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The Most Important Legacy of the Black Panthers

By Brandon Harris

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In 1969, when this photograph of Black Panther Party members was taken, outside a courthouse in New York City, the organization had begun to fracture due to clashes with the authorities and internal dissent. PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID FENTON / GETTY

“Relations between police and Negroes throughout the country are getting worse,” a mid-sixties newscaster intones over images of police arresting young black men, which appear at the outset of Stanley Nelson’s “The Black Panthers: Vanguard of The Revolution.” Perhaps this assertion is as true today as it was then, but for the subjects of Nelson’s documentary, the answer to police brutality was one that we

don't hear from many contemporary #blacklivesmatter activists: meet force with force, fire with fire.

This credo meant a lot to beleaguered black communities in California, in the mid-sixties. They were full of African-Americans who had left the South to find better opportunities and the rule of law, only to discover that laws were malleable things that could be shaped to ignore or brutalize them. From 1962 to 1964, the years just before the Watts rebellion, there were sixty-five people killed by the L.A.P.D., including twenty-seven who had been shot in the back. Only one of those deaths was deemed murder. In this context, it is not surprising that four years after the Black Panther Party was founded, in October of 1966, by a loose and very young assortment of Bay Area radicals (their initial mission was to legally follow and monitor police officers with unconcealed weapons), the organization grew to one with headquarters in sixty-eight cities. The Panthers also had a newspaper that reached one hundred and fifty thousand readers, and popular social programs that provided breakfast, clothing, and health care to many without it. Yet something like the Panthers still seems far-fetched, impossible in our time.

The story of the organization's rise and fall is told lucidly, in great detail, and without much adornment by Nelson's documentary. Interviews with former Panthers dominate, but Nelson also talks to retired policemen who harassed and raided the group, as well as to several journalists who covered them. In this way, Nelson's film provides a corrective to the stereotype-driven portrayals of Panthers and their ideology that one finds in popular movies like Lee Daniels' "The Butler." Nelson also eschews the narrative of unbridled heroism prescribed to the group in Mario Van Peebles's once influential "Panther," a highly fictionalized and haphazardly truncated account, released twenty years ago.

The initial furor that the Panthers caused cannot be overstated. Less than a year after the armed Panther Patrols emerged, the California governor Ronald Reagan signed the Mulford Act, put forward by the California State Assembly with the explicit desire to prevent the Panthers from carrying loaded firearms in public. In protest, on May 2, 1967, twenty-six armed Panthers, led by the co-founder Bobby Seale, invaded the State Assembly chamber, with shotguns and pistols drawn. The group's ranks and prestige exploded in the wake of the incident. The nascent notion of "black power," first coined two years before by the S.N.C.C.'s Stokely Carmichael, on the back of a truck in the Deep South, had its most visible standard bearer yet.

The Panthers, in the second issue of their newspaper, laid out a ten-point program, one which called for full employment, decent housing, historically conscious education, as well as the end of black imprisonment, service in the armed forces, subjugation to police brutality, and “the robbery by the white men of our Black Community.” Although the men who delivered these messages to the public, largely Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, were mocked by white conservatives such as William F. Buckley and Tom Wolfe, a look at the 1972 Democratic Party platform tells you that their ideas were taken far more seriously by the political establishment (and were far more concrete) than those of the Occupy Movement, two generations later.

Newton and Cleaver were both involved in gun battles with police officers in the late sixties. Cleaver, a literary celebrity for his 1968 memoir “Soul on Ice,” fled to Algeria after his shoot-out, which followed in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and was largely seen as a foolhardy ambush on the police, one which left one of the youngest and earliest members of the Panthers, Bobby Hutton, dead. Newton was initially jailed for his gun battle, which grew out of a mysterious traffic stop, and in short order he became a cause célèbre for much of the American left. (“Free Huey!” is still, just barely, part of the national nomenclature.)

As Nelson tells it, the early-seventies decline of the Panthers was brought about by the outright war waged against them by the F.B.I.’s COINTELPRO unit, which frequently raided Panther headquarters and, as in the case of Fred Hampton, the chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Panthers, assassinated group leaders. Yet decadence and dissension amongst the party’s leadership, and the ascendance of a black middle class with more access to the economic and social mainstream, are perhaps equally to blame for the Panthers’ decline. While the documentary doesn’t give as detailed account of these matters as it does the F.B.I.’s dirty tricks, Nelson doesn’t shy away from the less heroic elements of the Panther story nearly as much as Van Peebles’s “Panther” does. That film places the blame for the group’s demise almost solely on the intransigence of the F.B.I., who allegedly colluded with the mafia and local law enforcement to flood the black community with drugs, necessitating the drug violence and addiction that Van Peebles saw as the real reason behind the continued malaise of black communities in 1995, the year the film was made.

In the early seventies, while Newton advocated for doubling down on food and educational programs and leaving the threat of armed insurrection behind, Cleaver continued to argue for outright armed confrontation with the white man. Their

disagreements spilled into public, coming to a head when the two both appeared as guests on a radio program in 1971. Newton claimed that he was expelling Cleaver (and the international wing of the Panthers that he ran in exile) from the group; according to Bobby Seale, the group's rank and file became demoralized, unsure of whom to follow. Soon, those ranks began to thin for the first time since 1966.

Cleaver's more militant faction, joined by white radicals such as those in the Weather Underground, continued to preach revolutionary rhetoric, but such an uprising remained impossible. The incidents of political violence that punctuated the era—shootings, bombings, and the occasional robbery—remain unconvincing markers of a larger revolution that never came. Meanwhile, Newton's wing of the party, focused on “survival programs pending revolution,” became more circumspect. In Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin's celebrated history of the Panthers, “Black Against Empire,” they estimate that sixty-five per cent of the editorials found in the organization's newspaper in 1970 promoted “revolution now” as an attainable goal, but by 1973 less than one per cent continued to do so. Despite this change in focus, Newton proved to be an increasingly unstable leader, prone to drug abuse and violent, unhinged behavior.

A political moment in which the Panthers' most salient ideas would have been given a thorough vetting by our country's legislature has never existed, but the ten-point program remains as incendiary and intellectually defensible today as it was then, especially in our era of mass incarceration and structural joblessness. In “Panther,” a movie that knows no subtlety it is not willing to discard, J. Edgar Hoover (Richard Dysart) has the ten-point program read to him by one of his agents, and then complains that the nation's Negroes are calling for “reparations,” before giving the go-ahead on a violent crackdown of the Panthers. It's no small irony that so much of the scholarship that went into Ta-Nehisi Coates's celebrated essay on the subject, last summer, focused on the housing discrimination of the era in which many of the Panthers came of age. Reparations for Housing-Wealth Usurpation doesn't quite have the same ring as Reparations for Slavery, but it might make a more compelling case for future generations of black radicals seeking remunerative justice for the sins of the past.

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