

## COMMENTARY

## Black Panther Party experienced ups, downs

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The release of former Black Panther Party leader Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt from prison at least has momentarily rescued the Panther Party from historical oblivion.

Society's rebels often become the stuff of books, paintings, plays and films. The problem is that they are either demonized or idolized.

This can easily happen with the Panthers. Their story is loaded with adventure and political activism, demagoguery and dedication, idealism and stupidity. I witnessed all of it during the three years the Panther star burned brightest.

I first met Panther founder Huey Newton in August, 1967, when he came to Los Angeles to speak. It was his first major speech outside Oakland. I talked with him afterwards. He spoke openly and enthusiastically about the Panther's programs to help the black poor. When he talked about blacks "picking up the gun" to ward off police attacks it sounded like canned rhetoric designed to get media attention and attract converts. It was not.

From the time they burst onto the national scene in 1966 with their shotguns, black berets and tough talk, the Panthers kept the nation transfixed with a mixture of fear and fascination. The Panthers preached self-defense and anti-capitalist revolution. An amalgam of street hustlers, ex-convicts and disenchanted student radicals, the Black Panthers were the hard men and women of the 1960's black revolution.

A month after I talked with Newton, he became the first casualty. An early morning street confrontation in Oakland left one police officer dead and a severely wounded Newton, facing the gas chamber. The Panthers became an instant symbol of the "people's resistance" to oppression.

The months that followed were exhilarating for myself and many other young blacks. I went to many Panther meetings and rallies. I became acquainted with the rising Panthers stars, Bobby Seale, Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, Elaine Brown, Alprentice Bunchy Carter, Raymond "Masai" Hewitt and Geronimo Pratt.

Meanwhile, from jail Newton directed the Panthers to organize community self-help programs that eventually included free breakfast and free clothing programs and a voter registration campaign. Many moderate black and whites praised the Panthers for their efforts.

Panther chapters were formed in more than 20 cities and the government declared war. FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover called the Panthers "the greatest domestic threat to American security." Hoover deliberately exaggerated their numbers and importance. With the tacit support of President Nixon and Attorney General John Mitchell, he directed super-secret and illegal counter-intelligence operations against them that included: hundreds of informants, police agents, provocateurs, poison pen letters, mail covers, wire taps and physical threats.

The escalating deadly cycle of police-Panther violence further enhanced their street tough reputation. This, in turn, brought even more raids.

In December 1969, I watched the Los Angeles Police Department pour thousands of rounds into the Panther's ramshackle headquarters. The crowd cheered every time the Panthers returned the fire. Many blacks hailed them as liberators. Yet few knew about the personal pain and sufferings that these confrontations brought. I did.

I went to several funerals of slain Panthers. There were the usual fiery speeches pledging to continue the struggle. But there was also the grief and tears of mothers and fathers who only vaguely understood why their son or daughter had chosen to "die for the people."

I became close friends with one of the Panther women who was arrested and convicted for her role in the Los Angeles gun battle. I spent several hours with her the day before she was scheduled to begin serving a jail sentence. She wept as I held her tightly. Yet she still firmly believed that she was fighting for a noble cause. She was willing to suffer jail, even death, for this belief.

I talked with Newton again a few months after his conviction was reversed and he was released from jail. He still spouted the same politically correct radical slogans, but not with the same passion and sincerity as before. It appeared that he was trying to live up to the image of the defiant radical. By late 1970s, the Panthers were on a permanent downhill slide. Police attacks, jailings and self-destructive internal battles had taken a big toll. The change was evident in Newton.

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## Pathways to power

Special to Sentinel-Voice

This summer President Clinton said America must steadfastly examine its racial problems if it is to avoid being crippled by them.

His central question—are we ready to become a robust, multi-ethnic democracy—was not rhetorical. It is the fundamental challenge of America's future.

At first glance, there may seem to be little to connect the President's plea for inclusiveness to the fostering of economic power among African-Americans that is the focus of the Urban League's annual conference, which was held this week in Washington, D.C.

But you would think so only if you don't understand the paramount importance of economic prosperity in a world that promises to be harshly unforgiving of economic weakness.

America won't be strong unless it is strong economically, and it won't be strong economically unless the opportunities for economic success are shared far more broadly than they are today.

Black America won't be strong, either, unless it is strong economically—unless it directs its "human capital" to take advantage of the opportunities in the American and global free market.

If black America isn't strong economically, America can't be.

That's the new American reality. For White America that reality means making the commitment to lock the gates of opportunity in the open-not-closed-position. It means employers being committed to inclusion, even in the face of unrelenting assaults on affirmative action. It means labor unions including everyone in their ranks, from bottom to top.

Make no mistake. The patterns of exclusion and abuse of African-American workers persist. American industry has made great strides toward inclusion, but it still has a way to go to get it right. The backlog of 80,000 cases at the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is proof that encouraging inclusion up front is more effective than hoping that overburdened enforcers can catch up to bigots after the fact.

For African-Americans, this new American reality means that they must pursue economic power with greater vigor. That's one reason we say economic power is the next civil rights frontier.

Yes, it involves working to help shape the debate over the rules of the game. But it also means that we must play the game hard, whether we like the rules or not.

### To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price  
President  
National Urban League



We have part of the human "resource base" we need to take our people to an entirely new plateau of economic power. We have scores of management consultants, plant managers, product managers, salespeople and even a smattering of senior executives who've worked inside corporations in the core businesses.

We have a deep pool of talented MBAs, attorneys and undergraduate business and marketing majors who have been able to show-thanks to affirmative action—they have the requisite skills and ambition to get ahead, not just in minority markets, but in mainstream markets, too. And we have a growing corps of micro-entrepreneurs, working in an economic sector where business savvy and a reputation for reliability and quality work are equally critical to success.

There's no doubt that African-Americans have a long challenging road ahead. But this is a march that, given the dividends economic power pays, must be made. For one thing black-owned firms are much more likely to hire inner city residents for the jobs they're qualified to train for and do. For another, economic power provides the resources for exercising political clout at the local, state and national level. For a third, economic power generates the wealth that will make black philanthropy an even more potent force for good.

From Cleveland to Los Angeles our Urban League affiliates are pushing this message in many ways. The Los Angeles Urban League is taking long-standing relationships with companies to new plateaus by contracting to provide well-prepared entry-level workers in sectors like banking and automotive supply. The Cleveland Urban League recently sponsored a National Economic Development Summit on franchising. Our affiliate in Oklahoma City is helping small business owners secure start-up financing. The Trenton Urban League is operating a KidCo program, where youngsters run mini-businesses. The Phoenix Urban League is starting a charter school devoted to entrepreneurship.

These are just some of the ways we're trying to stoke a greater ambition for economic power within black America. That has been a major priority of the Urban League since its founding in 1910. Then we helped those migrating from farms and towns in the South to the factories and cities up North. Today we're helping Americans navigate a vastly different and much tougher journey. But the impulse remains the same: to find a pathway that will lead to a full inclusion in the American mainstream.

### THE VOICE FROM THE HILL

## Who's protecting and serving who?

By George Wilson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The ill wind of police brutality is blowing throughout the nation.

In Baltimore, an African-American male was shot and killed by a police officer when he didn't drop a knife fast enough. This incident occurred while onlookers were telling the man to drop the weapon and the policeman not to shoot. The officer in question had been disciplined earlier for allegedly shooting at someone close to him, and in the opinion of some, was unfit for duty on the street.

In New York City, some are in shock while others are saying "I told you so" after learning about how a Haitian citizen was treated by "the Men

in Blue."

Thirty-three year-old, Abner Louima, was arrested for his involvement in a street scuffle outside of a popular nightclub. According to Louima's attorney, the squad car containing his client stopped twice during the one-mile trip to the station house so that the officers could punch and kick Louima. Upon arrival at the police station, Louima was taken to a back room, beaten and forced to remove his clothes and had the handle of a toilet plunger forced into his rectum. At this writing, Louima is in critical condition suffering from a punctured intestine and a damaged bladder.

Four New York City police officers have been charged with

abuse and federal civil rights violations are a distinct possibility. Because of the law enforcement culture and the "blue wall of silence," officers don't as a rule tell on their colleagues, even if they are wrong. However, one officer was so disturbed by what he saw, he called the Internal Affairs Division to urge them to investigate the type of injuries sustained by Louima. Without that call, it appears that the brutalization of Louima would have received as much attention as a cat stuck in a tree.

One can only wonder how many similar cases go unreported, freeing "rogues in uniform" to strike again.

The cases in New York and Baltimore are just two examples of a problem that is

found in urban areas across the United States. The question is what drives this increased hostility in certain elements of the law enforcement community?

Ron Hampton is President of the National Black Police Officers Association and a 22-year veteran of the Washington, D.C. Police Department. Hampton indicates that the policy of "zero tolerance" which is being employed in New York, Washington and coming to a neighborhood near you, is the major reason for more collisions between the police and citizens.

"Zero tolerance in Washington and other cities is about going to the Anacostias (See Wilson, Page 15)