

The Black Panthers Revisited

Written by RON JACOBS ID1989
Friday, 14 October 2005 05:24 -

If a single date can be assigned to an historical event that developed over the course of a decade, then October 15, 1966 would be the date given as the day that the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed by two young men in Oakland, California. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton--two Black brothers attending community college who were frustrated with the existing rights groups on campus, in large part because they did not speak to the concerns or emotions of African-American on the streets. It's not that they didn't want those groups to exist, it was that they needed to be more radical and address the issues of those black-skinned residents of the United States who lived in situations that not only put them at the mercy of the landlord and the welfare system, but turned their daily existence into a struggle (sometimes armed) with the police force. Of course, the police were (and are) nothing but the most obvious brutality of the system built on the enslavement of a people in the pursuit of profit and power that we know as the American way.

Contrary to popular myth, the Black Panther Party did not come out of their clubs and homes in the black communities of Oakland, California with their guns a-blazing. In fact, their first actions involved working with church and neighborhood groups to get a traffic light at an intersection near a school in East Oakland after a series of traffic fatalities involving young children and suburban Californians speeding through the neighborhood on their way home from work. The Oakland city government had consistently ignored the requests of these very same church and neighborhood groups for years, telling them that while that intersection was on their list, it would be a while before the city could afford to install a traffic light. The Panthers disagreed with that assessment and took direct action. They began directing traffic, stopping cars so that children and their parents could cross the street. At first the Oakland Police Department (OPD) attempted to shut down the traffic control operation, but when many church members and leaders joined in with the Panthers and their supporters, the OPD backed off. Soon afterwards, the city installed a traffic light at the intersection.

If one reads the Ten Point Program of the Panthers, they will not see a radical document that calls for the installment of a dictatorship of the proletariat or a program to install a racially designed anti-white regime. No, the demands merely demanded fairness and some reparations for the historic enslavement of African-Americans by the white-skinned rulers of the American colonies and the early United States. Sure, the Panthers saw the situation of black people in the US as comparable to that of a colony, but that perception is still not that much of a stretch even today, thirty-four years after the founding of the Party. One can argue the various theoretical inadequacies of this perception, but the general truth of the economic status of most African-Americans in today's world is this: they own little property; they are subject to the whims of the major capitalist and political powers that work hand in hand to keep power among the rich who are also mostly white skinned; in those arenas where they do produce goods or services, the control remains with the colonial (or neocolonial) power; and in terms of the culture of the

The Black Panthers Revisited

Written by RON JACOBS ID1989
Friday, 14 October 2005 05:24 -

colonized, it is expropriated, manipulated, and exploited.

The Panthers were the targets of the most concerted governmental internal counterinsurgency effort while they existed, if not in the entire history of the United States. After they began observing Oakland police by following them around as they performed their duties the Party began to incur the cops' wrath. It was because the Panthers carried loaded guns during their observations that the California State Legislature outlawed that practice in California. The sight of Black men with loaded guns was too much for the fearful white culture. In April 1968, one of the first members of the Panthers was killed by Oakland police. Sixteen year old Bobby Hutton was shot down in a confrontation that also saw the arrest of Eldridge Cleaver, who had joined the party after his release from prison in 1967. Cleaver then went into exile after being released on bail. His theoretical differences with some of the original party members, especially Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, would be exploited by FBI agents and others involved in the counterinsurgency campaign waged against the Panthers. This campaign was a major part of the COINTELPRO program and involved everything from infiltration to murder. Bobby Hutton's death was but the first of many.

By 1971, the Party had seen its leaders imprisoned on charges that were at best questionable and often completely bogus. It had seen the assassination by government death squads of some of its members, most notably Illinois Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Government agents and informers facilitated rumors about members sexuality and infidelities that caused jealousies and mistrust. Furthermore, they hung snitch jackets on members in an attempt to destroy the credibility of the organization within the party and in the greater community. With the leadership in prison or constantly in court, membership continued to increase. Unlike earlier days, the political education was not broad enough to keep up with the increase in membership. This created a situation where street toughs that joined the party for their personal gain were provided a political motivation or kicked out if they refused to change their ways. On top of all this government murder and mayhem, there were always the drugs--the government's perennial counterinsurgency tactic against the poor and disenfranchised.

Within the Party, schisms were expanding. Cleaver's analysis of the situation was that the United States was in a revolutionary state and that the time was right for armed revolution. This view was held by many members in the East Coast chapters and by the Party's international wing. The analysis put forth by the Oakland wing and Huey Newton was that the US was far from a revolutionary situation and that the Party needed to engage in education and community action. Guns and violence were for self-defense only. Despite these differences in perception that resulted in differences in theory, most Panther chapters were running breakfast programs and schools, providing services and an affirmative education to their constituency's most vulnerable. One can convincingly argue that these programs were what the powers-that-be truly feared and opposed. After all, these programs took away the slavemaster's power to give and

The Black Panthers Revisited

Written by RON JACOBS ID1989
Friday, 14 October 2005 05:24 -

take away. These programs told the welfare and educational systems of the power structure that Black people were tired of being manipulated and patronized. They were going to take care of their own. In one way, it was like the Nation of Islam and its program of self-empowerment. But the Panthers went several steps further. They weren't just talking self-empowerment, they were talking self-determination. They weren't talking black-owned enterprises, they were talking black-run communities.

Unfortunately, like so many bold endeavors of that time period in the United States and around the world, they failed in the ultimate realization of that goal. Yet, they did help to establish something new in this nation of slavers. They gave those of us of all skin tones in the United States a reason for hope and a history to build on. They put the power elites in this country on notice--a notice that they haven't forgot. They didn't forget as they dismantled the education system in this country. They didn't forget as they shipped good jobs overseas. They didn't forget as they encouraged the criminalization of an entire generation of Black men. They didn't forget when they realized that, since they couldn't keep hiphop away from their white skinned kids, they could certainly encourage the element of that musical form that perpetuated various myths about the Black nation within America's borders. They didn't forget as they celebrated their sociologists that encouraged notions of racially-based pathologies that had nothing to with race and plenty to do with economics. They haven't forgot in California where law enforcement recently jailed four one-time Panther members because they refuse to join in the government's witch-hunt for the perpetrators of a thirty-five year old crime (see www.fbiwitchhunt.org). They haven't forgotten in Brunswick, Georgia, where former Panther leader Elaine Brown is running for mayor (<http://www.elainebrown.org/>) against a white skinned man who proudly proclaims his membership in the racist organization Sons of the Confederacy. Her campaign is simultaneously fighting a new voting law that requires voters to show an official Georgia ID before they can vote. I have voted in every campaign since 1974 in every state that I have lived in and never had to produce an ID. This is an attempt to disenfranchise the poor, since an ID costs at least ten dollars if one has all of their other papers in order. They haven't forgotten in the streets of Washington, DC, where this weekend's [Millions More March](#) will call on the inspiration of the Black Panthers in their words and their hopes.

They haven't forgotten and neither should we.

Ron Jacobs is author of [The Way the Wind Blew: a history of the Weather Underground](#) , which is just republished by Verso. Jacobs' essay on Big Bill Broonzy is featured in CounterPunch's new collection on music, art and sex,

[Serpents in the Garden](#)

. He can be reached at:

rjacobs3625@charter.net

The Black Panthers Revisited

Written by RON JACOBS ID1989

Friday, 14 October 2005 05:24 -
