

# What we don't learn about the Black Panther Party — but should

## Newsia Article

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Word Count 1199

Level MAX



*Image 1. A teacher leads his students with the black power salute and slogans at a Black Panther liberation school on December 20, 1969. Photo from Getty Images.*

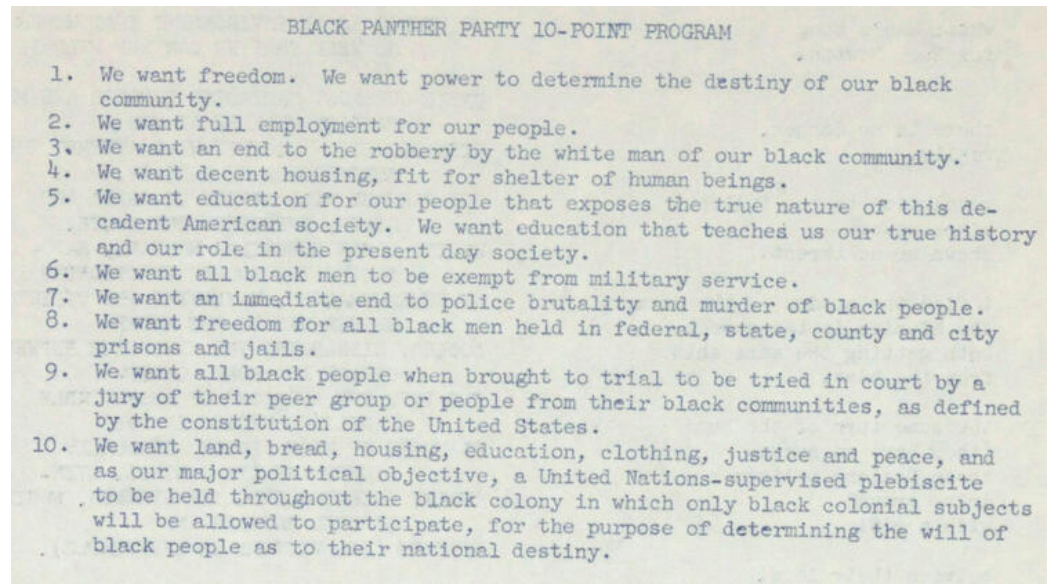
The Black Panther Party was born in Oakland, California, in 1966, a little over 50 years ago. Its history holds vital lessons for today's movement to confront racism and police violence, yet textbooks either misrepresent or minimize the significance of the Black Panthers.

The first issue of the Black Panther newspaper, which at its height had a weekly circulation of 140,000 copies, asked, "WHY WAS DENZIL DOWELL KILLED?" Helping Dowell's family demand justice in Richmond, California, was one of the first major organizing campaigns of the Black Panther Party. Anyone reading the story of Denzil Dowell today can't help but draw parallels to the unarmed black men and women regularly killed by the police. The disparity between the police's story and the victim's family's, the police harassment Dowell endured before his killing, the jury letting off Dowell's killer, even the reports that Dowell had his hands raised while he was gunned down, eerily echo the police killings today that have led to the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Yet when we learn about the early years of the Panthers, the organizing they did in Richmond — conducting their own investigation into Dowell's death, confronting police who harassed Dowell's family, helping mothers in the community organize against abuse at the local school, organizing armed street rallies in which hundreds filled out applications to join the party — is almost always absent. Armed with a revolutionary socialist ideology, as the Panthers grew, so did what they organized around. They fought in black communities across the nation for giving the poor access to decent housing, health care, education and much more.

This local organizing that Panthers engaged in has been erased in the textbooks, yet it is precisely what won them such widespread support. By 1970, a Market Dynamics/ABC poll found that black people judged the Panthers to be the organization “most likely” to increase the effectiveness of the black liberation struggle, and two-thirds showed admiration for the party. Coming in the midst of an all-out assault on the Panthers from the white press and law enforcement, including FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s claim that the Panthers were “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country,” this support is remarkable.

## **The Textbook Version Of The BPP**



*Image 2. The Black Panther Party platform, better known as the Ten Point Program, arose from the Black Panthers’ assessment of the social and economic conditions in their community.*

A few of the major textbooks don’t even mention the Black Panthers, while most give the organization only a sentence or two. Even the small number that do devote a few paragraphs to the party give little context for their actions and distort their ideology.

Textbooks often associate the Panthers with violence and racial separatism. For example, Teacher Curriculum Institute’s “History Alive! The United States” reads,

Black Power groups formed that embraced militant strategies and the use of violence. Organizations such as the Black Panthers rejected all things white and talked of building a separate black nation.

While ignoring that the Panthers believed in using violence only in self-defense, this passage also attempts to divide the Panthers from “nonviolent” civil rights groups. The Panthers didn’t develop out of thin air, however, but evolved from their relationships with other civil rights organizations, especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The name and symbol of the Panthers were adopted from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an independent political organization SNCC helped organize in Alabama, also called the “Black Panther Party.” Furthermore, SNCC allied with the Panthers in 1968 and while the alliance only lasted five months, it was a crucial time for the growth of the Panthers.

The passage from “History Alive!” also incorrectly paints the Panthers as anti-white, erasing their important work building multiracial coalitions. Most famously, Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton organized the Rainbow Coalition including the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Young Patriots — a group of poor Southern white migrants. The Black Panthers helped the Patriots set up their own community service programs. In California, the Panthers made an important alliance with the mostly white Peace and Freedom Party. The Peace and Freedom Party ran Eldridge Cleaver for President in 1968 in an attempt to provide an anti-war, anti-racist alternative to the Democratic Party. An editorial in the Black Panther explained: “The increasing isolation of the black radical movement from the white radical movement was a dangerous thing, playing into the power structure’s game of divide and conquer.”

Some textbooks erase the socialist character of the Black Panther Party. Holt McDougal’s “The Americans,” reads, “Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded a political party known as the Black Panthers to fight police brutality in the ghetto.” While the textbook later acknowledges other things the Panthers advocated, by reducing the reason for their founding to fighting police brutality, “The Americans” profoundly diminishes the important ideological basis of the party. More clearly than any other national civil rights organization, the Panthers linked the fight against racism with the fight against capitalism. As Newton explained in the Black Panther, reprinted in “The Black Panthers Speak,” “We realize that this country became very rich upon slavery and that slavery is capitalism in the extreme. We have two evils to fight, capitalism and racism. We must destroy both.” The Panthers understood that black people could not achieve socialism on their own and their work building multiracial anti-capitalist coalitions flowed from that analysis. In fact, the Panthers developed an education requirement for joining the party that consisted of reading 10 books relating to black liberation and socialism.

Several textbooks also blame the Panthers for the end of the civil rights movement, while ignoring or downplaying the role the FBI played in destroying the party. In a later section in “The Americans,” the authors write, “Public support for the civil rights movement declined because some white people were frightened by the urban riots and the Black Panthers.” What textbooks like this fail to mention, is the decline in public support was a result of the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) of the FBI. According to scholar Ward Churchill in “Agents of Repression”:

. . . the Black Panther Party was savaged by a campaign of political repression, which in terms of its sheer viciousness has few parallels in American history. Coordinated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation . . . and enlisting dozens of local police departments around the country, the assault left at least 30 Panthers dead, scores of others imprisoned after dubious convictions, and hundreds more suffering permanent physical or psychological damage. Simultaneously, the party was infiltrated at every level by agents provocateurs, all of them harnessed to the task of disrupting its internal functioning. Completing the package was a torrent of “disinformation” planted in the media to discredit the Panthers before the public, both personally and organizationally, thus isolating them from potential support.

Cyclorama and  
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American Identity

With minimal and problematic coverage in the history textbooks, fortunately, there are a few materials for teachers that explore the crucial history of the Black Panther Party and its relevance for today.

*For more resources on the Black Panther Party from the Zinn Education Project visit: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/collection/black-panthers/>*