Black Panthers and Civil Rights: Elaine Brown Speaks

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Black Panthers were formed in 1966.

She stated, “We need to figure out what we really need to do, not only black people, but peoples of all colors. This is not a free and equal society. There is something wrong here and we need to remedy that, so that we can create a society that everyone can live with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

A few examples she gives are that “69% of the prison population is black, yet we only represent 13% of the overall population in America, the black rate of education is at the lowest level, and black people have the highest rate of poverty than any other minority in America. Black children living in single parent households 80% are living in poverty. These figures are often times deny many Americans to ask what is wrong with black people today? Why are you in jail? Why are you poor? What is wrong with you people today? So she suggests that we look at the objective factors as to what is wrong with black people today.

Brown pointed out that, “In history, black people were the only people that came here unwillingly, and that we were brought here as slaves to provide a mass production which would give rise to economic stability in this country. We were torn apart from family, from land, no more music, no more culture, no more flag. We were left with absolutely nothing and had no tie to the land to the community to their own families here.”

For the rest of her lecture, Brown spoke about the “so-called freedom of the slaves after the Civil War. She stated that most did not know who they were, or even their names—everything had been stolen by the slave owners. Moreover, they did not have the means to begin to find out. Many would return to farming as sharecroppers, and would continue to be exploited because they did not know how to read and were given no rights. She stated that it was like this for decades, until the civil rights movement began, which is when her former group, the Black Panthers came into being.

The Black Panther party was a black militant political organization originally known as the Black Panther Party For Self-Defense. It was founded in Oakland, California by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in October 1966. Newton became the party’s defense minister, and Seale its chairman. The Black Panthers advocated black self-defense and the restructuring of American society to make it more politically, economically, and socially equal.

The Black Panthers proclaimed their goal in a ten-point platform which included demands for full employment, education and training, and an end to police brutality. A summary of their goals read: “We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.”

Through the years of the late 60’s the Black Panther party grew in size and developed many chapters throughout the country. As racial tension increased around the country the FBI blamed the Party for riots and other incidents of violence. The FBI launched a program called COINTELPRO ("counterintelligence program") designed to weaken the efforts to unify black militant groups such as SNCC ("Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee") and the Panthers. FBI agents sent anonymous threatening letters to Panthers, infiltrated the groups with informers, and worked with various police departments to weaken the party. Over the years more attacks from police further weakened the party. Also during this time Brown began moving up the ranks within the party, and in 1974 with the expulsion of co-founder Seale, Brown was named chairman of the Black Panther party. Later in the year when Newton was arrested he tried to avoid prosecution by fleeing to Cuba. Shortly after leaving the country Newton appointed Brown the Minister of Defense for the Black Panther Party.