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“Power to the People” Honors the 50th Anniversary of the Black Panther Party

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September 23, 2016



Fifty years ago, in October 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in Oakland, California. Inspired by black nationalists like Malcolm X, the BPP developed an economic and political plan that would build the African American community from the inside out.

While the Civil Rights Movement worked to dismantle Jim Crow laws and push for integration, the BPP developed the Ten Point Platform and Program that called for freedom, full employment, reparations, housing, education, military exemption, end to police brutality and murder, freedom for the incarcerated, Constitutional rights during trial, and full self-determination.

The BPP were not pacifists; they knew the letter of the law and armed themselves against an unjust government, exactly as the Second Amendment ordained. The BPP organized, fast and well, with local chapters established in 68 cities around the country. They set up more than 50 community survival programs including Free Breakfast for School Children, Free Medical Clinic, Free Food, Clothing, and Legal Aid programs, sickle cell screening, an award-winning charter school and SAFE—a senior citizen program to help prevent muggings and attacks on the elderly.

In response to their ability to exact the rights granted in the Constitution—including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom to protest—FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover called the BPP, “the greatest threat to the internal security of

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the country.” In response, he organized COINTELPRO, an illegal operation of surveillance, infiltration, perjury, police harassment, and ultimately murder, in order to destabilize, discredit, and criminalize the Party. Hoover’s illegal operation was ultimately successful, and by the early 1970s, the BPP had largely disbanded.

But the politics, policies, and practices of the BPP have not been forgotten; by and large, they are as necessary as now as they had been fifty years ago. In celebration of their incredible legacy, photographer Stephen Shames and Bobby Seale have authored *Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers* (Abrams Books), which has just been released in conjunction with an exhibition of Shames’ photographs and graphic by Emory Douglas, now on view at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York, through October 29, 2016.

Shames, a student at the University of California, Berkeley, first met Seale in April 1967 at an anti-Vietnam War rally. Seale became a mentor to Shames, and Shames, in turn, became the most trusted photographer to the party.

Power to the People is a brilliant tome for anyone who wants to know the truth about the Black Panther Party. The book is organized chronologically, taking us through the triumphs and tragedies of the Party’s fate. Alongside Shames’ evocative photographs are recollections of other living BPP members including Kathleen Cleaver, Elbert “Big Man: Howard, Billy X Jennings, Ericka Huggins, Emory Douglas, and Jamal Joseph, among others, as well as the words of Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver.

Power to the People takes us inside a grueling battlefield, for a war that continues to rage to this very day. It is an intense, dense history of a movement that has been misrepresented and misunderstood by the people who fear freedom and the rights granted all people under the Constitution.

As both the Founding Fathers and the Black Panther Party understood, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their powers from the consent of the government; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

Because history is written by the victors, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party. “You can jail a Revolutionary, but you can’t jail the Revolution,” Huey P. Newton said—and were he alive today, he would be straight up nodding his head. All Power to All the People.