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## Racial Justice

Racial Justice

### How History Came to Love the Black Panthers

By **Scott Thill**, January 31, 2007

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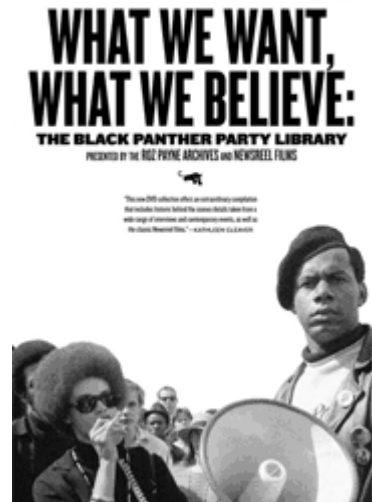
Opinion: While Dr. King's nonviolent resistance made the national papers, direct confrontation and community services made more sense to the Panthers.

Like any other student settling down to study in Berkeley and looking to change the world during the so-called Golden Age of Hip-Hop -- roughly 1987-1993, for those keeping count -- I could feel the history and activism pulsating from every corner of the Bay Area. And why not? It had served as the touchstone of America's sociopolitical conscience more than once, especially in the turbulent '60s and '70s. From the Free Speech Movement and the draconian gubernatorial reign of Ronald Reagan to the birth of the Black Panthers in Oakland and beyond, Northern California had its street cred on lockdown when it came to engaged activism. So I did what any ambitious Long Beach transplant might do and went to work for an ex-Panther.

That particular Panther was named **Ronnie Stevenson**, and his U.C. Berkeley-affiliated community service program was called **Break the Cycle**, a tutorship program for students lagging behind in math and English at, where else, Oakland's own Malcolm X Elementary School. And although Long Beach gave me plenty of rough and rugged street fights and racial tension, I didn't need to summon any of that experience once in the employ of Break the Cycle, because we did way more writing than fighting -- by a mile.

In fact, the first thing Stevenson made us do when we walked through the doors of Malcolm X Elementary's library was read, for hours, about the history of the **Black Panthers**, political activism, American capitalism, corporate corruption, practically anything you could think of that in any way related to the struggle of the working class and its attempt to survive a constant battering of economic disenfranchisement, institutionalized ignorance and historical suffering. Race and guns -- for so long the perceived domain of the Black Panthers -- even by the paranoid J. Edgar Hoover who championed and facilitated their demise, had no place there. Break the Cycle was about multicultural education, not armed insurrection, just like the Black Panthers before it. Perception may still be reality in some quarters of our hyper-real American experience, but time and its inevitable perspective-shifting has tempered the controversy over the Black Panthers, in the process revealing the remarkable innovations they provided to those the dominant culture had left behind.

This much one can tell from a single viewing of the exhaustive "What We Want, What We



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Believe: The Black Panther Party Library" [DVD collection](#), recently released from the equally conscientious AK Press Video, especially during archivist Roz Payne's conversations with ex-FBI field agents who worked overtime to encourage the dissension, destruction and eventual dissolution of the infamous sociopolitical organization. During Payne's interview with William A. Cohendet, the FBI's San Francisco-based case agent whose job was to correlate all of his office's intelligence on the Black Panthers to the paranoid Washington bureau led by Hoover, he's evasive but nevertheless staid in his determination that he "did not enthusiastically support" the FBI's attempts to derail the Black Panthers' social programs such as free community breakfasts and more. "I did not think it was an important part of our work," he tells Payne more than once, and in fact claims he was under threat of inspection from the Washington bureau if he didn't investigate the Panthers using informers, wiretap or other unethical counterintelligence methods. While he freely admits that his bureau manufactured everything from internal strife in the organization to a power struggle between founder Huey Newton and ascendant leader Eldridge Cleaver, he's clear on one major recurring theme: The orders to bring down the Panthers came from Hoover, and when Hoover talked, people listened.

"When they set a policy in Washington," he tells Payne in "What We Want, What We Believe," "when they say this is the most dangerous thing going, that's it."

But was it? Time tells a different story. Like countless other controversial social eruptions, the Black Panthers were a direct response to the injustices and abuses of their period, which were extensive. From corrupt cops and callous politicians to broader racial and economic prejudices that crippled the social agency of people of color, the pressures of everyday life were immense and impossible to assimilate. And although Martin Luther King's nonviolent methods made the papers, direct confrontation with oppression made more sense in a world of unilateral aggression from the powers-that-be, which resulted in catastrophic failures like the war in Vietnam.

It is no accident that the party's famous [ten-point program](#) called for "an immediate end to all wars of aggression," or that Newton himself compares the police abuse of blacks to the American occupation of Vietnam in Payne's finest newsreel [Off the Pig](#), or that Hoover himself, according to Cohendet, was fearful that the Panthers were "going to send troops to Vietnam" on the way to "burn[ing] Oakland." The war, which was costing not just the lives of blacks but of the country's mostly working poor, was a catalyzing force, an act of such obvious aggression that it only seemed logical that the Black Panthers felt its wielders would only respect a counteractive force, one rooted in the undeniable rights of American citizenship. Call the liberties into question, and the citizenship isn't far behind. Pushing that envelope, and all of its existential wrinkles, is what made the Black Panthers one of the bravest sociopolitical organizations of the last century, to say nothing of our much more convenient, sedated new millennium.

Which begins to beg the question: Could they survive the Bush administration? As recently as October 2006, it passed the [Military Commissions Act](#), which states that anyone, even American citizens, engaged in hostilities or materially supporting hostilities against the United States can kiss [habeas corpus](#) goodbye. Would black acceptance of what the fiery [Eldridge Cleaver](#) explained in "Off the Pig" as armed equality in favor of nonviolence sell better in this Washington? As it is today, most activists can't manage street theater before they're strong-armed into free-speech "zones" blocks away from the action.

"The cops were the terrorists in the '60s," Payne emails me during an interview about "What We Want, What We Believe." "Poverty was terrorism. Racism was and still is terrorism. The Panthers stopped the killing by cops. But now gangs are killing each other."

To envision those gangs and sundry other warring factions coming together across boundaries of race and morality to turn as one on the government that is sending their kids off to die somewhere they know nothing about? well, let's just say that President Bush would probably

out-Hoover Hoover if he had the chance. But time tempers all perspectives. Take Cleaver, for example, whose infamous split with an infuriated Newton following the latter's release from jail started an East-West coastal beef that tore the group into pieces, propelling it to an eventual dissolution in the late '70s. From a widely sampled speech from "Off the Pig" -- later used by hip-hop legends like Paris and Tupac -- where Cleaver described a black army marching on Washington and sticking up the government all the way to his later years as a Christian evangelical and, yes, a Republican, the man was anything but simple.

And neither is the story of the Panthers, no matter who's doing the talking. That's why you have to do the reading and research, like I had to, as Stevenson stared holes into all of Break the Cycle's tutors. Along the way, you'll no doubt feel differently, as the fog of war clears and the Freedom of Information Act requests begin to kick in. When the torturous story is finally told, as it is in Payne's *What We Want, What We Believe* and other studies, including your own, you will realize that the goals of the Panthers and the controversial means they used to achieve them are already wound into the fabric of your everyday lives. In other words, history has judged the Black Panthers favorably, in spite of Hoover.

"Just look at the books, movies and articles," Payne writes. "Every college and university has an African American studies department, which teaches the Black Panthers, as well as scholars writing books on them or speaking about them at conferences. The Panthers are loved by history. The FBI and Hoover overreacted. It is the image of Panthers with guns that freaked them and the media out. If the Black Panthers hadn't surrounded the Sacramento capitol with guns, the rest of the world wouldn't have known them."

No surprise, considering footage of marches from what is "essentially an educational party," as Newton calls the Panthers in "Off the Pig," don't usually sell a lot of soap. Picture those marchers with guns, berets, copies of Mao's red book (a last-minute goof, as Seale explains in the documentary "Berkeley in the Sixties") and catchy-as-hell slogans like "No more brothers in jail/Pigs are gonna catch hell" or "Revolution has come/Time to pick up the gun" and ? well, it's film at 11. Just ask Paris or even The Go! Team from as far away as the U.K., who sampled both of those slogans and made names for themselves and their music in the process. Or any other artist, from Public Enemy and The Boondocks to Tupac and even The Boo Radleys, who has cited [Huey Newton](#) and the Black Panthers and cashed a check afterward.

But all of the worship, gloss and drama overshadows the Black Panthers' true legacy, and that is community service, whether you're talking activism, education or engagement. Their free breakfast program reportedly pressured Lyndon Johnson's to pass the [1966 Child Nutrition Act](#) and also inspired the similarly interested [Food Not Bombs](#) collective, remarkable considering as recently as 2006 the FBI accused the latter of, you guessed it, terrorist connections.

All of which goes to show that, while much has changed, much has remained the same. If anything, a reflection on the Black Panthers would seem to lead one back into our embattled, embittered present, where catastrophic wars, unilateral aggression and a disturbing suspension of civil liberties should make those nostalgia fumes even more intense. You can almost smell the tear gas from here. At least I can.

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Scott Thill runs the online mag [Morphizm.com](#) and is a frequent [contributor](#) to WireTap. His writing has appeared on Salon, XLR8R, All Music Guide, Wired and others.

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**How many innocents were murdered**

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Posted by: bigdaddy on Feb 2, 2007 4:45 AM

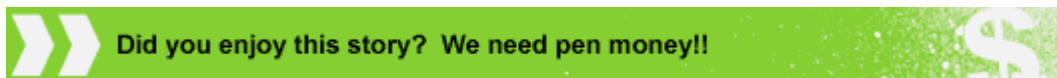
I can remember a judge in Marin County. A woman friend of Michael Medved was also "offed".  
How many more did Black Panthers murder?

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