

Bobby Seale On Panther Legacy

Written by Robert ID485

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"I have to explain some profound American history," said Robert Seale, a founding member of the Black Panther Party. For two and a half hours, over 200 students listened, laughed and learned as Seale explained the Panthers and their role in the Civil Rights Movement.

"A lot of young people don't know that era," he said. "It is a tough, hard era."

Seale first wanted to clear up the "Hollywood myth" surrounding the party.

He said that the 1995 movie Panther was "90 percent cheap fiction" that distorted the facts and ideology of the party so much that he had tried to sue the film's producers.

Seale said that, far from being the young thugs portrayed in the movies, he and his friends were educated and relied more on a keen knowledge of the law than on the guns that have become so iconic of the party.

Seale said that he was a 26-year-old engineer and design major at Mary College in Oakland, California when he first became active in the Civil Rights Movement.

He said that there was a street rally near his room, with students calling themselves "Afro-Americans" rather than "negroids," as the social theory at the time termed them.

"I'm listening to guys tell me history I've never heard of," he said. This history included legacy of Marcus Garvey and the achievements of African kings.

One of the biggest realizations that Seale had, he said, was that "Tarzan didn't run Africa ... this is what the movies portrayed to me."

As he learned more black history -- about the Nat Turner revolt and black soldiers in the Civil War-- his whole view of black culture changed.

"This stuff blew my mind," he said.

Seale and his friends formed groups pushing for African studies at his university. They developed four syllabi focused on the subject, and protested the university president until the courses were taught.

After the death of Malcolm X, Seale and his friends felt that they "needed to start a new organization."

In 1966, after Seale recited an anti-war poem in the street, he was accosted by undercover police officers.

"[The cop] says you were using obscene language," Seale told the crowd. He responded with an expletive and was tackled by two other undercover cops.

"To make a long story short," he said, "we got arrested."

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Seale and his friend, Huey Newton, were given one year of probation, a light sentence considering that they could have received nine years of prison.

That night, however, Seale and his friends drafted the first version of what would become the 10-Point Platform of the Black Panther Party.

"It took two months to get up fourteen members to go out and patrol," he said. "We got some shotguns, pistols."

Seale emphasized that the Panthers carefully trained their members before arming them. Seale and many other members had military training. Newton's legal training of members was also a major strength to the party.

"Huey taught everybody these little points about law," Seale said. "Not just about guns but also about civil rights."

Before patrolling the streets and keeping watch over the police, the Panthers also made sure that their members were "highly disciplined."

"Huey said only one person can talk," Seale said, so as to avoid conflicting reports if an incident went to court.

Seale then recounted an early run-in with the police. Fourteen armed Panthers were patrolling the neighborhood when they came across a policeman with a man in custody. The Panthers surrounded the officer, who told them to go away.

Seale said that Newton cited Supreme Court rulings giving them the right to observe police officers, the right to bear arms and the right to have loaded weapons.

"The cop is not scared," Seale said. "He is pissed."

The confrontation ended quietly, but not before the officer was given another shock. "He stops and he looks at the female [Panther]: he can't believe there is a female. He gets in his car and drives off."

Seale said that "this had never been done," where armed blacks had observed police officers while strictly staying within their constitutional rights.

It was not until a year later, in 1967, that these observations would turn violent, when Newton got into a violent confrontation with two officers.

Up until Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, Seale said, there were only 400 Panthers. The six months after the assassination saw "explosive growth" in membership across the nation. The party also expanded its activities to the Free Breakfast for Children program and free clinics in black neighborhoods.

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Seale said that the free clinics tested over one million blacks for sickle cell anemia, which helped make such testing standard. The Panthers also worked with other progressive groups, regardless of race, for what they saw as worthy goals.

Seale also addressed his own high profile trial, in which he was bound and gagged for contempt of court. He said that he was denied his Sixth Amendment right to the lawyer of his choice. The judge gave him sixteen counts of contempt of court, adding up to four years of prison. The contempt charges were eventually overturned by a higher court.

"We won 95 percent of the court cases we went through," he said.

Today, Seale said, it is a priority to reinforce the idea that "racism is out of date."

"We are less than one half a percent difference [genetically]," he said.

Gregory Hom '06 said that he had come to hear about the history behind the movement. "A lot of contributions by minorities are overlooked," he said. Omar Nolan '06 said that he enjoyed the speech.

"I thought it was very truthful in terms of what I've read in books over the years," he said. He said that he especially appreciated Seale's respect for black history.

"You only know what schools teach you," he said. "Nowadays, they are coming out with African centers, but in elementary schools, it's still the same thing."

John Rawlings III '06, director of public relations for LINK, said that his group brought in Seale for "what he's done for people in general, and especially what he's done for black people in particular. People know of him, but not about him."

In an interview with The Sun after his talk, Seale said that the college landscape was much different today than it was when he was in school.

"Back then it was very different for college students," he said. "All kinds of things were going on. All sudden, I'm being influenced by what's going on in South Africa, by the Civil Rights Movement."

For today's students, he recommended that "they always know the law."

"Sometimes you'll run into things that really don't serve us," he said.

Seale's visit was sponsored by LINK, the SAFC, Ujamaa, the Africana Resource Center, the Office of Minority Affairs, Vice President Susan Murphy '73, Vice Provost Robert L. Harris, Jr. and Prof. James Turner, Africana studies. [Source](#) .

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