
American Exported Black Nationalism: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, and the Worldwide Freedom Struggle, 1967-1972

by

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For the most part, the image of American black nationalism in the twentieth century depicts it as the product of foreign influences that extended from Marcus Garvey and Franz Fanon to Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung. Such images create the impression that African-Americans were greatly influenced by foreign contacts with little impact or contribution of their own. This essay answers two basic questions. First, in what ways did American black nationalist organizations, specifically the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party (BPP), contribute to the concept of a worldwide freedom struggle in the late 1960s? Second, how were the efforts of these groups received abroad?

While nationalism often is defined as loyalty to a native country, with black nationalism, the nation can consist of the black people who live in a particular country, as in the United States. Black nationalism also can be defined as a desire for a separate geographical nation within a country, or as a feeling of community with other blacks in the world—an extension of pan-Africanism. Still, black Americans who exported black nationalism not only sought community with other blacks in the world but also supported and sought kinship with other ethnic groups engaged in similar struggles like the Cubans, Vietnamese, and Koreans. This feeling of community, however, was not limited to expressions of solidarity with the third world, but was evident in the treatment and influence of American black nationalists abroad.

In 1967, SNCC formed an alliance with the Black Panther Party that placed the two organi-

zations at the forefront of militant black protest in the United States. Founded in 1960 by students seeking to coordinate protest activities, SNCC labored for six years in the nonviolent struggle for integration and civil rights in the southern United States. By 1966, however, SNCC abandoned non-violence as a tactic and integration as an objective and began to espouse a new militancy that called for black power. Meanwhile, in Oakland, California in 1966, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and others who sought a new revolutionary black organization, formed the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The BPP projected many different images ranging from a political gang to a responsible community-based organization. The BPP used strategies of political education and community organization to create a wide range of programs designed to help community members develop new attitudes of self control and power in their own community.

After forging an alliance with SNCC in 1967, the BPP became more international in its outlook, and members appointed Stokely Carmichael to prime minister and James Forman to minister of foreign affairs. The BPP benefited from the national and international celebrity of its new allies—especially Stokely Carmichael—and thus became a more recognizable. Indeed, a 1970 poll taken by Market Dynamics found that black Americans in New York, San Francisco, Detroit, Baltimore, and Birmingham considered the BPP the third most effective group behind the NAACP and the SCLC during the previous two years. The survey further revealed that 62% of the people polled admired what the BPP was doing. They also predicted that the BPP would be the only

black organization that would be effective in the future.¹

While the BPP borrowed heavily from the revolutionary literature of the third world, it also contributed to the growing concept of a world wide freedom struggle in the late 1960s. Members of SNCC and the BPP attempted to link their ideological struggle with struggles in the third world. For example, Stokely Carmichael redefined his call for "Black Power" into an appeal for pan-Africanism. Huey Newton contributed the idea of "intercommunalism" and asserted that imperialism had reached such a degree that sovereign borders were no longer relevant and that oppressed nations no longer existed; only oppressed communities within and outside artificial political borders existed. Members of the BPP used this concept as a rallying cry for an international coalition of oppressed peoples to fight against American and western imperialism.²

At the same time, the BPP in particular attempted to make the Marxist literature of third world revolutionaries relevant to the struggle in the United States. For instance, a BPP work assignment instructed members to read the chapter on "Communists" in Mao Tse Tung's *Red Book* but to "substitute the word communist with the word revisionist or revolutionary." Members were further instructed to record in "however many words it takes you to explain what you feel this chapter means to you," and encouraged to apply relevant Maoist solutions to their own particular problems in the United States.³

Between 1967 and 1972, the BPP had a far reaching impact on foreign shores as well. As members sought solidarity with third world struggles for independence, they exported a unique brand of American black nationalism that was evident in the goals and objectives of foreign revolutionary groups. In addition, they inspired fear in unfriendly governments that American black nationalists would ignite flames in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

The BPP also tied black liberation to an international struggle for freedom and independence and pledged leadership and unity with

oppressed peoples of the world. Representatives of SNCC and BPP abroad pledged revolutionary solidarity with all groups engaged in the struggle against imperialism, racism, capitalism, and fascism.

Hoping to bolster international ties and prestige, leaders in SNCC and the BPP linked illegal activities in the United States to a worldwide revolution against imperialism and oppression, and often portrayed acts of crime and domestic terrorism as proof that they were engaged in a revolution in America. During a visit to Cuba in July 1967, Carmichael told his hosts that "[i]n Newark we applied war tactics of the guerrilla for our defense in the cities."⁴ In an interview with the German publication *Der Spiegel*, Carmichael identified bank robberies as one source of the BPP's financial support:

There are three ways to get something: to work for it, to beg for it, or to take it. We are using all three methods. For instance, there may be bank robberies in the United States and more and more often by blacks . . . since blacks are responsible people, they hand a good part of the money to the organizers of the revolution. This is the third method after all, America also has taken everything it owns today.⁵

While in Cuba in 1967, Carmichael conducted a similar interview with Mario Mendez, editor of the Mexican magazine *Sucesos* and commented on the state of relations between SNCC and the BPP and the Puerto Rican Independence movement:

The one thing we must begin to do is to exchange fighters so that we can begin to understand the different areas where the imperialists live. For example, we should begin to exchange fighters with people of Africa and Latin America who are fighting for their liberation and they should begin to exchange with us, so we can work on an international system of warfare.⁶

Thus, Carmichael forwarded an ideology that called for international revolutionary cooperation in the struggle against imperialism.



Unidentified Black Panthers ejected from a 747 at Dulles Airport (VA). Copyright Washington Post; Reprinted by permission of D.C. Public Library

While SNCC and the BPP often linked urban rioting to acts of guerrilla warfare, the federal government was often ambiguous on the importance of black nationalist involvement. For instance, the 1967 Kerner commission that investigated the causes of the black riots in America concluded that “[w]e can not measure with any precision the influence of these organizations and individuals in the ghetto.”⁷ Yet, one year later, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover proclaimed that the BPP was the number one threat to the national internal security, thus bumping BPP leaders to the top of the bureau’s agitators list, and initiating various illegal counter intelligence ploys against them. Ironically, the BPP had not been listed as a target when the FBI launched Cointelpro, the FBI’s code name for its secret counterintelligence operations. However by 1972 when the program officially ended, the BPP was the subject of 233 out of 295 counterintelligence actions—or 79% of the total. The bureau also worried about the BPP’s foreign activities and, in addition to domestic counterintelligence measures, initiated a top-secret support program, Counterintelligence and Special Operations, to monitor the BPP’s foreign contacts and disrupt those contacts through misinformation.⁸

Nevertheless, Hoover’s classification of the BPP greatly enhanced the Panther Party’s image as a revolutionary group. Government fears heightened in 1970 when agent provocateur Thomas E. Mosher testified before a Senate subcommittee that the Black Panther Party was directly responsible for fomenting violence and domestic terrorism in the form of assaults, police ambushes, sabotage, armed propaganda, and prison liberations. The editors of *US News and World Report* and *Readers Digest* tantalized readers and added to black nationalist prestige with tales of their revolutionary activities in “Inside the Revolutionary Left,” “Who Are the Terrorists among Us,” and “Terrorism Is Developing into a Form of Total War.” While assistant FBI director William Sullivan downplayed the specter of a full-fledged guerrilla war, he readily acknowledged that acts of guerrilla warfare were “certainly being perpetrated.”⁹ Reports charged that bombings alone were responsible for twenty-five million dollars worth of damages, and that assaults against police rose and accounted for twelve dead and fifty seven wounded in the first half of 1971 alone. In the aftermath of a prison revolt, which left 43 people dead, the New York State commission on Attica confirmed Mosher’s observations

and found that the influence of the Panthers was a pervasive factor that led to the prison riot in September 1971.¹⁰

Members of the BPP were not limited to expressions of solidarity and attempted to take active positions of leadership in the international freedom struggle. For instance, in August 1967, SNCC sought to intervene on behalf of Achkar Marof, chair of a United Nations committee, who was detained by Houphouet Boigny, president of



Huey Newton on the *David Frost Show* in May 1971. A major rift occurred between Newton and Eldridge Cleaver in 1970 which split the BPP. Reprinted with permission by the *Baltimore Afro-American*

the Ivory Coast. Appealing to Boigny's sense of black nationalism and international brotherhood, SNCC charged that the further detention of Marof "in light of the armed revolutionary struggle now occurring in South Africa and Rhodesia is indeed a setback to the African Liberation movement and a bonus for the forces of colonialism and apartheid to which your movement has declared itself in opposition."¹¹

Black nationalists employed various forms of propaganda to assert their international leadership. At the International Seminar on Apartheid, Racial Discrimination and Colonization held in Lasaks, Zambia in the summer of 1967, a SNCC member delivered a position paper

that boldly attempted to establish SNCC's credentials as the "[v]anguard of the struggle against American racism." In Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, SNCC representative John Wilson affirmed the organization's support for the Vietnam liberation struggle. Wilson informed the general body that "[i]t is not our job to give our brothers in arms advice . . . it is our job to disrupt American society by any means necessary. The duty of a revolutionary who finds himself captured in the heart of imperialism is to destroy that imperialism by any means necessary so that it cannot carry its aggression to other people of color around the world."¹² African American revolutionaries promised to help their comrades overseas by occupying and destroying United States imperialism at the source.

International revolutionary organizations took the promise of America black nationalists and revolutionary groups seriously and often initiated contact with SNCC and the BPP for support. For example, in response to an invitation by the Movement for Puerto Rican Independence (MPI), Carmichael traveled to San Juan, Puerto Rico, in January 1967 to sign a protocol of cooperation with Juan Mari Bras, leader of the MPI. After signing the agreement, Bras proclaimed that SNCC and the MPI were "[i]n the vanguard of a common struggle against US imperialism."¹³ The formal agreement signaled an international cooperation between revolutionary organizations that fought a common enemy.

After Huey Newton was released from prison in 1970, he announced that the BPP's number one priority would be to recruit an African American unit to fight with the National Liberation Front, popularly known as the Vietcong. The proposal prompted NAACP president Roy Wilkins to ponder why "a young black American, as smart and articulate as Huey Newton could be so overcome with the anguish of a people 9,000 miles from the United States that he downgrades the suffering of his own people in the slums of Los Angeles or in the shacks of rural Alabama?"¹⁴ Nevertheless, Madam Binh, the foreign minister of the provisional revolutionary government of South Vietnam, took Newton's call seriously. In

1971, Binh sent an urgent communiqué that alerted the BPP about the escalation of the American war effort in Vietnam. The text of the wire read "Alert you/ Laos invasion with tens of thousands US Saigon, Thai troops/ action intense, US Air Force/ urgently call on you to mobilize peace force, your country check US dangerous venture Indochina."¹⁵

The United States government reacted seriously to the revolutionary movement and the far reaching impact that black nationalists had on America's reputation and image abroad. When BPP communications secretary Kathleen Cleaver warned West German officials that "the foundations have been laid for a people's army" that would overrun racist West Germany as well as the United States, the federal government revoked the passports of Cleaver and several other important party members. In addition, when professed communist Angela Davis was brought to trial for alleged involvement in a shoot out that left a California circuit judge dead, the United States government expressed concern about Davis' international celebrity and invited fourteen Russian scientists and legal experts to attend the trial as first hand observers. The invitation was meant to show that a black revolutionary could receive a fair trial in the United States, yet it also underscored the influence and impact that the activities of black nationalists had abroad.¹⁶

The federal government took active steps to prevent the Black Panthers from linking with other revolutionary groups in the western hemisphere. For example, the FBI aggressively moved to prevent a proposed alliance between Front du Liberation de Quebec (QLF) and the Black Panther Party. In October 1972, an anti terrorist squad of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police met with representatives of the FBI to discuss the possibility of disrupting a proposed meeting between the two revolutionary organizations. Members of the QLF and BPP had become acquainted in 1968 after Panther chair Bobby Seale attended the Hemispheric Conference to End the Vietnam War held in Montreal. Aware that they might be targeted for disruption, the QLF arranged to hold the meeting in an old barn that had been converted to an inn.



Huey Newton and family [wife Gwen and her two children, Jessie (8) and Ronnie (10)] in March 1976 during exile in Cuba. He was not allowed to speak to the media, so Gwen Fountaine Newton made all statements. *Reprinted with permission by the Baltimore Afro-American*

In the process, QLF frustrated efforts by the FBI and Canadian anti terrorist agents to place electronic listening devices at the location. Members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party were often keenly aware of government attempts to disrupt their activities.¹⁷

At times, the BPP's spirit of independence brought it into conflict with other entities seeking to be in the vanguard of an international freedom struggle. Richard Gibson, editor of a Washington weekly, maintained that the Russians feared the spread of militant black nationalism from "the black ghettos of the United States" to Africa and pressured the African National Congress to denounce Stokely Carmichael. Gibson asserted that "the fact that the ANC should turn so violently against Carmichael can only be seen as further evidence of the mounting fear of the Russians and their African proteges that Chinese militancy and Afro-American black power concepts say shut the door on white revisionist guidance for the African liberation movements."¹⁸ In the United States,

William Patterson, chair of the Communist Party of the United States, declared that the Panthers were not responsible for lifting the black liberation movement to an international level because "the Communist Party of the USA had already done that." In response, Huey Newton noted the lack of government concern over communist organizing and declared that "the Black Panther Party had accomplished more in three years to mobilize the masses than the American Communist Party in 20 years." Thus, black nationalists became embroiled in many of the tensions that permeated the revolutionary world.¹⁹

Between 1968 and 1972, those who traveled under the banner of black nationalism found refuge in supportive international communities during times of trouble. As early as 1959, black militant Robert Williams, who advocated violent self-defense, fled the nation after defending black protesters in North Carolina and secured political asylum in Cuba. Less than a decade later, he was joined by BPP minister of information Eldridge Cleaver who eventually set up an international wing of the BPP in Algeria to further cultivate ties with international revolutionary groups. Although the initial efforts of Cleaver and the BPP proved to be fruitful, those efforts remained controversial. For example, during negotiations with prisoners and officials at Attica, New York, BPP representatives including Bobby Seale caused a great deal of controversy when they offered prisoners political asylum in one of four foreign nations, either North Korea, North Vietnam, Algeria, or Congo-Brazzaville.²⁰

Cuba and Algeria were two of the most popular destinations for black nationalists abroad. Throughout the 1960s, the Cuban government in particular remained openly sympathetic and friendly to black nationalists in the United States. Robert Williams remained there for almost a decade. Moreover, Cuban leader Fidel Castro encouraged black leaders to visit Cuba at Cuba's expense, and impressed many black nationalists when he visited Harlem during a trip to New York to speak before the United Nations in 1968. In addition, the writings of Castro and Che Guevara became standard reading in most BPP political education

classes. In 1969, the United States government expelled two Cuban diplomats after determining that they had engaged in "improper activities involving United States domestic affairs." Although State Department spokesmen refused to elaborate, rumors circulated that Cuba had provided financial assistance to the BPP.²¹

By 1969, however, the relationship between Castro and the BPP began to sour in part because of pressure from the United States government but, more directly, because of abuses to Cuban asylum by non-political refugees and Cuban foreign policy considerations. From the beginning, the United States government strongly chastised Castro about the haven he had established for American criminals. By 1969, Castro began to express concern about the steadily increasing number of "non political" fugitives seeking asylum in Cuba: many of whom were accused of crimes in the United States or had skyjacked planes to the island nation. In late spring 1969, Castro curtailed access to Cuban airstrips and announced that political refugees were no longer welcomed. Castro further suggested that Cleaver and other refugees wanted for alleged crimes seek asylum elsewhere.

Subsequently, Cleaver relocated to Algeria where he was the subject of a negative FBI mailing campaign that sought to divide the Black Panther Party leadership. By 1970 the BPP had clearly split into two factions: one led by Newton and the other by Cleaver who continued to control the international wing of the Party. Still, the split damaged foreign support since the international wing had little tie to BPP activities at home. Violent confrontations between the Cleaver and Newton factions within the Party further hurt the Panthers' image.

Meanwhile, Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver were plagued by the same problems in Algeria that they had faced in Cuba. Following the skyjacking of a western air line plane to Algeria in June 1972, the Algerian government granted the skyjackers political asylum and balked at returning the \$500,000 dollar ransom that the air line paid for the safe return of the passengers. Under intense diplomatic pressure from the United States

to return the hijackers, the Algerian government announced that all hijackers and fugitives who had arrived in the country in recent months would be placed under house arrest. The Algerians imposed severe restrictions on the BPP's growing community in exile and, when Kathleen returned to Algeria, placed her under house arrest. Kathleen agreed to return to the United States, and upon her arrival told reporters that "[t]he life of Eldridge Cleaver is in danger. He has been threatened prior to this with a very bad fate."²²

Stokely Carmichael also began to experience problems in 1970. Less than ten days after his appearance before a Senate subcommittee on his overseas activities in March 1970, the BPP denounced Carmichael as a double agent operating on behalf of the CIA. A month later, Carmichael became embroiled in yet another controversy. Trinidadian students invited him to speak on the application of black power in the Caribbean, but the Trinidadian government banned Carmichael from entering the country. Instead, Carmichael declared that he would visit Guyana. Still, the Trinidadian government reinforced its decree and warned air lines not to allow Carmichael to pass through Trinidad.²³

While the BPP was able to convince many in the international community that they represented a force of great potential within the United States, in reality, the Panthers represented very little threat. Still, to argue that the BPP was no threat at all creates the distorted image that the Panthers were merely the hapless victims of federal harassment. Such a view diminishes the image of the Panthers as a truly revolutionary group in word and in action. The activities of SNCC and the BPP between 1967 and 1972 warranted the attention of the government, but not the illegal actions that accompanied that attention. Understanding the nature of the BPP's efforts to internationalize its appeal goes a long way to producing a more centered view of the Panthers as a revolutionary organization.

Attempts to link the ideological and physical struggle of black nationalists in the United States with freedom struggles abroad initially were received favorably, yet FBI counterin-

telligence initiatives and political in fighting within the BPP eventually endangered those efforts. Nonetheless, through expressions of solidarity and by redefining certain criminal activities as domestic revolutionary initiatives, for a time, the BPP stood at the forefront of the worldwide freedom struggle against imperialism.

ENDNOTES

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