one of these blackouts was when he struck the captain.² An Army psychologist wrote of Evans, "He is extremely polite and aloof. He is pedantic and guarded in his behavior. He is cooperative. This man has much hostility which he ordinarily controls, but under stress it breaks forth with aggressive behavior. He also has some paranoid tendencies and this adds to his aggressiveness and resentment."³

According to Evans, the next pivotal event in his life was in 1959 when in Mississippi a young black man was dragged from jail by a mob and executed. No one was ever indicted for the murder. Evans was working in Cleveland as a railroad maintenance man but from that point forward he became a self proclaimed agitator. In 1962 another event changed Evans life. "I saw a flying saucer at 79th and Kinsman. It hovered for awhile then disappeared. That started me thinking about the stars and God and I thought that here I was 33 and Jesus had died at 33 and I haven't even got started yet. So I moved off by myself to study the science of astrology and philosophy. Then...the kids who hung out there started asking me for advice. I began making astrological predictions and began to have faith in myself." Soon afterwards Fred Evans became a Black Nationalists and changed his name to Ahmed Evans. Evans described a Black Nationalist in these terms. "He think for himself. He does for himself. He doesn't need anyone to guide him by the hand....He has pride."

To understand the appeal of Black Nationalism to an African-American in Cleveland in the 1950's and 1960's, it's important to mention some specific local, state and national government policies that adversely effected them. In the 1930's, the Federal Housing Administration's underwriting manual warned against the adverse effect of any "infiltration of inharmonious racial or nationality groups" into a neighborhood. "The FHA actually recommended that restrictive covenants with regard to race be included in deeds." Even though the U.S. Supreme Court ruled this unconstitutional in 1948 it wasn't until 1962 that an executive order ended restrictive covenants in public financing of housing. In Cleveland, the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority was also found to have had discriminatory housing policies.⁶

At the same time that the FHA and CMHA were discriminating based on race in housing the Ohio State Board of Education and the Cleveland Board of Education were discriminating based on race in the public schools. A federal judge found that "the significant involvement of the Cleveland Board of Education in the creation or maintenance of a segregated school system cannot be denied...Other actions cannot be explained except by ascribing to them a deliberate, conscious intent on the part of the board to segregate public school pupils on the basis of race." The state board was equally guilty. "Despite being virtually buried in an avalanche of data pointing up the severely segregated nature of the Cleveland schools, the board steadfastly adhered to its donothing policy." These practices continued for over 20 years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional.⁷

The public schools in Glenville were particularly bad. Schools that were over 90% black and overcrowded in Glenville were maintained right next to schools that were over 99% white and under enrolled in Little Italy. "This practice, in the face of practicable alternatives, constituted an outright theft of those students' right to an even and equal educational experience, and can be explained only as the manifestation of an intention to contain blacks, at all costs." From these instances of government sponsored discrimination it is not hard to see why someone like Ahmed Evans would be radicalized.

Evans was "a steady worker with no disciplinary problems" with the railroad until April of 1966 when he was fired for a "high number of garnishments on his salary."

Evans outlook changed once again. "I had given up on the system. That is to say – I had come to realize that my pursuit of happiness was irrevocably blocked because I was a Negro." At the time of the Hough riots in Cleveland in the summer of 1967 Evans would

go to meetings between black militants and pastors and give speeches like, "I am a soldier. I have a roll to play and you have yours. I am willing to follow if you are willing to lead but it looks to me like we are heading for the streets." The local black nationalists were gaining influence and according to a member of the Greater Cleveland Council of Churches, "the Negro is utterly terrified of them". These militants didn't feel that the power and the ability to address their issues could be gained peacefully through the ballot box.

The urban guerilla is an implacable enemy of the government and...the men who dominate the country and exercise power.

One Glenville resident described Evans in this way, "Ahmed was a voice crying out in the community. And out here you listen to the voices crying out because you want to know what is happening in the movement. He came to meetings and spoke and people listened and when he spoke against the system, there was nothing to do but agree with that." Other Black Nationalists in Cleveland were not so impressed by Evans. "The truth is that he was tolerated…because he was angry and a brother but he was much more rhetoric than substance." ¹²

Evans stature, though, was such that when Martin Luther King Jr. came to Cleveland in the summer of 1967 he publicly embraced Evans. King told the local civil rights leaders that violent nationalists like Evans made his nonviolent approach more attractive to whites. For his part, Evans said after King's murder, "Martin Luther King was a great friend of mine, but a nonviolent man in a violent world is a fool."

Attacking wholeheartedly this election farce and the so-called "political solution" so appealing to the opportunists, the urban guerilla must become more aggressive and violent, resorting without letup to sabotage, terrorism...

In November of 1967 Carl Stokes was elected mayor of Cleveland, the first black mayor of a major American city. He became an celebrity and the one so many blacks, not only locally but nationally, looked to as a role model. "So many people who had spent their lives feeling disenfranchised by the system now felt that I was their mayor." To show to whites that his election didn't mean a black takeover of power he formed a interracial cabinet with a white police chief and safety director. To begin to address the effects of past discrimination he increased the number of black employees, especially in Cleveland's Human Resources Department, where previously there was not a single black employee. ¹⁴

Stokes also worked to reorganize the Police Department. Stokes wanted to bring accountability to the department to address charges of police brutality, lax enforcement in black neighborhoods and few black officers. Two goals were to integrate patrols on the predominantly black east side and to have monitors at districts to make sure prisoners were not abused. This reorganization was accomplished in January of 1968 to the outrage of white officers. At the same time as Stokes was working to reorganize the police, he was working to reign in the Black Nationalists, including Evans. At a meeting he told them, "I want you to work with me, cooperate with me," 15

Stokes next triumph was to get the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development to release funds to Cleveland that HUD had held up because of scandals in
the 1950's. In March Stokes announced a 300 unit, low-income housing development in
Hough. With his success with H.U.D. and reorganizing the police department, Stokes was
riding high. But on April 4 news came that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated
and Stokes faced a crisis. King had said of an earlier Stokes electoral victory that it

"reminds us that when black and white work together, we shall overcome." Stokes went on television and said, "I appeal to all Clevelanders to do honor to the memory of MLK by reacting to this tragic loss in the peaceful manner in which he lived." He also removed white police officers from black neighborhoods and formed an all-black "peace patrol", made up of black community leaders, including black nationalists, to try to prevent violence. The strategy worked and Cleveland was virtually the only major city without rioting following King's murder. Ahmed Evans was one of those who served on the "peace patrols". 18

One of the permanent concerns of the urban guerilla is his identification with popular cause to win public support.

Stokes sought to parlay the gratitude of the business community for helping to keep the peace by launching Cleveland: Now!. Cleveland: Now! was a ten-year, \$1.5 billion urban renewal plan. In the first year the plan was to spend \$177 million on employment, youth resources, health and welfare, neighborhood rehabilitation, economic revitalization, and city planning. Forty-six hundred new and rehabilitated housing units for low and middle-income families were to take the largest chunk of the money, \$86 million. After the business community had raised \$11 million the federal government released \$74.8 million. With this initial success Stokes was able on June 11 to get a tax issue passed by a reluctant and sometimes hostile city council. With this money Stokes could placate the largely white city bureaucracy by increasing wages and new hires.¹⁹

A small part of Cleveland: Now!'s budget, \$750,000, was earmarked for the Mayor's Summer Youth Program. As with all the money in the plan, Stokes was in charge of all disbursements. ²⁰ About \$31,000 of this money went to the Hough Area Coordinating

Committee to "help counter severe alienation of hard-core unemployed youth". Through this group Evans's group got \$10,000. ²¹Evans himself was paid \$450 in salary. ²²

In May, Evans's Black Nationalist group was evicted from their headquarters in Hough for code violations. Movers stacked furniture from the storefront on the sidewalk.²³ At this African Culture Shop, where Evans also lived since it opened in March of 1967, Evans wanted to locate a community center focusing on art, astrology, and black history.²⁴Evans characterized the group this way, "We were meeting and talking with our brothers. We are followers of Ho Chi Minh. He's a soul brother and we believe in his philosophy.²⁵

The danger to the urban guerilla is that he may reveal himself through imprudence or allow himself to be discovered through lack of class vigilance.

On July 20, Stokes marched in a parade to commemorate the people killed in the Hough riots of 1966. Marching with him were several men who wore bandoliers and carried carbines. ²⁶ Beginning on July 11, Evans and his men had begun to purchase from seven different gun dealers at least 13 rifles, including .22-caliber carbines, and two thousands rounds of ammunition. One of the men with Evans said at a gun store, "There's going to be a big smash in Cleveland." A neighbor of Evans said he saw cars with out of state license plates and men dressed in black nationalist attire carrying ammunition boxes and rifle crates to the alley by Evans apartment. On the afternoon of July 23, a fifteen year old boy and his mother saw about 20 men with rifles and ammunition in Evans backyard. When the boy asked what the guns were for he was told, "It started 200 years ago." ²⁸

Around 8 o'clock, councilman George Forbes and the director of the mayor's youth programs met with Evans in the alleyway beside Evans's house. Rumors were circulating

about trouble brewing and they were sent to diffuse it. They were shocked to see Evans with rifles and ammunition. After a talk, though, Evans told them to "tell the big brother downtown (Stokes) that everything will be alright."²⁹

It is necessary for every urban guerilla to keep in mind always that he can only maintain his existence if he is disposed to kill the police and those dedicated to repression.

Earlier, two cars of white police officers had been sent out in an unmarked car to do surveillance on Evans's home. After a couple hours they saw 10 to 12 people on Evans's front porch when Evans and three more men arrived in a car. Evans's group then went into the house and two or three minutes later a man exited carrying a carbine. Then Evans came out loaded with ammunition and a rifle, followed by 15 to 20 other armed men. "They grouped on the sidewalk all around Evans. And then they assumed a crouching position, cradling their carbines in their arms, and ran right towards us." 30

Ambushes are attacks typified by surprise when the enemy is trapped across a road or when he makes a police net surrounding a house.

Miss Edith Schepperd recalls she was sitting on her front porch reading a gospel tract when she saw a "handsome man with a black uniform and turban and straps of bullets around his waist." The man then "looked at two other men across the street and he smiled. He was putting bullets in his gun and he looked up, suddenly stiffened, and fired three shots."

The terrorist act...is an action the urban guerilla must execute with the greatest cold bloodedness, calmness, and decision.

Evans would later describe how the shooting started. "The beast was what we had come to call the police. I looked out and saw them...We were afraid they were going to come in with their tear gas and billy clubs...So we armed ourselves. And what followed was chaos....After we got our guns, it was every man for himself." 32

The urban guerilla's reason for existence, the basic condition in which he acts and survives, is to shoot.

The first man hit was a civilian tow truck officer who was wearing a uniform similar to a police officer. He had been standing by a car near Evans's home that he had an order to tow away. He ran from the scene while he was chased and shot at. ³³ A police ambulance man was hit as well as officers arrived on the scene. One patrolman described the scene. "We saw...a wounded policeman screaming for help...I heard rapid fire. The ground was blowing up with bullets hitting all around him...The firing became so intense it started to chop away a hedge near us. We returned fire and ran out of ammunition."³⁴ Another said that Evans's men had the advantage of height and yet another said, "With our service revolvers and shot-guns we were helpless" against the their high-powered automatic weapons.³⁵

The urban guerilla sniper is the kind of fighter especially suited for ambush because he can easily hide...on the roofs and the tops of buildings and apartments under construction. From windows and dark places, he can aim at his chosen target.

The shootout ended about an hour after it had started. Ten people had lost their lives, three policemen, three "snipers" and four civilians. Fourteen policemen had also been injured. Evans was eventually found a little after midnight unarmed in an attic on Lakeview and surrendered. He told officers where he had stashed his .30 M-1 carbine. One of the arresting officers said Evans asked him, "How many of my men died?" Evans was told three or four. Evans replied, "They died for a good cause."

The government has no alternative but to intensify repression. The police networks, house searches, arrests of innocent people and suspects, closing off streets, make life in the city unbearable.

The shootout was over but rioting and looting spread through Glenville and beyond.

Mayor Stokes pulled white policeman out of Glenville (much to their anger) and brought

in 3,000 Ohio national guardsmen to patrol the perimeter. Inside of Glenville Stokes sent in black community leaders much as he had done after King's assassination. Curfews were imposed, liquor sales stopped and traffic detoured. Although there was a great deal of property damage, into the millions of dollars, no more deaths were reported. ³⁹

Towards the end of the shootout a standoff developed at the Lakeview Tavern, from where shots had been fired. The account of what happened there illustrates how difficult it is to come to a clear conclusion of what did or did not happen through out the whole episode. According to the account of a police officer on the scene this is what happened. "I went into the Lakeview Tavern. There were people in there. They refused to come out. We had to throw tear gas in. About 12 came out." In answer to the question if any of those who came out of the tavern were hurt, the officer replied, "No, they all walked out." Did any policeman beat them or shot them?, "No". ⁴⁰

The accounts of those inside the tavern when the police came were much different.

The women inside were first brought out and then sexually assaulted. "The policeman ripped my clothes off me, he felt me in between my privates." The police then fired bullets and tear gas into the tavern and brought out the men who they then beat and berated. "We're going to kill this black motherfucker." After all this and after their prisoners had been taken away the police helped themselves to the tavern's liquor supply, drinking some of it right there on the street. 41

Soon after the shootout the debate began as to whether it was planned or spontaneous. Was it "a group of Negro revolutionaries" engaged in "guerilla warfare" or was it that Evans "just got tired of the police pushing him and blew his top"? ⁴² In Julius Lester's "Revolutionary Notes", Lester writes, "July 23, 1968 will have to go down in the history

of the black revolutionary struggle as a day of even more importance than July 25, 1967 (Detroit), and August 11, 1965(Watts). It was on a Tuesday night, July 23, that a small group of black men set up an ambush for the police in Cleveland. They set it well and carefully."⁴³ The Rev. Baxter Hill, head of an antipoverty group called Pride Inc., saw it differently. "This was no insurrection. The brother was mad and decided to fight. When an insurrection comes everybody'll be in it and we'll all know about it."⁴⁴

While being processed after his arrest Evans declared, "I am a prisoner of war and expect to be treated accordingly." He also said that although he shot at the police, and they at him, he didn't actually hit anyone because his gun jammed. A published statement Evans wrote called "Cause & Effect" read:

July 23^{rd} 68 came the same way as did the 22^{nd} . Except some people died in a somewhat limited war that was the same as untold number's of the same before it. And as usual know one knows how or why – and of course someone must bear the blame...And if you attend the trial to follow this incident – you'll notice the absence of the guilty party – providing you know the old gent...The guilty party as he has in the past sits in his overstuffed easy chair chumping on his twenty-dollar apiece cigar contemplating more of the same.

I bear no animosity.

Black people don't hate anything period – save their lot – in many cases identical to the policemen's wives. 46

The money that Evans and his group received from the Cleveland: Now! program came out in the press. Stokes's critics charged that the money amounted to blackmail paid to "those considered to be explosive elements...It was reported that concerned and respected Negro leaders helped to maintain communication and cooperation with the most dissident elements and get their help in averting incidents...But the financial support involved the risk that those responsible for it would become ensnarled if trouble blew up in the ghetto." ⁴⁷ Stokes was of course held responsible.

On July 26 first degree charges were filed against Evans for instigating the "sniper uprising." Along with the 37 year old Evans, Lathan Donald, 19, John Hardrick, 18, Alfred Thomas, 18, and Leslie Jackson, 16, were charged. The front pages of Cleveland's two dailies read "Ahmed Evans Charged in 'Massacre' of Police" and "EVANS IS CHARGED WITH RIOT MURDER."

As soon as a reasonable section of the population begins to take seriously the action of the urban guerilla, his success is guaranteed.

As Evans went to trial, he had supporters though. Evans "wore dark glasses, a red Afro robe, slacks and sandals in court" ⁵¹ and at a pretrial defense hearing he gave and received a clenched fist salute with about 30 black nationalists. ⁵² The UBFA, or United Black Front of Akron, demonstrated outside the court house claiming that Evans was the victim of an "insidious plot" perpetrated by the Cleveland and Akron police. ⁵³

The SNCC, or Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, offered to "aid and assist" Evans and establish a defense fund. They planned a campaign to put "the police under the guidance of the people of the black community." At the same news conference one speaker from the SNCC said, "We support Brother Ahmed in what he did, because that is the only kind of authority the police forces respect", while someone from the UBFA said, "Brother Evans is innocent of all charges. Brother Ahmed Evans has killed no one."

Students are noted for being politically crude and coarse and thus they break all the taboos.

The July 23 Defense Committee honored Evans during their "Week of the Political Prisoner Rally." Even a half dozen white youths passed out "Free Ahmed Evans" pamphlets. The pamphlets discussed a Newsweek article about an investigation of the

shootout by the head of Case Western Reserve University's civil violence center that was commissioned by the U.S. Justice Department. The CWRU investigation was critical of the police but was being withheld until the end of Evans's trial.⁵⁶

The trial of Evans was itself symptomatic of the environment in which the whole episode was played out. The defense charged that the news media had portrayed Evans as a "black Frankenstein" and that saturation news coverage made it impossible for him to get a fair trial in Cuyahoga County. The change of location was denied but the judge did sequester the jury. ⁵⁷ The 12 jurors and 3 alternates were chosen after lengthy deliberations. In a city which was 40% black and in a case charged with racial implications, all 15 were white. Evans's head counsel, Stanley Tolliver, summed it up when he told the jurors, "It is our conclusion that the composition of this particular jury poses no advantage to the defense."

Tolliver was a prominent civil rights lawyer who had worked on other high profile, racially charged cases. He and his assistant, a former county prosecutor, were both black. The prosecutor, John T. Corrigan, had been on the job over ten years and was a graduate of John Carol University and Western Reserve University law school. Corrigan, his assistant, and the judge were all white. Of the five, all except Corrigan graduated from Cleveland-Marshall Law School.⁵⁹

On May 12, 1969, Ahmed Evans was convicted of seven counts of first-degree murder and given the death penalty. He was spared the death penalty by the U.S. Supreme Court decision ruling it unconstitutional. While in prison Ahmed took up painting. ⁶⁰ Not even a year later, at the three day Black World Bazaar, Evans would have one of his paintings

titled "Daniel and the Lion" displayed. The gathering of various black business firms and artists was opened by Mayor Stokes.⁶¹

Stokes political career, though, was irrevocably damaged by the shootout in Glenville instigated by Ahmed Evans. Even though he was asked to give one of the nominating speeches at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago he was local appeal was shattered. ⁶² His administration had shown great promise in the early going in not only rectifying past discrimination but also in unifying the city, black and white. Whether there really was a way for Stokes to maneuver through the competing animosities is in the long run is doubtful. But by trying to keep Evans close, so as to keep him from exploding, he got blown up himself. The whole volatile situation was not of Stokes or Evans's making.

Ahmed Evans died of lung cancer in early in 1978 and his funeral was attended by about 150 at a funeral home on East 55th St. The coffin was surrounded by flowers and had two Black Muslim honor guards. A reverend who had visited Evans in prison challenged those present to seek to overcome crime and unemployment plaguing the black community. A black revolutionary from Dayton had other ideas. He didn't think Evans had died of cancer and warned that "for the benefit of the CIA, who may be here, his death will be avenged. It will be avenged by the young people who have been told to wait. The next generation will not wait." He also declared that the legend of Ahmed Evans would never be forgotten. ⁶³

Today, the legend of Ahmed Evans is forgotten. Whether one calls him a terrorist or a freedom fighter it's hard to see any lasting impact his actions had other than negative ones. The Glenville shootout derailed a very promising, young, African-American

politician who had shown skill in bridging racial divides. Large sections of Glenville were ruined by rioting and arson, particularly the commercial districts. What can be learned from Ahmed Evans is that actions have consequences. These consequences are not always predictable, but are inevitable.

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<sup>1</sup> The Cleveland Press, "From Evans to Ahmed: I Saw How Cheap Life Can Be..." (Cleveland: The
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