

Causes of the downfall of black panther party history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Black Panther Party was the most influential revolutionary group during the Civil Rights movement era. The BPP became a very strong political power. It influenced many government decisions and attracted the mass media. Yet, due to a number of reasons the BPP eventually collapsed. The Black Panther Party came to its demise due to government operations against it, various mistakes by the Party itself, and by shortcomings by its own leaders.

The most devastating cause of the BPP's demise was programs ran by the Federal Bureau of Investigation aimed at breaking up the party. The FBI was mostly responsible for the eventual breakup. In the 1960s, the FBI had a secret program to undermine upsurges sweeping through the nation. This program was known as COINTELPRO, which stands for "Counterintelligence Program". The Black Panther Party was one of many different "radical" groups that were targeted by this FBI led program. According to Wolf, "the FBI set out to eliminate radical political opposition inside the US." J. Edgar Hoover, who once called the BPP as the 'greatest threat to national security', and the FBI used any means required to demolish this threat.

"When traditional modes of repression (exposure, blatant harassment, and prosecution for political crimes) failed to counter the growing insurgency, and even helped to fuel it, the Bureau took the law into its own hands and secretly used fraud and force to sabotage constitutionally-protected political activity. Its methods ranged far beyond surveillance and amounted to a domestic version of the covert action for which the CIA has become infamous throughout the world."

Thus, the demise of the BPP was caused mostly by the FBI operation COINTELPRO. It destroyed the Panthers, in time, with a string of arrests, murders and forced exiles.

One of the effective ways COINTELPRO worked was how it systematically destroyed the power structure of the Black Panther Party. For instance, fabricated letters were sent to different factions causing dispute. These efforts were made to encourage division between essential leaders especially between Newton and Cleaver. The FBI's goal to have different factions fight against themselves worked well. In January of 1969, for example, unidentified gunmen murdered two Los Angeles Panther leaders at UCLA. The gunmen were believed to be fellow members of the BPP.

Another tactic used by the FBI to discredit the BPP was the use of infiltrates to engage in illegal which eventually caused members to be arrested. These agents also fabricated information when arresting members and when trials were held. This even included intimidation of witnesses and coercion. As Hilliard noted, " the Bureau concocted a threatening letter to jurors, during the ' Chicago Eight' conspiracy trials in efforts to obtain convictions"(179). Indeed, these tactics used by the FBI crippled and eventually broke up the BPP Party.

In the same way, the FBI's actions were not solely responsible for the BPP's demise. In fact, various BPP mistakes caused its own downfall. The most serious structural flaw in the BPP was the way it carried out operations. Party members who openly worked in BPP offices or organized in the community daily, were the same people who carried out underground armed operations

at night. Naturally, this provided the police with a convenient excuse to make raids on any BPP offices or the homes of the members. Such raids forced the party to make stationary defenses of the BPP offices.

Unfortunately, since there was no separation between the daily operations and the underground-armed apparatus, the Party became doomed.

In addition, although the BPP was proficient at the art of propaganda making very good use of its own and the establishment's media, too many Panthers still fell into the habit of making boisterous claims in the public media that they could not back up. These false claims eventually caused the media and the public not to take the Panthers seriously. The press, who were usually agents, encouraged Panthers to make these boisterous claims. The press encouraged these Panthers because it worked well for agents simply looking for slanderous material to air or information that may incriminate members of the Party.

Furthermore, the BPP often became demoralized by attitudes of fellow members. These tendencies were what the media played-up the most. These tendencies are associated with a lack discipline, misuse of alcohol, marijuana and curse words, loose sexual morals and a criminal mentality. This was partly due to the fact that a large number of the members were youths and students. These tendencies within the Party provided the media with an opportunity to slander the Party. As a result, the public's attention was directed away from the Party's more positive work.

In addition, the BPP was very much anti-capitalist transfixing the Party's concept of building economic foundations in the community. Thus, the BPP

built few businesses that generated income. Therefore, the Party did not help to provide self-employment to its membership and to the people in the community. The BPP failed to encourage the Black community to set up its own businesses to move toward self-reliance.

Finally, the corrupting of leaders of the Party was deeply damaging to the survival of the BPP. As mentioned, one of the FBI's tactics was to encourage differences and hatred between essential leaders of the Party. Indeed this tactic worked. This was a major cause of the eventual downfall of the BPP. COINTELPRO eventually intimidated and corrupted all three of the BPP's top leaders: Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver. Each in their own way, caved in to the pressure and adopted behavior that was deliberately designed to destroy the BPP. It also was designed to disillusion Party members and all African Americans. The aim of this tactic was to make African Americans distrust any African American leader to come. The program hoped to cause African Americans not to follow any organization or leader that advocated any solutions to the oppression of blacks.

In addition to the corruption of leaders, some panthers, due to early successes, came to feel as if they were the only possessors of absolute truths. Some became arrogant when dealing with its own members, the public and civil rights leaders. People began turning away from the Party. Meanwhile, within the party the leaders tended to have differences of opinion. Newton and Seale eventually decided to shift from the revolutionary ideals and concentrate more on helping the community. These leaders called for the developing of survival programs in black communities to build support for the BPP. Thus, they broke away from Cleaver who continued to

<https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

support black revolution instead of community programs. These internal divisions between the key leaders were destructive and by the late 1970s, the BPP was no longer a political force.

As the late 70s and early 80s settled in, the BPP started to fade into history. It no longer became an effective force to take seriously. Indeed, many forces were responsible for the downfall of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party faced its demise because of illegal tactics used by the FBI to break the BPP apart, by various mistakes by the Party and its members, and by the division and corruption within the BPP leader Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for self-defense in October 1966, in Oakland, California. The name was shortened to the Black Panther Party (BPP) and it began spreading eastward through the Black urban ghetto-colonies across country. In the summer of '68, David Brothers established a BPP branch in Brooklyn, New York, and a few months later Lumumba Shakur set up a branch in Harlem, New York. I joined the Harlem BPP in the fall of '68 and served as its Finance Officer until arrested on April 2, 1969 in the Panther 21 Conspiracy case which was the opening shot in the government's nationwide attack on the BPP. Moving westward, Police Departments in each city made military raids on BPP offices or homes in Philadelphia, Chicago, Newark, Omaha, Denver, New Haven, San Diego, Los Angeles, and other cities, murdering some Panthers and arresting others. After I and most other Panther 21 members were held in jail and on trial for two years, We were all acquitted of all charges and released. Most of us returned to the community and to the BPP but by then COINTELPRO had taken its toll. The BPP was rife with dissension, both internal and external. The internal strife, division,

intrigue, and paranoia had become so ingrained that eventually most members drifted or were driven, away. Some continued the struggle on other fronts and some basically cooled out altogether. The BPP limped on for several more years, then died what seemed a natural death. History will be the ultimate judge of the BPP's place in the Black Liberation Movement (BLM). But in these troubled times African people in the U. S. need to investigate both the positive and negative aspects of the BPP's history in order to learn from those hard lessons already paid for in blood. In particular we need to learn the reasons for the BPP's rapid rise to prominence, the reason for its ability to move so many Africans and other nationalities, and the reason for its demise during its brief sojourn across the American scene. It's not possible in this short paper, on short notice, to provide much of what is necessary, so this paper will confine itself to pointing out some of the broader aspects of the BPP's positive and negative contributions to the BLM.

The Positive Aspects of the BPP's Contributions

1. Self-Defense: This is one of the fundamental areas in which the BPP contributed to the BLM. It's also one of the fundamental things that set the BPP apart from most previous Black organizations and which attracted members (particularly the youth), mass support, and a mass following. The concept is not only sound, it's also common sense. But it must be implemented correctly; otherwise it can prove more detrimental than beneficial. The self-defense policies of the BPP need to be analyzed in this light by present day African organizations. All history has shown that this government will bring its police and military powers to bear on any group, which truly seeks to free African people. Any Black "freedom" organization that ignores self-defense does so at its own peril.
2. Revolutionary Nationalist Ideology: The BPP was a nationalist organization.

<https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

Its main goal was the national liberation of African people in the U. S., and it restricted its membership to Blacks only. It was also revolutionary. The BPP theories and practices were based on socialist principles. It was anti-capitalist and struggled for a socialist revolution of U. S. society. On the national level, the BPP widely disseminated socialist base programs to the African masses. Internationally, it provided Africans in the U. S. with a broader understanding of our relationship to the African continent, the emerging independent African nations, Third World nations, Socialist nations, and all the Liberation Movements associated with these nations. Overall the ideology provided Africans here with a more concrete way of looking at and analyzing the world. Heretofore much of Black analysis of the world, and the society in which We live, was based on making ourselves acceptable to White society, proving to Whites that We were human, proving to Whites that We were ready for equality, proving We were equal to Whites, disproving racist ideas held by Whites, struggling for integration or equal status with Whites, theories of " loving the enemy", " hating the enemy", " they're all devils", spookism, and other fuzzy images of how the real world worked. 3. Mass Organizing Techniques: Another fundamental thing that attracted members and mass support to the BPP was its policy of " serving the people". This was a policy of going to the masses, living among them, sharing their burdens, and organizing the masses to implement their own solutions to the day to day problems that were of great concern to them. By organizing and implementing the desires of the masses, the BPP organized community programs ranging from free breakfast for children, to free health clinics, to rent strikes resulting in tenant ownership of their buildings, to Liberation School for grade-schoolers, to free clothing drives, to campaigns

<https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

for community control of schools, community control of police, and campaigns to stop drugs, crime, and police murder and brutality in the various Black colonies across America. For these reasons, and others, the influence of the BPP spread far beyond its actual membership. Not only did the BPP programs teach self-reliance, but years later the government established similar programs such as free school lunch, expanded Medicare and day care facilities, and liberalized court procedures for tenant takeovers of poorly maintained housing, partly if not primarily in order to snuff out the memory of previous similar BPP programs and the principle of self-reliance.

4. Practice of Women's Equality: Another positive contribution of the BPP was its avocation and practice of equality for women throughout all levels of the organization and in society itself. This occurred at a time when most Black Nationalist organizations were demanding that the woman's role be in the home and/or one step behind the Black man, and at a time when the whole country was going through a great debate on the woman's liberation issue.

5. Propaganda Techniques: The BPP made significant contributions to the art of propaganda. It was very adept at spreading its message and ideas through its newspaper *The Black Panther*, mass rallies, speaking tours, slogans, posters, leaflets, cartoons, buttons, symbols (i. e., the clenched fist), graffiti, political trials, and even funerals. The BPP also spread its ideas through very skillful use of the establishment's TV, radio, and print media.

One singular indication, although there are others, of the effectiveness of BPP propaganda techniques is that even today, over a decade later, a large part of the programs shown on tv are still " police stories" and many of the roles available to Black actors are limited to police roles. A lot of this has to

do with the overall process of still trying to rehabilitate the image of the
<https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

police from its devastating exposure during the Panther era, and to prevent the true role of the police in this society from being exposed again. The

Negative Aspects of the BPP Contributions 1. Leadership Corrupted:

COINTELPRO eventually intimidated and corrupted all three of the BPP's top leaders: Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver. Each, in their own way, caved in to the pressures and began acting in a manner that was deliberately designed to destroy the BPP, and to disillusion not only Party members but African people in America for years to come. COINTELPRO's hopes were that Africans in America would be so disillusioned that never again would they trust or follow any African leader or organization which advocated real solutions to Black oppression. 2. Combined above and

underground: This was the most serious structural flaw in the BPP. Party members who functioned openly in the BPP offices, or organized openly in the community, by day might very well have been the same people who carried out armed operations at night. This provided the police with a convenient excuse to make raids on any and all BPP offices, or members homes, under the pretext that they were looking for suspects, fugitives, weapons, and or explosives. It also sucked the BPP into taking the unwinnable position of making stationary defenses of BPP offices. There should have been a clear separation between the above ground Party and the underground armed apparatus. Also small military forces should never adopt, as a general tactic, the position of making stationary defenses of offices, homes, buildings, etc. 3. Rhetoric Outstripped Capabilities: Although the BPP was adept at the art of propaganda and made very good use of its own and the establishment's media, still too many Panthers fell into the

habit of making boisterous claims in the public media, or selling " wolf
<https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

tickets” that they couldn’t back up. Eventually, they weren’t taken seriously anymore. The press, some of whom were police agents, often had only to stick a microphone under a Panther’s nose to make him or her begin spouting rhetoric. This often played into the hands of those who were simply looking for slanderous material to air or to provide possible intelligence information to the police.

4. Lumpen Tendencies: It can be safely said that the largest segment of the New York City BPP membership (and probably nationwide) were workers who held everyday jobs. Other segments of the membership were semi-proletariat, students, youths, and lumpen-proletariat. The lumpen tendencies within some members were what the establishment’s media (and some party members) played-up the most. Lumpen tendencies are associated with lack of discipline, liberal use of alcohol, marijuana, and curse-words; loose sexual morals, a criminal mentality, and rash actions. These tendencies in some Party members provided the media with better opportunities than they would otherwise have had to play up this aspect, and to slander the Party, which diverted public attention from much of the positive work done by the BPP.

5. Dogmatism: Early successes made some Panthers feel that they were the only possessors of absolute truths. Some became arrogant and dogmatic in their dealings with Party members, other organizations, and even the community. This turned people off.

6. Failure to Organize Economic Foundations in Community: The BPP preached socialist politics. They were anti-capitalist and this skewered their concept of building economic foundations in the community. They often gave the impression that to engage in any business enterprise was to engage in capitalism and they too frequently looked with disdain upon the small-business people in the

<https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

community. As a result the BPP built few businesses which generated income other than the Black Panther newspaper, or which could provide self-employment to its membership and to people in the community. The BPP failed to encourage the Black community to set up its own businesses as a means of building an independent economic foundation which could help break “ outsiders” control of the Black community’s economics, and move it toward economic self-reliance. 7. TV Mentality: The 60’s were times of great flux. A significant segment of the U. S. population engaged in mass struggle. The Black Liberation, Native American, Puerto Rican, Asian, Chicano, Anti-War, White Revolutionary, and Woman’s Liberation, Movements were all occurring more or less simultaneously during this era. It appears that this sizable flux caused some Panthers to think that a seizure of state power was imminent or that a revolutionary struggle is like a quick paced TV program. That is, it comes on at 9 p. m., builds to a crescendo by 9: 45, and by 9: 55 — Victory! all in time to make the 10 O’clock News. When it didn’t happen after a few years, that is, Africans in the U. S. still were not free, no revolution occurred, and worse, the BPP was everywhere on the defensive, taking losses and riddled with dissension, many members became demoralized, disillusioned, and walked away or went back to old lifestyles. They were not psychologically prepared for a long struggle. In hindsight it appears that the BPP didn’t do enough to root out this TV mentality in some members, but did in others, which is an aspect to ponder on. Although the BPP made serious errors, it also gained a considerable measure of success and made several significant new contributions to the BLM. The final judgment of history may very well show that in its own way the BPP added the final ingredient to the Black Agenda necessary to attain real freedom: <https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-downfall-of-black-panther-party-history-essay/>

armed struggle; and that this was the great turning point which ultimately set the Black Liberation Movement on the final road to victory.