What Really Happened to the 1960s

How Mass Media Culture Failed American Democracy

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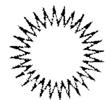

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the time in police repression and the massive American bombing of Vietnam.[19] Just as the American bombing of North Vietnam was meant as a form of communication to leaders in both North and South Vietnam, the state violence that political theorist Sheldon Wolin recalled as pervasive in the sixties era was also meant to communicate something: namely, that protesters' argument against the violence inflicted upon the Vietnamese had no standing in legitimate discourse. Even nonviolent actions taken in opposition to the state's authority were typically delegitimized and labeled as "violence" or "violence-causing."

Finally, exclusion from legitimate media discourse heightened the need to assert one's identity outside that discourse. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, "We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us."[20] As noted below, one can find repeated references to the empowering liberation of "fighting" or violent action among members of Weatherman, particularly in their formative stages prior to their self-inflicted 1970 townhouse explosion.

In effect, the media spectacle of the late 1960s was an invitation to increasing militancy and/or violence on the part of any groups sharply critical of society's mainstream. As the Skolnick report further predicted, "The [antiwar] movement's current mood of disenchantment with existing institutions will both generate new forms of militancy and spread into new segments of the American public."[21] Not only were the Panthers and the militant edges of the New Left notable icons of this kind of expressive politics, but radical feminists, the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords, and the Gay Rights movement burst onto the scene with forceful and riveting expressions of their own radical outsider identities.

These late-sixties activities share three notable common denominators. They were mostly carried out by young people. Their politics were in some sense radical; that is, they targeted for change some fundamental characteristic of the wider society, which placed their argument and analysis clearly outside the bounds of legitimate discourse. And they engaged in some form of expressive militancy. While their relatively youthful membership (some ranging into their thirties) may have contributed to their unrestrained behavior, their youth cannot explain their militancy, since only these relatively few young people, and even relatively few whose politics were radical, took this path of militant expression. What seems crucial is that the political perspectives of all these groups lay outside the boundaries of media discourse. Their perspective was just too "extreme" to be taken seriously within legitimate discourse. In effect, they and others who shared their outsider perspective were not viewed as capable of explaining their own cause; they were simply ignored or summarily dismissed unless they acted out their militancy, their anger. In these circumstances and given the perception that militant action produced palpable effects and captured media attention, it is hardly surprising that some responded with violence, particularly if they had been recipients of violence themselves.

Media One-Dimensionality: The Black Panthers — All Violence, All the Time

Rather than seeing the Panthers as the vanguard of a visible, guerrilla insurgency in the country, they might be better understood as practitioners of an insurgent form of visibility, a literal-minded and deadly serious kind of guerrilla theater, in which militant sloganeering, bodily display, and spectacular actions simultaneously signified their possession and yet real lack of power.

—Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 2004

During the 1960s, America's inner cities were violent places, especially for young African American and Latino males whose only readily available gathering places were street corners. As illustrated in books like Claude Brown's *Manchild in a Promised Land*, Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, and Elliot Liebow's *Street-Corner Society*, the street corner was the scene for watching the action, dealing drugs, playing the "dozens," and just "hangin' and jivin'." It was precisely this turf that was persistently targeted by the cities' largely white and often physically brutal police forces. As if to demonstrate their power over the inner city, police would cruise the streets and then, spotting a group of black males on a corner, pull over, throw the young men up against the wall, search them, verbally abuse them, and in some cases beat them.[22]

It was in this environment in the early sixties that the voice of Malcolm X began to reach these young men, urging them to have a sense of pride, to stand up for themselves. Malcolm's voice had the ring of authenticity, coming as it did from a man who had lived and hustled on the city streets before finding in the Nation of Islam a powerful message of empowerment. For Malcolm, the Nation of Islam rejected not only the self-destructive path of drugs but what Malcolm argued was a self-defeating path of nonviolently appeasing the white power structure.

Thus it was in 1966 that two black students at Whitman College in Oakland, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, decided to organize the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Over the course of their history, the Panthers' trajectory would bear the imprint of their origins, particularly the volatile and contradictory personality of Newton. This occurred in part because the mass media were from the start preoccupied with the Panthers' most charismatic leaders, their inflammatory rhetoric, their guns and threatening uniform of black berets and leather jackets, their aggressiveness toward police, and their subsequent encounters with violence.

During the Panthers' formative years from 1966 to 1969, violence, criminality, and aggressive language dominated all national newsmagazine articles, with most conveying the clear but inaccurate impression that the Panthers were

the aggressors in all their clashes with police.[23] This media attention, in turn, helped attract to the Panthers a volatile and diverse population of young blacks from the streets, including some who, unsurprisingly, had criminal records. In his account of his life as a Panther, Flores A. Forbes recalled, "While I had read about the Panthers that had been killed by the police . . . what I really had on my mind was the black leather jacket and how I would look in one with my black beret cocked to the side with my afro sticking out."[24] Yet the radical content of the Panthers' critique of American institutions and imperial foreign policy was virtually invisible, or at best caricatured by the mass media. The same could be said of the powerfully effective grassroots organizing of chapter leaders like Fred Hampton in Chicago or the range of community service and community-organizing activities adopted by several Panther chapters by 1968. In effect, from the beginning, the Panthers were frozen in a one-dimensional media image of a violent criminal gang spouting leftist revolutionary rhetoric.[25]

Newton and Seale's initial "Ten-Point Platform" called for black self-determination, full employment, trial by juries of their peers, freedom for black "political prisoners," and an end to the urban black community's "robbery by the white man." Point Seven demanded, "We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people."[26] In late fall 1966, in an effort to get the inner-city population—particularly its young—mobilized, the Panthers organized police patrols to monitor the notoriously brutal Oakland police. Reflecting what Newton had been learning in night law school, a group of legally armed Panthers would follow police cars through the city streets. When the police stopped to harass street-corner youths, the Panthers would also stop, get out of their car, ostentatiously load their guns—following the existing legal code—and observe the police, ensuring that the rights of the targeted youths were not violated. As such, the strictly legal armed patrols were a tactic to put a stop to police harassment and a means of emboldening the inner-city black population. They had an unmistakable impact on both. As Flores Forbes put it, "It was a scene that people in the community saw, and it informed black people not just in Oakland, but throughout the country that you had the right, not only to bear arms, but you had a right to defend yourself against a police officer if they attacked you unjustly."[27]

Except for the local Bay area press, the Panthers' initial Oakland action was not noticed by the national media. It was, however, noticed by the police and California political authorities, who immediately began a campaign to change the state laws governing the possession and use of weapons. This led to the Panthers' next action, in effect an escalation of the same tactic with a wider audience. On May 2, 1967, a group of black-clad, fully armed Panthers strode into the California state legislature in Sacramento to protest the new gun legislation. After the Panthers took a wrong turn through the doors to the floor of the assembly and were subsequently arrested, some of the national media took note of

this new aggressive group. The *New York Times*, perhaps influenced by the Panthers' appearance, anticipated subsequent media reports in noting at the opening of its account that with "loaded rifles and shotguns in their hands, members of the *antiwhite* Black Panther party marched into the state Capitol today."[28] Yet when asked by white newsmen if the Panthers hated white people, Bobby Seale angrily responded, "We don't hate nobody because of their color; we hate oppression." Indeed, the Panthers' record backed up Seale's words.[29]

From that point on, reflecting their preoccupation with potent visuals, dramatic action, celebrity personalities, and the threat of violence, the mass media defined the Panthers by their appearances and rhetoric as a violent, largely criminal paramilitary group. They systematically failed to hear or consider relevant what William Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld would call the Panthers' "alternative language" and "underlying ideas."[30] Typical early coverage came in the aftermath of an April 1968 shootout between police and the Oakland Panthers that resulted in the death of seventeen-year-old Panther Bobby Hutton. While both *Time* and *Newsweek* covered the shootout and included token Panther comments, both magazines' stories were dominated by police testimony and framed in ways that suggested the Panthers were the aggressors. *Time*, for example, opened its story with reference to the "maelstrom of looting and arson" that followed Martin Luther King's recent assassination. Without noting that the Panthers, who were highly critical of pointless "rioting," had spread out through the Oakland community urging young blacks to keep cool—the Skolnick Commission credited them with preventing rioting in Oakland[31]—the magazine went on to observe that "Oakland's police were deeply involved in a bitter private race feud of their own. Ranged against them was a strutting band of hyper-militants, styling themselves the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The Panthers, armed and angry, are defiantly demanding a facedown." The magazine proceeded to observe suggestively that "routine police procedure provided the invitation to bloodshed" without noting how that "procedure" inflamed tensions in the community. Police accounts of the shootout were "balanced" by a brief reference to Panthers who "shrilled murder, claiming Hutton's hands were raised."[32]

Newsweek gave its readers a short-cut introduction to the Panthers as a "particularly bizarre bunch [of] militant Negro extremists who model themselves after Malcolm X and take their motto from Mao Tse Tung, 'Political power comes through the barrel of a gun.'" After reviewing previous Panther events—the police patrols, Sacramento, and murder charges brought against Newton[33]—*Newsweek* described the shootout, relying exclusively on police accounts.[34] By contrast, in a more personalistic account in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Don Schanche reviewed far more detail about the clash, including trial testimony and his own follow-up investigation, and concluded, "My own examination of the house that was destroyed by police gunfire left me with the distinct feeling that [Eldridge] Cleaver, not the police, had truth on his side."[35] Following the *Newsweek* model,

several newsmagazine articles provided equally dramatic and one-sided attention to the subsequent trial of Huey Newton and its aftermath.

By 1968, the Panthers had instituted more substantive community organizing and service programs, like their "breakfast-for-children," an effort to provide hot meals for poor inner-city children that also served as an opportunity to raise community consciousness about inner-city hunger and its link to broader poverty in America and the Third World. The first newsmagazine reference to the breakfast program appeared in *Newsweek* in May 1969 in an article that began with a typical frame focusing on Panther style and symbolism: "They were all of white America's nightmares of the black revenge come chillingly to life—an armed, angry guerrilla cadre uniformed in black berets, black leather, black looks and devoted almost obsessively to guns." Referring to the breakfasts, the article asked if the Panthers had "turned pussycat" and assured its readers that, no, the "vanguard of the black revolution" had "begun experimenting" with a form of "escalation" that was "decidedly unrevolutionary," meaning, presumably, the breakfasts were not violent events.[36] Given the media's total preoccupation with the one-dimensional, violent Panthers, their only plausible interpretation of the breakfast program within this frame was that it represented a desperate public relations effort to cover for their group's violent criminality.

The FBI, however, had a somewhat different view. As the breakfast programs began to spread, the FBI added the Panthers to the government's COINTELPRO efforts. The breakfast for children program was singled out for "eradication," since FBI director J. Edgar Hoover observed that it was the "best and most influential activity going for the BPP and as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities . . . to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for."[37] Part of the FBI's effort involved providing the news media with scare stories about Panther activities. By August 1969, a *Newsweek* article focusing on the Panthers' efforts to form a "United Front against Fascism" with other groups on the left concluded with Hoover's public declaration that the Panthers represented the "greatest threat to the internal security of the country."[38] With the green light from Hoover, state repression of the Panthers moved into high gear.

By December 1969, amidst government pronouncements that the Panthers were a growing threat, legal charges had been brought against two groups of Panthers in New York and New Haven, the first on charges of an alleged bombing "conspiracy," the second (targeting Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Erica Huggins) on charges of murdering young Panther Alex Rackley. Both evolved into sensational trials, in 1970 and 1971, generating substantial media coverage, and both resulted in acquittals of all the principals.

The event that triggered the most significant media controversy about the Panthers was the Chicago police raid on Panther headquarters that resulted in the deaths of Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Later investigation revealed that Hampton and Clark had been murdered in their sleep as part of a

planned police assault that was assisted by a police infiltrator. Initially described as a "shoot out" between police and heavily armed Panthers, news reports ranged from the *Chicago Tribune*'s account that passed along almost verbatim Chicago district attorney Edward Hanrahan's deceitful press statement about the "vicious Black Panther attack,"[39] to a *Time* report on "Police and Panthers at War," to *Newsweek*'s initial report, "Panthers: Shoot it Out." The latter juxtaposed the Hanrahan account with Panther claims, including Panther attorney Charles Garry's contention that the raid "brought to 28 the number of Panthers killed by police this year."[40] The *New York Times*' first report relied exclusively on police accounts, with the exception of the final sentence: "Bobby Rush, Black Panther deputy minister of defense, charged later that Hampton was 'murdered' while he slept in bed in a 'search and destroy mission' by the Administration."[41]

Almost immediately after the raid, on-site investigations revealed that the police had fired all but a single shot *into* the Panthers' apartment, supporting Rush's charge of murder. In the days and weeks following the killings, a wide variety of voices challenged the Chicago police and called for formal investigation. Between December 6 and December 29 the *New York Times* carried six separate reports, citing charges coming from the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, the United Auto Workers, nine Democratic members of Congress, and a coalition of black community organizations. A feature article on December 14, written by Earl Caldwell, was entitled, "Declining Black Panthers Gather New Support from Repeated Clashes with Police."[42]

The newsmagazines followed suit with *Time*'s December 19 article on "Police and Panthers: Growing Paranoia" and *Newsweek*'s longer feature article on "The Panthers and the Law" on February 23, 1970. Both articles were framed by classic, stereotypical images of threatening Panther bravado. Yet both articles also seemed sobered by the impact of the government's prosecution of the Panthers as well as the actions in Chicago. *Newsweek* questioned how viable the Panthers would be with so much of their leadership in jail or under prosecution, but hastened to add Attorney General John Mitchell's warning that the Panthers continued to be a "menace to national security." Still, *Newsweek*'s opening paragraph focused on the Panthers' performativity with the kind of rhetorical flourish more typically found in the expressive, personalized style of "New Journalism" writers like Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe:

> They were the Bad Niggers of white America's nightmares come chillingly to life—a black-bereted, black-jacketed cadre of street bloods risen up in arms against the established order. They were, they announced, the Black Panthers, and the name alone suggested menace. They swaggered, blustered, quoted Mao, preached revolution, flashed their guns everywhere and sometimes used them. They addressed white power in harangues that began with F— — and mother-f—. . . . They are guerrilla theater

> masterfully done, so masterfully that at a point everybody began to believe them and to be frightened of them. . . . They are Media Age revolutionaries, gifted with words, good at sloganeering (POWER TO THE PEOPLE), irresistibly photogenic, scary on television, masterful at poster art from their first effort.[43]

Disturbed by the government's public proclamations, the Hampton-Clark murders, and the national and local prosecution of Panther leaders, well-connected white liberals began to raise funds for the Panthers' legal defense. Prominent figures like Leonard Bernstein held "meet and greet" gatherings between well-heeled, white New York philanthropists and selected Panthers. On January 15, 1970, an article in the *New York Times* fashion section highlighted humorous anecdotes of Panther-benefactor conversations in Bernstein's "elegant Park Avenue duplex."[44]

In one of the few published articles on media coverage of the Panthers, Michael Staub argued that the surge in media attention that began in 1969 reflected mainstream society's "moral panic" following the Chicago raid and the "specter of wealthy white liberal support for black militancy."[45] Careful analysis of news accounts before and after the Chicago raid suggests that there was more continuity in media coverage than Staub asserted, but that indeed "moral panic" became visible in news articles and commentaries denouncing allegations of a government plot against the Panthers and ridiculing the fund-raising efforts by supportive liberals.[46]

Over the two and a half years from the May 1967 Sacramento action to the Hampton-Clark murders, the national newsmagazines published a total of eleven articles about the Panthers. But in the two years after the December 1969 Chicago police action, the newsmagazines published forty-eight articles focusing on the Panthers. Almost half of these were particularly attentive to the New York and New Haven trials, or related events like pro-Panther protests at Yale University. The magazines highlighted the colorful personalities involved (and, in the New York case, their angry, confrontational courtroom behavior) and provided the appearance of balance by juxtaposing the two sides in adversarial criminal proceedings. However, magazine articles typically revolved around the state's case against the Panthers, often highlighted with dramatic testimony from informers. "Balance" was sometimes provided by brief mention of inflammatory rhetoric (and sometimes behavior) on the part of Panther suspects or their supporters.[47]

A backlash began to appear in the media targeting respectable liberal voices who supported the legal defense of persecuted Panthers or insisted on justice for Hampton and Clark and the liberal media that allegedly hyped patently false claims of government extermination. None of the voices audible in mainstream media defended any Panthers' activities; in fact, many took pains to separate themselves from Panther politics. What seemed to generate the scathing

critiques was the image of the Panthers as victims—an image that seemingly lent the Panthers a degree of legitimacy and thereby threatened the one-dimensional depiction of the Panthers as an aggressive criminal element attacking white society.[48]

Two articles define this backlash. One was author Tom Wolfe's "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's," a colorful, ironic *New York* magazine account that juxtaposed the earnest inquiries of New York's naïve upper crust against the street language and savvy of the Panthers.[49] Leonard Bernstein's legitimate liberal objective was most clearly stated on the article's final page: "If we deny these Black Panthers their democratic rights because their philosophy is unacceptable to us, then we are denying our own democracy." Yet the article's overall tone of ironic ridicule suggested that its readers were more hip than the gullible Bernsteins and their wealthy guests. *Time* picked up on the Wolfe essay in its own heavily ironic report on "That Party at Lenny's," while the *New York Times'* own version appeared a bit earlier in a Sunday magazine article entitled "Rapping with the Panthers in White Suburbia."[50] Wolfe's "radical chic" made its way into common parlance as a more general reference to a supposedly gullible liberal elite naïvely supporting leftist causes because it was fashionable to do so—a variant on later right-wing efforts to link liberal opponents with sixties radicals (e.g., Barack Obama and Bill Ayers) in order to denigrate liberals.[51]

The other widely publicized backlash article was Edward Jay Epstein's investigative *New Yorker* piece published in 1971, in which the media critic provided what appeared to be authoritative documentation that the mass media had uncritically and grossly overstated the argument that the government was engaged in a genocidal attack on the Panthers.[52] Reviewing quotations from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, Epstein created a clear impression that the prestigious national media had simply accepted as factual Panther attorney Garry's assertion that Hampton and Clark were the "27th and 28th" Panthers killed by police. Along with other media references to a "lethal undeclared war" and a "growing suspicion that something more than isolated local police action was involved," Epstein's claim that the media accepted the idea that a "virtual open season" had been declared against the Panthers rested on his contention that the media uncritically accepted Garry's exaggerated numbers as fact.[53] His article correctly raised questions about both Garry's initial claims and three individual news reports, yet his uncorroborated reliance on his own investigation into the deaths of nineteen Panthers and his conclusion about the numbers in news reports suffered from several shortcomings.

First, the article's clear implication that the media were unduly sympathetic to the Panthers rested in part on Epstein's charge that two of the nation's leading papers, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, reported the exaggerated Garry numbers as factual, without labeling them as "claims" by the Panther attorney.

Yet the three specific instances he cited were cases where the papers had attributed the numbers in earlier articles, and thus the papers had at most exercised questionable judgment in not mentioning the attribution in each instance.[54] Any implication that the media were overly sympathetic to the Panthers, however, was completely misleading. Overall, the mass media were entirely dismissive if not outspokenly critical of the Panthers, failing to take seriously any of their arguments or ideas while simultaneously responding almost viscerally to violent rhetoric and the Panther's style.

The real target of Epstein's criticism, beyond these few cases, turned out to be the fact that claims of "genocide" and "political assassination" had been echoing (though simultaneously contested) through the mass media because they were being voiced by legitimate, moderate black voices like Ralph Abernathy, Julian Bond, and Whitney Young.[55] Targeting narrowly selected instances of undue media "sympathy" for militant leftist expression, while ignoring the broader patterns of media coverage, would later become a trademark in the decades-long attack on liberal media that began in 1969. One effect of this attack, not surprisingly, has been that the media grew correspondingly more tentative in criticizing established power.[56]

Second, in the guise of providing a seemingly objective corrective to overly sympathetic media, Epstein's article was a vehicle for his own interpretive bias. After reviewing all his evidence, Epstein concluded that John Kifner's charge in the offending *New York Times* article—that the Nixon administration had "at least contributed to a climate of opinion among local police . . . that a virtual open season has been declared on the Panthers"—was "historically inaccurate."[57] However, grounds for precisely such a perception were expressed by none other than a Chicago policeman referring to the Hampton-Clark killings. Howard Saffold, a member of the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, observed of FBI director Hoover's proclamations about the Panther threat:

> The police community is sort of a built-in reward and punishment system of its own, and you get a lot of rewards when you go after who the boss says is the bad guy and you get him. And I think what J. Edgar Hoover was able to do was to give police officers the impression that it was ok, it was open season. You didn't have to worry about the law. I think what he in effect said was, "It's our ballgame, guys. We've got the authority. We have the capacity. Let's crush 'em."[58]

As documented later by the Senate Intelligence Committee and others, the Nixon administration and the FBI were indeed involved in a coordinated effort to neutralize the Panthers.[59]

The third way that Epstein's article was significant was that it became, in effect, the final word on the subject for commentators who have since helped to confine public discourse on the Panthers to the one-dimensional depiction of violent criminals—in other words, returning the media frame to its initial dismissive take before the Panthers-as-victims gained brief legitimacy within the mass media. Fifteen years after the first salvo in the media attack, well after the campaign against the "liberal media" and hysterical "Sixties" had borne fruit, the *Washington Post*'s centrist columnist, Richard Cohen, cited the Epstein article and joined in its conclusion that, in Cohen's words, "the public was misled by a press that was unwilling to verify the facts for itself."[60]

Gail Sheehy's 1971 investigation of the New Haven Panther trial, *Panthermania: The Clash of Black against Black in One American City*, was written in the highly subjective style of the era's New Journalism, without documentation.[61] Confessing at the outset that she had "rallied" to the "spellbinding cause" of the Panthers as victims and martyrs, Sheehy asserted (eschewing attribution), "Without verification, Garry's body count passed like gospel throughout the white media." Similarly, the "revulsion" over the murder of Fred Hampton, in her view, "revived the radical Left," since the "police conduct associated with the Hampton murder snowballed into a widespread public belief that the government was out to eradicate the Panthers."[62] Given the content of media discourse, Sheehy's "radical Left" presumably referred to those like the nine House Democrats and the NAACP's Roy Wilkins who defended the Panthers' constitutional rights; similarly, there is no documentation to support her assertion of "widespread public belief" regarding the government's stance toward the Panthers.

Interestingly, Sheehy commented that "[a] year ago I was just as taken up with the Panther cause as anyone else" and proceeded to describe her inclination to "think of all Panthers as martyrs" after the Hampton-Clark killings.[63] The Panther "mania" in the book's title was, in effect, about precisely this uncritical embrace of everything Panther. Sheehy's highly subjective investigation of the Alex Rackley murder in New Haven led her to an equally uncritical embrace of the Right's denunciation of the Panthers and the liberal media that helped "create" them. As she imagined it, "The Panther movement was created by and for the media. The more it was publicized by the liberal white media, the greater the imagined ranks of a black army grew."[64]

Sheehy's writing reveals visual association at work. On the one hand, she responded subjectively to the Hampton-Clark killings and the subsequent claims of government genocide. She was radicalized by the dramatic images and hype commonly found in the media—and little else. In this regard, she may have been like others who were drawn to radicalism by the media images they witnessed—because their subjective response, unlike those of more mainstream audiences, was to feel sympathetic to the outsiders in the media and thereby to simply reverse the official explanation that reduced the Panthers to the one dimension of violent criminality. Discovering that, indeed, some Panthers were violent, misogynistic thugs was sufficient for these observers to make the uncritical subjective switch

back to the conventional mainstream view that they all were thugs. One image proved they were "all good," a second image suggested they were "all bad."

In similar manner, several influential commentaries have consisted of "second thoughts" on the part of those who have reflected back on experiences with Panther violence and have written scathing accounts that reinforce the revisionist media line. In a 1967 *New York Times Magazine* article on the Panthers, Sol Stern sought to understand some of the controversial behaviors and styles of the Panthers, while simultaneously distancing himself from their violent rhetoric and fixation with guns. Thirty-six years later, Stern repented for once being a "left-wing crank," noting that, like other "ex-sixties radicals," he "made the unfortunate mistake of thinking that the Black Panthers were a legitimate social protest movement." The reason for his conversion, in addition to the "psychopathic criminals" who surrounded Huey Newton, was the "torrent of articles and books, many written by former sympathizers," that

> voluminously documented the Panther reign of murder and larceny within their own community. So much so that no one but a left-wing crank would still believe in the Panther myth of dedicated young blacks 'serving the people' while heroically defending themselves against unprovoked attacks by the racist police. . . . Except, that is, at the *New York Times*, where the obsession with white guilt and black victimhood apparently trumps every standard of journalistic and historical accuracy.[65]

For Stern, like Sheehy, David Horowitz, and others, there is no middle gray area, no bad *and* good within the Panther world. As one who made his conversion to Reagan conservatism highly visible and one who has led the charge of right-wing polemics against the Panthers, Horowitz was in all likelihood one of those "ex-sixties radicals" Stern referred to.[66] Like Stern and Sheehy, Horowitz has used evidence selectively drawn from the more violent fringes of the late Panther world to cast a wide net and delegitimize everything about the Panthers, extending his repentant condemnation to everything about the 1960s and post-sixties left as a whole. As with other backlash campaigns, these highlighted Panther behaviors are generalized so that they provide a wholly sufficient explanation of who and what the Panthers were. Repeated references to earlier attacks echoing in right-wing accounts have simply confirmed and reconfirmed this "truth." The rest of media discourse has incorporated these images of violent thugs, though the colorful, charismatic personalities of the most visible Panther leaders remain the object of media curiosity and repeated public lectures.

In 1995, Mario Van Peebles sought to correct the massive distortions about the Panthers with his film *Panther*. The film reestablished several authentic realities of the Black Panther Party's history, from their initial use of guns as a tactic to discourage police brutality in the inner city, to the FBI-led efforts to crush the Panthers, to the Party's breakfast-for-kids program. The film ends with a classic police-Panther shootout. However, in addition to downplaying the role of women in the party, *Panther* ultimately depoliticizes this most political of black power expressions by minimizing exposure to the Panthers' political ideology and defining FBI repression as a conspiracy with organized crime so as to introduce drugs into the ghetto and thereby debilitate inner-city youth. While former Panther chairman Bobby Seale thundered against the film's inaccuracies, the general media response reflected the long-established Panther iconography. *Time* accused the film of "criminal naiveté" and denounced it for suggesting that the Panthers were "idealists and as objects of veneration to today's youth."[67] Right-wing polemicist David Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture placed an ad in *Variety* calling the film a "two hour lie."[68] In the end, Peebles's effort to correct the prevailing public memory of the Panthers seemed doomed by the very dramatic symbolism used by the historical Panthers—the guns, the black berets and leather garb, the battles with police. Like the Panthers, it too became the subject of media exploitation and backlash attack.

Except for rare media glimpses of serious historical work excavating the history of local chapters or analyzing the Panther phenomenon, these images define mass media discourse on the Panthers. And, to be sure, when a serious consideration of the Panthers shows up in the media, the Right is ready to pounce, dismissing these accounts as if they were the same as the media culture's romanticized treatment of celebrities. Thus, for example, Panther-bashing columnist Kate Coleman described a 2003 conference that she did not attend—"The Black Panther Party in Historical Perspective" at Wheelock College—as having "all the veneer of a scholarly gathering." The bulk of her two scathing articles—"Revisionism: Guess Who's Mything Them Now: The Real Black Panthers Were a Bunch of Thugs" in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and "Black Panthers: Just a Pack of Predators" in the *Los Angeles Times*—revolved around rehashed Huey Newton stories and links between the long-extinct Panthers and the "leap in drive-by shooting deaths in Oakland" in the 1990s.[69]

New Left Militancy and Weatherman

For some in the group that became Weatherman in 1969, as with others in the New Left, police violence at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago was a telling turning point. Bill Ayers recalled the police wading into Lincoln Park and pummeling a friend: "Perhaps this is where the rage got started in the movement, this very night. I'm not sure, but before this, every meeting, every rally, every demonstration was filled with singing, and afterward the singing stopped. When we opened our mouths now, we could only scream. Idealism was there, but in abeyance. The apocalypse approached."[70]