

IN DEFENSE OF SELF-DEFENSE

BRUTALIZERS AND EXPLOITERS

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense began with two members, no funds, and no office. Newton and Seale's main resources were their sheer determination to build the organization and their commitment to each other. Their initial strategy to gain membership was to focus on the basic needs enumerated in the ten-point platform and program. They diligently circulated the document among their social and political networks and reached out to a cross-section of Oakland's black working-class and poor communities, including "all the Black brothers and sisters off the block," "mothers who had been scrubbing Miss Ann's kitchen," "brothers and sisters in college, in high schools, who were on parole, on probation, who'd been in jails, who'd just gotten out of jail, and brothers and sisters who

looked like they were on their way to jail.”¹ As byproducts themselves of a politicized college campus, Newton and Seale understood students were a key potential constituency. A witness to their organizing technique at San Francisco State recalled that they were a formidable tag team who “worked both sides of the fence” in “the lunchroom where people used to hang out and play cards.” Seale would engage people socially, with a style that was more “‘street’ and down,” while Newton was more “quiet, kinda introverted,” but with a “finesse” that made him the center of attention when he did speak.²

However, in Oakland’s flourishing political landscape the Panthers were just one of several groups attempting to organize young people. Their initial actions, such as agitating for the installation of a traffic light at a busy intersection, brought visibility but not bodies. Then they began to center their efforts on one of the most pressing community concerns among Oakland blacks: police brutality. The Panthers advocated armed self-defense as a means to address police violence, and their initial actions contributed to ongoing debates over what the strategy would involve.³ The Panthers’ stance was part of a nationwide conversation about armed self-defense among black nationalists and elements of the New Left. There was no single definition of self-defense; the debate that engaged Black Power advocates was not whether armed self-defense was more effective than nonviolent resistance but what self-defense would and would not entail.⁴ Some activists defined self-defense in uncompromising terms, advocating a prescriptive course of action. The exiled former head of the NAACP Robert Williams, one of the most vocal advocates for meeting “machine gun with machine gun, hand grenade with hand grenade,” had urged American blacks to “use whatever method in our possession” including “gas bombs, the lye can, the ice pick, the switchblade, the axe, the hatchet, the razor, the brick and the bullet.”⁵ Influenced by Williams and the Revolutionary Action Movement, some African Americans had organized gun clubs in urban areas. The founding charter of the Organization of African American Unity defined self-defense as self-preservation—a necessary step to take in the face of government’s inability and unwillingness to “protect the lives and property of our people”: “It is the duty of every Afro-American and every Afro-American community throughout this country to protect its people against mass murderers, bombers, lynchers, floggers, brutalizers and exploiters.”⁶ While influenced by both Williams and Malcolm X, the Panthers would chart their own path.

Newton and Seale realized that the “brutalizers and exploiters” that loomed the largest in the lives of Oakland blacks were those very agents of government who were not just “unable and unwilling” to protect blacks but were complicit in the maintenance of the racial status quo: the police. The defense that the Panthers would call for and the protection they hoped to provide would be against the violence that black people faced at the hands of the police. Point 7 of the ten-point program called for the end of police brutality and proclaimed that the key was “organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality.” The justification for this was drawn from the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms.⁷ The self-defense that the Panthers embraced staked its claims from within as well as from outside of the system. Its radical edge was in conceiving African Americans within the American political contract, challenging the historic correlation of a constitutionally protected right to bear arms with white privilege. Newton and Seale understood police brutality as an issue of dignity and disempowerment experienced by individuals. For blacks, hostile and violent interactions with the police were part of the fabric of daily life, and negative experiences with the police linked people across age, gender, and class. However, they also hoped to clearly connect the heightened police presence in Oakland’s black communities to structural discrimination and raise awareness of the role the police played in reinforcing the racial status quo. Self-defense was not a means to an end but an organizing tool. They implemented it by pairing bold and confrontational rhetoric with the assiduous avoidance of any offensive action and an awareness of the parameters of the law.

Emphasizing self-defense in the BPP’s early actions would heighten the party’s visibility, attract their first members, and garner national attention. However, it also created publicity that Newton and Seale were unable to define or control as they gained notoriety not for their political analyses but for their armed stance. They uncritically embraced the gendered assumptions of masculinist self-defense rhetoric, and their initial members were men. Despite the fact that women too were supporters and practitioners of armed self-defense, the prevailing dialogue had at its core the assumption that men would be on the front lines of white violence serving as protectors of the black community. Yet black women in Oakland boldly cast themselves in the image of a Black Panther. They trickled into the organization, drawn by a sense of self-empowerment and out of a growing

consciousness about the role racism, poverty, and violence played in their lives. These women would push the Panthers to broaden their conceptions of self-defense in ways they had never conceived. The Panthers forged their understandings of self-defense and their strategies to combat police brutality in the fire of these debates. It was part and parcel of organization building, but it also held the seeds of organizational destruction. Armed self-defense exposed the raw nerve of state repression as Oakland's local police forces responded to the Panthers' armed initiatives with surveillance and harassment and conservative politicians sought to sew shut the loophole that made the Panthers' weapons legal.

PATROLLING THE POLICE

The Panthers' advocacy of self-defense was an outgrowth of their engagement with international theorists, a reflection of their ability to address local concerns, and a continuation of earlier grassroots attempts to organize against police brutality. Oakland blacks had sought solutions to police brutality as far back the 1940s through civil rights organizations and other groups, and by 1966 grassroots activists had taken up the call. Conditions in Oakland were ripe for the Panthers' focus on police violence as public conversations and activism around this issues increased in 1966. The Oakland Direct Action Committee was a leading voice against police violence. They solicited the Ford Foundation for funds to establish the Police Affairs Committee, despite strong resistance from City Council. The new committee, made up of a cross-section of activists, religious leaders, and local politicians, investigated cases of police brutality and held public hearings.⁸ In March 1966 they called for a demonstration and a walkout by local high school students to protest a case in which three sisters were beaten up by the police.⁹ This mirrored a successful protest at the end of 1965, when hundreds of students walked out of McClymonds High School to rally against police brutality.¹⁰

Local activists spoke out at hearings on police-community relations before the California Advisory Commission of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Curtis Baker pointed out that in addition to brutality, disrespect was also an issue to be addressed as the police commonly addressed black men as "boy" and women as "gal," racially laden terms that dated back to slavery. John George, an activist lawyer and politician, argued that Oakland

was “an American brothel” as “the fundamental principles of American democracy” were prostituted daily in the city.¹¹ Mainstream politicians and police spokespersons responded to these allegations during National Police Week. District Attorney J. Frank Coakley stated, “There is nothing wrong with the Oakland police department. The Communist conspiracy has created disrespect for law and constituted authority.” Police Captain Palmer Stinson echoed this view, claiming that “nearly all critics of the police are from the radical left.”¹² Relations between the police and the community had reached a crisis not just in Oakland but nationwide. The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, set up to examine the causes of urban unrest in 1966, concluded that most of the forty-three rebellions reported that year were rooted in animosity between the black community and the police.¹³ Mark Comfort spearheaded citizen patrols of the Oakland police with a group from East Oakland called the Police Affairs Committee in an attempt to address increased police scrutiny and rumors and fears about riots and violence in Oakland in the wake of Watts.¹⁴ Although Oakland did not experience social unrest, Mark Mullins, president of the Oakland Police Department Welfare Association, acknowledged that the renewed demands by various groups for a police complaint review board “indicate[d] a deep suspicion of our entire system of government since the advocates, by asking for a review board, are saying that they are unable to obtain justice through normal established democratic processes.”¹⁵

Comfort’s actions echoed the types of mobilizations going on regionally. Influenced by similar initiatives in Seattle, a broad coalition of black organizations in Watts, ranging from civil rights groups to the Slausons, an increasingly politicized street gang, came together after an incident of police brutality to create the Temporary Alliance of Local Organizations under the direction of local leaders such as Clifford Vaughns, a SNCC field secretary.¹⁶ The Alliance created Citizens’ Area Patrols (CAP; later changed to Citizens’ Alert Patrol) to monitor police, sometimes with cameras and tape recorders, to deter brutality. To these activists CAP represented community empowerment and self-determination; the goal was not just to decrease incidents of brutality but to confront the feeling of helplessness.¹⁷ Reporters who shadowed the patrols argued that CAP had “the same esprit, the same urgency, [and] direct confrontation” as SNCC. One reporter described a scene in which police had stopped a carload of young people and two CAP members observed from ten feet away and recorded details of the

interaction. Another described being witness to the often hostile police reaction to CAP cars, often clearly marked with Black Panther bumper stickers, including issuing spurious tickets.¹⁸ The program received praise too; for example, the president of the local NAACP chapter called CAP “one of, if not the most, effective programs that we have seen actually reach the people in this community for some time.”¹⁹

Activists also discussed having Watts secede from the city of Los Angeles and becoming “Freedom City,” with its own police force. This secession movement had adopted as its emblem the Lowndes County black panther as a “symbol of independent Negro power.”²⁰

Newton and Seale launched their own patrols in the fall of 1966. Newton familiarized himself with all of the particularities of the Oakland gun law, learning that civilians could legally carry unconcealed weapons in public in Oakland, when it was legal for the weapons to be loaded, and what restrictions applied to persons on probation and those under the age of eighteen. In November he and Seale secured a donation of a shotgun and a pistol from Richard Aoki, a Japanese radical in the Bay Area. A few weeks later they began to monitor the actions of the Oakland Police Department, poised to intervene with tape recorders, cameras, law books, and legally carried firearms. Typically Newton and Seale would observe police as they arrested people to make sure the officers were not breaking laws or using excessive force. Their goal was to educate people about their legal rights, to legitimize self-defense, and to gain the attention of Oakland blacks. Their efforts soon paid off. The sight of two young black men, carrying guns, loudly asserting their right to bear arms and warning the police not to be the aggressors repeatedly drew crowds. The Oakland police reacted with surprise at the sight of the armed youths, and tense verbal confrontations often ensued. Newton’s fast talk and Seale’s sharp wit would turn these moments into dramatic street theater. The fact that the police were often the ones to back away from these potentially volatile situations and were powerless to strip the Panthers of their weapons was empowering in almost palatable ways. Afterward Newton and Seale would distribute copies of the ten-point platform and program to onlookers and talk about the need for black people to organize politically. These patrols earned the Panthers a reputation in the community, and within a few months the Panthers welcomed their first recruits.

BLACK MEN IN BLUE

Newton and Seale embraced a militant masculinism; appeals to manhood infused their organizing strategy, shaped how they were received in the community, and attracted an initial membership base of young men.²¹ Although Artie Seale, Bobby Seale's wife, Laverne Williams, Newton's girlfriend, and other women had helped in the Party's operations from its inception, they had not made a political commitment to the organization and were not considered members.

The first new member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was sixteen-year-old Bobby Hutton, affectionately dubbed "Lil Bobby," who met Seale while attending the North Oakland Anti-Poverty Center. Seale had arranged a job for him at the Center, and Hutton took part in political discussions with Newton and Seale. Eventually he joined the Panthers and was given the title of treasurer.²² Seale, Newton, and Hutton pooled their paychecks and rented a space for meetings, and on 1 January 1967 the first Black Panther Party for Self-Defense office opened at 5624 Grove Street. The office was a sparsely furnished storefront in the heart of North Oakland, with a boldly lettered sign on the window, announcing the BPP's presence.²³ Just a few blocks away were Seale's home and Merritt College; the seamless border between the campus and the community meant that the politically charged atmosphere of the college often spilled into the office.

They created an advisory board of older community members, some of whom had been involved in the North Oakland Poverty Program, to broaden their growing base of support. One of these advisory board members, Ruth Beckford, donated office supplies and made curtains for the Panthers' first office.²⁴ To further increase visibility in the community they devised chic and stylish uniforms: black slacks, a powder blue shirt or turtleneck, a black leather jacket, and a black beret, rakishly tilted to one side. The aesthetic flair was not lost on community members, who saw the uniforms as "sharp and clean and organized." According to Seale, the uniform represented organization and was a symbol of powerful masculinity to be emulated: "To the brother on the block, the lumpen, 'Man, them dudes sho' is sharp. Baby I sho' wish I had me some knobs and some pimp socks like that,' you know what I mean. But at the same time, it gave us a chance to talk with people about the ten point platform and program, really what we were about."²⁵

The police patrols embodied power, protection, and defense, characteristics that were often gendered male. Newton and Seale spoke of the

“brothers” on the block standing up and acting as the protectors of the black community. One early member recalled, “The whole thing of packing guns to protect yourself was real for a lot of Black males.”²⁶

The young men who began to trickle into the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense came from many different paths and from all levels of income, education, and political consciousness. Most had grown up in the Bay Area and often came to the BPP through their association with someone else. Membership spread throughout social and political circles, in what one member described as “waves of curiosity, interest, acknowledgment, concern.”²⁷ Willingness to join and work was initially the only criterion of membership.²⁸ Some recruits were unemployed, had prison records, or had been involved in gangs. These were the “brothers off the block” whom Newton and Seale wanted to make sure their organization spoke to. Others were student activists at Bay Area high schools or colleges. These early recruits were attracted to the BPP for different reasons. Some wanted the sense of “doing something” to change the conditions around them and were drawn to the concept of black people standing up for themselves. Others were attracted by the party’s ten-point platform and program, while still others were drawn in by the party’s armed stance. Some recruits fit into one of these categories; others fit into all of them.

What united these early members was their optimism and pride. The Panthers were a mirror that reflected an entirely new self-conception: the rejection of what some had seen as the weakness of a nonviolent strategy and the embrace of Black Power. One BPP member described it as both a “coming of age” and a “coming of consciousness”: “The party was started from people realizing that turning the other cheek, singing, letting no fucking dogs bite you, just ain’t the way—and the fact that we are black and we are proud of it and we gonna do something for our own. You can’t market that, you can’t never go back and get that again because when you forever had a slave mentality, not knowing your history, not knowing your place in society and coming to know that. You can never go back.”²⁹

Sherwin Forte was one of these early recruits. Forte became involved in the BPP in early 1967, when he was in his late teens. His family had migrated from Birmingham, Alabama, to Berkeley, and then to North Oakland. He grew up being conscious of police brutality and frequently witnessed the police harassing black teenagers. He had become an avid admirer of Malcolm X, and the Vietnam War had a major impact on his consciousness:

I had a choice whether I would go and fight the country's battles in Vietnam or whether I wanted to take my life and use it to redress some wrongs in this country. I didn't see the Vietnamese as the enemy. I saw the enemy as racist America. . . . And you know when you are young, you have a lot of fervor, a lot of strength. I think I felt like the way a majority of young people felt at that time given the riotous atmosphere, the killings, the national guard, the helicopters, the protest in Berkeley, the antidraft movement. It was a period of action and tension, and a lot of blacks focused on the political system.³⁰

In the context of Vietnam the Panthers were the literal embodiment of the Black Power soldier who was committed to the war at home. Forte wanted to do something about the social, economic, and political status of black people in the United States, and the Panthers' emphasis on the issue of police brutality resonated deeply with him. Self-defense was also a draw. Forte saw membership was a way to "have the same tools that the oppressor had: guns." At the time he joined he was a student at Merritt College and had taken part in many "bull sessions," where students would sit on the steps of buildings and debate and discuss "the black man in America, the draft, what Stokely Carmichael was saying, what H. Rap Brown was saying." Forte met Seale at one of these sessions and learned about the Panthers. He was intrigued. His younger brother, Reginald, was attending Oakland Technical High School at the time and had heard about the organization from Hutton. The Forte brothers decided to attend a meeting; they experienced an "instantaneous connection" and vowed to come back. Sherwin recalled, "By the second meeting they were presenting me with this nine-millimeter semi-automatic pistol. . . . And you pick it up and . . . you feel a little bit of power. You feel like you have some righteous equipment to begin to address these wrongs."³¹ Both of them joined.

As more people became involved in the BPP, the number of patrols increased and the geographic area covered grew as well.³² The party began to offer other services, such as explaining the law, coordinating bail, and notifying family members of arrests.³³ Although patrolling often consisted of reading the penal code or simple observation, there were several major confrontations and standoffs with the police in which the Panthers refused to back down. These adrenalin-filled experiences had an indelible impact on Panther participants. When Sherwin Forte went on patrols and saw Newton explain the law to the police and saw the officers react with frustration

and shock, he felt empowered: “[It] confirmed that we could gain respect, command respect. I think that bolstered our egos, made us feel very powerful, like we were a force to be reckoned with, and it was something that we became less and less afraid of doing.”³⁴

David Hilliard, one of Newton’s closest friends, soon joined the BPP. Hilliard was born in Alabama, and his family migrated to Oakland when he was nine. He lived around the corner from Newton, and the two had become fast friends. Growing up, Hilliard had been somewhat of a rebel who often chose hanging out and drinking over attending school. Then Malcolm X shaped his consciousness, and when he heard about the Panthers’ ten-point platform and program and about the armed police patrols he challenged himself to “take the intellectual and moral leap from the street corner into this world of action, ideas and revolution.”³⁵

Eldridge Cleaver and Emory Douglas joined the Panthers in February 1967. While in prison serving a nine-year sentence for rape, Cleaver had become politicized by reading Malcolm X’s work. After being paroled in December 1966, Cleaver and several others rented a house in San Francisco’s Fillmore district that served as a political and cultural center for various black organizations. Cleaver’s writing and oratorical skills landed him a position as a journalist for *Ramparts*, a popular magazine in the Bay Area.³⁶ His prison essays, which were later published as *Soul on Ice*, received much acclaim in both black and white radical circles. The eloquent writing, critique of white supremacy, and raw account of his political evolution overshadowed the fact that the book was also a paean to machismo and heterosexual manhood that excused the violent rape of women. Cleaver’s uncritical embrace by such a wide swath of movement activists speaks to the consensus around patriarchy and the promotion of manhood that was so central to movement culture at this time.

Newton and Seale encountered Cleaver at a planning meeting for the Malcolm X Grassroots Memorial, a conference on Malcolm’s legacy to be held on the anniversary of his assassination, organized by the Black Panther Party of Northern California (BPPNC). A black nationalist organization based in San Francisco that promoted self-determination, cultural pride, and black independent politics, the BPPNC was one of many organizations that had been inspired to take up the symbol and name of the black panther.³⁷ Newton and Seale agreed to work with the BPPNC as part of an armed delegation to escort Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X’s widow, from the airport to the *Ramparts* offices.

The Panthers made an indelible impression at that planning meeting. Cleaver described them as “the most beautiful sight I had ever seen: four black men wearing black berets, powder blue shirts, black leather jackets, black trousers, shiny black shoes—and each with a gun! . . . Where was my mind at? Blown!”³⁸ Emory Douglas, a twenty-two-year-old student activist at City College in San Francisco and a skilled artist, was also in attendance and marked this meeting as the moment that he knew he would join the organization: “I was very impressed with how they articulated themselves. They were armed and wearing uniforms. It was at that time that I knew that I wanted to be part of the Black Panther Party.”³⁹

The delegation of Panthers arrived at the San Francisco airport and escorted Shabazz without incident. But by the time they arrived at the *Ramparts* office, police, the local media, and onlookers had congregated outside. In a dramatic flourish Newton faced down a police officer who confronted him, and both the Panthers and the police drew their weapons. This tension-filled moment ended with the police officer backing down. This incident contributed to the Panthers’ growing reputation.⁴⁰

After this incident Douglas joined the organization and began patrolling the police.⁴¹ Cleaver also joined, and Newton and Seale immediately elevated him to the third highest position in the organizational hierarchy: minister of information. In April 1967 Cleaver added the Panther voice and symbolism to an antiwar rally in San Francisco that was part of the Program for the Spring Mobilization against the War in Vietnam. He promoted the Panther ten-point platform and program and linked the struggle of blacks in America with the struggle of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam.⁴² He represented the uncompromising militancy, strength, and powerful manhood that the Panthers would come to be associated with. However, gender politics in the Panthers, even in this early period, cannot be reduced to the politics of manhood.

COMRADE SISTER

The Panthers did not simply replicate the sexist assumptions, role patterns, and rhetoric that were promoted by some Black Power advocates who felt that male supremacy was part and parcel of fighting white supremacy. While much of their rhetoric revolved around the idea of brothers on the block standing up and acting as protectors of the black community, they also preached a nondogmatic message of activism that assumed a unified



FIGURE 2.1. Black Panthers from Sacramento at the “Free Huey Rally,” Bobby Hutton Memorial Park, Oakland, California. No. 62 from the series *Black Panthers 1968* by Pirkle Jones, Pirkle Jones Collection © 2014 Marin Community Foundation.

community where women were political actors.⁴³ They theorized about the need for strong manhood but didn’t counter that with descriptions of submissive womanhood. Black women turned these theoretical loopholes into open doors.

The Black Panther Party appealed to black women in Oakland who faced issues of poverty and political powerlessness similar to those black men faced and felt the same desire to do something. These young women had come to political consciousness in the context of the growing women’s movement and the public dialogue about women’s equality, rights, and liberation. They understood the commitment to armed self-defense as a marker of strength and determination exemplified not just by men but by women, including the nationally known activists Mabel Williams and Gloria Richardson, as well as women in their families and communities. Many of

these women had been involved in activism at their school or as part of the burgeoning black arts movement and were seeking to connect to an organization whose racial politics they agreed with and whose gender politics seemed malleable. For them, pragmatically, the Panthers posed a viable alternative to the strictly hierarchical gender roles advocated by some local nationalist organizations, such as the Nation of Islam.

Sixteen-year-old Tarika Lewis was the first young woman to join the BPP, in the spring of 1967. Like Bobby Hutton and Reginald Forte, she was a student at Oakland Technical High School and a member of the Black Student Union. She was one of the first students to agitate for a black history club and to proudly wear her hair in an afro. Lewis attended forums on black history and culture with her activist older cousins and often cut school to hang out and attend courses at Merritt College. One day she boldly walked into the Panther office and declared, “Ya’ll have a nice program and everything. It sounds like me. Can I join? ‘Cause ya’ll don’t have no sisters up in here.” Seale said yes and Lewis was swiftly incorporated into the organization.⁴⁴

Elendar Barnes also joined the BPP in the spring of 1967 in her late teens. Her family had migrated from Louisiana and she was raised in West Oakland. She was a student at Merritt College and involved in the Black Student Union as well as the local cultural resurgence around African dance. She learned about the Panthers through Laverne Williams, her best friend and Huey Newton’s girlfriend at the time. According to Barnes, her involvement in the Panthers was a natural evolution of the self-defense politics that she had grown up with:

I became very involved in that level of politics because it was an extension of what I knew, an extension of what they called the Deacons [for Defense] down South. And my grandfather wasn’t necessarily a member of the Deacons, but our family’s stance was, you know, you protect your family by any means necessary and, you know, you use guns. My grandfather was the first person to buy land on what was considered the white part of town. I’d go visit him in the summers and I remember that the Ku Klux Klan burnt a cross on his yard because they opposed him living on that side of town. And my uncles, the males of my family, came from different parts of the country and, you know, there was a conflict. It ended with cars being blown up, all that kind of stuff. So my involvement in the party came from me seeing

certain things that occurred in terms of my family organizing down South and that stuff being carried. I remember asking, “Papa, why you always got a gun?” He’d reply, “It’s for the white folks, baby.” “Papa, why you get up so early?” “To keep up with the white folks, baby.” That is from very young. That’s why I joined the Panthers. I came from that idea of standing up. And I think a lot of people in Oakland have these southern roots and that whole connection with the idea of protecting your own. People were used to using and keeping guns because that’s what they did in the country. My grandfather always kept a gun; it was invisible but it always was in the back of the car or up in the window in the back of the truck, and they always said in the South that they were for hunting but he said it was for the white man. And it wasn’t for the white man who wasn’t bothering you. It was for the KKK and the others. And that’s what moved me into the Panthers.⁴⁵

Judy Hart joined the Panthers in the summer of 1967 when she was twenty-two. She grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in East Oakland and was involved in the Black Student Union movement at San Francisco State University. She was attracted to the Panthers because she saw them as a group that was serious about combating police brutality.⁴⁶ Janice Garrett-Forte was also a student at San Francisco State and active in the Black Student Union movement when she first became involved in the BPP. She had met Newton and Seale when they came to speak on campus. She and her roommates had provided temporary housing for a few BPP members in their apartment, and soon their apartment became a meeting place. At first she was hesitant about the Panthers’ armed stance, but as she learned more she came to accept the principle of self-defense. Being a supporter heightened her political consciousness. Soon she felt she had no choice but to make a stand. She officially joined later that year.⁴⁷

These pioneering women opened the door for others. The political experience they brought, the expectations they had, and the challenges they raised would have an important impact on the Panthers’ evolution.

THE LOADED GUN

As the party’s ranks began to swell, Newton and Seale discovered that formal political education, leadership structures, and a plan for financing their activities were key components of organization building. Self-defense

played a prominent role in all of these strategies. Looking for sources of income, the Panthers decided to sell copies of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (also known as the *Red Book*) at the University of California at Berkeley. Berkeley was an important hub of white student activism in the nation, and students in its politically charged environment were ready consumers of Mao's ideas. The Panthers purchased the books for thirty cents and sold them for one dollar. What began as a chance idea turned into a profitable money-making strategy that they exploited for several months. Newton, Seale, and Hutton would prominently position themselves on Berkeley's bustling streets near the campus and aggressively hawk the books. Soon they were selling the books at rallies and other occasions.

The Panthers saw the sale of the *Red Book* as part of their larger strategy to politically educate their membership. They used the money to fund activities and buy guns for their police patrols, a prime tool for recruiting members whom they could politicize using ideas culled from the *Red Book*. It was a risky bait and switch as the weapons focus came to define the Panthers' public image. According to Seale, "Some brothers would come into the Party, and see us with guns, and they related *only* to the gun."⁴⁸ Some "sisters" fell into this trap as well. Tarika Lewis's second question to Seale on the day she joined was whether she could have a gun. Seale's answer was yes. Lewis quickly discovered, however, that membership meant learning BPP ideology and participating in a wide range of political programs. "I had to earn it [her weapon]. . . . I learned safety, I learned to respect it, I respected other people. I never pointed a weapon at anybody, and I followed the rules."⁴⁹ Lewis parlayed her gun skills into respect. When some Panthers questioned her emerging role in the organization, she invited them to "come on out to the weapons range," confident that she "could outshoot 'em."⁵⁰

The Panthers played a critical role in the dialogue among nationalist organizations such as SNCC, the Revolutionary Action Movement, and the Republic of New Africa, an organization that sought to create an independent black republic, about the role of political violence in the black liberation movement. In the summer of 1967 the cities of Tampa, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Newark, Cleveland, and Detroit were marked by uprisings led by students and youths. The root causes of these incidents ranged from black political powerlessness in local government to poverty, unemployment, and inadequate housing and education—but the spark was usually an incident of police brutality.⁵¹ The Panthers watched urban areas becoming battlefields, complete with national guard troops, looting, mass arrests, sniping, and

fire bombing, and saw the seeds of revolution in these sporadic acts of defiance. As one of the most visible organizations openly carrying arms, they were thrust in the forefront of these debates.

Newton would issue three policy statements in the summer of 1967 that delineated the Panthers' analysis of these uprisings. He condemned rioting as unproductive and disorganized and argued that the black community should arm itself with weapons and with the ideology of self-defense because "force and brutality can only be eliminated by counterforce through self-defense." In this equation the gun was the "basic tool of liberation" that needed to be embraced to be abolished.⁵²

To the Panthers these rebellions signaled the changing mood among black people and solidified a concrete role for the BPP: offering "guidance to extend and strengthen their resistance struggle." Pointing to examples of vanguard parties from Cuba, China, and Algeria and to the Russian Revolution, Newton theorized that the Panthers could serve the same leadership role in the United States. He used the bold, confrontational rhetoric that would become the Panthers' trademark. In one speech he said, "We were forced to build America, and if forced to, we will tear it down. The immediate result of this destruction will be suffering and bloodshed. But the end result will be the perpetual peace for all mankind." In another speech he compared the Panthers to the Vietcong, stating that "weapons must be taken from the oppressor."⁵³

In reality, however, the Panthers were far from ready to wage guerrilla warfare as a vanguard organization. Armed self-defense had proven to be a successful tactic for visibility, but the gun had the potential to overshadow other aspects of their political program. The Panthers attempted to transform the consciousness of their early recruits and disseminate their ideology through political education classes. New recruits were challenged to memorize and understand the ten-point platform and program and familiarize themselves with the ideas of Fanon, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Mao. Seale noted that although the Panthers had focused on self-defense, they "didn't have any intention of having [members] identify only with the gun." Instead the goal was to "teach them that the gun was only a tool and it must be used by a mind that thinks."⁵⁴ Barnes recalled that members went through a "mind change" once they began to study politics, read, and participate in disciplined patrols.⁵⁵

This "mind change," the idea of personal transformation, was key to the success of the organization, for the goal was not only to challenge and

change the conditions in America but also to politicize their membership and their mass following. Early political education efforts ranged from formal classes to informal discussions at Seale's house, where he and Newton exposed people who were interested in the BPP to some of the ideas and thinkers who had influenced them.⁵⁶

The Panthers held classes in political education and weapons training twice a week. Supporters with military experience, like John Sloane, taught members how to break the weapons down, clean them, and handle them in a safe manner. Seale and another early member, Elbert "Big Man" Howard, provided weapons training to new recruits.⁵⁷ The Panthers also focused on "coordinating various activities, and understanding the political significance of various actions we took."⁵⁸

Soon the Panthers had a dedicated group of members and supporters. For those Panthers who had jobs or were in school, involvement in the BPP meant spending some of their spare time attending rallies, leafleting, attending meetings and classes, patrolling, or recruiting. Rules were created to specify standards of conduct and enforce organizational discipline. Some of the new members were undisciplined and brought habits such as smoking marijuana, gambling, and drinking into the organization.⁵⁹ The first three rules warned against using or possessing narcotics, marijuana, or alcohol while doing BPP work. Rule 4 covered office work and meetings; rule 6 stipulated that no member could be part of any army force except the hypothetical "Black Liberation Army"; rules 5 and 7 warned against improper decorum while possessing a weapon. The remaining rules specified that BPP members should understand legal first aid and the proper procedure if they were arrested. All members had to know and understand the ten-point platform and program.⁶⁰

The Panthers' reputation began to spread beyond Oakland. On 1 April 1967 Denzil Dowell was killed by police in nearby Richmond, California. When conflicting police reports and eyewitness testimony raised suspicions about possible misconduct, the Dowell family turned to the community for support. Mark Comfort brought the case to the Panthers' attention. Although Comfort had not sought membership in the BPP, he was a key local ally for the fledgling organization. The Panthers worked with the Dowell family to put pressure on the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department and investigated the crime scene. A local newspaper reported on one of the Panthers' rallies in Richmond: "Some 150 Negroes listened as leaders of the group stood atop autos to make speeches and armed guards kept away all

whites. The speakers reportedly advised the crowd what to do regarding the alleged police brutality. While Contra Costa deputies kept an eye on the gathering from a helicopter, no action was taken on the ground, since a sheriff's spokesman said the Black Panthers broke no laws and displayed their weapons openly."⁶¹

As part of mobilizing the community about the case, the Panthers published the first issue of their newspaper, the *Black Panther*, on 25 April 1967. Many of their armed actions had received negative coverage in the mainstream media, and the newspaper was a bold attempt to shape their own public image and disseminate their own propaganda.⁶² The first issue was printed on both sides of two legal-size sheets of paper. It was hand-lettered and mimeographed and was distributed free. Emory Douglas was familiar with commercial art and worked on the layout; for this he was given the title minister of culture.⁶³ The masthead stated, "The Black Panther Black Community News Service, Volume 1 Number 1 published by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense." The front-page headline queried, "Why was Denzil Dowell Killed?" There was a picture of Dowell, an article giving the "family's side" of the killing, and a list of eleven questionable facts in the police account. The newspaper urged people to attend a meeting in North Richmond. In an article titled "Let Us Organize to Defend Ourselves," the Panthers chronicled several incidents of police brutality that had taken place in Richmond, San Francisco, and Oakland and called for self-defense. The paper also contained an article titled "Armed Black Brothers in Richmond Community," which discussed an armed rally that the police had been powerless to prevent and stressed that organizing around a political perspective was just as important as being armed: "The beautiful thing about the Brothers who held the rally is that they are organized, disciplined and politically aware of all the ins and outs of the problems facing Black People throughout the Bay Area in particular."⁶⁴ The newspaper was an act of self-definition and a way to assert that weapons were a means to an end, not an end in themselves. But it was perhaps too little, too late.

SACRAMENTO INCIDENT

The legal underpinnings of the Panthers' self-defense strategy soon came under attack. A newspaper article published in April 1967 noted that the Panthers had avoided arrest because they had been meticulous in obey-

ing the gun law: "Under California law, they have not violated any gun laws. They do not conceal the weapons, they do not carry loaded guns in vehicles—just guns and ammunition. It's legal." This article concluded with an interview with the state attorney general Thomas C. Lynch, who warned, "The time has come when we have to legislate against carrying or exhibiting guns in public places."⁶⁵ One month later the Mulford Bill, prohibiting carrying unconcealed firearms in public, was introduced in the state legislature, which would change the gun laws to make the Panthers' weapons illegal.

On 2 May 1967 the Panthers led a delegation to Sacramento to highlight their opposition to this bill. Among the thirty men and women were party members, such as Seale, Douglas, and Warren Tucker; relatives and friends of Denzil Dowell; and Comfort and other community activists.⁶⁶ Eldridge Cleaver's parole restrictions required him to go under the guise of an official assignment for *Ramparts*. Newton, also on parole, stayed behind.

In addition to protesting the bill, the Panthers saw a sure opportunity for media coverage. Twenty members of the delegation were armed. Seale planned to read a statement (Executive Manifesto #1) written by Newton declaring the right of black people to arm themselves in self-defense. It linked police aggression in black communities throughout the nation to American aggression in Vietnam and argued that the U.S. government had a policy of "repression, genocide, terror, and the big stick" toward communities of color, evidenced by the genocide of Native Americans and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.⁶⁷

The Panthers caused a stir the moment they emerged from their cars, weapons in the air. As reporters swarmed, Seale read the manifesto on the steps of the legislative office building; then, with no real plan of how to proceed, the delegation marched inside. With police and reporters in tow, the group tried to head for the balcony to observe the proceedings but took a wrong turn and ended up on the floor of the legislature. The police briefly confronted them but eventually released them because they had broken no laws. Seale read Newton's statement again and they departed. When they stopped at a gas station after leaving the capital, police officers swooped in and arrested them on charges of conspiracy, carrying concealed weapons, and more.⁶⁸ Sherwin Forte recalled the tenseness of that moment: "There was a big question there when the police were trying to round us up after we were leaving the assembly and leaving the capital, and they began to get a sense of how to deal with us. . . . Because it was such a surprise, such a

shock to the assemblymen, to the governor. . . . It merged into a confrontation between us and the Sacramento police. I really credit Bobby [Seale] with saving everyone's life there. Because he was the first one to say, 'Take the arrest.'"⁶⁹

Cleaver and several others were soon released. Despite the fact that he had permission from his parole officer and was on an official assignment for *Ramparts*, Cleaver had further restrictions placed on his parole. Seale briefly considered going underground but decided to stand trial. He and several other delegation members were imprisoned.

This action, known as the "Sacramento incident," was broadcast nationally and internationally as a defiant assertion of the right to bear arms. Supporters of the Panthers held a rally at San Francisco State to raise money for the arrested members of the delegation. Stokely Carmichael spoke at the gathering and pledged his support. The Panthers deftly manipulated this surge of interest and tried to add complexity to the powerfully symbolic yet simplistic image of themselves as gun-toting, leather-wearing militants. They created flyers, posters, pamphlets, and buttons.⁷⁰ Newton spoke on several local radio stations and to newspapers to elaborate on the ten-point platform and program and the BPP's politics. On 15 May 1967 the Panthers published the second issue of the *Black Panther*, which featured stories that would tell "The truth about Sacramento" since "the mass media has indulged itself in an orgy of distortion, lying, and misrepresentation seldom equaled in the history of the racist USA."⁷¹ The articles were written in vibrant language designed to capture the readers' imagination. The police were described as pigs: "an ill-natured beast who has no respect for law and order, a foul traducer who's usually found masquerading as a victim of an unprovoked attack."⁷² This language symbolically stripped the police of their authority, dignity, and humanity. Douglas, a skilled graphic artist, and Lewis created captivating visuals portraying black people as powerful fighters while representing the police as fat, slovenly pigs.⁷³

The Sacramento incident resulted in an increase in membership, especially among college students and other young people frustrated with police brutality.⁷⁴ Mary Williams recalled, "It was terrible here [Oakland], really terrible. And anyone who came along who had ideas about moving ahead, people would have listened, because it was really bad. You couldn't even talk to a policeman."⁷⁵ Williams, her husband, and her brother-in-law joined the BPP after the Sacramento incident. Terry Cotton was galvanized

by the media coverage of the incident; he remembered seeing “li’l Bobby and Bobby when they went into the capitol” and hearing about “all the politicians . . . getting down under their desks.” To him it was “really impressive”: “I thought that everybody should have the right to bear arms for self-defense against harassment, police brutality, and ya know, Mass Genocide.”⁷⁶

The media coverage fueled interest in the Panthers around the country. Steve McCutchen recalled watching news of the Sacramento incident from Baltimore: “What caught my attention at the time was, one, black men with guns; two, black men who were there in a state capitol; and three, it was at a time where the Vietnam War was raging and I was caught in the conflict because I was in twelfth grade then and I had no clue how I was going to finish the twelfth grade, finish school, and stay out of Vietnam. That caught my attention.”⁷⁷ Requests poured in from people who wanted to organize new Panther chapters or bring preexisting political formations under the Panther banner. While these local activists faced socioeconomic conditions that paralleled Oakland’s, they had their own organizing traditions, political ideologies, and social networks. These local tendencies would be knit into a national movement, a dynamic process that was rarely led or directed from Oakland. Panther chapters would spring up in Michigan, Georgia, New York, Tennessee, and southern California. The Panthers quickly realized that they were not equipped to handle organizational growth in any systematic way; there was no “administrative body that could handle these requests and supervise a large-scale organization.”⁷⁸ In a largely symbolic gesture, the Panthers drafted Carmichael, a skilled organizer, into the organization with the rank of field marshal.⁷⁹ Yet, although he considered the Panthers an ally and a promising manifestation of Black Power, his focus remained the growth and development of SNCC. In mid-1967 he visited Algeria, Syria, Egypt, Guinea, and Tanzania, leaving little time to recruit or organize on the Panthers’ behalf.⁸⁰ So the question of how to expand was set aside for the more pressing business of survival.

BLASTED OFF THE STREETS

At the end of the BPP’s first year its collision course with the state would come to its inevitable end. Prophetically Newton had written in his autobiography, “[I] did not think I would live for more than one year after we began; I thought we would be blasted off the streets.”⁸¹ Police harassment

of the Panthers had begun soon after they initiated their police patrols. Armed Panthers who were supposed to intervene between the community and the police became the targets of an escalating police campaign to neutralize the organization. The police knew which cars were driven by BPP members and would often stop them for traffic violations. Criminal laws were used as a pretext to arrest Panthers and incarcerate them for as long as possible. This tied up limited BPP resources for bail and created adverse publicity.⁸²

In July 1967 the Mulford Bill, which outlawed the carrying of loaded firearms on one's person or in vehicles and prohibited citizens from having loaded firearms in or near any state or government building, became law. It ended with a clear warning about the "increasing incidence of organized groups and individuals publicly arming themselves for purposes inimical to the peace and safety of the people of California."⁸³ Rhetoric to the contrary, the Panthers had been able to practice armed self-defense not because of Second Amendment rights but because of Oakland's liberal gun laws. The loophole in the law had been sewn tightly shut, and armed Panther patrols were now illegal.⁸⁴ Newton issued a directive ordering Panthers to stop carrying weapons publicly; as a result the arms went underground.⁸⁵

In August Seale was sentenced to six months in jail for disturbing the peace in the Sacramento incident. The irony of Sacramento was that it had thrust the Panthers into the national spotlight while decimating their ranks. On 28 October 1967 Newton was arrested in an early morning melee that left him wounded and a police officer dead. Newton and his companion were driving his girlfriend's tan-colored Volkswagen; they had just left a party celebrating the end of Newton's parole after his 1964 arrest. The police officer, John Frey, identified the car as a Panther-affiliated vehicle with outstanding parking tickets and pulled it over. While Frey was examining Newton's registration, a second police car pulled up with officer Herbert Heanes inside. Heanes had heard Frey's request for backup, and as the closest officer in the vicinity he arrived on the scene a few minutes later.

Subsequent events are in dispute.⁸⁶ In one version Newton was ordered out of the car. He initially refused but eventually complied, holding his law book in his hand. A fight ensued in which Frey was killed and Newton and Heanes were wounded. Newton and his friend left the scene and asked the driver of a parked car nearby, Dell Ross, to give them a lift. They later

jumped out of the car and fled on foot. In his autobiography David Hilliard revealed that Newton showed up at his home, and at approximately 5:30 a.m. he and his brother, June, dropped Newton off at Oakland's Kaiser Hospital.⁸⁷

Newton's law book, with his name written inside, was found at the crime scene. It didn't take the police long to check local hospitals, locate Newton, and place him under arrest as the prime suspect. News of the incident spread, and the next morning a photograph of Newton handcuffed to a hospital gurney was featured on the front page of local newspapers. The killing of one police officer and the wounding of another in an incident that involved one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense guaranteed the case would be high profile. Newton was hospitalized for two weeks for stomach wounds, then was transferred to the medical ward of San Quentin Prison, and then to the Alameda County Jail in downtown Oakland. On 13 November 1967 he was indicted for three felonies: the murder of Frey, assault with a deadly weapon against Heanes, and the kidnapping of Dell Ross.⁸⁸ He faced the death penalty.

The Panthers linked Newton's fate to the fate of armed self-defense, asserting, "What is at stake is first of all, Huey's life, and secondly, the right of black people to self-defense against armed aggression on the part of the police as the military arm of the racist power structure."⁸⁹

The Panthers were not the only ones to feel the blast from this incident. Berkeley was the epicenter of nationwide domestic unrest over the U.S. government's involvement in Vietnam, and increasingly white student activists were challenging the social order and coming into conflict with the police. Just one week before Newton's arrest the police had clashed with thousands of antiwar demonstrators at the Oakland Induction Center. Photographers and reporters chronicled the indiscriminate clubbing and use of mace that police practiced against demonstrators who were determined to stand their ground. The Bay Area radical community dubbed this day, 17 October 1967, "Bloody Tuesday."

In the wake of Seale's and Newton's arrests, Cleaver stepped to the forefront as the Panthers' principal spokesperson. Despite warnings from the parole board, he made public speeches on behalf of the Panthers and published literature in Newton's defense. Cleaver brought his distinctive brand of Marxist political polemics to the organization. The Panthers continued to speak in terms of the national liberation of black America but began to shift toward leftist economic analyses that critiqued capitalism. While



FIGURE 2.2. Kathleen Cleaver, communications secretary of the Black Panther Party and wife of Eldridge Cleaver, De Fremery Park, Oakland, California. No. 5 from the series *Black Panthers 1968* by Pirkle Jones, Pirkle Jones Collection © 2014 Marin Community Foundation.

Cleaver's role as a charismatic Panther leader was important, it would be the organizing skills of Kathleen Cleaver and other women that would play a decisive role in the Panthers' survival.

Kathleen Neal was working with SNCC when she met Cleaver in 1967 at a black student conference at Fisk College in Nashville. Cleaver recruited her to help him organize around Newton's case, and the two were subsequently married. Kathleen's organizing experience made her a valuable addition to the BPP.⁹⁰

The period immediately following Newton's arrest was a time of crisis for the Panthers. Their core membership had dwindled from approximately seventy-five to fewer than thirty committed members, many of whom were incarcerated following the Sacramento incident.⁹¹ The remaining mem-

bers faced the formidable task of rebuilding the organization with both of its founders imprisoned.

Kathleen Cleaver initiated fund-raising activities, planned demonstrations to raise awareness about Newton's case, and served as a contact person for the press to inform them about Panther events. Soon she came to see herself as a Panther and called herself "communications secretary." The organizational structure was "in a total state of collapse"; there was no money for the office rent, no regular newspaper, and only a handful of active members.⁹²

Despite their low numbers, the remaining Panthers mobilized behind Newton's case. They operated on a collective basis, met at different people's houses, and made decisions as they socialized.⁹³ Women played a central role in this process, asserting leadership and shaping policy not just despite the lack of formal structure but because of it. Janice Garrett-Forte recalled, "After Huey had gotten shot, we had a central committee that consisted of Kathleen, Eldridge, Huey, Bobby. I was in it 'cause I was his [Newton's] secretary. JoAnne Mitchell was the captain of the women, and we were lieutenants. We would have meetings about different policies within the party."⁹⁴ Kathleen Cleaver explained, "The party reconfigured itself in the midst of the 'Free Huey' movement. [It] allowed the party to reinvigorate [itself]."⁹⁵

The Panthers worked with Newton's family to create the Huey Newton Defense Fund to coordinate fund-raising efforts. They chose "Free Huey" as their rallying cry rather than the more modest demand of a fair trial. While the mainstream media defined the case as criminal, the Panthers persistently focused on the underlying politics of his arrest. According to their propaganda, the criminal justice system was persecuting Newton because he was the leader of a radical political organization that was raising awareness of police brutality. He was a *political* prisoner, wrongfully accused and imprisoned, the victim of an ongoing campaign of police harassment against the black community in general and the Black Panthers in particular. The role of incarceration in derailing movements, draining resources, persecuting dissent, and sparking solidarity campaigns would grow evident over the course of the movement for Black Power.

In their first year of activism the Panthers had boldly and legally picked up the gun—and been forced to lay it back down. They had seen the power of armed self-defense to motivate, inspire, and empower both men and women. They had faced the reality of its inability to politicize, educate,

and organize and witnessed its potential to unleash unheralded repression. Organizational development too was shaped by armed self-defense; it motivated the Panthers to create rules, weapons training, membership requirements, and political education classes. Going forward, Seale and Newton would continue to strategically advocate for self-defense but also prioritized developing other elements of their political program. Understanding that self-defense could be both a catalyst and a corrosive, they dropped the “for Self-Defense” from the party’s name—an act of self-definition that largely escaped notice. It was a balancing act that would become increasingly untenable.