

THE WASHINGTON CHAPTER OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY:
FROM REVOLUTIONARY MILITANTS TO COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS

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ABSTRACT

Forces singular to the Washington D.C. black community shaped the experience of the Washington chapter, and the Chapter's best work for the poor of Washington was when the remaining Panther members agreed to work within the system and ignore the militant posture of the National Office of the Black Panther Party. This thesis focuses on the unique problems and persecutions of the D.C. chapter, their contributions to the community from their programs, and their individual activism and exploits.

Using primary sources and secondary accounts of the party, along with interviews of former members, the D.C. Panthers experience differed from other chapters around the nation. The official Washington chapter was established three years after Oakland, Chicago, and New York; and the National Office of the Black Panther Party looked to set up an outpost of the Party in the belly of the beast, the capital of capitalism. The pressures put on the chapter in the first six months forced a transformation. The remaining members provided programs for the poor, and the less dedicated members soon lost interest or were incarcerated. The Washington chapter was in hostile territory, especially with the internationalist and integrationist platform of the Oakland headquarters. The numbers dwindled, but the idealists continued to work for the community. Today, many ex-members of the Washington chapter volunteer to help with the deprived of D.C. The lessons learned during the four years (1970-1974) of the Washington chapter's existence produced several community activists focused on an ignored and oppressed segment of society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several people deserve credit for guiding me through this project to completion. Dr. Glen Anthony Harris' great knowledge of the topic gave direction and support, along with many hours discussing Washington D.C.'s particular situation, helped crystallize my arguments. Dr. Kathleen Berkeley's extensive editing and guidance provided much needed focus to the topic, and narrowed the subject to the experience of the Panthers in Washington D.C. Dr. Michael Seidman's expertise in the rise of the New Left and Maoist theory gave new understanding to the Panther's platform and goals, as well as an international perspective of the leftist movements of the 1960s. With the paucity of sources in the field besides newspaper accounts, I truly thank the individuals who shared their time with me in interviews relating to the Washington chapter. Councilman and former Mayor Marion Barry enlightened me with his discussion of home rule, and the relationship between his organization, Pride, and the Panthers. Thanks to Dr. Jean Linzau from the D.C. Board of Medicine and a director of Howard University Hospital who described the Panthers and their free clinic that he ran. Appreciation as well to Ron Clark of RAP of Washington D.C. and his description of the Panthers, as well as to Sherry Brown's insight as the longest tenured Minister of Information of the Washington chapter.

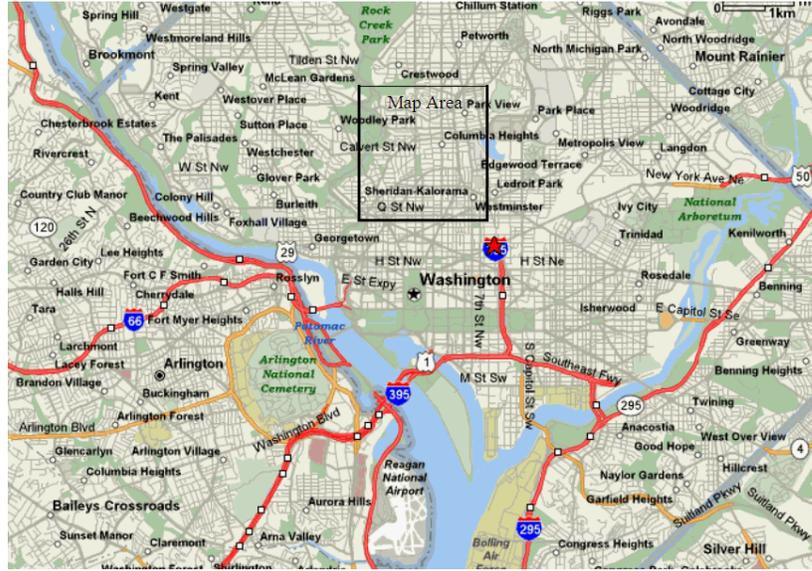
My thanks also go to my family's support and interest in my work, to my fellow graduate students who challenged me to excel in my scholarship, but most importantly to my wonderful wife Donielle, who supported my goal and provided stability and sanity while holding down four jobs herself.

DEDICATION

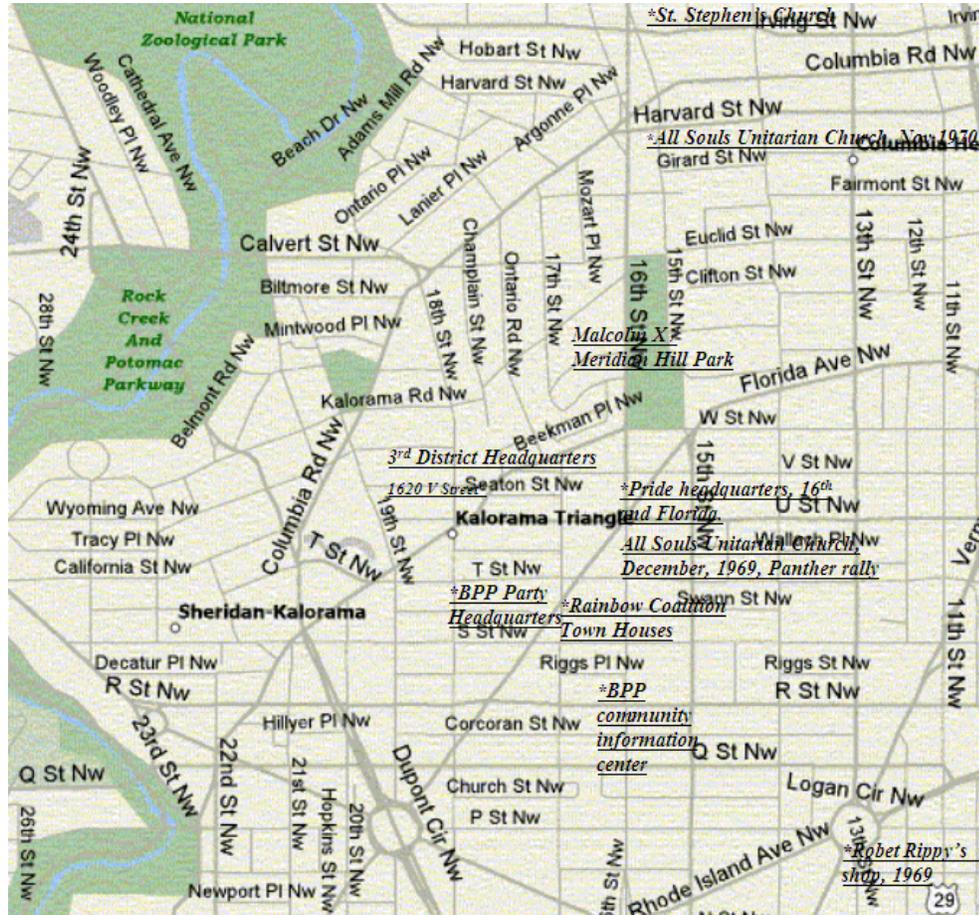
To Donielle, my muse

MAPS AND IMAGES OF THE WASHINGTON PANTHER CHAPTER

Map of the District of Columbia

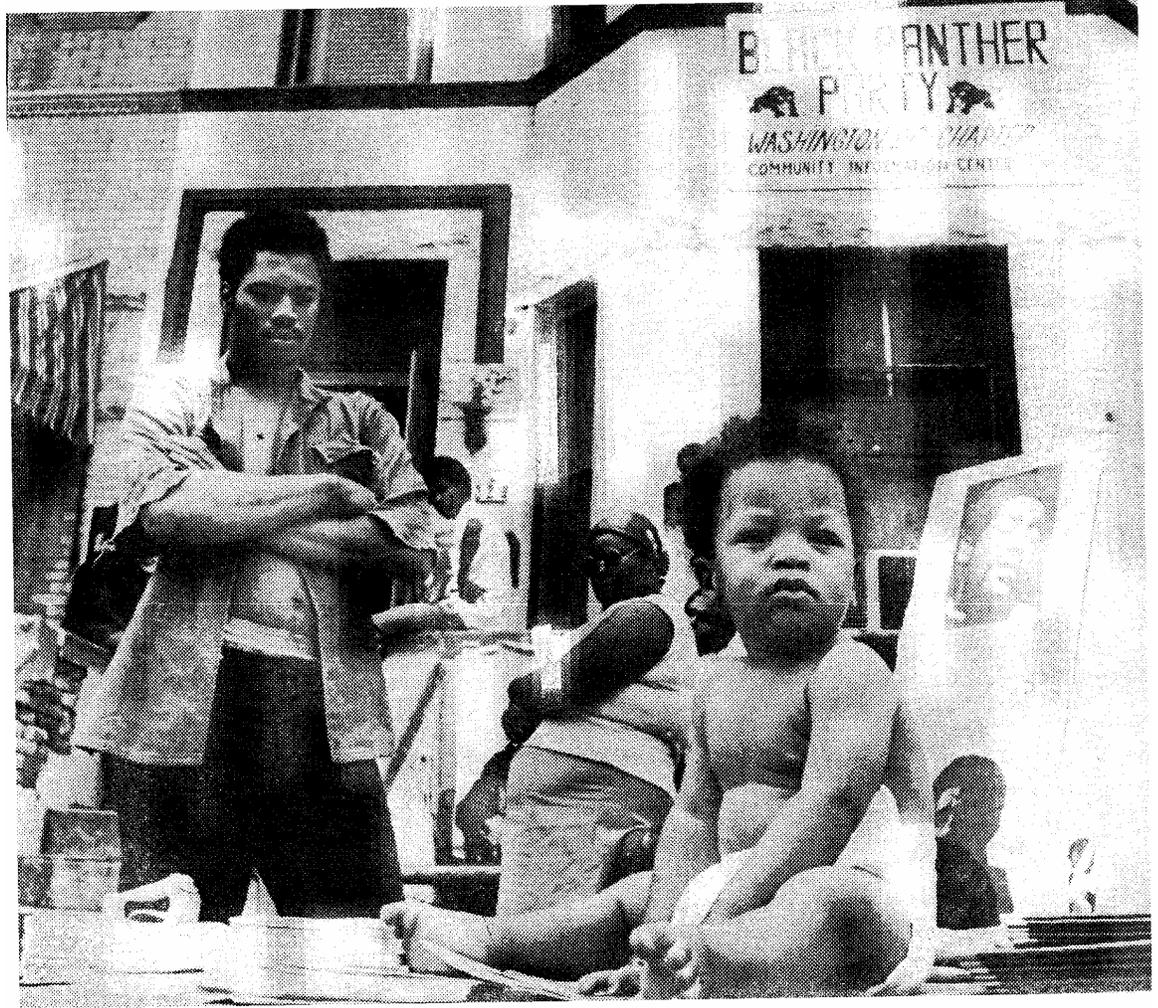


Map of D.C. Panthers Neighborhood





Picture of Panther supporters on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on June 19, 1970. (Picture by Washington Post)



Juan Schoop, one of the 16th month old twins taken to jail July 4th after police broke into the Black Panther Community Information Center, rested on a pamphlet table. Looking is Panther Wayne Purcell. (Photo by Geoffery Gilbert, Washington Post)



Two pictures of the Community Information Center during the build up to the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention November 27-29, 1970. On right, Elbert "Big Man" Howard, the editor of the Black Panther newspaper and the national Minister of Information gives a press conference Oct. 6, 1971.



Robert Rippy, founder of the first chapter of the Black Panthers in D.C.



Marion Barry, Fall 1971, successfully running for D.C. school board.



Sherry Brown, Minister of Information for Washington chapter, pictured in 2005.

OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE

To some of our people in the community and some of our comrades-in-arms, there still seems to be some question in minds regarding our decision not to have a "shoot-out" when the pigs broke through our doors on July 4th.

First of all, some of our people that weren't on the scene are wondering if we violated our principles by not wiping out the first of those gangsters that crashed through our door. Then some of our comrades who weren't at the scene are questioning the order that was given to "hold our fire until we're fired upon."

Both of these points could be cleared up by reminding all concerned about one of our main principles. "If anyone attacks us and if the conditions are favourable for battle, we will certainly act in self-defense to wipe him out resolutely, thoroughly, wholly and completely (we do not strike rashly, but when we do strike, we must win)." We must never be cowed by the bluster of reactionaries. In other words, no matter how much confusion these cowardly dogs create, they will never stop the Black Panther Party from serving our people. We're more concerned about the welfare of our people than about anything else. And because we were unable to get all of the community people through the back door, we decided not to fire until we were fired upon. These are the people we are here to serve, so how could we justify initiating a "shoot out" (and getting them all killed) just to prove that we're Panthers. We realize that the only way we'll stop these pigs from coming into our community, brutalizing and murdering our people, is to kill them. We don't bite any bones about that. "We'll kill anybody that stands in the way of our freedom." Because we don't have any other choice but to do that. And pigs are making that quite clear to our people every day.

And because they were able to take four of our weapons and beat us after we didn't shoot, they still can't stop us. How can they? Panthers don't drop out of the sky, and they don't grow out of the ground. No, Panthers come out of the conditions our people are subjected to. And the conditions that caused some of our community people to get trapped in our center wondering whether they'll live or die are the same conditions that caused our courageous leader and Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton, and our beloved Chairman, Bobby Seale, to organize our Party.

We will take a hundred beatings as long as it educates our people on the necessity of arming themselves. Every attack the pigs make brings them closer to their DOOM!

All Power to the People
Death to the Fascist Pigs

Washington, D. C. Chapter
Black Panther Party
1932 17th Street, N. W.

DEATH TO THE
FASCIST **PIGS!**



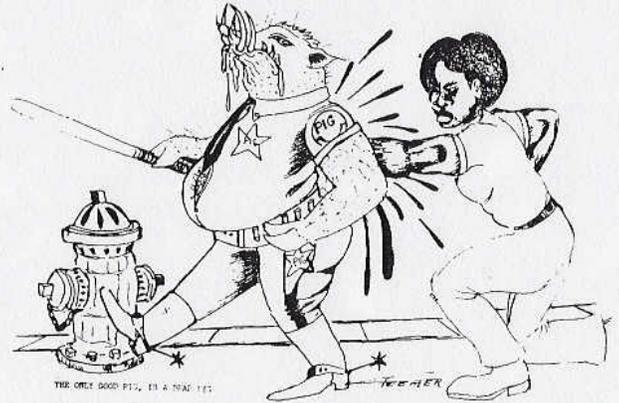
The backside art on the Open Letter to the People, July 1970.

Some Cartoons from 'Black Panther Coloring Book'

Designed for children, this 'book' has been widely distributed

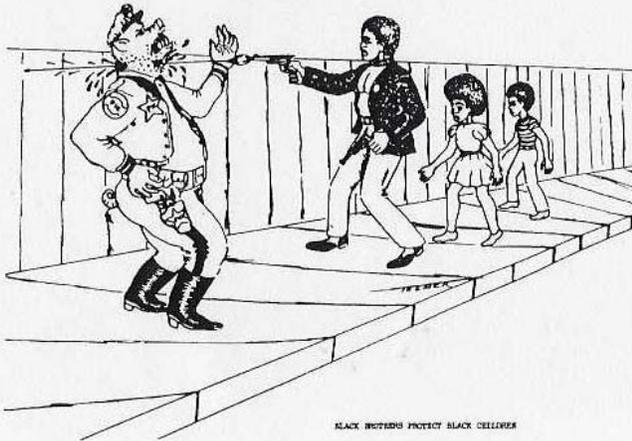


BROTHERS AND SISTERS DEAL WITH THE WHITE STORE OWNER THAT ROBS BLACK PEOPLE.



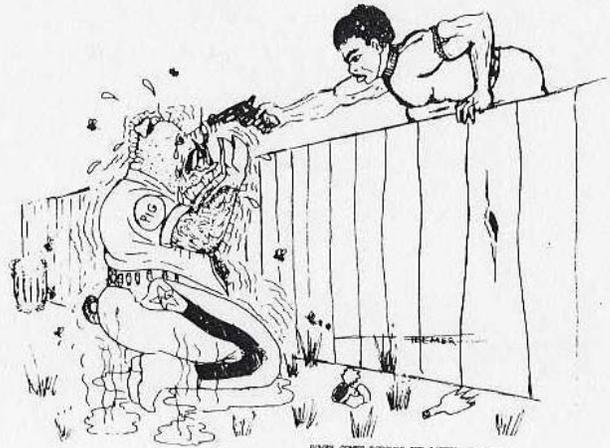
THE ONLY GOOD PIG, IS A DEAD PIG

THE ONLY GOOD PIG, IS A DEAD PIG



BLACK BROTHERS PROTECT BLACK CHILDREN

BLACK BROTHERS PROTECT BLACK CHILDREN



POWER COMES THROUGH THE BARREL OF A GUN

POWER COMES THROUGH THE BARREL OF A GUN

Bogus cartoons created by the FBI's CONINTELPRO unit to sway public opinion against the Black Panthers.

Black Panther Party

**IF YOU'RE NOT PART OF THE SOLUTION
YOU'RE PART OF THE PROBLEM**

**REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S - NOV. 27-29
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION**

Things in America are fucked up. The system doesn't work, it doesn't serve human needs; it serves capitalist greed which is ravaging the earth's air, land, and water in addition to killing people.

The Black Panther Party is calling for all people dedicated to changing the reality of Amerikkka to come to a Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention. In Philadelphia, 10,000 to 15,000 people, mostly Black people and young people from all parts of the Movement, came together at the Convention Plenary Session to talk about their grievances and goals.

Huey Newton, just sprung from prison, spoke of the need for a socialist revolution -- and the right of people to rebel and build their own new world. Thousands gathered outside the packed hall to hear him repeat the Black Panther Party Platform demanding freedom, political power, an end to unemployment and exploitation, decent housing, exemption from the imperialist draft, an end to police brutality, fair trials by juries of peers, freedom for all political prisoners, a United Nations plebiscite to determine the will of Black people as to their national destiny.

Lots of people got high off the fact that Huey was free and with them. But it wasn't just a bunch of speeches from a podium.

The Conference divided up into a dozen workshops on self-determination for Third World people, women, street people, workers, gay people, rights of children, control and use of the land and natural resources, reorganization of political, economic, legal, and military systems.

These workshops shattered the notion that people are just out to smash things mindlessly, without a program, unable to get together on goals. Each workshop delivered a report which will be used in drawing up the new Constitution at the next session of the Convention in D.C., Nov. 27, 28, 29.



Flyer published by the Washington Chapter, October 1970.

INTRODUCTION

The Black Panther Party's official Washington D.C. chapter formed July 19, 1970, much later than the thirty-seven other chapters around the country, some of which had been in existence for four years by then. This later formation was a result of many factors, most importantly the lack of a city government to run and organize black neighborhoods and the affluence of many D.C. blacks.¹ The District of Columbia's unique federal territory status outlawed structures of city government that were available to other Panther chapters. The Black Panther's militant communist platform was Marxist-Leninist and socialist, and as such threatened many blacks and whites in the District.² The D.C. Panthers incurred extensive law enforcement surveillance and persecution from the FBI and the Metropolitan Police during the summer and fall of 1970, with over twenty-eight Panthers charged with crimes and arrested. The well-publicized Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention created the Washington chapter's existence, and responsibility to organize the Convention fell on the shoulders of the D.C. Panthers. The massive failure of the convention drove many wavering Panther members away, and out of the ruins of the failure the remaining revolutionary activists refocused their efforts to first and foremost helping the D.C. poor.

The first chapter describes the rise of Black Power in D.C. in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the riots that followed. Robert Rippy, a

¹ Washington D.C. black neighborhoods primarily started east of Rock Creek Park in the District, especially the Shaw-Cardozo area where the Panther headquarters were located. United States Census, 1970.

² Jessica Christina Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (Summer, 2000), 162-174.

cultural nationalist activist who became radicalized during his association with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded the first group to organize and replicate the Black Panthers' actions. Rippy's small group looked to join the Panthers but was rejected by the National Committee of the Black Panther Party at the Unity Against Fascism conference held in California in 1969 because of Rippy's anti-white views. The National Committee of the Black Panther Party would not grant a charter to Rippy and his "cultural nationalists" because they disapproved of the Panthers' coalition politics with white radicals from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). During the height of Black Panther exposure in the national media, from June 1969 to June 1970, the D.C. area was without a Black Panther presence, and because of the unique situation of wealth and government oppression, rival leaders of black nationalist groups believed a chapter would never be founded in the capital of the United States. In January 1970 *Washingtonian* Reverend Douglas Moore, leader of the Black United Front, said that it would be suicide for the Black Panthers to establish a chapter in the nation's capital, because of the intense persecution and outright slaughter of Black Panthers by law enforcement.³

The nation's capital was organized from the beginning as a special, stateless District of Columbia, almost fully dependant upon the U.S. Congress for everything from its annual budget to criminal ordinances. The intent was to save Washington, D.C. from falling prey to any narrow sectional interest; the result was that a busy city of 827,000 inhabitants- over 70% African-American- found itself at the mercy of

³ Joseph D. Whitaker, "Black Panther Drive Falter in D.C.," *Washington Post*, 1 February 1970, A1, A8.

legislators whose various interests (a segregationist constituency back home, for example) had little to do with the district's pressing needs.⁴

The 1970 United States census described Washington as a city 71.1 percent black compared to 27.7 percent white. Only 4,974 whites, or 4.2% of the white residential population, lived in poverty. According to the census bureau, 81,678 black residents, 17% of the black population, lived under the federally mandated poverty levels in D.C.⁵ These levels were much lower than other black urban areas of the United States, with the most extreme example being Detroit, which had over a third of black residents living under the poverty level. Inner cities throughout the U.S. dealt with white flight to the suburbs, and in Washington D.C. the effect was lessened by the entrenched black middle class east of Rock Creek Park. The King riots of 1968 spurred some in the black middle and upper class to migrate to Prince Georges County, but this black flight of the inner-city really took off with the introduction of crack and the violence associated with crack dealing in the mid 1980's.⁶

Black unemployment at the time of the 1970 census was 43,848, or 12 percent of the black workforce of 360,048. Young black males (16-29 years of age) had the highest unemployment rate of 16.4 percent. White unemployment was much less for

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population: General Social and Economic Characteristics, District of Columbia, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population: Poverty Status in 1969 and Ratio of Family Income to Poverty Level for Persons in Families and Unrelated Individuals, by Family Relationship, Age and Race, District of Columbia, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

⁶ Howard Gillette, Jr, *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 195-8.

city residents, with only 7.3% of white workers unemployed and the greatest majority of those whites who were unemployed were in the 16-29 year old age bracket.⁷

Opportunities for blacks employed in professional administration or white-collar jobs were greater in Washington D.C. because of the federal government's drive to increase diversity in the bureaucracy that started with the Johnson administration. The 1970 census identified 151,486 black residents employed in white-collar positions in the District, positions that made three times the mandated poverty level. Positions in the federal or district government, academia, or private industry created much greater opportunities not available to blacks in other areas of the country.⁸

The bourgeois reputation of Washington D.C.'s black community made it difficult to organize and recruit, and the official chapter's roots were in the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party. Members of the Panthers began selling the Panther newspapers in D.C. and acquired a D.C. coordinator by the name of Jim Williams, sent from Oakland in January of 1970. This "branch" office of the Panthers became a National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF) office in D.C., in the activist neighborhood of Shaw, close to the headquarters of Marion Barry's organization Pride, Inc and other activist groups. By Spring 1970 the stage was set, and the second chapter traces the movement from the foundation of the party to the spectacular failure of the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population: Labor Force Status and Year last Worked of Persons Not in the Labor Force by Age, Race, and Sex: 1970, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population: Labor Force Status and Year last Worked of Persons Not in the Labor Force by Age, Race, and Sex: 1970, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

The founding of the D.C. chapter, which began officially a month after the tragedy at Kent State, became a manifestation for radicals of the growing animosity towards the Nixon administration and the “system.” With the reputation of the Panthers preceding them, the multiple raids and arrests attested to the militant confrontational stance adopted by the D.C. Panther chapter during its first six months of existence, and was similar to the experiences of the larger chapters of New York, Los Angeles, and Oakland. Unique conditions and experiences molded the D.C. Panthers into a different type of chapter, one that quickly turned fiery, violent militants into peaceable community activists. The fewer remaining Panther members could assist their Washington neighborhoods more effectively working within the system and influencing the new city government.

The turning point for the D.C. party was Thanksgiving Weekend, 1970. The Washington chapter failed its main reason for existence, securing a convention hall for the highly publicized Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention. The violent leftist revolutionary militant organization depicted in the press and by its own earlier open letters and press releases departed from its bravado. Washington Defense Captain Jim Williams and the remaining members of the D.C. Panthers transformed the chapter into a dedicated, effective, and peaceful community support entity that embraced new opportunities provided by the creation of self-rule.⁹ This change to activism and community support is highlighted in chapter three, and a changed party emerged to uplift the poor in D.C.’s blighted neighborhoods.

⁹ Sherry Brown (Minister of Information for the D.C. and Baltimore Chapters of the Black Panther Party), interview by author, 20 February 2006.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, represented black militant radicalism and a profound departure from the goals of integration championed by Martin Luther King Jr. and other traditional Civil Rights leaders. Scholarship about the Black Panthers in the context of the larger Civil Rights Movement, particularly the transformation and radical history of the Panthers, often depicts the party as a radical sect bent upon the destruction of the white capitalist state.¹⁰ Scholarly interpretation focusing on the Black Panthers ranges from crazed hooligans, to a necessary evil, to avenging angels; during the Vietnam War the New Left movement of the 1960s depicted the Panthers as the vanguard of communist revolution.¹¹

The methodology used in this project is different from previous scholarship because of the dearth of published sources. Little work has been published about the Washington, D.C. Panthers, and perhaps because this small organization left few written documents. Many other existing primary sources like police and Federal Bureau of Investigation files are confidential, and the request period for classified documents exceeds the time constraints of this project. The use of interviews of those close to or inside the chapter has covered many subjects relating to the existence and transformation of the party in D.C., and has painted a canvas of transformation.

The Panthers established "survival programs" (free breakfast programs, sickle cell anemia testing) as a way of gaining legitimacy in the face of government persecution and attacks. The government and the establishment perceived these programs as a greater threat than the violence associated with the Panthers in its

¹⁰ Massimo Teodori, *The New Left: A Documentary History*, (New York Bobs-Merrill, 1969), p.276-9.

¹¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1981.

earlier years. The role of the Panthers in feeding and clothing their communities supplanted the government's lackluster programs in poor black communities nationwide, and the Panthers became subject to increased repression.¹² The evolution from black nationalist militancy to community activism is a familiar theme among most chapters, but the Washington chapter's members started late and ended early because of the District's overarching hostility to militant groups.

The histories of individual chapters have been ignored in deference to the drama that unfolded in Oakland, and to a lesser extent the killing of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago, Alex Rackley's murder in New Haven, and the Panther 21 trial in New York which have been reported about and written about extensively. Scholars have mostly ignored the histories of chapters for the easier route of reinterpreting the relationship between the leadership of the Black Panthers.

The proclamations and writing of the Black Panther's leadership often glorify the movement. Huey Newton's *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, describes the many transformations of Newton's and the party's political ideologies and motivations. Newton also included articles supporting the feminist and gay rights movements and coalitions with white radicals. As a collection of writings of the Panthers' most charismatic leader, this text is great primary-source material for understanding the goals of the National Organization of the Black Panther Party. Newton describes the Panthers' grass roots organizing and goals of the black power movement.¹³ The

¹² Jama Lazerow Yohuru R. Williams. "Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Panthers ," Book Review 2001 Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, Inc.

¹³ Huey Newton, *Huey Newton's Reader*, David Hilliard ed., (New York: Random House, 1984).

ideals of the Panthers are laid out simply, and the ideas of the Panthers seem quite drastic.

Similarly, *Black Panthers Speak*, edited by Phillip S. Foner with a foreword by Clayborne Carson, is a collection of primary documents. Possibly the most important source of original material of the Party, it includes cartoons, flyers, and articles by Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, and Newton.¹⁴ Perhaps the most important primary source on Black Power is Kwame Ture (aka Stokely Carmichael) and his mantra *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. First written in 1967 with Charles Hamilton, this revolutionary work supposedly exposed the depths of racism in the United States. The system was envisioned as racist and entrenched, and Ture's work became the political framework of cultural nationalist groups and the Maoist Black Panthers. It was a plan to find independence from oppressive white America.¹⁵

Scholars have advanced a number of conflicting views of the Panthers and their contribution to history. Scholars in this polarized field viewed the Panthers as either thugs or visionary radicals (or both). Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* and David Hilliard's *This Side of Glory* romanticized and glorified the party, ignoring the dark side of the Panthers.¹⁶ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin's *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* argued a cultural civil war waged during the 1960s, pitting the left-liberals on one side and conservatives on the other. Isserman and Kazin

¹⁴ *The Black Panthers Speak*, Phillip Foner, ed., (New York: DeCapo Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

¹⁶ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992); David Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, (Boston: Little Brown Press, 1993).

glorified the sacrifices of the Black Panthers as leaders of the New Left and depicted the Panthers as noble examples of romantic Third Worldists.¹⁷

Hugh Pearson's gritty view of the national party in *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* posited an opposing view. He concentrated on many of the negatives within the party, particularly drugs and criminality. Many scholars thought the Black Panthers were destroyed by FBI counterintelligence. Pearson's book, which provided a more accurate view of Panther history, suggests that the party fell apart over the party's criminal activities of some of its members. Pearson argued the Panthers created a negative impact on the community and its members' lives which resulted in the Panther experiment. He argued that the Party began as a criminal enterprise with revolutionary trappings and was eventually consumed by its own criminality. Pearson contradicts the prevailing view that the Panthers began as a worthy endeavor but was tragically destroyed by mismanagement and illegal government efforts of CONITELPRO. Pearson does not paint a completely bleak picture and notes the accomplishments of the Panthers, such as how the party brought serious attention to issues such as police brutality, and inspired urban youth all over the world.¹⁸

The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered], edited by Charles E. Jones, depicts a Black Panther Party that fell apart because of the consequences of the unstable membership mix of political activists and quasi-criminal types. Jones blasted the group's romantic notions of social revolution but also argued that the

¹⁷Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, (New York: Oxford University Press USA), 2003.

¹⁸ Hugh Pearson. *Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994).

Panthers became a base of Black Nationalism and a bridge to the white New Left.¹⁹

Jennifer Smith published *An International History of the Black Panther Party*, a dissertation that focused on the international reach of the Panthers, with allied movements in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean. The Panthers' international reach influenced many activists around the world. Smith highlights the global phenomenon of the Black Panther Party and showed how an international approach broadens and changes understanding of Black Panther history.²⁰

Dr. Yohuru Williams examined the inner workings of the New Haven Black Panther chapter torn apart by the Alex Rackley murder investigation, in which Bobby Seale was indicted. Williams' book is about much more than the Black Panther Party. The city of New Haven, an interesting phenomenon, is described as the rise and demise of a "Model City," with Williams tracing the impact of the Panthers on big city Democratic mayors and the fate of postwar liberalism. Williams uses newspapers, government documents, personal papers, and oral histories to construct his picture of a local Panther chapter.²¹

In the most balanced book, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar takes a new look at the Panthers and the Nation of Islam. Dr. Ogbar argues many African Americans embraced the seemingly contradictory political agenda of desegregation and nationalism and he is critical of older understandings of the Panthers. Ogbar suggests looking at the chapters on a

¹⁹ Charles Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. by Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore, MD: Classic Black Press, 1998).

²⁰ Jennifer Smith, *An International History of the Black Panther Party*, Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1997.

²¹ Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil rights, Black power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven*, (New York: Brandywine Press) 2000.

local, individual level instead of focusing on the overall national experience of the Panthers.²²

The different scholarship paints a picture of defiance and glory, of criminality and thuggish behavior, and devotion to a downtrodden community with a undercurrent of rage. By brandishing arms against police and embracing and distilling the Black Power message of self-determination, the Panthers frightened a white America recently forced to dismantle segregation and many whites struggled with the concept of equality with blacks. Because of extensive media coverage, Panther chapters spread to many urban black ghettos, and the Maoist belief that power flowed through the barrel of a gun put the Black Panthers on a collision course with local law enforcement agencies.

The ideal of Black Power, armed for revolution, formed in D.C. during December 1967, when Robert Rippy founded his pseudo-Panther group “The Black Defenders.” The Black Panther Central Committee denied affiliation to this small group of “cultural” nationalists who were to champion Pan-Africanism in 1969, thus the real D.C. Panther party failed to form until May 1970. Cultural nationalist groups believed in total segregation between blacks and whites, and followed leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, and the Black Muslims. The Black Panthers’ decision in late 1968 to ally with white radicals was considered counter-revolutionary to black racial nationalist groups (cultural nationalists). Rippy’s group then joined the cultural nationalist Black United Front. Black cultural nationalists created several groups in Washington, D.C, including the Black United Front, the Blackman’s Volunteer Army

²² Jeffery O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001.)

of Liberation, and Stokely Carmichael's All African Peoples Revolutionary Party.

These rival groups also contributed to the tardy formation of the official D.C. Black Panther chapter.

RISE OF BLACK POWER IN WASHINGTON D.C AND THE CULTURAL NATIONALIST PANTHERS

Washington D.C.'s territory status meant that the city was administered by an appointed council and mayor handpicked by the federal government. The District of Columbia appointments were delegated to the powerful District committee, presided over by influential conservative southerners in the U.S. House of Representatives. Residents of the federal District of Columbia were not allowed any participation in government, and only by the 1961 passage of the twenty-third amendment were D.C. residents allowed to vote for President. The all-powerful District committee governed the majority black city of Washington, and District representatives were proponents and supporters of segregation. The majority of the District committee allied itself with supporters of a segregated South, such as Alabama's Governor George Wallace. Governor Wallace symbolized the increased intensity of violence against the Civil Rights Movement by physically blockading black students from university classes. The bombing of a black Birmingham church killed four young girls, and countless other racist acts were committed daily throughout the United States by the late 1960s.²³ Nonviolent resistance changed to direct action for many younger civil rights demonstrators.

In the 1950s, D.C. had become the first large city with a black majority, and those in Washington's powerful black middle class enjoyed job security from the federal government.²⁴ The black community in Washington, D.C. lost many wealthy

²³ Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, eds, *"Takin' it to the Streets": A Sixties Reader*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7-17.

²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 1960 Census of Population: General Social and Economic Characteristics, District of Columbia, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962).

and powerful members after 1948 when the Supreme Court declared restrictive housing covenants illegal and the decision facilitated the flight of black elite to more affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods. Continued destabilization of D.C.'s black community and ghettoization of neighborhoods followed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act, both of which hastened the flight of the black middle class to neighborhoods in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.²⁵ Areas east and north of the nation's Capitol became poorer and less stable, rife with crime and vice, the same type of conditions the Black Panthers condemned nationwide.

The violence of the white segregationists supported the belief of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth for many of the young activists, especially those followers of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X. Early in 1966 when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) elected Stokely Carmichael (later named Kwame Ture) and H. Rap Brown as leaders of a newly radicalized movement which purged white members from its ranks, the official reason was to send them to university campuses and white neighborhoods. SNCC's new leadership focused more on militant black activism and black power.²⁶

SNCC attracted younger and more direct action orientated recruits, including many liberal and Marxist-minded white youth. Students for Democratic Society (SDS) leaders such as Tom Hayden and Mark Rudd volunteered to register black voters, and their exploits transmitted back to northern campuses inspired new

²⁵ Fred Harris, *Locked in the Poorhouse: Cities Race, and Poverty in the United States*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 35-39.

²⁶ Hugh Pearson. *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994, 48 and Brown, H. "Rap", *Die Nigger Die!*, (New York: Dial Press), 1969.

activists.²⁷ The 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer established the precedent for white and black leftists working together; the Panthers returned to coalition politics in late 1968 to the dismay of many black nationalists, especially the Black Nationalist group hoping to join the Panthers from Washington, D.C.

In Washington D.C., a segregated town until the 1950's, racial barriers were not as clear as the rigid segregation of the South, still racism and bias permeated the mentality of judges, police officers, real estate agents, and small businessmen, and the white power structure was viewed as engaged in a conspiracy to keep blacks oppressed.²⁸ SNCC's leader Stokely Carmichael dismissed the Civil Rights movement stating, "Integration is irrelevant. Political and economic power is what black people have to have."²⁹ Washington's black militants described the "white world" as a giant conspiracy and a "fascist" state arising.³⁰

The focus shifted from a caste societal problem (in the south) to a class problem (in the urban industrial cities of the north), and the enemies were no longer klansmen or southern sheriffs, but institutional racism. Hostility shifted to the economic and political elites who perpetuated racism. The new ideology of Black Power approved meeting violence with violence and arming for self-defense.³¹ Northern cities dealt with riots, open housing marches, and school bussing during the late 1960's with these confrontations seemingly intensifying each summer.

Polarization and fragmentation of increasing militant Civil Rights groups such as the

²⁷ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975*, (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 30-1.

²⁸ Charles E. Jones, "Reconsidering Panther History," *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. by Charles E. Jones, (Baltimore, MD: Classic Black Press, 1998) 39.

²⁹ Kwame Ture, *Black Power*, 71-4.

³⁰ Pearson, *Shadow of the Panther*, 48.

³¹ Kwame Ture, *Black Power*, 76-82.

Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and SNCC soon rejected the original goal of the Civil Rights Movement –integration- and national leadership of black militants began shifting to the Black Panther Party.³²

In Washington D.C., a new set of barriers unique to the Black Panthers prevented the formation of an official chapter for four and a half years. The territorial status of the District encouraged Washingtonians to ignore local politics. The lack of political organization led to political apathy particularly in D.C.’s black community. Without the sympathetic black city politicians that the Black Panthers had around country, and the rosters and rolls of those politicians, the Panthers found Washington an extremely difficult place to organize. Combined with hostile competing Black Nationalist groups, the middle-class status of many Washington blacks contributed to this delay.³³

President Johnson’s administration changed the way the District would be administered. Understanding and placating D.C. activists who demanded local government and representation, Johnson responded by using his powers to do away with the three-commissioner system, replacing it with a council and an appointed mayor, the black career bureaucrat Walter E. Washington. During this same period, the city gained an elected school board. For the first time in a hundred years, local residents could vote in a city that now was more than 70% black by 1970.³⁴ Among

³² “Justice in Time of Crisis” District of Columbia Committee on the Administration of Justice under Emergency Conditions Report, June 18, 1969. Washington D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969.

³³ Joseph D. Whitaker. “Black Panther Drive Falter in D.C.,” *Washington Post*, 1 February 1970, A1, A8.

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 1970 Census of Population: General Social and Economic Characteristics, District of Columbia. (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington D.C., 1972).

the leaders elected was a school board member named Marion Barry, an advocate of black power.³⁵

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael began preaching armed resistance to racist police and a racist society. This stance gained resonance with the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. The outbreaks of violence in urban areas continued to grow in intensity and the message that black communities were colonies under domination from the nation's capital and the white police represented an "occupation army."³⁶ The racial tensions increased with the escalation of the Vietnam War, especially because the disproportion of draftees were poor blacks. Frustration with the stalled Civil Rights movement provided momentum to the new Black Power groups.

Tumultuous times began in D.C. with riots in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. The rise of black power, increasing peace demonstrations, and the aggressive policing of the Nixon administration made D.C. a focal point for demonstrations. A small group of District activists turned their attention to political apathy that had been ingrained for generations because of the District Committee; slowly many black D.C. residents began to support self-determination and backed the D.C. statehood movement. The home rule movement reached a zenith in the fall of 1970, cresting at the height of membership of the Washington Chapter, and many Panthers were active in the statehood cause. The statehood goal and the idea of black government combined into one cause. The city's more conservative blacks wanted

³⁵ Jonathan I. Z. Agronsky, *Marion Barry and the Politics of Race*, (New York: British American Publishing, 1991), 167.

³⁶ "Activists Decry White Police Presence," *Washington Post*, 5 May 1969, C3, Col. 1.

national representation of the District and agreed on home rule desired by progressives and black power advocates.³⁷

Black Power groups in D.C. included the unofficial Panthers, formed by Robert Rippy with four fully trained members in December 1967. They met with a representative from the established New York Panther chapter and were told they had to meet Panther standards of membership and indoctrination before using the name. Rippy promptly named the group the Black Defenders.³⁸

In 1968 Rippy was a community organizer and supervisor for the United Planning Organization. Rippy moved to the District from Salisbury, N.C., in 1950, and served in both the Marines and the Navy, then later in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). His group was aimed at youths from age 14 and up, and Rippy wanted to train the recruits to deal with all types of crime occurring in the black community, especially crime by outsiders and police. Applicants for his group had to own a gun as part of training, and the use of guns for self-defense was central to Rippy's vision.³⁹ This group modeled itself after the Panthers and again went out to secure a charter at the United Front Against Fascism conference in 1969. At the conference Huey Newton read a quote by Chairman Mao Tse Tung of the Chinese Communist Party. "We are advocates of the abolition of war. We do not want war, but war can only be abolished through war. In order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to pick up the gun.' POWER TO THE PEOPLE!"⁴⁰ After the speech Newton and the rest of the National Committee met with Rippy and his group, and

³⁷ Howard Gillette Jr. *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 217-23.

³⁸ "No to Panthers", *Washington Evening Star*, Jan. 22, 1968, A1 Col.4.

³⁹ "No to Panthers," *Washington Evening Star*, 22 January 1968, A1 Col.4.

⁴⁰ "Field Marshal Don Cox at the Conference," *The Black Panther*, 26 July 1969.

denied them a charter because Rippy abominated coalitions that included white radicals.⁴¹

Later in 1969, Rippy opened a wig store in the 3100 block of Georgia Avenue NW, where he held meetings of the United Black Brotherhood. The United Black Brotherhood were cultural nationalists who stated “you couldn’t look to your oppressor for salvation” and detested the alliance the Panthers made with white radical groups like the White Panthers and the Patriots.⁴² Howard students would come, and Rippy would teach out of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Rippy continued to be an advocate of black power but differed in ideology with the National Office of the Panthers. Rippy’s United Black Brotherhood became rivals with the official Panthers when they formed in 1970, and both competed for new recruits.⁴³

Another advocate of black power in Washington was the future four-term Mayor, Marion Barry. Barry was operations director of his self-help organization Pride, Inc. in July 1969, and he asked blacks not to take part in a national day of celebration to honor the Apollo 11 moon landing. Barry stated “Why should blacks rejoice when two white Americans land on the moon when white America’s money and technology have not even reached the inner city?”⁴⁴ In May 1970 Barry called on city residents to shoot any policeman entering their homes unannounced under the controversial “no knock” provision of a new crime bill. This bill allowed police to burst into suspected criminals’ houses unannounced.⁴⁵ He also labeled the Metropolitan Police an “alien army of occupation” and preached against the white

⁴¹ Sherry Brown, interview by author, 20 February 2006.

⁴² Sherry Brown, interview by author, 20 February 2006.

⁴³ Sherry Brown, interview by author, 20 February 2006.

⁴⁴ “Barry Nixes Celebration,” *Washington Post*, 22 July 1969, C3.

⁴⁵ “Barry Fights “No Knock” Crime Bill,” *Washington Daily News*, 14 May 1970, p.2.

dominance of businesses in the inner-city after the 1968 riots. “White (business) people should be allowed to come back only if the majority of the ownership is in the hands of blacks.”⁴⁶

Barry enjoyed a close relationship with the Washington Chapter of the Black Panthers. Many Panther members were also members of Barry’s organization Pride. The Office of Economic Opportunity financed Barry’s self-help organization Pride in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King riots, as a “public rights organization.”⁴⁷ Formed in 1968, Youth Pride, soon shortened to Pride, Inc, set up headquarters at 16th and Florida Avenue in the Shaw neighborhood of D.C. Located across from Meridian Hill (unofficially named Malcolm X) Park, the Shaw and Adams Morgan neighborhoods were home to many young black activists and Howard University students.⁴⁸ Pride’s headquarters was a few houses down from the future Panther community center on 1732 17th street and two blocks from the future Panther chapter headquarters on 18th street. When asked about the closeness of these organizations, Barry noted that many Panthers were also part of Pride.⁴⁹

The black power turn that SNCC took with the election of Stokely Carmichael as leader of SNCC made Barry separate himself from the newly radical SNCC so that he could apply for federal monies to establish poverty programs under Johnson’s Great Society initiatives. He still supported the organization’s views of self-determination and community control of police.⁵⁰ Barry moved to the District in

⁴⁶ Algronzy, *Marion Barry*, p.133-42.

⁴⁷ Marion Barry, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

⁴⁸ Paul K. Williams, *The Neighborhoods of Logan, Scott, and Thomas Circles*, (Columbia, SC: Acadia Publishing, 2001), p 16-20.

⁴⁹ Marion Barry, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

⁵⁰ Marion Barry, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

1965, and has lived in the Capitol since that time. He worked with and was close to Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Fred Hampton, Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver, as well as other leaders of Black Power organizations and the Black Panther Party.⁵¹ Barry's drug problems and felony record notwithstanding, he made a profound influence on the Washington poor during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many poor blacks credit him with finding their first job in the District, and Barry parleyed his organization Pride, Inc. into a grassroots political machine that helped him get elected to the first school board in 1971.

The cultural nationalist group rejected by the National Committee in the summer of 1969 left Washington D.C. without Black Panther Party representation for close to a year. In December of 1969 the well-publicized murder of Chicago leader Fred Hampton by the FBI added new sympathy to the Panther cause in Washington, D.C. and inspired a rally that drew attention from the National Committee of the Black Panther Party. That December, a group named the Coalition Against Racism and Fascism (CARF) formed to serve as an umbrella for the area's diversified black and anti-war organizations. CARF sponsored a rally at the All Souls Unitarian Church on 16th and Harvard Streets NW on December 21, 1969 to protest the "murder of Black Panther members."⁵² This rally's main point was to support the cause and plight of the Black Panthers, even though no chapter existed in the District. This rally did lead to the founding of the National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF) in the spring of 1970, an organization created to raise funds and spur sympathy throughout Washington D.C. for the Black Panthers. The Panther national headquarters in

⁵¹ Marion Barry, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

⁵² Michael Anders, "D.C. Activists Marked, Pro-Panther Rally Told," *Washington Evening Star*, 22 December 1969, A1, p. 3.

Oakland sent Jim Williams to be the NCCF's coordinator in Washington. Williams stated some progress has been made in late 1969 and early 1970, but he was very disappointed in what he called the "bourgeois attitude" of Washington blacks.⁵³

Williams described the problem as "the government has been able to control the black people in this city through jobs and poverty programs, and has virtually silenced so-called community leaders by putting money into their pockets."⁵⁴ Programs like Pride and similar anti-poverty work made D.C. more difficult to organize a revolutionary party. Black Nationalist groups had already entrenched themselves into Washington's black communities, especially those around Howard University. The Black United Front was formed after the assassination of Malcolm X and included many radical splinter groups after SNCC disbanded. They believed in revolution, as long as it took place within the context of a capitalistic system. The Black United Front disavowed the methods expressed by the Maoist influenced Panthers and the felt private enterprise was central in securing equality with whites. Led by the Reverend Douglas Moore, the Black United Front adamantly denied working with white groups. Moore stated "the policy not to participate in coalition with white groups is because we believe you cannot look to your oppressor for salvation."⁵⁵

Another radical militant black group with a presence in Washington was the Blackman's Volunteer Army of Liberation, led by Colonel Hassan Juru-Ahmed Bey. Bey's group was a splinter group off the Black Muslim movement, and the Black

⁵³ Joseph D. Whitaker. "Black Panther Drive Falter in D.C.," *Washington Post*, 1 February 1970, A1, A8.

⁵⁴ Joseph D. Whitaker. "Black Panther Drive Falter in D.C.," *Washington Post*, 1 February 1970, A1, A8

⁵⁵ Whitaker, 1 February 1970.

Muslims had a strong presence in the District as well as at Lorton reformatory, D.C.'s jail twenty miles south in the Virginia countryside. The Panthers had entrenched militant groups to contend with, and Robert Rippy, by 1970 a member of the Black United Front, stated he didn't "believe that the police and the FBI would allow a Black Panther Party to exist here in the form which they exist in other cities."⁵⁶ In addition to the predominately white Metropolitan Police, the capital was headquarters of the FBI, the Secret Service, the ATF, and other federal law enforcement agencies tasked with destroying the Black Panther Party. Combined with no city government structure and entrenched black nationalist groups, the District was a very hostile environment for the Panthers to found a chapter.

Nixon's invasion of Cambodia set off massive campus unrest which resulted in the deaths of students at predominantly white Kent State and historically black Jackson State. This galvanized the radical left, who felt the invasion was an expansion of the Vietnam War. With the SDS splintering at its convention in 1969, the Black Panther Party was the only national major New Left organization that continued to grow from 1968 to 1970. The Panthers had become the vanguard of the radical militant revolutionaries, like the Weathermen and the American Indian Movement. Its growth from a chapter in Oakland in 1966 to over 37 chapters nationwide by January 1970 made the Panthers targets of the CONINTEL program of the FBI, under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover who declared the Panthers the "number one domestic threat." In January of 1970 the party was under intense attack from the state, and police killed more than twenty-five Panthers by this time, according to Panther attorneys. Seale was jailed while awaiting trial for murder,

⁵⁶ Whitaker, 1 February 1970.

Newton was imprisoned for attempted murder, and Eldridge Cleaver was in exile.⁵⁷

The only national leader of the Panthers not dead, imprisoned, or in exile was David Hilliard, who was jailed briefly in April following a speech in which he threatened the life of President Nixon.⁵⁸

David Hilliard and the national leadership of the Black Panthers felt it was the proper time to announce a new chapter formed in the nation's capital, whose sole purpose was to provide loyal Panthers to organize the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention in the fall of 1970. A rally was scheduled on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for June 19th, 1970.

The District's National Committee to Combat Fascism's office became quite busy with inquiries about the Panthers, and took direction from the close by and established Baltimore chapter. Sherry Brown, the Minister of Information for the Baltimore chapter, described activists of the District's NCCF excited because Hilliard was coming in June, and a rumor was circulating that the NCCF was to be declared a full Panther chapter.⁵⁹

Four years after Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panthers for Self Defense, the rapidly expanding Black Panthers attempted to penetrate the capital of capitalism, the heart of the monster, the District itself. Hilliard, Sherry Brown, and Jim Williams, the leader of the Washington D.C. NCCF, agreed that a Panther outpost should be official.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Jessica Christina Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (Summer, 2000), 162-174.

⁵⁸ Joanne Grant, *Black Protest: 350 Years of History, Documents, and Analyses*, (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1974), p. 493-5.

⁵⁹ Sherry Brown, interview with author, 20 February 2006.

⁶⁰ Sherry Brown, interview with author, 20 February 2006.

DC PANTHERS FIGHT THE SYSTEM: CONFRONTATION AND CONVENTION

In May 1970, over 100 people were killed or wounded by the police and National Guard. Besides the four murdered and ten wounded at Kent State white students on May 4 and the two black students murdered and twelve wounded at Jackson State on May 14th; six more blacks were murdered and twenty were wounded in race riots Augusta, Georgia; eleven students were bayoneted at the University of New Mexico; twenty people suffered shotgun wounds at Ohio State; and twelve students were wounded by birdshot in Buffalo.⁶¹ All these events were unified by the protest of the Cambodian invasion by the Nixon Administration.

A top-secret special report written by the FBI for President Nixon described the Black Panther Party as “the most active and dangerous black extremist group in the United States.” It continued describing the appeal of the Panthers: “a recent poll indicates that approximately 25 percent of black population has a great respect for the BPP, including 43 percent of blacks under 21 years of age.”⁶² Regarded as an enemy of the government, the BPP came under intense legal scrutiny nationwide.

This month of violence contributed to the formation of the Panther chapter in DC. The power and influence of the Party had reached its zenith because it was the last remaining original organization of the coalition called the New Left, and leftist radicals worldwide looked to the Panthers to spark a revolution. David Hilliard scheduled a speech in Washington, DC on June 19th to announce a call for a new

⁶¹ George Katsiaficas. *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*, (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 120.

⁶² “Gun-Barrel Politics: The Black Panther Party, 1966-1971,” *Report by the Committee on Internal Security, House of Representatives, 92nd Congress, First Session*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 18 August 1971, p.7-8.

constitution and needed loyal Panthers to organize and prepare for the Revolutionary Convention.⁶³

David Hilliard was in Washington to help deliver the Message to America statement at the one hundredth seventh anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, which was held on the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial. On July 19, 1970, in front of over a thousand in attendance, David Hilliard declared that the District's National Committee to Combat Fascism graduated to a Black Panther chapter, with the full backing of the National Committee. He stated that the group had grown enough to be a full chapter. His speech, on the same spot in front of the Lincoln Memorial where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I have a Dream" speech in August of 1963, railed against the Nixon administration, white colonization of black neighborhoods, and competing militant black power organizations like the Black Liberation Army.⁶⁴ Hilliard, the Chief of Staff of the Black Panthers, gave Panther sympathizers full Panther membership with the agreement that the D.C. Panthers would be responsible for organizing and hosting this major convention.⁶⁵ Many speakers warned President Nixon that this new document, offering a true guarantee of freedom and justice to all Americans, was the only alternative to revolution in the country.

The penultimate reason the chapter was formed was to secure a convention site for the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention in November 1970, an event that promised to be a significant gathering of New Left organizations. The pressures placed on the chapter's all-important goal turned many D.C. Panthers

⁶³, David Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Press, 2001), p. 143.

⁶⁴ Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, 2001, p.143-5.

⁶⁵ Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, 2001, p.143-5.

against the guidance and authority of the National Office in Oakland, California when the convention's lack of a hall became an embarrassment to the Panthers, an embarrassment whose blame focused on the D.C. chapter.

The D.C. Panthers new headquarters were located near Howard University. The headquarters of the National Coalition to Combat Fascism (NCCF), based in a town house in the Adams Morgan/Shaw area, became the thirty-eighth chapter of the Black Panthers. The Peoples Revolutionary Constitutional Convention was the reason the NCCF became the first official chapter of the Panthers in D.C. and its location was close to other radical groups.⁶⁶ The Black Panthers promoted the Ten Point Plan, which demanded economic development, full employment, community services, and an end to police brutality. This platform included coalitions with other radicals, regardless of skin color, sex or sexual orientation. The predominantly black neighborhood around the new chapter headquarters contained many black power groups like the Blackman's Volunteer Army and the Blackman's Liberation Army, the Black United Front, and Marion Barry's Pride.⁶⁷ In the center of this neighborhood was the three block long Meridian Hill Park. In 1969 Meridian Hill Park was lobbied by Black Nationalists to be renamed Malcolm X Park. A bill was introduced to rename the site Malcolm X Park, although the bill failed, many referred to it as Malcolm X Park, and the area around Malcolm X Park became a destination for radicals.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ "Washington Chapter Official," *The Black Panther*, 26 June 1970, 1.

⁶⁷ See map on page 58.

⁶⁸ "Meridan Hill Park up to be renamed Malcolm X Park" *Washington Evening Star*, 22 June 1969, A1, Col. 1.

The townhouse at 1822 18th street, once the headquarters of the six-month-old National Coalition to Combat Fascism, transformed into a headquarters for an official Panther party. As decreed by the National Headquarters in Oakland, the official Washington chapter excluded white members of the NCCF, who formed a new party, the Patriots. The Patriots, along with representatives from the Young Lords, a revolutionary Puerto Rican group based on the Panther model, formed an alliance with the D.C. Panthers and lived collectively in adjoining town houses in the Shaw/Adams Morgan area of the District for four years.⁶⁹

The first major undertaking of the chapter happened in late June, the opening of a community center on 17th street, less than two blocks from the Third District Police headquarters. For two weeks the Panthers began their process to win over their neighbors and to establish their presence in the Adams Morgan area. The Washington summer continued to grow hotter. The July 4th holiday was right around the corner and friction was growing between the D.C. police and the Panthers. The Black Panther Party's publications calling for the blood of police and songs chanted from Panther gatherings, like "Off the Pigs," got the attention of the Third District officers.

On July 4, 1970, around 10:30 P.M., the Washington Metropolitan Police Department responded to a noise ordinance violation at the location of 1932 17th St NW. Osa Massen, a fifteen year old member of the Party recalled "the one time that there was a police raid just because we were singing 'Off the Pigs.'" The police came up the stairs like storm troopers breaking cement on the stairs. Their justification was that someone threw a brick and hit a cop in the face. No one knew of that

⁶⁹ Jean Linzau M.D. , interview by author, 19 April 1996; Sherry Brown, 20 February 2006.

happening.”⁷⁰ The officer hit with the brick that required stitches to his head soon appeared in the local papers. The differing views on the raid quickly became apparent.

Two different stories of the incident emerged. The chapter was less than two weeks old and chapter members believed that the major reason for the raid on the Panther community center was police desire to intimidate the Panthers. The police contend that “they were in hot pursuit of a felon,” who had assaulted a peace officer. On July 5 the *Washington Evening Star* reported that the incident began after the group would not stop singing “We shall overcome,” and chanting “Power to the People.”⁷¹ Conflicting with the *Washington Evening Star*, the *Washington Daily News* whose readership was predominantly black stated that the group was not singing spiritual songs but quoted a Panther saying, “Who sings that anymore? -We were singing ‘Power to the People- Off the Pigs’. Are the papers afraid to print that?”⁷²

The warrantless raid was violent and chaotic. Several different accounts basically told the story of the Panthers taunting the police and throwing rocks and bottles at the first police that arrived. Someone hit Officer Robinson in the face with a brick, busting his scalp wide open. More officers arrived and one charged into the crowd flailing a nightstick. Most of the Panthers retreated inside their community center, but some still stayed out on the steps and porch taunting the officers. A third group of police arrived and the rest of the men retreated inside. The police then

⁷⁰ Osa Massen, interview by author, 16 February 2006. Washington, D.C., tape recording.

⁷¹ Donald Lott and Harvey Kabaker, “D.C. Policeman Critically Hurt, Panthers Hit,” *Washington Evening Star*, 5 July 1970, 1B, p. 1.

⁷² Ben McKelway III. “Police vs. Panthers: Two Views,” *Washington Daily News*, 6 July 1970, p. 5.

proceeded to break the door down and arrest everyone inside, taking them to Third District Police Headquarters, three blocks away.⁷³

Maurice Laurence, information officer for the local chapter, told the story this way. “The people were so stimulated by the songs, so they sang louder. Then the pigs moved in and we went into the house. Then they kicked in the door and started beating everybody.” A police official said there was “some struggling” as arrests were made.⁷⁴

Maurice Laurence also stated that over eight hundred dollars in cash disappeared during the police raid. The raid coincided with the theft of the monies targeted for the Free Breakfast and Clothing Program. In the *Washington Afro-American*, Laurence was quoted, “These Fascist fools with wrecking hammers and axes in their hands started chasing children, women, and men all over the house like mad slave catchers. It took five or six for every brother. They handcuffed the brothers, threw them on the floor and began their mad terrorist act of beating, stomping, and kicking.”⁷⁵ Throughout Panther literature and interviews, accusations of Fascism and Fascist actions of the federal government sought to symbolize the oppression and heavy-handed justice felt by the Panthers. The Saturday, July 4th raid seemed another instance of injustice to the Panthers, and the claims of Fascist attacks on the D.C. Panthers arose soon after. All the Panthers posted the \$10 collateral and were released from jail on Sunday, July 5th.

The confrontation sparked attention throughout the community and led to a march on the Third Street Police Station on the night of July 4th. The crowd, many

⁷³ Ivan C. Brandon, “Panthers Dispute Charges by Police,” *Washington Post*, 6 July 1970, A4, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Brandon, “Panthers Dispute Charges by Police,” 6 July 1970.

⁷⁵ “20 Arrested at Center; Officer Hurt,” *Washington Afro-American*, 7 July 1970, A1, p. 1,

whom witnessed the raid, was hostile towards the police and marched the few blocks from the Panther Community Information Center. Almost 200 people strong, the crowd wielded rocks and beer bottles. The police set up extra guards and called for backup to control the riotous and dangerous crowd.⁷⁶

Tensions between police and Panther supporters simmered all night although the crowd eventually dispersed by early morning when all the Panthers were released. These demonstrators were determined to block police brutality and warrantless raids. Demonstrators protested how the police broke into the Panther headquarters, beat them up, and arrested them without the due process of law. The new high profile in the community of the Black Panthers was the reason many suspected the police used violent tactics in raiding and searching the headquarters.

The *Evening Star* described the incident two days later, publishing the fact that all the guns taken from the Black Panther Community Center by the police were not registered. Two rifles, a shotgun, and a pistol, along with over two hundred rounds of ammunition were seized. In this article the police declined to answer the charges that arresting officers destroyed personal property, including clothing, furniture, and tape recordings. James Heller, a lawyer for the Black Panther's Washington Chapter, told the *Evening Star* that "it was a unbelievable mess. The place was completely ransacked." A Black Panther named Maxine told the paper that one of her eight year-old daughters was knocked downstairs and her sixteen-month-old baby received a bump on the head.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ben McKelway III. "Police vs. Panthers: Two Views," *Washington Daily News*, 6 July 1970, p. 5.

⁷⁷ "Seized Black Panther Guns Unregistered, Police Report," *Evening Star*, 6 July 1970.

John O'Bryant, Washington's Metropolitan Police Chief at the time, spoke of the incident in these terms. "I don't regard the Black Panther as something exceptional. They do not warrant special concern. What may be considered a threat to other departments is not what we consider a threat here. We deal with demonstrations differently from other departments."⁷⁸ Much of the Panther notoriety, he said, comes from the publicity. "They need confrontation and they're not going to get it here."⁷⁹ He did set up a probe into the allegations of the beatings and the theft of the Black Panther's funds for the Free Breakfast program. Maurice Laurence, spokesman for the chapter, described the probe as useless. Laurence viewed these probes as something that happens "every time a pig takes an oppressive act against the people."⁸⁰ The violent tone and rhetoric that echoed during the summer of 1970 increased the pressure on the Washington chapter.

Marion Barry, head of Pride, chaired the Citizens' Board of the Pilot District Project, an experimental project in which citizens of the Third Police district were given a say in their police services. Quoted in the *Washington Daily News*, Marion Barry announced an investigation into the incident. "The July 4 incident has come to our attention and we are going to find out what happened."⁸¹ Mr. Barry said the Panthers had indicated they would cooperate with his investigating committee. The report was to be submitted to the citizen's board on July 30, 1970. "We'll decide what to do from there. We just want to make sure the police department is doing its

⁷⁸ "Panthers Say Police Took Their Money," *Washington Daily News* 7 July 1970, p.1.

⁷⁹ "Panthers Say Police Took Their Money," *Washington Daily News* 7 July 1970.

⁸⁰ "Panthers Say Police Took Their Money," *Washington Daily News*, 7 July 1970

⁸¹ "Probe Panther Incident," *Washington Daily News*, 14 July 1970, p. 10.

job and that our people are cooperating with them.”⁸² The publicity from the incident landed Willie Dawkins, an organizer of the Washington Chapter, a local television interview with WMAL-TV/7.

In a televised interview on WMAL-TV’s “Newswatch” show which aired Sunday, July 26, 1970, Willie Dawkins stated that the government is “taking away the constitutional rights of black and white people instead of enforcing them.” He recanted historical events to describe these “fascist tendencies,” saying, “in Chicago, not only at the conspiracy trial (of the State’s Attorney raiders of the Panthers who shot up the house, killing two Panthers and wounded seven more), but at the Democratic Convention where they said they would not give their children a voice in the decision-making of the country. In fact, we’ll prosecute and murder them if we have to.”⁸³ While this made for good ratings, the content and militant rhetoric of Dawkins and Lawrence continued to incense local law enforcement. The confrontational tone of these early days of the D.C. chapter resulted in intense surveillance and persecution of the Panthers.

Willie Dawkins, organizer, Jim Williams, coordinator, and Charles Brunson minister of defense, provided the local leadership which oversaw the NCCF transform into an official Black Panther Party during summer 1970. Hilliard himself placed Charles Brunson, a senior Panther member, in charge of organizing and securing the Convention site. In August 1970 he was charged for the unregistered weapons confiscated by the police on the Fourth of July raid. The D.C. police department, the U.S. Attorney’s office and lawyers for the Panthers worked together to avert a

⁸² “Probe Panther Incident,” *Washington Daily News*, 14 July 1970.

⁸³ Willie Dawkins, interview by Vivian Hunt, 26 July 1970, *WMAL-TV Newswatch*, Washington D.C., transcript, National Archives, Washington.

potentially explosive situation. They allowed Brunson, charged with possession of a prohibited weapon, to surrender voluntarily in the Court of General Sessions rather than issue an arrest warrant. The U. S. Attorney explained that the warrant was not issued because, “Experience in other cities indicates they have had major confrontations.” So, “when we have a viable alternative, we should use it.”⁸⁴ The government wanted to avoid another major raid but continue the pressure on the Panther chapter.

Zayd Shakur, Panther deputy minister of information for the East Coast, stated that if a warrant was issued, police will be allowed to search Panther offices or homes “as long as they are accompanied by members of the community, namely the Citizens’ Board of the Pilot Precinct Project and our attorneys.” He also said that “the person that the police are looking for is not in any of our offices or homes” but also “judging from the repressive history meted out against our party and black people here in Babylon, we think it would be stupid and absurd for us to turn over one of our members to barbaric tortures.”⁸⁵ Shakur came down to the D.C. chapter from New York City after the July 4th raid, and guided the response of the Panthers for the next few months. The Panthers continued their belligerent tone for the next six months.⁸⁶

The height of publicity of the D.C. Panthers came in the first months of existence, from June to November 1970. The Panthers were in every newspaper in D.C. and the chapter enjoyed new recruits among local black radicals. The growth of

⁸⁴“Cooperation Averts Panther Confrontation,” *Washington Daily News*, 22 July 1970, p. 8

⁸⁵Washington D.C. Chapter of the Black Panther Party. Press Release. “From Washington D.C. Concerning Pig’s Plans for Genocide,” 20 July 1970. Senator James Eastland files, Chairman of the Commission of the Internal Security of the United States, National Archives.

⁸⁶ Sherry Brown, interview by author, 20 February 2006.

the chapter was problematic because many new recruits were enchanted by the image of the Panthers, and knew little about the Ten Point Platform and the community services central to goals of the party. The Black Panther's major confrontation with the Metropolitan Police happened within two weeks of its formation, and the Washington chapter felt it was necessary to publicly explain to the community and other radicals why it did not have a shoot out with the police. The Black United Front, a rival Black Nationalist organization, questioned the tough talk of the Panthers, and used the raid as an example of Panther bluster and cowardice.

In an open letter to the community the D.C. Panthers responded to the Black United Front. On one side of the letter was drawn an armed Panther holding a bloody machete and a pig's head with a police officer's cap, and while the other side declared the chapter's position on the raid. Entitled "Death to the Fascist Pigs," the letter was distributed with Black Panther Newspapers and outside the community information center and Chapter headquarters. It challenged the rumor that the Panthers were scared of the police.

"Some of our peoples that weren't on the scene are wondering if we violated our principles by not wiping out the first of those gangsters that crashed through our door. Then some of our comrades who weren't at the scene are questioning the order that was given to 'hold our fire until we're fired upon.'" The D.C. Panthers went on:

"We'll kill anybody that stands in the way of our freedom. And because they were able to take four of our weapons and beat us after we didn't shoot, they still can't stop us. How can they?"

We will take a hundred beatings as long as it educates our people on the necessity of arming themselves. Every attack the pigs make brings them closer to their DOOM!”⁸⁷

The flyer was meant to assure Washington’s black community the Panthers were prepared to fight the law. The Panthers were focused on being the most radical, the most revolutionary group in D.C. Under direction of Zayd Shakur, the Panthers continued preaching military revolution. By 1970 the National Committee began to purge its most militant and violent members. The split between Cleaver and Newton began with these purges. Cleaver preached the need for urban guerrilla warfare and Newton declared community organization and education the number one priority. Shakur and his wife, Assata Shakur, left the Panthers in the fall of 1970 to join Eldridge Cleaver’s splinter group the Black Liberation Army, a much more militant and violent revolutionary group comprised of the most militant ex-members of the Panthers. In 1973 Zayd Shakur and a New Jersey State Trooper were killed in a shootout on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike, and Assata Shakur was arrested for the death of the trooper. In 1979 she escaped prison and fled to Cuba, where she currently resides.⁸⁸ The Panthers who gravitated to Cleaver’s group often ended up imprisoned or killed; at the national level the Panthers refocused on community survival programs.

The violent tone and confrontational posture of the chapter kept it in the sights of the Metropolitan Police and the FBI. With Charles Brunson charged, law

⁸⁷ Washington D.C. Chapter Black Panther Party, “Open Letter to the People/Death to the Fascist Pigs!,” July/August 1970, National Archives, Senator James Eastland Internal Security Commission File.

⁸⁸ For more information on the incident see Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, (Boston: Lawrence Hill, 1999).

enforcement continued surveillance and worked on infiltration and building a network of informants to destabilize and destroy the Panthers in D.C.⁸⁹

On September 5, 1970 the plenary session for the Convention began in Philadelphia. Plans were finalized to hold the Convention in D.C. Thanksgiving weekend.⁹⁰ Members of the Washington D.C. chapter of the Black Panther Party continued looking for a location that could accommodate the 7,500-8,000 people expected to arrive for the convention. After meeting with people from almost all of the Washington area's largest places of public assembly, the members of the local Chapter, in cooperation with other groups in the city, requested permission to rent the National Guard Armory for the Constitutional Convention. A three-man civilian board, composed of a Montgomery County businessman, a general in the National Guard, and a representative of Mayor Walter Washington, reviewed the application for the use of the armory and turned it down because the convention conflicted with prearranged activities. Representatives of the Black Panther Party went back to the Armory Board and asked specifically if the convention could be held on Thanksgiving weekend. On October 6th, 1970 Armory head Administrator Arthur Bergman said that the armory was no longer to be used for "rock concerts or organizations such as yours."⁹¹ The powers that controlled the armory were steadfast in their refusal, and the Panthers had little chance to lease the armory, or other large convention hall because of their militant rhetoric and communist platform.

⁸⁹ Citizen Pilot Precinct Board, "Community Intelligence Report about the BPP," August, 1970. Senator Eastland papers, National Archives.

⁹⁰ Flyer for the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention, November 27-29, 1970. Senator James Eastland Internal Security of the United States Commission Files, National Archives.

⁹¹ "Armory board denies Panthers," *Washington Post*, 8 October 1970, C1, Col.1.

That same day the Panthers' application was turned down, Elbert "Big Man" Howard, the National Black Panther Minister of Defense and Editor of the Black Panther Newspaper, called a press conference on the steps of the Washington headquarters to discuss the Armory Board's action. "Why should the Black People of D.C., which is 80% of the population, pay their tax dollars for a facility that exists primarily for the use of white people who live outside the community?"⁹² The establishment's silence on the matter reinforced the feeling among the Panthers that there was little chance to secure the needed large hall for the convention.

Following the denial, a law suit was then filed by the Panthers and their lawyers on the grounds that one of the stated uses of the National Guard Armory is for "conventions" and that to refuse permission to the armory for the Revolutionary Peoples constitutional convention was a violation of the constitutional rights to freedom of assembly. The suit was denied by the D.C. superior court because the Panthers could not prove that a convention hall was necessary for their convention.⁹³ An example of bias against the Panthers by the courts, the ruling reflected the Washington elite's fears of the Panthers and method of the government using all means necessary to sabotage the Panthers' Convention.

At the same time that the Panthers were working on getting the D.C. Armory for the Convention, students representing the Democratic Radical Union of the University of Maryland (DRUM) and the Student Government Association began to negotiate with the University of Maryland administration for use of Cole Field House for the convention activities. Despite growing support of on-campus groups and

⁹² Washington Chapter of the Black Panther Party, "Big Man", Press Release, " Why should D.C. blacks pay taxes?" October 6th, 1970. Senator James Eastland Papers, National Archives.

⁹³ "Armory board denies Panthers," *Washington Post*, 8 October 1970.

individuals, use of the field house was denied.⁹⁴ According to the decision makers, the Panthers were refused because of the potential for violence associated with the Black Panther image.

Even though a guaranteed convention meeting place had not yet been found, groups in Washington took the initiative in organizing housing, food, and transportation which were needed for attendees and convention participants. Anti-War G.I.s, Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, The Youth International Party (YIP), and numerous campus organizations made arrangements for their particular workshops. The Panthers envisioned high-school students, college students, workers, street people, and welfare recipients working to perfect a vision of a new America.⁹⁵ This new vision included participatory democracy, socialist programs, an end to imperialism, racism and social classes, and a more open society with new personal freedoms. The ideal was easy to envision but hard to implement.

Attempts to sabotage the convention were organized by the FBI, the Metropolitan Police, and carried out by law enforcement and local utility companies. The convention was denied the armory and the University of Maryland's Cole Field House. Jim Williams and Elbert "Big Man" Howard from Panther national headquarters scrambled to find a convention hall. The Panthers complained of "a large machine designed to destroy all revolutionary movements in the United States, the Black Panther Party in particular. Because the Convention is scheduled for Washington D.C., the police harassment of the local Chapter of the Black Panther

⁹⁴ "U MD Dismisses Panthers," *Washington Post*, 22 August 1970, C3.

⁹⁵ Flyer for the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention, November 27-29, 1970, Senator James Eastland Papers, National Archives.

party has become heavier as the opening date of the Convention moved closer.”⁹⁶

The police began to arrest the leadership of the Panthers in particular, and used information from the FBI and the intelligence section of the Metropolitan Police department to go after Panthers with the greatest visibility.

D.C. Panther members Willie Dawkins and Robert Schoop were listed on warrants of “Criminal Anarchy” and “Flight to Avoid Prosecution” issued on September 17, 1970 by the District Attorney of New Orleans. The warrants became public one day after a brutal raid of the New Orleans NCCF which resulted in the arrest of 14 members of that committee. Both Schoop and Dawkins had important duties in the organization of the convention, and now had to defend themselves in court, represented by attorneys of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).⁹⁷ The ACLU took the case because it felt the Panthers were being targeted for their political affiliations.

In addition to legal pressure, financial pressure increased against the Washington Chapter. Threats from the gas, electric, and telephone companies insisted that if the bills were not paid immediately on the date due, the utilities would be disconnected and a two hundred dollar deposit would be required to re-install them. This was a much different policy than other customers of the utilities, who often had a two-month window to pay late bills before services were denied. The pressure on the Washington Chapter in the summer and fall of 1970 increased legally and financially.

⁹⁶ “Two Panthers Wanted in Connection with New Orleans NCCF,” *Washington Daily News*, 20 September 1970, p.4

⁹⁷ “Two Panthers Wanted in Connection with New Orleans NCCF,” *Washington Daily News*, 20 September 1970.

The FBI's Counter Intelligence Project (CONITELPRO) used eavesdropping, bogus mail, disinformation, and harassment arrests to deepen the split and create animosity between Panther leaders. The FBI and local law enforcement created intense pressure on the D.C. Panthers, especially by manufacturing threats from rival black revolutionary groups such as the Black Nationalists. The FBI used agent provocateurs and infiltrators to sow dissent in the leadership of Panthers, and advocated violence that often ended in arrest or death.⁹⁸ The Panthers in D.C. had to deal with this persecution of local law enforcement and the strife that afflicted the National Headquarters.

By the end of 1970 the *Black Panther's* national circulation reached 250,000, and the Panthers continued to use the paper to fund the party.⁹⁹ In D.C., the members of the Panther chapter continued to pound the pavement and spread the word. Osa Massen, a sixteen-year-old member of the party recalled selling papers on 14th and H in front of the Waxie Maxie record store, a popular hangout where "everyone" went. "I can remember having conversations with people going in and out of the record store. It really was a good feeling to sell all of them."¹⁰⁰ She stated how "we also had an information table in front of the house where we would sell books or give out information, and I would sometimes sit out there to speak with the people in the community."¹⁰¹ The dedication and devotion of some members began to change the perception of the Panthers as violent militants.

⁹⁸ Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, (Boston: South End Press), 1990, p 41-53.

⁹⁹Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil rights, Black power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven*, (New York: Brandywine Press) 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Osa Massen, interview by author, 16 February 2006.

¹⁰¹ Osa Massen, interview by author, 16 February 2006.

Sherry Brown, the Minister of Information for the D.C. and Baltimore Panther chapters, described competing cultural nationalist organizations in the District, including Stokely Carmichael's All-African People's Revolutionary Party (AAPRP). The AAPRP, Black United Front, and other Pan-Africanist organizations felt the Black Panthers should not associate with SDS and other white leftists, particularly the Patriots. They felt black activists should not look to white activists for help, and "D.C.'s cultural nationalists had a more nationalistic line about black community, exclusively black police, businesses, government."¹⁰² The former Minister of Information of the D.C. Panthers stated his group had a coalition building and international approach; and the Panthers took a lot of criticism in the black community for their cooperation with white radicals.¹⁰³ By fall of 1970 the Black Panther Party leadership supported coalitions with groups working for female and gay liberation, and in the Shaw/Cordozo/Columbia Heights neighborhoods cultural nationalists used these unpopular issues to deter recruits from joining the D.C. chapter and steer them to other organizations.

When asked about the paucity of recruits in D.C., Sherry Brown stated that, "it was a very white-collar, very bourgeois city. D.C. was more of a middle-class city, unlike the Baltimore and Philly chapters that had many more members and had a lot more going on. Baltimore and Philadelphia were blue collar, were more lumpen proletariat folks, and they were the primary recruiting target. Panthers would work with the poorest of the poor. Washington had more government jobs here and had a

¹⁰² Sherry Brown, Minister of Information for Baltimore and Washington Chapter of the Black Panther Party, interview by author, 20 February, 2006.

¹⁰³ Sherry Brown, interview with author, 20 February 2006.

more bourgeois orientation.”¹⁰⁴ The lack of heavy industry, such as the steel mills and ports in Baltimore, made Washington harder to organize. Much of the District’s black workforce was not unionized, and therefore less class-conscious than other industrial cities.

In the fall of 1970 the Panthers sued the Metropolitan Police for the July 4th raid. The Washington chapter lawyers filed a \$1 million dollar lawsuit against the police, and a week later on October 17th all charges against those arrested in the confrontation were dropped, including the charges against Charles Brunson for possession of illegal weapons.¹⁰⁵ The Panthers were sure that they would be raided again, and desired greater firepower. Charles Brunson, a founding member of the chapter and in charge of convention organization, again was jailed on weapons charges from a traffic stop on Interstate 95 in Virginia.

Brunson’s path to imprisonment began with the theft of a Chinese sub-machine gun and a Russian light machine gun from the residence of a Richmond, Virginia gun collector in October 1970. In Richmond, contacts with the Black Panthers in Washington told of the cache, now including German machine guns as well, and Charles Brunson traveled to Richmond to secure the arms for the D.C. chapter. With him was Jacob Bethea, a fellow D.C. Panther. They were arrested on Interstate 95 in Virginia for the crime of transporting stolen weapons and faced trial on May 21, 1971. Brunson and Bethea were convicted with Bethea given eight years and Brunson four years.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Sherry Brown, interview with author, 20 February 2006.

¹⁰⁵ “All Charges Dismissed in Panther Case”, *Washington Post*, 17 October 1970, C1, Col.1.

¹⁰⁶ “Three Convicted in Panther Weapon Case,” *Washington Evening Star*, 7 July, 1971, B3, p. 3.

When Brunson and Bethea were arrested, there was little over a month left to plan for the Revolutionary Peoples Convention. The Panthers resubmitted their proposal for the later dates of November 27, 28, and 29, 1970, and the Armory board again denied their proposal. D.C. Panther leaders Willie Dawkins, Juan Shoop, Jacob Bethea, and Charles Brunson were jailed on various charges, and less inexperienced Panthers had a month to find a hall.

The Black Panther lawyers asked that all nine appellate judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals be present to hear the complaints of the Panthers. A previous hearing with three appellate judges was denied, and the Panthers sought better odds in finding a way to coerce the armory to let them hold their convention there. Panther lawyers claimed that the three-judge panel “has permitted the government to deny access to the only suitable hall in Washington for the conducting of the proposed convention for reasons based on vague fears.” The Panthers were officially denied access to the armory on the first week in November 1970. They had only three weeks to find another location of the convention.¹⁰⁷

Their last choice was the campus of Howard University. The university was disinclined to offer its facilities but reluctantly agreed. Howard University was planning to charge the Panthers \$10,823.06 for the use of the facilities, in advance.¹⁰⁸ The chapter did not have the funds to pay a fee that large and pleaded with the university to donate the use of the campus “to the people.” An unidentified Black Panther Party spokesman told the *Washington Daily News* that the Panthers were

¹⁰⁷ Richard E. Prince, “Panthers Press Armory Bid,” *Washington Post*, 9 October 1970, A7, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ “Black Panthers Want Howard University to Cancel Fee,” *Washington Post*, 22 November 1970, B3, p. 3.

willing to pay \$1,000 in advance and the rest later, but the university rejected the offer. The Panthers had no place to hold the nationally publicized convention.

At the last minute, the Black Panthers received a permit from the National Park Service to hold a rally at Malcolm X Park to tell the delegates that the convention was off.¹⁰⁹ The six months the Panthers had to organize were frustrated by persecution and institutional bias against the radical organization.

Hundreds of delegates from all around the nation converged on Washington on November 27, 1970, to attend the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention sponsored by the Black Panther Party's Washington Chapter. Malcolm X Park was filled with representatives from the Socialist party, the Youth International party, Women's Collective, Young Lords, and the Gay Liberation. Instead of telling the convention to disband, the Panther's Minister of Information, Elbert "Big Man" Howard, announced that they would stay in Washington for three days, or three months if necessary, until they had found a suitable convention hall.¹¹⁰ Sympathetic ministers in the Shaw/Cardozo opened their doors to the arriving activists, many of whom were white. After registering at the All Souls Unitarian Church on 16th and Harvard Street and St. Stephen and the Incarnation Church near the Panther headquarters the delegates were told to canvass Washington's inner city. By mid-afternoon, the delegates organized into workshops, divided up by region. They

¹⁰⁹ Phil Hiltz. "Panther Convention has a Time but No Place," *Washington Daily News*, 28 November 1970, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ Ivan C. Brandon and Jim Mann. "Panthers Hold Rockfest, Meet Today," *Washington Post*, 28 November, 1970, A3, p. 3.

concentrated on important issues and worked for different social policies to create a better society.¹¹¹

Huey Newton, freed from prison in August 1970, made a rare public appearance at the convention, and gave a speech at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church on Saturday, November 28. He declared that the Black Panthers' immediate goal was "revolutionary intercommunalism, under which oppressed communities around the world would cooperate to destroy capitalism."¹¹² Newton told the delegates that they would get a "rain check" on writing a new constitution. The Panther leaders, however, gave the delegates a draft of the proposed constitution written by the participants of the Philadelphia Plenary session in September 1970.¹¹³

Students across America descended on Washington, some with the hope of massive, revolutionary change and some with the intent just to escape and enjoy the bands. The convention was marked with confusion. It began when the Panthers had trouble finding a meeting place and continued when the gay liberation movement and the women's liberation movement threatened several times to split from the convention because of perceived homophobic and misogynistic comments by speakers. The lack sufficient public space made it impossible for participants to meet and discuss issues. These logistical issues destroyed the concept of drafting new documents and mandates, and the Convention ended informally when it disbanded for lack of attention. Delegates to the Black Panther-sponsored revolutionary convention

¹¹¹ Ivan C. Brandon and Jim Mann. "Panthers Hold Rockfest, Meet Today," *Washington Post*, 28 November, 1970, A3, p. 3.

¹¹² Ivan C. Brandon and Jim Mann, "Panthers End D.C. Convention" *Washington Post*, 30 November 1970, C1, Col.1.

¹¹³ Hugh Wyatt. "Unconvened Panthers Go Home," *Washington Daily News*, 30 November 1970, p. 21.

left Washington with a draft constitution that had little work done to it, and with little else to show for two days of apparently aimless activity on the sidewalks along 16th street NW. According to newspaper sources between 3,000 and 5,000 predominantly white young persons arrived from across the United States but the planned workshops never developed because Panther organizers were unable to obtain an indoor convention site.¹¹⁴

The Panthers' meeting, to give blacks a bigger role in government, was a complete flop. Delegates started leaving almost immediately, and many of the young whites that stayed through the last night left angry and disappointed at the disorganization of the Panthers. These delegates felt that the Panthers should have solved the logistical problems. The problems of the Panthers highlighted the struggle that pitted integrationists and liberationists, such as the Panthers, against black nationalists and Pan-Africanists, including some black intellectuals and the Black Muslims. The majority white turnout for the Panther convention reinforced the idea that the Panthers were working in partnership with whites. Panther rivals like the Afro-American Radical Peoples Party, led by Stokely Carmichael and Reverend Douglas Moore's Black United Front used the cooperation with the white radicals as a issue to isolate the Panthers from the Washington D.C. African American community.

The Panthers were not in friendly territory. Washington had the most middle-class orientated blacks of any city in the United States, and had no heavy industry. The federal and city government's were the biggest employers, and most blacks had a

¹¹⁴ Ivan C. Brandon and Jim Mann, "Panthers End D.C. Convention" *Washington Post*, 30 November 1970, C1, Col.1.

middle-class political orientation in D.C. African-Americans in Washington were among the wealthiest in the country, second only to the black community in Los Angeles.¹¹⁵ Also, radicalized civil rights groups SNCC and CORE folded in D.C. before they did in other cities, establishing a precedent for the failure of militant organizations like the Panthers.¹¹⁶

"This town has always had an appeal to the black middle class," says demographer George Grier. "Even when this town was segregated that held true. There were more good, decent jobs here for blacks than most anywhere else."¹¹⁷ Uncle Sam was hiring African Americans in jobs more or less commensurate with their training long before the private sector adopted even the rhetoric of equal opportunity. The presence of Howard University also helped. The "black Harvard," was the first historically black university to offer a full complement of professional schools, from law to dentistry to medicine, to go along with its broad range of undergraduate programs. This strong black middle class resisted revolutionary change, and supported conservative politicians and ministers.¹¹⁸

Howard University's famous alumnus Stokely Carmichael broke with the Panthers in 1969, terming the party "dogmatic" and its tactics "dishonest and vicious."¹¹⁹ Considered a hero on the campus of Howard, the Panther message of coalition building with whites fell on deaf ears of Howard students, many who believed more in Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism's goal of unity of Africans and the

¹¹⁵ Ben-Chieh Liu, *The Quality of Life in the United States, 1970, Index, Rating, and Statistics*, (Kansas City, MO: Midwest Research Institute, 1973), 23.

¹¹⁶ Paul Delaney, "Panther Parley Failure: Problems at Convention in Washington Reflect Philosophical Rift Among Blacks" *New York Times*, 30 November 1970, p. 27.

¹¹⁷ Michael A. Fletcher, "The Structure of Change," *Washington Post*, February 1, 1998, A 3.

¹¹⁸ Fletcher, "The Structure of Change," *Washington Post*, February 1, 1998.

¹¹⁹ Kwame Ture, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*, (New York: Scribner, 2005, p. 78-83.

elimination of colonialism and white supremacy in Africa differed from the international goals of the Black Panthers. Newton referred to these differences in the Washington black community in his speech at St. Stephens. He maintained that the Panthers had a you-cannot-go-home-again attitude about Africa, and said that the party was internationalist rather than nationalist.¹²⁰

To top off the failure of the convention, fourteen Panthers were removed from an American Airlines flight 75 to Los Angeles on Sunday, November 29, allegedly for being “boisterous and unruly” as the plane prepared to take off from Dulles International Airport. A stewardess didn’t want to fly with the considerable swearing and shouting Panthers, the plane turned around and the fourteen Panthers were forcibly removed and issued refunds.¹²¹ This last bit of bad press became the salt in the wounds for the Washington chapter, and the criticism heaped on the chapter became intense from the embarrassed National Headquarters.

The convention was a turning point for the Washington chapter, a low point in which the rebellious glamour of the party had worn off, and the work of social change took center stage. The change from a fiery militant party to involved community activists was the result of the directives of the national office, law enforcement pressures, and rival Black Nationalists in the District. In addition, the problems of dealing with congressionally appointed city government officials made it difficult to organize the urban poor through city government structures. The D.C. Panthers

¹²⁰ Paul Delaney, “Panther Parley Failure: Problems at Convention in Washington Reflect Philosophical Rift Among Blacks,” *New York Times*, 30 November 1970, p. 27.

¹²¹ Stephan D. Caplan, “Fourteen Removed from Plane as “Unruly,” *Washington Post*, 30 November 1970, C1, Col. 1.

evolved into an independent-minded community support organization until all party members were called to Oakland in early 1973.

The newspapers of Washington described the Panthers in starkly different terms, with the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Evening Star* siding often with law enforcement sources and rival militants when reporting about Panther activities during the six months of June to November 1970. Black newspapers like the *Washington Daily News* or the *Washington Afro-American* supported Panther views, and interviewed members of the D.C. Panthers decried the obstacles that were unique to the Washington chapter. The experience of the Panthers in their first six months of existence was manic, with all of the problems and persecutions intertwined with the militant rhetoric espousing fighting the law. The following six months the Party calmed its tone and began its survival programs among D.C.'s poor, and aimed to change its image as a troublemaker.

The militant posture the Panthers took in the first months of existence exacerbated the tension from law enforcement, rival cultural nationalist groups, and neighbors who viewed the Panthers as excessive. Continued pressure from these groups, combined with criticism and factionalism from the national headquarters, modified the Panthers actions and their focus, and a much different Washington Chapter of the Black Panther Party emerged.

D.C. PANTHERS SHIFT TO COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

The Washington chapter of the Black Panther Party regrouped from the failure of the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention. During the winter of 1970-71 membership in the chapter steadily decreased, and the revolutionary rhetoric lessened. The Panthers set up and initiated programs after the debacle of the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention passed. The most important program the Panthers set up was the Free Breakfast program in the poor neighborhoods of Shaw/Cardozo and Anacostia. The feeding of children before school gained the party credibility in the black press of D.C. and the Panther community center on 17th street operated the first Free Breakfast Program. The next year the Panthers expanded the program to other locations in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Northeast Washington. The Panthers also set up a Free Bussing to Lorton Prison program, which allowed those without a car to visit incarcerated city residents jailed twenty miles south in Lorton, Virginia. The Angela Davis People's Free Food Program was a food bank for the neighborhood poor that began in 1971, and eventually the People's Free Health Clinic based in the blighted Anacostia neighborhood.¹²²

At the national level a major split divided the Black Panthers after the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention. Loyalties to party leadership were shaken when Eldridge Cleaver broke with Oakland and while in Algeria began the international section of the party, soon to be renamed the Black Liberation Army that advocated urban guerrilla warfare. Newton and Seale denounced the "treason," and

¹²²Jim Woodson. "Helping Out in Face of Fascist Oppression," *The Black Panther*, Vol. VIII, No. 13, 17 June 1972, p. 7, 16.

changed focus to education and political organization. Still a revolutionary party, the Panthers shift to community programs was important to lay the foundation for the eventual revolution. This split led to the eventual crumbling and fracturing of the party.¹²³

By 1972, the Black Panther Party of Washington D.C. had opened the People's Free Health Clinic in the basement of the Johenning Baptist Center at 4025 9th St SE. At this time the membership of the party had decreased from a high of one hundred members in 1970 to thirty-five or forty members. Health coordinator Catherine Showell described the clinic for a reporter, stating "We aren't going to shoot anybody." The physician in charge of the clinic, Dr. Jean Linzau, taught at Howard University.¹²⁴

"I was working on setting up free health clinics in Mississippi, working as the Medical Director of the Howard University Mississippi Project." stated Linzau. "I returned late in 1971 and was contacted by the Panthers to see if I would help set up a free health clinic in D.C. I volunteered and looked at the new home of the free clinic. The basement was filthy, and had to be remodeled for the clinic. The medical equipment was mostly donations and old rejected stuff. Several doctors volunteered."¹²⁵

"The worst part of the clinic was that we never had the right drug for the disease. We would get our drugs from pharmaceutical companies that would hand out promotional 'samples.' Therefore we were always in desperate need of drugs.

¹²³ Hugh Pearson. *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, (New York: Addison-Wesley), 1994, p 270-296.

¹²⁴ John Saar. "Health Clinic is Opened By Panthers," *Washington Post*, 21 May 1972, C1, p. 1, 7.

¹²⁵ Jean Linzau, M.D. interview by author, 12 April 1996, Washington D.C.

The clinic did help out people that would of gotten sicker if there was no place to go if you had little or no money.”¹²⁶ The Panthers’ free health clinic represented their commitment to the community, and the remaining members of the Panthers were extremely active in the D.C. community. From clothes to rides, from breakfast to baby sitting, from food to health care, the Panthers established a survival network for many of the District’s poorest residents. The Black Panthers were credited for understanding the needs of its community, and lived in the communities they helped support. Ron Clark, a young supporter of the Panthers, described the leader of the D.C. Panthers, Jim Williams, as the “Marxist Guru” who always viewed society in class terms. He also practiced what he preached by living communally with other Panthers.

When asked about the Panthers’ living conditions Dr. Linzau replied, “They did take care of each other. They lived in an enormous building on 4th street and all of them lived together. The women and the men all had sex with each other. I remember when the clinic would close and they would all line up to take shots to cure the sexually transmitted diseases they all caught from the same woman. They didn’t use hard drugs, and asked for complete secrecy with their medical histories, for fear of government agents accessing them. Therefore all their medical records were labeled by a code which only I had the master key.” The government continued its war on the Panthers and the secrecy of Panther medical records was just one of the precautions the Panthers took against government intrusion. Panthers had a vigorous process to weed out government agents and informers, and had little trust of outsiders. They continued to focus on community organization and services, but

¹²⁶ Jean Linzau, M.D., interview by author, 12 April 1996.

assumed a raid by law enforcement was an eventuality and fortified their living quarters and headquarters with metal doors and reinforced windows.

Linzaou stated “I never got paid, but they invited me to their complex on 4th street to eat and talk. I would go over to their complex and enjoy relaxing conversation and meals with them.”¹²⁷ The Panthers accepted Dr. Linzaou for his volunteer work at their clinic, and his interaction with the D.C. Panthers intimately depicts them. Linzaou stated that he never saw weapons but was sure they were there. The D.C. Panthers also were very paranoid about the government and about their own central party and after the split the group was rife with purges. “They never knew who was going to report you to whom.” Dr. Linzaou said that the D.C. chapter was also very interested in “communalistic capitalism” where they could make some money for the group as a whole. They wanted to “empower the poor people of society.” He enjoyed the Panthers’ company and knew that they would always protect him from others. “They were really trying to make a difference in this community.”¹²⁸

The Washington Chapter also supported other radical groups in Washington. The American Indian Movement, champions of Red Power, took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building for six days close to Nixon’s reelection in November 1972. By the fifth day of the occupation, Election Day, one of the things that troubled federal forces was a rumor that the four-story building was wired with explosives. The rumor gained traction when the leaders of the takeover held a joint news conference on the steps of the BIA on November 6, 1972. The leaders of the

¹²⁷ Jean Linzaou, M.D., interview by author, 12 April 1996.

¹²⁸ Jean Linzaou, M.D., interview by author, 12 April 1996.

takeover and the D.C. Black Panthers stood in solidarity against law enforcement, on the eve of Nixon's reelection. Jim Williams, the Washington Panther chapter head, stated the Panthers supported the Indian demands but declined to say if or how many Panthers were being added to the Indian forces. Standing next to him was Russell Means, the leader of the American Indian Movement's Trail of Broken Treaties. "If we go, we're going to take this building with us. If we go, this building is not going to be here- There's going to be a helluva smoke signal," Russell Means boasted.¹²⁹

Tension abated because the administration tried to avoid a confrontation on the eve of the election. The Indians abandoned the building after being guaranteed money and safe transport by the Nixon Administration. Before they left, they also ransacked the building and caused over two million dollars in damages.¹³⁰

In 1972 a synopsis of the Panthers was published in the *Washington Evening Star*, describing how they metamorphosed into a party with less militant proclamations and more involved in securing the party goals of education, political and economic freedom for black people. In June 1972 the Panthers initiated a program to provide free rides to the elderly to and from local banks on the first of the month when welfare and Social Security checks arrived.¹³¹ Charles Brunson, still active in the chapter and freed from prison, stated "While the Panthers nationally were doing great things politically, here in D.C. we were producing a new image for

¹²⁹ *Trail of Broken Treaties: BIA, I'm Not Your Indian Anymore*, (Roosevelt, NY: Akwesasne Notes, Mohawk Nation, 1974) p. 77-85.

¹³⁰ *Trail of Broken Treaties: BIA, I'm Not Your Indian Anymore*, (Roosevelt, NY: Akwesasne Notes, Mohawk Nation, 1974) p. 77-85.

¹³¹ Jacqueline Bolder. "Panthers Shelve Militant Image," *Washington Evening Star*, 9 July 1973, B3, p. 3.

the Panthers.”¹³² This new image was one of community activism, with volunteerism the main focus of the Panthers.

Anita Stroud, also a longtime member of the party, explained, “those who left the party did so because all the romanticism disappeared when we stopped making headlines, and the military dress disappeared, and the flame died.”¹³³ The smaller and more dedicated Black Panther Party of 1972 differed significantly from the violent militant group who attacked police officers with bottles and bricks in 1970. The Panther programs continued, and the publicity of the first six months quickly quieted down after the Panther’s failed convention. The Panther support of the American Indian Movement’s takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs by Jim Williams was the last major confrontational display of the Panthers’ in Washington, and after November 1972 the Washington Black Panther Party’s last appearance in the local media was when the leaders were summoned to headquarters and ordered the party disbanded and moved to Oakland.¹³⁴ Dr. Linzau described the end of the party as inevitable, and thought the clinic was going to stay open for only a few months anyway. “It was only open for a few months and closed that winter.” The programs were slowly dismantled and the community looked to other groups to help out where the party left off.¹³⁵

The remaining members of the Washington Chapter moved to Oakland in the spring of 1973, and left behind the struggles in Washington. Panthers blamed D.C.’s strong law enforcement agencies and the burgeoning black middle class which had

¹³² Bolder, “Panthers Shelve Militant Image,” *Washington Evening Star*, 9 July 1973.

¹³³ Bolder, “Panthers Shelve Militant Image,” *Washington Evening Star*, 9 July 1973.

¹³⁴ Sherry Brown, interview by author, 20 February 2006

¹³⁵ Jean Linzau, M.D., interview by author, 12 April 1996.

resisted the efforts to form a chapter for three years. The strong cultural nationalist radical groups of D.C. added to the difficulty recruiting, and the lack of city government structures and forums also contributed to the Panthers failed attempt to organize for a revolution.

The confrontation on July 4th, 1970, when the chapter was only two weeks old, foretold an escalation of hostilities between the Panthers and law enforcement. The debacle of a convention later that year, combined with Bethea and Brunson's conviction on weapons charges, made many lose respect for the Party.

In the years 1971 and 1972 the Panthers made numerous attempts to change their violent image by focusing on their community programs, but the image of the Panthers came primarily from the National Headquarters. The leadership of the Party was stricken with confrontations and purges, and many members became disillusioned by the infighting of the leaders. Jim Williams, the loyal captain of the D.C. Panthers, was expelled from the party for a short while in 1972 in one of the many purges by national leadership. He said of the chapter in 1972, "We had no real influence in raising the consciousness of the black community, that is the point where we, the Panthers, failed."¹³⁶

The Black Panthers of Washington D.C. failed in recruiting for the revolution, and also failed organizing an historic convention where a new version of the American Constitution was to be drafted. The great success of the Panthers in D.C. was the tradition of community activism that the Panthers inspired and the impact the Panthers had on poor families of D.C. who benefited from the Panthers' actions. The violent militaristic rhetoric the Panthers spouted in the first months of existence in

¹³⁶ Bolder, "Panthers Shelve Militant Image," *Washington Evening Star*, 9 July 1973.

D.C. shifted to grassroots educational, political, and social programs. These programs had much more influence on the D.C. community as a whole than any violent bluster from a press release or interview, and the legacy of the Panthers in D.C. is community service, which many surviving members still practice.

EPILOGUE

The building that formerly housed the Black Panther Party Headquarters in Washington D.C. no longer stands. In its place, just south of the newly revitalized Adams Morgan area is a community center run by the District. It seems fitting that the headquarters was leveled and in its place a center constructed that accentuated all the good and supportive ideals of community. The Washington Panthers were summoned by the national leadership of the Panthers to go to Oakland in early 1973, and some members of the Washington chapter still reside in California. Charles Brunson now works with anti-poverty groups in Sacramento, California, and Sherry Brown spent nine years in Oakland until the Party finally collapsed in 1982.

Elbert “Big Man” Howard said that he “visited the Washington chapter often back in the day. I worked with the leadership as well as members of the rank and file. Jim Williams was in charge of the chapter. He has passed on. I can tell you the chapter was very strong and made an impact on the community”.¹³⁷ Howard is active in the Black Panther Alumni association, and lectures around the country about the legacy of the Black Panthers.

Activists like Marion Barry and Ron Clark, while not officially members, sympathized with the Panthers and work today with Washington’s disadvantaged. Dishonored by drug and tax prosecution, Marion Barry continues to be reelected in D.C. politics in part because of the anti-poverty work he piloted during the years of the neighboring Panther chapter and his support of Washington D.C.’s poor black

¹³⁷ Elbert “Big Man” Howard, Editor of the Black Panther Newspaper, email interview with author, 27 February 2006.

community. Councilman and four-term Mayor Barry described his anti-poverty work as his great passion, and fellow sympathizer Ron Clark admired Black Panther captain Jim William's as the "Marxist Guru" who described the issue of class conflict in layman's terms.¹³⁸

D.C. Panther Osa Massen reflected "the party taught me social responsibility at an early age. This early activist training followed me all of my life where on some level I have been of service to the people."¹³⁹ D.C. Minister of Information Sherry Brown stated that community service was the goal of the Panthers. "You joined the party because you wanted to uplift the communities. I don't see that as a change. That's why I joined the Black Panther Party, because I thought that traditional civil rights organizations were not doing enough, and I wanted to uplift my community."¹⁴⁰

Robert Rippy, the founder of the cultural nationalist Panthers, served three terms in federal prisons for drug or drug-related offenses; while serving he numbered among his acquaintances the Watergate burglars G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt and the spy Jonathan Pollard. Today, Rippy lives in Upper Cardozo, where he joined a program that trains public housing residents to help their neighbors protect their health. "The city government now ain't nothing but a bunch of consultants," he says. "Anybody can evaluate something and see the problems. We need to see the solutions."¹⁴¹ Many D.C. Panther members and sympathizers turned to community activism and local volunteer positions to continue the message of the party, "Power to the People."

¹³⁸ Ron Clark, interview by author, 5 February 2006.

¹³⁹ Osa Massen, interview by author, 16 February 2006.

¹⁴⁰ Sherry Brown, interview by Author, 20 February 2006.

¹⁴¹ Michael A. Fletcher, "The Structure of Change" *Washington Post*, February 1, 1998, A 3.

The Washington chapter of the Black Panther Party tried militancy, and the Washington Metropolitan Police surveilled, raided, and arrested the Panthers members. New problems arose from the failure the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention and the split between the Cleaver and Newton faction polarized the Panthers. Fragmentation of the national leadership made the D.C. Panthers feel they had more control over their programs because little direction emanated from Oakland.

The dedicated and remaining Panthers invested themselves in the Washington community, inspiring new activists and programs supported by the newly formed City of Washington government. The Free Breakfast Program inspired the D.C. government to offer it in their elementary schools, and the Panthers and other radicals pushed for charter schools that could create their own curriculum. The D.C. Panthers sprouted in Washington during a period in which many wealthy D.C. blacks moved to the suburbs, and became a transition organization for the programs needed but not performed by the government. City government projects like the Neighborhood Spending Programs and Neighborhood Citizen Oversight Boards gave poorer blacks greater control over their communities; the Panthers also inspired food banks, public transportation, and clothing donations to help the underprivileged.

Because of the massive failure of the convention which drove many uncommitted Panther members away, the remaining revolutionary activists refocused their efforts to first and foremost assist the D.C. poor and then they sealed their legacy as dedicated community activists rather than violent rebels bent on the overthrow of the system.

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