

Black Panthers. Targeting Dissent: The San Francisco Eight

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Throughout much of American history, dissent was never tolerated if thought to threaten entrenched interests. Especially in times of war, economic crisis, or social stress. During the great Red Scare from 1917 – 1920. Under the 1917 Espionage Act that barred mailing materials advocating insurrectionist or forcible resistance, and the 1918 Sedition Act that banned criticism of the government and ongoing war effort. Later targeting those on the left by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the Smith Act, and during the age of Joe McCarthy. Post-9/11, anti-war activists, Latino immigrants, and Muslim Americans viciously targeted. The San Francisco Eight as well.

Former Black Panthers. On January 23, 2007, arrested in early morning raids in California, New York and Florida. Charged with the 1971 killing of a San Francisco police officer and various conspiracy acts from 1968 – 1973. A racist frame following decades of harassment and a ruthless vendetta against the Black Panther Party.

Targeted for destruction under COINTELPRO. The FBI's war against dissent. From 1956 – 1971 officially but it never ended and now is worse than ever. To disrupt, sabotage, and neutralize it. Against the Panthers from 1967 through the early 1970s. The party apparatus and its members. A "Black Nationalist Hate Group," according to the FBI. For J. Edgar Hoover, "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." Along with the American Indian Movement, its primary target. The toll was devastating. Dozens incarcerated and killed. Including Fred Hampton and Mark Clark (in 1969) murdered in their sleep by Chicago police. George Jackson (in 1971) assassinated in San Quentin prison.

In 1968, eight Panthers (including Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Hutton and David Hilliard) nearly killed when ambushed by Oakland police. They took cover in a basement that police quickly surrounded. Fired on it for over an hour. Then tear-gassed it. Cleaver was wounded. He and Hutton offered to surrender. Hutton first with his hands in the air and was shot 12 times and killed instantly. Murdered in cold blood.

A Brief History of the Panthers

In October 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Progressive, activist, militantly for ethnic justice, racial emancipation, and real economic, social, and political equality across gender and color lines. Radical ideas then and now. The party's ten-point program expressed them:

- (1) freedom and "power to determine the destiny of our black community;"
- (2) full employment for black people; for everyone;

(3) “an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black community;”

(4) decent housing;

(5) education to expose “the true nature of this decadent American society (and teach) us our true history and our role in the present-day society;”

(6) for “all black men to be exempt from military service” at a time they were drafted for foreign wars;

(7) “an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people;”

(8) “freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails;”

(9) for black people in court “to be tried....by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities;” and

(10) “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”

It added words from the Declaration of Independence at the end:

— “that all men are created equal”;

— “to secure (their) rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed;”

— “that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and institute a new government;”

— “to throw off (despotism), and to provide new guards for (peoples’) future security.”

They believed in the rule of law. Published a newspaper with 250,000 readers. Articulated fundamental wants and needs. Practiced what they preached with nutritious breakfasts for poor children. Groceries for needy families. Free clinics for medical care. A free ambulance service. Help for the homeless. Free legal aids and bussing to prisons. After-school and summer classes teaching black history. Voter registration drives for blacks. It helped elect Oakland’s first black mayor, Lionel Wilson, in the city where the Panthers were founded.

They were young and idealistic. Willing to put their lives on the line for their beliefs and activism. Their goal - to make the world a better place. For black people and everyone. They were revolutionaries. Hostile to repression. In Huey Newton’s words: “never a group of angry young militants full of fury toward the ‘white establishment.’ The Party operated on love for black people, not hatred of white people.” They demanded change and fought for it. From over 30 branches throughout the country. By its over 2000 members.

They wanted redress of longstanding grievances - slavery, Jim Crow, segregation; neglect and abuse. The right to self-defense against them. A revolutionary agenda, and for practicing what Jefferson preached, the US government targeted them for destruction and largely succeeded. The 1960s civil rights gains as well so that today blacks are repressed, impoverished, and segregated. Stripped of their voting rights, and consigned to second class status by a society disdaining them. Targeted like the San Francisco Eight for crimes they didn’t commit:

- Ray Boudreaux, Richard Brown, Hank Jones, Richard O’Neal, Harold Taylor, and Francisco Torres;
- Herman Bell and Jalil Muntaqim already imprisoned for 30 years; as political prisoners on trumped-up charges; and
- a ninth man Ronald Stanley Bridgeforth still being sought.

No new evidence was found against any of them for decades. On February 7, 2008, the conspiracy charge against Boudreaux, Brown, Jones, Taylor, and O’Neal was dropped. The result of defense motions correctly challenging it on grounds that the three-year California statute of limitations expired. Similar motions for Bell, Muntaqim and Torres were heard by the California Appeals Court. O’Neal is now cleared of all charges.

Evidence in this case was obtained through torture. In 1973, on Taylor, John Bowman (recently deceased) and Ruben Scott. They were arrested and brutalized by New Orleans police. Assisted by two San Francisco detectives. Abuse continued for several days. Stripped naked for maximum effect and humiliation. Applied were electric shocks, cattle prods, beatings, sensory deprivation, plastic bags, and hot wet blankets for asphyxiation. Confessions finally extracted to end the pain. A federal court at the time ruled that torture was used and dismissed the case.

Ruben Scott is now believed to be the government’s chief witness. To be used against the others. On the basis of torture-induced confessions. To get convictions and life sentences or perhaps the death penalty for innocent men. The result of continued COINTELPRO viciousness. Today as part of the “war on terror.” Dissent and be targeted.

In 2003, the San Francisco police reopened the 1971 case. Along with FBI agents, visited dozens of people around the country. Pressured them to cooperate. When that failed, grand juries were convened (state and federal in 2003, 2004 and 2005) to subpoena people to testify. In 2005, Brown, Boudreaux, Taylor, Jones and Bowman were jailed for refusing to cooperate. Later released when the grand jury didn’t indict them.

They responded by forming the Committee for Defense of Human Rights:

“to draw attention to human rights abuses perpetrated by the government of the United States and law enforcement authorities which were carried out in an effort to destroy progressive organizations and individuals. By building coalitions with organizations and groups that advocate for human and civil rights.” Against extracting evidence through torture. Trying to make what was inadmissible 35 years ago acceptable today in a court of law. Legitimizing the “war on terror” on US soil. To be used against anyone the state targets. Their innocence irrelevant. Their guilt pre-ordained, case closed.

Activist blacks are again targets. The San Francisco Eight to send a message to others who resist. Six were released on bail. Thanks to heroic work by their families, supporters and lawyers. Two others, Muntaqim and Bell, are ineligible. They would be in New York where each served 30 years in prison. Their cases up for parole. Their transfer to San Francisco disqualifies them.

Bell was framed for the murders of two New York policemen. He’s been a political prisoner since 1973. Muntaqim was arrested in 1971 on weapons charges. Later falsely implicated in the police officer killings. He’s a founder of the Jericho Amnesty Movement for Political

Prisoners and Prisoners of War. From organizations like the Panthers, American Indian Movement, MOVE, the Republic of New Afrika, and the Puerto Rican independence movement. Also North American anti-imperialist prisoners. Jailed for their solidarity with these movements and fighting for change in the current economic and political system. They're in prison for their activism. For being against racism, imperialism and injustice. For participating in the Black Liberation Struggle.

For the San Francisco Eight, delay is the prosecution's strategy. A preliminary hearing date approaches to decide if enough evidence exists to proceed. Thousands of document pages were delivered to the defense and a list of 180 potential witnesses. Enough time to review them and interview witnesses is needed. It was requested and granted. A new trial date has yet to be scheduled.

Meanwhile, Judge Philip Moscone refused to return Bell and Muntaqim to New York temporarily for their parole hearings. Both men may now lose any chance for release for years. It's to keep them and other activist blacks targeted and imprisoned. Victims of the "war on terrorism." For their efforts against it. Supporting the Black Liberation Struggle. Being the wrong color for the wrong cause at the wrong time and having only their raw grit in its behalf. United in solidarity as well. Along with others, committed against the power of the state. For the privileged, not the people. Determined to persist no matter how this case turns out. To prevail no matter how long it takes.

Support the San Francisco Eight. Demand their exoneration and release. Their struggle is ours.

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