

The Founding of the Black Panther Party

All during this time, Bobby and I had no thought of the Black Panther Party, no plan to head up any organization, and the ten-point program was still in the future. We had seen Watts rise up the previous year. We had seen how the police attacked the Watts community after causing the trouble in the first place. We had seen Martin Luther King come to Watts in an effort to the people, and we had seen his philosophy of nonviolence rejected. Black people had been taught nonviolence; it was deep in us. What good, however, was nonviolence when the police were determined to rule by force? We had seen the Oakland police and the California Highway Patrol begin to carry their shotguns in full view as another way of striking fear into the community. We had seen all this, and we recognized that the rising consciousness of Black people was almost at the point of explosion. One must relate to the history of one's community and to its future. Everything we had seen convinced us that our time had come.

Out of this need sprang the Black Panther Party. Bobby and I finally had no choice but to form an organization that would involve the lower-class brothers.

We worked it out in conversations and discussions. Most of the talk was casual. Bobby lived near the campus, and his living room became a kind of headquarters. Although we were still involved with Soul Students, we attended few meetings, and when we did go, our presence was mostly disruptive; we raised questions that upset people. Our conversations with each other became the important thing. Brothers who had a free hour between classes and others who just hung around the campus drifted in and out of Bobby's house. We drank beer and wine and chewed over the political situation, our social problems, and the merits and shortcomings of the other groups. We also discussed the Black achievements of the past, particularly as they helped us to understand current events.

In a sense, these sessions at Bobby's house were our political education classes, and the Party sort of grew out of them. Even after we formally organized we continued the discussions in our office. By then we had moved on to include not only problems but possible solutions.

We also read. The literature of oppressed people and their struggles for liberation in other countries is very large, and we pored over these books to see how their experiences might help us to understand our plight. We read the work of Frantz Fanon, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*, the four volumes of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*. Che and Mao were veterans of people's wars and they had worked out successful strategies for liberating their people. We read these men's works because we saw them as kinsmen; the oppressor who had controlled them was controlling us, both directly and indirectly. We believed it was necessary to know how they gained their freedom in order to go about getting ours. However, we did not want

merely to import ideas and strategies; we had to transform what we learned into principles and methods acceptable to the brothers on the block.

Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by any philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint. They had suffered a hold up by gangsters, and rape; for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. At bottom, this is a form of self-defense. Although that defense might at times take on characteristics of aggression, in the final analysis the people do not initiate; they simply respond to what has been inflicted upon them. People respect the expression of strength and dignity displayed by men who refuse to bow to the weapons of oppression. Though it may mean death, these men will fight, because death with dignity is preferable to ignominy. Then, too, there is always the chance that the oppressor will be over whelmed.

Fanon made a statement during the Algerian war that impressed me; he said it was the "Year of the Boomerang" which is the third phase of violence. At that point, the violence of the aggressor turns on him and strikes a killing blow. Yet the oppressor does not understand the process; he knows no more than he did in the first phase when he launched the violence. The oppressed are always defensive; the oppressor is always aggressive and surprised when the people turn back on him the force he has used against them.

Negros with Guns by Robert Williams* had a great influence on the kind of party we developed. Williams had been active in Monroe, North Carolina, with a program of armed self-defense that enlisted many in the community. However, I did not like the way he had called on the federal government for assistance; we viewed the government as an enemy, the agency of a ruling clique that controls the country. We also had some literature about the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Louisiana, the state where I was born. One of their leaders had come through the Bay Area on speaking and fund-raising tour, and we liked what he said. The Deacons had done a good job of defending civil rights marchers in their area, but they also had a habit of calling upon the federal government to carry out this defense or at least to assist them in defending the people who were upholding the law. The Deacons even went so far as to enlist local sheriffs and police to defend the marchers, with the threat that if law enforcement agencies would not defend them, the Deacons would. We also viewed the local police, the National Guard, and the regular military as one huge armed group that opposed the will of the people. In a boundary situation people have no real defense except what they provide for themselves.

We read also the works of the freedom fighters who had done so much for Black communities in the United States. Bobby had collected all of Malcolm X's speeches and ideas from papers like *The Militant* and *Muhammad Speaks*. These we studied carefully. Although Malcolm's program for the Organization of Afro-American Unity was never put into operation, he has made it clear that Blacks ought to arm. Malcolm's influence was ever-present. We continue to believe that the Black Panther Party exists in the spirit of Malcolm. Often it is difficult to say exactly how an action or program has been determined or influenced in a spiritual way. Such intangibles are hard to describe, although they can be more significant than any precise influence. Therefore, the words on this page cannot convey the effect that Malcolm has had on the Black Panther Party, although, as far as I am concerned, the Party is a living testament to his life work. I do not

claim that the Party has done what Malcolm would have done. Many others say that their programs are Malcolm's programs. We do not say this, but Malcolm's spirit is in us.

From all of these things-the books, Malcolm's writings and spirit, our analysis of the local situation-the idea of an organization was forming. One day, quite suddenly, almost by chance, we found a name. I had read a pamphlet about voter registration in Mississippi, how the people in Lowndes County had armed themselves against Establishment violence. Their political group, called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, had a black panther for its symbol. A few days later, while Bobby and I were rapping, I suggested that we use the panther as our symbol and call our political vehicle the Black Panther Party. The panther is a fierce animal, but he will not attack until he is backed into a corner; then he will strike out. The image seemed appropriate, and Bobby agreed without discussion. At this point, we knew it was time to stop talking and begin organizing. Although we had always wanted to get away from the intellectualizing and rhetoric characteristics of other groups, at times we were as inactive as they were. The time had come for action.

**Robert Williams was the president of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, when he recruited its male members into an organization that advocated carrying guns for self-defense, a move made necessary for protection against whites who went on regular shooting sprees into Black community, terrorizing its residents. Williams was one of the first modern Black advocates of self-defense and he wrote articles supporting his position. In 1961, he fled from the United States when a federal fugitive warrant was issued against him for kidnapping. Members of Williams's organization said that a white couple from the area, whom they had detained for a short period, had been sent into the Black community at night to give police an official excuse for harassment and violence. Williams went to Cuba, China, and Tanzania, where he continued to write. In 1969, he returned to the United States.*

**"As a sapling bent low stores energy for a violent
backswing, blacks bent double by oppression have stored
energy which will be released in the form of rage-black
rage, apocalyptic and final."**

William Grier and Price Cobbs, *Black Rage*