

The Panthers, Police, and Press Printed in Black and White

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. Originally named The Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the BPP's goal was to provide protection and aid to the black community. Their ten point platform included providing sufficient housing, food, and jobs for members of their community. As the Civil Rights movement progressed, the Panthers dropped the "Self Defense" part of their title due to the wide political influence the party was gaining.¹ Yet as the party's clout increased, so did its feud with federal and local law enforcement. Raids and sieges were common as the two groups fought through 1972 when the Black Panther Party collapsed.

The radical philosophies of the Panthers and their advocacy of violence garnered headlines up until 1972, the unofficial end of the party. Conflict between the police force and the Panthers also prompted extensive newspaper coverage. How the BPP and the police were depicted varied, however, depending on the viewpoint of the newspaper. White owned newspapers, such as *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*, often used the image of the typical Panther, in his black beret and leather jacket, to project an image of Panthers being more concerned with looks rather than politics.

¹ Jessica Christina Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," *The Journal of Negro History* (2000): 167 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

Black newspapers, such as *The Chicago Defender* and *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, used the actual speeches and actions of the Panthers to create their image. These two different methods of describing the Panthers illustrated the opposing views of the Black Panther Party by white owned and black newspapers. Black papers tended to view the Panthers as fighters working hard for their cause yet also attention seeking, while white papers saw them as disorganized radicals. When it came to the police officers, however, the white and black newspapers were oddly in sync. They both portrayed the police as loose cannons and did not approve of their actions. These patterns show that although the Panthers were regarded as radicals, the police officers were depicted in a more extreme and dangerous manner.

Despite the radical politics of the Black Panther Party, it was the members' guns, uniforms, and never-back-down attitude that gave them the most publicity. The white papers used these images and BPP rhetoric to discredit their validity as political party and suggested that the Black Panther Party was just a militant group of hostile, arrogant men looking to cause trouble. Even if the paper did mention their political opinions, it was juxtaposed with their image and attitude. *The New York Times* ran an article which stated:

Like many other activist organizations, the Black Panthers seem to be a marriage of angry intellectuals and just plain angry... The rank-and-file members are much less concerned with revolutionary theories, although they do seem caught up in such militant rituals as Afro haircuts, secret handshakes and the rhetoric particular to the black revolution.²

Thus *The Times* portrayed the Panthers as simply a group of discontented angry men, held together by their affinity for paramilitary discipline rather than an organization bound by beliefs and ideals for advancing the cause of African American rights. They

² Thomas A. Johnson, "Black Panthers." *New York Times*, September 15, 1968, E5. <<http://www.proquest.com>> (February 8, 2010).

were not worried about political ideals, claimed the paper, but instead about their image and attaining a sense of camaraderie. The “militant rituals” such as “secret handshakes” and “Afro haircuts” bonded these men together, not their revolutionary ideas. The paper asserted that they were not a threat to society because they were not focused on fundamentally changing society. The Panthers were solely an imitation of a revolutionary army, as shown by the “rank-and-file members” who could not care less about “revolutionary theories”. The paper highlighted the Panthers' lack of involvement and absence of political and social awareness, thus discrediting them as a threat to society. This group of “angry intellectuals” was not trying to change the nation; they were just forming a secret club.

An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* described the Panthers as, “Clad in black, identifying one another by military rank, often flamboyant in manner.”³ The word “flamboyant” made a mockery of their operations and interactions. These papers used the image of the Panthers to discredit them as a political group. It highlighted their appearance rather than what the Panthers stood for, thus stressing the idea that they were not a threat. This portrayal made them seem less dangerous and more like a group of men who enjoyed pretending they were in the army. They were not capable of waging war on society; they did not have the capacity.

The white papers also ventured even further, implying that violence was more important than the Black Panther's politics. The newspapers focused on how the Panthers’ trigger fingers seemed to act without any consideration of their politics. They put emphasis on the role of violence in the party although in reality the Black Panther

³ James B. Alexander, "Black Panthers." *Christian Science Monitor*, January 13, 1969, p. 7. <<http://www.proquest.com>> (February 16, 2010).

Party was founded under the principle that, like the panthers themselves, they would never attack first but only retaliate harshly.⁴ The white papers completely disregarded this fact. During an interview with an ex-Panther, one paper quoted:

‘They did not attend political education classes, rather...they were to make fire bombs; they studied how to dispose of things such as power installations, “pig” [police] stations, railroad tracks, communications systems, and things like that.’⁵

By including this quote from the interview with an ex-Panther, the paper tried to show that Panthers valued violence above their principles. By doing so, the BPP seemed like a group of angry radicals who only cared about guns. One reporter described a BPP patrol as follows:

During the rally George Dowell patrols the fringes of the small group, carrying a loaded .30-.30 rifle. Another Panther stands on the Dowell roof, demonstrating the lading of a shotgun with a 20 inch barrel—a gun which Bobby Seale tells the group he recommends highly.⁶

Instead of depicting Seale focusing on the rally, the paper highlighted the leader of the Black Panther Party walking around talking about guns. This suggested that politics came second to violence in the Black Panthers’ minds. The white papers tried to place violence at the very heart of the Black Panther system. By doing so, they created an image of gun-happy radicals rather than political activists. Another white author reported that, “All members of the Black Guard must be willing to perform acts of violence before they are

⁴ Jessica Christina Harris, “Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party.” *The Journal of Negro History*, 2000. <<http://www.jstor.org>>

⁵ Robert P. Hey, "Ex-Black Panther tells of arms, extortion, campus action." *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 1969, 3. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 16, 2010).

⁶ Sol Stern, "The Call Of the Black Panthers." *New York Times*, August 6, 1967, 186.<<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 3, 2010).

nominated.”⁷ This illustrated the paper's perception of the importance of violence to the Panthers. What held the Panthers together, according to the white press, was a common interest in radical behavior rather than principles or beliefs. The prevalence of guns made the Panthers appear violent and dangerous, and not politically inclined in the slightest. They made the Panthers seem like they had lost, or never had, an idea of what they were fighting for. *The Christian Science Monitor* described the Panthers’ short tenure as an attempt that was “largely unsuccessful—to define its ideology and purpose.”⁸

Although the black newspapers did not mention the beliefs of the Panthers either, they praised their determination and fearlessness. They portrayed the Panthers were hard and strong fighters, not violent civilians. When describing raids, these papers would often praise the fight the Panthers put up, even if they lost. They would portray their resistance as hard fought and honorable. When describing an attack on a downtown Panther headquarters, one author wrote:

The odds were nowhere even; the Panthers had 11 fighters and three women against 300 of L.A.’s finest. The Panthers finally gave up with three of their own being wounded and they in turn wounding three cops.⁹

In this report the Panthers were described as greatly disadvantaged, thus making them look admirable for continuing to fight. This description of the attack made the Panthers appear as strong and tenacious fighters. The report of the siege also made the Panthers appear as determined and capable fighters despite their surrender. Another reporter wrote,

⁷ Robert P. Hey, "Ex-Black Panther tells of arms, extortion, campus action." *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 1969, 3. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (accessed February 16, 2010).

⁸ "Someone ... is firing at us'." *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 8, 1969, 7.<http://www.proquest.com> (March 1, 2010).

⁹ Bill Robertson, "Central Avenue, Surrounding Area 'No Man's Land' As Police Raiders Lay Siege to Panther Headquarters." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 11, 1969, A1.<http://www.proquest.com> (March 1, 2010).

“The black power boys now walk the streets expecting anything,”¹⁰ The fact that the Panthers were “expecting anything” made the Panthers seem fully aware and completely prepared for whatever the fight might throw at them. They were strong fighters who could hold their ground.

Although the Panthers were strong fighters in the eyes of the black papers, they were also portrayed as attention seeking. During the siege mentioned earlier, the author stated that, “Panthers sent word they would surrender if the press were allowed in.”¹¹ This quote illustrates the importance of the media for the Panthers. They wanted publicity and headlines, not for the siege to end quietly and quickly. Another paper reported that after a similar incident, “a Panther inside telephoned to say they would surrender if the press were there to witness against them.”¹² These papers stressed on the fact that the Panthers made a point to call in the press. This illustrated the Panthers desire for headlines and attention.

The black press also showed that the BBP strove for attention by using their rhetoric. Panthers' speeches were infused with such statements as “‘We will kill Richard Nixon’.”¹³ Queried by the press after this speech, the lawyer for the BPP claimed that the speaker never intended to threaten the President, and this language was merely political

¹⁰ "Black Panther Killings Open Pandora's Box." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 18, 1969, A2. <<http://www.proquest.com>> (March 1, 2010).

¹¹ Bill Robertson, "Central Avenue, Surrounding Area 'No Man's Land' As Police Raiders Lay Siege to Panther Headquarters." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 11, 1969, A1. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 1, 2010).

¹² "Panther-Police Shootout Brings Mixed Reactions." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 11, 1969, A3. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 1, 2010).

¹³ "Panther Denies 'Arsenal' Charge." *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 30, 1969, 5. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 11, 2010).

rhetoric. If the statement was just “political rhetoric”¹⁴ and was not a legitimate threat, then the only reason for such language would be to grab headlines across America. The Panthers’ wanted the attention, drama, and chaos their words created, not the actions their words insinuated. The black press, however, did recognize the Panthers’ right to make such outrageous claims. One reporter wrote, “But our Constitution guarantees free speech, no matter how provocative. Actions can be punished, but rhetoric can’t.”¹⁵

Although the two types of papers differed on their portrayal of the Panthers, they had similar depictions of the police officers, with only slight variations. White papers focused more on the attitudes of the police, while black newspapers paid more attention to their actual actions. Either way, they both illustrated that the cops were undisciplined, violent, and abusive. Their actions only served to worsen situations, not defuse them.

White papers especially thought that the police caused more trouble than they fixed. With crimes against the Panthers skyrocketing, the white papers began to get angry. *The New York Times* published an article that stated:

The attack in a court building makes a mockery of the rule of law and court-decreed justice. It feeds the fears of those in our society who already consider the police less their guardians than their oppressors. It undermines the public’s confidence in its law-enforcement establishment.¹⁶

In essence, *The Times* believed that policemen were breaking laws rather than enforcing them. By expressing this opinion, the paper portrayed the cops as lawless, violent, and unconcerned with an individual's civil rights. Instead of helping to calm the panicked public, they were inciting greater anger and protest. The police were supposed to tame the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Black Panthers And The Police.” *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 17, 1970, 6. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 11, 2010).

¹⁶ “Brutality, New York Style.” *New York Times* September 5, 1968, 46. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 10, 2010).

Black Panthers while also keeping the public safe and secure. The white press felt that the police were not doing either of their tasks. Instead they made the police appear ineffectual, or perhaps incompetent, in dealing with the Panthers. Not only were they not succeeding in fighting the Black Panthers, but they were also causing panic among the general public. Police ineptitude caused them to be portrayed as “oppressors” rather than “guardians”. Police actions only served to exacerbate the tension and violence.

The white papers advanced their idea of policemen as villains by making them seem immature, power hungry, and more dangerous than the Panthers. Having naïve, angry, and ambitious men at the head of the police force was more hazardous than a group of not-so-politically-inclined radicals. In fact, by the time the BPP was at its height, the police had created the Law Enforcement Society, a group similar to the BPP except that their aim was to take the law into their own hands against the Panthers. This group “demands a tough ‘law and order’”¹⁷ approach in order to defeat the Panthers. In essence, the police turned into what the Black Panthers were supposed to be, and the white papers freely voiced this view. The papers referred to the Law Enforcement Society as “a militant right wing.”¹⁸

The police had formed into an even more radical group than the Panthers, whom the press believed, could barely articulate their ideology. An officer was quoted saying, “‘Maybe those guys ought to pick their best gunman and we pick ours and then have an old-fashioned shoot-it-out.’”¹⁹ This arrogance coupled with their combative tendency

¹⁷ Sylvan Fox, "Leary Says Police Reflect Community In a Swing to Right." *New York Times*, September 11, 1968, 1. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 8, 2010).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sol Stern, "The Call Of the Black Panthers." *New York Times*, August 6, 1967, 186. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (February 3, 2010).

made the police look more dangerous when compared to the Black Panthers. They appeared more threatening not only because they could articulate their ideas and goals, but they also had the entire law enforcement system on their side. The police had the training, support, and ammunition to turn rhetoric into action. The Panthers on the other hand, lacked the training, guns, and organization of a real established police authority, thus presenting less of a threat.

The black papers took the white paper's portrayal of the police a step further, making the cops seem not only dangerous, but dishonest bullies. They highlighted instances of police brutality and secretiveness. A reporter, when reporting on a recent shooting between the cops and the Black Panthers, described that, "Within five seconds officers had him on the ground with repeated clubbing, even after the handcuffs were on his wrists. One policeman attempted to shield the scene from a *Sentinel* photographer."²⁰ Not only was this an instance of police brutality, but it was also an example of the police trying to hide their actions from the general public. The cops continued to beat a helpless civilian even after they had handcuffed him. The reporter made sure to emphasize the fact that this man had no way to fight back. The police would take every advantage, no matter how unfair, to beat and pummel their enemy. This image was one of cruelty and blood thirst; an image that was never given to the Black Panthers.

Not only did the police beat up a civilian, but they attempted to hinder the press from reporting the abuse. Newspaper photographers' camera films were routinely confiscated by the police. In account after account of police raids and brutality film was

²⁰ Charles Baireuther, "Panther-Police Shootout Brings Mixed Reactions." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 11, 1969, A3. <<http://www.proquest.com/>> (March 1, 2010).

confiscated — the very film that would have provided the most damaging evidence against the police. Never in any of these accounts is there any explanation given from the police. It was simply assumed that they took away their film to hide the damage they caused and their brutality towards their victims. The black papers used the confiscation of their film to vilify the police as authoritarian and brutal. They showed that the police wanted to hide their actions, thus demonizing them even more.

Both the white and black press made the police officers look power hungry. A reporter from the *Chicago Defender* wrote, “Policemen can’t appoint themselves judges, nor can they summarily dispense justice to those with whom they disagree.”²¹ This phrase implies that the police overused their power to the point where they were becoming all the different parts of the justice system. It made the police seem like tyrants who could engage in any acts with immunity. It implied the belief that because they enforced the law any actions they took, no matter how reprehensible to a civilized society, were justified. A reporter for *The New York Times* wrote that there was a “dangerously spreading sentiment among policemen here and elsewhere that because they enforce the law they are, somehow, personally, above the law.”²² It is clear that both white and black owned papers shared this belief. They both portrayed the police officers as people who thought that they could not be held responsible for their actions. One reporter wrote, “More and more it is becoming obvious that the real danger in America lies less in radical dissent than in the official lawlessness and official disregard for democratic values and civil

²¹ "Black Panthers And The Police." *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 17, 1970, 6. <<http://www.proquest.com>> (February 11, 2010).

²² "Brutality, New York Style." *New York Times* September 5, 1968, 46. <<http://www.proquest.com>> (February 10, 2010).

liberties.”²³ The papers saw the police's need for power and control as the worst part of the situation. The press blamed the police for most of the violence and brutality. They repeatedly reported incidents of police abuse, thus making them seem far more dangerous than the Black Panthers.

White and black newspapers disagreed on their portrayal of the Black Panthers. The white owned papers showed them as simply a mob of men with the desire to belong to something greater than themselves, not to change society. They saw the BPP as only capable of causing physical harm. They showed the party as unable to articulate their ideals. They were far too disorganized and disjointed to represent a threat to society. The black newspapers on the other hand, showed the Panthers as hard working and determined. They also illustrated them as attention seeking, even if what they were fighting for was admirable.

Although race influenced the newspapers' coverage of the BPP, it had no effect on the newspapers' representation of the police. Law enforcement was portrayed in both white and black owned newspapers as more radical and dangerous than the Black Panther Party. The black press highlighted police instances of brutality, cruelty, and secrecy. White newspapers, on the other hand, focused more on how the police abuse was undermining people's confidence in the justice system. Loss of confidence in the justice system would have a far greater impact on society than the Panthers, a disorganized paramilitary group, ever could. Although they went about it in different ways, both the black and the white press came to the conclusion that the police were in fact more radical than the militant organization they opposed.

²³ "Black Panthers And The Police." *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 17, 1970, 6. <<http://www.proquest.com>> (February 11, 2010).

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