Explaining the Demise of The Black Panther Party

The Role of Internal Factors

Ollie A. Johnson III

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Contents

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, twenty-four and thirty years old respectively, founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) on October 15, 1966 in Oakland, California, because they wanted an organizational vehicle to contribute concretely to the social, economic, and political uplift of Black people.[1] Newton and Seale maintained that the recent gains of the Civil Rights movement failed to adequately address the needs of the masses of Black people. Central to the Black power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the BPP represented the most prominent radical African American politica) organization of *this* period, with established chapters in many states throughout the United States and an active International Section in Algeria headed by Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver.[2] At their peak, the Black Panthers were in the forefront of a multiracial and transnational struggle for fundamental social change in the United States and abroad. The Party's demise continues to intrigue scholars, progressive activists, and the general public. The debate has become centered on whether external or internal factors led to the fall of the BPP.

The main purpose of this essay is to contribute to our understanding of the eventual decline of the Black Panther Party.[3] In particular, I explore various reasons for the transformation of the BPP from a national and international organization with approximately five thousand members in forty chapters in 1969 to a local organization with fewer than fifty Panthers in the Oakland, California area by 1980.[4] Most scholarly studies of American social movements during the 1960s put forth the view that multiple factors account for the eclipse of these movements.[5] Among those factors identified are state political repression, ideological errors, an inexperienced and youthful membership, intraparty strife, strategic mistakes, and the cult-of-personality phenomenon. This essay examines the role and impact of internal factors in the demise of the Black Panther Party.

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[1] Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,1973), 99–114; Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time* (BaJtimore: Black Classic Press, 1991), 44–69. The original and revisedversions of the BPP's 10 Point Platform and Program illustrate the founders' diverse concerns.

[2] Alphonso Pinkney, *Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 98–126; Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990.* Revised Second Edition (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991), 108–110.

[3] I want to thank many friends and colleagues for comments and criticism. From the University of Maryland at College Park, graduate students Pam Burke, Todd Burroughs, Margo Plater, and Delgreco Wilson provided important research assistance and feedback. Faculty members Ken Conca, Mark Graber, Ted Gurr, Paul Herrson, Joe Oppenheimer, Clarence Stone, Eric Uslaner, and Bruce Williams read and discussed early drafts with me. Outside the University of Maryland, Black politics scholars Charles E. Jones and Robert C. Smith offered penetrating and constructive critiques. Unfortunately, I was unable to incorporate all of their suggestions. Monifa Akinwole contributed a helpful and vigorous critique. Special thanks to the Black Panthers who agreed to give interviews.

[4] There is ongoing debate regarding the membership figures for the BPP. The above numbers are from Bobby Seale, former chairman of the BPP from 1966 to 1974. Seale argues that Party membership peaked at around 5,000 in late 1968 and into 1969. He says that the BPP had approximately 3,000 members in February 1971 following the major split between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. Seale states that the Party had 1,250 members in early 1973 during his mayoral election campaign and 500 after his electoral defeat. He believes that there were 200 members in the Party when he resigned on July 31, 1974. Seale's estimates are based on his observations and numbers given him by Party leaders from around the country, Interview by author, September 24, 1994, Philadelphia, PA. Most academic and journalistic estimates of Party membership are lower with membership peaking at around 2000 in 1968 and 1969. The BPP did not keep formal membership rolls or lists. Party membership fluctuated greatly throughout the Party's history. Seale's figures should probably be seen as estimates of a constantly fluctuating membership.

[5] See for example, Anthony Oberschall, *Social Movements: Ideologies, Interests, and Identities* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993); Jo Freeman, ed. *Social Movements of the Sixties and Seventies* (New York: Longman, 1983); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Robert Michels and other scholars have developed a social theory concerning political organizations and political systems.[6] Michels' view, known as "elite theory," is that popular, revolutionary, and democratic socialist organizations are confronted with a paradox, namely, that despite their attempts at equitable membership participation, the necessity for organization leads to oligarchy.[7] Thus, political activists attempting to expand democratic practice inevitably produce unequal organizational relationships. The iron law of oligarchy holds that a numerica] minority will gain and misuse power and control within a political organization because of technical and psychological factors,[8] Technically, it is difficult for large numbers of the membership to process the many complex issues facing the organization in a timely and effective manner, which results in the overreliance on a small group of leaders. Psychological factors pertain to the unequal distribution of information, knowledge, and competence within the organization. Consequently, the uninformed members tend to defer to those individuals who are knowledgeable about organizational affairs. Both types of factors give elites a clear advantage over the mass membership in organizational operation. As Cassinelli states, "The exercise ofpower has a conservative effect, and the leader tends to use all his power to retain his position of power. The leader comes to regard the organization, and his own-office, as more important than the professed goal of the organization."[9]

Elite theory is employed to argue that the BPP' s decline was in part due to oligarchizatîon. At a critical point in the Party's development, the leadership centralized organizational power. This process changed the Party's organizational structure and faci1itated significant abuse of power by the leadership. From 1970–74, the Party changed from a large, decentralized, revolutionary organization to a small, highly centralized, reformist group. By 1974, great responsibility had been placed in the hands of a single individual — Huey P. Newton — who often used this power irresponsibly and destructively. While the tenure of Elaine Brown renewed Panther influence and partially halted the decline of the organization during the self-imposed exile of Newton, his return to leadership in July 1977 signaled the eventual demise of the BPP. The depletion of organizational resources spent on numerous Newton criminal trials, coupled with the resurgence of authoritarianism and criminal behavior, ultimately undermined the organization.

Historical Overview

The history of the BPP can be divided into at least four phases. The first phase extended from the birth of the Party in 1966 until the major Party split in 1971. In retrospect,these were the Party's glory years. During its first year and a half, however, the Party was essentially a California phenomenon that began as a small group of young Black men and women working to protect and serve the Black community. The BPP initiated "policing the police" in Oakland because of

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[6] Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies ofModernDemocracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1962). For direct applications of elite theory to American politics and society, see the work of Thomas R. Dye, especially, *Who's Running America? The Bush Era,* 5th ed. (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990) and Thomas R. Dye and Harmon Zeigler, *The Irony of Democracy: An Uncommon Introduction to American Politics* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1990).

[7] Oligarchy refers to an organizational or political situation in which top leaders are unconstrained and uncontrolled in their decisions and activities .

[8] Michels, *Political Parties,* 61–106.

[9] C.W. Cassinelli, "The Law of Oligarchy," *American Political Science Review* (1953), 773–784. Thanks· to Professor Clarence Stone for emphasizing the importance of this article.

widespread police brutality. Panthers demanded their right to observe police officers during an arrest and referred to the local, state, and national laws that ensured them that right. More importantly, the Panthers patrolled the streets with guns. When confronted by the police, they would vigorously explain their constitutional right to carry weapons.

This boldness impressed the local Bay Area Black community. The Party first gained state and national recognition in May 1967 when Party members led by Chairman Seale marched into the California state legislature to protest a bill to prohibit individuals from carrying loaded guns. At this point, the Party probably had less than one hundred members. In October 1967, when Huey P. Newton was shot and charged with killing an Oakland police officer, the incident became a catalyst for the national growth of the Party.[10]

In 1968 Party membership dramatically expanded nationwide following the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Hutton (one of the first members of the Party), and the summer's urban protests and rebellions. In 1969–70, the Black Panther presence was felt in almost every major city in the country, and the BPP gained thousands of recruits. However, even during the peak period (1968–70) of the organization's membership, the Party lost members to government repression and organizational purges that attempted to weed out government infiltrators and agent provocateurs.[11]

During this period, serious political and ideological differences developed within the Party. Panthers outside of California complained about their lack of involvement in decision making at the national level. After many violent confrontations with police officers, national Party leaders began to downplay armed self-defense and place greater emphasis on community service programs, especially the popular free breakfast programs for children, free health clinics, and liberation schools. However, some Panthers in other parts of the country disagreed with these policies. Consequently, internal conflicts that were manipulated by the FBI emerged, which led to a major schism within the organization. The 1968–70 period culminated in a series of Party purges and expulsions that were confirmed by Newton and the Central Committee.[12]

The second phase began in spring 1971 with a struggle for the soul of the BPP and ended after the defeat of Seale and Brown in the 1973 Oakland municipal elections. By summer 1971, Newton's supporters had won the internal war. Many of the Panther comrades who dissented joined the Black Liberation Anny or other revolutionary groups. Despite this internal conflict, the BPP maintained its organizational integrity as a progressive Black political formation with a firm base in the San Francisco Bay Area and several strong chapters throughout the country.

In 1972, the national leadership decided to call all Party members to Oakland to gain local political power by running Bobby Seale for the office of mayor and Elaine Brown for a city council position. Many members went to California while others refused and left the Party. The BPP invested in local electoral politics in an unprecedented way. However, the decision to close virtually all of the Party's chapters and mount an electoral campaign precipitated a nearly irreversible process of organizational contraction and decline. In Oakland, Panthers worked round the clock

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[10] Ula Y. Taylor and J. Tarika Lewis, "Part 1-The History," in *Panther: A Pictorial History of the Black Panthers and the Story behind the Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1995), 26–51.

[11] On the role of agent provocateurs, see Gary T. Marx, "Thoughts on a Neglected Category of Social Movement Participant: The Agent Provocateur and the Informant," *American Journal of Sociology,* no. 2 (1974), 80. I would like to thank Professor Robert C. Smith for calling my attention to this article.

[12] Clayborne Carson, "Foreward," *The Black Panthers Speak,* edited by Philip S. Foner (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), xii-xvi.

registering voters, organizing, and mobilizing the Black community, attending and promoting rallies, and participating in countless campaign meetings. During this period, the BPP also moderated its language and emphasized its reformist rather than its revolutionary image. Reflective of this deradicalization, the Panthers registered as Democratic Party members for the local election. Despite this concentrated electoral effort, the BPP failed to capture the city hall of Oakland. Elaine Brown lost her bid for a seat on the city council while Seale was defeated in a run-off election after placing second in the general election.[13]

The third phase began after the Party's electoral defeat, was intensified by Seale's resignation from the Party in 1974, and culminated with Elaine Brown's departure from the BPP in November 1977. This phase was largely characterized by small organizational membership, successful Panther involvement in Oakland politics, and questionable security activities. Scale's mayoral defeat and resignation prompted an exodus of Party members. During this period, Newton consolidated organizational power. The absence of organizational accountability combined with Newton's addiction to alcohol and drugs led to increasingly erratic and violent behavior that generated negative publicity for the Panthers. In August 1974, Brown assumed the mantle of leadership of the Party. Before Newton fled to Cuba to avoid criminal charges, he appointed Brown chairperson of the BPP. Brown worked to increase BPP influence with local economic and political elites.[14]

The fourth phase, which signaled the final demise of the Party, began in the summer of 1977 with Newton's return to the United States. Although Newton was acquitted of felony murder charges, his resumption of organizational power proved fatal to the Black Panther Party. It was during this period that Elaine Brown left the Party. While some Party members worked on the few remaining positive institutions of the BPP, such as the community school and newspaper, Newton and his security squad engaged in activities that continued to defame the organization. These activities included drug and alcohol abuse, violent behavior against Party comrades and members of the community, and the misappropriation of Party funds.[15] The BPP formally ended with the closure of the Oakland Community School in 1982.

External Factors: Government Repression

Many writers persuasively argue that the BPP was destroyed by the combined repression of the local, state, and national governments. While there is evidence to support this contention, it nonethe1ess provides an incomplete picture for several reasons. Consequently, a review of this interpretation is in order. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall suggest that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) "was founded, maintained and steadily expanded as a mechanism to forestall, curtail and repress the expression of political diversity within the United States.?" Consistent with the above assertion, the FBI considered the BPP an unacceptable participant in American

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[13] Taylor and Lewis, *Panther,* 99–124.

[14] Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 311–450.

[15] Taylor and Lewis, *Panther,* 120–128. See Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994) for the view that excessive violence, sexism, and elitism permeated the Party from the beginning. Pearson exaggerates the early negative activities of Party members by describing real and alleged wrongs committed by specific Party members and then generalizing this behavior throughout the Party.

politics and society. In I 968, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover described the BPP as the greatest internal threat to the nation's security. As one historian noted,

> The Black Panthers attracted the nation's attention, so J. Edgar Hoover decided that they had to be destroyed. Launched in the lame-duck months of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, the Panther campaigns had entered their most repressive phase before the Nixon administration began to pressure the FBI to do more. Hoover's pursuit of the Black Panther Party was unique only in its total disregard for human rights and life itself.[16]

Given the extensive FBI effort to crush the BPP, Churchill and Vander Wall write that "under the weight of such ruthless, concerted and sustained repression-and despite the incredible bravery with which many of its members attempted to continue their work-the Black Panther Party simply collapsed."[17]

Indeed, the government's attack on progressive and radical Black groups was systematic and vicious. The argument for the government's destruction of the BPP is based partially on the fact that the BPP was the victim of almost 80 percent of the 295 FBI authorized "actions" against Black political groups. The FBI's covert action program against the BPP began in 1968 and continued until 1971 when the Bureau allegedly terminated all of its counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO) against domestic groups because of security leaks. The COINTELPRO against the Panthers was in reality part of a program initiated in August 1967 against a diverse group of Black organizations identified as "Black Nationalist Hate Groups" by the FBI. Among the targeted African American political organizations were the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Nation of lslam (NOI). Several prominent individuals were also identified as targets of COINTELPRO. They included Martin Luther King, Jr., Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Maxwell Stanford, and Elijah Muhammad. Although the Panthers eventually received the bulk of the FBI' s attention, the BPP was not an original target of COINTELPRO. As the BPP gained national and international prominence, the FBI attempted to promote violent conflicts between the BPP and other Black power groups, encourage BPP internal dissension, undermine Panther support, and provoke local police attacks on the BPP. With such repressive tactics, in many instances, the FBI succeeded in neutralizing the Party's political programs.[18]

The BPP was confronted with comprehensive government repression that took diverse forms. All Panthers were subject to police surveillance and harassment. Police officers regularly harassed both the leadership and rank and-file Party members. They issued parking and traffic tickets for minor and/or nonexistent violations and often arrested Party members on trumped up charges. Court fines for traffic violations and unjustifiable arrests forced the BPP to allocate time and money to legal matters rather than organizing in the Black community. Between December 1967 and December 1969, the Party paid more than two hundred thousand dollars in bail-bond premiums, money the BPP would never recover. During the same period, at least

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[16] Kenneth O'Reilly, *"Racial Matters": The FBJ's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 294.

[17] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FB/'s Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 164.

[18] U.S. Congress. Senate. *Book Ill, Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities.* 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976.

twenty-eight Panthers were killed.[19] These deaths, which occurred early in the Party's history, were usually the result of conflicts with local police and FBI-inspired intra-party strife and external conflicts with other Black power organizations. Consequently, Panthers were often beset with a siege mentality, unsure who to trust and uncertain about when they might meet death. New York Panther Dhoruba Bin Wahad, formerly Richard Moore, recalls,

> I felt I was in a war. I would walk down a street and if kids threw firecrackers, man, I would duck. The only reason we wouldn't shoot back was that we had a policy to see who it was first. It stayed that way until I was arrested. You could see by some of the photos how I looked. I looked like one of the POW's in the early stages of the battle outside Laos-you know, Vietnam. I was completely shell shocked. I had a combat mentality.[20]

In its destructive program against the BPP, government agencies attacked top chapter leaders in particularly brutal and sophisticated ways. Two brief examples of effective government repression illustrate this point. Created in November 1968, the Illinois chapter of the BPP was one of the most active and productive in the country. Led by charismatic leader Fred Hampton, the Illinois chapter initiated a free breakfast for children program, operated a free health clinic, and brokered a truce among some of Chicago's most violent and notorious street gangs. Hampton and fellow Panther Bobby Rush led the Illinois chapter in sponsoring massive "Free Huey" rallies and other well-attended street demonstrations. The chapter's success in organizing effectively gained the attention of law enforcement at the local, state, and national levels. In fact, FBI informers infiltrated the chapter and attempted to undermine its activities. In one of the clearest examples of this conspiracy, the FBI coordinated activities and shared information on the Illinois BPP with state, county, and local police officials. These efforts culminated in the murder of Illinois BPP leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark on December 4, 1969 by Chicago police officers. Several other Panthers were also wounded in the 4 a.m. police raid on the Panther apartment.[21]

The situation of Elmer "Geronimo" ji Jaga (Pratt) provides another example of the United States government's attempt to destroy the BPP. On August 24, 1994, ji Jaga was denied parole for the twelfth time by the California State Board of Prison Tenns. A former BPP leader, ji Jaga was incarcerated in California prisons for twenty-seven years. In June 1997, ji Jaga was released from prison after a judge overturned his prior conviction. The available evidence suggests that ji Jaga was a victim of the FBI's effort to "neutralize" Panther leaders. After spending two years in prison on an unrelated charge, ji Jaga was convicted in 1972 by a Los Angeles jury for the 1968 murder of a Santa Monica woman. Three of the case's four crucial points involve the FBI. First, and without FBI interference, immediately after the attack, the victim's husband gave a description of the murderer that did not resemble ji Jaga. Four years later, the husband identified ji Jaga in a police lineup. Unlike the other men in the lineup. ji Jaga was wearing clothing similar

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[19] Charles R. Garry, "A Survey of the Persecution of the Black Panther Party," *The Black Panthers Speak*, edited by Philip S. Foner (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 257–258. The recent book by Frank Donner, *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) also highlights how local police departments often harassed Black Panthers in cities around the country.

[20] Jim Fletcher, Tanaquil Jones, and Sylvere Lötringer, eds. *Still Black, Still Strong; Survivors of the US. War Against Black Revolutionaries — Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Assata Shakur* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1993), 10.

[21] Lynn French, "The Murder of Fred Hampton," Photocopy, 21–30; Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression,* 64–77.

to the type worn by the murderer as described by the victim's husband. Second, the prosecution's chief witness Julius C. Butler, a former Panther, denied under oath that he worked for any law enforcement agency. The FBI also denied under oath that Butler was an informant. In 1979, newly declassified FBI documents showed that not only had Butler met with FBI agents, he had also supplied them with information about ji Jaga. Third, the FBI infiltrated the group of friends and attorneys who planned ji Jaga's trial defense. Finally, ji Jaga argued that he was in Oakland on the day of the murder, December 18, I 968. Mysteriously, the FBI claimed that their tapes of wiretaps on Panther phones in Oakland and Los Angeles for that month had been destroyed. According to ji Jaga, those tapes would have confirmed his presence in Oakland. In freeing ji Jaga, the California judge considered the aforementioned points. At this time, the District Attorney's office has not taken a position on a ji Jaga retrial.[22]

Ji Jaga' s true crime seems to have been that as a rank-and-file member and then Deputy Minister of Defense, he was a tremendously effective Panther. Ji Jaga's effectiveness as a member of the Black Panther Party was partly due to his military experience. He served in Vietnam as a paratrooper and "participated in a series of highly classified missions, garnering some eighteen combat decorations-including the Silver Star, Bronze Star (for valor), Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, and the Purple Heart. Despite his military heroics, ji Jaga was disenchanted with the nature of the war, the military system, and the social order that spawned them."[23] Ji Jaga taught other Panthers the basics of self-defense, military strategy and tactics, and political organizing. He worked in the BPP' s Southern California chapter and contributed to its early popularity and community respect.[24] The unjust imprisonment of ji Jaga and the murders of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were not isolated incidents. Panther leaders and rank-and-file members were constantly harassed and incarcerated by law enforcement throughout the United States during all phases of the Party's history. Several Panthers remain in prison today because of their Panther affiliation and background.[25]

To counteract the onslaught of government repression, the Party developed several measures, which included purging suspected infiltrators, improving ties with traditional community groups, and intensifying its community survival programs.[26] In short, the Black Panther Party was the target of systematic and comprehensive (overt and covert) political repression by all three levels of government. Nevertheless, the singular focus on government repression fails to explain the complex factors leading to the demise of the BPP. We must examine the role of internal factors to fully understand the decline of the Black Panther Party.

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[22] *Oakland Tribune,* 5 May, 1987, A-9; *Oakland Tribune,* 6 May 1987, A-6; *San Francisco Examiner,* 12 January 1986; Court TV's *Lock & Key,* "Geronimo Pratt,'.' 23 November 1994; Associated Press "Judge Orders New Trial for Fonner Panther" *The WashingtonPost,* 30 May 1997, A20; B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. HA Black Panther is Free at Last" *New York Times,* 15 June 1997, Section 4, 2.

[23] Churchill and V ander Wall, *Agents ofRepression,* 77.

[24] Heike Kleffner, "The Black Panthers; Interviews with Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal," *Race & Class* 35. I (1993), 9–18.

[25] Herb Boyd, *Black Panthers: For Beginners* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1995), 126, 128; Fletcher et al. *Still Black, Still Strong,* 10.

[26] Huey P. Newton, *To Die For the People* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1995), 44–75.

Demise of the BPP: Internal Factors

Elite theory does not posit that large political organizations will inevitably decline. Rather, elite theory holds that the leaders of such organizations will generally attempt to increase their power, often at the expense of the organization. In addition, rank-and-file members are usually unable to control their leaders. Oligarchization, as described earlier, helps to account for how Party leadership contributed to the decline of the BPP. In this respect, the leadership contributed decisively to the eventual collapse of the organization in three ways, which include (1) intra-party conflict, (2) strategic organizational mistakes, and (3) a new authoritarianism by Huey P. Newton. In examining the role of these factors, I review the four main phases of the Party's history to highlight how critical these factors were in the eventual demise of the Party. I argued earlier that the first phase began with the Party's birth in 1966 and lasted until the 1971 split within the Party. Newton's release from prison in August 1970 represented the crucial point in this phase.

During this initial period the BPP grew from a small group based in the San Francisco Bay Area to a national and international organization. The BPP created a three-tiered structure to accommodate its rapid expansion. At the highest level, the Party's governing body, the Central Committee, comprised BPP founders Huey P. Newton as Minister of Defense and Bobby Seale as Chairman, along with Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, Deputy Minister of Information Frank Jones, and Chief of Staff David Hilliard. The Central Committee was always based at national headquarters in the Bay Area. The intermediate level was formed by state regional chapters such as Illinois, Maryland, and New York. The leaders of these chapters were chosen, or if self-selected, confirmed by Chairman Seale or a representative of national headquarters. Local branches represented the BPP at the ground level. The rank-and-file members would report to branch or chapter leaders depending on Party organization development in a specific geographic area.[27] An overview of the Party's organizational structure can be seen in Table l.

The state and local pattern of organization varied significantly from place to place. Finally, community workers were members of the Black community who desired to be Panthers, but who were not official members. They often performed various Party duties, such as selling the Party newspaper, *The Black Panther,* working in the free breakfast programs, and attending political education classes. Their status became somewhat difficult to distinguish from that of rank-and-file members after 1969 because police infiltration made the Party discontinue formally accepting new members.[28]

An important fact of this early period is that the most prominent Panther, Huey P. Newton, did not participate directly in the building of the national BPP. That task was carried out primarily by leaders Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, Chief of Staff David Hilliard, and state and local leaders throughout the country.[29] Because Newton was arrested for the murder of a police officer in

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[27] Taylor and Lewis, *Panther,* 31; Kit Kim Holder, "The History of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971, A Curriculum Tool for African American Studies," (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1990), 16–26.

[28] Holder, "The History of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971," 6–26; Paul Coates, interview by author, Baltimore, MD, 10 September 1994; Sharon Harley, interview by author, College Park, MD, 7 September 1994. See the bibliography for a list of the author's interviews with Party members. These personal, semi-structured interviews ranged from approximately one to five hours. In all of the interviews, the author covered the following topics: personal history and background, participation in the Black Panther Party, and government surveillance and repression of the BPP.

[29] With Newton incarcerated from 1967 to 1970, Cleaver out of the country after April 1968, and Seale travelling frequently and also in and out of prison between 1968 and 1971, Hilliard assumed major national leadership for the BPP from 1968 to 1971. He often spoke to the media on the Party's behalf and gave guidance to chapter leaders around the

Level of Organization	Units and Positions of the Organization
National	**Central Committee**
Minister of Defense,	
Chairman,	
Minister of Information,	
Deputy Minister of Information,	
Chief of Staff	
Conununications Secretary,	
Field Marshals,	
Minister of Education,	
Prime Minister,	
Minister of Justice,	
Minister of Foreign Affairs,	
Minister of Religion,	
Minister of Culture,	
Minister of Finance	
Regional	**State Chapters**
Chapter Leaders	
Local	**City Branches**
Branch Leaders	
Rank-and-File Members	

Table 1. Black Panther Party Organizational Framework, 1967–1968
Source: Taylor and Lewis, 31; Holder, 16–26. Note: The BPP's International Office was developed more fully in 1969 and 1970.

Oakland, California in October 1967 and was eventually convicted of voluntary manslaughter in September 1968, he was not released from prison until August 1970 after his lawyers gained anew trial on appeal. In prison, Newton became a device for recruitment and his life the subject of a national and international "Free Huey" campaign. Newton achieved mythic status among many Black and radical activists as a political prisoner capable of facing down vicious white racist cops.

Despite problems of every description, the BPP's first four years were its most successful in terms of growth in chapters and membership, effectiveness, and prestige.[30] Perceived by many African Americans as a fearless radical political group, the BPP challenged and called national and international attention to police brutality, poverty, socioeconomic inequality, and the Vietnam War. The Party's success stemmed fundamentally from its ability to inspire African American youth and young adults to work for their people. Sharon Harley, a member of the Washington, DC, chapter, reflects on her experience:

> For me it was an opportunity to be with people who I thought were right on or who were really smart or politically savvy ... They were willing to risk their lives for their people. The people being mainly described as poor, black, but also, in various points we identified with people of color throughout the world who were struggling against oppression.[31]

The Party was winning the hearts and minds of many African Americans who were impatient with the Civil Rights movement's perceived emphasis on gradual and legislative change.[32] Although each chapter had a distinct political culture depending on its locality, all Party organizational entities were influenced by the founders' organizing principles ofdemocratic centralism and strict discipline. According to these two principles, members' opinions were sought on diverse issues, but after decisions were made, they were to be implemented promptly and without further question.[33] The early Panther armed patrols, the military experience of Seale and many other members, and the Party's militant rhetoric gave the BPP a paramilitary image and a commitment to disciplined action. The Panthers considered themselves at war with an oppressive capitalist and racist political system. To ensure organizational discipline, Party leaders utilized corporal and other punishment when a member violated Party rules or risked a fellow comrade's life unnecessarily. For example, Seale once ordered a Panther beaten by his Party comrades for raping a female member.[34]

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country. The Party's top leaders (Newton, Seale, and Cleaver) were never free to meet together and formulate policy after 1967. As a result, many national leadership decisions regarding organization, finances, legal representation, discipline, and membership became Hilliard's responsibilities. Phone interview with David Hilliard by the author, 6 August 1997; Audrea Jones interview by the author,.Rahway, NJ, 30 October 1994; Coates, interview.

[30] In addition to lethal government repression, these problems included constant fund raising for legal fees and Party programs, Panther isolation/rejection by family members/friends, and competition with other political groups.

[31] Harley, interview.

[32] Pinkney, *Red, Black and Green,* 115–116.

[33] Coates, interview; Jones, interview.

[34] Seale, September 24 interview. Although a1most all the Panthers interviewed agreed that there was sexism in the BPP, their opinions varied greatly on the extent of the problem. See Pratt interview for a short statement; Kleffner, 14; see Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* for another view.

Intra-Party Conflict: The Early Signs of Decline

During the second phase (1971-1973/4), intra-party conflict racked the Party. The seeds of this conflict were planted after Newton's release from prison in August 1970. Once a free man, Newton worked to gain the recently imprisoned Seale's freedom and to strengthen the Party's community service programs. At this time, Eldridge Cleaver was in exile in Algeria heading the International Section of the BPP. Newton and Cleaver, two of the Party's most prominent members and leaders of the Central Committee, increasingly differed on strategy and tactics. Newton downplayed self-defense and police confrontation. Cleaver, however, advocated violent revolution and urban guerrilla warfare. Cleaver failed to recognize. that the emphasis on military action isolated the BPP from the community thereby reinforcing its image as a gang of super-revolutionaries. On the other hand, Newton was unprepared and overwhelmed by a national organization built largely in his name. In late 1970, he toured the country speaking at major political events and visiting Panther chapters. As a public speaker, Newton greatly disappointed his followers. As David Hilliard, Newton's lifelong friend, remembers,

> Huey's great in small sessions, enthusiastic, intense, funny. But before large groups he freezes; his voice gets high-the soprano that used to be a cause of fights back in school-and his style stiffens; he sounds academic, goes on incessantly, and becomes increasingly abstract, spinning out one dialectical contradiction after another.[35]

Newton did not inspire his audiences in the manner of Cleaver, Seale, and other Panther leaders such as Chicago's Fred Hampton and New York's Cetewayo (Michael Tabor).[36]

The stylistic and substantive differences between Cleaver and Newton reflected deeper schisms within the Party that manifested in conflicts between national headquarters and state chapters. A case in point was the friction between Oakland and the New York chapter, one of the largest in the country with local branches in Harlem, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and other parts of the state. The New York State chapter lodged several complaints with the national leadership while Newton was in prison. New York leaders assumed that with the release of Newton their grievances would be addressed. Unfortunately, Newton's release only exacerbated the tensions between the New York chapter and Oakland. New York leaders tended to agree with Cleaver that the Party should emphasize military action. However, other substantive disagreements were readily apparent. New York Panthers noted that the lack of chapter representation on the Central Committee hampered their local organizing efforts. Moreover, African American nationalism was very strong among New York Panthers exemplified by the adoption African names, the display of the Red, Black, and Green flag symbolizing the Black Nation, and frequent participation in Black cultural events. Conversely, national headquarters emphasized class over race and experienced numerous and sometimes fatal conflicts with Black cultural nationalists.[37]

Consequently, the BPP national leaders prohibited New York Panthers from working closely with cultural nationalists. Moreover, New York Panthers resented the national leadership's deem-

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[35] David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 302.

[36] Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory,* 302, 313, 318, 321; Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther,* 226–227.

[37] On these conflicts, see the perceptive short essay by a leading protagonist and Black cultural nationalist, Maulana Karenga, *The Roots of the Us-Panther Conflict: The Perverse and Deadly Games Police Play,* (San Diego: Kawaida Publications, 1976) as well as other essays in this volume.

phasis of local organizing around housing issues and drugs in the Black community. Instead, Oakland placed greater emphasis on the free breakfast, clothing, and health care issues. In short, New York leaders felt that their lack of representation on the Central Committee prevented the national leadership from appreciating the importance and distinctiveness of local conditions.[38]

Disagreements over the distribution of material resources also fueled intraparty strife. To operate its programs, the BPP received funds from various sources: lawyers' groups, church organizations, community organizations, and individuals. Party leadership also raised funds via speaking engagements.[39] The Panthers also received thousands of dollars from wealthy White, and sometimes famous, supporters.[40] Bert Schneider, the Hollywood movie producer, personally contributed large sums of money and secured the Oak.land penthouse apartment occupied by Newton after his release from prison.[41]

Party chapters were required to contribute a certain percentage of paper sales and other income to the national headquarters for organizational maintenance. Increasingly, members of the other Panther affiliates felt exploited by the national office. Party members in New York, Illinois, and other chapters became concerned when reports surfaced that Newton and other national leaders were living in penthouse apartments and extravagant homes. Diana Lin Tiatt, a Panther from the Brooklyn branch, recalls,

> It seemed like they were taking everything in California. I don't know where the money was going. We were turning in our paper money ... People gave us contributions ... I went to various people. We went to various well-to-do people and they gave us contributions, mostly checks or whatever. We turned everything in. We turned every dime in ... Then we found out that people were living good ... some local, but mostly Californians ...I started hearing these rumors that they were living in penthouses ... and all kinds of stuff. That makes you look like sort of a chump or a fool, when you're going without... Nobody forced me to do any of that. I willingly gave. And I willingly did everything. And I was happy to be there to do that. But then things started breaking down. And rwnors, and rumors, and rumors.[42]

Intra-party disputes combined with government repression finally culminated in the splintering of the Party. Newton, in the Central Committee's name, confirmed the split by expelling several well-respected Party leaders. In early 1971, Newton expelled Geronimo ji Jaga, Connie Matthews, Michael "Cetewayo" Tabor, and Dhoruba Moore, as well as the entire New York 21 after proclaiming them "enemies of the people."[43] Several attempts to reverse these expulsions

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[38] Holder, "The History of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971," 259–261. Panthers from other chapters complained about the unrepresentative nature of the Central Committee. For New Jersey Panthers' complaints, see the *Newark Star-ledger*, 7 August, 1969, 7. In this article, Panther leader Carl Nichols noted that the Central Committee was dominated by California Panthers.

[39] Seale, *Seize the Time*, 178–181.

[40] Lynn French, interview by author, Washington, DC, 27 September 1994; Jones, interview.

[41] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 209, 262–264.

[42] Diana Lin Tiatt, interview by author, New York, NY, 25 September 1994.

[43] The New York 21 were top New York Panthers indicted and arrested on bomb conspiracy charges in 1969 and given very high bails. They wrote a letter to the Central Committee explaining their situation and requesting urgent legal and financial assistance. The Central Committee was not acting promptly on their request so they wrote a letter to the underground Weathermen, a predominantly White revolutionary political group, requesting support. This second letter is the alleged reason for their expulsion. See *Right On,* 3 April 1971, 8 and Hilliard and Cole, 320.

were ultimately unsuccessful. Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver and others argued that as Central·Committee members they should have been informed prior to the expulsions. The Cleaver-led faction argued for reinstatements of the purged Panthers. Newton and the national leadership rejected this view. On February 26, 1971, Newton and Cleaver agreed to discuss Party differences during a local San Francisco television program in which Eldridge Cleaver phoned in from Algeria. They promptly began to argue and expelled each other from the organization. This intra-party strife continued throughout the year. The New York leadership as well as various Party members scattered across the nation aligned with Cleaver.[44]

Organizational factional conflict reached a deadly level when Robert Webb, a West Coast Panther originally who sided with the Cleavers and the New York Panthers, was murdered on March 8, 1971.[45] Six weeks later on April 17, 1971, Samuel Napier, Distribution Manager of *The Black Panther,* was tortured and killed in New York allegedly in retaliation for Robert Webb's death.[46] Both Napier and Webb were respected and beloved members of the Party. Such internecine warfare created general fear in the Party and prompted many Panthers to abandon the organization.[47] According to Seale's recollection, approximately thirty to forty percent of the BPP left as a result of this internal conflict.[48]

As previously noted by both activists and scholars, intra-party conflict was fostered and abetted by governmental officials. Unbeknownst to Newton and Cleaver, in Marc'-11970 the FBI initiated a program to divide the two Panther leaders. The FBI also conspired to permanently divide the New York chapter from national headquarters. Years later, Newton would reflect on the government's successful attempt to divide the Party. In conducting research for his 1980 doctoral dissertation, Newton discovered: "For three solid weeks a barrage of anonymous letters flowed from FBI Headquarters. The messages became more and more vicious."[49] Newton's behavior was clearly affected by the government's psychological warfare and disinformation campaigns.[50] These counter-intelligence activities continued throughout 1970–71 and certainly weakened the Party's effectiveness, but proved not to be the sole determinant of its demise.

In late 1971 and early 1972, Newton and Seale regained control of the Party and intensified and expanded its involvement in the Black community. New BPP programs included the Samuel Napier Youth Intercommunal Institute, the Free Busing to Prisons Program, the People's Free Clothing Program, and the George Jackson People's Free Medical Research Health Clinics.[51] In August 1971, the Panthers initiated a boycott of Bill Boyette's liquor store in Oakland. The boycott began after Cal-Pak, a local group of Black business owners, refused to give money directly to the BPP for its community service programs. As Cal-Pak's president, Mr. Boyette claimed to support the actual programs, but he rejected the heavy-handed demand for money and the lack

[44] Holder, "The History of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971," 275–277; Shakur, *Assata,* 230–233 .

[45] *Right On,* 3 April 1971, 3.

[46] Jim Fletcher, Tanaquil Jones, and Sylvere Lotringer, eds. *Still Black, Still Strong; Survivors of the US. War against Black Revolutionaries: Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Assata Shakur* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1993), 238–241.

[47] For one example, see interview with Mumia Abu-Jamal, Kleffner, "The Black Panthers," 18–19.

[48] Seale, September interviews. See note 4 for Seale's view on the evolution of Party membership.

[49] Huey P. Newton, "The War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America," (Ph.D. diss., The University of California at Santa Cruz, 1980), 87. Our understanding of the BPP will increase greatly as more Panthers write memoirs and scholarly analyses of the Party and the Black power movement.

[50] Newton, "The War Against the Panthers; A Study of Repression in America," 70–83.

[51] Pinkney, *Red, Black and Green,* 112–115.

of public accountability for ensuring that donations would, in fact, go to the programs. Only the intervention of Congressman Ronald Dellums led to a compromise that ended the boycott in January 1972.[52] The Party's new activities demonstrated Panther engagement in local community affairs but also signaled the Party's ideological and political transformation from revolutionary to reformist views.

Strategic Organizational Mistakes: The 1973 Election

In 1972, the BPP made what proved to be a strategic mistake that led to an unfortunate concentration of power in Newton's hands. In that year, the Party decided to mount a campaign to capture the Oakland mayoral and other local offices. Toward this goal, the Central Committee agreed to close all chapters outside of Oakland, California in order to support Bobby Seale's mayoral candidacy.

In an attempt to preempt more state chapter rebellions and increase the BPP's power in Oakland, Newton presented the Central Committee with two bold ideas: (1) the Party should run Bobby Seale, leading a full slate of Panther candidates for local office, for mayor of Oakland and (2) the Party should close all chapters outside of Oakland and redeploy all Panthers and their resources (money, cars, office materials, etc.) to Oakland to work on the campaign and consolidate the Party at its birthplace.[53]

Newton's proposal reflected his evolving thought on the nature of power. At the Party's founding, Newton defined power as the ability to define a phenomenon and make it act in a desired manner. He and Seale related power to the use of political violence. Consequently, they adopted Mao's credo that "political power comes from the barrel of a gun" for the Party. But as a result of his studies in prison, fatal Panther shoot-outs with police, and the recent internal Party warfare, Newton's original definition of power evolved into the new theory of intercommunalism.[54] In Newton's new thinking, the Party gave more serious attention to the political and economic dimensions of power and de-emphasized its earlier military focus.

Newton believed that if the Party gained political control of Oakland, it could promote an ambitious economic development plan that included turning the city's port into a highly profitable state of the art facility, promoting local Black business, and implementing new human and social service programs. The Central Committee enthusiastically supported the idea of acquiring political power in Oakland, but was initially divided on the necessity of dismantling the national organization. Chairman Seale led the opposition to breaking down the chapters on strategic and tactical grounds. Strategically, he saw nó need to take this action because the Party was already strong in Oakland and had excellent local organizers. Tactically, Seale reasoned that the national headquarters lacked the resources necessary (money, houses, apartments, and jobs) to receive over a thousand members from around the country on short notice. More importantly, the-Party had organizational commitments and existing service programs in operation around the country. According to Seale, the Party could not and should not fold its chapters.[55] In retrospect, Audrea

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[52] Coates, interview; Flores Forbes, interview by author, New York, NY, 25 September 1994; Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther,* 241–246.

[53] Seale, September interviews; Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 276–285.

[54] Seale, September interviews. For a broad discussion of Newton's views, see John T. McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African American Political Thought,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 133–150.

[55] Seale, September interviews; Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory,* 326–329; Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 276–281.

Jones, former Massachusetts chapter leader, Central Committee member, and the only woman to lead a state chapter, agreed with Seale's early assessment:

> It [the closing of all chapters outside California] was a major mistake. I think that it was a major mistake. It was a national organization with viable structures in communities. I think people felt abandoned by that. There was great support for the Party in local chapters and branches. People had put themselves out to be part of that. To just close down clinics and close down breakfast programs. I mean the whole idea was to organize these things to the extent that things could be taken over. But there was a hole left.[56]

A large contingent of Panthers from outside the Bay Area also shared Seale's opinion. When the membership received the new directive from the Central Committee, many members refused to uproot their lives and move thousands of miles from home. These Panthers simply left the Party. The i leaders of the various state chapters expressed misgivings with the Central Committee's directive to close their respective Party units. In addition to running community programs, they had comrades in jail and on trial for I various charges who required legal assistance.[57]

On the positive side, members were happy to finally get to know and·work with all the Party comrades from around the country. This infusion of new energy reinvigorated many of the Bay Area community service programs. Members also benefited from the ideological and political training provided by the national leadership. On the negative side, some Panthers new to the Bay Area, were disappointed inthe intellectual capacity and lack of'preparation of various national leaders who-were teaching political education classes. Compounding this problem was the limited contactbetween most Party members and the Party's main leader, Huey P. Newton. Party cadres wanted to interact more with Newton but were constantly told that he was busy writing. Paul Coates, leader of the Maryland chapter, experienced this problem:

> Now Huey, who is the teacher, or who was supposed to be the teacher, is busy writing a book ... but he can't come down to the masses. So rm frustrated with this, too. Huey never made his presence felt at that time. This is after he was out of jail. He never really made his presence one with the masses.[58]

After weeks of debate and individual lobbying of Central Committee members by Newton and Seale, the Committee decided to close all chapters temporarily and to dismantle them gradually over the course of the year (1972). Newton had won the day by accepting Seale's recommendation of a staggered closing of chapters and arguing finally that Party members would eventually take their new campaign skills and governing experience (obviously anticipating victory) and return to their home cities and replicate the Oakland experience of gaining local power. In the end, Seale accepted this view and threw himself into organizing Oakland and running for mayor.[59]

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[56] Jones, interview.

[57] Coates, interview; Hilliard and Cole, *This Side of Glory*, 326–327. A few state chapters were allowed to exist after the directive to close chapters was sent. For example, the Illinois office in Chicago and the office in Winston-Salem remained open.

[58] Coates, interview.

[59] Seale, 24 September interview.

During 1972 and early 1973, Panthers converged on Oakland from all parts of the country. The BPP concentrated the majority of its resources on Seale's mayoral bid and Elaine Brown's campaign for a city council seat. Panthers registered voters, distributed campaign literature, and participated in campaign meetings and rallies throughout 1972–73.[60] Even though both races were competitive, Seale and Brown lost their elections. Seale ran second in the initial three-person race. In the run-off election, he captured 43, 719 votes, but lost to incumbent Mayor John Reading who received 77,634 votes.[61] The impact of the electoral defeat was devastating on the Party because its members had invested so much time and effort in the campaigns.

Shortly after the election, many Panthers resigned from the Party because of disappointment, exhaustion, and disillusionment. Their departure represented the beginning of the end of the BPP's second phase. According to Seale, the Party had five hundred members at this point. The organization initially gained its popular support and national prominence as an anti-system party that selectively supported progressive politicians (for example, Ron Dellums) and ran symbolic candidates (Newton for Congress in 1968 while he was in jail), served the Black community, and offered a systemic critique of American society ·and politics.

In the 1973 election, the BPP formally entered the electoral process. However, the decision to invest almost all of its political and material resources in the 1973 elections proved to be a critical strategic mistake by the Party leadership. From that point on, the Party never recuperated its size, prestige, and effectiveness. The Party's future efforts remained confined to the Oakland Bay area.[62]

Authoritarian Politics: The Final Demise

The last two phases of the BPP's history were characterized by a sharp contrast between the Party's constructive activities and its increasing authoritarianism.[63] This latter development was the third major internal factor contributing to the BPP' s decline. Authoritarianism emerged as early as 1971 but expanded dramatically after the 1973 electoral defeat. The decision to close down all chapters outside of Oakland not only reduced the size of the BPP, it also changed the Party's organizational structure. Most importantly, Newton increasingly centralized power. During most of the BPP's first phase, state regional leaders developed their own contacts and relationships with various institutional and local individual supporters. Consequently, despite the lack of representation on the Central Committee, they still maintained relative autonomy based on their personal contacts and geographical distance from national headquarters. After 1972, Newton required that all money coming into the Party go directly to him. Then he would distribute it to the BPP's relevant programs. Newton created several corporate entities to store the Party's money. He also diverted money from Party programs to support his personal activities.[64] Party

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[60] JoNina Abron, interview by author, Oakland, CA, 31 October 1986.

[61] Taylor and Lewis, 123–124; Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rodgers Marshall, and David H. Tabb, *Protest Is Not Enough: The Struggle ofBlack and Hispanics for Equality in Urban Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 65, 114; Rod Bush, ed. *The New Black Vote: Politics and Power in Four American Cities* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1984), 323–326.

[62] Seale, September interviews; Abron, interview; Forbes, September interview.

[63] By authoritarianism, I mean a system of governance characterized by limited popular participation, illegitimate use of violence, and a lack of respect for basic civil liberties and human rights.

[64] Seale, September 24 interview; Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther,* 236.

members tended to accept this centralization of money and power by Newton because of their excessive worship and later fear of him as a leader. This pattern of behavior is consistent with elite theory. The leader took clear steps to increase his power, and the organization's members failed to prevent this concentration of power and resources.

The Party's last two periods, 1973–77 and 1977–82, witnessed numerous incidents of abuse of power resulting from Newton's centralization of authority within the BPP. Whereas Party leaders would discipline members for violations of Party rules in the first phase (1966–71), in the subsequent periods, Newton began to assault Party members and innocent bystanders on personal whim. These outbursts by Newton usually occurred in his penthouse apartment or in one of the Panther-owned or controlled establishments, such as the Lamp Post Restaurant and Bar in Oakland. Two such reported outbursts occurred in August 1974. In the first event, Newton allegedly stepped out of his car on a Monday evening, a little before midnight, and shot Kathleen Smith in the jaw for calling him "baby." Kathleen Smith, a prostitute, had been working on the Oakland streets that evening with her friend Crystal Gray. The gunshot damaged Smith's spine and sent her into a coma. She died three months later. Gray was an eyewitness and identified Newton as the murderer.·Less than two weeks later, Newton pistol-whipped Preston Callins in Newton's penthouse apartment, Callins, a tailor, had offered to make Newton some dress suits at a discount price. During their conversation, Callins innocently referred to Newton as "baby" and Newton became enraged. He smashed a gun into the back of Callins' head and continued to brutalize him until Callins finally struck Newton back and attempted to leave the aparbnent. Bleeding profusely, Callins stumbled out of Newton's apartment only to be caught and forcéd back into the apartment where he was repeatedly tortured.[65] Newton's behavior was partially the result of serious alcohol and drug abuse. After his release from prison in 1970, Newton's celebrity status brought him a regular flow of alcohol, drugs, and other substances that he consumed recklessly.[66]

Other BPP abuses during this phase were of a more organizational nature. In 1972, the Central Committee created the Party's security cadre.[67] Its original purpose was to provide security for Panther leaders, especially the Party's candidates for public office. In addition, Newton believed that to consolidate political power in the city of Oakland, the Party would have to gain complete control of both legal and illegal affairs. This meant regulation of the city's vices or underworld activities. Newton reasoned that Oakland's criminal class would only understand violence. So, the Party's security cadre protected the Party's leaders while trying to force Oakland's criminal groups to pay the Party money for the right to continue their activities.[68] Apparently, during 1973–74 only Newton was privy to the full extent of the Party's growing activities and multiple organizational units, which included political and extra-political wings of the Party. Even Bobby Seale, co-founder of the BPP, did not know the extent of Newton's substance abuse, extortion of local crime organizations, misappropriation of Party funds, and violence against fellow Party comrades and members of the community. The BPP's decline accelerated in 1974 with the de-

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[65] Kate Coleman with Paul Avery, "The Party's Over," *New Times: The Feature News Magazine,* 10 July 1978, 33–35. On Callins' blood in Newton's penthouse, see Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 356.

[66] Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther,* 225; Forbes, September interview.

[67] Bobby Seale states that Newton had created the Party's first, short-lived underground military wing while in prison between 1967 and 1970. Seale, September interviews.

[68] Apparently, the original BPP goal also included the eventual elimination of these activities. Forbes, September interview.

parture of several key Panther leaders. Seale resigned July 31, 1974, after a major argument with Newton.[69] Audrea Jones and other Panthers left the Party shortly after Seale's resignation.[70]

Newton might have caused the demise of the BPP then had he not gone into exile in Cuba in August 1974. Newton fled the U.S. to avoid a series of felony counts related to the Smith murder and the assault of Preston Callins. Newton returned to the United States three years later to face these charges on which he was later acquitted. In Newton's absence, Elaine Brown became the Party's-leader and managed to recuperate some of the Party's respectability. Brown appointed more women to leadership positions in the Party. Ericka Huggins guided the community school, and Black women such as Phyllis Jackson, Joan Kelley, and Norma Armour handled financial and administrative tasks.[71] At this time, the Party, with less than two hundred members, returned to its roots as a local Oakland organization. Brown also successfully secured government and private financial support for several Panther programs.

In 1975, she ran another impressive campaign for Oakland City Council and finished second. However, her campaign was seriously hampered by drug charges and accusations that she was involved in the murder of Betty Van Patter, a White woman who had been hired to put the Party's financial records in order.[72] Brown was also former California Governor Jerry Brown's delegate to the 1976 Democratic Party's National Convention.[73] During her leadership, the BPP played a key role in the election of the first Black mayor of Oakland, Judge Lionel Wilson, in 1977. At the same time, Brown continued the BPP's violent underground operations and tended to rely on corporal punishment to maintain her authority over Party comrades.[74]

The final stage of the Party lasted from 1977–82. In August 1977, Newton returned to the U.S. In response,Brown, citing a lack of mental and physical *I* strength, resigned from the Party. She too has claimed to have been beaten by Newton.[75] Following Newton's return, the security cadre increased its involvement in criminal activities. Under Newton's guidance, the Party began I to lose all legitimacy. For example, on October 23, 1977, the security cadre contributed greatly to discrediting the Party's remaining image when a botched assassination attempt of Crystal Gray (the eyewitness to the murder of Kathleen Smith) resulted in the death of Panther Louis Johnson and the wounding of another.[76] During this phase, there were revelations of gross financial mismanagement of private and government grants. The Party discontinued several community programs beginning in the late 1970s. The last issue of *The Black Panther* was published in 1980, and the school closed in 1982 because of a lack of money, some of which Newton was eventually convicted of embezzling.[77]

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[69] Elaine Brown argues that Newton also physically beat Seale during this incident. Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 348–353. Seale has denied to this author that he was beaten by Newton, Seale, September 24 interview.

[70] Jones, interview; Forbes, September interview; Hilliard and *Cole,This Side o/Glory, 373–378.*

[71] Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 408–412.

[72] Ibid., 363–367.

[73] Coleman, "The Party's Over," 35–36, 41.

[74] Brown, *A Taste ofPower,* 368–371.

[75] Ibid., 356, 437–450.

[76] Coleman, "The Party's. Over," 22–47.

[77] Taylor and Lewis, *Panther,* 126–128.

Conclusion

The BPP emerged at a time of great political activity and excitement at the possibility of radical social change in the U.S. In their work, the Panthers contributed significantly to making America a more democratic, egalitarian, and humane society. Party members led the movement to end police brutality and create civilian police- review boards. The BPP's free breakfast programs became a catalyst for today's free meals to poor school children. More than most progressive political groups, the Party highlighted, con- *I* nected, and protested U.S. oppression abroad and U.S. injustice at home. The revolution was not achieved, but important reforms were.

The rise of the Party was rapid and dramatic; its fall, slow and embarrassing. The BPP's experience provides a guide for a new generation of Black activists. Members of the Black Panther Party were committed activists who read and studied a wide body of revolutionary literature in order to understand and improve the plight of their people. They applied the teachings of European, Asian, African, and Latin American revolutionaries to the African American condition: Party theoreticians also drew on the revolutionary writings of the founding fathers of the United States, especially the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Perhaps their most important influence was Malcolm X. Black Panthers sought Black power and liberation "by any means necessary."[78] Their genius was to transform their radical analyses into practical programs affecting the daily lives of the masses of Black people. However, like many revolutionaries, the Panthers were young and impatient, and they made mistakes. The confluence of three internal factors (intra-party conflict, strategic organizational errors, and a rise in party authoritarianism) contributed directly to the demise of the BPP. As a result of these forces, the Party dismantled its national organizational apparatus, concentrated its remaining resources in one geographic area, and lodged organizational authority in a single person.

Elite theory asserts that leaders usually have more power and influence in organizations than the rank-and-file membership. Nonetheless, the membership has the responsibility of holding top leaders accountable to an organization's principles. The BPP's decline might have been averted if an effective system of intra-party democracy and financial accounting had been instituted. Black America has frequently suffered because "Great Men" have gained too much power within leading organizations and groups. Government repression, intra-organizational conflict, and strategic mistakes are likely to occur in radical social movements. These factors become increasingly detrimental for an organization when combined with an unwarranted concentration of power in one or a few leaders. Such a combination of forces eventually undermined the Black Panther Party.

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[78] William W. Sales, Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 180–181. This excellent book highlights theoretical, ideological, and organizational problems related to radical Black politics in the United States.

Ollie A. Johnson III
Explaining the Demise of The Black Panther Party
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