

**Power to the Panthers:
An Overview of the Black Panther Party, 1966-82
By Charles E. Jones**

October 2006 marked the fortieth anniversary of the birth of the Black Panther Party, an organization co-founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by two college students, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Newton and Seale adopted the image of a black panther for their fledgling organization, borrowed from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which was established to secure black voting rights in Alabama. The Black Panther Party rapidly evolved from a local, Oakland-based group into a national organization with affiliates in twenty-eight states and Washington, D.C., as well as an international chapter in Algeria. Panther chapters existed in such unexpected locations, as Seattle, Des Moines, Omaha, and Denver; and contrary to conventional wisdom, they also appeared in numerous southern cities, including New Orleans, Memphis, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Throughout the course of their relatively short existence, (1966-1982) the Black Panthers electrified the nation with their dynamic image—berets, black leather jackets, weapons—and their revolutionary zeal. Panther comrades galvanized communities and regularly participated in coalitions with the white Left and other radical groups of color including the Young Lords. Their community outreach activities, later named “survival programs,” fed, clothed, educated, and provided health care to thousands.

The party’s socialist orientation, advocacy of armed resistance, effective community organizing, and inflammatory rhetoric triggered intensive governmental surveillance and political repression. Over a dozen members are known to have died in gun altercations with the police. Panthers were frequently arrested and were often the target of the FBI’s notorious and illegal counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO. The Panthers helped define the turbulent 1960s, and their slogan “All Power to All the People” their political rallies, and their revolutionary art, inspired by Emory Douglas, the BPP minister of culture, were common fixtures of the time. The organization’s bravado, community service, and uncompromising leadership captivated the imagination of oppressed people across the nation and throughout the world.

During its sixteen-year life span, 1966 to 1982, the BPP went through five distinct stages. In the first, from October 1966 to December 1967, the party was a revolutionary California-based organization engaged in grassroots activism in the Oakland Bay area and Los Angeles. The second phase, January 1968 to April 1971, represents the heyday of the Black Panther Party, during which the overwhelming majority of BPP chapters across the United States were formed. This rapid expansion led to intense political repression and factional conflict. In the third phase, May 1971 to July 1974, the party’s leadership stressed community outreach programs and electoral politics rather than armed confrontations against the government.

This deradicalization phase was highlighted by the Bobby Seale–Elaine Brown campaign for political office in Oakland. So important was this shift toward electoral politics that Huey P. Newton decided to close all Black Panther Party chapters outside of Oakland, and ordered party members to relocate to Oakland to support the campaign. This phase concluded with the departure of Bobby Seale, who resigned from the organization in July due to irreconcilable differences with Newton. The party’s fourth stage, August 1974 to June 1977, is characterized by Newton’s exile in Cuba. The official explanation put forth by the BPP was that Newton fled to Cuba to escape a contract placed on his life by the city’s drug dealers. However, it is more likely that Newton left the country to avoid pending criminal charges. In his absence, Elaine Brown, a member of the central committee who had served as minister of information to the organization, assumed leadership of the Black Panther Party, which successfully wielded its influence in Oakland politics. In the final phase, July 1977 to June 1982, the party’s membership dwindled to fewer than fifty members, and the organization lacked the resources to implement many of its survival programs. The closing of the Oakland Community School in June 1982 marked the end of the Black Panther Party.

U.S. government repression is first and foremost among the multiple factors that contributed to the demise of the Black Panther Party. This systematic political repression not only took a toll on the membership but also diverted critical resources from the Panther's community organizing to the legal defense campaigns that were mounted to support indicted or imprisoned cadre. However, there were internal problems as well. Newton's substance abuse and erratic dictatorial tendencies severely crippled the organization, contributing to its downfall. A cult of personality around Newton permitted his unprincipled behavior to go unchallenged. In addition, factional conflict over tactics—urban guerrilla warfare versus an emphasis on survival programs—resulted in the death of two Panther comrades in 1971 and prompted the exodus of other members, including several key members who had the stature to challenge Newton's leadership dominance. Finally, the organization eventually ceased to exist due to membership burnout. Black Panther Party membership required a full-time commitment. After years of tireless service, communal living, and constant government harassment, many Panthers eventually left the organization to regain a sense of normalcy.

The legacy of the Black Panther Party has surpassed its actual lifespan, which was less than twenty years. The party's uncompromising defense of the black community inspired and empowered people throughout the world. Its commitment to community service, multiracial politics, and the self-determination of all people, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, provides a model for contemporary political organizations dedicated to the liberation of oppressed people.