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 Scale was just another name, another face, another Negro waiting to become black. The Texas-born son of a poverty-stricken carpenter, Scale 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, Scale joined the U.S. Air Force where he remained until a clash with an obstructive 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, Scale managed to eke out a living as a nomadic sheet-metal mechanic at various aircraft plants. Meanwhile, he enrolled at Merritt College, where he nurtured dreams of becoming an engineer—until black history caught his attention. Fed up with the job waltz he was dancing with the aircraft industry, Scale dropped out of college for one semester to pursue work as a comedian along the West Coast clubs' 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 Scale revolutionary philosophy so that, by the time they co-founded the Black Panther Party in 1967, Scale 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 Scale 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" stance.

Since that time, Scale 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 a supposed police informant Alex Ruckley in New Haven, Conn. But in 1973, Scale shocked the nation when, in an apparent switch from militancy to middle-classness, he donned bourgeois ties and ran for mayor of Oakland—winning a respectable 47,000 votes. Although he lost the election to incumbent John Randle, Scale's new image signaled an end to previous Panther paramilitarism and marked a unique stage in the organization's thrust for black liberation. Herein are Scale'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 rebellions against poverty, wrenched conditions and police brutality—but what Huey and I saw was a waste
in surprise switch from militant to middle-class image, an impeccably-dressed Sable outlines political platform (above) during his recent campaign for mayor of Oakland, Calif. New Feather strategy describes change as vital, more effective step toward black liberation.

Steel's bid for mayoral seat sparked handshaking scene (left) in effort to capture black vote. Dapper Feather amassed 47,000 votes but lost to six-year incumbent John Reading by two to one margin. Steele claims that Feather support has increased since ideological face-lift occurred.
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50 killed, 236 wounded and 300 arrested. Black human energy was wasted, put in prison, corralled, 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 bourgeoisie. 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-roots based political organization which would attract the best talent 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, we 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 their income; it's your relationship to the slave-master. Are you with the slave-master or against him? It's not your residence, it's your politics.

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

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

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

Probably because of the small percentage of people there. We were
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Talking about the freedom of the masses of people, even MLK's program was aimed at the masses.

You've held down your gun, 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 racism has 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 sons 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.

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Playground ramp with his youngest son, Jonathan George, gives Seale feeling of pleasure. Playful long beets smile (right) from his wife, Attie, while their daughter, Dana, minds her own business. Seale's income derives from membership in the Nation 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 setting. He plans to keep himself preparing other black candidates for future local elections. Seale says that he presently has no plans to enter a political race.

Ebony 1973