

Dark Rose in a Drought: The Importance of Guns to the Black Panther Party

Claire McFarland

In light of the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, Beyoncé shocked American audiences at the Super Bowl 50 halftime show by commemorating the Black Panther Party on their 50th anniversary. She dressed in the Panthers' trademark black leather jacket and beret, completing the look with a bandolier across her chest. The image of the Black Panthers is not complete without some reference to their use of guns. The Black Panther Party was formed in 1966 as an outgrowth of the previously non-violent Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s. As this movement progressed, blacks became more and more disgruntled with continued racial injustice. "We shall overcome," Dr. King's famous non-violent mantra, did not speak to the many urban blacks experiencing continued violence and discrimination at the hands of police and white supremacists. These disempowered blacks preferred the Black Panther Party's rallying cry, "Power to the people!" As mentioned in the *N.E.G.R.O. News*, blacks were tired of non-violent tactics that "have resulted in no change."¹ The Black Panther Party was born in Oakland, California, in 1966 in the midst of racial tensions. Blacks were regularly abused by the Oakland Police. It was commonplace for routine traffic checks to escalate into beatings and even killings of black citizens.

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense (later known simply as the Black Panther Party) was formed in response to this brutality. The Panthers went one step further than existing civil and black rights advocates such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and chose to carry guns both to ensure their safety and to highlight their fundamental rights as citizens of the United States. Historians disagree

This paper was written for Dr. Charles Hanson's Advanced Placement U.S. History class in the spring of 2016.

as to whether the Panthers' provocative tactic of carrying guns helped or hurt their cause. It is true that, as historian Curtis J. Austin argues, the Panthers' use of guns and violence led to "poor choices and unworkable strategies" and set the police and FBI on the path to destroy the organization.² However, guns also empowered blacks to claim their human and legal rights. As historian Paul Alkebulan argues, the party was very popular among young urban blacks who were excited to carry guns to stand up to their lifelong oppressors.³ And as Bridgette Baldwin, a Ph.D. in Law, Policy and Society, contends, the Black Panthers' use of guns allowed the Panthers to address rights that had long been denied to black Americans.⁴

People Dismiss Panthers as Thugs and Criminals

Carrying guns generated a lot of backlash against the Black Panthers. In the early stages of the party's growth, the Panthers went on what they called "patrols," in which members drove behind police cars looking for incidents when black citizens were pulled over. When this happened, the patrol members also pulled over, maintaining a reasonable distance from the police, and got out of their car with their guns in hand. They would then watch the police to make sure the police were acting appropriately and not harassing the blacks. The Panthers carried their guns in the open, and would only load and point their weapons if the police did so first. When the incident was over and the police were leaving, the Panthers got back in their cars and continued to patrol their area, looking for other such incidents with the police. Not only were the police shaken up by the Panthers' bold, confrontational use of guns, but the Party also frightened many whites in the community. Shortly after the Panthers began these patrols, California State Assemblyman Don Mulford introduced a bill prohibiting the carrying of loaded firearms in public. He introduced this bill to the public stating,

When bands of armed people with loaded weapons can move about our streets intimidating and frightening citizens, then I think we should act and we intend to act. It's my intention to make it a misdemeanor to have loaded rifles and shotguns and weapons in public places.⁵

This statement was made to appease his white supporters who were scared of blacks carrying guns in the streets. Oakland was highly populated with both blacks and whites, and although the two races tended to live in separate communities, they crossed paths all the time. Many whites saw the Panthers carrying guns, wearing all black and leather, and marching militaristically around the city, and came to fear them and view them as thugs and criminals. The media, composed of people who “wish to see [the Panthers] eliminated,” reinforced this stereotype as Julian Bond, the communications director of SNCC, expressed.⁶ The media characterized the Panthers as “gun-totin’ militant black radicals,” as Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Party, wrote in an essay accompanying photos commemorating the Panthers’ time.⁷ An article from the *Lake Forest College Newspaper* in 1970 similarly states that the media characterized the Panthers as “crazy fools who just want to kill honkies.”⁸

Seale also described in this essay how the media distorted facts to make it seem like the Panthers initiated conflicts with the police. In reality the FBI planned many confrontations with the Panthers, for example the police shoot-out with Huey Newton and Little Bobby Hutton.⁹ The FBI even had a special secret organization, COINTELPRO, which was formed for the purpose of destroying the Black Panthers.¹⁰ The shoot-outs that COINTELPRO staged were reported on in the popular media to give the perception that the Panthers were the aggressors. The police often used such distorted media reports, as well as anti-gun legislation like the Mulford Act to justify putting Panthers in jail for the possession or use of guns. Eventually, this harmed the BPP because many of its most prominent members and leaders were jailed. This included the co-founders Bobby Seale and the charismatic and popular Huey Newton. Their incarceration created a void in the Party that left it scrambling to find replacement influential leaders to match Seale and Newton’s caliber.

Because many whites were scared of the Black Panthers, other black power and black rights organizations disapproved of and distanced themselves from the Party. They did so because they did not want their

own movements to be similarly discounted as too extreme. For example, Earl Anthony, a former Panther, describes how the San Francisco Black Panther Party (which developed at the same time as the Oakland based one but was not connected to it), “would go to great lengths” to explain how they differed because the San Francisco Panthers viewed themselves as political and they condemned the Oakland organization as paramilitary.¹¹ Some more conservative black citizens disagreed with the Panthers’ use of guns as well. A 1970 article from *Crusader*, a newspaper in Rockford, Illinois, included a quote calling the Black Panthers a “tiny minority degrad[ing] the image of our fine Black citizens and claim[ing] to represent the rest of their race.”¹² The controversy sparked by the Black Panthers’ use of guns caused them to be isolated from other activist groups and to be targeted by the media, police, and FBI.

Guns Brought Support and Recruits to the Party

After the Black Panthers’ march in Sacramento protesting the Mulford Bill on May 2, 1967, the Party gained national publicity. During the march, Bobby Seale led a group of thirty gun-wielding Panthers across the lawn and up the steps of the State Capitol building, where they were surrounded by reporters who took pictures and video footage and asked them questions. These reporters had previously been on the lawn taking footage of California governor Ronald Reagan talking with a group of children, but once they saw the congregation of young black men carrying guns and wearing all black outfits, they decided this group would make for a more interesting cover story. Bobby Seale even captured enough of their attention that when he read the Party’s ten-point program demanding freedom, employment, good housing and more for blacks, reporters asked him to repeat sections they had missed. The very next day, the Panthers’ plan advocating armed protest of the racist national system was spread across the nation in newspaper articles, TV news reports, and over the radio.¹³

This event brought the Black Panthers a tremendous amount of publicity and soon black people across the country wanted in on the action.¹⁴ As Phyllis Jackson of the Black Panther Party described, “We would get calls from Atlanta, Nashville, Raleigh, North Carolina, from Washington D.C., Bridgeport, Connecticut. Every city small or large you could think of wanted a chapter of the Black Panther Party.”¹⁵ A large number of blacks left school; some even drove across the country to join the Oakland chapter after the Sacramento event. Ericka Huggins, a black female former leader of the Black Panther Party, recalls leaving Lincoln University and driving across the country in a “hoopy” car to get to Oakland after learning about the Black Panther Party through televised footage of the party’s protest in Sacramento.¹⁶ The Panthers received a lot of their support from university students like Huggins. For example, the Lake Forest College student newspaper published an article commending the Panthers’ revolutionary tactics. Young, educated blacks were particularly attracted to the boldness, controversy, and uniqueness of carrying guns. The Panthers were making a statement and differentiating themselves from other black rights and black power organizations, and many people loved it. As Mumia Abu-Jamal, a black man formerly involved with the Panthers described,

Huey’s determined, principled stance, overnite, created a psychic umbrella of protection over America’s Black community, as the one fundamental right that all life shares, the singular principle of self-defense, seeped, like Spring rain after a desert drought, into the awakened consciousness of a parched people to whom this basic law was denied. Like dark roses, [Black Panther Party] offices sprouted across America in response to this fresh, new wind.¹⁷

Abu-Jamal suggests that the Black Panthers’ radical approach to achieving racial equality and social justice provided oppressed blacks, especially those who had made it as far as college, with a newfound sense of empowerment and hope.

Not only did blacks view the Black Panther Party as a good vehicle for achieving empowerment, but the Party's use of guns provided a sense of "street cred" with young urban black males. They saw the guns as a sign of power, confidence, and independence. Ray Gaul, a retired white policeman who served in Oakland in the 1960s and 1970s, described the Panthers' tactics of carrying guns and confronting policemen as "pretty intimidating."¹⁸ The idea that blacks could stand up to their oppressors, white policemen, was appealing to many young urban blacks. Michael McCarty, a former Black Panther member, remembered, "When I heard about Sacramento, I was like damn, these brothers are bad! They're here up in Sacramento in the Capital? Packing?"¹⁹

Not only did the use of guns appeal to men, but it brought support from young black women, too. Stephen Shames, a photo-journalist and social activist, captured the following image at a Free Huey rally in San Francisco in 1970 (see Figure 1 on next page).



Figure 1: Words on poster: “The racist dog police men must withdraw immediately from our communities, cease their wanton murder and brutality and torture of black people, or face the wrath of the armed people” -Huey Newton²⁰

Huey Newton was convicted of shooting and killing a white police officer during a traffic stop in 1968. His conviction led to public outcry and a long series of rallies and protests demanding his freedom. The young black girl pictured standing among the crowd of protestors chose Huey's quote warning the white establishment of "the wrath of the armed people," demonstrating the centrality of guns and armed protest to the appeal of the Party. The Party also appealed to women in its welcoming stance towards women as equal members to the men. As Tarika Lewis, the first female member of the Party, describes her entrance into the Party,

I walked into the office and told them I wanted to join the Black Panther Party and they kinda laughed. I didn't know that there weren't any other women in the party at that time. But then I asked them could I have a gun.²¹

Many women followed Lewis' example, and the Party embraced women recruits. At a time when the women's movement was taking hold in the broader culture, black women saw joining the Party as a great opportunity to break out of gender norms. The illustration in Figure 2, by Audry Hudson, a secretary for the Black Panther Party and an editor of their newspaper, shows a black woman carrying a baby, a book, and a gun. This illustration is accompanied with the quote, "Until the day of liberation, protection for my child can only be guaranteed through the barrel of the gun."²² This demonstrates how black women, just like their male counterparts, were drawn to the Party for their rhetoric of armed self-defense. They also appreciated that they did not have to give up their pursuit of education or their female identity in the process of taking up arms, as shown by the textbook and baby the woman carries in the drawing.

Although the Party had very few white members, it drew support from white student activists and other white liberals and radicals at the time. Many of the participants at Party rallies and fundraising events were white. When twenty-one Panthers in New York were jailed on trumped-up charges and funds were needed for their legal defense, young high profile white celebrities rallied to the cause. Roland Free-

man, a former Black Panther, describes such a fund raising event at Jane Fonda's townhouse:

*We all get our leather jackets, we all have our berets. Some of us would be packing, some of us wouldn't. The only people that would speak would be the two people that was designated to speak. The rest of us would just line the walls, fold our arms, and look like Black Panthers. Like, you know, we was ready to kill somebody. And them stars, they loved that shit. They just ate that shit up.*²³

As this quote demonstrates, liberal whites embraced the image of powerful blacks with guns.

James M. Barrett, a liberal white man, sympathized with the Panthers in a 1970 letter to the editor of the *Milwaukee Star*, writing, "if we [whites] had been treated the way blacks are being treated by us, and if we had guns, we know what we would do, don't we?"²⁴ This statement suggests that liberal whites like Barrett were able to put themselves in the shoes of black citizens and could see the importance of the Black Panthers' use of guns to achieving their goals.

Bearing Arms Adds Symbolic Weight to the Panthers' Message

Taking up arms was a powerful, practical and symbolic way for the Panthers to claim their rights as American citizens. The use of arms highlighted to the Panthers themselves, as well as to society at large, the fact that their struggle was for a universal right guaranteed under the Constitution. The Bill of Rights was introduced into the Constitution for the purpose of assuring individual rights to protect citizens from the possibility of the government abusing its power. In particular, the Second Amendment guarantees citizens the right to bear arms. The framers believed it important that individuals had the right to defend themselves against a government that would unjustly subjugate its citizens. In this way, the gun symbolizes individual rights. The Panthers believed that the police were routinely and unjustly subjugating and abusing blacks. For this reason, they called upon the Second

Amendment as the justification for arming themselves and patrolling the police. As the historian Bridgette Baldwin argues,

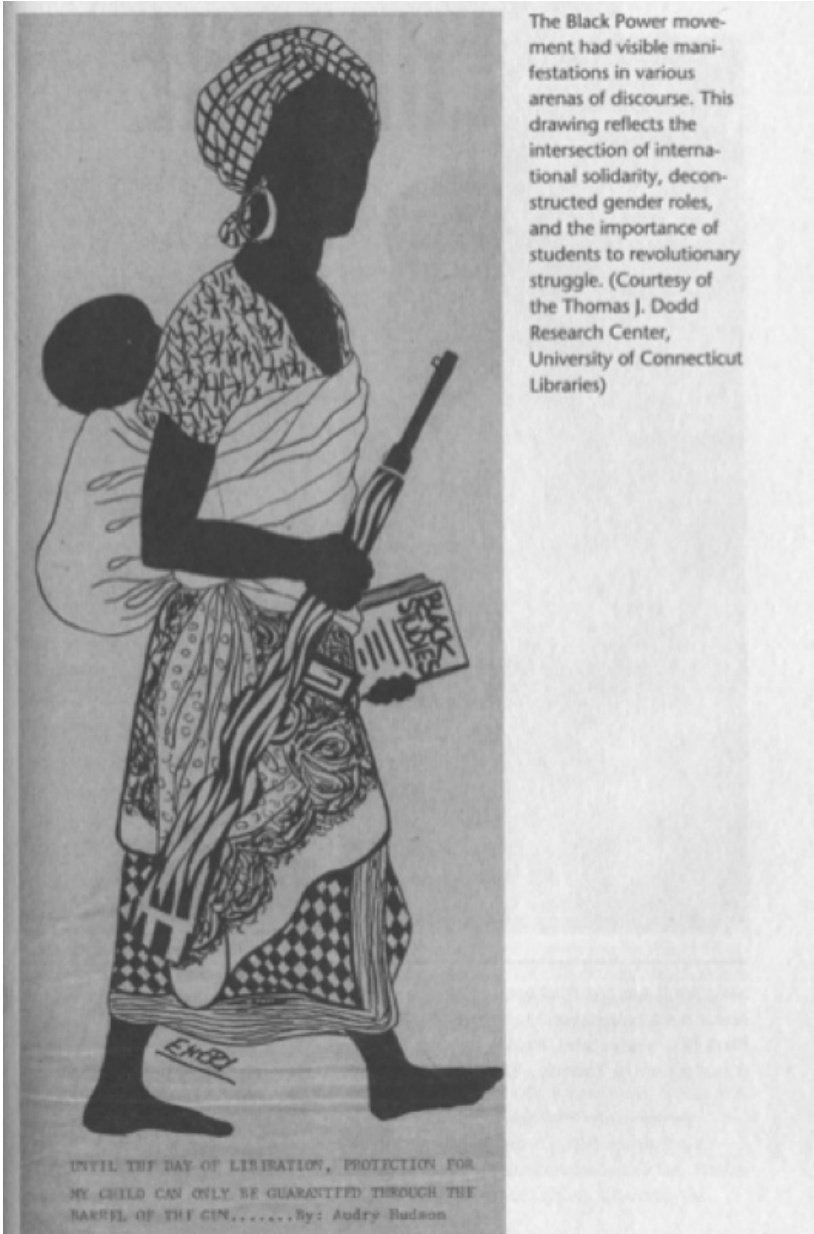
In the face of colonial occupation, Samuel Adams wrote, "If existence... is at stake, it is lawful to resist the highest authority." His cousin and the future president, John Adams, concluded that "insurrection is always due to despotism from the government" and, further, that it served as legitimate resistance against a colonial regime.²⁵

Seen from this perspective, the Panthers' choice to bear arms highlighted the plight of blacks, whose lives were often endangered by the actions of racist policemen.

The United States was founded because colonists (specifically white men) felt their rights were being violated when, without any representation in their own government, they had to pay taxes to Britain. To protect their rights, the colonists organized and took up arms against their colonizers. The Black Panthers brought up the argument that they deserved the same rights to protect themselves as did the colonists. Whereas the colonists were objecting to paying taxes, the blacks felt a more fundamental threat against their safety in their day-to-day lives due to police harassment and violence against them. Mumia Abu-Jamal eloquently captured the sentiment that blacks possess the same inalienable rights as whites, and defending oneself with a gun, as the Panthers did, is one example of this.²⁶ Bridgette Baldwin echoes this in her description of Black Panthers reciting the law to police officers on the Capitol building steps as "important street theater."²⁷ When the Panthers confronted policemen during their patrols, they always waited for the police to make the first move. If the police loaded or pointed their guns, the Panthers met their escalation. Without being aggressive, they still made the policemen uneasy.²⁸ Before the Panthers began their patrols, white police did not think twice about harassing and abusing black citizens. Now the police were held accountable for their actions.

The Black Panther Party Pushes Black Rights One Step in the Right Direction

It has been fifty years since the rise of the Black Panther Party. While historians disagree over whether guns helped or hindered the Black Panthers' cause and about the status of women in the Party, the organization's efforts raised awareness of the need for fundamental rights and equality for our black citizens. One might argue that the fact that we now have our first black president is an indication that blacks have achieved equality in our culture. And yet the very brutality that blacks suffered at the hands of the police in the 1960s is echoed today in the killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and the numerous unpublicized killings of unarmed black men at the hands of American policemen. These horrible killings have given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement that is currently energizing public discussion of issues of racism. Combating institutionalized racism is a long and drawn-out process. Sometimes it requires dramatic actions to wake people up to the racism to which they have become habituated. The Black Panthers' radical actions served to do just this. While the Black Panthers alone were not able to eliminate racism, they were important in furthering the fight towards equality for African Americans. ●



The Black Power movement had visible manifestations in various arenas of discourse. This drawing reflects the intersection of international solidarity, deconstructed gender roles, and the importance of students to revolutionary struggle. (Courtesy of the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries)

Figure 2: “Until the day of liberation, protection for my child can only be guaranteed through the barrel of the gun.” Illustration by: Audry Hudson

Notes

1. "Panther Exclusive," *N.E.G.R.O. News* (Jamaica, New York), November 1, 1968.
2. Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 69.
3. Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution; The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 87-88.
4. Bridgette Baldwin, "In the Shadow of the Gun: The Black Panther Party, the Ninth Amendment, and Discourses of Self-Defense," in Jama Lazero (Ed.), *In Search of the Black Panther Party* (Duke University Press, 2012), 136.
5. Don Mulford in 1967 quoted in *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, "Early Backlash Against the Panthers," PBS, first broadcast February 16, 2016, directed by Stanley Nelson.
6. Julian bond, *A Time to Speak, A Time to Act* (New York: Simonand Schuster, 1972), 100.
7. Bobby Seale in Stephen Shames, *The Black Panthers – Photographs by Stephen Shames* (New York: Aperture, July 15, 2006), 12.
8. "Right On to the Black Panther Party," *Black Rap: Black Students for Black Action of Lake Forest College* (Lake Forest, Illinois), October 1, 1970.
9. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1970), 228.
10. Seale in Shames, *The Black Panthers*, 12.
11. Earl Anthony, *Picking Up the Gun: A Report on the Black Panthers* (New York: The Dial Press, February 1970), 22.

12. Vant Neff, "Quips, Auanderies, and Queries," *Crusader* (Milwaukee), December 30, 1970.
13. Civil Rights, "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution," PBS, February 16, 2016, directed by Stanley Nelson.
14. Seale in Shames, *The Black Panthers*, 12.
15. Phyllis Jackson, "Aftermath of Sacramento," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard*.
16. Ericka Huggins, "Aftermath of Sacramento," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard*.
17. Mumia Abu-Jamal in Dhoruba al-Mujahid bin Wahad, *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1993), 197.
18. Ray Gaul, "Early Backlash Against the Panthers," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard*.
19. Michael McCarty, "Aftermath of Sacramento," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard*.
20. Stephen Shames, *Free Huey/Free Bobby Rally*. San Francisco, February 1970, in *The Black Panthers*.
21. Tarika Lewis, "Aftermath of Sacramento," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard*.
22. Audry Hudson, *Black Woman with Gun*, N.d., illustration in Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
23. Roland Freeman, "21 Panthers on Trial in New York," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, PBS, first broadcast February 16, 2016, directed by Stanley Nelson.

24. James M. Barrett, letter to the editor, *Milwaukee Star*, January 10, 1970.
25. Baldwin, "In the Shadow of the Gun," in Lazerow (Ed.), *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, 117.
26. Abu-Jamal in bin Wahad, *Still Black, Still Strong*, 197.
27. Baldwin, "In the Shadow of the Gun," in Lazerow (Ed.), *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, 136.
28. Gaul, "Early Backlash Against the Panthers," interview, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard*.

Bibliography

Primary

- Abu-Jamal, Mumia in bin Wahad, Dhoruba al-Mujahid. *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1993.
- Anthony, Earl. *Picking Up the Gun: A Report on the Black Panthers*. New York: The Dial Press, February 1970.
- Barrett, James M. Letter to the editor. *Milwaukee Star*, January 10, 1970.
- Black Rap: Black Students for Black Action of Lake Forest College*. Lake Forest, IL. "Right On to the Black Panther Party." October 1, 1970.
- Bond, Julian. *A Time to Speak, A Time to Act: The Movement in Politics*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.
- Neff, Vant. "Comments from the Capital – Quips, Quandaries, and Queries." *Crusader* (Rockford, IL), December 30, 1970.

N.E.G.R.O. News (Jamaica, New York). "Panther Exclusive."
November 1, 1968.

Seale, Bobby. *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*. Baltimore, Maryland: Black Classic Press, 1991.

Seale, Bobby in Shames, Stephen. *The Black Panthers – Photographs* by Stephen Shames. New York: Aperture, July 15, 2006.

Shames, Stephen. Free Huey/Free Bobby Rally. San Francisco, February 1970, in *The Black Panthers – Photographs* by Stephen Shames, by Stephen Shames. New York: Aperture, July 15, 2006.

Secondary

Alkebulan, Paul. *Survival Pending Revolution; The History of the Black Panther Party*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2007.

Austin, Curtis J. *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2006.

Baldwin, Bridgette *In the Shadow of the Gun: The Black Panther Party, the Ninth Amendment, and Discourses of Self-Defense*, in Lazerow, Jama (Ed.), *In Search of the Black Panther Party*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Civil Rights. "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution." PBS. February 16, 2016. Directed by Stanley Nelson.

Ogbar, Jeffrey O.G. *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

