



Reflections On The Black Panther Party 50 Years Later

October 23, 2016



The Black Panther Party of Self-Defense's reputation has been mostly misunderstood. Rachel Martin speaks with co-founder Bobby Seale and Stephen Shames, who photographed the group from 1967 to 1973.

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Fifty years ago this month, a small group of African-American activists in Oakland got together and decided to take a different kind of strategy in the fight for civil rights. They formed what was initially called the Black Panther Party of Self-Defense (pp), and it did look like an army of sorts. Members wore berets and black leather jackets. They carried rifles. To the communities they served, the Black Panthers were seen as vigilantes. But to law enforcement, they were a threat.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: The Oakland Police have had more than their share of racial difficulties. The Black Panthers are their sworn enemies and this latest bloodshed...

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, today, asserted that the Black Panthers represent the greatest internal threat to the nation. Hoover said the Panthers have perpetrated numerous assaults on police and have engaged in violent confrontations throughout the country.

MARTIN: Bobby Seale was one of the founders of the group.

BOBBY SEALE: If you know the history and understand what our principles and our policies was, media and politicians and the counterintelligence program took everything totally out of context of what we were about.

MARTIN: Seale has tried to put his movement into context in a new book called "Power To The People: The World Of The Black Panthers." It's a compilation of photographs of the movement back in the '60s and '70s taken by Stephen Shames. The white college kid from Berkeley was given insider access to the Panthers. He and Bobby Seale formed a friendship that lasts to this day. And I got to talk with both of them recently about the legacy of the Black Panthers 50 years later.

STEPHEN SHAMES: You know, there was a movement going, a student movement against the war in Vietnam. And all the things I grew up with started to get questioned by the - you know, Martin Luther King was a hero of mine. And I just saw the courageous workers that - you know, in the civil rights movement, people were getting killed.

So when I went to Berkeley - you know, it was the year after the Free Speech Movement - I became part of the movement. I got introduced to the Panthers. So basically, I was against the war. I thought of myself as a young revolutionary, and the Panthers were really on the - at the vanguard of that movement. If you look at it, the Panthers, with their 10 points, really delineated the issues, most of which we still face today.

MARTIN: Let me just pick up on that and ask you, Bobby, the Black Panthers, as Stephen references, had this platform, this 10-point plan. And this was about specific things. The overarching mission was to be able to make legislative change, change laws to further equality. But also...

SEALE: That was my goal objective.

MARTIN: It was also about social programs, about making real change in people's day-to-day lives. What did that look like?

SEALE: The making of change - trying to make change in day-to-day lives is still connected with the political organizing - was part of a political-organizing strategy that I had. What I did is I added programs to demonstrate. The Free Breakfast for Children program was connected with a voter registration drive, the free sickle cell anemia testing program, the free preventative medical health care clinics, later on the other programs with the free ambulance program, the free pest control program, etc., etc.

So we had 50-some odd programs over the years that evolved, and we set those programs up in the community. Well, with those programs, we unite the people, and we constantly are registering people to vote. By the end of 1968, I had 5,000 members in 49 chapters and branches throughout the United States of America. And in those chapters - I would go there. I would teach these brothers and sisters the fine particulars in the methodology of grassroots community organizing centered around the programs in the community.

STEVEN
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GALLERY

MARTIN: I want to ask you, Stephen, about one particular photo that's included in this book. This is one you snapped of health care workers who were working for a free clinic that the Black Panthers had set up. Can you describe this photo?

SHAMES: There's an older woman and a younger girl, and they're doing the sickle cell test where you actually prick the finger and take a blood sample. And then they would take that to the lab and see if the people had sickle cell anemia. And then they, you know, if the people did, then they would get the appropriate medicines and whatever they needed. The idea behind this was, you know, at the time, the government really wasn't spending - really dealing with sickle cell anemia, which is a disease which primarily affects African-Americans, and so it was really ignored.

And part of the reason for these programs was, number one, to highlight what the Panthers would call a contradiction. In the richest nation in the world, we can't provide - you know, kids could go to school hungry. In the richest nation in the world, people aren't getting decent medical care. So that's a contradiction. Secondly, the Panthers provided a solution.

SEALE: And the sickle cell anemia testing program took off all across the country. And as my organization grew, there was a movement in itself. And it was quiet, but it evolved over a five-year period.

SHAMES: And if I can add to what I said before about the picture, one of the things I didn't say is that this picture is taken out in the street. What was unique about the Panthers is they didn't make - you know, people had to come to the clinic to get tested. The Panthers would send workers out into neighborhoods and go door to door and talk to people in the street and test them right into - in the street. And that outreach, to me, was unique.

MARTIN: The director of the FBI at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, did target the Black Panthers. He called the group a terrorist organization. He set up a special unit within the FBI to monitor you and other members. How did the Panthers respond to that?

SEALE: J. Edgar Hoover's FBI said that the Black Panthers is the black community's Klu Klux Klan. That's what he put out. Then he puts out that the only reason the Black Panthers had guns is to go into the white community and shoot and kill white people. Now, here we are, we are in coalition with thousands of young, white, left radicals and liberals and others who support us. We protest together, etc., and he's saying that we only - we got guns just to kill white folk. And that's just a bold-faced lie. This was the targeting he did. This was the stereotyping he did, etc.

MARTIN: If I can, Bobby, the Panthers weren't a nonviolent, unarmed organization. I mean, your people were armed.

SEALE: We were nonviolent as anybody.

MARTIN: At the time, the Black Panthers stood in contrast to other civil rights groups. Martin Luther King and his pledge of nonviolence, John Lewis - that generation of civil rights leaders were taking a different tack. And I guess my question is, why did you see that as insufficient?

SHAMES: I think that what's taken out of context is that the Panthers did peaceful protests, which is what most Americans believe. If someone comes into your house and threatens your family and your children, you have a right to self-defense. That's basically what was, I think, misrepresented by the government and the media.

MARTIN: Clearly, we are living through another inflection point today, right now, in the civil rights struggle. How do you see the legacy of the Panthers shaping what's happening today?

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

SEALE: A new generation's, etc. - young black lives movement, I support them, etc. - are evolving. Protests, moving frameworks are cross-supporting them, etc., etc.

SHAMES: I think the Panthers have a very broad legacy. You know, just to summarize, the Panthers were about race and about racial prejudice. But they were also about economic justice. And there's a place where the two of them intersect. And the Panthers were very progressive about that. The Panthers were among the first to be really - organizations in the movement to be really progressive about women's rights and involving women and also gay rights. There's a broad legacy there.

MARTIN: Could each of you identify what you think has been the biggest mischaracterization of the Panthers over the years? I mean, what do you want people to understand about the Black Panthers with this book all these years later?

SHAMES: The biggest misconception was not seeing the Panthers as a broad-based political party that was really trying to make legislative change. So I think that's the biggest misconception, to see them as kind of a narrow group. The Panthers made coalitions with whites, with Asians, with Native Americans, with Latinos. So that's the biggest misconception.

SEALE: The gun - it's like a nemesis. And it's a nemesis because people misinterpret and don't like and didn't like - and the racist power structure didn't care - about black folks saying we have a right to defend ourselves. We had peaceful protests. I remember the times - I tell people - I tell the youth today, ever since Rodney King, I says today, you don't need guns. Let's use the technology to observe the police. We went out there with law books, tape recorders and guns to defend ourselves, just in case, to observe the police. And that technology has - is paying off in terms of the ability of the people to educate people in the community about the viciousness of police brutality as one issue. But yes, ours was about constitutional, democratic civil human rights.

(SOUNDBITE OF MARVIN GAYE SONG, "FUNKY NATION")

MARTIN: That was co-founder of the Black Panther Party Bobby Seale with photographer Stephen Shames. They are the authors of "Power To The People: The World Of The Black Panthers"

(SOUNDBITE OF MARVIN GAYE SONG, "FUNKY NATION")

MARTIN: And if you're missing 2016 election coverage, don't. Coming up - NPR's Mara Liasson. We'll talk to her next.