

Huey P. Newton (1942-1989)

He founded the Afro-American Society and was a co-founder of the Black Panther Party, serving as its minister of defense during much of the 1960s. Later he turned to community service for the poor.

Huey P. Newton was born February 17, 1942, in Monroe, Louisiana. The youngest of seven children, Huey was named for former Louisiana governor Huey Pierce Long. The Newton family moved to Oakland, California, in 1945 to take advantage of the job opportunities created by World War II wartime industries. In Oakland the family moved often, and in one house Huey was compelled to sleep in the kitchen. Even though the Newtons were poor and victims of discrimination and segregation, Huey contends that he never felt deprived as a child and that he never went hungry.

Huey attended the Oakland public schools where, he claimed, he was made to feel "uncomfortable and ashamed of being black." He responded by constantly and consistently defying authority, which resulted in frequent suspensions. At the age of 14, he was arrested for gun possession and vandalism. In his autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton wrote, "during those long years in the Oakland public schools, I did not have one teacher who taught me anything relevant to my own life or experience. Not one instructor ever awoke in me a desire to learn more or to question or explore the worlds of literature, science, and history. All they did was try to rob me of the sense of my own uniqueness and worth, and in the process they nearly killed my urge to inquire."

According to Newton, he did not learn to read well until he had finished high school. "I actually learned to read--really read more than just "dog" and "cat," which was about all I could do when I left high school--by listening to records of Vincent Price reading great poetry, and then looking up the poems to see how the words looked." In order to prove that high school counselors were

wrong in saying he was not college material, Newton attended Merritt College intermittently, eventually earning an Associate of Arts degree. He also studied law at Oakland City College and at San Francisco Law School.

Newton claimed he studied law to become a better burglar. He was arrested several times for minor offenses while still a teenager and he supported himself in college by burglarizing homes in the Oakland and Berkeley Hills area and running the "short change" game. In 1964, at age 22, he was convicted of assault with a deadly weapon and sentenced to six months in the Alameda County jail. Newton spent most of this sentence in solitary confinement, including the "soul breaker"--extreme solitary confinement.

While at Oakland City College, Newton had become politically oriented and socially conscious. He joined the Afro-American Association and played a role in getting the first black history course adopted as part of the college's curriculum. He read the works of Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara. A child of the ghetto and a victim of discrimination and the "system," Newton was very much aware of the plight of Oakland's African-American community. Realizing that there were few organizations to speak for or represent lower class African-Americans, Newton along with Bobby Seale organized the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in October 1966, with Seale as chairman and Newton as minister of defense. Like a wary panther that would not attack unless attacked, so too was the organization regarded.

Cop-haters since childhood, Newton and Seale decided the police must be stopped from harassing Oakland's African-Americans; in other words, to "defend the community against the aggression of the power structure, including the military and the armed might of the police." Newton was familiar with the California penal code and the state's law regarding weapons and was thus able to convince a number of African-Americans of their right to bear arms. Members of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense began patrolling the Oakland police. Guns were the essential ingredient on these patrols. Newton and other Black Panther members observed police procedure, ensured that African-American citizens were not abused, advised African-Americans of their rights, and posted bail for those arrested. In addition to patrolling the police, Newton and Seale were responsible for writing the Black Panther Party Platform and Program, which called for freedom, full employment, decent housing, education, and military exemption for African-Americans. But there was a darker side to the group, described in Former Panther Earl Anthony's book, *Spitting in the Wind* as a party created with the goal to organize America for armed revolution. Moreover, Washington, D.C., intelligence spent many years trying to bring down what they believed to be "the most violence-prone of all the extremist groups."

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Huey Newton proved to be as violent as the party he helped to create when he was thrust into the national limelight in October 1967; accused of murdering Oakland police officer John Frey. In September 1968 Newton was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced to two to 15 years in prison. In May 1970 the California Appellate Court reversed Newton's conviction and ordered a new trial. After two more trials the State of California dropped its case against Newton, citing technicalities including the judge's failure to relay proper instructions to the jury.

After his release from prison Newton overhauled the Black Panther Party, revised its program, and changed its rhetoric. While he had been imprisoned, party membership had decreased significantly in several cities, and the FBI had started a campaign to disrupt and eventually bring down the Black Panthers. Abandoning its Marxist-Leninist ideology, Newton now concentrated on community survival programs. The Black Panthers sponsored a free breakfast program for children, sickle-cell anemia tests, free food and shoes, and a school, the Samuel Napier Intercommunal Youth Institute. However, as before, the Black Panthers were not without controversy. Funding for several of their programs were raised as the result of the co-operation of drug dealers and prostitution rings.

Newton tried to shed his image as a firebreathing revolutionary, but he continued to have difficulty with the police. In 1974 several assault charges were filed against him, and he was also accused of murdering a 17-year-old prostitute, Kathleen Smith. Newton failed to make his court appearance. His bail was revoked, a bench warrant issued, and his name added to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most wanted list. Newton had jumped bail and escaped to Cuba, where he spent three years in exile. In Cuba he worked as a machinist and teacher. He returned home in 1977 to face murder charges because, he said, the climate in the United States had changed and he believed he could get a fair trial. He was acquitted of the murder of Kathleen Smith after two juries were deadlocked.

In addition to organizing the Black Panther Party and serving as its minister of defense, Newton unsuccessfully ran for Congress as a candidate of the Peace and Freedom Party in 1968. In 1971, between his second and third trials for the murder of John Frey, he visited China for ten days, where he met with Premier Chou En-lai and Chiang Ch'ing, the wife of Chairman Mao Tse-tung. While there he was offered political asylum. Newton studied for a Ph.D. in the history of social consciousness at the University of California in 1978. In 1985 the 43-year-old Newton was arrested for embezzling state and federal funds from the Black Panthers' community education and nutrition programs. In 1989 he was convicted of embezzling funds from a school run by the Black Panthers, supposedly to support his alcohol and drug addictions. By this time the Panthers had turned to less violent activism. On August 22, 1989, Newton was gunned down by a drug dealer, ironically in the same city streets of Oakland that saw the rise of the Black Panthers 23 years ago. Bill Turque in Newsweek described a sad but appropriate farewell: "A small florist's card, resting with bouquets of red gladiolus's and white dahlias on a

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chain-link fence near the shooting scene, summed it up: "Huey: for the early years."