The Decline of The Black Panther Party: The External and Internal Struggles of a Radical Group

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The Mulford Act was a bill created to prevent civilians from carrying loaded weapons in public. Many may find this bill a peaceful act that would help serve and protect many citizens, but the early Black Panther Party was furious about this new bill. On May 2nd, 1967, a small group of around thirty self-called revolutionaries protested at the California General Assembly. Although their protest would be aligned with civil rights and aiding the African-American social structure, their ideals were not conventional to civil rights protests of the time. Led by Bobby Seale and constructed by Huey P. Newton, this group was set on defining itself as an answer against police brutality. Their protest raged on without conviction. The members of the black panther party took a new approach to fighting for the black minority. Newton best stated the defining intention, establishing the party's radical characteristics: "Well they have been calling us thugs, and hoodlums for 400 years, that ain't gon' hurt me!" (Austin and Howard 1).

The party has influenced the majority of African-American culture, including future protest campaigns, service and aid, and the trajectory of the civil rights movement as a whole. However, the party's importance to African American history is often underrepresented, even with its contributions. This is because of the party's radicalized ideals, but through analysis, the party may display unexplored views and perspectives on African American culture and black radicalism.

Radicalism is defined as a group working towards creating social reform within a larger society. During the Civil Rights movement, there was a rise of black radicalist groups, mostly focused on revolutionizing the U.S. to include equality for minority races among the majority of white people or to prioritize black power. The most popular of these groups is the Black Panther

Party. Since its inception in 1966, the party has held three main views: its communism-rooted ideals, the necessity of violence for self-defense, and its opposition to police brutality.

The party has influenced the majority of African-American culture, including future protest campaigns, service and aid, and the trajectory of the civil rights movement as a whole. The importance of the party to African American history is often underrepresented, even with its contributions. This is because of the party's radicalized ideals, but through analysis, the party may display unexplored views and perspectives on African American culture and black radicalism. The particular gap in history may show a new perspective on the party's involvement in the inception of African American gang culture.

A specific analysis will be provided to determine and find these new perspectives on the party. First, an in-depth introduction to the Black Panther Party and Black radicalism will be discussed, including their inception in American society. Next, the rise and decline of the party and its catalysts will be explored. Then, a defining cause that led to the inception of gang culture will be determined. Finally, the transition and legacy of the spread of gang culture will be linked to the spotlighted cause for its inception.

The historical context of the black radical movement begins almost a hundred years before its inception. Slavery was an economic institution that the United States built itself around that placed black people as unpaid workers without basic human rights. The former president Abraham Lincoln oversaw tensions brewing between the North and South of the United States over economic differences and, therefore, slavery. A civil war would break out between these: the North, known as the Union, fighting against the institution of slavery, and the South, known as the Confederacy, fighting *for* the institution of slavery (Austin and Howard). The outcome would be a victory for the Union and the freedom of African Americans, a step towards basic

rights for African Americans. In 1863, the declaration of this freedom was spread, known as the Emancipation Proclamation. It declared that anyone held as a slave would, from then on, be known as a free U.S. citizen. This almost entirely affected the black race living in the United States, who were discriminated against and sold into slavery for around 200 years in the Americas. Even though it was illegal to hold slaves in the United States, the black race, who were the majority of enslaved people, would continue to be discriminated against for years after the fact. The lives of black people during this post-Civil War period were what many would describe as difficult. They may have been free, but many lacked a foundation to accumulate wealth, jobs, and education.

The interpretation of this discrimination by black people was not received well. Still, due to the societal class discrepancies and the black race as a minority, it was not common for black people to speak up or have the platform to do so in the late 19th century into the early 20th century. However, the World War I period in the United States would elevate many minorities to begin to speak out against their hardships. The women's suffrage movement and other protests grew in popularity, and many other groups desired their success in goals. These protests were characterized as mostly non-violent. One of the first activist groups for African American rights, the NAACP, or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, created in 1909, would promote this non-violent approach. The non-violent standard would become popular, but it did have many divergences. Roots of disagreements in protesting styles began to emerge as black people struggled without compensation for their efforts.

No matter the characteristics of the protesting styles, it was clear that black protesting had its foundation in influence. Important figures of the time, like W.E.B. Du Bois, would craft literature on black power. He would lead African Americans toward demanding their human

rights and defending themselves against white attacks. In which the interpretation and use of his literature would become a standard for sects of black protests. Creating two standards, one non-violent and the other towards self-defense, is imperative to understanding the clear divide in protesting during the civil rights movement. As the inequalities of black minorities changed, the standard of self-defense did as well.

Suffering would continue for black people in the United States into the 1930s to the late 1950s. Each decade would lead to adaptations to the black outlook on self-defense. The 1930s, defined by their economic disparities due to the Great Depression, created difficulties in creating financial stability for anyone. Although the entire country struggled, the black population still concentrated their desires on fundamental rights for themselves. Attacks, physical and verbal, against black people were commonplace; lynchings and violent attacks plagued the lives of black people. During the 1940s, World War II broke out, and as the oppressed groups, countries, and cultures of the time looked at the allies' defense against Hitler's regime, they took notice of their lack of nonviolence. Countries controlled by imperialist rule took the opportunity to push for independence, and this would influence black protests in the United States. The 1950s for black people in the United States were characterized by more violent attacks by white people on black people. The abhorrent death of Emmett Till and many others caused uproars in black communities. Self-defense was becoming more popular as anxiety set in for black people. The inception of self-defense groups for the black minority began to expand during the 1950s to 1960s.

On an international scale, the Cold War would begin to pick up. Another war with the involvement of the United States created more comparisons and criticism from the country's citizens. The war's involvement with outside countries like Cuba and China, which displayed

freedom fighting, created desires for black people in the United States. The liberation of many

African Countries from colonial rule inspired the African American population in the United

States. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam's teachings on connecting heritage back to Africa

influenced black activists to transform into a revolutionary style in hopes of changing the United

States. The necessary changes that many of these black revolutionaries realized for the United

States were a breakdown of the systemic racism that provided a struggle for the black minority.

Segregation was not just a societal construct to hinder black people. It was governmental

policies to restrict, separate, and oppress black people, effectively removing their fundamental

rights as citizens in the United States. Jim Crow laws were both statewide and local county laws

that enforced segregation as a legal practice in the United States. Most of these laws separated

black and white people from interacting in public places. For example, public bathrooms were

separated into colored and white. These segregated places were also unequal. Colored sections

would contrast with the white sections, with much less maintenance or care. This meant not only

was there a divide between colored individuals and white individuals, but colored individuals

would also receive worse conditions than white people. Segregation was effective in allowing a

majority white government to control a black population, and this shaped more disconnections

with authority in the country for the black minority.

The population of the police profession was almost entirely white. The black minority's

relationship with the police authority during a time of segregation was always tense. It was

bound to happen that violence between both groups would occur. A large number of encounters

between black people and police, especially in the South, were harmful to black people. The

defenseless black minority who ended up in altercations with police faced police brutality. As the

police held authority over the black minority, it meant many could not do anything against

violent encounters with the police. This was another request of many activists for black equality or power. Although it was not accepted as a social practice in the United States, it did not stop officers from pursuing violence against black people.

At this point, as the black revolutionary ideal became defined in the United States, many black people aligned with these ideals and saw an incentive to lay down their lives for freedom if it meant they could achieve their goals. This was the inception of black radicalism in the United States. Groups that desired and would fight for change in government policies to improve the well-being of the black race. One of these groups, the Black Panther Party, would pride itself on its empowerment of the black race, radical nature, and defense against police brutality.

Huey P. Newton was a young college student from California when he realized the situation African Americans were against in the United States. Newton heard about violent attacks by police around his community as they were occurring in real-time, allowing him to experience them "first-hand." He also experienced the outrage and resistance black people put forth after such tragedies. This unstructured opposition that black people presented toward the violent police attacks did not stop the attacks from occurring. Newton desired to organize the outrage his community fostered. While studying law, he delved into the policies surrounding gun possession in California. He discovered the possession of firearms on one's body was allowed in public as long as it was not concealed. Newton learned about a self-defense group from a pamphlet that held the idea that it was necessary to carry weapons to defend oneself against violent attacks. Their symbol for the defense group was a black panther, which Newton later adopted for his group. Newton worked closely with Bobby Seale, an established black revolutionary, activist, and friend of Huey P. Newton.

Seale was a man of action and showed many strong qualities of an activist in his early years. He held a similar desire as Newton to organize the ghetto community in California in the way the civil rights movement organized black people in the South. Bobby Seale met Newton during a rally in 1962. Due to the two sharing similar political views for the defense of black people, a connection was instantly formed between them. They both decided to join the same black revolutionary study group, where they would eventually work together to create the Black Panther Party.

On October 15th, 1966, in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party was created by its founders and co-founder Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, respectively. The civil rights movement had caught national attention for its impact on the lives of black people in the country. However, Newton and Seale believed the movement failed to address the majority of black people's issues. During the first year of the party's inception, they were just a small group of young black men and women fighting for the black community. To address police brutality, they began the "policing the police" movement. This movement was characterized by members of the party stating and demanding their rights to observe police interactions and carry weapons openly in public. As the party began to take more action, more communities in the California area began to notice. In May 1967, the party, led by Seale, marched on the California State Legislature's General Assembly. They were marching to protest a bill prohibiting the ability to carry firearms. Later in the year, Newton would be shot and charged with killing a police officer. These two events allowed the party to go from less than one hundred members to a couple of hundred nationally by the end of one year.

The party would grow exponentially as they committed to more activism and protests, but what caught the nation's attention was the lack of change occurring in black communities.

Prominent figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and even early Panther members like Bobby Hunton were murdered for their desire to help the black communities. The party, which was becoming the most prominent radical African-American political group, with a growing number of thousands of members by the end of the decade (Johnson), was beginning to look like a group that black people could trust to see results. The party's growth may have been built on the many events the party was a part of, but to maintain its growth, its ideals would be its main factor.

Key goals of the party pertain to strengthening the black community. Any hindrance to the community should be eradicated, any setback put forth, and relationships reinforced. Self-defense, specifically from police brutality, would be considered a hindrance. The party believed the black community could not flourish if black people were constantly put down by authority. Setbacks like low income, poor housing, and education forced the black community to play catch-up with the majority white community. A list of demands from the party that contained their hopes and goals for the black community was established to aid black people in reaching better equality. This list, known as the Ten Point Program, contained ten demands the party desired most for their community. They stated that freedom for black people included employment, education, and housing, to name a few. The party had a clear goal to rebuild their community.

When wanting to rebuild a community from the destruction of systemic racism, one would find strengthening relationships to be imperative. The Black Panther Party was more than revolutionaries aiming to topple oppression based on their ideals; they also looked towards improving bonds within their community by aiding them where the government fell short. The party is most famous for its complimentary breakfast program, in which many members volunteer for needy children. Free health clinics and schools were also popular, with the party

displaying their devotion to the community, creating an inseparable bond between the black

community and the Black Panther Party (Street).

Regardless of the Party's key goals and aspirations, the Panthers were a militant group

that saw the necessary use of violence. Violence is what made the Party stand out compared to

the civil rights movements and other organized groups for the black empowerment cause. Like

Martin Luther King's adoption of non-violent protests from a foreign revolution by Mahatma

Gandhi (Johnson 16), Newton and Seale adopted the idea of political violence based primarily on

Mao Zedong. Zedong was a Chinese politician during the mid-20th century. He is known for his

ruthless dictatorship and revolutionary ideas. Zedong believed that "political power comes from

the barrel of a gun," a belief the Black Panther Party would come to adopt. A larger majority of

the black community was beginning to embrace a violent stance to obtain black power, but this

meant their goal would shape and characterize the party on a national scale from the perspective

of an outsider.

The media focused on the Black Panther Party, portraying the party as controversial at

best. The defining outlook the public was granted, from the media, was that the party was a

radical, violent group, which was true to an extent, but at many times overshadowed the party's

goals. The public perception never fazed the party; they believed what they did was necessary for

the black minority, no matter the cost, including the public outlook. The media would also

spotlight the Panthers' political alignment. The Panthers aligned themselves with Marxist-

Leninism, a sect of communism with its ideology rooted in overthrowing a capitalist state to

replace it with either a communist or socialist state. This ideology would be successful in China,

and the Panthers idealized that success for their mission. The media's focus on their political

alignment would cause uproar within the nation due to the time period and political stance the

United States was in. The 1960s through the 1970s were the height of the Cold War. With the United States' goal to stop communism, it would create tension for the country and a revolutionary group going against everything they stand for, which has been growing quickly.

The Black Panther Party's rise and growth can be attributed to the black community's desire for change during a period where there was a lack of. The party began with less than a hundred members in its first year, to around 5,000 members and forty chapters, nationally and internationally (Johnson 3), in less than 5 years at its height. Their goals and actions shaped the black power movement in the 1960s, which improved the lives of black people, took a revolutionary stance, and brought a community together. However, the party was also radical, not afraid to use violence, and militant. Although it can be argued that the Black Panther Party was either beneficial or harmful to their community or others in their rise, what is factual is their controversy. Obviously, the Black Panther Party was infamous nationally. Its rapid decline from 5,000 members nationally to less than fifty in the local Oakland, California area by the early 1980s is jarring and left to speculation by historians today.

The Black Panther Party's decline has a multitude of causes, but there is an assumption to be made that there is a primary catalyst for the party's demise. To discuss the causes of the party's decline and uncover any leading catalyst, the factors of the party's decline have been categorized as internal and external. The internal factors are defined as factors that include members of the party, their decision-making, and conflicts within the community. External factors include any outside contributors to the party's decline. Afterwards, a judgment can be made on the factors.

The first internal factor is leadership struggles. The Party's exponential growth over a short period meant the leadership organization of the party would need to be refined often to

accommodate all of its members. When Newton was arrested in 1967, his status as a party leader transcended into that of a mythical figure. A campaign known as "Free Huey" was popularized during the time and only elevated his status. When he was finally released in 1970, he aimed to rule in an authoritarian manner. Although this did not align with the party's ideals since it was common for punishments to be enforced on members who conflicted with the party's goals, Huey Newton pushed for more strict actions. Oligarchizing, which leaves power only to the few, is a significant cause for the destruction of many political revolutionary groups (Johnson 9). The party does not show an extreme of oligarchizing. However, the pattern of leaders following this form of leadership was a concern that created some collapse in chapters and relationships between party sections.

The ideological differences between party members would also increase tension and sour relationships in the party. In 1971, Newton and a well-respected Party leader and member, Eldridge Cleaver, had disputes over the intra-party (Johnson 14). The intra-party at the time could be described as all political party members, a large part of the Panthers' ideals. Newton invited Cleaver to a TV interview to show the public his tolerance for Cleaver's split from the party. However, Cleaver would reject this positive interaction, forcing both leaders to expel each other from their sects in the Party. These disputes would cause the single most significant split between the parties so far. The internal issues are many conflicts that range between its members and ideologies, but the external issues the party faced were broader.

Ever since its inception, the Party's direct and open viewpoint against police brutality was going to lead to conflict. Martyrs for the Panthers' cause in its early years were powerful. They proved the Party's serious nature, but this bold decision to align itself as a strong militant group would attract more authoritative intervention and prove unsustainable. As police shootouts

became a common occurrence with the Panthers, it meant areas of the party were becoming hive minds for violence. The tension between the police and the Panthers' disagreement forced black communities to endure bombardments of violence near their homes. Even if the communities supported it, it would still leave the communities gaining less, for the party to succeed on a political and militant standpoint.

The Black Panther Party did not care for their public perception, and they did not care for the status quo. The party built itself as an answer to the lack of aid for the black minority. Although the party denied the use of public perception, it would ultimately hinder them by their decline rather than strengthen them. The party's societal struggles were due to its radical and revolutionary ideas. The party's focus on being a Marxist-Leninist during a time in the United States when it was considered unacceptable only fueled the public with simplistic hatred for their political viewpoints (Williams 1). Also, with its contrast to the non-violent civil rights movement that often settled for competency over addressing and pushing for black empowerment, the Panthers could only attract a bad reputation from a more significant white majority on a national level. One would assume that such a bold, radical group like the Black Panther Party could bounce back from external issues like societal pressures and poor police engagement. However, it becomes clear that the United States national government took notice of their bad reputation and revolutionary ideals.

The involvement of the United States Government in the demise of the Black Panther Party is often disputed. Some historians consider government intervention theory work, but clear evidence points to the United States Government at least having tension with the revolutionary group. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) deals with the security and national affairs of the United States. They would be the leading organization on behalf of the government

interfering with the Black Panther Party. The FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover described the Party "as the greatest internal threat to the nation's security" (Johnson 6). Hoover would crack down on the Panthers, pushing them into their first repressive phase during Lyndon's presidency. Nixon would pressure the FBI further to do more during his presidency, forcing Hoover's treatment of the party to be what could be described as a disregard for human rights (Johnson 7).

The FBI's operation and direct involvement in the Black Panther Party was known as COINTELPRO. This operation was directed towards American political organizations that the country deemed a threat. Their actions were illegal and invasive to these organizations, usually aiming to discredit, observe, and infiltrate (Williams 11). The first and most popular tactic the FBI used was the mass incarceration of Party members. This would prove ineffective, as many members idealized those sent to prison as bold and strong. Even leaders like Huey P. Newton, who were sent to prison, used it to influence the cause. The FBI would require a different stance to provide an effective end to the Black Panther Party. Another tactic used was infiltrating the party to weed out dissenting discourse amongst party members. This could mean toppling leadership or causing disputes.

Two figures of leadership in the Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, of the Illinois chapter of the Panthers, were targeted by the FBI. A premeditated, political assassination was committed against these two within their own home. They were raided by law enforcement, shot, killed, and claimed the murders to be in self-defense ("Why We Should Learn"). The law enforcement argued the decision to murder these party leaders to prevent violence from the party. The decision to assassinate these leaders created uproar within the black community and the nation; it proved that law enforcement's tactics would go against human rights to stop the party. Although the FBI has never claimed to have involvement in the death of

Fred Hampton or Mark Clark, many decades after the deaths, law enforcement officials spoke out, apologizing for the deaths as wrongdoings. Even if just speculation, the proof of law enforcement's premeditation to assassinate the Panthers aligns with the FBI's mission to silence the party. This would not be an isolated event of meddling from the FBI. They used precision and inhumane tactics to keep progress vague.

During the early 1970s, when the FBI began its involvement with the party, its decline began to decline exponentially. In retrospect, the addition of the FBI could be easily integrated into many of these events. For example, the dispute between Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver that led to a falling out between the two leaders and a major split between the party has some historiography pointing to the split as a cause of the FBI (Street). It is not only clear to identify where the FBI could have had involvement, but it also displays a pattern of Panther events with grave conclusions containing many similarities. The Party's split between Newton and Cleaver, which was conceptualized earlier within the internal struggles section, is one of these events. If the involvement of the FBI runs true with this event, it would be a great success for the operation. Since it would be described as a success, if the FBI wanted to continue, one would expect more of this "fractionalization". Therefore, if the FBI's involvement has any truth, there is an expectation that they had a larger impact on the many splits from the party. This is known as the "fractionalization theory", a theory that, due to the success the FBI had in party conflict, they caused a large national fractionalization of the Black Panther Party, consequently spawning hundreds of groups from the once major party, eliminating the party's strength in numbers. This theory has always contained evidence pointing to its legitimacy. However, whether this is a distorted claim, holds implications towards the government, or is deceitful, neither the FBI nor the government has ever claimed to have participated in any Pather

fractionalization. Although the FBI's involvement could explain a multitude of conflicts that the party faced, the entirety of the blame for the party's decline cannot be placed upon the FBI.

The Panthers' goals were admired, but their approach to accepting violence skewed any potential government appeasement. The Black Panther Party has experienced several struggles that led to its decline, but one catalyst stands out. Rather than this catalyst being disconnected from the other struggles, these struggles had an overall connection. The external issues the party faced from its controversial viewpoint led to government intervention, which either amplified or created internal struggles within the party, leading to a swift decline of the party. This leads to the conclusion that the government intervention from the FBI may not be an isolated catalyst, but instead a consequence of their external struggles that caused internal struggles, driving the party to an end, making government involvement the most efficient cause of the Black Panther Party's demise. Now that a catalyst has been discovered, a detailed discussion of the aftermath is required to reveal the implications of what government intervention does to a radical group.

In the urban California areas, a rise of street gangs emerged during the late 1970s to early 1980s. These street gangs were characterized by their territoriality, collective identities, and criminal activities. The majority of members of this rise of street gangs were from the black community, and as these gangs grew, street gangs in urban areas began to be integrated into black culture. Although a majority of street gang members were black, this form of organized gangs was not traditionally a part of the African culture. The urbanization of African Americans began in the early twentieth century. Cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago began to grow their black population. Migration, especially to urban areas, requires a change in jobs, education facilities, housing, and other living conditions. For the black population, this change elevated the struggle already occurring in many communities.

The Black Panther Party was a defining group for black power during the 1960s-1970s. Its inception was built on the exigency of black communities' struggle for basic human rights. The party's unique style to combat its oppression and struggle popularized the black radical identity. The party's mission was controversial, but it aimed for good intentions. As the Panthers began to decline, it was nearly as quick as they rose to popularity. The chaotic multitude of issues the Panthers experienced would all contribute to their decline, but the underlying involvement of the FBI has proven to be its most efficient aid to their demise.

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