

The Black Panthers Continue to Expose America's Racial Divide

By: R.C. Baker

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Like many American icons — P.T. Barnum, Andy Warhol, Ronald Reagan — the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense got its start through a bit of flimflam. Huey Newton, an ex-con and self-taught radical intellectual, and Bobby Seale, foreman of an Oakland, California, anti-poverty youth program, founded the party in October 1966. The fledgling organization needed cash to build membership, and Newton hit upon the idea of selling copies of Mao Tse-tung's Little Red Book at a San Francisco protest against the Vietnam War. By buying the books in wholesale lots from a Chinese bookstore, the budding revolutionaries realized a 400 percent profit. "That was our first fundraiser," Seale said later. "We had not even read this book."

College student Stephen Shames photographed Seale hawking the tiny volume — "Get your 'Red Book'! One dollar! The thoughts of Chairman Mao Tse-tung!" — and the two have remained colleagues ever since, most recently collaborating on *Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers*, a fiftieth-anniversary collection of photographs, graphics, and reminiscences.

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Seale (born 1936) and Newton (1942–89) used their big markup on the Communist bestseller to rent office space, install telephones, and buy shotguns, which they used to "police the police." The Panthers' initial program consisted of following members of the overwhelmingly white Oakland police force around predominantly black neighborhoods to guard against police brutality. As Newton told an interviewer in 1968, "In America, black people are treated very much like the Vietnamese people or any other colonized people because we're used, we're brutalized by the police in our community."



A number of Shames's photos in *Power to the People* feature heavily armed, sharply dressed Panthers standing outside party offices or government buildings, where they had gone to demand equal rights. As Seale remembers in the book, "I saw Huey one day. He didn't know what he had on. A sporty leather jacket, black slacks, nice blue shirt. He's walking down the street. I say, 'Hold it, Huey,' just like a director." That street encounter, plus a movie Seale saw featuring the black berets worn by French resistance fighters in World War II, resulted in a party uniform that added a stylish swagger to the Panthers' revolutionary front.

Peppered throughout the book are streetwise graphics by Emory Douglas, the Panthers' Minister of Culture, who designed the party's newspaper. The June 27, 1970, issue of *The Black Panther* features "Warning to America," a drawing of an African-American woman hefting an automatic rifle under the headline, "We are armed, and we are conscious of our situation, and we are determined to change it, and we are unafraid." (Shames's photos, a selection of Douglas's graphics, and copies of *The Black Panther* are on display at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea through October 29.)

Shames includes an excerpt from Newton's autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*: "I constantly felt uncomfortable and ashamed of being black," he wrote. "During those long years in Oakland public schools, I did not have one teacher who taught me anything relevant to my own life or experience.... All they did was try to rob me of the sense of my own uniqueness and worth, and in the process nearly killed my urge to inquire." Newton was functionally illiterate after graduating from school, and taught himself to read as an adult by working through Plato's *Republic*; he went on to study law with Edwin Meese, who eventually became President Reagan's retrograde attorney general.

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Meese later observed, "I was teaching law, criminal law, for police officers and people who wanted to be police officers and one of the students in my class was Huey Newton. He later wrote in his book that he was taking these law enforcement courses because he wanted 'to know as much as the pigs knew.'" Meese recalled, "In the middle of the course, one day he asked if he could ride to the courthouse with me.... Well, it turned out actually he was on trial. He had stabbed someone with a steak knife at a barbecue some months before." After serving a year for assault with a deadly weapon, Newton returned to Meese's class while on parole, and earned an A.

Newton schooled the party members in both constitutional and local California law, making sure they carried law books containing the relevant statutes whenever they went on armed patrols. Power to the People exposes the pretzel logic that still governs America's racial divide, pointing out that in 1967, Reagan, at that time the governor of California, signed a very strict gun-control law after the Panthers began toting rifles and pistols in public. Seale notes in the book, "The NRA wanted us arrested for carrying guns back in those days. Yes, they did." Shames adds, "The National Rifle Association did not utter a peep of Second Amendment protest. Can you imagine what they would say if President Obama proposed a [similar law] today?"

But while stories about armed black men marching through California's state assembly building were making nationwide headlines, the Panthers were also creating programs based on Newton's and Seale's ten-point platform demanding job opportunities, better public education, increased access to healthcare, prison and judicial reform, and other improvements in the lives of black citizens. The Panthers struck a balance between Malcolm X's black separatism and Martin Luther King's pacifism (they admired both leaders greatly). As Seale puts it in the book, "I can understand the difference between a white left radical who stands up for my constitutional rights and some goddamn racist Ku Klux Klan who wants to murder me."

Shames (who is white) documented numerous multiracial "Free Huey" rallies when the Panther co-founder was on trial in 1968 for the killing of a police officer. (After Newton was convicted, two drunken Oakland police officers fired shots through the plate glass window of the Panthers' office; they were later dismissed from the force. One of Shames's iconic photos captures the bullet holes rending a poster of Newton sitting in a wicker chair holding a spear and gun. One can only imagine the reaction of the two former cops when the conviction was reversed on appeal and, after two subsequent hung juries, Newton was released in 1970.) Shames also photographed a massive funeral for party member George Jackson, author of *Soledad Brother*, a collection of letters condemning brutality and racism in the prison system. Jackson was killed during a 1971 prison break.

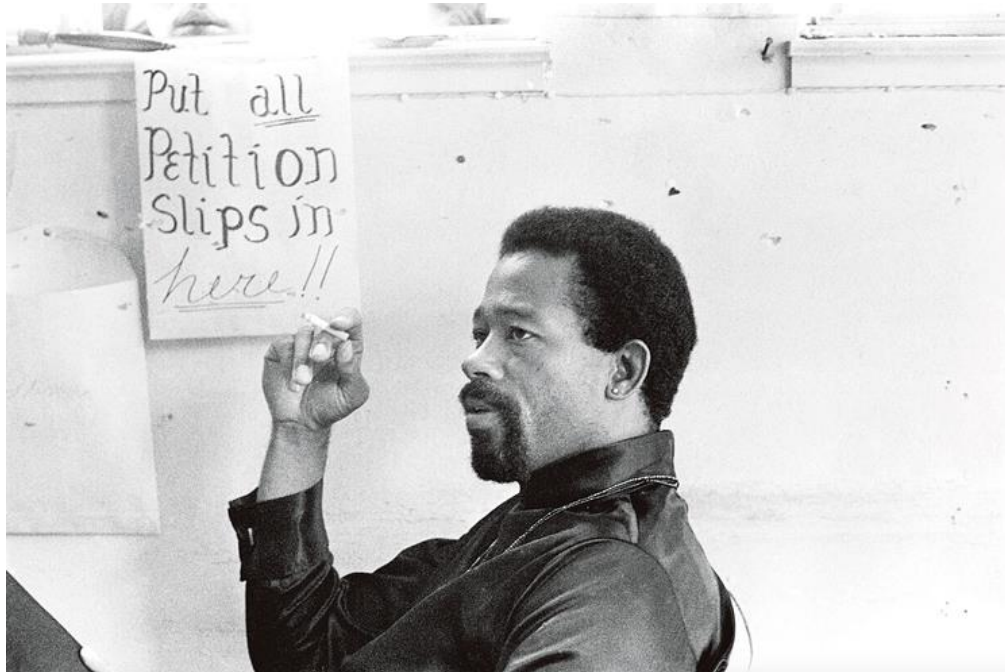
The Panthers were perpetually in the crosshairs of local and federal authorities. A December 1970 copy of the party newspaper features a portrait of Chicago leader Fred Hampton surrounded by black chevrons, with party slogans in red — "You can jail a revolutionary but you can't jail the revolution" — along with an epitaph of sorts: "Born August 30, 1948, Murdered by Fascist Pigs December 4, 1969." None of the officers who raided Hampton's apartment at 4:45 a.m. were charged with murder for shooting the unarmed Panther leader multiple times in the head, but his family and that of another victim won a massive \$1.85 million settlement from the City of Chicago, Cook County, and the federal government in a wrongful-death suit, in part because it emerged that Hampton had been drugged by an agent provocateur directed by FBI COINTELPRO operatives.

Even non-party members were harassed. *Power to the People* recounts how the FBI tailed the man who'd volunteered to do the plumbing at the George Jackson People's Free Medical Clinic. "God, they wasted millions of dollars following innocent people around," Dr. Tolbert Small remembers. The Panthers' medical facilities were some of the first in the nation to routinely screen patients for sickle cell anemia, and they provided free STD screening for local youths as well.

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Shames also photographed members distributing free food and clothing in poor neighborhoods. One shot captures party member Leonard Colar, big as a linebacker and natty in a double-breasted overcoat, escorting an elderly woman on a grocery shopping trip, as part of the Panthers' SAFE Club that accompanied seniors to cash checks and buy food in high-crime areas.

The book's oral histories (which elide time periods by mixing quotes from the deceased with current conversations) point out that the Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children Program provided a template for school breakfast and lunch programs today, and that the Panthers' police patrols eventually evolved into civilian-review boards and what we now consider community policing. And for all their machismo, the Panthers were open to women in their ranks. A former leader, Ericka Huggins, notes in the book, "Part of the legacy of the Black Panther Party is that we were not afraid to look at race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. All of it. Huey wrote in support of the woman's movement and the gay liberation movement. Who the heck — what black man, what white man, what any man was talking like that in 1970?"



Shames often composed portraits to include telling background details. A photograph of Eldridge Cleaver, taken in 1968 when he was running for president representing the Peace and Freedom Party, is dominated by a huge banner behind the Panthers' Minister of Information's head, reading, "Don't Vote for Shit." (The electorate took him at his word: He received 0.05 percent of the vote.) And despite the perils of their endeavor, the party founders retained a sense of humor. Toward the end of the book, Shames includes a four-frame sequence in which Newton and Seale stare at the lens with steely gravitas, glare at each other, and then begin cracking up before the camera pulls back as they double over with laughter.

The book closes with a litany of current concerns that echo the Panthers' original ten-point program: a justice system that remains stacked against the poor, galloping wealth inequality, shadowy oligarchs pouring money into the electoral process, a tax system that favors the wealthiest 1 percent of citizens, racial disparities in employment and education, banks that redline minorities out of homeownership. And of course, the continued killings of unarmed black men and youths by police, which has given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. The Panthers were canny in their ability to turn protest into publicity, forcing issues that too many Americans wanted to ignore — police brutality, institutionalized

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racism — beyond the pages of the party's own newspaper and into the mainstream media. It fell to BLM to update the imagery of outrage by using social media, via instantaneous cellphone uploads so different from the laborious process of shooting and developing film in Shames's day.



One double-page photo (taken in Brooklyn circa 1970–71) captures a rubble-strewn lot hard against a crumbling brick wall spray-painted with the phrase "THE MOON BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE!!!" Is this a cry against the millions spent in 1969 to land a man on the moon even as some American children went to bed hungry, or a joyful outburst that finally there was something all Americans could share equally?

Outmanned and outgunned, the Panthers stood their ground, and paid a fearsome price, but they remained steadfast in the belief that Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness is the birthright of all Americans. That wasn't true for slaves when those words were written in 1776, and they remain unattainable for many of their descendants — and for too many of the 99 percent of any color. Seale and Shames remind us that progress has been made but that true equality can still feel as distant as the lunar surface.

Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers
By Stephen Shames and Bobby Seale
256 pp., Abrams, \$40

'Power to the People: The Black Panthers in Photographs by Stephen Shames and Graphics by Emory Douglas'
Steven Kasher Gallery
515 West 26th Street, 212-966-3978
stevenkasher.com. Through October 29

Bobby Seale & Stephen Shames talk + book signing
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
515 Malcolm X Boulevard, Thursday, October 27, 6:30 p.m.