



Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party

Joshua Bloom , Waldo E. Martin Jr.

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In Oakland, California, in 1966, community college students Bobby Seale and Huey Newton armed themselves, began patrolling the police, and promised to prevent police brutality. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement that called for full citizenship rights for blacks within the U.S., the Black Panther Party rejected the legitimacy of the U.S. government and positioned itself as part of a global struggle against American imperialism. In the face of intense repression, the Party flourished, becoming the center of a revolutionary movement with offices in 68 U.S. cities and powerful allies around the world.

Black against Empire is the first comprehensive overview and analysis of the history and politics of the Black Panther Party. The authors analyze key political questions, such as why so many young black people across the country risked their lives for the revolution, why the Party grew most rapidly during the height of repression, and why allies abandoned the Party at its peak of influence. Bold, engrossing, and richly detailed, this book cuts through the mythology and obfuscation, revealing the political dynamics that drove the explosive growth of this revolutionary movement, and its disastrous unraveling. Informed by twelve years of meticulous archival research, as well as familiarity with most of the former Party leadership and many rank-and-file members, this book is the definitive history of one of the greatest challenges ever posed to American state power.

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Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party Details

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Kevin says

The Good:

--Very accessible; the 500 pages of blow-by-blow historical details with intermittent theory flew by. Given the easy flow, audiobook format also works well. The Conclusion (final pages) provides an excellent summary.

--Framework for understanding history: what were the historical factors that contributed to the rise and demise of the BPP?

1) *Black support*: during the rise (1967-70), assassinations (X, MLK, Hampton) and urban riots provided broad support for BPP's message of armed self-defense. This eventually unraveled when State concessions allowed for a black middle class and some political representation.

2) *Anti-war movement*: BPP were early resistors of the draft for war on Vietnam, and became allied with the growing anti-war movement. This eroded as Nixon scaled back the draft (Chomsky: when the draft ended, US army became mercenary army of the poor) and mainstream Democrats started opposing the war (Chomsky: the elite remains to this day opposed only for business/strategic reasons, while the public encompasses moral reasons)

3) *International revolutionary governments*: BPP framed black America as a colony struggling against the empire, and built alliances with anti-imperialist countries. This declined as other governments sought diplomacy with America.

--Other important themes throughout the historical account: the relationship between level of repression and opportunities/consequences for insurgency, strategy and the range from reform to revolt.

The Missing:

--I was surprised there was little mention of The War on Drugs and gangs.

--Demography (particularly in relation to capitalist boom/bust cycles) keeps rising up my list of areas to research. This book provided another reminder: the domestic context for black nationalism include urban ghettos (WWII jobs boom led to mass migration to north/west cities; after war, returning soldiers and de-industrialization brought stagnation).

Loránd says

Chronicles the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party, of its "core" members and opponents, of its ideology, and the broader historical context in which it stood.

It gives history an honest treatment and looks at the party's internal struggles with: from ideological disputes, that ultimately lead to a split in 1971, to its struggle with male chauvinism and its ever increasing embrace (and oftentimes pioneering) of one would call intersectional politics. And ultimately its struggle with the

repressive police state – painfully evident in the brutal murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark.

From community breakfast programs for children, to sickle-cell anemia research centers, to armed revolutionary struggle (of Maoist persuasion) the Black Panther Party is fascinating to study and learn from. This book does an excellent job of giving the reader information to understand *why* the Black Panthers ultimately faded into history, and were ultimately demonized.

Any revolutionary movement that seeks to emerge from the US will have to take a closer look and understand what happened to the Black Panther Party, the lessons, both positive and negative, to be learned from it are indispensable. Of course, choosing the right ideology from which to launch the critique will be the most difficult part, and I will refrain from doing it in this review.

If one wishes to gain any meaningful understanding of the Black Panther Party then reading this book is almost a necessity.

Alison says

"If one would look closely, and check this three year history, he will find that in damn near every rebellion a racist cop was involved in the starting of that rebellion. And these same pig cops, under orders from the racist government, will probably cause 50 or more rebellions to occur the rest of this year alone, by inflicting brutality or murdering some black person within the confines of one of our black communities. Black people will defend themselves at all costs. They will learn the correct tactics to use in dealing with the racist cops. . . . The racist military police force occupies our community just like the foreign American troops in Vietnam. But to inform you dog racists controlling this rotten government and for you to let your pig cops know you ain't just causing a "long hot summer", you're causing a Black Revolution."

It is impossible I suspect to read a history of the Black Panthers now without feeling the weight of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the murders which make it necessary, settling over you as you read. You wonder how these young revolutionaries would react to thousands of people chanting: "Hands Up, Don't Shoot", and the depressing reality that despite the fact that Black kids play on the White House lawn, most of their peers live with endemic poverty, more Black boys will go to jail than university; Black kids die in wars overseas in disproportionate numbers in wars whose gains they will never see; and Black men and women are gunned down by police with regularity. Of what the originators of the Black Pride movement, the young Panthers who patrolled police, would think of parents teaching their children how to be polite to cops at all times, how to keep their hands away from their pockets, how to stay safe through compliance. (There is no implied criticism here, just a musing on what changes, and what doesn't). Of course, the Panthers themselves, the authors contend, faced dilemmas over militancy vs mass support at mobilisations, choosing increasingly to hold fire to conserve support and stay alive, in both a literal and metaphorical sense.

This history itself is fairly straightforward - there is some broad theses about the reasons for the rapid growth and rapid decline woven through - but mainly the authors have produced a dense-but-readable, roughly-chronological-while-grouping-themes-and-locations history of the Panthers (no small feat given the diversity to cover). It's not a ripping yarn. The authors are more concerned with dynamics than personality, accuracy than anecdote, and if the writing remains unmemorable, the book is still the more thought provoking for the approach.

While some things - the focus on police violence as a key mechanism of Black oppression - remain familiar,

others contrast to current politics. In particular, the book places a strong emphasis on the importance of Third World Liberation struggles in formulating the Panthers critique, particularly the experiences of Cuban, Algerian, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries. Far from adopting terms like African-American, the Panthers' overtly identified the interests of Blacks with these struggles against the USA, and rejected an identification with the US as a whole. Their use of the capitalised Black chose to emphasise the commonality with people of colour (African-American wasn't in use till the 80s). This broader, global perspective, a rejection of nationalist rhetoric, or the underlying idea that Black people should be fighting for incorporation into the American state is evident throughout their approach. From the formation of alternate sources of community organisation - from schools to health clinics to law enforcement - through to a strategy of intense alliance building. The Panthers described in this book certainly weren't separatists, quite the opposite, they saw the Black struggle as part of something much larger, global in scope but also taking in the struggles of others whose interests were not aligned with the State, from other racial groups like the Young Lords, through to the emerging LGBTI movement and the women's liberation movements. Working with peace organisations was a natural for the Panthers, as they saw common cause with the Viet Cong, and the entire Third World Bloc. One of the biggest, and most welcome, surprises for me in this book was the extent to which the Panthers helped, funded and underpinned other movements, including those dominated by white activists, while maintaining clear leadership and focus on Black liberation.

This may not be an accurate comment - coming as it does from an Australian librarian - but it felt is stark contrast to current US politics, where the Black Lives Matter movement seems largely self-contained, a struggle others have not effectively connected to or supported. Bernie Sanders initial remove from this movement, lack of connection to Black activists and movements seemed to indicate this. Or not.

And of course, nothing was that simple. It is fascinating, and far too briefly touched on, how the Panthers formal support for Women's Liberation, and alliances with Women's Lib organisations, sits alongside an internal culture which was, in most cases and places, overwhelmingly sexist. The book covers this briefly, but densely, with a scattershot of comments from leading Panthers - many of whom are influential feminist leaders now and then - about the expectations upon women to serve, to have sex and to have children with the Brothers. The topic clearly needs a proper book long treatment, throwaway references to the painful difficulty of trying to deal with sexist violence when racist violence is deadlier just touch on what kinds of complex struggles women Panther leaders navigated and won gains on. I highlighted most of these comments - which should be visible as quotes from this book in my Goodreads account somehow.

The book has a few minor flaws - the organisation seems as if the different authors took different chapters: some of the material overlaps in an awkward way (the same quotes used twice a few times, the same info presented, like chatting to someone who forgets what they have already told you). I like Gramsci, I do, but his omnipresence in framing revolutionary analysis lately reminds me of the inescapability of Foucault in my postgraduate courses in the late 90s (yes, Gramsci is better than Foucault, just y'know, not the only thinker out there). But on the whole this is an amazing feat, a key reference and readable story.

Mh says

I have read a lot about the Black Panthers including most of the memoirs (Seize the Time, Taste of Power, This Side of Glory, Soul on Ice, Assata, Panther Baby) and several good books on narrower pieces of the history (Living for the City, Survival Pending Revolution, Murder of Fred Hampton). So I was looking for a big picture, and didn't expect to learn much detail here. But I was shocked. There was something new on every page. Who knew that the FBI paid a highly placed agent (William O'Neal) to write stories in the Black Panther encouraging party members to torture suspected informants? Or that the commonly reproduced "October 1966" ten point program is actually from July 1968? Or that women Black Panthers hotly contested gender dynamics in the Party at the United Front on Fascism Conference? And even the events I was very

familiar with (like the early police patrols in Oakland, or storming the Assembly in Sacramento) the authors put these in a whole new light, placing the events in a broader context and relation to one another in a way that it all makes sense.

Most important for me was the analysis. The authors show HOW the Black Panther Party built POWER, step by step. In Part I, they trace the roots of the Panthers' political practices, and explain their initial successes patrolling the police. It's telling that when black people figured out how to use gun laws to build political power, Reagan and the Republicans enacted laws to restrict the right to bear arms! In Part II, the authors show how the Party shifted gears once they couldn't legally run the armed patrols any more. They go through this on all levels (theoretical discussion, lots of historical detail). I especially liked hearing about how the Party got organized in New York, Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, and cities across the country. It is hard to believe how quickly the Party grew. In Part III they discuss the service programs, the repression, and mobilization by allies. I hadn't realized the breakfasts and other community programs only came about in 1969. The authors show that the Party kept growing even when the government was attacking it the hardest. The Panthers were able to sustain their armed self-defense because they attracted support from so many sources. Not just radicals! I couldn't believe organizations like the Urban League or mainstream politicians like Willie Brown were taking real action to oppose the repression of the Panthers. So much has changed today. And I knew there were Asian, and Latino, and even white groups that had copied the Black Panther Party. But I didn't understand how important broader allies were in organizing on the ground support for trials, and community programs, and the newspaper, and keeping the Party growing. Part IV the authors talk more about those alliances, and some of the incredible international work the Panthers did, with China, Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba.

As a long-time activist, these were the most important lessons for me. We can't just take up arms and take over our communities. Anyone with sense knows that wouldn't work today. But neither can we just march and sit in and demand civil rights and turn the other cheek. More black people are in jail today than were slaves before the Civil War. How can we do something about that? The authors don't give easy answers to these questions. But they really helped me think about what it would take. If we are going to resist authority, we will be repressed. So who is going to help us face that repression?

The last few chapters where the Party unravels were the hardest part of the book for me to read. So sad that things had to come to that. But ignorance is bliss, right? I was really grateful that the book didn't pull any punches. And I think I am convinced by the authors' arguments that the tensions that tore the Party apart were larger than the personal and organizational conflicts through which they played out, and had a lot to do with growth of the black middle-class, and the repeal of the draft.

Thank you Drs. Martin and Bloom! Your book really changes things for me.

Sara Salem says

Fascinating and extremely detailed history of the Black Panther Party that shows how the global context of the 1960s was a large part of why such a radical organisation could become so successful. The book also explains why a movement like this is unlikely to emerge in the US anytime soon.

Carly says

I don't say this type of thing much, but here goes: I believe that if you live in the US, this is one of those books you should read.

"The issues are not complex. The objective is seizure of power. Until we seize power, not visible power where a black man looks like he's running things--but real, actual power; everything else is bullshit [...] Peace and order are bullshit; they are meaningless without justice."

--Leroy Goodwin

I believe we have entered another Civil Rights era, and I have a perhaps naive hope that this one will finally complete the mission that was left incomplete during the time of MLK and Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense: full, meaningful equality. Equality that is reflected in housing, in the police force, in education, in integration of society, in self-determination for all.

The Black Panthers believed that such a world could only come through true revolution.

I believe that we must share a common context for what *has* happened before we can shape what should happen. We must understand the past in order to shape the future.

And here's the problem: mainstream America still has a woefully inaccurate view of the BPP, even though at this point, it's widely acknowledged that the Black Panther Party was the target of an insidious, targeted, widespread, often illegal onslaught by the U.S. government, including a concerted policy of propaganda and isolation and infiltration and misinformation. And yet despite continuing revelations about the extent of COINTELPRO-BLACK-HATE, Operation CHAOS, and all the rest, the Black Panther Party remains an uncomfortable and often misunderstood political movement. Independent of whether you agree with the stances taken by the BPP during its evolution, it's crucial to understand their contexts.

It's easy to laud a nonviolent movement, at least once the movement is over. It's safe. Putting nonviolent figures on a pedestal is comfortable. It's probably why my childhood education repeatedly ignored all other aspects of the Civil Rights movement to focus on MLK. Maybe that's why we remember, say, Harriet Tubman as a kindly figure of the Underground Railroad rather than an active supporter of John Brown's raid and a vocal supporter of war against the South. It's even harder to go back and look at revolutions where violence was a relevant factor, particularly when those revolutions were lost. But this battle will be fought again and again until it is won, and I believe that a crucial aspect is for all Americans to try to understand the history and context of the unrest of today.

Black Against Empire is a fact-driven, unemotional examination of the social history and context of the Black Panther Party. Although a little dry at times, the sense of impartiality is one of the most impressive aspects of the book. It's a massive tome because the BPP has a long and fascinating history.

Often, as the rhetoric on each side mounts, it's difficult to read. But it illuminates an aspect that I, at least, was missing before reading this book: the BPP saw itself as a revolutionary force representing a disenfranchised nation occupied by a hostile invading force. The BPP's Ten Point Program even paraphrased the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, and that all men are created equal that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. [...] But when a long train of abuses and usurpations,

pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, and their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards of their future security.

This aspect alone goes far in explaining the rationale behind armed defense. As George Mason Murray put it in 1968:

The Black Panther Party recognizes the critical position of black people in the United States. We recognize that we are a colony within the imperialist domains of North America and that it is the historic duty of black people in the United States to bring about the complete, absolute and unconditional end of racism and neocolonialism by smashing, shattering, and destroying the imperialist domains of North America.

Wondering if this book is relevant? As the news is awash with warnings of another "Bloody Summer" in Chicago and elsewhere, consider Bobby Seale's words in 1967:

"If one would look closely, and check this three year history, he will find that in damn near every rebellion a racist cop was involved in the starting of that rebellion [...] by inflicting brutality or murdering some black person within the confines of one of our black communities. Black people will defend themselves at all costs. They will learn the correct tactics to use in dealing with the racist cops [...] The racist military police force occupies our community just like the foreign American troops in Vietnam. But to inform you dog racists controlling this rotten government and for you to let your pig cops know you ain't just causing a 'long hot summer,' you're causing a Black Revolution."

TL;DR: if you live in the US, and maybe even if you don't, this is a book worth reading.

Matthew WK says

Grade: A-

Hands down the most thorough and engrossing read on the Black Panther Party to date. The research is exhaustive and the story is well told. This will make the majority of the public rethink their vision of the Panthers and their significance in history. Its been 45+ years since the peek of the Panther party and we have yet to have another movement so instrumental in changing societal thought and attempting to address the grievances of the oppressed. Besides documenting the governments programs to undermine, debase, and assassinate leaders of the party, the authors also look at their movement from a broader perspective, analyzing why the party exploded onto the American consciousness when it did and why we haven't had another such movement since. If you're a fan of history, the Civil Rights movement, or dissenters in the 1960s, this is a must ready!

Cate White says

Ever wonder what happened to the Panthers? Well, these two guys do a great job of breaking it down for ya. In their analysis, the state didn't destroy the Black Power movement. The movement lost steam when they lost allies b/c of govt concessions. I guess you could say the govt destroyed the movement by conceding just

enough to calm people down a little bit: de-escalated war in Viet Nam, opened doors to higher education & jobs to blacks through affirmative action, made peace with new leaders of newly de-colonized states internationally. It almost seems to me like, once the enemy--the fascist pigs--backed down a little, the internal enemies--the psychological effects of oppression--reared up and, through internal fighting and internal pain, the Panthers fell apart. The thuggery and shit has been waaay overplayed. These men & women were highly organized, disciplined and making very practical improvements to the lives of the people, often at the expense of their own lives. Literally. I'm humbled by this book. And inspired. Read it!

Richard says

Between 1968 and 1970 the Black Panther Party was the vanguard of the revolutionary moment the United States was experiencing. They got there over a period of years of solid organizing, and through a charismatic leadership that positioned the Party as the armed defenders of ghetto communities they likened to occupied zones within the imperium. Huey Newton and company pointed the finger at police brutality, and pointed guns when necessary. It was by following California gun laws to an end no one expected, and then following through with social programs, a somewhat inchoate but powerful Marxist rhetoric, and a willingness to build power through cooperation and in some cases cooptation with and of other black power and civil rights organizations. It didn't hurt that the US was absolutely ripe for the moment, fighting an unpopular war in VietNam, a war of ghetto oppression, and a war repressing the liberal peace movement. The established power structure really didn't know what was hitting it, and it responded as power does when it's threatened. And, as if it were textbook, repression built resistance. The BPP thrived. But, the BPP was a mixed bag of programs, and an internal mess of power plays in which gangsterism would raise its head along side vital community service, in which factions vied for autonomy, and leadership, in which gender and gay equality fought and won battles within, and in which the national organization led with a very heavy hand.

Eventually, the Party imploded, and the radical community has been picking up the pieces ever since.

Black Against Empire is another attempt to pick up the pieces. It's a fascinating story, made more fascinating for me because of my proximity to the Party and its activities. I was in Chicago. There were two factions in the politics I was attracted to: those who wanted to end the war, and those who wanted to smash the state. I wanted to smash the state, and the Panthers, SDS and the Weathermen, Rising Up Angry, and the Yippies (my gang) were the milieu in which I liked to raise my fist. We did think we were making a revolution. Fred Hampton's assassination proved it, the trial of the Chicago 8 proved it, the Days of Rage proved it - well, those things proved we had a moment, the student uprisings and the revolutionary gangs of Europe, and Mexico reinforced the moment, the reaction of the authorities gave us phrases like "chaos builds community," but we were wrong, and were easily co-opted.

The BPP was not an insurgency, and neither were the other groups I loved so much. Once state power figured out that giving in on a few thing would weaken us faster than all the SWAT teams in the world, we quickly fell apart, took our cookies, and went back to school, or work, or the farm, or wherever.

Anyway, I'm going on now as obnoxiously as we did then.

My biggest quibbles with Black Against Empire lie in the field of language, and an inflated importance of events.. Riots were not insurrections or rebellions, the over blown titles of authority the Panthers gave themselves were ridiculous, then and now, and the movement was really a moment - longer lasting than the Occupy moment, but a moment - none the less. Black Against Empire tries to make it bigger than that, but

the fact is, it was big enough. That we're still enthralled has to tell us something.

Given that, this was a good read, and a good look at the scope of the Party in its heyday. Its scope was great, and shines in the history of US radicalism, and its good for us to know about it - and to celebrate what was good. And, hey, berets and black leather - amen.

Dayton says

As an exploration of Black Panther politics and how they related with the rest of the New Left, it's great and highly useful for contemporary activists. As history it's a little confusing, the events aren't in chronological order (because they're grouped thematically to better explore the political side) and I didn't totally follow some descriptions.

Joerg Rings says

Black Against Empire is the first comprehensive history of the political development of the short-lived yet hyperinfluential Black Panthers has been released. The authors managed the incredible feat of cutting a path through the complex jungle of the Panthers' development, concentrating on the politics, the causes for their rise and decline. Sometimes I wished that some loose ends, especially biographical and technical issues, had been explained a bit more. But the chapters are build in a logical order to span the rise and fall of the Party, highlight their achievements and carefully weigh the good and the bad. Also, this book conclusively shows that the US under Nixon and Hoover, and California under Reagan have been guilty of the most barbaric acts of terror to subdue the anti-Imperialistic movements of the 60s.

Christian Holub says

So much of what we're taught as kids about the 60s protests and the Civil Rights Movement is bullshit, but it wasn't until very recently that I started to realize that. I found this book incredibly informing because it presents a history of that time from a radical perspective. The way we talk about civil rights, it almost sounds like America was an incredibly racist apartheid state until Martin Luther King Jr assembled protesters to march through the streets, after which LBJ passed some laws and everything was fine and everybody went home happy. In reality, black liberation activists were brutally repressed by the state (MLK was almost certainly assassinated by FBI counter-intelligence, not much different than socialist Chicago Black Panther Fred Hampton was), and they were fighting for much more than just equal voting rights. In such an explosive context, for the one and only time in American history, a revolutionary organization developed a nationwide following and strong political influence: the Black Panther Party. This book gives a comprehensive overview of the Panthers' politics, their rise to prominence in the late 60s, and their dissolution in the 70s. In our current time of political upheaval, I've been particularly interested in the history of revolutionary and socialist movements. This book is one of the best I've read so far, and I really can't recommend it highly enough. As a side note, it has some of the best back-cover blurbs I've ever seen: Cornel West calls it "the definitive history of one of the great revolutionary organizations in the history of this country," Angela Davis praises it for not shying away from the Panthers' contradictions, and Alicia Garza says reading it inspired her to co-found Black Lives Matter. Truly an intellectual and political feast here.

Mal Warwick says

Black Panthers, the FBI, and the Vietnam War

When I moved to Berkeley in 1969, the Black Panther Party was in its heyday. Only three years earlier, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had begun building the party around an image and a name they'd appropriated from other Black organizations then active in those turbulent years of the Vietnam War and exploding ghettos. Yet before the decade of the 1970s was out, the Black Panther Party had all but disappeared. *Black Against Empire*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin's excellent study of the Panthers and their politics, makes clear why and how they grew into such a force — and why the party collapsed so few years later.

The pivotal event in the history of the Black Panther Party was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. Before that day, the Party was just one of hundreds of activist African-American organizations, most of them vanishingly small, in Black ghettos and on university campuses all across the country. The Panthers were set apart from others by their distinctive black outfits, by carrying guns in public to defend themselves against police brutality, by their outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War, and, perhaps most of all, by their willingness to encompass people of other ethnicities. As a result, they had grabbed headlines locally and were growing at a fast pace, attracting African-Americans in their late teens and twenties who were disillusioned by the timidity of their elders in the Civil Rights Movement — but the party's activities were largely limited to Oakland, Berkeley, and nearby cities. However, when Rev. King was murdered, the Black Panther Party quickly emerged as the leading organization nationwide with the credibility and the activist ideology that could channel the fury and the hope of young African-Americans and attract alliances with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other largely non-Black radical organizations. The Party quickly began opening offices around the country — a total of 68 cities by 1970 — and for three years remained a powerful and ever-present force in the activist politics of the day.

Soon, however, the party's rapid decline began in earnest. Bloom and Martin emphasize two key factors — the Panthers' establishment enemies and the shrinking U.S. engagement in Vietnam under Richard Nixon — to which I would add a third: the explosive personality dynamics of the Panthers' leaders themselves.

The Black Panther Party's sworn enemies included the FBI, the Oakland police, and, later, police in Chicago and many other cities. J. Edgar Hoover personally led the FBI's campaign against the Panthers, introducing informers and agents provocateur to trigger violence and sow dissent within their ranks. The Bureau's efforts went so far as to hand out explosives, spread destructive rumors to undermine the marriages of Panther leaders, and arrange the assassination of key Panther activists. The Oakland police used violent and often illegal tactics, invading Panther homes and offices without search warrants and arresting individual Panthers on transparently trumped-up charges. The most egregious incident took place in Richard J. Daley's Chicago, when police, acting on information from an informer, illegally burst into an apartment in the middle of the night and murdered Fred Hampton, the local chapter leader, sleeping in his bed. All told, police murdered dozens of Panther activists around the country.

Richard Nixon played a pivotal role, too. "Nixon was the one who rolled back the draft, wound down the war, and advanced affirmative action." The cumulative effect of these strategic moves was to erode the foundation of the Panthers' support both in the Black community and among white radicals (whose popularity among young people, it became clear, was largely grounded in fear of the draft). Once regarded

not just by themselves but by other self-appointed revolutionary organizations as the vanguard of the revolution, the Panthers increasingly found themselves alone as liberals attacked them and the revolution on the nation's campuses went the way of the draft. The party was officially dissolved in 1982.

So far as it goes, this analysis of the principal forces that undermined the Black Panther Party is right on target. However, I would argue that the personality dynamics of the party's leadership played a significant role as well. Judging from my own observations as well as the evidence advanced in *Black Against Empire*, the three leading figures in the party were all brilliant men. It's idle to speculate what roles they might have played in society had they been born white in middle-class families — but it's clear that their life experiences as African-Americans growing up in America in the 1950s and 60s, not to mention the cruel frauds worked on them by FBI agents and informers during the late 1960s and early 70s, wreaked havoc on their mental health. Of the three, only Bobby Seale survived the Panther years whole and sane. Both Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver were, by all accounts, unhinged in the final years of their lives. So far as I'm concerned, no further proof is needed than the bitter feud that erupted between the two of them, which led to dangerous and sometimes violent splits within the Panther organization.

For anyone who lived through those unsettling times on the margins of the day's events, *Black Against Empire* is illuminating. Though I crossed paths with a number of the individuals named in the book, and we had a great many mutual friends, I was quite unaware of the Panthers' early history and of the party's years of decline. If you have any interest in East Bay history, Berkeley politics, or African-American history and politics, you'll find *Black Against Empire* essential reading.

Joshua Bloom, the principal author, is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at UCLA. His collaborator, Waldo Martin, is a Professor of History at UC Berkeley specializing in African-American history.

tout says

I took a exceptionally long time to read this because I read it with my partner. We'd take turns reading a chapter or two and then talk about it. Sometimes a month would go by in between other distractions. Over the last month we both set a goal to finally finish it so that it wouldn't take us an entire year to read. But because of this long reading it has been in the background and a kind of refrain for the last year an a half of the anti-police movement or "black lives matter."

It has often felt that in many conversations about why the black panthers fell apart or were defeated that repression and especially COINTELPRO were largely the key factor in this. This book gives a narrative that doesn't underscore the importance of a systematic campaign to discredit and eradicate the panthers, but it sees that repression as also part of the growth of the organization, primarily because the political prisoner campaigns to Free Huey, the trial of Bobby Seal and countless martyrs allowed the panthers to find allies in the new left, moderate blacks, and other anti-colonial struggles. The authors argue instead that the BPP fell because tensions within the organization, between those who wanted to carry out immediate insurrectionary measures (which turned into the Black Liberation Army / BLA) and those who emphasized, in the most vulgar sense, community building via food programs and revolutionary communizing and later turned more and more into neutered social democratic and traditional political campaigning. The split, partially caused by Huey's release from prison, declines in popular or allied support for various reasons (concessions to moderate blacks and waning liberal support through the slow end of the US involvement in South East Asia) pushed the core militants mostly toward insurrection and the leadership toward social democracy. What some call the inherent sameness of "living and fighting" had been broken and thus doomed them to

dissolution.

A big part of the failure of revolutionary imaginations during the 1960s was, in my opinion, due to the form of struggle being cast within the shadow of larger anti-colonial and national liberation struggles that had little to do with the real political situation in advanced capitalist countries. An application of the same methods — armed struggle — was bound to fail. But its failure is what we should learn from. Like Autonomia (the red brigades and others), Greece in 2008 (cells of fire), and many other revolutionary situations, the warriors break out on their own form of revolutionary suicide with the state only when the movement is in decline. It seems to signal the end, however long the end may be.

This book is important for anyone interested in what revolution could look like or might look like in the US. Since slavery and race are the foundation of this machine that casts out a group as both necessary yet superfluous, as means to define the human community, as surplus population, etc, we will keep coming back to variations of the same problems the Panthers and others faced. Most importantly how do we construct a "survival kit", as Huey Newton said while maintaining a resolute conflict with the existing hell we inhabit?

I found the sections on urban uprisings and insurrectionary situations before and after MLK Jr's assassination and sections on things like the SF State strike to be especially interesting.

Skip says

I wrote my high school senior research paper on the Black Panthers so this is a subject that has interested me for 40 years. Although I cannot find it, I am virtually certain that this comprehensive, well-researched profile of the Black Panther party is better than mine.

The meteoric rise of the BPP in the aftermath of MLK's assassination in 1968 was matched by its equally stellar collapse in the early 1970s, occasioned by three or four developments: the Panthers' establishment enemies (particularly the FBI, and law enforcement generally), the shrinking U.S. engagement in Vietnam under Richard Nixon (breaking up anti-establishment support), and bitter divisiveness among party leaders and criminal activities in the rank and file. Many people forget about all of the positive things that the BPP did for black communities: protecting them from police brutality, social programs, especially food and medical, promoting black studies, etc. and that they did not reject non-black support.

There were a couple of things about the book, which I did not like: (1) the author's need to list dozens upon dozens of people, who were at an event or had minor roles and (2) the book was organized topically, rather than chronologically, so there was significant repetition of seminal events, challenges, etc.
