



AN ESSAY

# FBI Files Enable Balanced Research on the Black Panther Party

*Historian Joe Street explains how ProQuest History Vault provides new perspectives and deeper insights for the full-length history he is currently writing about the Black Panther Party, the radical African American organization formed in Oakland, California, in 1966.*

## Looking back at the Black Panther Party in the “post-civil rights era”

The BPP achieved international notoriety in the late 1960s for a series of events that came to international attention. In May 1967, a delegation of Panthers entered the California State Capitol building, ostensibly to protest an imminent legislative bill that would prevent loaded firearms being carried in public and that the BPP considered a direct assault on its members’ rights to self-defense.

Described by a hostile media as an ‘invasion,’ the event catapulted the BPP into the forefront of the African American freedom struggle. Less than six months later, the BPP’s co-founder, Huey P. Newton, was arrested and charged with the murder of an Oakland police officer. Newton’s case soon became an international cause célèbre and cemented the BPP’s position as a major protest organization.

Drawing inspiration from Marxist intellectual traditions, popular protest, and black nationalism, the BPP rose to prominence just as the African American civil rights movement was losing momentum. It helped to transform left wing and African American political activism in the late 1960s and 1970s while attracting an unprecedented level of state repression.

A concerted FBI and police campaign facilitated the collapse of the BPP in the mid-1970s as it attempted to recalibrate African American political activism through an acceptance of black capitalism and a turn towards local electoral politics. Irrespective of its demise, the BPP left an indelible mark on African American grassroots politics and protest. Its history offers many insights into the role of radical organizations, racial injustice, and indeed police brutality in the post-civil rights era.

## Seeking balanced insight and perspectives on the BPP

One of the major problems in studying the BPP surrounds the relationship between the Party and the law. A number of commentators such as Hugh Pearson, David Horowitz, and Kate Coleman emphasize the BPP's criminal activities over all of its other activities, suggesting that the major FBI COINTELPRO that targeted and helped to dismantle the BPP was fully justified and appropriately robust.

Since the publication of their works in the 1990s and early 2000s, a raft of BPP historiography emerged which emphasizes the BPP's social activism, often focusing on the histories of BPP chapters outside the San Francisco Bay Area. These histories offer a useful counterpoint to the narrative defined by the BPP critics, but in removing Oakland from the equation, overlook the Party's most important chapter.

Recent years have also witnessed a number of sympathetic chronicles of the BPP's history. What unites these studies is a reliance on sources that are friendly towards the BPP: oral histories from former activists, publications from the radical press (including the BPP itself), and the BPP's own organizational records. The authors suggest that police and FBI records of the BPP are too tainted with disgust for the BPP to be reliable sources.

Yet, as the historian and filmmaker Roz Payne suggests, FBI records offer valuable insights into the inner workings of the BPP, provided they are used carefully and critically.

The top document is a memo from SAC San Francisco (157-601) dated 11/26/68. It is addressed to the Director, FBI (100-448006) and is marked with 'REC 26' and 'Director, FBI (100-448006) (4)'. The subject is 'COUNTERINTELLIGENCE PROGRAM BLACK NATIONALIST - HATE GROUPS RACIAL INTELLIGENCE (BLACK PANTHER PARTY)'. The memo is dated 'Reurlet 11/15/68'. It contains the following text: 'The anonymous mailing of a factual letter to Kathleen Cleaver, as suggested by you, is approved. Handle the above in such a manner that the mailing is not traced to the FBI. Hand print the note on unwatermarked paper and mail in a commercially purchased envelope. Advise the Bureau of all tangible results obtained by this counterintelligence action. WDN:re/l/rs'. There is a stamp on the left that says 'NOV 28 1968' and another that says '54 DEC 1968'. The bottom document is a memo from SAC Los Angeles (157-1751) dated 11/29/68. It is addressed to the Director, FBI (100-448006) and is marked with 'REC 26' and 'Director, FBI (100-448006)'. The subject is 'COUNTERINTELLIGENCE PROGRAM BLACK NATIONALIST - HATE GROUPS RACIAL INTELLIGENCE'. It contains the following text: 'Re Los Angeles letter to Bureau dated 9/25/68. I. OPERATIONS UNDER CONSIDERATION The Los Angeles Office is currently preparing an anonymous letter for Bureau approval which will be sent to a member of the "US" organization in which it will be stated that the youth group of the "US" organization is aware of the "US" members, in retaliation, have made plans to ambush leaders of the BPP in Los Angeles. It is hoped this counterintelligence measure will result in an "US" and BPP vendetta. Investigation has indicated that the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) has been furnishing the BPP with financial assistance. An anonymous letter is being prepared for Bureau approval to be sent to a leader of PFP in which it is set forth that the BPP has made the whites in such meetings that when the armed rebellion comes the whites in white. It is felt that this type of a letter could cause considerable disruption of the association between the BPP and the PFP. In order to cause disruption between the BPP of Oakland, California, and the PFP of Los Angeles, an envelope is being prepared for Bureau approval which appears to be from the Bureau (BPP) to Los Angeles. WDN:re/l/rs'. There are several stamps and handwritten notes on this document, including 'NOV 28 1968', '54 DEC 1968', and '11/29/68'.

## FBI files shed light on unfolding of controversial events

ProQuest History Vault contains a plethora of FBI files that are essential to the study of the BPP, including surveillance files on principal BPP figures Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, and the BPP in a wider sense, as part of the FBI's campaign against so-called 'Black Hate Groups.' The FBI's activities in Los Angeles are particularly controversial, since they resulted in the deaths of at least two BPP members.

Aware that the BPP was competing with a rival organization, US (a pro-black community group founded by Maulana Karenga), for the hearts and minds of young African American activists in the city, the FBI set about exploiting this rivalry, using forged letters, infiltrators, and other methods to inflame tensions.<sup>1</sup> According to the FBI's agents, US infiltrated a BPP rally on November 3, 1968. Their discovery apparently led the BPP to discuss eliminating US outright.<sup>2</sup>

Three weeks later, J. Edgar Hoover cheerfully informed his agents that 'The struggle [between US and the BPP] has reached such proportions that it is taking on the aura of gang warfare with attendant threats of murder and reprisals.'<sup>3</sup> Less than two months later, US members (who were rumored to be in cahoots with the FBI) murdered BPP activists Alprentice Carter and John Huggins in broad daylight.

In my own research, the documents in History Vault enabled me to construct a fuller timeline of these events than has previously been published. As a UK-based academic with limited research funds, visits to the United States to collect archival material are at a premium; thanks to Northumbria University's subscription to the History Vault, I was able to make repeated 'visits' to the FBI files.

1. SAC Los Angeles memo to Director, FBI, October 14, 1968 in FBI COINTELPRO Black Extremist file 100-448006 section 4; SAC Los Angeles memo to Director, FBI, November 29, 1968 in FBI COINTELPRO Black Extremist file 100-448006 section 5.

2. G.C. Moore memo to W.C. Sullivan, November 5, 1968 in FBI COINTELPRO Black Extremist file 100-448006 section 4.

3. Director, FBI memo to SAC Baltimore (copies to thirteen other offices), November 25, 1968 in FBI COINTELPRO Black Extremist file 100-448006 section 5.

# Enhancements make it easier to target critical information

Additionally, the History Vault collection is more voluminous than those available via the FBI's own website and its contents are fully searchable. The sections of COINTELPRO Black Extremist cited above total over 500 pages; the entire file contains thousands of pages of material. That these documents are easily searched enables keyword, date, and subject searches, considerably reducing the time taken to cross-reference each document.

This process is essential when assessing the activities of the FBI. It enables better analysis of the speed with which field agents responded to Hoover's missives, thus enabling more accurate assessment of the latitude they were given as operatives and developing a fuller appreciation of Hoover's investment in disrupting the Black Panther Party. This adds depth to our understanding of the FBI's organizational dynamics, especially the ways in which agents played on Hoover's racism to earn themselves kudos for creating a situation in which the FBI's enemies were fighting each other. Such outcomes enabled the agents to gather more time, money, and energy to involve themselves in further activities.

Combining the Black Extremist files with those on individuals such as Newton and Cleaver also demonstrates the breadth of the FBI's operation; combined date and subject searches of these files reveal how the FBI pivoted between Los Angeles and Oakland to cause maximum disruption, exploiting tensions in one location to heighten those in other locations, and taking advantage of the BPP's poor intraparty communication, playing individuals off against each other. As this suggests, historians are now better able to relate the organization culture of the FBI to the demise of African American political radicalism, adding new dimensions to our understanding of the BPP.

# Accessing essential information that would otherwise be out of reach

ProQuest History Vault also provides material that has formed the basis of dozens of student essays and dissertations at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The civil rights movement is consistently fascinating to students, and the History Vault collections underpin numerous dissertations each year at Northumbria. For example, in 2017, one student developed a dissertation on the development of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's use of nonviolence in its major demonstrations between 1961 and 1963. Using the records of the SCLC available through History Vault, the student was able to trace internal discussions between SCLC leaders and activists over the success and failure of nonviolent direct action in the two major campaigns in Albany, Georgia and Birmingham, Alabama.

Without access to History Vault, this dissertation would have been impossible.

Our undergraduate students are not eligible for research funding, so the student would not have been able to visit the British libraries that hold the SCLC records on microfilm, let alone the originals.

The sheer vastness of the SCLC records, which encompass thousands of documents, is daunting even for postgraduate students, let alone undergrads. Through careful use of the History Vault search functions, my student was able to zoom in on particular areas of the archive, resulting in a tightly focused dissertation.

My students have consulted History Vault for essays and dissertations on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (again using FBI surveillance material), the activism of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (through the SNCC files), the actions of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations on civil rights, the activist Robert F. Williams, and the Freedom Rides of the Congress of Racial Equality.

The collage consists of several historical documents:

- SCLC Newsletter:** A page from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference newsletter, dated April-May, Number 10. It features a table of contents listing items like 'Editorial', 'Martin Luther King, Jr.', 'Dr. King Writes', 'Ed Clayton', 'Selma Day By Day', 'New Year Projects', and 'SCLC, SNCC Unite'.
- 50,000 Make History In 50-Mile Selma To Montgomery March:** A newspaper article with a photograph of a large crowd of marchers. The text describes the historic event and mentions the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- SCLC Continues Economic Withdrawal Against National Industries In Alabama:** An article by James Griffin discussing the economic boycott strategy of the SCLC.
- INTERSTATE FLIGHT - ASSAULT WITH INTENT TO COMMIT MURDER WANTED BY FBI LEROY ELDRIDGE CLEAVER:** A large 'WANTED BY FBI' poster for Leroy Eldridge Cleaver, featuring mugshots and identifying information.
- Mugshot of Leroy Eldridge Cleaver:** A black and white mugshot of Cleaver, with a signature 'Leroy Eldridge Cleaver' written below it.

## An unrivaled opportunity to engage with historical research

History Vault has also facilitated some postgraduate dissertations. Two in particular made extensive use of the FBI records pertaining to the BPP during 1968, the year when the organization was arguably at its peak. Both students were interested in the 'Free Huey' campaign that dominated the Party's activities. With Newton facing the gas chamber, the BPP enlisted thousands of people both in Oakland and across the globe to press for his release, a campaign that was ultimately unsuccessful but which boosted the ranks of the BPP to hitherto undreamed of levels.

Frustrated with the BPP's own reporting of the campaign, both students sought out the FBI's observations. Again, using History Vault, they constructed chronologies of the BPP's activities but became more interested in the discrepancy between the BPP's and the FBI's accounts, ending up with dissertations that probed the BPP more acutely but that also questioned the conclusions drawn by the FBI on the BPP's own activities.

Their conclusions on this issue added important analytical heft to their dissertations. Such collections offer our students an unrivalled opportunity to engage with advanced historical research, conducting the same inquiries of the same materials that professional historians continue to use. Without ProQuest History Vault, I have no doubt that our students would struggle to produce such excellent work.

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Visit [proquest.com/go/blackhistory](http://proquest.com/go/blackhistory) for additional resources, including Alexander Street Black Panther videos



Joe Street was educated at Sheffield University between 1996 and 2004. He joined Northumbria as Senior Lecturer in 2009 after stints in the History Departments at Sheffield University and the University of Kent. Joe's research focuses on the nexus between politics and culture in the twentieth century, with a particular focus on the African American political struggle of the 1960s and 1970s and the San Francisco Bay Area after World War Two.

More information on Dr. Street is available at: <http://ow.ly/julJ30dMKFG>

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