

Chapter 5:

THE RESURGENCE OF BLACK NATIONALISM AND DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK POWER



The magnificent advances of the 1960s civil rights movement allowed African American school children and university students to attend integrated schools, enabled African Americans to eat and shop wherever they chose, and helped them obtain employment where they formerly had been excluded. The movement even registered many African Americans to vote, and they became a significant electoral force throughout the nation, including various Southern locales. But it would have been seriously wrong to declare victory.

The economic position of ordinary African Americans remained largely static. Black income remained among the lowest in the nation, and violence—including police brutality—against African Americans and other people of color remained a daily reality. Millions of black people continued

to live in poor inner-city areas with inferior public and private services and declining schools. Racial problems hardly disappeared after 1965, and neither did the civil rights movement.

Severe black frustration and anger resulted in major urban uprisings, referred to as “riots” in the news media and educational materials, throughout the decade. The disturbances resulted in extensive property damage, injuries, fatalities, and rampant lawlessness, as well as brutal responses by the police and military forces called in to quell them. Such outbursts occurred in New York City in 1964; Rochester, New York, in 1964; Philadelphia in 1964; Los Angeles in 1965; Newark in 1967; Detroit in 1967; and Washington, D.C., in 1968, among other cities.

A 1970 shooting incident in the Marin County Courthouse in California, where black radical Jonathan Jackson tried to negotiate freedom for the Soledad Brothers from nearby San Quentin Prison (where they allegedly killed a prison guard but were later acquitted), evoked major national publicity when four people died, including Jackson and Judge Harold Haley. Black radical Angela Davis was arrested and charged as an accomplice in the shooting incident, but she was later found not guilty. The 1971 Attica prison uprising in New York State, resulting in

a massacre of prisoners ordered by Governor Nelson Rockefeller, followed on the heels of these traumatic events and presaged ongoing black grievances about incarceration in the United States. The urban uprisings and the incidents in Marin County and Attica fueled black rebellion and added impetus to the drive for Black Power and nationalism.

The overall focus and direction of civil rights activity thus changed, assuming a more militant and radical tone. Many of the new figures in the emerging racial struggles were younger veterans

**Jonathan
Jackson**





of established civil rights organizations. They had experienced the most dramatic battles and were seasoned community organizers. Now they began to articulate a new vision, calling for greater black empowerment, leadership, and racial pride, articulated in the slogan “Black Power.” Earlier commitments to nonviolence began to give way to visions of self-defense and even armed revolt. The violent confrontations that rocked major American cities as the 1960s progressed both deepened greater racial polarization and intensified the spirit of black nationalist rebellion.

Many historians and social commentators point to a separation between the nonviolent civil rights movement of the early to mid-1960s and the subsequent Black Power movement. But a closer examination reveals that the later developments reflect a continuation of the same basic struggle. The preceding phase of the civil rights movement in mid-decade created the context for the new militant phase, which focused on the long-neglected needs of the urban black poor and others for whom the breakdown of legal segregation was valuable but inadequate.

Although some civil rights activists were troubled by the new rhetoric, many, perhaps even most, came to understand that black political power and economic development were the logical next steps. Dr. Martin Luther King, despite some initial doubts, incorporated a stronger and more radical economic message in his activism. His vision, especially at time of his tragic murder in 1968, was actually much closer to that of the militant Black Power leaders than the media portrayed. Popular accounts, persisting into the early 21st century, that posit Martin Luther King as the “good black” and Black Power figures as Afro-wearing, gun-wielding, white-hating Black Panthers and fanatic Malcolm X followers are patently misleading.

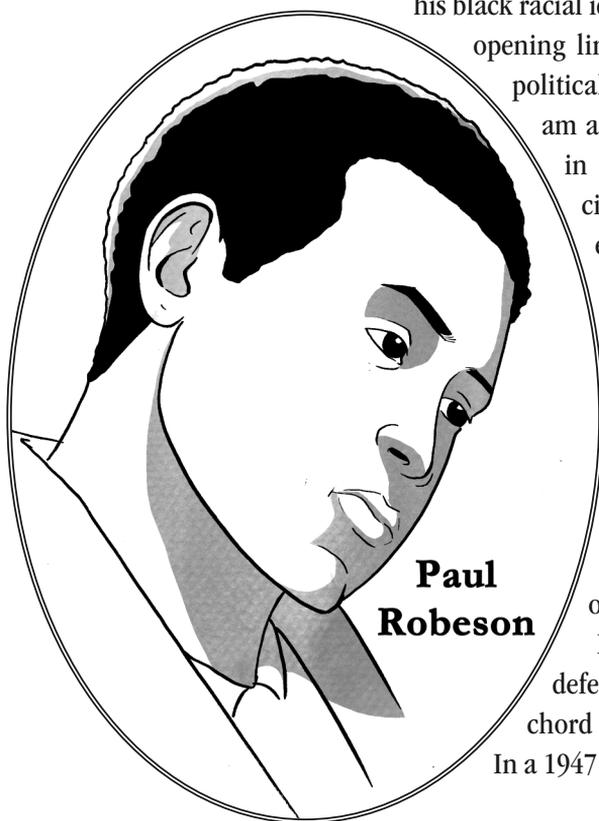
The new black militancy of the mid- and late 1960s had long historical roots in America. Rebel slaves and radical abolitionists were legitimate precursors of the Black Power movement. In the early 20th century, Marcus Garvey's UNIA movement, for all its organizational and other problems, generated similar racial pride among working-class blacks that new militants like Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and others could generate many decades later. The Communist Party likewise generated a radical vision that often had a robust influence among some African Americans. Its Marxist critique of capitalism generally resonated with black activists of the late 1960s and 1970s by incorporating a class as well as a racial analysis in its call for structural change.

Several prominent contemporary African American figures also deeply influenced the militant new phase of the civil rights/freedom struggle. Foremost among them was Paul Robeson, who devoted his entire adult life as an artist and political activist to a powerful vision of liberation for all oppressed people, nationally and internationally. That vision was rooted in

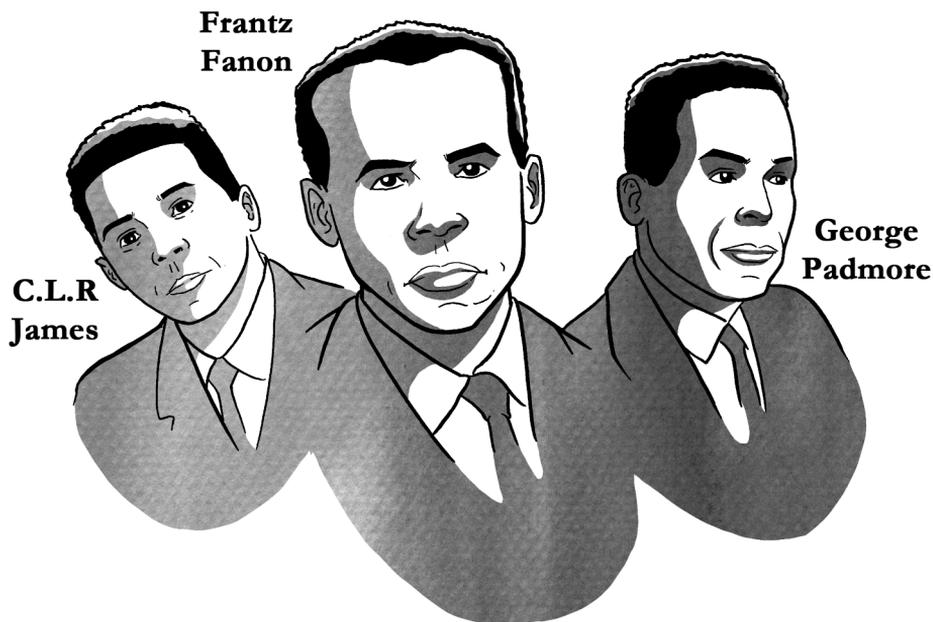
his black racial identification, expressed in the opening lines of his 1958 memoir and political manifesto, *Here I Stand*: "I

am a Negro. The house I live in is in Harlem—this city within a city. . . ." In the book, Robeson expressed his strong identification with Africa and Third World peoples of color, promoting an aggressive strategy for black liberation in America and for black leadership. Each of these principles found significant expression during the height of the black nationalist revival.

Robeson's views on self-defense also struck a responsive chord with Black Power adherents. In a 1947 meeting with President Harry



Truman about the continuing problem of lynching, he told the president that if the federal government refused to defend black citizens, blacks would have to defend themselves—a statement that would presage the comments of Malcolm X during the early 1960s. That position, perhaps as much as anything else, revealed Black Power's radical departure from Martin Luther King's pacifist approach to racial justice.



Robeson's friend and close political ally, W.E.B. Du Bois, whose roots in earlier civil rights struggles made him a highly venerated figure among the younger activists, was also a major influence on the new black militancy. His longtime intellectual and activist record and his powerful Pan-African perspective pervaded the ideological focus of many Black Power advocates in the late 1960s and 1970s. Du Bois joined such other intellectual theorists as C.L.R. James, George Padmore, and Frantz Fanon and African liberation leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, martyred Patrice Lumumba, and others as inspirations of the new American black militants.

MALCOLM X

The most iconic figure associated with black nationalism in the United States was Malcolm X. Throughout his later life and for many years after



his assassination in 1965, he was demonized in conventional media as the angry black demagogue who hated whites and wanted nothing more than black separatism. He was typically juxtaposed with Martin Luther King, the good and noble leader (who, in fact, was also widely reviled during his lifetime). After the posthumous publication of Alex Haley's more comprehensive if sentimental *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the public found a more nuanced and sympathetic treatment of this major figure in 20th century African American history. Spike Lee's 1992 biopic and later scholarly treatments by Michael Dyson, Victor Wolfenstein, Manning Marable, and others countered the simplistic earlier portrayals of Malcolm, offering new insights into his leading role as a proponent of the African American freedom struggle.

The trajectory of Malcolm's life is well known, from his early days as a street hustler, his time in prison and conversion to the Nation of Islam (NOI/Black Muslims), and his emergence as a charismatic religious and political leader. That emergence included his early work with NOI and his black nationalist organizing, speeches, and writings, his break with Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad, his trips to Africa and Mecca, his formation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and his assassination on February 21, 1965.

Malcolm X had a voice and vision that spoke directly to the most marginalized members of the African American community. Like Garvey before him, he spoke to people who knew unemployment, welfare, incarceration, and rank indifference or worse from the white majority. Unlike Dr. King, whose roots were solidly upper-middle-class, Malcolm came from and understood the "black street." His message of black consciousness reflected the idea that black people were not and could never be defined as

victims of racism, but instead were destined for greatness based on the rich heritage of their African past. This nationalist, Pan-African perspective had a major influence on the development of Black Power ideology, as Stokely Carmichael acknowledged.

Malcolm's specific political statements were directly contrary to those of most mainstream civil rights organizations and leaders. In one of his last speeches as a Black Muslim, "Message to the Grassroots" in November 1963 in Detroit, he essentially called for black revolution. In the speech, he charismatically combined the rhetoric of self-defense and anti-colonialism with a mocking critique of many contemporary blacks, using his famous distinction of "house Negroes and field Negroes" to drive home the point.

After leaving the NOI, Malcolm further refined his political philosophy. In his April 1964 speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," his nationalist perspective emerged clearly. Speaking at a church in Cleveland, Malcolm called for blacks to control the politics and economics of their own communities and to use the ballot strategically for genuine political change.

He also reiterated his advocacy of self-defense, justifying the appeal for violence: "Where the government has proven itself unwilling or unable to defend the lives and property of Negroes," he declared, "it's time for Negroes to defend themselves."

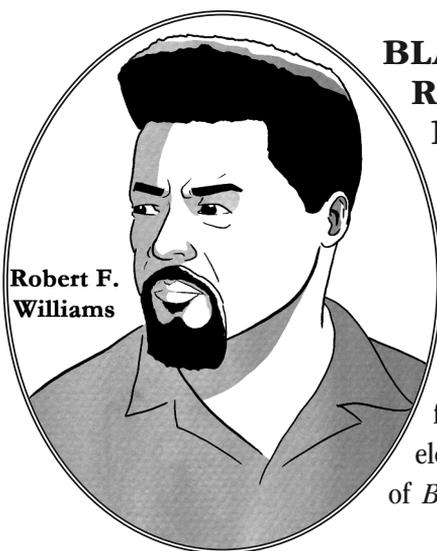
Malcolm continued his political activity, shadowed by NOI attacks and threats of death from his enemies. Near the end of his life, in the months before his murder, his social and political vision expanded even further. Now it included people of different races and nationalities, as he became open to a more global vision of radical political transformation.

Many observers today like to regard Malcolm X as little different from Martin Luther King, undergoing a transformation following his trip to Mecca that turned him into a humanist and integrationist. Like the earlier



caricatures, this, too, is simplistic. As biographer Manning Marable argues, Malcolm always saw himself, like Paul Robeson, as black man living in America. He was a black nationalist *and* an internationalist, who linked the black struggle in America to the broader campaign against colonialism and imperialism. His commitment, above all, was to his people, a vision that played a powerful role in the values and practices of the women, men, and movements that followed him after his tragic death.

The Black Power and nationalist crusade in the aftermath of the civil rights struggles and triumphs of the late 1950s to mid-1960s was far from a unified movement. Like its nonviolent predecessors, it had several strains and many conflicts, some of which resulted in hostility and violence. Some of the differences were ideological and some were personal; all were exacerbated by concerted governmental repression against various black militant groups, especially by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and local police throughout the country.



BLACK SELF-DEFENSE: ROB WILLIAMS AND THE DEACONS FOR DEFENSE

Although the Black Power focus emerged largely after the most significant civil rights victories of the early to mid-1960s, there is no simple, linear timeline for this more aggressive approach. There had been earlier voices. One powerful early figure was Robert F. (Rob) Williams, whose eloquent 1954 comments about the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* reflected

national African American sentiment. He was active and controversial at the same time that King and others were more prominent in national consciousness and public recognition.

In 1955, Williams returned to Monroe, North Carolina, and assumed a leadership role in the NAACP. Monroe had a strong KKK presence, and Williams fought a series of battles with local racists, encouraging fellow African Americans to return gunfire. The national NAACP suspended him for six months because of his strong disagreement with organizational leadership.

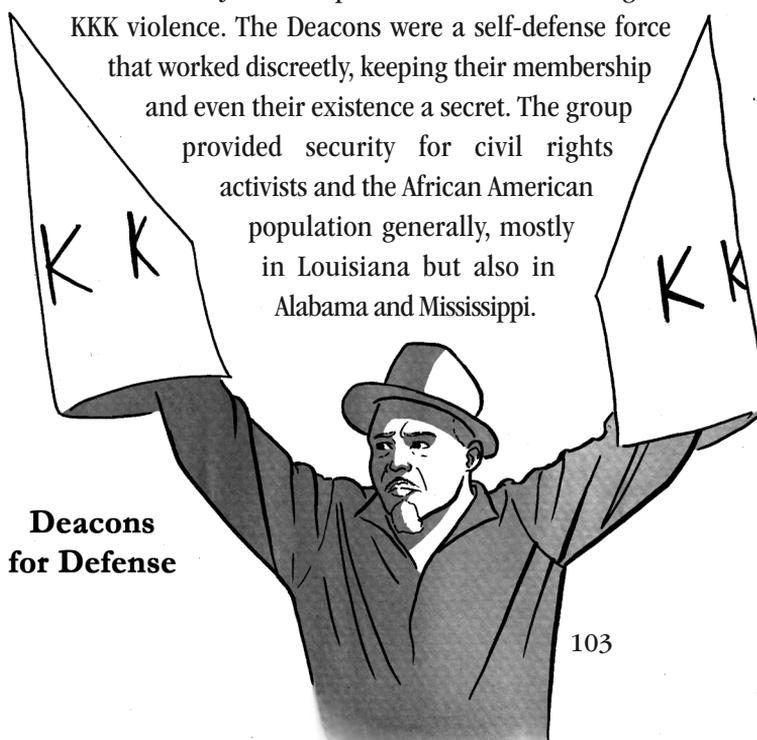
Williams also took strong issue with King's commitment to nonviolence. Following a confrontation with the Klan in which Williams brought a white couple to his home to keep them safe from angry fellow blacks, he was charged with kidnapping and fled the country. Eventually landing in Cuba, he published a book in 1962, *Negroes With Guns*, that advocated armed self-defense. The tract was to have a powerful influence on the Black Panthers and other black militants. It also won respect among many civil rights volunteers, who, while practicing nonviolence because it was a powerful and effective strategy that gained national respect, were not the fully committed pacifists that Martin Luther King and his colleagues were. In exile, Rob Williams made radical broadcasts on a program from Havana called Radio Free Dixie.

Rob Williams was not alone in rejecting Gandhi's pacifist vision. In Louisiana, in 1964, a group of African American men formed the Deacons

for Defense and Justice to protect CORE members against

KKK violence. The Deacons were a self-defense force that worked discreetly, keeping their membership and even their existence a secret. The group provided security for civil rights activists and the African American population generally, mostly in Louisiana but also in Alabama and Mississippi.

**Deacons
for Defense**



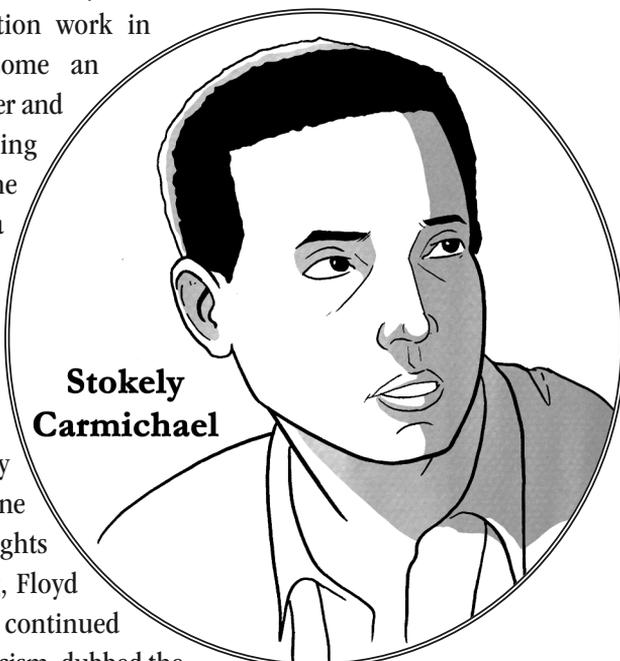
Although they departed from the nonviolent orthodoxy of the mainstream civil rights movement at the time, the Deacons represented a long strain of black willingness to resort to force in defense of their physical safety and their ideals.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL, SNCC, AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Another giant figure emerging from the earlier days of the modern civil rights movement was Stokely Carmichael, a leading Black Power spokesperson with roots in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Carmichael had been a freedom rider and had been imprisoned at the notorious Parchman Penitentiary, had done outstanding voter registration work in Mississippi, and had become an effective community organizer and public speaker. After being elected SNCC chairman, he turned the organization in a more radical direction.

The spark of Carmichael's transition to Black Power was a march in Mississippi after the shooting of James Meredith during his solitary walk through the state in June 1966. Prominent civil rights figures including Rev. King, Floyd McKissick, and Carmichael continued Meredith's protest against racism, dubbed the March Against Fear. Carmichael was arrested during the march and introduced the concept of Black Power in a speech upon his release from jail. For him, the phrase was a plea to African Americans to unite and build their own political, economic, social, and cultural institutions. For many in the white media, it was a "racist" slogan, a dangerous departure from the dignity of the older civil rights figures.

SNCC began to change significantly in the aftermath of Carmichael's Black Power proclamation. It distanced itself from the other civil rights



organizations, suffered serious internal conflicts, and excluded its white participants, though a handful remained. Carmichael himself indicated that white volunteers should focus their energy on their own communities and work to rid them of their deep-seated racism. He also urged them to organize among the white poor, eventually creating a strong coalition between poor blacks and whites. Carmichael's successor as the head of SNCC, H. Rap Brown, took the militant rhetoric a step further, saying, "violence is as American as apple pie." SNCC became a target of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) and was weakened by internal conflicts and loss of financial backing. It faded into obscurity during the 1970s, albeit with a proud legacy of militant struggle and accomplishment.

Stokely Carmichael followed a radical path for the rest of his life. He opposed the Vietnam War, affiliated himself with the Black Panther Party, and spoke vigorously on behalf of black nationalism and international leftist movements. Changing his name to Kwame Ture, he moved to Africa (primarily Guinea) for most of the rest of his life and was active in the All-African People's Revolutionary Party.



Just as Malcolm X was the most visible black nationalist figure of the 1950s and 1960s, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was the most prominent Black Power organization from its inception in 1966 to its demise in the mid-1970s. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, it was also demonized as a band of revolutionary zealots dedicated to destroying society, engaging

in senseless violence, and causing discord in African American political life. Like the mainstream view of Malcolm X, such portrayals of the Black Panthers were (and still remain) extremely simplistic and prevented a more comprehensive public understanding of the historic role and contributions of the party throughout its existence. Although the Black Panthers were riddled with factional disputes and attracted some problematic elements, they reflected the widespread rage of millions of black youth and provided valuable community services that governmental officials had ignored for generations.



Throughout its relatively short existence, the Black Panther Party attracted men and women who would become significant historical figures in the period following the gains of the nonviolent civil rights movement. In addition to Newton and Seale, such notables as Stokely Carmichael, James Forman, Angela Davis, Elaine Browne, Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, and Erika Huggins all played prominent roles in party activities. Some of these activists remained active into the early 21st century.

Newton and Seale got the name Black Panthers from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama. This was a black political party in a white-controlled county with a majority black population that Carmichael and SNCC created in 1966 with a black panther as its emblem. Newton and Seale had read Fanon, Malcolm X, and Rob Williams along with various Marxist theorists, setting the ideological tone for their activities. One of the original objectives of the BPP was to patrol black neighborhoods to protect residents against police

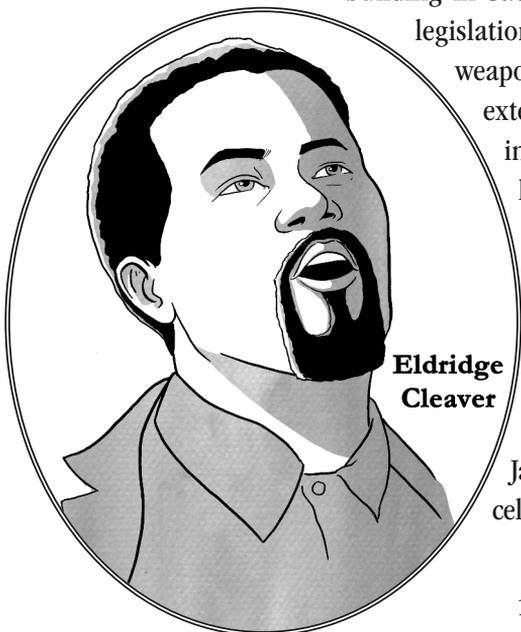
harassment and brutality, an acute problem in Oakland at the time. Enscorced in the poor African American neighborhoods of that city, the Panthers, with their black leather jackets, berets, and scarves, shadowed the police, often intimidating them to back away from their threats to arrest black citizens.

One of the BPP's initial acts was to lay out its agenda, a ten-point program designated "What We Want" and "What We Believe." The demands sounded radical, as much in tone as in substance, but most were fully in keeping with those pursued by the earlier civil rights movement—decent housing, better education that incorporated genuine African American history, the end of police brutality, and full employment for black people. Among the more revolutionary demands were calls for the release of black prisoners, an exemption for black men from military service, and a UN-supervised plebiscite for African Americans to determine their national destiny.

The BPP also published a weekly newspaper, *The Black Panther*, which reflected the leaders' ideological vision, often in provocative language reflecting the militancy of the movement. The paper also contained artwork, stories of international rebellion, and critiques of institutional power that contributed further to the party's aggressive, revolutionary reputation. While this attracted young black adherents in Oakland and elsewhere, it also attracted law enforcement scrutiny that would eventually have devastating consequences.

In May 1967, the Black Panthers made headlines when an armed contingent of 30 men and women went to the California State Capitol building in Sacramento. They were there to protest legislation that would ban the open display of weapons, aimed directly at them. Covered extensively in the national media, the incident propelled the BPP into a leadership position in the growing Black Power movement.

The Sacramento "invasion" also attracted other high-profile African American figures into its ranks. A temporary merger with SNCC brought Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and James Forman to the BPP. One of the most celebrated recruits was Eldridge Cleaver, a



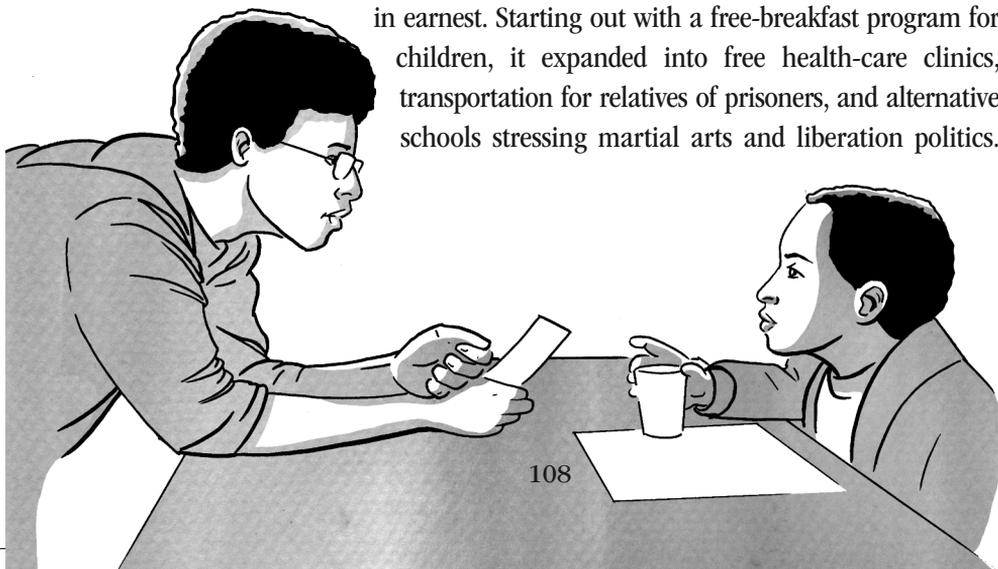
**Eldridge
Cleaver**

felon since his teen years who became a black nationalist while in prison. His highly celebrated book in 1968, *Soul on Ice*, was widely read in black and white radical circles, with strong approval for its angry vision of racism and black masculinity. Widely overlooked was the pervasive sexism of Cleaver's screed, an issue and practice that would ultimately jeopardize the Panthers and that would exacerbate tensions between the African American liberation and women's liberation movements.

The BPP's conflicts with law-enforcement authorities escalated dramatically on October 28, 1967, when Newton was pulled over by Oakland police officer John Frey. The ensuing shootout injured Newton and killed Frey under ambiguous circumstances. Newton was indicted for murder. The Panthers made the "Free Huey" campaign into a cause célèbre that resonated with black militants and white radicals throughout the country. The BPP used the poster of Huey Newton wearing a black beret, sitting on a wicker chair, and holding a spear, as a powerful fund-raising image; it became one of the iconic Black Power portraits of the entire era. In September 1968, Newton was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to prison.

The campaign surrounding Newton facilitated the BPP's expansion to other U.S. cities. By 1968, there were branches in Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, New York, Newark, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington, and elsewhere. As membership grew, the party was recognized as the leading Black Power organization in the nation. One of its greatest impacts was to politicize and radicalize urban black youth, turning thousands into a potent force that the government could scarcely ignore.

In early 1969, the Black Panther Party began its community-service activities in earnest. Starting out with a free-breakfast program for children, it expanded into free health-care clinics, transportation for relatives of prisoners, and alternative schools stressing martial arts and liberation politics.

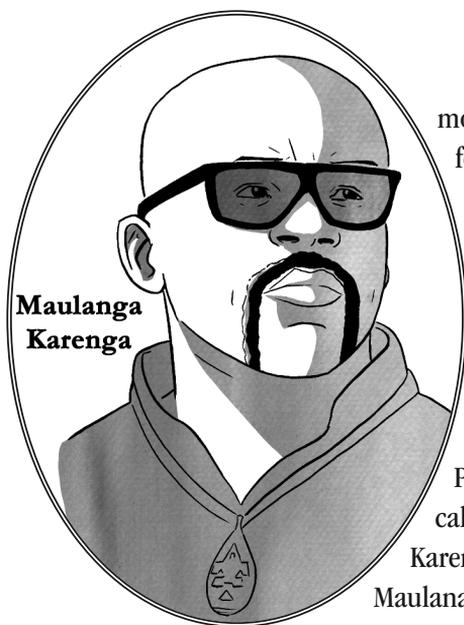


These were activities with highly practical human consequences—hungry elementary school pupils cannot learn if they are hungry—that reflected the BPP’s vision of a more humane, equitable social order. Social programs remain one of the major and still under-acknowledged legacies of the entire Panther enterprise.



The year 1969 was also a time of crisis for the Black Panther Party. Continued conflicts with police and intense federal scrutiny and harassment combined with deep internal divisions and purges within the organization to intensify its problems. The high-profile murders in 1969 of Panther members Bunchy Carter and John Huggins in Los Angeles and of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by police in Chicago exacerbated the existing strains within the party. Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale faced their own legal problems while Newton was still in prison. Earlier mass arrests and criminal prosecutions in New York and New Haven in 1969 also weakened the BPP structure.

Internal sexism was another contradiction in the Black Panther Party, although its formal principles promoted the role of women. Elaine Brown, in fact, became party chair in 1974 after Newton’s release from prison and his decision to flee to Cuba. The BPP entered electoral politics in Oakland, unsuccessfully running Brown for city council and Bobby Seale for mayor. The party lived on through the 1970s, albeit in significant decline from its previous strength. Its legacy, though mixed, extended the earlier civil rights



**Maulana
Karenga**

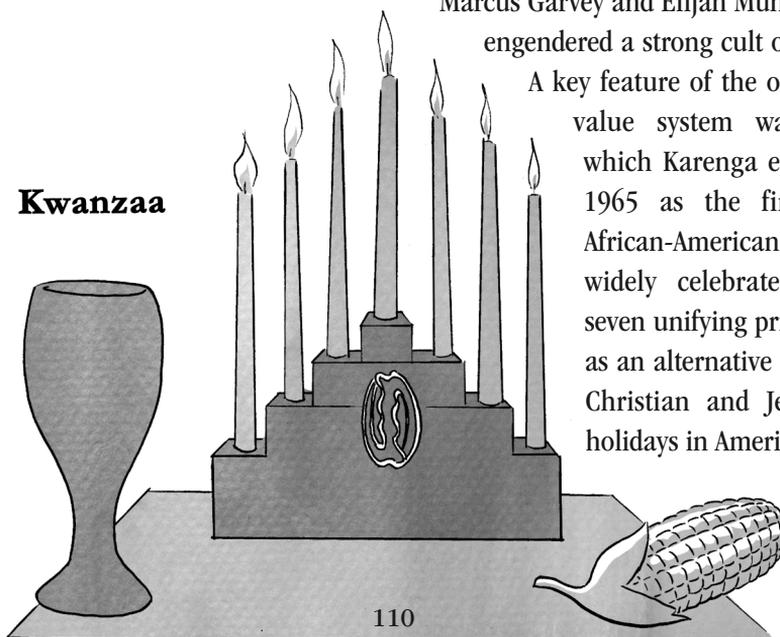
movement into a broader and deeper fight for black liberation. Whatever its flaws, the Black Panther Party made indelible contributions to the long and proud history of African American resistance.

MAULANA KARENGA AND US

The most prominent rival to the Black Panthers was a black nationalist organization called US, whose driving force was Ron Karenga. Originally Ron Everett (and later Maulana Karenga), he had studied African history and culture, which served as the foundation for his Afrocentric vision. As a student, he became deeply involved in studying African-related subjects, developing a lifelong commitment to a black nationalist perspective that gave rise to the creation of US (as opposed to “Them”).

US members, like Karenga, assumed Swahili names and dressed in African garb. Their rituals were designed to promote African identity. Like the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Nation of Islam, US had a highly authoritarian structure with carefully structured rituals and specifically ordered roles for members, especially women. Karenga, like Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad, also engendered a strong cult of personality.

A key feature of the organization’s value system was Kwanzaa, which Karenga established in 1965 as the first uniquely African-American holiday. Still widely celebrated today, its seven unifying principles serve as an alternative to traditional Christian and Jewish winter holidays in America.



US became a major rival, especially in Los Angeles, of the Black Panther Party. Each claimed to represent the vanguard of black revolution, but the differences were clear. Newton and the BPP regarded Karenga and US as mere cultural nationalists whose African dress, language, rituals, and the like were promoted at the expense of a rigorous political critique. For the BPP, US and what it represented negated political transformation. US, on the other hand, mistrusted the Panthers' alliance with white radicals and their commitment to a Marxist understanding of capitalism.

Turf wars in Los Angeles, reflecting in part the experience of former gang members in both organizations, led to a 1969 shootout at UCLA that resulted in the deaths of two Black Panthers. Retaliatory violence ensued, and the FBI used its power to escalate the conflicts. Karenga was imprisoned on assault charges in 1971, and US disbanded a few years later. After his release on parole in 1975, Karenga became a leading Afrocentric academic and denied criminal wrongdoing.

Although the resurgence of black nationalism and the promotion of Black Power from the mid- to late 1960s onward hardly altered the basic structure of power and the dynamics of race in America, it had lasting implications with positive consequences well into the 21st century. Above all, it gave African Americans, especially in urban ghettos, a renewed sense of pride, dignity, and hope. Among the most enduring concrete results were true educational advances in the wake of black nationalism and power. One of the early demands of the BPP and other groups was for a curriculum that would truly incorporate a comprehensive vision of black accomplishments in world and U.S. history.

That demand took an activist turn in the form of student demonstrations and takeovers calling for the creation of Black Studies programs and departments. Militant African American students, often organized into Black Student unions and similar organizations, along with many white and other allies, picketed, sat in, and went to jail to communicate their demand for fundamental curricular change. Major eruptions at San Francisco State College, Cornell University, the University of California at Berkeley, and many other institutions helped establish Black Studies units only after considerable agitation.

Political pressure for Black Studies emerged substantially from the most militant members of the African American community. University

administrators, mostly male and mostly white, reluctantly gave in to the pressure. As with the transportation officials in Montgomery in 1956 and restaurant proprietors throughout the South, political force rather than moral suasion carried the day, compelling change and racial justice. As a result, most U.S. colleges and universities today have thriving African American Studies departments that have made distinguished contributions in education, scholarship, and public service for more than 40 years.

The impact of the new black militancy also had enduring effects on the arts. Organized black arts protests, with significant participation from black nationalist and Black Power groups and individuals, were held in many U.S. cities. Artists in New York, Los Angeles, and other locales with large numbers of African American cultural workers demanded both recognition and institutions for the dissemination and exhibition of their creative work. In Los Angeles, for example, the influence both of the Black Panthers and Karenga's US Organization led, at least in part, to the political impetus for creating black-controlled venues promoting black art in the city. Like African American Studies units in higher education, these institutions continue to survive into the early 21st century, resonating the tumultuous but vibrant period following the nonviolent civil rights era.

