

# A SHIFT TO THE MIDDLE

## Chairman Bobby Seale changes Black Panther image to fit the times

BY B. J. MASON

PRIOR to 1967, Bobby George Seale was just another name, another face, another Negro waiting to become black. The Texas-born son of a poverty-stricken carpenter, Seale grew up in Dallas, Fort Arthur and San Antonio before his parents moved to Oakland, Calif., with their two sons and daughter in tow. Following high school graduation, Seale joined the U. S. Air Force where he remained until a clash with an obstinate colonel led to a jail term, a court-martial and a bad-conduct discharge in the late 1950s. Generally shunned by potential employers because of his negative military record, Seale managed to eke out a living as a nomadic sheet-metal mechanic at various aircraft plants. Meanwhile, he enrolled at Merritt College, where he nursed dreams of becoming an engineer—until black history caught his attention. Fed up with the job waltz he was dancing with the aircraft industry, Seale dropped out of college for one semester to pursue work as a comedian along the West Coast chitlin' circuit. January, 1961 found him back at Merritt College, seriously plowing his way through books and exams. He met Huey P. Newton in September, 1962 and an immediate friendship developed. During the next few years, Newton taught Seale revolutionary philosophy so that, by the time they co-founded the Black Panther Party in 1967, Seale had become a loaded weapon.

Together, they laid out a 10-point platform for the Party and each chose his own title. Newton became minister of defense and Seale agreed to be chairman. Taking advantage of the fact that the California Penal Code permitted citizens to carry loaded guns, the two attracted enough members to form an armed patrol squad in Oakland, where they confronted racist policemen and sparked a national controversy with their no-nonsense, "off-the-pig" strategem.

Since that time, Seale has achieved notoriety—both in and out of jail. He became a martyr for black militants in 1969 when, at the famous Chicago Seven trial, Judge Julius Hoffman ordered him bound and gagged while being charged with incitement to riot during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. He stirred attention in 1971 when he was acquitted of murder charges in the death of supposed police informer Alex Rackley in New Haven, Conn. But in 1973, Seale shocked the nation when, in an apparent switch from militance to middle-classness, he donned bourgeois togs and ran for mayor of Oakland—winning a respectable 47,000 votes. Although he lost the election to incumbent John Reading, Seale's new image signaled an end to previous Panther paramilitarism and marked a unique stage in the organization's thrust for black liberation. Herewith are Seale's remarks on the subject:

*Since altering one's concepts of existence is usually painful, what effect did becoming a Panther have on your psyche?*

Actually, my psyche was being altered quite a time before the party started. I call it one finding himself, his dignity, and I had experienced dignity for quite a while. I wasn't different from a lot of people.

*For you, then, what made the Black Panther Party necessary?*

There was a number of black rebellious against poverty, wretched conditions and police brutality—but what Huey and I saw was a waste:



Escorted from State Capitol building in Sacramento, Calif., during 1967 show of force (top), Black Panther Party Chairman Bobby Seale (r.) and other members end armed protest of legislation designed to curb carrying of fire-arms in public. Thirteen years later, Seale raises clenched fist (above) as he leaves Montville, Conn. Correctional Center in custody for New Haven trial in slaying of Panther Alex Rackley, suspected police informant. Seale and Black Panther Party Defense Minister Huey P. Newton formed controversial gun-toting revolutionary group in Oakland, Calif. in 1967.



In surprise switch from militant to middle-class image, an impeccably-attired Seale outlines political platform (above) during his recent campaign for mayor of Oakland, Calif. New Panther strategy describes change as vital, more effective step toward black liberation.

Seale's bid for mayor's seat sparked handshake drive (left) in effort to capture black bloc vote. Dapper Panther earned 47,000 votes but lost election to six-year incumbent John Reading by two to one margin. Seale claims that Panther support has increased since ideological face-lift occurred.



**Panther co-founders** Seale (above, L) and Huey P. Newton hug each other following Seale's release from jail in 1971. Oakland passers-by greet Seale (right) as he engages in last-minute campaign thrust for mayor of coastal city. Panther leader asserts that former use of firearms was only a means of self-defense. In new Party philosophy, bullets have been replaced by ballots.



### SHIFT TO MIDDLE *Continued*

50 killed, 200 wounded and 300 arrested. Black human energy was wasted, put in prison, corraled, shot and killed on a broader scale than ever before. We didn't think that was conducive to the real political organizing we knew had to be done.

*But black people also had the NAACP and SCLC operating at that time—two distinctly middle-class organizations which drew heavy support from the black bourgeois. Did the Panthers feel that both were inadequate?*

Probably more in political terms, political organizing, since we were thinking in terms of the electoral process when we formed. Our objective was to create a *grass-root based* political organization which would attract the less fortunate and teach them to use the electoral process as one avenue of gaining community control of the institutions that affect their lives, especially on the local level. Most people don't realize it but Huey and I had a certain respect for Dr. King.

*Yet, you never publicly adopted or worked toward implementing his approach. Why?*

Malcolm X's approach appealed to us more. He stated, "Every human being has a right to have a shotgun by constitutional rights—to defend himself." As I look at it now, the Party didn't start separately from the

NAACP, SCLC and the others. If it hadn't been for them, the Party wouldn't have existed in the first place.

*When the Party organized, you deliberately overlooked the black middle class—which, by the way, didn't buy the shotgun approach that was used. Generally speaking, they were afraid of the Panthers.*

I have criticized the black middle class in the past, but not in a totally negative sense. It was the income of the black middle class that the grass-roots people criticized—the clothing, the residences. But now we realize that it's not your income, it's your relationship to the slavemaster. Are you with the slavemaster or against him? It's not your residence; it's your politics.

*Can you re-phrase that in terms of the capitalistic urges of the black middle class?*

We can speak of how capitalism exploits and blood-sucks the people on the one hand, but what props this particular capitalistic system up so much higher than others is racism. So even the black middle class is oppressed.

*But knowing that, why wasn't your program more directly aimed toward liberation of the black bourgeois?*

Probably because of the small percentage of people there. We were



**Political chat** with Oakland voters (above) impels nattily-clad Seale to drop rhetoric for reason as he explains mayoral campaign promises. Between appointments, he lunches (right) with (l. to r., seated) his mother, Thelma; his wife, Artie; his niece, Charlatte; his son, Malik; his sister, Betty, and brother, John. Once feared as a die-hard revolutionary, Seale is now known as peaceful man working to change system from within.





**Momentary break** in schedule permits Seale to relax (top, r.) with his brother, John, who serves on Oakland's Model Cities planning committee. Sipping coffee with parents (above) Seale brings his mother, Thelma, and father, George, up to date on his future plans.

## SHIFT TO MIDDLE *Continued*

talking about the freedom of the masses of people. Even MLK's program was aimed at the masses.

*You've laid down your guns, now. Could you have gone through what the non-violent demonstrators went through?*

At that time, I think not. I'm not that type of person. I could probably do it today—for certain tactical and political reasons. But racists have a certain respect for me, now. They know I'm not going to take any crap from them.

*What's the big difference between the Bobby Seale of yesterday and the Bobby Seale of today—other than a change of clothes?*

His consciousness. I think. Everything and everyone develops. A lot of my practices and philosophical thinking has changed for the better.

*To put it another way, what do you know about the black middle class now that you didn't know when you co-founded the Party? Obviously, there is now a thrust toward, an appeal to, the black middle class that wasn't there before. What have you discovered?*

**Young fans** raise victory signs with Seale (right) during recent stroll through park. Seale is well-known throughout Oakland by young and old alike. He considers pre-teens as tomorrow's leaders and often teaches and plays with them whenever time allows.



*Continued on Page 86*



**Playground romp** with his youngest son, Jonathan George, gives Seale feeling of pleasure. Playful long beings smile (right) from his wife, Artie, while their daughter, Dana, mindfully her own business, Seale's income derives from royalties on *Seize the Time* and from speaking fees.



**Entire Seale clan** gathers (above) at family home after mayoral campaign. Swinging (below) with his wife and children, cheerful Seale enjoys quiet playground outing. He plans to busy himself preparing other black candidates for future local elections. Seale says that he presently has no plans to enter a political race.



Ebony 1973