

Introduction

Deep unrest marked the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Resentment against the US involvement in Vietnam fueled riots in major cities and protests at universities. The civil rights movement grew in intensity as African Americans, American Indians, Mexican Americans, and women demanded equal rights and better economic opportunities. Blacks and many other minorities expressed fear and resentment of municipal police departments, few of which had more than a token number of minority officers. On August 28, 1963, over 200,000 people, mostly blacks, marched on Washington, DC, to hear Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" oration at the Lincoln Memorial. Despite King's popularity, militant blacks challenged his nonviolent, Gandhian approach to attaining civil rights. In August 1965, the National Guard was called out to help quell six days of protests and riots in Watts, a large black section of Los Angeles. The very popular black leader Malcolm X was murdered in 1965, and the following year forty-three American cities—including Washington, DC; Baltimore; Atlanta; and Detroit—experienced race riots in which over 3,500 persons were arrested and 7 killed.

Within this context of social and political unrest, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in Oakland, California, in October 1966.¹ They appropriated the black panther symbol from Alabama's Lowndes County Freedom Organization²

and composed the Black Panther Party Platform and Program (BPP), entitled “What We Want; What We Believe.”³

With few exceptions, the wants stated in the BPP Ten Point Program were universal in nature. All people want (1) freedom, (2) full employment, (3) an end to their exploitation, (4) decent housing, (5) a true history of themselves, (7) an end to police brutality, (9) trial by a jury of peers, (10) land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. Point 6, the exemption of all black people from military service, and point 8, freedom of all black men held in prison and jails, were specific to African Americans, who believed that their historic experience of slavery and the injustices in the American criminal justice system justified their claims that involuntary military service and imprisonment were unfairly oppressive.⁴

The Black Panther Party became part of the American black power movement, formed by black citizens who rejected their subordinate positions in society and wanted to self-determine their lives, control economic resources, gain political power, and achieve better living conditions.⁵ Because they regarded the police and white racists as enemies of the people, they insisted on the right to arm themselves for self-protection. By so doing, the BPP joined the long history of African American individuals and organizations who engaged in armed self-defense.⁶ The Panthers organized watches to prevent police from engaging in callous or brutal behavior toward black inner-city residents.

The iconic image most Americans associate with the Panthers is militant: Huey Newton sitting in a large, throne-like cane chair, wearing a black beret, black turtleneck and leather jacket with a bandoleer across his chest. He holds a rifle in one hand and an African spear in the other. In an interview Newton downplayed the weaponry and pointed out the shield at the foot of the chair, maintaining that it better symbolized the purpose of the BPP: “to shield our people from the brutalities visited upon them by the police and other racist institutions in the society.”⁷

The Panthers’ stress on self-defense and service to the black community captured the imaginations of young blacks across the United States. Soon BPP chapters cropped up in many major cities. Similar to other African American individuals and organizations (for example, Father Divine, Garveyites, Nation of Islam), the Panthers organized “survival programs” that included free breakfast for schoolchildren, free health clinics, rent strikes against slumlords, and clothing drives for those in need.

In addition to focusing on domestic issues, the party developed a strong international orientation, allying with anti-colonial movements and peoples subjected to oppressively, discriminatory governments.⁸ They supported all peoples' struggles for freedom from repression.

Evolving Panther Ideologies

In December 1966 Eldridge Cleaver was released from Folsom Prison and paroled in San Francisco. He joined the BPP and became its minister of information and one of the party's most eloquent spokespersons. He wrote that "the ideology of the Black Panther Party is the historical experience of Black people . . . interpreted through the prism of the Marxist-Leninist analysis by our Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton. . . . One of the great contributions of Huey P. Newton is that he gave the Black Panther Party a firm ideological foundation that frees us from ideological flunkeyism and opens up the path to the future—a future to which we must provide new ideological formulations to fit our ever changing situation."⁹

This is not to imply that everyone in the party followed Newton's instructions or agreed fully with his pronouncements. There were often sharp differences between the West Coast Panthers, headquartered in Oakland, California, and the East Coast Panthers in New York. As Eldridge Cleaver writes, "The Panthers were never a tightly run, cohesive national body. Metropolitan groups would spring up, using our name . . . but their operations were often vague and their motivations puzzling. Discipline was constantly a hassle and enforcement a real challenge for people running the party."¹⁰

Newton wrote that, "when we started in October 1966, we were what one would call black nationalists."¹¹ Influenced by the early writings of Malcolm X, Garveyites, and the W. E. B. DuBois Club of America, Newton then believed that the suffering at the hands of others would end when African Americans established a nation-state of their own.¹² He advocated taking land from the United States to create a separate state for American blacks. Later he realized that was impractical. He considered a movement of American blacks to Africa, but concluded that Africa was too foreign a place for people who had been deprived of their African language and culture. Since all of the earth's livable land surface was already claimed, establishing a new nation-state required the power necessary to take land from others. Realizing that the BPP and African

Americans alone would be incapable of doing this, and believing that class not race was critical, in 1969 he changed the party's identity and goals from those of black nationalism or separatist nationalism to revolutionary nationalism.¹³

Revolutionary Nationalism

Part of the reason for the rejection of cultural nationalism may have been the Panthers' confrontations with other black nationalist groups. Early in its history, the BPP clashed violently with Maulana Karenga (aka Ron Everett, b. 1941), a self-described cultural nationalist and leader of US (United Slaves) Organization, who advocated for a separate state for blacks and the adoption of African culture. In the late 1960s, the US Organization and the Panthers vied for control of the African studies program at UCLA. In their confrontation, two US members shot and killed two Panthers.¹⁴

David Hilliard, one of the BPP's first members and its chief of staff, commented on the party's new self-identity as follows: "We call our position 'revolutionary nationalism,' as opposed to 'cultural nationalism,' which limits the struggle for self-determination to appearances—dashikis, African names, talk about 'new nationhood' and the black nation. . . . We won't free ourselves through steeping ourselves in an African past and folklore but by aligning ourselves with other liberation fighters."¹⁵

Newton reasoned that white racists are able to oppress black people because they control the means of production and profit from maintaining a black underclass.¹⁶ To effect real change, the reigning economic system of capitalism had to be replaced with socialism. Newton realized that capitalists exploited people regardless of color and that many whites (communists and socialists) who opposed capitalist exploitation were also genuinely concerned about racism. Furthermore, Newton saw that black capitalists exploited poor blacks, just as white capitalists did. Consequently, he changed Point 3 in the Panthers' Ten Point Program to read: "We want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black community." The original version had read "robbery by the white man."¹⁷ Newton contrasted revolutionary nationalism to the reactionary nationalism of the cultural nationalists, who viewed whites as the oppressors, whereas he regarded the capitalist class as the oppressor.

The revolutionary element of the BPP was heavily influenced by inter-