

How the US Destroyed the Black Panther Party and Continues to Persecute its Veterans

John Bowman

The following statement was recorded in 2005 by:

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It was clear to me that the federal government tried to destroy and did destroy the Black Panther Party and tried to destroy me as a member of the Black Panther Party. They used deceit, they used false information and they participated in overt assaults on people's lives.

I was assaulted, and two other people were assaulted and shot and imprisoned in Los Angeles. I was imprisoned for six years for assault with intent to commit murder on police officers, when in fact it was the police who initiated the assault—and eventually charges was [sic] dropped. It was clear to me then that this was an attack to destroy us, and I survived. And in 2003, it became clear to me that they wanted to continue their campaign to destroy me by visiting me, accusing me and wanting to talk to me about things that happened in 1971.

From 1968 to 1973, I experienced false arrests, I experienced assassination attempts, I experienced being railroaded through the courts, I experienced police brutality, experienced torture—because of my association with this organization called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. So how does it make me feel in 2005? I feel like it's something that's never gonna [sic] end, that my commitment is being challenged again by the United States government.

Because of the commitment that I made in 1967, I'm still being persecuted and punished for that commitment and believing in the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party and implementing some of the programs of the Black Panther Party in some of the social programs that myself and my colleagues are doing. So, I'm very concerned. I'm angry. I don't feel like it's right, and I don't feel like it's something that should go unnoticed, and I don't feel like the government should be able to get away with this continuous harassment.

The same people who tried to kill me in 1973 are the same people who are here today, in 2005, trying to destroy me. I mean it literally. I mean there were people from the forces of the San Francisco Police Department who participated in harassment, torture and my interrogation in 1973. And these same people I have to come in contact with, I have to go before courts in front of, who are asking me the same questions that they interrogated and tortured me for [sic].

I have to be confronted with these people, and none of these people have ever been brought to trial. None of these people have ever been charged with anything. None of these people have [sic] ever been questioned about that. So I think if they have to put me in court, I think they should be brought to court and questioned about their behavior as it related to John Bowman, Harold Taylor and Ruben Scott and dozens of other people in New Orleans in 1973.

So if I have to be brought before a grand jury and questioned in secret, where no one is there but the grand jurors, John Bowman, the US Attorney and the state's Attorney (General)—no lawyer for me. Why can't there be some forum where some questions are put to the police department from San Francisco about their behavior in 1973, which is the basis of this grand jury investigation today. That's what I'm asking for is some justice [sic].

What makes John Bowman tick? Well, one of the things that makes me tick is that I have two children. I have 28 nephews and nieces who [sic] I care quite a bit about. I'm a man [who thinks] that each one could teach one and that each person has an obligation to give something to the community in which he dwells. I learned [sic] that concept and principle through my parents. I learnt that by growing up in what is now called the Western Addition, but [which was then called] the Fillmore district of San Francisco, where I went to school and where I was raised.

It took awhile for me to understand who I was. In fact, I had dropped out of high school. There was a program in the community called the Neighborhood Youth Corps program, and I had a job counselor who gave me books, Malcolm X's autobiography, and James Baldwin's book, Go Tell It on the Mountain. So I read the books, and that excited me quite a bit. And then I heard about Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party. So I was beginning to be socially conscious [when I was] 17 years old.

So who am I right now? I'm 57 years old and still feel like I need to contribute to my community and contribute to my family. That's what I

try to do on a daily basis. One of the things that I was able to do is [sic] to appreciate the programs that would give things to the people, and one of the things that attracted me to the Black Panther Party was their 10-point platform and program, which spoke to the issues of housing, education and employment, spoke to issues of social justice and justice in the criminal justice system.

And in my community, in the Fillmore district, there was lots of social injustice, there were lots of businesses that didn't contribute anything, there was dilapidated housing and absent landlords and all of that was just pressing me. I felt like it was time for me to do something besides just talk about it. And that's when I decided to pay attention to the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party. So I joined their organization, and I began to work with their programs—the breakfast programs, collecting medical supplies, having a clinic and programs inside the housing projects, working with tenants and families, organizing rent strikes. Those are the kind of things that shaped and molded me to be a contributor to the community.

The Black Panther Party was educating people to some of the realities, some of the criminal realities of the system that was governing them. In the local communities and nationally, the Black Panther Party was, through its newspaper, educating people to what is wrong about the structure and the policies of housing, what is wrong about the prison system and about the criminal justice system. And people began to listen to the Black Panther Party, and they began to support the Black Panther Party.

The environment was very oppressive. The Tac Squad that was created by Joseph Alioto [former San Francisco mayor], their task was to disrupt our function. And we would get pulled over if we were driving, if we were walking. We would get held up on the streets, we'd be laid down in the streets. We would have AR-15s or machine guns pointed at us. That's when I first learned got introduced to AR-15 automatic weapons through watching the Tac Squad put them in my face and other members of the party.

Wherever we would go, they would come and disrupt. They would kick in our doors. Or they would sit outside our houses waiting for us to come home. And when we got home, before we got into our house, they would search us. So it became very clear to me that not only was this a social service program that they were attacking, they were attacking me as a person because of my beliefs.

This is when I began to feel that my life was in danger, always. Because everywhere I went, I had to be confronted with [sic] police. Organized harassment is what we came to realize was taking place against us. And as a means to protect ourselves, we had to go out in groups of threes and fours, even if just to sell newspapers or to go to community meetings and set up community meetings.

It was clear that things had changed and that, on a national level, the Black Panther Party was the focus of an organized attack against the leadership. In Chicago and in New York, in San Diego and in Los Angeles, there was [sic] people dying, people being assassinated in their cars. Fred Hampton himself, who was a member and a leader in Chicago, he was assassinated [as was Mark Clark]. And there was [sic] people assassinated in New York City and people arrested by the dozens in New York City.

So it was clear to us here in San Francisco that something like that was gonna [sic] happen to us. And eventually it did happen, where our office got raided on Fillmore Street. And they shot tear gas in our office. And they didn't shoot anybody, but they destroyed thousands of dollars of materials and food and medical supplies. And then simultaneously they raided different homes that people were living in.

So it was clear to us that this is what it was gonna [sic] be about. It was gonna [sic] be about us being violently attacked and unjustly shot and put in jail. We knew it was the local police, but we didn't know [at that time] it was coordinated by the FBI and the CIA and the United States government. So what we were going to do about it, we had no idea.

The Black Panther Party built coalitions with people who were against the Vietnam War, who were against the murders of citizens in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, with people who were against apartheid in South Africa, people who were on college campuses who wanted to protest the war and protest exploitation of people of color all across the world. The Black Panther Party even went as far as to communicate with other governments—the Vietnamese government, the North Korean government, the ANC government [sic], the organization that Nelson Mandela was a part of which is called the African National Congress.

We all had one thing in common. We all were being oppressed. And there was a need to stop war and a need to stop oppressing and exploiting people. And the Black Panther Party was a very vocal part of this movement on a world-wide basis. This is why the Black Panther Party took the brunt

of all the murder of its membership and the jailing of all its membership, because we were an organization that was very vocal.

People embraced the Black Panther Party, and that's why the federal government created a program called the COINTELPRO program. And that's why they had a Senate committee hearing, and people admitted that J. Edgar Hoover orchestrated and created mass hysteria and mass murder, because of our relationships with people all over the world. Eldridge Cleaver and Don Cox and Kathleen Cleaver and other members of the organization who went into exile traveled all over the globe internationally and were telling people what this government was doing and giving them documented evidence, just like Malcolm X did when he went to Africa—he talked to people all over the African continent about this government and its treatment of people.

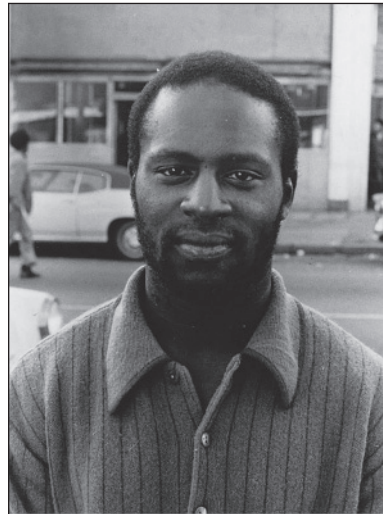
Well, the Black Panther Party did the same thing. They [opponents of the party] never talk about the relationships between people all over the world and the Black Panther Party. They only create criminal images of Black Panthers. So it's important that people take a broader look as to what it is when they speak today of the Patriot Act and Homeland Security and what does it do to affect us today, us ordinary citizens. I think I'm a victim of the Patriot Act. We all became victims of the COINTELPRO program.

In fact, it was the Black Panther Party that enabled me to grow as a man and as a person, because it taught principles, it taught integrity. And I've been doing this for—I can't even count the years—35, 40 years. And I continue to give this example to my son, who is 19 years old, and to my daughter who is 26.

I am a community activist. I'm a social program developer. I don't consider myself a member of the Black Panther Party today. But I do consider myself someone who have [sic] learnt from the principles, the basic principles and ideology of the Black Panther Party, which was to reform and revolutionize the social system so Black people and all people could benefit more from it.

John H. Bowman, Black Panther veteran, called to appear before a grand jury in San Francisco, was in jail with four other BPP veterans.

In late 2006, John H. Bowman passed away. Tribute was paid to him on January 11, 2007 in Spencer, Oklahoma and on January 28, 2007 in San Francisco, California. Donations in his memory can be made to “The Committee of Defense of Human Rights” at P.O. Box 90221, Pasadena, California 91109. E-mail: cdhrright@hotmail.com.



John H. Bowman III
1947- 2006