



BLACK POWER: THE PANTHERS MARK 40 YEARS

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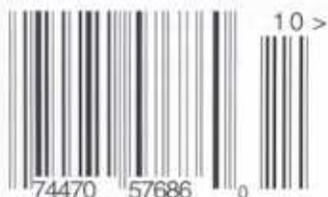
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Black residents regularly faced the wrath of the notorious Oakland Police Department, so they decided to strike out on their own. As Newton and Seale planned strategy, usually at night at the center, they studied Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela and the law.

“Following the Watts riots in ’65, there was a group called the Community Alert Patrol. They would ride around and observe police officers to make them think twice about brutalizing someone,” recalls Seale, 69. “But they got beat up by the police and were dragged to the precinct and locked up. Huey argued how this was a violation of the First Amendment because they had a right to assemble. He found a California State Supreme Court ruling that said all citizens have the right to observe officers carrying out their duty.”

But that wasn’t all he found. Newton also discovered an obscure California statute that allowed citizens to carry loaded rifles and shotguns in public as long as the weapons weren’t directly pointed toward another individual. “We struck upon something very legal with the right to defend ourselves if the police attacked us. Those guns gave us equalizers,” says Seale. The men crafted an agenda dubbed the Ten-Point Program, which listed as goals everything from affordable housing and universal healthcare to full employment and military service exemption for Black men.

One afternoon, Newton and Seale reviewed drafts of their unnamed group’s stated objectives. “I was looking through some mail from the day before,” remembers Seale. “I wrote to other organizations to send me information on their efforts, and I received a sheet from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization with a picture of a black panther on it.” When they later reconvened, Seale told Newton that he was fixated on the feline creature’s attributes.

“I told Huey that if you push a panther into a corner and don’t let it out, sooner or later it’s going to wipe out whoever is oppressing it,” he recalls. “I said, ‘Damn Huey — that’s like Black folks being pushed into a corner.’ We need-

**July 1967:
Bobby
Seale, left,
and Huey
Newton at
the Panther
Party head-
quarters.**

ed a name for the organization, so Huey said, 'What about the Black Panther Party?'"

On a coin toss, the men adopted militaristic titles, with Newton becoming the minister of defense and Seale the chairman. "I was the organizer and Huey was the leader. I told Huey, 'You be the designated leader under one condition — that crap with [Nation of Islam leader] Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X not getting along, that's not me. So we shook hands and that's how we kicked it off,'" says Seale.

Later that night, Seale's brother, John, came to the antipoverty center and asked him to return home to discuss "family business." When Seale and Newton arrived at the house hours later, they were taken aback. "The door was open and the lights inside were out. When I went in, the lights came on," Seale explains. "Guess what was happening inside? It was my surprise birthday party." The date was Oct. 22, 1966. On the day Seale turned 30, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was born. "We started handing out some Ten-Point Programs while everyone was dancing," says Seale. "But all they said was, 'Yeah, yeah, Bobby.' Nobody was interested."

INTEREST HAS ONLY GROWN since then. Four decades later, from universities to legions of Internet Websites, the Black Panther Party remains a subject of both intense analysis and fierce debate. For years, details on the inner workings and history of the party have been revealed mainly through the writings of prominent former Panthers, many of whom, like Emory University law professor Kathleen Neal Cleaver and University of California-Santa Cruz professor Angela Davis, have long been in high demand on the lecture circuit. But now, new voices are emerging to provide insight as a stream of books begins hitting store shelves this fall.

The new titles include *Will You Die With Me?: My Life and the Black Panther Party* (Atria Books), an engrossing account from Flores Forbes, the youngest member of the organization's central committee; *The Black Panthers* (Aperture), a photo-

graphic tome with images by Stephen Shames; and *In Search of the Black Panther Party* (Duke University Press), in which historians assess the group's social and



May 2, 1967: Panthers argue with a policeman at the state Capitol in Sacramento; July 22, 1968: Panthers march in New York; July 30, 1968: A Panther protest at the Alameda County Courthouse in California.

political impact both in the United States and abroad. Several full-length documentary projects are also in production.

To mark the party's 40th anniversary, the Oakland-based Huey P. Newton Foundation plans to convene a panel at the University of New Mexico in October. David Hilliard, the former Panthers chief-of-staff, and Elaine Brown, a former Panther chairman, established the foundation with Newton's wife, Fredrika, in 1996. The event will feature Seale, other former Panthers and actor Roger Guenveur Smith, whose haunting one-man stage portrayal of Newton was adapted into a film for PBS by Spike Lee in 2001.

"It's a good thing that academics are starting to study our movement," says Hilliard, a childhood friend of Newton's. "There's been so much revisionist history by people who were not there and know nothing other than what they read in a few books."

Also in October, former rank-and-file members will attend a reunion at Oakland's Malonga Center for the Arts. The October 13-15 assembly, organized by the It's About Time Committee, a Black Panther alumni association formed in 1995, will include a banquet, films and forums on issues ranging from criminal justice reform to reparations. It's About Time has also coordinated several anniversary-related exhibits throughout California, including one that begins in September at the Oakland Main Library showcasing vintage editions of the group's weekly newspaper, *The Black Panther*.

"We want people to know what we were really all about," says Billy X. Jennings, director of It's About Time, who served in the party's Oakland headquarters from 1968 to 1974. "A lot of us were involved in different social programs,



LIFE OF A PARTY

THE BLACK PANTHERS MARK 40 YEARS



BOBBY SEALE has told this story more times than he'd care to remember. It's the tale of how he and Huey P. Newton, a friend from his days as an engineering student at Merritt College, held meetings over the course of several frenzied weeks in October 1966 in Oakland, Calif. Their mission: to set up an organization committed to the philosophy of Black resistance and building a broader social and political empowerment movement.

Seale first offered an account in his searing 1970 memoir, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*. The book was adapted from several audio recordings he made in the San Francisco County jail while being held for two separate trials on charges of conspiracy to commit murder and incitement to riot, both of which were later dropped. He's also shared the narrative with countless journalists, documentary filmmakers, entertainers, activists and college students who have asked him about it over the years.

But on this morning in mid-June, after a rigorous workout at an Oakland gym, a rejuvenated Seale reflects upon the turbulence of the 1960s and contemplates something that few outside his immediate circle realize — namely, that he and the organization he co-founded were essentially born on the same date.

By the fall of 1966, despite more than a decade of aggressive desegregation efforts and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, widespread disenchantment prevailed among Black Americans. In the South, the Ku Klux Klan

and White citizens councils maintained a terrifying grip, and in the North urban life was generally defined by poverty, housing inequality and police brutality. As the demand for "Black Power" grew, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) underwent a volatile transition when its chairman, John Lewis, now a Congressman from Georgia, was ousted by the fiery Trinidad-born activist Stokely Carmichael. Still, SNCC remained engaged in its core issue of voter registration and waged a new drive to establish an independent political party in Lowndes County, Ala.

Newton, an evening student at San Francisco Law School, and Seale, who worked at the North Oakland Neighborhood Service, were also in search of something new. After brief stints in groups such as the Afro-American Association, both were frustrated by organizations they felt were inactive and lacking a connection to the streets, where

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BY CURTIS STEPHEN

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