

SOLITARY

**Unbroken by
four decades in solitary
confinement. My story
of transformation and hope.**

ALBERT WOODFOX

with Leslie George



Grove Press
New York

Chapter 11

What Is the Party?

[If] any white man in the world says “Give me liberty, or give me death,” the entire world applauds. When a black man says exactly the same thing, word for word, he is judged a criminal and treated like one.

—James Baldwin

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was started in October 1966 by two college students in Oakland, California—Huey Newton and Bobby Seale—who wanted to stop police brutality in their neighborhoods. In the sixties, police were regularly raiding black neighborhoods while armed with guns, dogs, and cattle prods. Black people were harassed, intimidated, chased, beaten, shot, and killed by police in their neighborhoods on a daily basis. Newton and Seale created a program they called “copwatching” to monitor police activity in their neighborhoods. They started carrying legally acquired firearms to police incidents in black neighborhoods, for self-defense they said, to protect the people in the neighborhood if necessary. Newton carried law books in his car. “Sometimes,” he wrote in his autobiography, “when a policeman was harassing a citizen, I would stand off a little and read the relevant portions of the penal code in a loud voice to all within hearing distance. In doing this, we were helping to educate those who gathered to observe these incidents. If the policeman arrested the citizen and took him to the

station, we would follow and immediately post bail. Many community people could not believe at first that we had only their interest at heart," he wrote. "Nobody had ever given them any support or assistance when the police harassed them, but here we were, proud Black men, armed with guns and a knowledge of the law. Many citizens came right out of jail and into the Party, and the statistics of murder and brutality by policemen in our communities fell sharply." The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense grew from that.

It's a common myth that the Black Panther Party was a racist organization. Racial hatred was never taught in the party. In the late sixties, Illinois Black Panthers Bob Lee and Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois chapter of the party, formed an alliance with a group of white youth from Chicago's poverty-stricken North Side whose roots stretched back to Appalachia. The white group called themselves the Young Patriots Organization and wore Confederate flags on their jackets. Like the Black Panther Party, the Young Patriots Organization was formed to combat police brutality in impoverished neighborhoods. The Panthers reached out to the Young Patriots because they shared common goals: equal opportunities as well as the end of white supremacy, the end of racism, the end of housing discrimination, and the end of police brutality. The Young Patriots started wearing BLACK POWER buttons on their jackets. Lee and Hampton created other multiracial alliances—with the Young Lords and the Native American Housing Committee, among others. Hampton called this fledgling movement the Rainbow Coalition. Who knows what could have been? Fred Hampton, at the age of 21, was assassinated in his bed by police in a 1969 predawn raid at his Chicago home. His pregnant fiancée, who was lying next to him, was shot too. Jesse Jackson used Hampton's phrase when he created the National Rainbow Coalition for his 1984 presidential run.

The Black Panther Party wasn't a violent organization. If you check the history you will see that whatever violence Panthers were involved in was a response to being attacked first. Bobby Seale said, "Our position was: If you don't attack us, there won't be any violence; if you bring violence to us, we will defend ourselves." One of the rules laid out by

party leaders was, "No party member will use, point, or fire a weapon of any kind unnecessarily or accidentally at anyone."

"The nature of a panther is that he never attacks," said Huey Newton. "But if anyone attacks him or backs him into a corner, the panther comes up to wipe that aggressor or that attacker out." Yet the mainstream media painted the Panthers as a violent militia. The sight of black men legally carrying guns was so terrifying to the establishment that even the National Rifle Association (NRA) supported a measure to repeal the California gun law that allowed the public to openly carry loaded firearms. In 1967, a Republican assemblyman from Oakland introduced the bill that became the Mulford Act. To protest the bill, which party members knew was created to stop them from being legally allowed to patrol their own neighborhoods, 30 Black Panthers in leather jackets and berets gathered on the steps of the California state capitol in Sacramento, legally carrying their guns. Some party members made their way into the assembly chamber and were arrested. Outside the capitol, Bobby Seale read a statement against repealing the gun law. In part, he said, "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense calls upon the American people in general and the black people in particular to take careful note of the racist California Legislature which is considering legislation aimed at keeping the black people disarmed and powerless at the very same time that racist police agencies throughout the country are intensifying the terror, brutality, murder, and repression of black people." Two months later, Governor Ronald Reagan, a longtime member of the NRA and supporter of gun owner rights, signed the Mulford Act into law.

Much of the violence attributed to the Black Panther Party was caused by infiltrators on the FBI's payroll. Only one year after Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the party and released its 10-Point Program, in 1967, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover expanded the bureau's covert "dirty tricks" operation known as COINTELPRO—which stands for Counterintelligence Program—created in 1956 to fight communism, in order to focus on and attack the Black Panther Party. The FBI spent millions of dollars to infiltrate the Black Panther Party, create divisiveness and mistrust among its members, murder and incarcerate its leaders,

hamper fund-raising for community programs and lawyers, and leak false information to the press and law enforcement authorities, all to destroy the party. (It was an FBI informant, acting as 21-year-old Fred Hampton's bodyguard, who reportedly set up Hampton's murder by Chicago police.) The FBI constantly surveilled Panthers and harassed their family members and anyone who supported the party. COINTELPRO-like tactics were used by local police and DA offices across the country to persecute party members: to charge them with crimes they didn't commit and to keep Panthers in jail, separating them from the party and disrupting chains of leadership and communication within the organization. Arresting Panthers tarnished their reputations and called into question the motives of the Black Panther Party to the public at large. The arrests distracted party members on the street by forcing them to raise funds—which would normally go to the community—to use for bail and to hire attorneys for Panthers being persecuted by police, DAs, and the judicial system. (In the end the FBI won; the party wouldn't officially end until 1982, but it was decimated from inside out by the early seventies.)

When Panthers raised a clenched fist, it was for unity. If you raise an open hand your fingers are separate, you are vulnerable. When you close those fingers and your hand comes together into a fist you have a symbol of power and unity. The mainstream media turned the Panther salute of a raised clenched fist for Black Power into a rebuke against other races, which it was never intended to be, instead of a call for unity, which is what it was. A raised fist was for unity between Panthers, unity within black communities, and unity with anyone waging the same struggles for the people, for empowerment and equality and justice.

Countless peoples' movements for human rights around the world have raised fists as a form of protest and solidarity, and outsiders seem to understand those struggles for human rights. However, when black men raised a fist, it was seen as something different, a threat. I think of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, African American athletes who won gold and bronze medals for the 200-meter dash at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. After they raised their fists and bowed their heads on the winners' stand, they were torn apart in the American

press. They were called “renegades” who were “angry, nasty, ugly”; their actions were described as an “insult” and “embarrassment” to the United States. Some people wanted to take their medals away. How many people ever knew they were speaking from a well-thought-out human rights platform created by the Olympic Project for Human Rights, an organization of nonprofessional black athletes they belonged to?

Smith and Carlos raised their fists for Muhammad Ali’s right to protest the Vietnam War and refuse to be drafted, and for the return of his championship belt that was stripped from him. They raised their fists to demand the removal of Avery Brundage, the anti-Semitic, white supremacist head of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), who was responsible for resisting a U.S. boycott of the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany. They raised their fists to demand the IOC hire more African American coaches and to protest the inclusion at the Olympic Games of countries ruled by apartheid. They stood without their shoes on to call attention to poverty in black communities in the United States and wore beads and scarves around their necks to protest lynching. Smith, who broke the world record in that 200-meter race, and Carlos sacrificed personal fame, future endorsements, and possibly jobs to stand against apartheid, the Vietnam War, discrimination, poverty, lynching, racism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy—but what most people saw, and many condemned, was two black men who dared to raise their fists.

The phrase “Power to the People” was a rallying cry for black people and for all disempowered people to come together and fight for what we all didn’t have: equal education, equal opportunities, equal justice, equal treatment, and respect. At various times party members referred to police, politicians, DAs, and judges as “pigs.” I did too. It comes from George Orwell’s book *Animal Farm*, in which one of the characters, a pig, is a corrupt, power-hungry opportunist who turns against his followers and betrays the principles of democracy. On the street, the word “pig” was—and still is—used to describe any corrupt official, anyone in power who betrayed the people, any policeman who brutalized people, white or black. Black policemen who hurt people, black DAs who framed people were, and are, pigs. When you have no power you often use language as a defense mechanism. We lived in a world where

a black person who stood up for other blacks could go to jail. In many cases language was all we had.

When I first became interested in the party I was acting more on emotions than intellect. I was a knucklehead with a newfound sense of awareness. My ability to form theories and understand ideas was very limited at that time. The party's 10-Point Program was my guide to doing the right thing. I was impressed by the principles, even though I didn't understand the depths of them. As I began to educate myself I began to understand more and more the social forces—mostly economic forces—that caused Bobby Seale and Huey Newton to formulate the 10-Point Program. Even though I didn't understand what was behind it when I first read it, I knew what it was saying.

10-Point Program of the Black Panther Party

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black and oppressed communities.
4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people.
8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails.

9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black Communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.