

# "Seize The Time": The Black Panther Party

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*"To die for racists is lighter than a feather. But to die for the people is heavier than any mountain and deeper than any sea."*

--Huey P. Newton

In the United States, white Americans historically have almost totally dominated the power structure. White Americans have economically, politically and socially controlled the system. Consequently, they have attempted to maintain a status quo which has led to the subordination of minority groups; In other words, blacks don't have power. Even the mention of the words "BLACK POWER" antagonizes and scares most white people in the world. "Black Power" is a revolutionary concept that has caused controversy and unrest in the nation. "Black Power" is stereotyped as a die-hard militant ideology in which only black radicals believe. The Black Panther Party served as one of the most articulate groups concerned with the black power concept. The Black Panther Party was criticized for advocating violence and the overthrow of capitalism in the U.S. However, when you examine the history of the party, you will see that the Panthers were not really radical at all. The Black Panther Party was a group of revolutionaries who developed solid leadership and a legitimate platform for social change.

The Black Panther Party started during the latter stage of the civil rights movement, which has been labelled the "Black Power Phase." During the late 1960s, some black activists became discontent with civil disobedience or passive resistance as a means to achieve social change. Civil disobedience involved the use of *satyagraha*, peaceful persuasion designed to appeal to the consciences of people. Later, organizations changed to *duragraba*, which is tactical nonviolent direct action protest designed to dramatize racial injustice and force the federal government to react. The limitations of civil disobedience surfaced as nonviolent protesters were beaten in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. The Black Panther Party rejected nonviolence as a means to uplift African-American citizens. They also provided new insight into tactics for social change and introduced a new era in black political thought.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense organized in October 1966 in Oakland, California. The Panthers

adopted the idea of revolutionary nationalism—the belief that black people should work together to overcome oppression in the United States. Revolutionary nationalism also involved the use of self-defense in order to protect a people fighting for their economic, social and political liberation. The Black Panther Party believed in the importance of mobilizing the masses of black people. They criticized the NAACP for being elitist and overlooking lower-class blacks in their work. Although the Panthers began in California, they organized chapters in cities nationwide. The Black Panthers were dedicated to the uplift of disadvantaged black people by implementing breakfast programs for children and organizing clothing drives for the poor.

The Black Panther leadership included some of the most controversial

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*The Black Panthers were a band of visionaries operating on a "soul force" that white America just couldn't understand...*

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black activists in the nation. The party was started by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Bobby Seale, a former soldier, served as chairman of the Black Panther Party. Huey P. Newton, a former student activist, served as Minister of Defense. In 1967, Eldridge Cleaver, an ex-convict, became Minister of Information for the Panthers. The Black Panther Party also attracted several members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was started in 1960 to coordinate the efforts of student activists. Two former SNCC chairmen, Stokely Carmichael and H. "Rap" Brown, became prominent Black Panthers. The Black Panther Party also attracted black female activists, including JoAnne Chesima and Angela Davis, two women who appeared on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) most wanted list.

The Black Panthers developed a 10-point party platform, which articulated their goals, and was, in effect, a plan by which black people could uplift themselves. Panther leader Huey Newton articulated the party's goals in his book *To Die for The People* Published in 1972. Newton said:

1. We want power to determine the destiny of our black community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our black community.

4. We want decent housing fit for shelter of human beings.

5. We want history that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service because they should not have to defend a government that doesn't defend them.

7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.

8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails because they did not receive fair trials.

9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried by a jury of their peers.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

The Panther platform was not radical

or racist in any way. In fact, the 10-point program articulated the goals of many of the civil rights organizations of that time period. The Panthers had very rational and obtainable goals designed to help black people. People rejected their ideas because of their methods of achieving social change.

All Black Panther Party members were classified as outside agitators trying to stir up trouble. Americans have always feared people who have revolutionary ideas. This is a fear which has grown out of the Nativism concept—a rejection of immigrants and foreign ideas. Sometimes persons with different ideas would be considered outsiders, even if they were Americans. People with radical ideas usually are "red-baited" (an attempt to dilute the strength of a civil rights organization) or stereotyped as Communists. Americans generally believe that all revolutionary ideas stem from communist party affiliation. As the Black Panthers organized more chapters and gained followers, the more they were classified as dissidents with communist ideas.

The FBI became convinced that the Black Panther Party had to be stopped. The FBI, led by J. Edgar Hoover, instituted a Counter Intelligence Program designed to destroy black nationalist organizations. The program, called "COINTELPRO," was aimed at so-called

white hate groups, such as the Black Panthers. Counter Intelligence activities were originally aimed at alleged communist sympathizers during the Red Scare. Cointelpro included a wide-range of illegal and immoral activities by the FBI. They tapped the phone lines at several Panther offices and tampered with their mail—a federal offense. The FBI also fabricated letters in order to cause splits within the Panther organization. The letters contained information designed to make one member become upset with another. The FBI also infiltrated the Panther organization with *Agents Provocateurs* who worked inside of the organization as phony Panthers..

Many Black Panthers also were harassed constantly by FBI members. They were arrested and jailed for petty crimes such as traffic violations. Bobby Seale was arrested under a 1887 law that outlawed guns near jail. Several Panthers were framed for murder, armed robbery and inciting riots. Black Panther Ericka Huggins was arrested and charged with assault to commit murder in 1969. The New York 21 was a group of Panthers charged with conspiring to bomb department stores. Several Panther offices across the country were raided for no apparent reasons. The FBI raided or sent police to raid offices in many cities including Oakland, California; Seattle, Washington; Newark, New Jersey; Denver, Colorado and Des Moines, Iowa. In fact, police raided 31 Black Panther headquarters in 1969.

Cointelpro directly and indirectly led to the deaths of dozens of members of the Black Panther Party. Sometimes the FBI plotted the assassinations of prominent leaders of the Black Panther Party, and in other instances, the FBI worked with Ron Karenga's "US Organization," which advocated cultural nationalism and opposed the Panther's idea of revolutionary nationalism. Denzil Dowell was killed by police in Richmond, California in 1967. Bobby Hutton was killed in a shootout in 1968 in Oakland. Otis Baskett was killed in 1968 by police in San Francisco. Ralph "Bunchy" Carter and John Huggins were gunned down in 1969. Chicago Panther leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed by police in December of 1969. In total, 28 Black Panthers were killed from 1967 to 1969.

The Cointelpro operation was successful in creating rifts between Panther members and destroying its

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