Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale

Co-founders of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was the most influential black militant group during the civil rights era outside of the Nation of Islam. The organization was founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California in October of 1966. They embraced the teachings of Malcolm X and created a militant organization that would spread across the nation well beyond the streets of Oakland. Their power and cult-like following would cause the United States government and FBI to implement a special operation geared towards their demise. Despite numerous attempts on their lives and other member’s lives, their impact and influence still permeates throughout today’s society.

Huey Newton was born on February 17, 1942 in Monroe, Louisiana to Armelia Johnson and Walter Newton. He was the youngest of his parent’s seven children. Shortly after his birth, Huey’s family moved across the nation to Oakland and settled there. Huey would go on to graduate from Oakland Technical High School. Despite graduating from high school, he was unable to read or write until eventually teaching himself. Huey enjoyed learning and continued to educate himself on numerous topics. Eventually he would go on to enroll at Merritt College in Oakland and chose to study law.

Bobby Seale was born on October 22, 1936 in Dallas, Texas to George and Thelma Seale. Bobby was the oldest of his parent’s three children. The Seale family lived in Texas for a few years before moving to Oakland, California around the time of World War II (1939-1945). Bobby would attend Oakland High School, but he eventually dropped out due to racism and joined the U.S. Air Force in 1955. In 1959, Seale had a disagreement with a commanding officer and was discharged from the Air Force. He returned to Oakland and eventually enrolled in Merritt College. In 1962, Seale would meet Huey Newton through an African American student organization. Both young men followed the teachings of Malcolm X and felt that non-violence was not the answer to the plight facing black people in America. The death of Malcolm in 1965 saddened them both, and the following year they would go on to create their own organization to help fight the injustice and racism in America.

In October of 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale co-founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Seale would serve as the chairman and Newton would be the minister of defense. They created a document that expressed their objective and guidelines for the party called the Ten Point Program. The Ten Point program addressed numerous problems that the party felt was plaguing the black community such as demanding better employment, better housing, education, exemption from the military for black men, police brutality, and the right to a fair trial. The Panthers followed the same mindsight of Malcolm X, in teaching that non-violence was not the answer. They wanted to stress the importance self-defense and achieving freedom by any means necessary, even if that meant violence. The Panther party became notorious for their black attire and being heavily armed. In the early days of the party, they patrolled local police officers in Oakland to ensure that proper policing was taking place within the black community. The guns were not just props and their call for freedom by any means was not just an empty threat, as they would have numerous violent clashes with the police over the coming years. Self-defense was not the only aim of the Panthers, as they implemented community programs to promote togetherness in the black community, free food programs, free health clinics, voter registrations drives, and education programs. The Black Panthers also made it a point to empower women during a time were that was virtually unheard of. The women made up close to half of the total membership of the party and they regularly held leadership roles. Men could regularly be seen holding roles traditionally held by women by American standards. This roles reversal was intentional and was aimed to provided equality amongst genders within the community. The combination of the party’s community activism, militant organization, and growing popularity across the nation caused for the US Government to task the FBI with the job of dismantling the organization.

The Black Panthers peak years lasted until around 1973. Both Seale and Newton had endured jail stints while other members had been killed at the hands of the police as well as exiled from the country. Despite their movement only lasting for a short period of time, they were able to inspire African Americans across the globe with their Black Power movement. In the years that followed their movement, we have seen African Americans continue to push for some of the very points listed in the Panthers original Ten Point Program. Time has proven that Seale and Newton were revolutionaries who helped sparked much needed change within America. The Panthers instilled confidence and pride into black communities across the nation. They gave courage to the black man and the black woman to stand up and fight for what they believe in, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY.

<http://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/actions/actions_platform.html>

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