

Poverty is greater threat, activist says

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OGDEN, Utah — Two decades separate Elaine Brown from her leadership role in the Black Panther Party, but her top concern remains the same: America's growing disparity between rich and poor.

"That was the agenda of the Black Panther Party and that is my agenda today," Brown told a Weber State University audience of 350. "We have more in common than not."

Brown, who took over the Panthers from Huey Newton in the 1970s, added on Thursday: "We were not a racist organization."

She said the Panthers' true goal was to unite the economi-

cally oppressed, and the group coordinated with Chinese-Americans and Latinos as well as poor whites.

"When we did that we became, as (late FBI director) J. Edgar Hoover called us, the single greatest threat to the United States of America," she said.

The Panthers unraveled in the late '70s, and Brown eventually left the country, spending six years in France. She says she returned to a country still painfully divided by race.

"This country has not embraced the black population, and the reason is we have not reviewed the slave history," she said. "If this country wants to heal itself seriously, it will have to address the crimes of the

past."

Brown pointed to American legends lauded for their moral fortitude as examples of sterilized history.

Abraham Lincoln wanted to return emancipated blacks to Africa, she said, and slave owner Thomas Jefferson referred to blacks as "beasts of burden."

"We have rewritten history to clean it up," she said.

Brown noted that many in the mostly white audience likely felt no culpability for slavery.

"Whites say, 'It's not my fault,' and it's not," she said. "But truly, you have benefited."

What she wants now is a public apology from the federal government.

Waters goes her own way

Continued from page 1A

Her upbringing in St. Louis as one of 13 children in a welfare family living in public housing stoked her affinity for the underdog.

"I'm one of them," Waters, 58, said in an interview.

Waters, first elected in 1990, emerged as a spokeswoman for blacks after rioting in the spring of 1992 that followed the Rodney King verdict tore up parts of her district — including her legislative office.

While Republicans often are the prime targets of her rhetorical lashes, the fourth-term congresswoman has struck out at Democrats as well. When the Clinton administration hailed passage of a bill granting workers unpaid leave for family and medical needs, she said "poor people cannot afford to take off from work without pay" and called for paid leave.

Waters also opposed President Clinton's North American Free Trade Agreement, fearing job losses in her poor south-central Los Angeles district, and was one of six Black Caucus members to vote against his crime bill. "I don't think that anybody

should have a muzzle on them," she told a Los Angeles radio station in 1993.

She jumped on Republicans for blocking Clinton's economic stimulus package early in his first term, accusing them of insensitivity. "Philosophically, they just don't believe in investing in poor people," she said.

She shouted, "You're out of order. Shut up!" to Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., when he refused during a Whitewater committee hearing to halt his sharp questioning of the first lady's chief of staff — Maggie Williams, a black woman.

Eddie Williams, president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington think tank, said Waters is "one of the most thoughtful, articulate and forceful leaders on Capitol Hill today."

"Her presence, I think, will raise the voice of the caucus like perhaps no other in recent years," Williams added.

Payne, her predecessor, agreed.

"She's an outstanding person who'll do a superb job," he said.

Her plans include issuing a formal Black Caucus agenda,

partly to hush critics who think the group has become ineffective. But the fact is that the caucus lost much of its clout and access to the leadership when Republicans gained control of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections.

Along with the traditional issues, Waters said the Black Caucus will pay special attention to the spread of drugs and HIV-AIDS in black communities, bias against black farmers, creating jobs, fixing crumbling schools and helping small and minority-owned businesses.

The caucus' 38 members are Democrats. Rep. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, the only black Republican in Congress, has refused to join.

Although the caucus survived the first two years under Republican rule, some observers are looking to the fiery Waters to shake things up as the 105th Congress starts to pick up momentum.

"In this particular era ... race issues are going to get short shrift if somebody doesn't throw some flames," said Ronald Walters, a University of Maryland political scientist.

Black role in Revolution probed

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GAFFNEY, S.C. — They were soldiers, spies and guides, blacksmiths and carpenters. But documenting blacks' roles in the Revolutionary War is difficult because records are scarce and finding even a few facts takes hours of research.

Thousands of blacks took part in the Revolutionary movement in the South — some on the patriot side and many more for the British, who promised to free the slaves.

Now, historical fragments are helping flesh out a powerful story that has largely been overlooked. And scholars like Donald Williams, who recently found a dozen names of blacks who fought in 1781 at Cowpens, hope the momentum grows.

"I'm pleased I've been able to do something useful to help all people understand more of their heritage," said Williams, who teaches at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. "This can be valuable to everybody."

One man Williams researched was James Anderson, an escaped slave who joined the army under Gen. George Washington. Anderson fought in the Carolinas at Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse, and when the Revolution ended, he fought Indians on the Kentucky frontier.

The findings will be used in an interpretive program this summer at Cowpens National Battlefield in Cherokee County. The Cowpens battle marked a significant victory of Continental army troops and backwoods militia under Daniel Morgan over a larger force of British regulars.

Williams' list also will be

used in programs for area schoolchildren.

Also this summer, the Revolutionary War experiences of a slave known only as Watt will be the focus of two programs at Historic Brattonville in York County.

Chetter Galloway, curator of African American studies for the York County Historical Commission, has tried to provide more context.

He knows that Watt warned his owner, Col. William

Bratton, about the approach of a British force under Capt. Christian Huck in July 1780.

And he is fascinated that the slave, who could have joined the British and been set free, remained loyal to Bratton.

Gathering even the barest facts is hard because "the scarcity of records is unbelievable," said Galloway, who digs in libraries whenever time permits.

"It's a real challenge, but I won't give up," he said. "I'm hooked."

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