

“Fed by Fear: The FBI’s Crusade Against Fred Hampton and the Black Panthers” placed sixth in the nation at National History Day in 2003. It was written by Sam Bouman of St. Ignatius High School.

In the United States there exists a delicate relationship between individual rights and the interests of national security. An individual’s rights may extend up to, but not cross, a certain point at which the individual becomes a threat to national security. However, the government must distinguish between when the line is crossed and when it is merely approached. This delicate relationship can change dramatically due to fear and emotion on both sides. A person or group, motivated by frustration or hate, demanding vengeance, revolution, or even anarchy, is a true threat to security.¹ On the other hand, exaggerated fears can cause the government to resort to harmful, sometimes covert, tactics that can abrogate individual rights.² Such was the case when the FBI, fed by fear of a black revolution, embarked on a secret crusade against Fred Hampton and the Black Panthers.

During the Sixties, a new generation grew especially distanced from their parents and government. Many disillusioned youths deliberately went against societal convention. Others were not content merely to withdraw from the Establishment; they wanted to *change* it. This is evidenced by the many protests against the Vietnam War, as

¹ Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 114.

² The most well known examples of this were Lincoln’s suspension of the writ of habeas corpus during the Civil War, Roosevelt’s internment of the Japanese, and both Adams’s and Wilson’s Alien and Sedition Acts. All of these occurred during wartime, when national security was especially delicate. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 43, 99, 177-79.

well as the increasingly militant civil rights movement. In Chicago, race riots broke out in 1968 on the West Side, sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King.³

King's assassination proved for some that nonviolence was an ineffective course for attaining long-sought civil rights for blacks; many felt they could no longer leave their freedom up to people who planned on attaining it through such a slow and grueling process. One icon, Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam, had become popular with some in the black community partly because of his nationalist views: he wanted a separate black nation free from oppression by whites, whom he originally perceived as evil without exception.⁴ This view appealed to those blacks who were bitter towards whites in general. Many were simply tired of the years of racial abuse and unequal treatment they had experienced at the hands of some whites. In 1966, an organization was formed in Oakland, California, to, among other things, gain for blacks the "power to determine the destiny of our Black Community."⁵ They called themselves the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and by 1969 reportedly had up to 5,000 members in 40 cities.⁶ The Black Panther Party⁷ (BPP, or Panthers) was an alternative to King's nonviolence for more restless members of the black community.

The BPP was formed by black militants Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. They quit a black nationalist group in college because they disagreed with its policy of "cultural nationalism"—the view of whites as a single racist oppressor, without making

³ Jay Robert Nash, *Terrorism in the 20th Century: A Narrative Encyclopedia from the Anarchists through the Weathermen to the Unabomber* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1998), 175-86; *American Freedom*, 275-305.

⁴ Henry Hampton, prod., *Eyes on the Prize II* (Blackside, Inc., 1990).

⁵ Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 2.

⁶ John O'Brien, "Black Panther Quandary etc.," *Chicago Tribune*, 7 December 1969, 4.

⁷ "For Self-Defense" was dropped in early 1967. *World Book Encyclopedia*, 1990 ed., s.v. "Black Panther Party," by Charles V. Hamilton.

any distinction between racist and non-racist whites.⁸ They went door-to-door in Oakland's ghetto to ask black families what they wanted, and, based on these answers, drew up a ten-point platform divided into "What We Want" and "What We Believe."⁹

At first, the BPP emphasized Point Seven—"We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people"¹⁰—by following police officers on traffic stops and standing by with loaded weapons to ensure that no injustices were committed against blacks. When the police told them to leave, Newton, a law student, would point out that what the Panthers were doing was perfectly legal. Nevertheless, six Panthers, Seale included, were convicted of disturbing the peace. In 1967, Newton was wounded in a gunfight in which one policeman was killed. Though Newton maintained that he was framed, the incident increased the FBI's opinion that the BPP was a group of militant, gun-toting thugs.

The BPP's unorthodox methods and revolutionary rhetoric prevented some from seeing the positive impact of the organization on the black community: people who wanted to make change now had an outlet where they could be of service to the black community. Instead of merely reading about the accomplishments of civil rights leaders, they were empowered to take responsibility for obtaining their own rights. If blacks did not actually *have* power in the government, the Panthers told them they deserved it, and encouraged them to fight for it.¹¹

Some in the government felt threatened by the BPP. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was especially concerned about groups like the Panthers because of their

⁸ *Panthers Speak*, xxiv; Michael Gray, prod., *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (Chicago: The Film Group, 1971).

⁹ *Panthers Speak*, 2. A copy of the Panther's Ten-Point Platform can be found in Appendix A.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 (emphasis in original).

¹¹ *Eyes on the Prize II*.

militancy and potential for violence. He initiated the then-secret COINTELPRO¹² to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence or civil disorder.”¹³ COINTELPRO activities included wiretaps, raids, anonymous letters, media infiltration, even murder.¹⁴ The primary target was the BPP. In 1969 alone, 27 Panthers were killed in police raids, and 749 were jailed.¹⁵

One of the FBI’s fears stemming from the BPP was the potential rise of a “black messiah,” someone “who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement.”¹⁶ Some people given as examples of a possible “messiah” were Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael,¹⁷ and Elijah Muhammed, founder of the Nation of Islam.¹⁸ However, by 1969, it was apparent that a new voice from Chicago might unite black people in just the way the government feared.

¹² COINTELPRO stands for Counter-Intelligence Program. NLG Task Force on Counterintelligence and the Secret Police, ed., *Counter-Intelligence: A Documentary Look at America’s Secret Police*, vol. 1 (Chicago: NLG Counterintelligence Documentation Center, 1990), 3.

¹³ *Counter-Intelligence*, 12. The 3-page memorandum initiating COINTELPRO targeting black militant organizations can be found in Appendix B.

¹⁴ Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz, *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 219-21. The FBI is known to have used “friendly” reporters to provide local media with a steady flow of negative coverage about the Panthers. Brief of the Plaintiff-Appellant at 10, *Hampton v. Hanrahan*, 600 F.2d 600 (7th Cir. 1979); Ward Churchill, “To Disrupt, Discredit and Destroy”: *The FBI’s Secret War against the Black Panther Party* [article on-line] (date unknown; accessed 12 May 2003); available from <http://www.thestee.com/Churchill.pdf>; Internet, 8-10.

¹⁵ Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Freedom* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 374.

¹⁶ *Counter-Intelligence*, 19. They also feared the formation of a “Mau Mau” in America. Mau Mau was a brutal terrorist organization in Kenya in the early 1950s formed to drive out the British. *Terrorism*, 149-58.

¹⁷ Carmichael was the founder of the original Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Georgia. They were a decidedly nonviolent organization devoted solely to making sure blacks, who made up an 80% majority of the county’s population, would be able to vote for their own candidates. The Oakland Black Panther Party co-opted the name, originally adding “for Self-Defense.” Carmichael later joined the new Panthers along with other members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). *Eyes on the Prize II*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

He was born Frederick Allen Hampton in 1948 in Chicago, and grew up in Maywood, then a predominantly white suburb. He attended Proviso East High School from 1962 to 1966, where he experienced the racial tensions of the times. Race riots would break out during the school day, and teachers would have to lock the doors as police cleared the building floor by floor. Police used violent tactics to put down some of the riots, sometimes resulting in severe injuries.¹⁹ Hampton became actively interested in civil rights, and as a senior was placed in a school group called the Cross-Section Committee, a multiracial organization formed by the principal to discuss racial issues in the school.²⁰

Following his graduation, Hampton became a member of the NAACP, and soon reached a position as head of the Youth Council of the organization's West Suburban Chicago branch. With the NAACP, he hoped to achieve better communities for black people through nonviolent demonstration and organization. In the summer of 1966, just after he graduated, black youths in Maywood were upset because Maywood had no swimming pool and they were denied access to the neighboring communities' pools because of their race. Hampton helped organize a demonstration.²¹ When the assembled group became rowdy, he calmed them and turned it into a peaceful march on the Town Hall. His natural leadership skills were apparent, and he was able to recruit some 500 members to the NAACP.²²

¹⁹ Doug Deuchler, personal interview by the author, 15 February 2003.

²⁰ Proviso East High School, *Provi* (Chicago: Proviso East High School, 1966); George Bliss, letter to the author, 10 December 2002.

²¹ The current Maywood swimming pool, built in 1970, was posthumously named after Hampton. Bill Hampton et al., eds., *The Essence of Fred Hampton* (Chicago: Salsedo Press, 1994), 25.

²² Don Johnson et al., "Chairman Fred died a natural death," *Chicago Journalism Review*, December 1969, 10-11. In his pre-Panther years, Hampton was frequently called in to speak to groups discussing race issues in Maywood. Joan Elbert, telephone interview by the author, 18 May 2003; Jon F. Rice, *Up on Madison, Down on 75th* (Evanston, Illinois: The Committee, 1983), 12.

Around this time the BPP was rising to prominence around the country. Hampton was attracted to their ten-point platform, and soon left the NAACP for the Panthers.

In November 1968, at the age of 20, Hampton founded the Illinois Chapter of the BPP. He soon became one of the top Panther leaders in the nation, due to his leadership and speaking skills, as well as his utter devotion to the cause. His rhetoric was revolutionary, even vulgar and shocking at times,²³ but his actions were almost the opposite. Many individuals who knew him, white and black, regarded him as a concerned, intelligent, and good-humored man.²⁴ He helped soften the Panthers' image as a totally militant group by starting a free breakfast program for children in Chicago. Though the idea was basically socialist, it was free of all of the difficulties of government programs. All a child needed to be allowed to eat there was hunger—no approval forms or tickets. This approach was also used for a free medical center.²⁵ To many, the Panther programs were better than government programs. They were free of bureaucracy, and simply gave aid to the people who needed it.²⁶ If this meant socialism, so be it.²⁷

The FBI feared that the purpose of the breakfast program was to spread the Panthers' Communist ideas to the youth of the ghetto. Hoover demanded that this “nefarious activity” be stopped.²⁸

In late 1968, Hampton tried to make an alliance with the Blackstone Rangers, a violent Chicago group which otherwise shared the Panthers' ideology. To thwart these

²³ Rev. David Stein, telephone interview by the author, 4 March 2003; Edward V. Hanrahan, telephone interview by the author, 9 April 2003; Elbert.

²⁴ *Essence*, 5-24, 26-37; Rev. Tom Strieter, telephone interview by the author, 17 May 2003; Stein; Elbert; Deuchler.

²⁵ “A Natural Death,” 11; *Murder of Fred Hampton*.

²⁶ *Price of Dissent*, 228.

²⁷ “A Natural Death,” 10-11; *Murder of Fred Hampton*.

²⁸ *Eyes on the Prize II*. Hoover had been a crusader against Communism in the United States since the late 1910s. *Terrorism*, 59-60. A similar counterintelligence program, also coined COINTELPRO, was initiated in the 1950s against the Communist Party USA. *Counter-Intelligence*, 104.

efforts, the FBI sent anonymous letters to both Hampton and the Blackstone Rangers' leader, Jeff Fort, telling them not to trust each other.²⁹ The FBI further tried to sabotage the Panthers by installing William O'Neal, a convicted car thief, amongst them as an informant.³⁰

In June 1968, a young white Good Humor man was attacked and beaten by a group of black youths, who made off with \$71 worth of ice cream. Hampton was identified as one of the attackers and arrested. He was convicted and given a two- to five-year sentence.³¹

It was Hampton's only conviction out of 25 criminal charges, and many believe that it was a frame-up—another attempt by the FBI to remove Hampton from the scene.³² Many people who believed in his innocence waited in freezing weather to hear Hampton speak after he was released on bond. He said, prophetically, "I believe I'm going to die high off the people."³³

During his brief career with the Panthers, Hampton also peacefully brought together various street gangs under the BPP's wing.³⁴ This association with violent

²⁹ The FBI memo recommending the Jeff Fort letter can be found in Appendix C. Despite what the memo says, a letter *was* also sent to Hampton two months later. Dempsey Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Politics* (Chicago: Urban Research Press, Inc., 1987), 411.

³⁰ O'Neal's first action against the Panthers was to send a dozen of them, Hampton included, to Robbins, Illinois, on a wild goose chase after members of the Blackstone Rangers street gang. When the Rangers did not appear, the Panthers became confused and ran from police, who were also called by O'Neal. Hampton escaped back to Chicago, but Panther Bobby Rush was arrested. *Black Politics*, 412-14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 416.

³² Prior to the actual trial, Hampton and his supporters held a mock trial at which he was found not guilty. In his "testimony," Hampton noted that even in the allegation against him the police had him engaging in "Robin Hood-type" behavior by distributing the stolen ice cream bars to neighborhood children. He mused that even the police knew that that exemplified Panther behavior. *Murder of Fred Hampton*.

³³ The December 4th Committee, *Fred Hampton: 20th Commemoration* (Chicago: Salsedo Press, 1989), 16; *Murder of Fred Hampton*.

³⁴ He called this the "rainbow coalition," long before Rev. Jesse Jackson made the term popular. *20th Commemoration*, 2; *Price of Dissent*, 224.

groups caught the attention of the FBI. Soon they and local law enforcement began to take more direct action against the Panthers.

After Hampton was released, the local FBI office conducted a raid, taking eight Panthers into custody and ransacking the headquarters. This still failed to discourage the Panthers' efforts.

When the FBI saw that attacking the BPP was not discouraging its revolutionary tactics, it targeted the leaders. O'Neal was instructed to find incriminating evidence of Hampton's possible drug use, but could find none.³⁵ In November 1969, Hampton traveled to California to meet with BPP leader David Hilliard about Hampton being given a national leadership position in the party. The FBI kept a careful eye on this meeting, and it likely served to heighten its concern that Hampton could be the black "messiah" they feared.³⁶

Soon after, O'Neal's FBI contact, Roy Mitchell, asked O'Neal for a detailed floor plan of the apartment where Hampton stayed with other BPP members. Mitchell gave this floor plan to Chicago law enforcement officials, and a raid of the apartment was planned.³⁷

At 4:40 a.m. on December 4, 1969, fifteen armed police officers posted themselves at both doors to the apartment, and, after getting no answer to their orders to open the door, they blasted the door down and rushed into the building, shooting as they went. They moved through the house, rounding up the Panthers as they found them.

³⁵ *Eyes on the Prize II*.

³⁶ *20th Commemoration*, 4.

³⁷ *Hampton v. Hanrahan*, 600 F.2d 600, 611-13 (7th Cir. 1979); United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, *Report of the January 1970 Grand Jury* (United States Government Printing Office, 1970), 25-27; Roy Wilkins and Ramsey Clark, *Search and Destroy: A Report by the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and the Police* (New York: Metropolitan Applied Research: 1973), 49.

Verlina Brewer, a 16-year-old Panther, was awakened by gunshots and taken from her room. While standing with the other Panthers, she heard the words “If he wasn’t dead, he’s dead now,”³⁸ come from Hampton’s bedroom. Hampton’s pregnant fiancée, Deborah Johnson, said she heard two lone shots fired after she was taken from his room. Hampton was dead, along with Mark Clark from Peoria. Inexplicably, the police left the site without cordoning it off.³⁹

The next morning, stunned Panthers patrolled outside the house. They led people on tours of the carnage inside, where nearly everything had been shot up. It appeared that the bullets had come almost without exception from the outside. Several attorneys for the Panthers arrived and began collecting as much evidence as they could before the police came back to finally close the site down. For two weeks lines of people paying their respects at the site of the “Northern lynching” extended around the block.⁴⁰

A few hours after the raid, Cook County State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan held a press conference. In his version, there was a fierce gun battle in which both officers and Panthers were wounded, and two Panthers killed. In an exclusive story for the Chicago Tribune a few days later,⁴¹ his evidence included a doorframe with holes in it, which were later found by the Panthers’ attorneys to be nail heads. As evidence of a cover-up was mounting, the local newspapers continued to publish Hanrahan’s version of events without question. Jim Hoge, editor of the Chicago Sun-Times, was persuaded to

³⁸ *Black Politics*, 428-31.

³⁹ Some speculate that the police did not seal off the site so they could leave the scene quickly in order to avoid facing the residents of the mostly black neighborhood. G. Flint Taylor, personal interview by the author, 10 February 2003.

⁴⁰ Taylor; *Eyes on the Prize II*.

⁴¹ Dan Rottenberg, “Who’s to blame for Trib’s scoop?” *Chicago Journalism Review*, December 1969, 7.

visit the site, after which the Sun-Times became the first paper to suggest in editorials a possible government cover-up.⁴²

Though the details of what happened that morning remain a mystery, more information has been revealed over time. The FBI's COINTELPRO agenda was discovered in 1971 when anti-war activists robbed secret documents from FBI headquarters.⁴³ O'Neal's role as an informant was discovered in early 1972, when a government attorney handed over O'Neal's floor plan to the plaintiffs' attorneys during discovery in a civil action brought by the Hampton family.⁴⁴ An FBI memo commending O'Neal for giving information leading to Hampton's death was also uncovered.⁴⁵

Hanrahan was later indicted along with several other officials for the raid. All were acquitted. The acquittal infuriated many members of the black community, which had pinned the death of Hampton on Hanrahan. The black voting bloc came out in record numbers in 1972 to defeat him in his reelection bid.

The increased strength of black voters was one of the major results of the raid. Black voters had previously been either uninvolved at election time or had voted automatically for Democratic Machine candidates. It was now more likely for an independent candidate to have black support in Chicago. Some political strategists say that this led, in large part, to the 1983 election of Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor.⁴⁶

⁴² Taylor.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Shortly after the filming of *Eyes on the Prize II*, O'Neal apparently took his own life by walking into heavy expressway traffic. Taylor; Sheldon Waxman, *The Rise, Fall and Death of an FBI Informant* [article on-line] (date unknown; accessed 11 February 2003); available from <http://www.ummah.net/albayan/informant.html>; Internet, 5.

⁴⁵ A copy of the FBI's cryptic memo authorizing a bonus for O'Neal (not mentioned by name) can be found in Appendix D. See also *Black Politics*.

⁴⁶ 20th *Commemoration*, 24-25 (quoting Don Rose); *Essence*, 32 (quoting Lu Palmer).

Another result was the changing of Panther tactics in the early 1970s. Increasing government animosity towards them had culminated with the Hampton raid, and by 1973 some Panthers had begun resorting to more conventional tactics. For example, Bobby Seale ran for governor of California that year, receiving one-third of the popular vote,⁴⁷ while Bobby Rush is a Congressman today.

The government feared the BPP because of their confrontational tactics, revolutionary rhetoric, and socialist political views. But did these traits add up to a significant threat to national security? The Panthers demanded rights in a way that the government of the times was not used to, channeling anger and frustration into harsh words and militant actions instead of passive nonviolence in the tradition of Martin Luther King. The government reacted by depriving the Panthers of their rights in what it claimed was an effort to protect the country. What it did was make the road to civil rights longer and harder for the black community. Instead of seriously considering the BPP's demands, the government labeled them a menace and secretly set out to render them ineffective.

When the BPP demanded their rights, the government drew back from its responsibility to protect and uphold those inalienable rights. The government has the unfortunate tendency to do this when national security appears threatened. With the current climate of hostility toward the United States following September 11th, we must heed the lessons learned from the FBI's actions against Fred Hampton and the Black Panthers.

⁴⁷ *World Book Encyclopedia*, 406.