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Revolution or Reform: Contradictions  
Within the Ideology and Actions of the  
Black Panther Party, 1969-1970

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REVOLUTION OR REFORM:  
CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE IDEOLOGY AND ACTIONS OF THE BLACK  
PANTHER PARTY, 1969-1970

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Honors Thesis  
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## Introduction

The front page of the January 4, 1969, edition of the Black Panther Party's newspaper—*The Black Panther*—consisted of a piece of artwork by the Party's Minister of Culture Emory Douglas which depicted a beret-wearing, AK-47 toting, African American man colored a single shade of black (clothes and all) against a background of red and white rays emanating from behind him. The raised arm—here bearing the gun—and the red rays are reminiscent of the propaganda posters used during China's contemporaneous Cultural Revolution. The implication of a violent, and potentially communist, revolution is obvious, and this implication would have been classified as radical by mainstream Americans.

However, sixteen pages into the same issue of *The Black Panther* were articles advocating community breakfast programs for school children and educating readers about their legal rights and how to act before police officers. These ideas carried more of a reformist impulse than a revolutionary one, and were not extremely radical in comparison to the militancy and potential for violence depicted on the cover of the issue. The article on recommended conduct before police even encouraged a certain degree of obedience to law-and-order by reminding the reader that “you may not resist arrest forcibly or by going limp, even if you are innocent. To do so is a separate crime of which you can be convicted even if you are acquitted of the original charge. Do not resist arrest under any circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Black Panther Party is known for its strong anti-police (or, more accurately, anti-police brutality) stance, here it advocated knowledge of rights, respect and adherence to the law, and no violence. The author of a neighboring article titled “Review of Panther Growth and Harrassment [sic]”

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<sup>1</sup> “Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in David Hilliard, ed., *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* (New York: Atria Books, 2007), 7.

wrote that in late 1968/early 1969 the “Panthers [made a] resolution; To continue and intensify the struggle,” yet what exactly this struggle is seems unclear; at times the Black Panther Party (BPP) called for a violent communist revolution, while within the same issue of the newspaper the Party would also agitate for political and social reform.<sup>2</sup> The distinctions between the two methods is somewhat obvious: “revolution” connotes a complete break from and overthrowing of the previous system, while “reform” refers to efforts to change the system from within without destroying it. The Black Panther Party seems to have advocated both.

Despite the group’s fairly overt internal contradiction—revolution versus reform—most recent scholarship has ignored this tendency. Indeed, Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams’s edited collection *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* includes an entire section dedicated to the idea of “the Panthers as American revolutionaries,” but there is limited discussion on the group’s reformist goals, which are discussed only in Rod Bush’s “The Panthers and the Question of Violence.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, this is not the only discrepancy overlooked by scholars. As mentioned by communications scholar Davi Johnson in her rhetorical study of Huey P. Newton’s 1970 address to the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention, “in the popular mind as well as in academic scholarship, the Panthers are conceived of as a separatist, militant, and isolated social

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<sup>2</sup> “Review of Panther Growth and Harrassment,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Rod Bush, “Introductory Comment: The Panthers and the Question of Violence” in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 63.

movement.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, articles about the group’s wide-ranging alliances with other political organizations—including radical white groups—abound. There appear to be very few attempts to reconcile these two scholarly tendencies. Either the party is viewed as separatist or viewed as fully cooperating and allied with other revolutionary groups; instances of scholars attempting to reconcile these two polarized viewpoints are few; Paul Alkebulan’s *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* and Gwendolyn D. Pough’s “Rhetoric that Should Have Moved the People: Rethinking the Black Panther Party” are the best examples of scholarship willing to address potential contradictions within the Black Panther Party’s ideologies and actions.

Recent historians of the Black Panther Party such as Lazerow and Williams—despite the potential shortcomings of their own collection—have found the scholarship lacking as well: the Panthers “have been reconsidered before being fully considered; celebrated and condemned in memory and imagination before historical inquiry has even begun; haunted by the shadow of their failures and resurrected as a legacy for their heroic efforts before being fully appreciated for their uniqueness and their overall significance.”<sup>5</sup> Although the type of full consideration desired by Lazerow and Williams cannot be accomplished in a study this brief, here the Panthers will be “appreciated for their uniqueness.” The Black Panther Party was a very nuanced and at times contradictory group: they were separatist while also cooperating and coordinating with fellow revolutionary movements, and they were both revolutionary and reformist in their ideologies and

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<sup>4</sup> Davi Johnson, “The Rhetoric of Huey P. Newton,” *Southern Communication Journal* 70, no. 1 (2004), 17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080.10417944049373309> (accessed October 16, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, “The Black Panthers and Historical Scholarship: Why Now?” in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, 2.

conduct. This can be seen in their ideas and actions, specifically in their Black Nationalism, communist ideology, anti-Vietnam activism and alliances, and their pragmatic survival programs and general ideology as seen in the Party's newspaper *The Black Panther* between 1969 and 1970.

### The Black Panther Party & Black Nationalism

The Black Panther Party, especially in its early days, was a Black Nationalist organization. Black Nationalist thought was by its very nature fairly separatist and purposefully excluded the participation of other groups for the sake of fostering racial pride and independence. This ideology emphasizes self-help, self-determination and solidarity within the African American communities, and at times includes an international component.<sup>6</sup> Black Nationalist thought, as defined by the *Dictionary of American History*, includes four basic elements: an emphasis on black identity, an emphasis on the idea of a homeland (this aspect was deemphasized in 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Nationalist movements, but traces of it can still be found), an emphasis on self-help, and a frequently anti-white ideology.<sup>7</sup> Much of the Black Panther Party's ideology demonstrated these ideas, which can be seen as an example of how the Party leaned towards isolationism.

Black Nationalist ideas and inspirations are clearly evident in the Black Panther Party's rhetoric and programs, such as the Black Panther Party's platform, also known as the Ten Points. The first point of this platform is: "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny

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<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, s.v. "Black Nationalism."

<sup>7</sup> *Dictionary of American History*, s.v. "Black Nationalism."

of our Black Community.”<sup>8</sup> This demand reflects the sentiment behind many of the other appeals: while this point demands that the United States government improve the living situation of the black community, it wants to do so for the sake of improving the black community’s ability to practice self-determination. Another example of this desire for self-determination can be seen in the ninth demand: “We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>9</sup> This demand is essentially a request that members of the black community be able to determine the criminality of actions taken by fellow community members and have a part in determining the judicial fate of its members. Such self-determination is a fundamental component of Black Nationalist thought.

The separatist aspect of Black Nationalism is also apparent in the final point of the Black Panther Party’s platform. This point states that:

We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.<sup>10</sup>

While this point (like the ninth point before it) also appeals to a desire for self-determination, it has a clear separatist tendency. The Black Panther Party wanted the black community to be the sole subject of this proposed United Nations plebiscite (which never occurred), and furthermore the Party referred to their national destiny, which implies the existence, or desired existence, of a nation of only African Americans (even if it is not a physical nation).

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<sup>8</sup> “October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program: What We Want, What We Believe,” *The Black Panther*, May 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

This separatist Black Nationalist thought can also be seen in one of the Black Panther Party's earliest and most famous survival programs: their program to provide schoolchildren with breakfast. Although the breakfast programs were open to all children, the announcements in *The Black Panther* newspaper made it clear that the program was organized by and targeted specifically at the black community. For example, an announcement and volunteer request published in the January 4, 1969, issue read, "Black people in the Black Community—mothers, welfare recipients, grandmothers, guardians, and others who are trying to raise children in the black community where racists oppress us—are asked to come forth to work and support this needed program."<sup>11</sup> Although the article ends with the request that "both black and white communities and citizens [let us know] what you can donate in money, time, etc." it is clear that this program is an example of intracommunity self-help.<sup>12</sup> Whites were allowed to participate, but the rhetoric of the first quotation and repeated emphasis on the race of the participants underscores the fact that this was a program run by the black community to benefit the black community; the whites were not nominally excluded, but the separatist tendency is apparent.

Despite these pronounced connections between the Black Panther Party's ideology and actions and Black Nationalist thought, the relationship between the two should not be overstated. Indeed, the Black Panther Party experienced a dramatic conflict with another Black Nationalist organization—Ron Karenga's US organization—that revealed the limits of the Black Panther Party's Black Nationalist tendencies. As described by historian Paul Alkebulan, US members accused the Party of "being racial sellouts" due to their willingness to make interracial alliances,

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<sup>11</sup> "Breakfast for School Children," *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

as opposed to US's preference for all-black alliances.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, one large factor in the strife between the two groups was the fact that the Party was not employing Black Nationalist thought enough for US.

### The Black Panther Party & Communism

While using Black Nationalist separatist tendencies, the leaders of the Black Panther Party also subscribed to a political ideology which featured a heavy reliance on extensive and international alliances: communism. As argued by Lazerow and Williams in the introduction to *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, unlike other Black Power movements, the Black Panther Party believed that “blacks were united with Third World nations, yet it was a unity not primarily by cultural ties but by political repression – that is, by a common enemy.”<sup>14</sup> The Black Panther Party, in the process of combatting the imperialism of the American system, frequently called for class consciousness and a united struggle against the “bourgeois state apparatus.”<sup>15</sup> These ideas were obvious extensions of a communist ideology, which the Black Panther Party advocated frequently and openly. However, there is surprisingly no significant scholarship available on the relationship between the Black Panther Party and communism, despite the many connections between the organization and the ideology.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 84.

<sup>14</sup> Lazerow and Williams, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Huey P. Newton, “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” *The Black Panther*, September 15, 1970, quoted in House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, *The Black Panther Party: Its Origins and Development as Reflected in Its Official Weekly Newspaper The Black Panther Black Community News Service*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 1970, 49.

The Black Panther Party's advocacy of an internationalist, non-separatist communism can best be seen in the images and articles published in *The Black Panther*. Nestled between articles about the murder of Fred Hampton and calls for the release of arrested Panther leader Huey P. Newton are dozens of articles advocating communist ideology and advertisements for communist literature. Furthermore, more than one international communist leader graced the cover of the newspaper itself.

The Black Panther Party leadership was heavily influenced by Marxism and Leninism and, as their editorials in *The Black Panther* expressed, frequently advocated united class consciousness and an overthrow of the tyranny of upper classes by the proletariat. For example, in the May 4, 1969, issue of *The Black Panther*, Bobby Seale—one of the founders of the party alongside Huey P. Newton—wrote that “a democratic dictatorship by the proletarian class the people who the Black Panther Party members come from is the real reason for the Party.”<sup>16</sup> Although the Black Panther Party advocated racial consciousness and racial pride, they frequently joined with other causes to uplift all oppressed people, not just those in the African American community or even just within the larger African diaspora community. For instance, the group coordinated with the Gay Liberation Movement and the Feminist Movement during the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Black Panther Party advocated joining forces with people who were suffering from a variety of forms of oppression, but battling class-based oppression seems to

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<sup>16</sup> Bobby Seale, *The Black Panther*, May 4, 1969, quoted in House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, “Rhetoric That Should Have Moved the People: Rethinking the Black Panther Party,” in *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson II (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 63, 67.

have been a major basis of their ideology. Eldridge Cleaver, another Black Panther Party leader, expressed this sentiment in a July 12, 1969, article:

knowledge of Marxism-Leninism is invaluable to oppressed peoples struggling against capitalism and imperialism because in theories of Marxism-Leninism, we find a very accurate and very useful analysis of the capitalistic system, we find a clear picture of what's going on in the world and it makes us know who our friends are and who our enemies are, who are our potential allies are, and how we have to move in order to destroy the system of our enemies.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, the Black Panther Party was not afraid to use communist ideology and theory, and indeed it appears that this ideology was a fundamental underpinning for why—contrary to the frequent scholarly interpretations which portray the Black Panther Party as solely separatist—the Party was so willing to join forces with other oppressed groups.

In addition to advocating communism in general, the Black Panther Party openly expressed support for communist nations and even went so far as to support the communist forces in Vietnam, which the United States was then currently fighting. For example, the March 3, 1969, issue of *The Black Panther*, printed against a red backdrop, featured a photograph of Ho Chi Minh—the North Vietnamese president—and his new year's message, presented without commentary.<sup>19</sup> In his message, Ho Chi Minh lauded the “very glorious victories for our [the Vietnamese] armed forces and people throughout the country” against “U.S. aggression.”<sup>20</sup> The message consistently and repeatedly referred to the American forces in Vietnam as “aggressors”

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<sup>18</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *The Black Panther*, July 12, 1969, quoted in House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, 38.

<sup>19</sup> “President Ho Chi Minh’s New Year’s Message,” *The Black Panther*, March 3, 1969, in Hilliard, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

and “imperialists.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Ho “on behalf of the people throughout our country, [wished] to convey [his] warm greeting and thanks to the brotherly socialist countries, friendly countries and peace-and-justice-loving peoples in the world, including the progressive people in the United States.”<sup>22</sup> Such rhetoric, when printed in *The Black Panther*, portrayed the Black Panthers as members of an international community of communists and socialists united against the tyranny of the United States. Similarly presented without substantial commentary was a photograph published in the March 16, 1969, issue of *The Black Panther* of Viet Cong soldiers. The dynamic photograph depicted a group of soldiers racing forwards while a second group, crouched in the left foreground of the photograph, held machine guns at the ready.<sup>23</sup> The caption read “South Vietnamese Liberation Fighters Launch An Attack On the Enemy.”<sup>24</sup> Importantly, the caption did not name “the Enemy,” but it is clear who the Viet Cong is likely fighting: the United States. By referring to the United States armed forces as “the Enemy,” this caption and photograph further served to unite the Black Panther Party with international socialists and communists against a common “Enemy.”

Similar conventions can be seen in the Black Panther Party’s newspaper’s portrayal of communist China and Mao Zedong. The cover of the same issue as that which contained the Viet Cong photograph featured a photograph of Mao, applauding, superimposed over a red-and-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “South Vietnamese Liberation Fighters Launch An Attack On the Enemy,” *The Black Panther*, March 16, 1969, in Hilliard, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

black background of soldiers holding guns aloft.<sup>25</sup> In the bottom left-hand corner of the cover read the words “without a people’s army, the people have nothing.”<sup>26</sup> This portrayal was visually very similar to that of Ho Chi Minh: a simple photograph of a communist or socialist leader with a red background (a color associated with communism). Such front-page photographs publicly supported and lauded these leaders’ governments and countries. Included in the same issue was an advertisement for Mao’s writings—likely the *Little Red Book*—with instructions for where to order a copy.<sup>27</sup> Thus not only did the Black Panther Party’s newspaper publicize its support for communist China but even worked to—or at least allowed whoever placed the advertisement to—disseminate Mao’s communist writings.

This communist ideology was quite radical for the time, especially considering the fact that America was still living in the Cold War and at war against communist forces in Vietnam. While these communist ideologies encouraged the Black Panther Party to foster alliances with other non-black communist groups, these ideologies were also highly revolutionary. The Black Panther Party advocated a complete overthrow of the United States government and a dictatorship of the proletariat, along with a restructuring of America’s social system. This type of ideology did not lend itself to internal reform, but rather a revolutionary rebuilding of American political and social institutions.

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<sup>25</sup> “Chairman Mao—People’s Republic of China,” *The Black Panther*, March 16, 1969, in Hilliard, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *The Black Panther*, March 16, 1969, quoted in House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security, 41.

## The Black Panther Party & Vietnam Dissent

As demonstrated in some of *The Black Panther* issues mentioned, the Black Panther Party's communist ideology lent itself to support of the Vietnamese against the US government and opposition to the Vietnam War. Such opposition led the Party to create multiple alliances with American antiwar groups, such as the Peace and Freedom Party and Oakland Seven, a fact which clearly challenges scholarly impulses to describe the group as separatist. These alliances also demonstrated the Party's at-times contradictory revolutionary and reformist impulses.

The Peace and Freedom Party was a white, middle-class antiwar organization, and the Black Panther Party created a strong connection with it. Together the two groups formed a political coalition that ran candidates for public office on the 1968 ticket. The coalition nominated Eldridge Cleaver—Black Panther Party Minister of Information and later head of the Party's international branch in Algeria—for President of the United States, Dr. Benjamin Spock (a famous pediatrician who advocated against the war in Vietnam) for Vice President, Huey P. Newton for Congress, and Bobby Seale and Kathleen Cleaver for state assembly.<sup>28</sup> The candidates did not win and, as historian Paul Alkebulan argued, had not expected to; Alkebulan pointed out that “the 1968 campaigns were widely understood to have been a consciousness-raising effort.”<sup>29</sup> Despite this, the very existence of the coalition demonstrates how far the Party was willing to take its alliances. Furthermore, this coalition was remarkably reformist rather than revolutionary. The coalition—and by extension the Party—operated within the confines of the United States government's political system, rather than directly attempting to undermine it or overthrow it. Running for the presidency, a “consciousness-raising effort” or not, was a

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<sup>28</sup> Alkebulan, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

manifestation of a reformist impulse within the Party and an example of the group's willingness to operate within the system in order to change it.

The Oakland Seven were another group with which the Black Panther Party fostered an alliance. This group—consisting of Frank Bardacke, Terence Cannon, Reese Erlich, Steven Hamilton, Jeff Segal, and Michael Smith—was recognized as one of the leading groups in the Stop the Draft Week protests in Oakland, California (the birthplace of the Black Panther Party). This week, lasting from October 16 to October 20, 1967, involved planned protests before the Oakland Induction center in an attempt to disrupt and express displeasure with the draft for the Vietnam War. There was a significant turn-out, with the final day of protest drawing an estimated ten thousand people. The last two days of protest turned violent and were considered by contemporary media sources to be riots; 277 individuals were arrested during the five days. As a result, the Oakland Seven were eventually arrested, charged, tried, and later acquitted.<sup>30</sup>

In the January 4, 1969, article regarding the Oakland Seven, the unnamed author voiced enthusiastic support for these men, demonstrating the extent of this alliance. In numerous instances, the author established clear parallels between the Black Panther Party and the Oakland Seven. For example, the author wrote that “the Oakland Seven go to trial in Alameda County Superior Court on January 13—the same court that tried to MURDER Huey legally. Following the path of Minister Newton they are not going to sit still and take what the power structure dishes out.”<sup>31</sup> Not only does this statement serve to portray the Oakland Seven as victims of the same system which victimized—and according to the author attempted to assassinate—Black Panther Party Minister of Defense and veritable organization leader Huey P. Newton, but it also

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<sup>30</sup> *The Sixties in America*, s.v. “Oakland Riots.”

<sup>31</sup> “The Oakland Seven,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 7.

embraced the Oakland Seven as fellow revolutionaries. Like Newton, they “are not going to sit still,” and they are “following [his] path.” The author went on to say that the “Oakland Seven stand for the right of self-defense and self-determination.”<sup>32</sup> Considering the fact that the Black Panther Party’s full title was the “Black Panther Party for Self-Defense,” such rhetoric would have drawn an obvious connection and parallel between the two groups. Both were fighting for the same thing: self-defense and self-determination. Furthermore, they were both fighting *against* the same thing: “both are opposed to the imperialist war in Vietnam.”<sup>33</sup> Like the BPP, the Oakland Seven as described by this author did not want to limit themselves to only pacifist methods. Finally, the author mentions that the Oakland Seven enlisted the same lawyer as had Panther leaders Newton, Cleaver, and Warren Wells. Such commentary highlights connections between the two groups while minimizing the differences, namely, the fact that the BPP was black while all members of the Oakland Seven were white.

This support was not a one-way street; according to this article, there was clear solidarity between the Black Panther Party, the Oakland Seven, and the Stop the Draft Week protesters as a whole. This further demonstrates the depth of the Party’s alliance with the Oakland Seven and, furthermore, its complete willingness to create extensive collaborations with fellow revolutionary groups. The author wrote that the “Panthers and the Oakland Seven are supporting each other,” as exemplified by the author’s discussion of the Oakland Seven’s support of Newton (who was in prison at the time on charges of killing a police officer and injuring another).<sup>34</sup> The Oakland Seven were described as using slogans during the second Stop the Draft Week (April

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, s.v. “Newton, Huey P.”

1968) which were “not just ‘Hell No, Nobody Goes,’” a common antiwar chant, “but also, ‘Free Huey.’”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in a parallel similar to those mentioned above, the author claimed that:

The Black Panther Party says, “We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails.” The Oakland Seven say, “We want freedom for all political prisoners now in jail for opposing the policies of imperialist America.” Both say, “We want Huey Newton freed immediately.”<sup>36</sup>

This language not only heightened the similarities between the two groups but also further emphasized the idea that the two groups wanted the same thing: the end of perceived American imperialism and the freedom of Huey P. Newton. At the time of this article’s publication, the campaign to free Huey was a rallying cry not only for members of the Black Panther Party but for members of the predominantly white New Left as well.<sup>37</sup> By emphasizing this similar rallying cry, the author highlighted the idea that these two groups had the same goals, ideals, and even similar methods.

This support of the Oakland Seven directly challenges the common scholarly conception of the Black Panthers as separatist. The Black Panther Party frequently fostered associations with other movements against the American status quo, and this article regarding the Oakland Seven is another instance of this strategy. The author of the article even went so far as to say that “if there’s anything that puts the pig power structure uptight, it’s the fear that white revolutionaries like the Oakland Seven and the black revolutionary vanguard will join together.”<sup>38</sup> The author of this article—and likely the Black Panther Party as a whole—was

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<sup>35</sup> “The Oakland Seven,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, s.v. “Newton, Huey P.”

<sup>38</sup> “The Oakland Seven,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 7.

aware of the fact that organizing with other like-minded groups would make their movement stronger, rather than remaining isolated solely within their own community.

### The Black Panther Party, Survival Programs, and General Party Ideology

Although the Black Panther Party's advocacy of communism was clearly part of a revolutionary ideology—and its antiwar beliefs only somewhat less radical—*The Black Panther* repeatedly published recommendations and rules for its readers and Party members which were surprisingly reformist. This can be best seen in the January 4, 1969, article “Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid” and the May 4, 1969, article “October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program.”

The “Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid” must be understood carefully. This article was written with the intention that readers would cut it out and carry with them at all times as a check-list of do's and don't's when interacting with (or being arrested by) police. The Black Panther Party's relationship with the police was fairly straightforward: they frequently antagonized each other, with the party being initially formed to monitor police actions in the hopes of preventing brutality.<sup>39</sup> The police frequently targeted Black Panther Party members with property searches and arrests.<sup>40</sup> The Black Panthers referred to the police as “pigs” and saw them as extensions of an oppressive and brutalizing imperialist American system.

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<sup>39</sup> David Hilliard, Preface to *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, vii.

<sup>40</sup> “Review of Panther Growth and Harrassment,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 10.

While the Black Panther Party as a group frequently confronted the police, the article “Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid” was created for individuals and was pragmatically written with that goal in mind; in it individuals were encouraged to not challenge the police. Rather, this article indicates a (qualified) respect of traditional advocacy of law and order. The author informed readers of their rights and explained how they affected their interactions with police. For example, the author wrote that:

3. Police have no right to search your car or your home unless they have a search warrant, probable cause or your consent. They may conduct no exploratory search, that is, one for evidence of crime generally or for evidence of a crime unconnected with the one you are being questioned about. (Thus, a stop for an auto violation does not give the right to search the auto.) You are not required to consent to a search; therefore, you should not consent and should state clearly and unequivocally that you do not consent, in front of witnesses if possible. If you do not consent, the police will have the burden in court of showing probably [sic] cause. Arrest may be corrected later.<sup>41</sup>

This piece of practical advice did not encourage the reader to violently fight the police, but rather to challenge the system within its own confines by adhering to the exact word of law and using one’s rights to one’s advantage.

Ultimately, this approach was not extremely radical. The author wrote in the preface to the article that “we are always the first to be arrested and the racist police forces are constantly trying to pretend that rights are extended equally to all people.”<sup>42</sup> The “pocket lawyer” served to help individuals challenge mistaken belief that rights were applied equally, but it did not serve to challenge those rights themselves. Rather, it served to use them. This article did not advocate individuals starting revolutions; instead, it offered pragmatic advice to avoid becoming a victim of police brutality while also encouraging a reformist attitude; the individual abided by their

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<sup>41</sup> “Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid,” *The Black Panther*, January 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

rights as given by the system and encouraged the police to do so as well. This “Pocket Lawyer” essentially encouraged its user to force the system to him or her the way it was legally required to. It was reformist, not revolutionary.

A similar reformist impulse can be seen in the Black Panther Party’s Platform (also known as the Ten Points), which was also discussed earlier with reference to Black Nationalism. For example, the seventh point demands an end to police brutality and points out that “the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense.”<sup>43</sup> Here, the Party advocated members using the Second Amendment—and not going beyond it—in order to protect themselves against police brutality. The goal appears to be to end police brutality, not to overthrow the police system. Furthermore, the means of attack—using the Second Amendment to their advantage—is an instance of working within the system in order to change it. Such reformist ideas can also be seen in the ninth point which (as previously discussed) demands that African American defendants be tried by a jury of their peers, with peers defined as fellow members of the black community.<sup>44</sup> The platform went on to say that

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that black people will receive fair trials. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical, and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the black community from which the black defendant came. We have been, and are being tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the “average reasoning man” of the black community.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program: What We Want, What We Believe,” *The Black Panther*, May 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

This point is quite clearly not revolutionary. Instead of challenging the very existence of the United States justice system, the Party wanted it to be reformed so all the rights supposedly afforded to all United States citizens *actually* applied to all United States citizens. The fundamental structure of the United States courts was not challenged, and instead the Party wanted the United States government to follow its own laws.

The pragmatism and reformist tendencies present in these two articles—the “Pocket Lawyer” and the Party’s Ten Points—convey a fascinating facet of Black Panther Party politics: while some ideologies and actions such as communism may be revolutionary, others were significantly more reformist. Historian Paul Alkebulan has argued that these instances of reformist ideas were examples of the fact that “revolutionary rhetoric had to be toned down if the Panthers were to survive.”<sup>46</sup> However, the existence of revolutionary rhetoric within the Ten Points—appearing simultaneously with reformist ideas—challenges this. The Black Panther Party did not “tone down” its rhetoric in its official platform, and because if it had it would be unlikely that extreme, revolutionary demands would appear next to more mild and reformist ones. For example, the tenth point—previously discussed in terms of separatist Black Nationalism—requested a “United-Nations supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.”<sup>47</sup> This demand explicitly challenged the authority of the United States government by threatening to bring in an oversight council from the United Nations while also stating that the black community had been colonized by an

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<sup>46</sup> Alkebulan, 27.

<sup>47</sup> “October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program: What We Want, What We Believe,” *The Black Panther*, May 4, 1969, in Hilliard, 24.

imperialist United States in spite of the fact that the black community has its own, independent “national destiny.” This claim is clearly revolutionary, not reformist. Furthermore, the sixth point of the Party’s platform demanded that “all black men be exempt from military service” and that “we will protect ourselves from the force and violence of a racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.”<sup>48</sup> This threat, again, challenged the United States system and potentially even threatened to overthrow certain portions of it, this time with violence rather than the United Nations. However, these two revolutionary demands were included in the Platform alongside requests for housing reform, education reform, and requests that the United States government adheres to its own Constitutional amendments.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

The contradiction is clear: the Black Panther Party demanded revolution and destruction of the American system while also demanding that the system be repaired but ultimately maintained. Furthermore, the Party simultaneously abided by Black Nationalist separatist ideas while creating and fostering alliances with a wide variety of other organizations, including alliances with the communist government in Vietnam and white middle-class antiwar organizations. Such contradictions have not been given the proper attention from historians, and Paul Alkebulan’s attempt to fill this void does not fully explore or explain the existence of these contradictions. Despite the party’s attempts at revolution, reform seems to have been an accepted secondary goal. Scholar Gwendolyn D. Pough argued that such contradictions, and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

specifically rhetorical contradictions, are the reasons why the Black Panther Party ultimately fell apart; however, internal corruption and the schism between leaders Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver in 1971 were also significant factors which must be taken into account.<sup>50</sup>

Besides, these contradictions do not necessarily imply a disorganized or shoddy group: the Black Panther Party, despite its potential failings, was effectively run by a group of intelligent people. The perceived contradictions within the party may have been a result of varying beliefs and priorities amongs the leadership or may have even been intentional.

Ultimately, the contradictions within the Black Panther Party's ideology and actions may indicate an attempt to fulfill all of the immediate needs within the black community while also preparing for revolution. Jamal Joseph—a member of New York City's infamous Panther 21 from 1969 to 1971—indicated this in his autobiography *Panther Baby: A Life of Rebellion and Reinvention*. Joseph wrote that when he joined the New York chapter of the BPP

it was made clear that the duty of a Panther was to organize and teach so that the political consciousness of the broad masses of people could be raised to the point that they were ready to engage in revolution. We were taught that the revolution could not be fought or won without people and that if the masses were organized and unified enough that armed struggle might not even be necessary.<sup>51</sup>

The Survival Programs and attempts to gain the political office, while part of a reformist impulse, were also attempts to organize and strengthen the Black Panther Party and the black community as a whole. It was a pragmatic approach to revolution that not only prepared for a restructuring of society but also combatted the problems of the black community along the way. As

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<sup>50</sup> Pough, 62; Alkebulan, 78-83, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Jamal Joseph, *Panther Baby: A Life of Rebellion & Reinvention* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2011), 62-63.

Alkebulan titled his monograph, it was a strategy of “Survival Pending Revolution.”<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, this survival pending revolution philosophy may explain the Black Panther Party’s perceived contradictions between separatist tendencies and the group’s extensive alliances.

While the black community needed self-determination and empowerment—which could only come from within the community itself—the communistic revolutionary goals of the Party necessitated coordination and support from other like-minded groups.

The importance and influence of the Black Panther Party and its movement are clear. They identified many of the flaws within American society which perpetuated the mistreatment and disenfranchisement of the black community and other groups. The Party attempted to create a wide-ranging philosophy that could repair all of the problems faced by the black community and the international community of the oppressed. The Party knew exactly what the problems were; the contradictions emerged along the path of how to best address those issues.

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<sup>52</sup> Alkebulan, 79.

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