

Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther

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From the time that college students Bobby Seale and Huey Newton armed themselves and announced that they were going to patrol the police and fight police brutality, a cultural match was lit that sparked a revolution. In a matter of months, the organization that they helped to found, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, managed to make enemies of the United States government, frighten 'White America', and fan the flames of racial tension and 'black power.' The Black Panther legacy has been largely misunderstood; the idealistic notion of self-reliance and self-determination that was at the core of the Panthers beliefs was too often lost in the public persona of an organization that was perceived as violent, racist, and anarchical, and the Black Panthers themselves did seemingly little to dispel that perception. Interpretations and reflections in subsequent years of recollection have often yielded uneven results, with varying accounts rife with bias and inaccuracy, leaving their legacy and impact incomplete.

With *Black Against Empire*, Waldo E. Martin and Joshua Bloom have managed to produce what could be the most thorough and detailed history of the subject to date. The authors note the difficulty in researching the Panthers, as previous work has often been clouded by public opinion, and the concerted and dedicated efforts of law enforcement and the government to discredit the Panthers throughout their short but influential existence. The pair pushed forward, seeking firsthand accounts from former Panthers, researching Panther literature, academic texts, and declassified police and COINTELPRO documents from the FBI, to piece

together what Cord Jefferson has called the ‘definitive’ account of the Black Panthers. They have succeeded in providing a comprehensive, unvarnished examination of the Party itself, but also the Panthers’ place in the larger scope of revolutionary and political tides swirling in the tumultuous 1960s, including their relatively swift unraveling from both internal and external pressures and forces.

Despite their quick decline, the Panthers had still had an enormous impact. They were shaped by and helped to shape the prevailing political and cultural mood of a country in the midst of an identity crisis and a social civil war of sorts. A generational clash was firmly entrenched in the United States by the mid 1960s, and the Panthers certainly embodied that struggle within black America, but also emboldened young white activists, and drew constant fire from the federal and local law enforcement. In short order, they had managed to become a national movement, embodying a spirit of defiance and right to self-determination that could no longer be denied, a concept that the Party leadership felt was being glossed over by the mainstream Civil Rights movement. And therein lies the story of the Black Panther Party.

Black Against Empire serves as a compelling account of the Panthers, offering analysis from both ends of the spectrum. The authors’ intention of dispelling the myth of the Panthers as merely armed thugs who viewed white America as the enemy is counterbalanced by their efforts to avoid romanticizing them, or classifying them as simply another civil rights group. To be certain, Bloom and Martin strove to dig deeply into the history of the Panthers, in an effort to examine their legacy and contributions, both positive and negative, and to analyze the actions and provide first-hand introspection of the motivations of the individuals involved.

The Black Panthers were remarkably successful at recruiting membership with a message that at its core had violent overtones, in an era that was otherwise marked by peaceful protests within the civil-rights movement. Bloom and Martin assert that much of the success can be attributed to the Panthers view that peaceful protests were proving to be powerless in addressing the poverty and ghettoization that were becoming increasingly common for blacks. White flight tended to leave pockets of urban black poverty, and those cities responded with containment-style policing, often brutal in nature. This poverty, exclusion from the political process in many areas, and lack of access to the same educational opportunities as whites combined to form a volatile mixture that threatened to explode. Into this morass walked the Panthers, and helped to channel that rage and frustration. Based on the increasing number of riots and urban black rebellion, the Panthers saw an opportunity to organize new ways of achieving economic and political power.

Black Panther rhetoric and actions were explosive and confrontational, as evidenced by Honorary Prime Minister Stokely Carmichael calling the United States a ‘nation of thieves ... that has stolen everything that it has’. The Panthers viewed the nation’s ghettos as black territory that needed to be defended against the police and others intent on maintaining the status quo. Openly carrying loaded weapons, while legal in California, served to further exacerbate the fear and suspicion among opposition groups who held contemptuous views toward the Panthers. Perhaps in response, law enforcement, long the adversary in predominately black areas, and later the federal government, viewed and classified the Black Panthers as a terrorist group, labeling them as ‘the single greatest threat to the security of the United States’. At the behest and direction of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, law enforcement engaged in subversive and disruptive behaviors to not only infiltrate, but to disrupt Panther activity.

Conversely, the Panthers sole aim was not to merely present a militant and aggressive agenda. They maintained an idealist and communal vision in the communities where they felt that help was needed. In what Bloom and Martin call an ‘impressive array of community programs’, the Panthers were responsible for offering free health clinics, the Free Breakfast for Children program, free housing cooperatives, and legal aid, among many other programs. These programs meant little to Hoover and the FBI, as he determined that the programs were formed ‘by the BPP for obvious reasons, including their effort to create an image of civility, assume community control of Negroes, and to fill adolescent children with their insidious poison’. The historical record of the Black Panther Party is certainly marred in part by this continuous harassment and assault, which played a large part in the ultimate fracturing of the Panthers just a few short years later.

This is not to say that the Panthers recoiled in the face of this harassment. Despite proving to be part of an overall amalgam that would undermine them and facilitate the undoing of the Panthers, for a time, this resistance served them well in growing the Party. Bloom and Martin reference this odd dynamic: the more resistance that the Panthers encountered at every level and by various means, the more support that the Panthers attracted. They were seen as the only beacon of hope to a growing population of disenfranchised and angry youth in the inner cities. The Panthers offered a way out of a life of gang activity and poverty, instead channeling that rage into mobilization. In many ways, the Party's momentum reflected society at large. The uneven and unfair draft process served as a rallying point, pointing out the inequities that existed. The Panthers used this to drive home the point that the United States government viewed black men as expendable, that they were second-class citizens expected to do the 'dirty work' and fight its war. Opposing sending the poor and disadvantaged to fight a war for a country that would deny them their basic rights was a central principle of their Ten-Point Plan, a Bill of Rights for the Black Panther Party.

Bloom and Martin assert that as the military draft was ended, much of the energy and commonality that existed in opposing the Vietnam War began to erode across much of the landscape. Additionally, affirmative action programs and more focused economic development in urban areas aimed more specifically at middle-class blacks, created a rift within their ranks, as it became more difficult to speak to the lack of action and attention on their behalf. Coupled with the ever-present battles against the government and law enforcement, these actions served to derail progress in many cases. Increasing levels of internal strife further hampered Party efforts to maintain their momentum.

As the pressure from government and law enforcement continued, internal strife and fighting increased, the national mood and psyche was also shifting. A growing sense of fatigue was settling over a country that had endured unprecedented foreign and domestic conflict, racial and class strife, and hardening economic times. The Panthers, particularly in the wake of the much-publicized New Haven trials, began to splinter and fade back into a local community organization in Oakland. What remained was the debate as to their legacy.

At times, the sheer volume of information could prove overwhelming to the casual reader, as Martin and Bloom delve deeply into detail of seemingly insignificant facts, but one can assume that this was done intentionally to show the level of research supporting their narrative. Indeed, that attention to detail displays a commitment to telling the story as it happened, but could to the casual reader be an impediment to understanding. This is by no means a scathing rebuke of their excellent work. This is an extraordinarily well-researched and well-written work, as authoritative and complete as any about the Black Panther Party that have been published.

Black Against Empire is a fascinating work, and Bloom and Martin succeed in telling the story of what is still one of the more polarizing, controversial, and effective civil rights organizations in American history with great skill. There is no 'catch-all' phrase to adequately describe the Panthers' influence during their brief time in the spotlight. Instead, it is a sweeping story of revolution, resistance, violence, community outreach, organization, and the uplifting of a people at a time when they needed it most.

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