

# The States Must Be Crazy: Dissent and the Puzzle of Repressive Persistence

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# The States Must Be Crazy: Dissent and the Puzzle of Repressive Persistence

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According to forty years worth of research, dissent always increases repression whereas state coercive behavior has a range of different influences on dissident activity. If the outcome of government action is uncertain, why do authorities continue to apply repression? We explore this “puzzle of repressive persistence” using official records of U.S. government activities against the Republic of New Africa, a Black Nationalist organization active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, we investigate three proposed answers to the puzzle: repression is effective but in a way not currently considered; repression functions by mechanisms not hitherto considered by quantitative researchers; or those who use repression are not actually interested in eliminating dissent. We find that persistence in this case can be attributed to: 1) a long-term plan to eliminate challengers deemed threatening to the U.S. political-economy and 2) the influence of particular agents of repression engaged in a crusade against Black radicals. Both factors increased the likelihood of continued coercion despite short-term failure; indeed such an outcome actually called for additional repressive action. These insights open up a new area of research for conflict scholars interested in occurrence, persistence and escalation.

For approximately forty years, quantitative researchers have tried to understand the relationship between political dissent and state repression, commonly referred to as the “dissent/conflict-repression nexus” (e.g., Lichbach 1987). Understanding the interaction between dissident behavior and state repression is important because, at its core, it represents one of the most crucial elements of modern life – the former (dissent) identifying an effort to bring about political, economic, and/or social change by raising the costs of governance and the latter (repression) identifying an effort to create as well as protect the status quo by raising the costs of collective action. Essentially, two conclusions can be drawn from this body of work. On the one hand, dissent always increases repressive behavior (Cingranelli and Richards 1999; Davenport 1995, 1996, 1999; Davenport 2005; Davenport and Armstrong 2004; Franklin 1997; Gartner and Regan 1996; Hibbs 1973; King 1998; Poe and

Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999; Regan and Henderson 2002). On the other hand, repression has a variety of different influences on dissent. For example, it has been found to increase it (Gurr and Duvall 1973), decrease it (White 1993), alternatively decrease or increase it depending upon context (Boswell and Dixon 1990; Bwy 1968; Gupta and Venieris 1981; Weede 1987), decrease it over time (Rasler 1996), lead to substitution where one form is decreased while another is increased (Moore 1998; Shellman 2007), and have no impact whatsoever (Gurr and Moore 1997).

These results are puzzling and different researchers have attempted to explain the varied outcomes in diverse ways (e.g., using new data or a new method, or developing new theory) but the focus of the current paper follows from these puzzles: we seek to understand why, when the impact of repressive action on dissent is believed to be variable (i.e., the

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outcome of repression is not generally known), authorities would continue to use coercion? Are states “crazy,” repeatedly using a policy that does not always work or is their some method to the madness? Although current research does not explicitly address this question, when one consults the literature relevant to the topic numerous answers emerge, none of which have been examined explicitly.

Within this article, we explore three explanations for repressive persistence: 1) repression may work as a “regulatory” activity but not in the way currently examined; 2) repression may work differently than expected; and 3) government objectives may be different than currently theorized. To do this, we deviate from existing work and use a unique database on the interaction between the United States government and a Black nationalist organization called the Republic of New Africa (RNA) between 1968 and 1973. These data were compiled from records of fifteen different local, state, and federal policing organizations as well as a wide variety of other archival material, by the street address (spatial unit) – hour (temporal unit), for all events between 1968 (the founding of the organization) and 1973 (considered to be a low point for the organization, if not its end). Such a design is necessary to examine the competing arguments discussed above – something that is extremely difficult to accomplish within the traditional large-N framework. This design clearly complements other research, providing some insight into a puzzle that has lain unaddressed within conflict studies for quite a while as well as providing some directions for further investigation.

We find that in the case of the RNA it is best to view repressive persistence as part of a broader government policy to: 1) eliminate a behavioral threat (i.e., secession) which, if successful, could upset the political system and 2) sustain a particular ethic within the repressive apparatus that was largely anti-black as well as anti-radical. The existing research here assists us in understanding why repression is applied despite varied behavioral outcomes, returning us to some of the earliest theories where government coercion

was prominently featured. In the conclusion, we outline how such insights can be integrated into the large-N, quantitative investigations that currently predominate.

### 1. Understanding the Conflict-Repression Nexus

For most researchers in political science and sociology the interaction between governments and dissidents is one of dueling combatants (e.g., Dahl 1966; Hobbes [1651] 1950; Lichbach 1995; Machiavelli [1513] 1980; Pierskalla 2010). In this scenario, each actor attempts to influence the other by using diverse coercive strategies (respectively protest/dissent for challengers and protest policing/repression for governments), attempting to alter the opponents’ willingness to continue their current path of action. It is suggested within this work that if neither actor engaged in provocative behavior, then there would be no need for coercion. If nobody moved (i.e., challenged the other), then it is expected that nobody would get hurt, so to speak. If one side moved, however, then a counter-move is expected and some form of dissent/coercion would be applied. This would continue until one side quit or was defeated.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, challengers use certain tactics to raise the costs of political order, compelling authorities to withdraw from or engage in specific policies and/or practices. Here, sit-ins, petitions, strikes, demonstrations, terrorist acts, and insurgent attacks are expected to diminish the perceived legitimacy of authorities (through increased disruption within society) and political leaders are prompted to reassess the relative gains derived from giving in to challengers or persisting in their current activities. Given the objectives of challengers and the way in which challenging tactics are used, it is understandable that authorities engage in state repression when confronted with challenges. Such behavior is intended to protect established institutions, practices, and individuals or clear the way for new ones by raising the costs of challenging activity. Arrests, detention, verbal harassment, beatings, targeted assassinations, and mass killings alter the decision calculus of those in opposition. Consequently, movement participants are prompted to reassess

<sup>1</sup> There are other alternatives (e.g., exit/flight or accommodation) but these are not generally considered in the work discussed here.

the relative gains of giving in to authorities or persisting in their struggle.

Adopting the view described above, the research design employed to investigate the conflict-repression nexus is relatively straightforward. Generally, the influence of repressive and dissident behavior at time  $t$  is inferred from examining values of dissident and repressive behavior, respectively, at time  $t + 1$  compared to those at time  $t - 1$ . If dissent increases after repression has taken place, then repressive behavior is deemed “unsuccessful” because government coercive action did not diminish the challenger’s activity. If repression increases after dissent has taken place, then dissident activity is deemed “unsuccessful” because challenging behavior did not diminish government coercion. There are some variants on this basic theme. For example, most researchers consider contemporaneous impacts. In this context, the effect of relevant behavior is anticipated within a single unit of time. Such a perspective lies implicit within the work referenced; while none of this is discussed openly and in detail, it nevertheless follows logically.

Exploring a wide variety of places, periods, and operationalizations (for both behavioral challenges and repression), it is clear that conflict theorists have been partially correct in their characterization of what takes place. On the one hand, behavioral challenges consistently increase state repressive action (Cingranelli and Richards 1999; Davenport 1995, 2005, 2007a, b; Franklin 1997; Gartner and Regan 1996; Hibbs 1973; King 1998; Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Leith 1999; Regan and Henderson 2002). Certain types of challenges have a greater impact than others (e.g., violent behavior relative to non-violent activity, which further supports the threat hypothesis), but the basic finding is robust across examinations. On the other hand, findings are mixed with regard to the influence of repression on behavioral challenges – especially dissent, which is the focus of this article and the area that has received the most empirical attention. To date, researchers have found almost every relationship. For example, as Davenport states (2005, vii):

Confronted with state repression, dissidents have been found to run away (e.g., White 1993), fight harder (e.g., Eckstein 1965; Feirabend and Feirabend 1972; Gurr and Duvall 1973; Koran 1990; Khawaja 1993; Francisco 1996), and alternatively run away or fight (e.g., Bwy 1968; Gurr 1969; Gupta and Venieris 1981; Lichbach and Gurr 1981; Weede 1987; Rasler 1996; Moore 1998) – varying according to political-economic context. Additionally, work has been found where there is no response whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Puzzle of Repressive Persistence

To date, research investigating the dissent-repression nexus has been dedicated to understanding how the two forms of conflict influence one another. Building off this work, however, we take the conclusions of forty years worth of empirical research, accept its validity and attempt to understand one puzzle that emerges when all of this is viewed together: *given the mixed effectiveness of state coercion in diminishing political dissent, why would governments continue to apply repressive behavior?* This we refer to as the “Puzzle of Repressive Persistence.” Within research focused on the relationship between conflict and repression no explicit attention has been given to this issue. Reading this body of work creatively and drawing upon other areas of research, however, allows several arguments to be developed. To initiate this discussion, we present the most closely related argument emerging from the work of Ted Gurr (1988), which proves to be useful, but ultimately limited. Three extensions of this basic argument are then provided, the plausibility of which is explored in the RNA case.

### 2.1. Gurr’s Coercive State Thesis

Our investigation of Repressive Persistence begins with what appears to be among the oldest and most straightforward of explanations. In 1988, Ted Gurr sought to theoretically understand the circumstances that led to the creation and continuation of some of the most powerful organizations in human history and to generate testable propositions. One of these organizations, and the one most relevant to the current discussion, concerns state security forces. These are important because they engage in state repression.

According to Gurr’s argument, repressive behavior is enacted for two distinct reasons. In his first proposition, he argues that:

2 This work is not as robust as the one mentioned where dissent uniformly increases repression, as

findings are not as stable when different variables, methods, and contexts are applied.

States involved in recurring episodes of violent conflict tend (a) to develop and maintain institutions specialized in the exercise of coercion; and (b) to develop elite political cultures that sanction the use of coercion in response to challenges and perceived threats. (Gurr 1988, 50)

Following this logic, one could make the case that repression would be used by political authorities despite variation in behavioral outcomes (i.e., its influence on dissent, terrorism and insurgency) after these tactics have been employed because this is simply what institutions that specialize in “the exercise of coercion” do. From this perspective, repressive action sometimes works to reduce behavioral challenges and sometimes it does not, but repression would be applied regardless because this is what the actors and institutions engage in.

While moving in the right direction, we find this is a somewhat unsatisfactory answer to the puzzle identified above for two reasons. On the one hand, there is some variation in government repression against internal challengers that have been involved in “recurring episodes of violent conflict.” The US government, for instance, which clearly fits under the category of a recurring episode of violent conflict during the mid to late 1960s,<sup>3</sup> wielded repressive action against communists and the Black Panther party quite differently from how it responded to laborers (especially after the Wagner Act of 1935) and the Ku Klux Klan. On the other hand, the consequence of ignoring information about behavioral challenges likely varies across distinct actors. For example, for much of the Cold War anti-radical persecution was acceptable in the West but this was much less the case toward the end or immediately afterward. The result: just having a specialized institution that uses coercion does not seem to address the point about varying outcomes, leading to another proposition.

In the second circumstance favorable to repressive action, Gurr argues:

To the extent that coercive strategies lead to conflict outcomes favorable for the political elite, their preference for those strategies

in future conflict situations is reinforced. To the extent that coercive strategies have unfavorable outcomes, political elites will prefer noncoercive strategies in future conflicts (Gurr 1988, 50).

Here, governments repress in situations where they believe it will work for them (i.e., it is successful). What is “success”? Well, Gurr argues that “successful use of coercion enhances leaders’ assessment of its future utility” (1988, 49). What makes a political leader think that their future benefits would be great? While not exactly clear, it seems to be the case that this involves the containment and/or elimination of politically important rivals. As Gurr argues (1988: 47):

... all durable states of the modern world established and consolidated rule over their national territories by the successful use of force: by revolution; by suppressing rebellions and secessions; by forcibly subordinating and integrating, in diverse combinations and sequences, neighboring peoples, reluctant aborigines, ethnic minorities, lords and merchants, peasants and laborers, kulaks and capitalists.

Containment and/or elimination thus seem to be crucial for establishing and consolidating rule, and ultimately maximizing government utility, which appears to be the objective of governance and the principal conclusion of Gurr’s piece.

Gurr’s second proposition is a step in the right direction toward addressing the problem of Repressive Persistence, but it ultimately fails as an explanation because of a series of unresolved issues that remain.

First, it is unclear what constitutes “containment” and “elimination.” The latter seems clear: the entity making the claim against authorities is vanquished and disappears. The former seems less so. In the case of containment, the entity making the claim against authorities is limited somehow, tamed. Although Gurr does not argue this, it seems reasonable to argue that containment would be revealed if the challenger’s challenge was diminished in some way: i.e., reduced in frequency and/or degree of radicalization (the displacement of existing leaders from office as well as the magnitude of overall change desired).

<sup>3</sup> This judgment is made based upon the country’s experience with the War of Independence, wars against various Indian nations, the Civil War,

the labor wars, the struggle for civil rights and the black power movement, as well as diverse episodes of urban unrest.

Second, it is unclear what the relevant unit of analysis is within Gurr's discussion of successful repression. He appears to suggest that some kind of running evaluation is conducted, where contentious interactions at the nation-year unit of analysis are evaluated for relative success or failure and government actions are taken accordingly (i.e., repress or not). Where repressive action has been successful in the past (i.e., challengers were contained or eliminated), it will be employed in the future; where repressive action has failed in the past, it will not be employed. This is problematic in the sense that it is unclear how political authorities evaluate contentious politics. For example, how far back do governments look in their evaluations? Do governments consider all challengers together at the nation and year or simply those that are confronted at some local unit and some lower level of temporal aggregation? By what metric do governments evaluate their activities (in hours, days, weeks, months, quarters, years, or by campaign)? These issues need to be addressed and units of analysis should be clearly specified.

Third, there is a serious tension between the two propositions built into Gurr's argument. In the first, governments are completely irrational and ignore new information. In the second, governments are completely rational and follow new information perfectly. We believe that a reasonable response to Repressive Persistence should be clear on exactly what drives the explanation.

Fourth, it is not clear exactly what challenges Gurr deems worthy of attention. He appears to suggest that only challenges that could result in the complete disruption of the government would be worthy of consideration, but there is no reason to maintain this position. It is not apparent that governments know which challenges could result in their removal and/or significant modification. As a result, it is possible that they would keep their eyes on a wide variety of challengers.

The questions raised by Gurr's propositions are useful because the answers frame the various answers to the puzzle that we put forward below. Following from Gurr's argument we offer three possible explanations for repressive persistence.

## 2.2. Repression Works – But Differently than How It Is Typically Examined

The first answer to the persistence puzzle is that repression is effective but in a different way than currently considered. Most closely connected with the examinations of the dissent-repression nexus discussed above, there are three variants of this argument. In one, discussed by Rasler (1996), *the impact of repression is not contemporaneous but lagged* (i.e., repressive behavior at time  $t$  does not influence dissent at time  $t$  but much later [time  $t + n$ ]). Alternatively, Lichbach (1987) and Moore (1998) suggest that the impact of repression on dissent is not simply revealed where prior repressive action decreases subsequent dissident behavior as the literature generally maintains. Rather, it is argued that “substitution” exists where *repression decreases certain forms of dissent (generally violent behavior) while increasing other forms (non-violent behavior)*. A third variant of this argument highlights a different kind of substitution effect. Similar to dissidents engaging in different types of behavior, authorities may also use distinct methods of influence depending upon the threat faced. For example, *governments may attempt to accommodate certain dissident interests* – in some way incorporating challengers into the system or paying them off (Gamson 1975; Krain 2000). This is crucial to address because if one actor were exclusively focused on repressive behavior but ignored accommodative efforts, then it might mischaracterize the state's influence. In short, dissent might just as well be influenced by accommodation as repression.

## 2.3. Repression Works – But Differently than Theorized

The second answer to the persistence puzzle maintains that state coercion is effective but functions in a way that is not considered by quantitative researchers. This argument draws upon qualitative and historical literature on social movements and covert repressive activity (e.g., physical and electronic surveillance, informants and agents provocateurs [Marx 1988; Cunningham 2004; Davenport 2005]). In this work, the objective of state repression is not the reduction of overt dissident behavior but rather the “pacification” of dissident claims-making and/or the reduction of the various activities that dissidents engage in prior to contentious dissident behavior (e.g., meetings, the development and articulation of movement objectives, training, recruitment, and so forth). Here, authorities at-

tempt to substantively alter the degree of threat presented by challenges through reducing the degree of radicalism of group objectives (e.g., from revolution to reform) and/or preempting overt challenges.

This approach to the topic represents an important shift in how we understand the persistence puzzle, for it suggests that it is irrelevant whether actual dissident activity is modified by repression (e.g., the number of protest events observed and coded during a particular temporal unit). What is more important is what precedes and underlies these efforts at social change (e.g., what dissidents talk about wanting to do, how many dissidents show up, whether or not dissidents meet, and for how long).

To date, no systematic work has been done on this argument. While much research attempts to understand social movement trajectories (highlighting the use of the repressive tactics discussed above) and many attempts have been made to understand how and why covert repression is applied, no-one has rigorously tracked exactly how and in what manner covert repressive action influences claim-making or pre- and post-mobilization, thus addressing the punishment puzzle explicitly.

#### **2.4. Who Cares if Repression Works? A Different and Older Take on Persistence**

The third and final answer to the persistence puzzle suggests that those who use repression are not interested in eliminating dissent; in other words, there are other ends to which repressive action is put that outweigh the concerns of behavioral control. For example, drawing upon Durkheim's work on punishment (1933), it could be argued that repression is less about deterring or controlling dissidents than it is about unifying societal opinion (Walter 1969). Here, repressive action against deviance informs those not directly targeted about what is and is not deemed acceptable within the relevant community. In a sense, it is the (behavior and attitudes of the) general population that becomes the target of repressive control, not the behavior of specific challengers.

A diverse array of theorists most prominently represented by Marx and Pushakianis (Garland 1990), but including others as well (Chomsky and Herman 1979; Donner 1990;

Petras 1987; Pion-Berlin 1989; Stanley 1996) suggest that techniques of punishment like repression are less about behavioral regulation than about protecting specific political-economic relations (i.e., protection rackets). In this case, repressive behavior serves as a mechanism by which those who benefit from particular exploitative relationships are allowed to continue in their exploitation.

A different variant of the argument returns to Gurr but extends his proposition. In Gurr's first proposition repression would be continued because this is what specialists in coercion do. One could also view the occurrence of persistence despite varying behavioral outcomes as a form of bureaucratic extension (Foucault 1977; Gurr 1986). Within the work just identified above, authorities are less attuned to the vicissitudes of dissident behavior than they are to the internal dynamics of repressive and governing organizations themselves. For example, it is expected that once repressive organizations have been created and become active, employees will have a vested interest in perpetuating the use of coercive action. As a consequence of this, one would likely see increased attempts to institutionalize and extend the application of repression to greater numbers of problems (e.g., Lustick 2006). This is less tied to how institutions initially came into being than what any self-interested institution will do to maintain its access to resources. With little to no disaggregated data on the subject, there has been no consideration of this explanation (but see Cunningham 2004 for an important exception).

#### **3. (Re)Configuring the Analysis of State Repression**

In order to rigorously investigate all of the arguments made in the last section, a new approach to repressive behavior is required. For example, according to the first explanation offered above (repression works – but differently than it is typically examined), repression would be most likely at the beginning of a dissident campaign or in direct response to the number of dissident activities initiated, trailing off over time. If repressive behavior is repeatedly applied without dissident behavior, however, or if repression precedes dissident activity, then this suggests that authorities are not waiting for lagged effects. Alternatively, repressive behavior would be most likely applied when the most threatening forms of dissent appear and prior to any switch in dissident

tactics. After the tactical shift has taken place or in situations when the most threatening behavior has diminished, repression is expected to be withdrawn. Finally, in a different variant of this argument, repression would be most likely applied when accommodative policies are non-existent. When such activities are undertaken, then repressive behavior is more likely to be reduced. This suggests the need for an alternative empirical specification which accounts for these possible variations in repressive activity.

Examination of the second explanation for the persistence puzzle (repression works – but differently than theorized) requires other considerations. In this case, one must identify and examine pre-mobilization challenging activity and look for changes – both contemporaneously as well as over time. Repression is expected when pre-mobilization is increasing or at a high point. State coercive behavior is withdrawn when pre-mobilization is pacified (i.e., made less radical) and/or significantly diminished in efficiency (i.e., when fewer people attend, when greater numbers of fearful expressions are made and when fewer individuals participate).

Finally, the third explanation for the puzzle of repressive persistence (those who use repression are not interested in eliminating dissent) compels researchers to consider factors other than contentious politics. For example, in one variant of this argument one must focus on the influence of repression on public opinion. In another, individuals must focus on the structure of the political economy, exploring the degree to which repressive action protects/extends these arrangements. In the third variant, researchers must focus on the influence of repression on the repressive apparatus itself (e.g., its morale, its access to resources and the impact on the interaction with political-economic elites).

#### **4. The Republic of New Africa vs. the US Government**

From the discussion, it is clear that the standard investigation of the dissent-repression nexus is ill equipped to address the insights provided by the diverse arguments highlighted in the last section. Toward this end, we outline the state-dissident interaction of interest to this study, addressing the challenger, the government's response to them and then the data collection effort that facilitated the analysis.

#### **4.1. We Shall Overthrow: Black Power and Freeing the Land**

The social movement whose behavioral challenge we concentrate on was named the Republic of New Africa or RNA. Disgruntled with the ineffectiveness of the civil rights approach to modifying American attitudes and conditions, observing a continuation of white violence despite the adoption of certain laws, and influenced by the political theorization and strategies of Malcolm X, a small band of Detroit-area activists joined with Black Nationalists from around the United States (e.g., the Revolutionary Action Movement and the Deacons for Defense and Justice) and founded the RNA on March 31, 1968 (Obadele 1995).

The primary objective of the Republic of New Africa was to establish African-American independence from the United States government; specifically, it sought: 1) land for the establishment of an independent country in the deep South: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina (the so-called "Black Belt"); 2) a plebiscite among Blacks in order to determine the "national status" of the "New Afrikan population in North America"; and 3) reparations for the treatment of Blacks as slaves (Republic of New Africa 1968). The strategy was clearly articulated. For example, the RNA would take advantage of a numerical concentration of African Americans to secure the election of diverse public officials who were supportive of the Republic. Once in power, these individuals would appoint sympathizers to the cause as well as members of the Black Legion (the military unit) in order to protect and serve the African American nation – effectively deputizing an army and initiating a technique of electoral secessionism. Following domino theory, the RNA would start with one locale and then progressively move through the other states. If, at any time along this path, the US government attempted to block any of these efforts, then the organization threatened to employ guerilla warfare in inner cities throughout the country until they were granted what they desired. Differing from most secessionist groups, the RNA did not try to hide their strategy. The objectives and plans were communicated via RNA press release, speeches, and publications as well as through interviews on radio and television and in popular magazines like *Esquire*.

To accomplish these objectives, the organization engaged in many legal forms of protest: rallies, petitions, political education courses, food drives, lectures, conferences, and the publication of “independent” newsletters/papers, as well as other activities long-established in Black communities (e.g., armed “self-defense” programs [deacons]). The group also engaged in efforts to legally separate parts of the United States: it began purchasing land in Mississippi for the capital of the new nation, elected a government, and attempted to develop a security force/army – the Black Legion (an admittedly small unit with limited military capability). To signify the independence they sought, members adorned themselves with African cloth and many changed their “slave” names to alternatives befitting liberated individuals. Members of the Republic also engaged in diverse illegal and violent activities: robberies, shootouts with police, shooting practice, plots to bomb state and federal buildings, and even a plane hijacking.

#### 4.2. Repressing the “Negro Threat”

Unsurprisingly, the United States government (in and out of Detroit) did not sit idly by in the face of the RNA – regardless of how improbable the group’s objectives might seem now or might have seemed at the time. The authorities were well aware of what was at stake and took the group seriously. An FBI memo from Detroit to Chicago published in 1973 (File #157-907, section 55), identified the RNA as being “engaged in activities which could involve a violation of Title 13, United States Code (USC) Section 2383 (Rebellion or Insurrection), 2385 (Advocating Overthrow of the Government), Title 22, USC, Section 401 and 1934 (Neutrality Matters) and Title 18, USC, Chapter 12, Section 231 (Anti-riot laws)”. As such, the RNA threatened the core aspects of the US government and civil society. Set against the backdrop of summer riots that resulted in millions of dollars worth of damage, dozens of deaths, and increased racial tension throughout most cities in the United States – especially in the North – the potential threat was immense.

The US government applied a wide variety of techniques against the RNA in order to identify, counter, and/or eliminate their behavioral challenge; overt techniques such as arrests, raids and grand juries were employed by the police

and courts (Earl 2003; Goldstein 1978; Wolfe 1978). Such an approach followed a general pattern established across most cities during the time – commonly referred to as the “escalatory force” model (McPhail, Schweingruber, and McCarthy 1998). Covert activities by police and intelligence organizations, including wiretaps, physical surveillance, informants, and agents provocateurs, were also employed (Marx 1988; Cunningham 2004; Davenport 2005). These strategies were employed to identify who was involved in social movements, as well as how they were recruited (so that these processes could be disrupted), what activities challenging organizations were involved in (frequently ahead of time so that authorities could pre-empt them), and to identify as well as counter any behavior deemed worthy of attention.

The question most relevant to the conflict-repression nexus is, how did this repression influence the RNA? According to most research, repressive behavior was generally effective in eliminating this social movement. For example, Pinkney, highlighting overt repressive behavior, notes (1976, 125–26):

Since its inception the Republic of New Africa has encountered friction wherever it has attempted to operate. ... In August [of 1971] the headquarters [which moved from Detroit to the South] was raided by Mississippi policemen and agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. During the raid two policemen were wounded by gunfire. ... The incident in Mississippi has ... signaled the demise of the Republic of New Africa.

Brisbane offers a similar account (1974, 184–85). Highlighting covert repressive activity, Tyson notes that “the COINTELPRO operation, the FBI’s effort to disrupt and divide the Black movement, often by illegal means,” took a toll (1999, 303–4).

While insightful, it is problematic that these accounts are not based on any detailed investigation of the topic. Although they demonstrate generally that repression was effective at decreasing RNA dissident activity, it is not exactly clear how well individual instances of repression succeeded in influencing relevant behavior, which is the core unit of analysis for empirical research on the topic. To understand the influence of repressive behavior on social movements, therefore, one has to rigorously investigate the subject.

### 5. Researching the Republic of New Africa

Our primary source for our investigation of how repression influenced the RNA comes from what is commonly referred to as a “Red Squad” file. These records are compiled from diverse organizations principally city-based but extending up to state and federal levels and across diverse aspects of governments: police departments, judicial institutions (e.g., the Justice Department and district courts), intelligence organizations (e.g., FBI, CIA, State Department, and the Army), and the Internal Revenue Service. The objective of the Red Squad was twofold: 1) to monitor behavior that was deemed radical in its intent, violent, or relevant to “national security” (Donner 1990, 3) and 2) to eliminate targeted organizations.

The RNA records housed at the [self identifying reference] include files from Detroit Police Department (Special Investigations, Demonstration Detail, Intelligence Division, Inspectional Service Bureau, Security Unit, Detective Division, Criminal Division, Public Complaints Division, and Tactical Reconnaissance), the Michigan State Police (Special Investigation Bureau, Special Investigation Unit), the Internal Revenue Service, the US Department of State, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. From these files, repression of the RNA was coded to identify the type of activity undertaken by state authorities (e.g., instances of physical and electronic surveillance, wire-tapping, and the forging of letters by authorities), the identity of the organization involved in the action, the number of agents involved, location, date, and time. Event type is subdivided into two areas: overt repressive action (e.g., arrests, raids, and harassment) and covert repressive action (e.g., physical and electronic surveillance).

Coded characteristics of dissident behavior include the type of activity undertaken by RNA members (e.g., business meetings, fundraising, shooting practice, riots, demonstrations, political education courses, petitions, speeches), the identity of individuals in attendance and their participation in the organization’s activities, number of people in attendance, location, date, and time. This is relevant for the current research, because it allows us to gauge the influence of arrests and instances on dissident behavior where informants are suspected, if meetings are

held, how many people were present within them, how many people spoke at these events, what did they speak about as well as what did the relevant personnel do (e.g., talking, training, lecturing, leafleting, protesting, taking target practice, and so forth). Equally as important, we can do this by the week, as well as explore lagged values from the relevant date. This is important for we use the week as the principal unit by which government considers its effectiveness (a concern raised by our discussion of Gurr). Such an approach seems reasonable for the police appeared to employ this unit in their compilations.

In addition to the event-based information we rely upon other materials as well to contextualize what we observe. For example, the archive contains police and civilian reports about the period, an extensive compilation of local and national newspaper articles about the RNA and police activity against them, some public opinion surveys conducted around the period of interest, as well as Republic of New Africa records such as internal memos, personal letters, flyers, posters, and a biography of one of its leaders. Over the last few years there has also been a respectable amount of scholarship generated about the black nationalist movement. We utilize the information contained within these records as well to engage in something of a plausibility probe of the various propositions identified above. This is done because given the complex nature of the arguments put forward it would be very difficult to apply the type of analysis most commonly used when examining the conflict-repression nexus, with a standard statistical model and cross-national database. In the conclusion, we return to how the present study might speak to more conventional analyses.

### 6. Probing the Persistence Puzzle

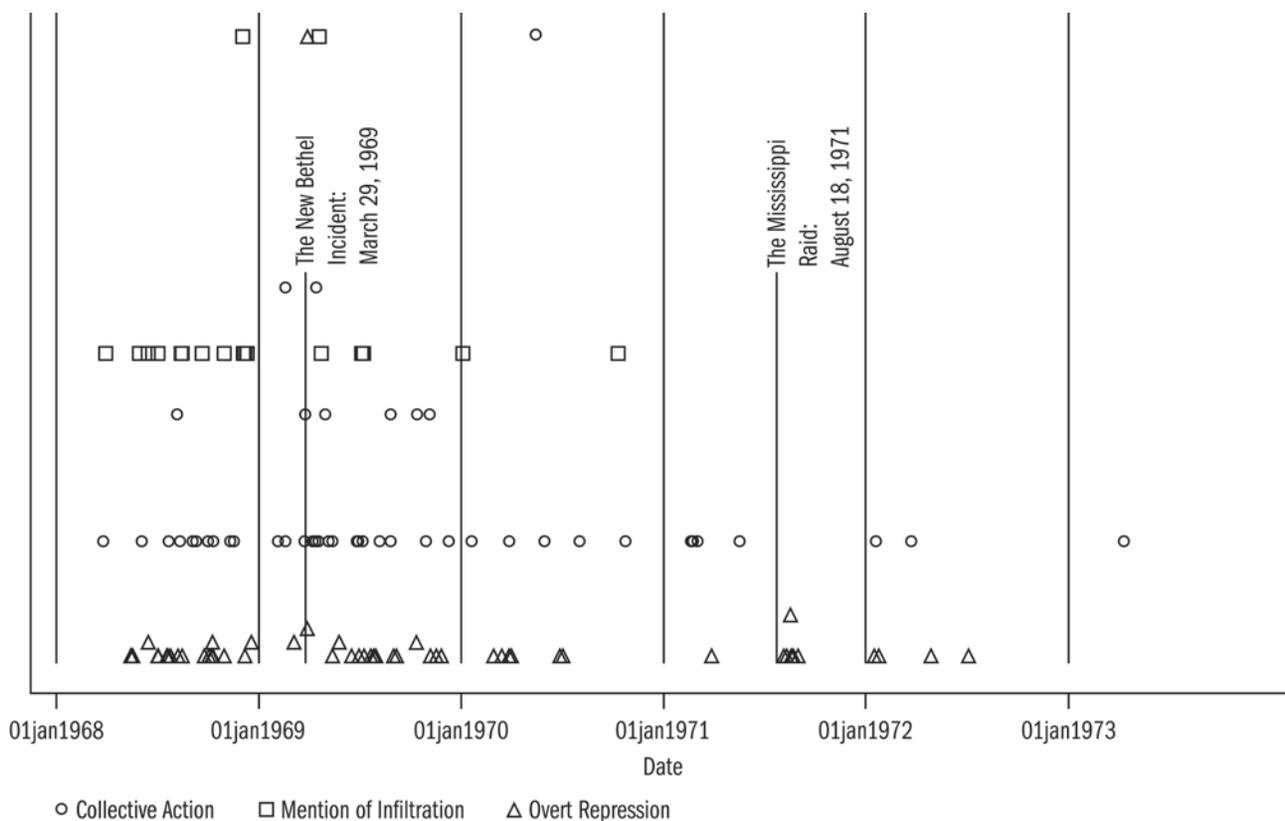
Viewing the data, it is clear that neither individual acts of overt or covert repression led to a decline in dissident behavior as expected by the conventional view (i.e., there is no straightforward indication of “success”). For example, as one can see in Figure 1, the arrests and raids that took place on July 3, 4, 18, 21, and 25, as well as August 8 and 16, 1968, did not prevent dissident behavior on August 27 and again on September 10 and 15. The basic argument is also undermined by the fact that the raid and mass arrest at New

Bethel (on March 31, 1969) – by far the largest and most severe repressive act of the period – prompted the most extensive dissident response, continuing from April 1 to November 9, 1969. By the time of the raid and arrests in Mississippi during August 1971, the basic story was quite different. Now there was no growth in dissent after repression. Indeed, barring a few later protests, RNA collective action was almost finished by that point. This is perhaps the

**6.1. The Unconventional View: Delayed and Tactical**

The first explanation for the persistence puzzle was that repressive behavior continues despite dissent because: 1) the objective of authorities is long-term and not short-term in nature; 2) the objective of authority is a tactical shift away from radicalism not a reduction in all dissident behavior; and 3) authorities perceive no other alternatives.

**Figure 1: Contentious activity by the RNA and the US government**



only place where repression worked as most scholars suggest (decreasing dissent after repression was used).

Having identified the varied outcomes of repression, the question remains: Why would coercive behavior be applied consistently despite its ineffectiveness in behavioral regulation?

**6.1.1. Effectiveness Deferred**

The delayed impact thesis would lead us to expect some form of overt repression as the initial response to overt dissident behavior and for there to be a state response with either breaks between episodes of coercive action (so as to allow the repression to take its effect) or for repressive behavior to be clustered temporally with dissent gradually

diminishing over time. In the case of the relationship between RNA dissent and US authorities, Figure 1 shows that while dissident behavior decreases over time, it is difficult to attribute such a result to the delayed effect of state behavior.

For one, repressive behavior does not respond to RNA activity, challenging the state-responsivity argument. One can see that after the founding convention, the Black Nationalist organization engages in dissident behavior in roughly six distinct periods within which at least one event takes place every two weeks: 1) March 29–30, 1968; 2) June 8–November 21, 1968; 3) February 8–August 31, 1969; 4) October 18, 1969–January 24, 1970; 5) April 1–June 4, 1970; and 6) sporadic events from August 5, 1970, through April 15, 1973, after which activity wanes. In their attempt to counter the RNA, the authorities are approximately two months too late: the first arrests are in May of 1968. The delayed response of the authorities to dissident behavior appears to be a pattern. Thus, it is only at New Bethel (the first anniversary of the RNA) that the police respond immediately to increasing activity.

After New Bethel (which involved a massive raid and mass arrests following a shooting that left two officers dead), arrests continue for quite some time, responding to the increased collective action of the RNA. Again, arrests decrease but this takes place amidst another increase of RNA activity in April (on the 12th, 17th, 18th and 23rd). As the dissident challenge continues into May (4th and 11th), this prompts another wave of police activity on the 13th, 25th and 26th of the same month. Challenging the delayed response thesis in a different way, another wave of repressive behavior in Detroit around the time of a Mississippi raid in August of 1971 represents sporadic arrests completely unrelated to dissident behavior, which was also taking place infrequently both before and after the arrests.

### 6.1.2. Substitution and Shifting Tactics

Investigation of this case supplies little support for the substitution argument either. If the RNA were influenced as advocates of this position suggest (following overt repressive behavior conceived as either events [Lichbach] or episodes [Moore]), then one would see a decrease in one tactic

(e.g., violent or non-violent behavior) and an increase in another (respectively, non-violent or violent activity). This appears to ignore information about what the objectives of the different activities were however.

For example, the RNA was initially committed to focusing its efforts on establishing its “nation” within the deep South. All discussion and preparation (e.g., speeches, military training, conferences, workshops, and community meetings) concerned this activity and location. By 1971, however, the RNA had given up this rather large-scale, ambitious plan and focused on merely purchasing land in Mississippi for the establishment of a city-state as well as conducting a preliminary plebiscite; this would serve as the platform from which they could move back to the broader plan (Obadele 1995). This tactical shift is important for it supports specific aspects of existing research while significantly challenging others.

Indeed, one could argue that Detroit-based repression of the RNA was successful because it compelled the Black radicals to move their base from Detroit to New Orleans (in May 1970). The organization still maintained a chapter in Detroit, but it moved its leadership and headquarters to the new location. While reducing the cost of collective action, in line with the conventional conception of repression, the geographic change was also undertaken to facilitate the move to the South (directly related to the organization’s ultimate objective and clearly most radical goal). From the new home base, with support as well as participation from the Detroit chapter, the RNA purchased land in Mississippi and began to educate and train members throughout the organization for the next stage in state-building. At the same time, the RNA also began to reach out to the residents of Mississippi. Repression thus pushed the RNA not *away from* but *toward* radical behavior in an outcome that is inconsistent with the expectations of existing research.

### 6.1.3. Sticks as well as Carrots.

Regarding the third variant of the unexpected influence argument, it is clear that political authorities did not apply any other tactic against the RNA. By the time the Republic of New Africa emerged, the federal government was em-

phasizing a “law and order” approach to poverty and civil unrest. This involved significant resources being given to police organizations, training in counter-dissident activity, and the granting of extensive leeway with regard to the use of coercive practices. In many respects, the context facilitating repressive behavior was most prevalent during this period (Goldstein 2000).

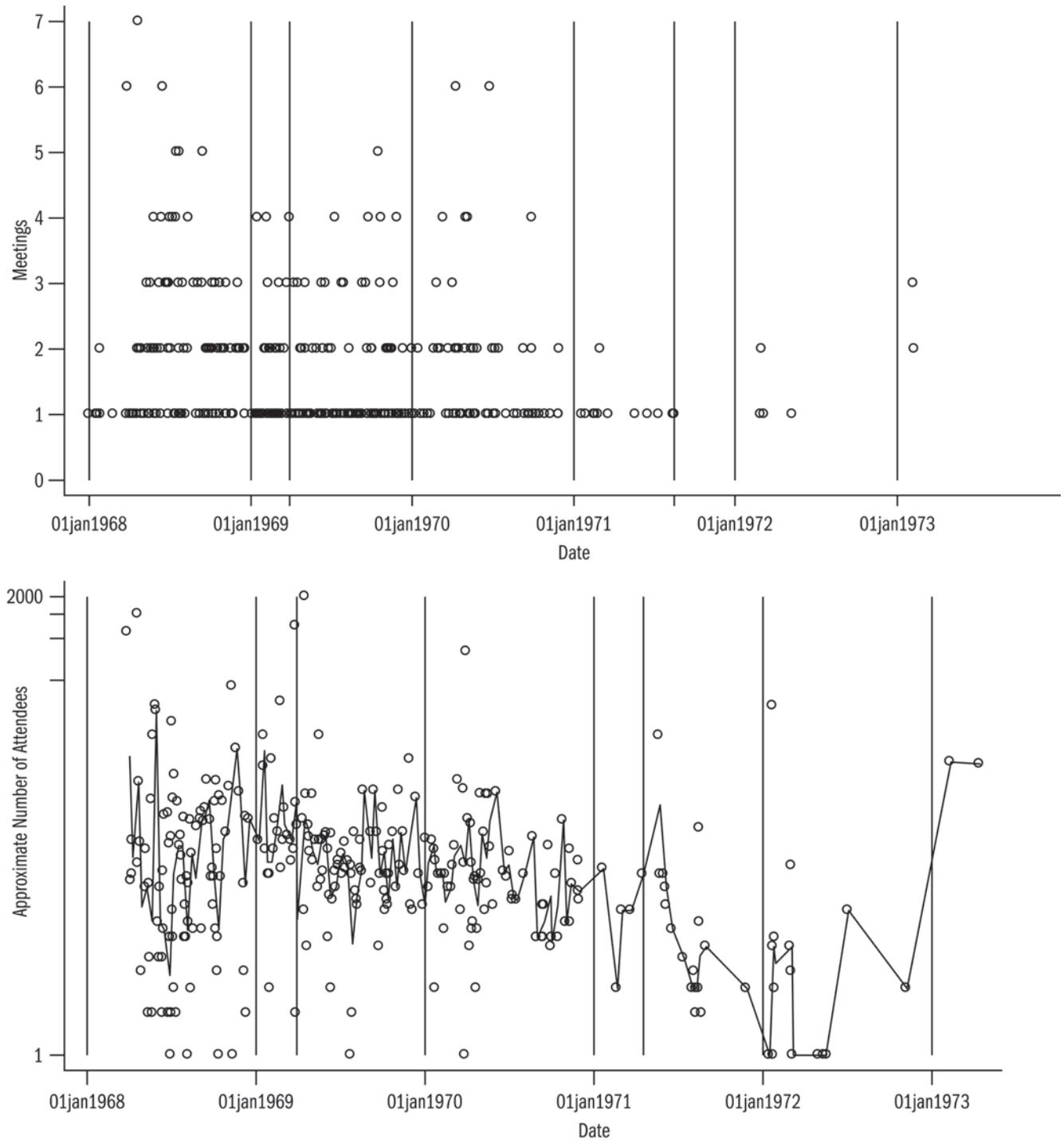
### **6.2. The Unexpected View: Pre-mobilization and Objective Management**

The second explanation for the persistence puzzle is that repressive behavior continues because its actual targets are those engaged in challenging behavior (i.e., challengers) not the challenges themselves (i.e., the challenging behavior). Here, state behavior is expected to limit RNA efforts at establishing and sustaining collective action, and diminish the radicalism of their objectives.

#### **6.2.1. Patterns in Pre-mobilization**

Observing diverse aspects of RNA behavior such as meetings and number of event attendees (Figure 2), one can see that despite consistent mention of infiltration (covert repression) and several arrests (overt repression) – shown above in Figure 1, the organization initially increased the number of meetings and the number of attendees per meeting. Indeed, as Robert F. Williams (the first president of the RNA) noted: “Sometimes it was hard to tell the infiltrators from the idiots” (Tyson 1999, 204). However, this did not dampen the mobilization efforts. But around November 24, 1968, one can also see that prior to the New Bethel incident the values diminish across both characteristics. This suggests that the lagged influence of repression was effective at weakening the RNA organizationally but not in any easily observable way.

Figure 2: RNA Pre-mobilization activity



As seen in the figure, the New Bethel incident in late March 1969 represents an interesting period. Members came to Detroit from all over the United States for the first anniversary of the RNA. In the context of the declining characteristics mentioned above, it appears that the meeting could not have occurred at a better time to reinvigorate the organization. New Bethel also represented a prime opportunity for the authorities to confront the African American dissident organization. With organizational characteristics declining (i.e., the number of people attending), one large raid with mass arrests and extensive interrogation could potentially produce tremendous amounts of information about the organization. Additionally, living through such an experience could intimidate the victims and, through media coverage of the events, potential recruits. Not only was the RNA's largest meeting to date completely disrupted (a disaster for the organization), but the shooting of the police officers and the magnitude of police sanctions that followed was expected to turn public opinion against the RNA.

From the record, the actual aftereffect of New Bethel was mixed, thus complicating the assessment of government repression. On the one hand, the raid and arrests galvanized the members – slowly increasing the number of meetings held and the sheer breadth of participation by organizational members, supporters, and the curious (i.e., greater numbers of those attending spoke and/or engaged in whatever activity was being undertaken, such as leafletting). On the other hand, the events set in motion a gradual decline in the number of attendees at organizational functions. In line with the “Radical Flank Effect” (Della Porta 1995), mobilization increased but the actual number of individuals involved in these activities decreased.

By March 29, 1970, amidst a wave of police action, the number of meetings and number of people actively speaking at events had begun to decrease again. Again, the effect of the police activity appears mixed. After this time, there were essentially no RNA meetings open to the public, just some special sessions of the governing council and miscellaneous get-togethers. Toward the end of the time series, after the last few arrests, there is a brief increase in number of meetings and number of attendees as the organization attempted to withstand this effort at disruption. These

were short-lived however. Very soon there were no activities reported at all.

### 6.2.2. Killing Claims

A second variant of the unexpected view maintains that authorities persist in their repressive efforts despite varying successes at behavioral regulation because the actual objective is to control dissident claims not behavior. In this theory, authorities are concerned with eliminating the most radical dissident goals. Evaluating the historical record, this does not appear to be the case. In line with the earlier discussion of tactical shifts, repression did not alter the RNA's objectives. They were always interested in setting up a Black nation, signified by their consistent use of the phrase “seize the land” at all meetings and in most publications. In fact, repression actually seemed to accelerate the RNA's plans, prompting them to attempt to try to get Ocean-Hill Brownsville to secede in mid to late 1968 and their decision to move to Mississippi in 1971, much earlier than anticipated (i.e., the timetable was advanced).

In this context, one might expect political authorities to persist in their use of repression against the RNA despite varying behavioral outcomes, because the black radicals were advancing their political agenda. We tend to disagree with this, however, because there is simply no evidence that RNA claims were a topic of discussion within police documents and thus there is no support in these sources for the claim-kill argument, at least not on a day-to-day basis. We do, however, see indications that the US government was utilizing laws concerning the RNA's attempt to overthrow a sovereign government as a pretext for engaging in repressive action. This does suggest that at a broader, more aggregate level the content of the RNA's challenge was relevant to government action.

### 6.3. The Unconcerned View: Protecting and Serving, not Countering and Eliminating

In different ways, the previous two explanations for repressive persistence are largely connected to behavioral regulation: the first through an impact on overt collective action and one aspect of the second through an impact on pre-mobilization. Both presume that an evaluation of dissident behavior (its frequency and trajectory) is taking

place over some unit of time and space. Exploring different influences, we find that the arguments identified above are not well supported. In an attempt to discover what is really taking place, we extend the kill claim argument further and consider an alternative explanation.

On almost every dimension, it is clear that the RNA represented a serious threat to the United States political and social system, thereby meriting persistent repressive effort. It did not, however, threaten all aspects of the system equally, and this variation is important.

### 6.3.1. For the People

The symbolic order argument revolves around teaching lessons to specific subjects about proper behavior and likely responses to deviance. When threatened by political dissent, authorities engage in repression not to counter and/or eliminate challengers but to communicate to non-participants that this form of political activity is illegitimate and that they will be sanctioned for engaging in such behavior. We find evidence that this was the lesson intended for African Americans. Specifically, political leaders at the local, state, and federal levels realized that the mobilization potential for organizations like the RNA was significant and that repressive action might prevent them growing in their appeal. We are aided in this investigation by a number of public opinion surveys conducted in Detroit during the period under investigation.

Concerned with the causes and aftereffects of the July 1967 riot, the Detroit Free Press (1968) conducted a random probability sample survey of African American attitudes in August of the same year. A follow-up repeat study was conducted in October of 1968. As the RNA was created on March 31, 1968, it comes into existence right between the two surveys. Given that it was engaging in diverse activities at the time without any high-profile repressive activities, if the proposition outlined above were correct we would expect to find a growth in sentiments favorable to the RNA: Black separatism, Black ownership, ethnic pride, distance from whites in particular and the United States in general.

Examining the surveys, we find some support for the general argument regarding a favorable context for the RNA

and the need for continued repressive behavior despite varying behavioral outcomes revealed within the government's data. The DFP survey shows that from August 1967 to October 1968, Blacks generally felt that they had more to lose by engaging in violent action (from 53 to 63 percent) and that if war broke out the United States was worth fighting for (from 67 to 77 percent). However, there is also a clear finding that a specific subset of African Americans expressed interest in organizations like the Republic of New Africa. The research discloses that among rioters in 1967 (10–12 percent of all respondents), non-religious individuals and the young were more likely to support Black nationalism, measured as accepting a “militant” position, avoiding whites socially, fighting with other African Americans for rights, and building a separate Black society apart from whites in the United States or Africa.

While there are no explicit measures of repression in the survey, the authors do note a precipitous increase from 57 to 71 percent in the number of respondents who identify police brutality as a problem that could lead to another riot. These results present an interesting paradox: repressive action may be necessary to close the window for additional radicalism by eliminating the challengers but the use of this behavior could be associated with open the window further by provoking the disengaged.

Of course, the surveys discussed here represent only two slices of a much more complex and dynamic pie. Implicit within this type of examination is the argument that the logic behind persistence associated with lessons is changed slowly, whenever modifications are provided in popular opinion. What carries the explanatory weight in between these alterations, however? For this, more and perhaps different information is needed. We return to this below.

### 6.3.2. For the Cash

The essence of the economic argument concerning repressive persistence is that government applies coercion consistently despite short-term failure to regulate behavior because it is attempting to protect economic relationships over the long term. The relevance of this explanation seems limited given the objectives of the RNA and its small degree of success in realizing those objectives.

In theory, the RNA threatened the US economy in different ways. Basically, the organization was interested in providing the six essentials of decent human life for its black constituents: food, housing, clothing, health services, education, and defense. Hostile to the basic principles and practices of capitalism, the key to the RNA's plans was a collective, full-employment strategy like in a socialist system. Here, every individual would work at their chosen profession not for profit but for the greater good of the collective. Clearly this economic strategy was a longer-term objective, but its essence fundamentally threatened the legitimacy of the US economy. In addition, potentially removing the African American from the marketplace would have significantly damaged the American economic system, especially given the sheer size and spending patterns of this community.

One could argue that although the US economy was not substantively directly threatened by the actions and/or rhetoric of the Republic of New Africa, the symbolic challenge was significant. The RNA represented a socialistic, all-Black movement whose success might prove to be a challenge for a government and economy that had major problems meeting the needs of African Americans. While this may be true, the available historical evidence appears to focus on explicitly political factors: nationhood, weapons, military training, and the potential for violence. The government records on the RNA discussed their economic plan in principle, but, again, the day-to-day records discussing what the Republic was doing paid very little attention to their economic activities. This makes sense as the primary focus of the organization concerned government infiltration, avoiding arrest, and paying the rent. Similarly, political factors were essential components of the RNA program. Equally important, however, a group of government institutions throughout the United States were specifically prepared to identify, monitor, and respond to the behavioral threat presented by the RNA. This is discussed below.

### 6.3.3. For the Troops

Instead of teaching lessons to the general population or protecting economic relations, the third argument attributes repressive persistence to coercive agents themselves, as initially introduced by Gurr (see above) but modified/ex-

tended. Here it was argued that state coercion continues despite failure to regulate behavior because of the habitual patterns built into repressive institutions carrying out relevant activity and permissiveness for such activities within governing elites. When applied to the Detroit case, it is clear that while coercive institutions were extremely important for understanding the persistence of repressive action, in an interesting twist, it is also revealed that the agents of repression were able to continually apply coercive action in spite of regulatory failures *because of the failures themselves* and because of the ability of the relevant government organizations to manipulate the situation for their own purposes. In a sense, repressive persistence is attributed to a crusade of government agents to “fight the good fight” where every failure became yet another reason and opportunity for them to prove themselves. Such an argument is a departure from Gurr, who he maintained that coercive institutions would simply ignore inconsistent information or that prior successes would guide subsequent behavior.

In order to understand the role of coercive institutions in repressive persistence within our extension of Gurr's argument, we must begin by noting that the authority's response to the RNA emerged during a special period in American and Detroit history. At the time, the general level of threat presented by black unrest was significant throughout the United States. During this period, the United States was struck by one of the largest rises in violent crime in its history. The sheer severity of civil unrest added another, more politicized dimension to this threat. In Detroit, the riot of 1967 represented nothing less than a watershed in local-level challenges to public order and repressive action. The damage caused by the event and the authority's response was extensive by any measure. During the riot, forty-three individuals were killed, hundreds wounded, and there were millions of dollars of property damage. In reaction, approximately 7,200 individuals were arrested, the city was essentially occupied, and numerous curfews and other restrictions on civil liberties were imposed for weeks after the event.

While the magnitude of the police response was significant, in many ways it was “too little, too late.” Prior to 1967, three separate reports by the community-police commis-

sion highlighted the racial tensions in the city and the potential for violence (Jacobs 1977, 145). In addition, there was a pervasive belief among patrolmen that the “riots” were not disorganized; rather, it was argued that they reflected a coordinated strategy of Black radicals such as the RNA to disrupt urban America. The event was important precisely because it (re)emphasized the perception that Blacks were a threat and that white people’s fears were legitimate. This provided the motivation for repressive action (of almost any type and level of lethality) as well as permissiveness for such behavior – despite failures.

As a direct result of the riot, two important dynamics emerged. First, “(r)acial conflict [moved to] the heart of all Detroit-based politics” (Farley et al. 2000, 46). Second, whites largely moved out of Metro Detroit to the suburbs, leaving the urban environment to the Blacks and the predominantly white and southern police department. This movement was particularly problematic because the historically insulated policing institutions of Detroit were already engaged in a rather heated battle with its geographically isolated Black residents. As Donner notes (1990, 291):

A number of cities, of which Detroit is a prime example, reflected in their police structures and target priorities a similar “urban pathology”: a decaying Black ghetto, ... the emergence of potentially violent Black and white groups, and the development among white policemen of a “siege mentality” against the Black community. ... after the ghetto riots of the late sixties, self-help and violence inevitably came to be regarded in both camps – police and ghetto – as a vital means of survival. “Law and order” became a coded battle cry as the police were transformed into an army defending white power and the status quo.

Exacerbating this, the diverse units that confronted the RNA were the ones most removed from ordinary police duties; the various sections of the “Red Squad” had very little contact with other parts of the department and had essentially no oversight. Such a pattern continued after the riots, as increasingly aggressive special units emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s: e.g., the “Big Four” and “Stop Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets” (STRESS). These programs resulted in a large number of hostile Black-police interactions, several deaths of African Americans, and significant inquiries by citizen as well as government committees.

In addition, in the lead-up to the riot, Detroit police department was engaged in a bitter fight with the Mayor of Detroit, which it won. After an at times extremely contentious dispute (involving ticketing slow-downs and “sick-ins” where officers would call in sick en masse and city lawsuits to prevent any disruption of law enforcement), the Mayor’s office settled with the police right before the riot, on terms as diverse as “seniority, grievance procedures, management rights, vacations, leaves [and union recognition]” (Bopp 1971, 172). Bargaining amidst a hostile interaction with the Mayor and confrontation on the streets significantly enhanced the collective identity of the police. It is in this context that a need to prove its worth and a lack of political accountability allowed repressive persistence to occur. Indeed, seemingly under siege and fighting the “good fight” to preserve an essentially white order over the black threat, governing authorities were exempted from having to justify any short-term lack of success of repressive activities. Here, the “show” of force was sufficient to appease both the agents of repression, the principals who unleashed as well as stood over these agents, and the white constituency to which both were loosely accountable.

## 7. Conclusion

For the last forty years, researchers investigating the relationship between dissent and repression have produced the same contradictory findings. On the one hand, individual acts of dissent always increase acts of repression but, on the other hand, individual acts of repression consistently have different influences on dissident behavior. While many scholars analyzed one of the two components of the relationship (either the influence of repressive behavior on dissent or vice versa), no-one has yet attempted to explain the question that emerges when both results are considered simultaneously: when the outcome of repressive efforts is largely uncertain, why would authorities continue to use coercion (presumably in an effort to decrease dissent) – what we refer to as the puzzle of repressive persistence? Are states crazy or is there some method to the madness? This article sought to explore this issue by identifying diverse explanations and examining one of the most thoroughly documented state-dissident dyads available – the interaction between US authorities and the Republic of New Africa between 1968 and 1973.

Specifically, considering an event catalog as well as diverse historical documents covering the state-dissident interaction, we investigated three different answers to the puzzle. One suggests that repression works but that it has been examined inappropriately (through lags, substitution effects, and the fact that governments use other techniques). A second explanation posits that repressive behavior may work but in a way different from that examined. Here, it is expected that repression influences pre-mobilization (meetings, recruitment, and objective formation). A third explanation suggests that individual acts of repression are not applied to influence dissent; rather, they are applied to sustain the identity of the agents.

Considering the US-RNA case, we find the most support for the third explanation. While individual acts of repression do not immediately decrease dissent, the magnitude of the threat posed by a radical Black Nationalist organization was significant, as was the insulated and combative identity of Detroit-area policing organizations. Indeed, these factors reveal not only why the repressive campaign against the RNA was initiated but also why it continued despite the varying effectiveness of state coercion.

From the work provided here, a new set of hypotheses emerge, which require further investigation beyond the case explored here. For example, if the argument above is correct, then we should expect to see varying acceptance for repressive failures across contexts. Citizens as well as leaders within authoritarian systems should be more accepting of failures compared to democracies, as the former are not subject to citizen scrutiny, evaluation, and punishment at the ballot box. At the same time, even within democracies, we would also expect that when a behavioral challenge is significantly threatening, authorities may be able to persist despite repressive failures – at least for a time, as long as they can show some effort toward, if not evidence of progress. The exact nature of the threat, the duration of time that states can fail without repercussions, and the meaning of non-events (success or no evidence at all) are all issues that require consideration.

In many respects these are not new issues for social scientists; rather, they are new for the current generation of con-

flict researchers as the present way of investigating relevant behavior has become largely divorced from the theories explored here. Indeed, questions of state responsiveness to citizen electoral threats are mainstays within the literature. What the research in this article reveals, however, is some of the tensions in this work. For example, if governments are to respond to behavioral challenges directed against them and if citizens are expected to evaluate their leaders regarding the appropriate/effective use of repression, then it is crucial to understand precisely how these two interact. If citizens believe that challenges are severe enough, then they may be willing to tolerate significant amounts of repression, but if information concerning behavioral threats and the repressive action directed against them are both provided by authorities, then this may not represent much of a check on their activity. If the media is censored in some manner and/or information is withheld from citizens, then this further undermines political accountability. How long can information about dissent, repression and behavioral effectiveness be withheld from citizens without electoral and/or attitudinal aftereffects? If authorities manipulate information about dissent and behavioral regulation, what are the repercussions? These questions reveal that the puzzle of persistence sits not only at the core of conflict studies, but at the core of more broadly defined political science.

In addition to challenging the topics that are explored in existing research of state repression, the current work also prompts researchers to alter what they collect information on. At present, scholars are focused on vague nationally-aggregated structural characteristics. Our work suggests that researchers should attempt to understand the objectives and interests of both principals (e.g., politicians) and their agents (e.g., police, military, intelligence service, and militias). As a community, we have been more focused on the former than the latter but there are still limitations. With the former, we are not very good at understanding what is perceived by the relevant actors or how they understand/explain what is done. With the latter, we know very little about those that pull the trigger, beat the protestor, and/or torture the victim. Newer work is pushing in this direction (e.g., Cunningham 2004; Butler et al. 2007) but clearly more effort needs to be extended toward understanding why governments agents do what they do. This involves not

just looking at these actors functionally as to how they relate to the state but also viewing them organizationally, psychologically, as well as sociologically. With these ad-

ditions, our investigations into repression, its withdrawal, its escalation, and its persistence would be immensely improved.

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