



## kathleen cleaver

Since the enactment of the Patriot Act, anti-terrorism legislation passed by Congress in October 2001, people have been concerned about the way our civil liberties are being compromised. Kathleen Cleaver, the former Black Panther, is one of them—and with good reason. In the 1960's she was the communications secretary for the party when it was under attack by the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover, then the director of the agency, declared that the Panthers were “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” and launched a campaign to undermine it. By the time the smoke cleared, many members of the Black Panthers had been killed by law-enforcement officers and others were incarcerated, often on trumped-up charges. Others still—including Cleaver—were emotionally scarred. But in 1981, she returned to school and earned a law degree. Today, at 58, this grandmother of six teaches students at Emory and Yale universities what real justice is.

She said

**The Black Panther Party represented concrete action** against racism and domination. We fed people, provided them with medical care and took families to visit loved ones in prison. These were activities that people could identify with. You didn't have to be a radical to support a breakfast program. Contemporary copycats just stand on corners and holler, “Bill Clinton go home! White people out of Harlem!” But what does that mean when people need direct, constructive social action?

**The Black Power Movement was incredible because** it was an exuberant, creative burst of imagination. It spread across everything in our culture—from literature to education to politics. Nothing was unaffected. It was like an earthquake.

**The shootings, the arrests were constant.** The first SWAT team was created in Los Angeles, and their first major attack was against the Panthers. The assault against us was an unrelenting campaign. Hoover wanted to shut us down by 1969. That didn't happen. But by 1971 we had been virtually destroyed, and almost 30 of us had been killed.

**After all the funerals,** you try to reconstruct a life that won't put you in harm's way. You move to a new town, go back to school, reconnect with friends that you had left behind when you were in this revolutionary movement that scared the s--- out of them. You try to make your life look like something that approaches normal. But that's all it is. Something that looks normal.

**To really start healing,** you have to go to the root of it all, where your trauma and anxiety come from. I've helped put together healing retreats for women who had been in the Black Panther Party, women who had been living underground, who had been tortured, who had been exiled. We had meetings at places near the sea, and we talked about everything that happened to us—and all the people we lost to death or prison. I think it was very helpful for all of us. Still, if you're suffering from being caught up in a failed revolution, it's an ongoing issue. You can't ever say that you're fully healed. I'm just glad I can say I'm not crazy.

**I decided to become a lawyer while watching the Watergate hearings.** I looked at all those people who worked for the president. They were lawyers; the president was a lawyer. So I figured there must be something they knew that I needed to know because they were the ones who could make decisions. And lawyers could go into prisons and bring people out. I thought that was really cool.

**No one will ever convince me** that there are things women can't do. My role models were the women of the Civil Rights Movement. They were dynamic and fearless. And they were in charge. □

INTERVIEWED BY asha bandeled