

# Black radicalism and political repression in Baltimore: the case of the Black Panther Party

Judson L. Jeffries

## **Abstract**

Much has been written about the Black Panther Party. However, little is known about the organization outside of Oakland, New York and Chicago. This article focuses on the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party. Using resources such as interviews with former Panthers, government documents, and a content analysis of four newspapers including the Black Panther newspaper, this essay discusses the history, inner-workings and systematically analyses the repression that ultimately rendered the Baltimore Black Panther chapter ineffective.

**Keywords:** Black Panthers; Baltimore; Radicalism and Black Power.

Huey P. Newton and Bobby G. Seale co-founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California in 1966. Among the things that this revolutionary organization advocated was that blacks should bear arms in order to protect themselves from the violent whims of the oppressor, especially the police. The Panthers also called for a redistribution of wealth and resources in the United States and for blacks to build and control their own communities and institutions. The founding of the organization came at a critical juncture for many black Americans. In 1965, Malcolm X had been assassinated, thus robbing many urban blacks of their spokesman for black militancy. His death created a void that could not be filled by any of the traditional civil rights leaders. Furthermore, many blacks had become disenchanted with the direction towards which the civil rights movement was heading. Non-violent protest had earned blacks the right to vote in the south, as long as they were willing to do so at their own peril; they earned the right to eat in previously segregated restaurants they often could not afford and hold elected offices that were frequently devoid of any real power. The limited success of the civil rights movement nevertheless resulted in raised

expectations and growing dissatisfaction. Consequently, large numbers of less patient activists demanded more and faster change; they in turn reduced their commitment to non-violence and embraced a more militant posture, as espoused by Malcolm X. Thus, the stage was set for the emergence of the Black Panther Party.

Much has been written about the Black Panther Party, however most of this work has focused on the history, inner-workings and the demise of the Oakland chapter (Anthony 1970, 1990; Seale 1970, 1978; Major 1971; Newton 1980; Jones 1988, 1998; Brown 1992; Hilliard and Cole 1992; Pearson 1994). Moreover, the majority of these works are either exposés or autobiographies. Given their overtly subjective nature, most autobiographies do not lend themselves to the kind of detachment that is required of a rigorous scholarly study. In addition, little is known about the Black Panther Party outside of the Oakland Bay area (Sheehy 1971; Clark and Ramsey 1973). Indeed, nothing scholarly has been written about the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party. This essay will fill that void. The Baltimore chapter is important because it played an instrumental role in the success enjoyed by the organization on the East Coast.

This article will address three main questions: (1) What forces gave rise to a Panther chapter in Baltimore? (2) What were some of the similarities and differences between the Baltimore chapter and the more widely known Oakland chapter? (3) What role did local, state and federal governmental repression play in the disintegration of the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party?

### **Previous literature and its limitations**

With the exception of Charles E. Jones and Huey P. Newton, there is a dearth of scholarship that systematically analyses the political repression that the Black Panther Party was subjected to during its existence. Most of the previous work has focused on particular incidents of repression such as the 1969 Chicago 'raid' (Chandler 1970; Clark and Wilkins 1973), the trial of the New York 21 (Chevigny 1972; Zimroth 1974; Wahad *et al.* 1993), the New Haven 14 case (Freed 1973) and the much ballyhooed trial of Newton for the alleged murder of an Oakland police officer (Keating 1970; Williams 1998). There is some work that describes various acts of political repression that the Oakland, Chicago and New York chapters encountered, but not in any systematic fashion (Moore 1981; Churchill & Vander Wall 1988, 1990; O'Reilly 1989).

The first scholarly work on the subject was written by Newton himself. Newton (1980) expanded the focus of previous studies by examining (in a quasi-systematic fashion) a range of incidents of political repression that were levied against the Oakland Panthers. In addition to the FBI's attempt to discredit Panther leaders and Party activities, Newton also

examined the repressive tactics engineered against the Black Panther Party by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Internal Revenue Service. Although a step beyond other works, Newton failed to examine the more routine acts of political repression involving the rank-and-file members of the organization. While Newton's study is not an objective one, it is still a valuable and pioneering work.

Kenneth O'Reilly's (1989) work as well as that of Churchill and Vander Wall (1988, 1990) resemble those works mentioned earlier in that they cite and discuss, in an interesting yet non-systematic manner certain repressive forces that operated against Panther leaders in the major chapters of the organization like Oakland, Chicago and New York. Jones's (1988) essay overcomes the shortcomings of these studies by conducting an in-depth examination of the repressive tactics employed by government officials against the Black Panthers in Oakland from 1966 to 1971.

This essay builds on, yet moves beyond, the previous work. Rather than focusing on the National Headquarters and providing interesting yet scattered tidbits of information about various other chapters, this essay focuses solely on the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party. Utilizing several unique sources, this article chronicles the history of the chapter and systematically analyses the repressive government tactics that the Baltimore chapter was subjected to during its life span.

### **Power-conflict theory as applied to political repression**

The power-conflict perspective is essential to understanding the phenomenon of political repression. The intellectual tradition at the heart of conflict theory began principally with the writings of Karl Marx. Power-conflict theorists focus on the disparity in the distribution of power, wealth and income in a given society. The conflict perspective assumes that social behaviour is best understood in terms of conflict or tension between competing groups. Marx argued that the dominant class under capitalism – the bourgeoisie – manipulated the economic and political systems in order to maintain control over the exploited proletariat. Since Marx, the power-conflict perspective has developed through the works of more recent theorists like C. Wright Mills, Robert Dahl, William Domhoff, Joe Feagin and others (Mills 1956; Dahl 1961; Horowitz 1963; Domhoff 1967; Feagin and Feagin 1990). Like Marx, contemporary conflict theorists maintain that human beings are prone to conflict because of inequities in resources. These inequities exist not only along class lines, but along racial and gender lines as well. According to critical power-conflict theorists, the structure of capitalism in the United States, in which white capitalists hold a large proportion of the wealth, leads to the birth of dissident groups and a social system characterized by domination, exploitation and subjugation.

Feagin and Feagin (1990) developed a number of propositions to describe the power-conflict relationship including the idea that in society certain groups of people dominate over others because of their control and possession of several important resources, such as wealth and property that serve to generate further wealth, and greater control over the police and law enforcement generally. As applied to the issue of political repression, power-conflict theory develops from the history of policing and the growth of capitalism within the United States. Herbert Marcuse argues that repression, in both its psychological and political aspects, is an essential feature of an advanced industrial society (Marcuse 1955, 1968). Focusing on the competition for power by various elements within society, power-conflict scholars see political repression as a tool of domination used by the ruling white group to protect its stronghold on limited resources. In doing so the ruling elite is able to keep insurgents and their constituents marginalized and mired in poverty. From the Jeffersonian Republicans in the 1790s to the International Workers of the World of the 1920s to the Black Panthers in the 1960s and 1970s, groups which have pushed for a fairer share in the distribution of goods and services or challenged the exclusionary practices of America's so-called Democratic institutions have found themselves under attack by various government agencies intent on preserving the status quo (Belknap 1977). Suffice to say, the status quo is desirable to those with wealth, status and power; hence they have a vested interest in curtailing the efforts of those who wish to dismantle it.

### **Mode of analysis**

The primary research method employed in this study is content analysis. A quantitative content analysis of four newspapers was conducted: the *Baltimore Sun*, the *News American*, the *Afro-American* and the *Black Panther Party Intercommunal News*. By contrast, Jones's work (1988) is limited to analysing two newspapers—the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the Black Panther newspaper. Why Jones chose not to analyse the *Oakland Tribune* is unclear. Primary data for this essay were obtained from interviews with former Panthers and their affiliated supporters as well as government documents.

The *Sun* and the *News American* were selected because they were the largest circulating newspapers in Baltimore at that time. The *News American* is now defunct. The *Afro-American* is Baltimore's black newspaper while the *Black Panther Intercommunalism News* is the official voice of the Black Panther Party. As there is no index for these newspapers, each day's news was read and copied from microfilm. In the case of the *Afro-American* and the Black Panther newspaper each week's news was read as these publications are printed just once a week. By analysing four different newspapers we decrease the chance of

omitting events that may have transpired during the life span of this local branch.

The period of investigation for this study begins in 1968 when the Baltimore chapter was founded and ends in 1972 when the chapter shut down. Each article that mentioned the Black Panther Party was read and analysed. However, only those articles that made mention of an encounter between the Black Panther Party and law enforcement during that period was coded according to Alan Wolfe's classification of Political Repression Acts (see Table 1). This was done to determine the nature, pattern and frequency of political repression levied against the Baltimore chapter. Again, supplementing these data are government documents and interviews with former Panthers and their affiliated supporters. Before proceeding with a discussion of the founding, inner-workings of the Baltimore chapter and the repression it encountered, it is important to provide a history of black political activism in Baltimore in order to place the emergence of the Baltimore chapter in context.

### **Baltimore, black activism and the politics of discontent**

Baltimore is an old industrial mid-southern city. Between 1930 and 1960, the black population of Baltimore increased from 142,000 to 326,000 as waves of southern blacks were drawn by the industrial opportunities associated with World War II (McDougall 1993). In 1970 blacks constituted 46 per cent of Baltimore's population. Although the city is presently over 60 per cent black, blacks have not been able to convert these numbers into policy outcomes which redistribute services and goods that have traditionally been dispensed at disproportionately low levels to blacks. In 1935 the Baltimore Urban League commissioned a study that commented on the powerlessness of blacks in the political process (Urban League 1935):

If ever the Negro population of Baltimore became aware of it's (*sic*) political power, the . . . governmental, economic and racial set-up of the community would undergo a profound change. The political seers have long been aware of the presence of this sleeping giant and have handled him successfully from time to time.

It was not until 1987 that black Baltimoreans were able to elect a black into the mayor's office. Other large cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Oakland and Philadelphia were able to vote blacks into the mayor's office long before Baltimore, despite the fact that blacks did not constitute a majority in any of those cities at the time those mayors were elected.

While the city's black population has only recently demonstrated that it can be a force in electoral politics, Baltimore has experienced a degree of black grassroots political activism that has gone largely unnoticed by

**Table 1:** Wolfe’s Classification of Political Repression in the United States

Category	Definition	Example
1) Legal Repression	The use of laws and or the legal system for the purpose of neutralizing dissent	Loitering, Traffic violations
Harassment Laws	When a law that was originally passed with no political purpose is used to repress	Robbery, Assault charges
Inclusion Laws	Determine who should be included in society	Restrictive immigration policies
Process Laws	A law that punishes a person for planning to commit a criminal act	Conspiracy charges
Public Order Laws	Actions which create disorder	Disturbing the peace
Preventive Practices	Practices employed to control the members of an organization and to discourage others from joining that organization	Frequent arrests and long jail sentences
Political Laws	A law which is enacted for the specific purpose of stifling dissent	Smith Act
2) Political Intelligence	The practice of spying on an organization and causing disruption within that organization	Informers, surveillance
3) Violent Repression	Stifling dissent by using the police and other law enforcement to berate, intimidate and physically rattle dissenters.	Raids, National Guard

**Source:** Wolfe (1973, p. 93–124).

historians and students of politics. For example, one month after four North Carolina A&T College students staged a sit-in at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, black students from Morgan State College (now University) joined by whites from Johns Hopkins University and Goucher College staged a sit-in that won desegregation of the lunch counters in the Northwood Shopping Center near the Morgan campus (Callcott 1985).

In 1968, when frustrated blacks across the country took to the streets

en masse in response to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's assassination, Baltimore too exploded. Six persons were killed, more than 700 others were injured and more than 1,000 businesses destroyed over the six-day ruckus (Peterson and Zumbrun 1968). Most of the 1,000 burnt-out stores and businesses were white owned (Olson 1980). Some were places that had refused to serve blacks in the 1950s and early 1960s (Olson 1980). A day after Baltimore erupted, Governor Spiro Agnew declared martial law and sent in 5,500 National Guardsmen to assist 1,200 city police. Nearly 6,000 arrests were made before order was restored (Olson 1980).

Several days later Governor Agnew summoned one hundred leaders of the moderate black community (who were exhausted from walking the streets trying to calm the rioters) to the state Capitol. Instead of thanking them, as many of the leaders had expected, the Governor berated them as cowards who were secretly allied with the criminals and who shared responsibility for what had occurred. Many of those in attendance walked out, and Agnew refused to allow those who remained to explain themselves (Olson 1980). Governor Agnew's handling of this situation was indicative of the way the white establishment had historically dealt with Baltimore's black political leadership in particular and black concerns in general. Case in point: When 450 black students from Historically Black Bowie State College marched on the State House to see the Governor, demanding improved dormitories and classrooms, Agnew refused to see them and called for the state police. Over 200 students were arrested. To make matters worse, Agnew ordered the troops to proceed immediately to Bowie, where they arrived at seven in the evening to close down the college, giving the remaining students five minutes to vacate their dormitories and leave the campus (Callcott 1985).

Despite the presence of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE], and the Urban League, black leaders were not taken seriously and black socio-economic conditions continued to lag behind those of whites. A survey conducted in 1965 found several disturbing patterns concerning the poor and working class in Baltimore (Health and Welfare Council 1965). The survey found that the poor belonged to families in which under-education was a generational pattern, as members dropped out soon after completing elementary school; they felt more oppressed by and suspicious of civilian authorities than helped by them; and under-served in terms of schools, fire protection, sanitation, recreation, police protection and healthcare.

Dr. King's assassination, the inferior status to which Baltimore's black leadership had been consigned by the white elite and the deteriorating quality of life for the city's black residents signalled the decline of the traditional civil rights movement and ushered in a movement that

exhibited a greater sense of urgency-the Black Power Movement. Out of this movement sprang the Baltimore Black Panthers.

### **Panthers come to Baltimore**

Warren Hart founded the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party in 1968. Less than a year later Hart was accused of operating the Baltimore branch as a social club and was demoted from captain to a rank-and-file member (McCutchen 1998). Shortly thereafter, he was expelled by the national office for 'irregularities'. As a result, John Clark, who had been active in the organization in Los Angeles was sent to Baltimore to head the local branch (McCutchen 1992). The Baltimore Black Panthers brought a sense of militancy that resonated with many blacks. 'The Panthers are the only brothers who can deal with the white man on any terms necessary, they're not scared to stand up and tell the honkies where to go according to one black resident' (Robinson 1970, p. 1). Paul Coates, who joined the Party after nineteen-months of military service in Vietnam said, 'I began thinking about the Panthers in early 1969. I had tried SNCC<sup>2</sup> and the Republic of New Africa,<sup>3</sup> I felt that the Party was doing things that would have an impact on the lives of the people' (Coates 1993).

On an organizational level, the Black Panther Party maintained a strict hierarchical chain of command that consisted of a 'central committee', a term traditionally used by the Communist movement. This body was made up of eleven positions. Their order of importance is as follows: 1) Minister of Defense; 2) Chairman; 3) Minister of Information; 4) Chief of Staff; 5) Minister of Education; 6) Prime Minister; 7) Minister of Justice; 8) Minister of Foreign Affairs; 9) Minister of Culture; 10) Minister of Finance; and 11) Communications Secretary. The notion that the top leadership should reside with the military commander, who simultaneously fulfils the role of Chief Theoretician and strategist, derives from Regis Debray, the Latin American theorist (Debray 1967).

Organizational structure at the local level exhibited a similar layout with Deputy Ministers, Defense Captains, Lieutenants of Information, Lieutenants of Education, Lieutenants of Finance, Communications Secretaries and the like. Below them were section leaders, subsection leaders and rank- and-file members (McCutchen 1992, 1998). According to Baltimore Panther Steve McCutchen, the system of organization at the local level was called the '10-10-10'. First, a city was divided into ten sections and each section was assigned a leader by the local central staff. Next, each section was divided into ten subsections and assigned subsection leaders. The sub-sections were then divided and each rank-and-file member was given the responsibility of organizing a certain number of people in a given community. The key actor in this process was the area captain, who was the link between the local central staffs and the



section leaders. According to one Panther, 'In the event of police harassment of a motorist/pedestrian, you would call your block leader who would get some type of assistance to the individual being harassed. . . . The bigger the problem the higher you went into subsections and sections. In the case of something like a riot all ten sections would be dispatched' (McCutchen 1992). It should be noted that a number of Panther chapters around the country were credited with discouraging would-be rioters after the assassination of Dr. King (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1984).

For information purposes, there was an official organ of party opinion, the *Black Panther Intercommunal News*. The Party believed that blacks were being misinformed by mainstream media. Hence, the newspaper was created to present factual and reliable information to the public. Political education classes were held regularly. Special emphasis was placed on Mao Tse Tung's *Red Book* and the autobiography of Malcolm X as a way of heightening the political consciousness of the organization's members. 'Mao Tse Tung has been our inspiration,' said Paul Coates. 'He is the symbol of achievement. Huey and Bobby read his works and used some of Mao's ideas as the basis for the Panthers' (Coates 1993). Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Karl Marx were also required reading for new recruits.

Members of the Baltimore chapter largely consisted of individuals in their twenties and early thirties, whereas members at the National level were more varied in age (Douglas 1992; McCutchen 1992). Members in the Baltimore chapter were also less heterogeneous in background and occupation (McCutchen 1992; Coates 1993). Almost all the Baltimore Panthers were products of working-class families. Some were college students while most were high school graduates who worked in the service and industrial sectors of the city. Like the National headquarters, the Baltimore Panthers were clandestine about the actual membership of their chapter. 'We don't speak in numbers, said Clark. We think all black people are potentially [*sic*] Black Panthers' (Robinson 1970, p. 3).

Some argued that the reason the Black Panther Party would not disclose details about the membership is because the figures were not as impressive as the Panthers would have outsiders believe. In the late 1960s the Justice Department estimated that there were only 1,000 Panthers in the entire country (O'Reilly 1989). If true, this finding is interesting in the light of J. Edgar Hoover's claim that the Black Panther Party represented the greatest internal threat to the national security of the United States (U.S. House of Representatives 1971). While the exact number of Panthers in Baltimore is unknown, the chapter was significantly smaller than the Bay Area Headquarters. However, the smaller membership may have proved advantageous in that it did not easily allow for factionalism or infiltration by informants.

In keeping with the objectives of the National headquarters, the Baltimore chapter immersed itself in community service projects. However, the Baltimore Panthers did not patrol or monitor the police in the way that West Coast Panthers did. This may be explained in part because Maryland law prohibited the carrying of guns openly. Like the National headquarters, the Baltimore chapter did provide the community with a number of survival programmes. The Baltimore chapter operated a free breakfast programme during the school year at Martin De Porres Catholic Church where interestingly one would find more men than women cooking and serving children their meals. The Panthers fed as many as 200 children a day with food donated by area merchants (Wickwire 1993). John Clark said:

the local merchants don't really want to do this, but we feel that since they make their living off of the poor people it shouldn't be too much to ask that they put a few dollars back into the community to feed hungry children. "If they refuse to donate, we throw up a picket line and urge black people not to patronize them. They know that if blacks don't buy from them they'll have to close their doors. Eventually, they do participate in the program" (Robinson 1970, p. 5).

The idea of picketing as a way of urging merchants to support the Panthers' breakfast programme was encouraged by the National office in Oakland (Newton 1972). Soon after the breakfast programme was started in Baltimore the Panthers implemented a free lunch programme during the summer months. The children in the breakfast and lunch programmes ranged in age from toddler to pre-teen (Wickwire 1993). When the Panthers started the lunch programme, they served lunch and then attempted to give the children 'liberation lessons'. Party members quickly learnt that the children would not sit still for lectures or films after they had eaten. Wisely, the Panthers reversed the schedule so that the lessons came before lunch.

The breakfast and lunch programmes were subjected to the same scrutiny that the national office encountered. Hoover and local law enforcement accused the Panthers of operating the breakfast and lunch programmes as a front for indoctrinating children with Panther propaganda (Who are these Black Panthers and what do they really want? 1970; Senate Committee 1976; O'Reilly 1989). Clark maintained that nothing could be further from the truth. 'They think we teach the kids to kill "Whitey".' We try to educate the children as to what our ten-point platform is all about. It's true that we have told them that in order for black people to survive we have to take up guns for self-defense. We see nothing wrong in that. Their minds must be prepared now so that they will understand the struggle' (Who are these Black Panthers, 1970, p. 2).

While the Baltimore chapter provided its residents with several meaningful community service endeavours the actual number of programmes provided by the Baltimore office paled in comparison to those offered at the National level. This was because the National office had access to certain resources that the Baltimore Panthers did not. Being in California afforded the National headquarters the opportunity to tap into liberal Hollywood celebrities and philanthropists like Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Donald Sutherland, Lynn Redgrave, Candice Bergen and others (Freed 1973; Douglas 1992). One service that the Baltimore chapter did provide that did not exist at the National level was a free dry-cleaning service. Like the Oakland office, the Baltimore Panthers also operated a free medical clinic. Doctors and Nurses from the Johns Hopkins Hospital helped to staff the clinic. The Panthers also served as a liaison and spokesperson for many of the community's residents. For example, when one lady fell ill and was unable to work the Panthers took her to the department of social services and acted as her spokesperson. As a result she received the necessary funds. On another occasion when an elderly woman was on the verge of being evicted from her apartment for non-payment of rent the Party provided the money.

The Black Panther Party's primary source of income came from selling its newspaper. On a good week the Baltimore chapter claimed to have sold as many as 7,000 copies (Who are these Black Panthers 1970). The West Coast Headquarters supplemented its income by giving speeches and lectures across the country, mainly on college campuses. Newton, Seale and the best selling author Eldridge Cleaver were the most sought after speakers. Likewise, the Baltimore chapter received a number of requests to fill speaking engagements as well but turned down the majority of them. Surprisingly, the Baltimore chapter did not view speaking engagements as a practical endeavour, especially those outside of the Baltimore Metropolitan area. 'We've got to get the message across to the brothers and sisters right here in the colony. It's not worth it to us to spend a lot of time travelling around to give talks. We found that four or five of our top people were killing entire days talking with people on the outside' said Clark (Who are these Black Panthers, 1970, p. 4). The invitations that were accepted by the Baltimore Panthers included most local colleges like Morgan State College, Johns Hopkins University, Coppin State College and the Community College of Baltimore. The Panthers were also invited to speak at high schools, but school officials would not permit it.

Unlike the National headquarters the Baltimore chapter did not get consistent extensive financial support from philanthropists. There were a few exceptions to this rule. In 1969, when the local chapter was experiencing financial difficulties, a group of black professors at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, provided donations of various amounts. On another occasion the Panthers received \$8,000 from the Catholic

Archdiocese of Baltimore earmarked specifically to help subsidize the free breakfast programme (Robinson 1970). For the most part, the Baltimore chapter relied on the sale of newspapers, books, pamphlets and small donations.

Like many other dissident left-wing organizations in America, the Black Panther Party was not permitted to enjoy a peaceful existence free from government harassment. In 1967 FBI director J. Edgar Hoover created Cointelpro, a counter intelligence programme designed to neutralize New Left organizations. According to an internal agency memo from Hoover, 'The purpose of this programme is to expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize the New Left, their Leadership and adherents' (Marx 1974; Blackstock 1975). Among the programme's objectives was the destruction of the Black Nationalist movement in the United States. Hoover said: 'Agents are instructed to prevent coalitions from forming, to prevent "the rise of a messiah", to neutralize potential troublemakers', and to prevent black nationalist groups from 'gaining respectability' by discrediting them with unfavorable publicity, ridicule, and whatever other means "imaginative" agents could think up' (Marx 1974). As a result of Hoover's directive, the Panthers became the victims of manhunts, political trials and unprovoked shootings – a search and destroy mission probably unprecedented in America for its scope and systematic ferocity (Parenti 1995). To give an idea of how intent the FBI was on destroying the Panthers, of the 295 actions taken by the FBI's Cointelpro between 1968 and 1971, 233 (79 per cent) were directed against the Black Panther Party (Goldstein 1978).

### **Political repression in the American milieu**

In *Political Repression in Modern America*, Robert Goldstein (1978, p. xiv) defines political repression as 'government action, which grossly discriminates against persons or organizations viewed as presenting a fundamental challenge to existing power relationships or key government policies, because of their perceived political beliefs'. In other words, political repression is a response to any perceived threat to social peace or tranquility. This repression involves not only the act but the general message conveyed to the public. Political repression can range from what J. C. Scott calls steady pressure – 'the occasional police visit, arrest or detention – to widespread disappearances, torture and killings' (Scott 1985, p. 249–310). A disappearance, whether by the police or government apparatus, means a person has been seized and placed in detention without a record. A disappearance has been called the highest form of political repression because all legal protections of the individual can be ignored. Indefinite detention and torture can then be conducted with little or no impunity and with crushing effects on individual lives

(Fanon 1963; Gutierrez 1984). According to SNCC activist Willie Ricks, this was a common practice used against civil rights activists in the south (Ricks 1998).

A close review of the literature on political repression reveals three common types: legal repression, covert repression and violent repression. Some argue that the use of the legal system is the most widely used means to squash dissent (Levin 1971; Wolfe 1973, p. 118; Grossman 1976). Wolfe defines legal repression as 'when a simple law that was originally passed with no political purpose is used to harass and repress'. Covert repression is a tactic whereby police and government officials use surveillance or put informants in place to disrupt organizational operations. Violent repression is physical aggression used to intimidate or in some cases annihilate those considered to be subversive or unAmerican.

As alluded to earlier, one of the main purposes of repression is to create a climate of fear (Balbus 1973). In the first half of the century, southern law enforcement helped spread fear by putting pictures of lynchings in the press, ostensibly to help relatives claim their dead but also as a warning to others (Schmid 1983). Terror as a policy is so shrewd that the government does not have to do everything; terror works through personal networks based on conversations and rumours among the public at large (Schmid 1983). Repression also involves a circle of complicity. A fully operative government apparatus for repression may come into existence and, once established, a network grows around it to maintain and protect it (de Swaan 1977). Beginning with the police, the FBI and the National Guard, a repression apparatus may also include judges, lawyers, informers and other government bureaucracies. The apparatus also tends to find a widening circle of victims (Ruthven 1978). With the concept of political repression made clear, a discussion of the local state and the Baltimore Panthers now follows.

### **The nature of local and state political repression**

Although Panthers in Baltimore did not walk the streets brandishing weapons like the Panthers on the West Coast, they were still subjected to many of the same kinds of politically motivated repressive governmental tactics. In 1969 a group of concerned citizens (both black and white) formed the Baltimore Committee for Political Freedom because they feared that the Baltimore Police Department was planning to assassinate Panther leaders in their city, as Fred Hampton and Mark Clark had been in Chicago. The committee of forty included William Zinman, an attorney for the Maryland ACLU, Dr. Peter Rossi of the Department of Social Relations at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. John Mann of the School of Education, and the Reverend Chester Wickwire, a chaplain for Johns Hopkins University and spiritual adviser for the Black Panther

Party. According to Wickwire, the committee believed that Police Commissioner Donald Pommerlau (who considered J. Edgar Hoover a mentor) was engaged in a 'vendetta' against the Panthers (Donner 1990; Wickwire 1993).

Pommerlau was a strict 'law and order' man whose background would give some indication as to the type of reception the Panthers could expect. Pommerlau had been a Marine lieutenant colonel, a combat commander during the Korean War, and an instructor at the Marine Corps School in Quantico, Virginia, before assuming the post of Baltimore Police Commissioner in 1966. Incidentally, Baltimore's red-squad, formally known as the intelligence section of the Inspectional Services Division [ISD] was launched on 1 July 1966, coinciding with the date of Pommerlau's appointment as Commissioner. In addition to an organized crime unit, the intelligence section sheltered an anti-subversive squad responsible for 'gathering information regarding the activities of subversive, extremist and militant groups'(Donner 1990, p. 298). In 1974, two years after the Baltimore chapter shut down, it was revealed that Pommerlau compiled dossiers on the Panthers and anyone else he considered subversive (McDougall 1993). These dossiers were shared with the mayor, the FBI and United States Army Intelligence. For fifteen years (1966–1982) Police Commissioner Pommerlau presided over and directed a huge counter subversive operation, which he also used to intimidate his critics and repress any challenge to the political social order in Baltimore.

### *LEGAL REPRESSION*

Harassment laws were employed on no less than twenty occasions throughout the chapter's existence (see Table 2). The typical harassment violations were assault, loitering and weapons charges. For example, on 25 February 1969, six Panthers were arrested for allegedly assaulting police who were arresting a seventh Panther. This Panther was later revealed by the *Baltimore Sun* to be working for the Police Department. At the trial eighteen months later, state prosecutors admitted that the Panthers were not guilty and dropped all charges. Whether the initial Panther and the police officer were in collusion with the express purpose of ensuring the arrest of the other six Panthers is unclear. However, police informants have been known to instigate trouble as a way of providing the police with a justification for taking action against those dissidents targeted for annihilation. These particular informants are often the most unruly, reckless and 'bodacious' members (Collier 1992). For example, Chicago informant William O'Neal built an electric chair to torture alleged agents all while he was helping to set up Mark Clark and Fred Hampton for assassination (O'Reilly 1989).

In the spring of 1969 a Panther rally, for which a permit had been obtained, was being held in a city park when suddenly there appeared

**Table 2** Acts of political repression levied against the Black Panther Party in Baltimore 1968–1972

Category	Arrests/Incidents
1 Legal Repression	
Harassment Laws	20
Inclusion Laws	0
Process Laws	1
Public Order Laws	10
Preventive Laws and Practices	25
Political Laws	1
Total	57
2 Political Intelligence-	
Covert Repression	11
Political Espionage/ Agent-Provocateur	4
Total	15
3 Violent Repression	
Raids	20
National Guard	0
Shoot-outs	0
Total	20
Overall Total	92

**Sources:** *The Baltimore Sun*, *The News American*, *The Afro American*, *the Black Panther Party Intercommunal News*, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Internal Security, U.S. Senate Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Operations; Baltimore Police Department's Newsletter and Interviews with Black Panthers.

on the scene ten buses loaded with 400 policemen (Hart 1969; Baltimore Free Huey Rally 1969). Fortunately, the officers were persuaded to leave the scene and position themselves where they would not be visible. Such a show of force may have been an attempt to intimidate Panthers as well as those who were there in support of their cause. This type of behaviour by the police was not an uncommon occurrence at Panther rallies. In his dissertation, *Black Radicalism in Southern California 1950–1982*, Bruce Michael Tyler cites a similar instance in Los Angeles where a Panther sponsored rally was being held in a city park for which a permit had also been obtained. As the rally got underway carloads of police saturated the area. Tyler writes, 'their presence in the park was not designed for protection of life and property, but designed as a sort of psychological warfare theme to say that you (to the Panthers) can't keep us out of here. We aren't afraid of you' (Tyler 1983).

A similar situation occurred a year later on 13 October 1970, when several Panthers participated in a rally in support of political prisoners in Baltimore and in the Maryland State Penitentiary. The rally also

protested against the conditions of the prisons and the substandard medical treatment received by the inmates. During the rally the police again stood by in an apparent attempt to intimidate those in attendance. Recognizing what the police were trying to do the people held the rally in an orderly and peaceful manner. When the rally began to attract large numbers of passers-by the police became infuriated and began snatching signs away from people. When this did not provoke anyone the police singled out one participant and demanded that he stop the rally. When the gentleman explained that 'it was not his rally to stop', the police started clubbing him with a nightstick (Pigs Run Amuck in Baltimore 1970, p. 1). Upon seeing this, the crowd began to disperse. By the end of the night nineteen persons were arrested three of whom were Panthers. The following day three more Panthers were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and inciting a riot and held on \$25,000.00 bond (Pigs Run Amuck in Baltimore 1970).

There is some evidence that the police tried to stunt the development of the Baltimore chapter by arresting and incarcerating its members. Paul Coates says that he was arrested at least fifteen times 'for everything you can imagine – from parking tickets to attempted murder' (Tibbs, n.d.). On other occasions, the FBI arranged for police to release one of a group of Panthers that had been arrested together or to single one Panther out for special treatment, and then spread the rumour that the beneficiary had cooperated. One of the most noteworthy arrests occurred in August 1970 when John L. Clark, the chapter leader, was extradited to Los Angeles and charged with illegal possession of a deadly weapon (Fitzgerald 1970b, p. A1). The arrest of the Panther leader left a leadership vacuum that proved to have a far-reaching impact on the chapter during the remainder of its existence. Other incidents were more petty in nature. On one occasion, as a Party member walked towards his car several police cruisers converged on him whereupon he was arrested and charged with failure to have a driving licence and registration card in his possession even though he was not driving. In addition, in the Winter of 1969 as several members of the Baltimore Police Department looked on, the Baltimore Gas and Electric company shut off gas service to Panther headquarters by digging up the street and turning off the main valve (Chutkow 1969). As irony would have it, when the four-hour operation was completed, the company learnt that they had turned off service to the wrong building. The second attempt proved more successful. When *Baltimore Sun* reporters alluded to there being an ulterior motive on the part of the gas company, a spokesman for Baltimore Gas and Electric commented that 'there might be some feeling that we are picking on the Black Panthers, but this is not correct. We are not engaged in an effort to put the Black Panthers out of business' (Chutkow 1969, p. C8). The fact that service had also been disconnected at an apartment four days



earlier where several Panthers were known to frequent weakens the veracity of that claim.

The second type of law employed extensively to repress the Baltimore chapter was the public order law. Simply put, this law prohibits disturbing the peace. Numerous Panthers were arrested for violating public disorder laws. Arresting members of the Black Panther Party on public disorder charges was relatively easy because police possess an enormous amount of discretion (Lipsky 1980; Smith and Visher 1981). A perfect example was the arrest of a Panther charged with disorderly conduct, assault and resisting arrest when he refused a policeman's order to stop selling the Panther's newspaper in front of the Baltimore Civic Center. On another occasion, several Panthers were arrested on suspicion of killing a police officer. Patrolman Donald Sager was killed and his partner wounded in a deadly sniper attack. No gunman was identified at the scene, but Baltimore police officials suspected the Panthers on general principle (Newton 1980). The Police Commissioner admitted that although he had no evidence, 'the persons who would commit this crime must belong to some sort of radical group'. (Who are these Black Panthers, 1970, p. 10).

One important incident of repression by a political law was the securing of a ten-day injunction on 1 May 1970, against the distribution of the Panther's newspaper. The state attorney general and Bernard L. Silbert, the Police Department's legal adviser, argued that the newspaper advocated the killing of police officers. In an accompanying affidavit, the two state officials claimed that the Panther newspaper played an important part in the 'ambush' of two city policemen, and 'will continue to present an immediate danger to the lives, health and well-being' of members of the department (Fitzgerald 1970a, p. A1). 'Refusal to comply with the order', Mr. Burch said, 'can result in imprisonment for contempt of court' (Fitzgerald 1970a).

Forty-five 'high-echelon officers' of the Police Department were deputed to enforce the injunction. Sheriff Frank J. Pelz admitted that the number of individuals deputed was a bit unusual. 'I don't know of any time previously that this has been the case in Baltimore,' he noted (U.S. Judge Alters Injunction 1970b, p. 17). David L. Glenn, executive director of the city's Community Relations Commission, criticized Commissioner Pommerlau for seeking the injunction (Governor Denies 1970a, p. A10). Glenn stated:

There are plenty of right-wing groups in the city whose literature tells people to "kill Niggers" and I don't see the police going after them. We have been bothered by hate literature for years and years. I don't see any difference between literature that urges people to kill policemen and literature that wants Negroes killed.

In response to the assertion that the Panthers represented a threat and

an immediate danger to the well-being of the Police Department, National CORE Leader Roy Innis submitted:

Black Panthers are no threat in Baltimore. You have never heard of them burning police stations or threatening the police. Law enforcement agents all over the country consistently have involved themselves in a massive conspiracy. At present they are using the Panthers as a foil to increase their power to suppress (Oliver 1970b, p. 2a).

### *COVERT REPRESSION*

On the issue of covert intelligence, fifteen incidents were uncovered in which political intelligence mechanisms were employed to subdue the Baltimore chapter (see Table 2). In December 1969, investigative reporting by the *Baltimore Sun* and the *News American* revealed round-the-clock police surveillance of local Panther headquarters. The police had installed a movie camera in a building across the street from Panther headquarters (Donner 1990). When this discovery was made, police admitted photographing Panthers and placing their pictures on bulletin boards in precinct stations but denied any use of videotape. Chester Wickwire says that 'when the Panthers learned of this surveillance, it put many of them on guard and fostered paranoia within the chapter' (Wickwire 1993). On more than one occasion, members of the Committee for Political Freedom received early-morning calls from Panther headquarters, asking them to stand vigil outside the office as police with shotguns were cruising around it (Baltimore Committee for Political Freedom 1970; Wickwire 1993).

Over the course of the chapter's existence, as far as this author could ascertain, local, state and federal law enforcement infiltrated the branch by strategically placing at least four informants/agents provocateurs within Panther offices in Baltimore. The use of informants and infiltrators by law enforcement has proved to be an effective way to neutralize radical groups. Police infiltrators are afforded the luxury of acting in an extremely militant fashion and even engaging in illegal activity because they know that for the most part they will be protected from prosecution (Escobar 1993). Basing their actions on this assumption and hoping to please their superiors, agents/informants often concoct outrageous schemes, foment dissension, provoke others to commit crimes, or commit crimes themselves in order to disrupt an organization or provide testimony in court (Escobar 1993). The job of one Baltimore informant was to disrupt what was already a tenuous alliance between the Panthers and the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS]. This informant was instructed to portray SDS as an 'elite corps of chauvinistic whites who wanted to exploit the BPP' (Davis 1997). These efforts must have succeeded. A memo dated 26 August 1969, reported, 'BPP members have

been instructed not to associate with SDS members or attend any SDS affairs' (Davis 1997, pp. 141–42). Another memo reported 'an officer of the Baltimore chapter [name deleted] was expelled from the chapter for his association with an SDS member' (Davis 1997, p. 142).

Because the business of espionage is a clandestine one it is difficult to determine exactly how many agent provocateurs infiltrated the local branch. In fact, a study by Frank J. Donner would seem to suggest that this author has conservatively estimated the number of informants used to foil Panther activities. Donner notes that of the police departments he studied 'no department placed so heavily an emphasis on informers as a way of neutralizing dissident groups as did Baltimore's Inspectional Services Division' (Donner 1990, pp. 298–301). According to Gary Marx, 'the use of agents can be seen as a device whereby police may take action consistent with their own sense of justice and morality, independent of the substantive or procedural requirements of the law' (Marx 1974). Because intelligence operations are by nature secret considerable damage can be done to an unpopular yet legal group without necessarily evoking legal sanctions.

While it appears that the Baltimore chapter was not infiltrated to the degree that other chapters were, the infiltration that did occur was made possible for two reasons. Because the lifeline of most organizations is to a large degree contingent upon new recruits and because Panthers were constantly being jailed, the chapter was forced to accept new members as a way of replenishing membership. Second, because being a Panther was an extremely dangerous undertaking, few individuals were overly zealous to join an organization where their lives would be at risk on a daily basis. Indeed, Michael Newton notes that coming out of the civil rights movement many blacks were still too conservative – or too afraid to adopt the Panther Party as a vehicle for reform (Newton 1980). Hence, in some ways the Panthers could not be as selective and discerning when it came to reviewing applications as some other left-wing or civil rights organizations could be. In early 1969 Panther leaders began to purge members from the organization who were thought to be working against the interests of the Party. This purge was apparently directly related to infiltration of the organization. The names of purged members were subsequently printed in the Party's newspaper with the admonition that 'They are not to be associated with or let into any Black Panther office anywhere' (Purged Panthers 1969; Seale 1970, p. 370). Later, the organization took a more serious measure to curtail infiltration by placing a moratorium on membership intake. While this tactic undoubtedly prevented agents provocateurs from gaining entry into the Party, it did little to thwart the efforts of those informants who were already in the organization.

Infiltration proved valuable in creating mistrust and paranoia within the chapter. Fear of informers was sufficient, in many cases, to generate

a climate of mistrust needed to precipitate serious internal problems. Sociologists McAdam and Moore (1989) submit that it is difficult to overestimate the divisive internal effect that government surveillance had on insurgents. Suspicion reduced morale and led to unfounded accusations. Sociologist Gary Marx cites a 1970 memo in which 'FBI agents were instructed to plant in the hands of Panthers phony documents (on FBI stationary) that would lead them to suspect one another of being police informers' (Marx, 1971). Subsequently, several Panthers were expelled (justly or unjustly) because they were suspected of being police informants (Marx 1971; Jones 1988; Hilliard 1993).

### *VIOLENT REPRESSION*

Compared to the Oakland office, the Baltimore chapter was subjected to an excessive amount of *violent* repression. Not even children were spared harassment by the police. One morning breakfast was interrupted at the Martin de Porres Center by police who entered with guns drawn. 'They walked around with their guns drawn and looked real mean. The children felt terrorized by the police. They were like gangsters and thugs,' said a Panther spokesman (Who are these Black Panthers 1970a, p. 10).

Raids, which are the primary method of violent repression, seldom occurred, but when they did they were carried out en masse. Most notably, on 1 May 1970, police staged numerous raids on known Panther hangouts and homes. According to the Baltimore Police Department's own newsletter, seventeen Baltimore homes, offices and nightspots were raided (Baltimore Police Department 1970). Approximately one hundred and fifty heavily armed policemen wearing bulletproof vests participated. By comparison, according to Jones, only five raids were carried out against the Oakland office from 1966 to 1971. At any rate, the Baltimore raids of 1 May resulted in four party members being arrested on weapons charges and six members arrested for the murder of Panther Eugene Lee Anderson, a suspected informant (Police Claim Victim Skinned 1970). The main Panther office went unscathed as local white youth, members of the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] and a group of sympathizers from New York's East Village held a vigil in front of the storefront office. None of the raids resulted in gunfire.

Several days later in a bail hearing, police detectives indicated that all evidence in the Panther murder case had been assembled three months prior to the arrests. Interestingly, detectives refused to give reasons for the delay in conducting the raids. Curiously, the presiding judge refused to entertain any argument that the police may have been seeking to avenge the recent death of a fellow police officer for which Panther Marshall Eddie Conway was eventually convicted (Pigs Railroad

Panther 1970). Donald Vaughn, Arnold Loney and Mahoney Kebe were alleged participants in Anderson's slaying. All three were produced by the FBI as witnesses to the crime, and turned over to the Baltimore's "red squad" (Newton 1981). Police named Arthur Turco, a white attorney who had defended Panther cases in the past as the mastermind behind Anderson's execution.

The main discrepancy in the case concerned the identity of the body suspected to be that of Anderson. After a skeleton was discovered buried in a park, a local examiner determined it was that of a white man, aged twenty-five to thirty (Newton 1981). Moreover, the man's death was ascribed to a drug overdose. However, when the remains made their way to the FBI laboratory in Washington, the body became that of Eugene Lee Anderson, a black man, aged twenty, killed by a shotgun blast (Donner 1980). The final indictments, delayed for half a year after the discovery of the disputed skeleton, came after Attorney General John Mitchell huddled with ranking Baltimore officials. Prosecutors sought federal advice on 'how to deal with Panther cases', but what they learnt from Mitchell was that the FBI did more harm than good for the state's case (Newton 1981). When finally hauled into Court, witness Mahoney Kebe lied so outrageously that the trial judge ordered Kebe's removal from the stand and his testimony to be struck from the record. The Panther named as Anderson's executioner was promptly acquitted, whereupon the state offered compromise deals to the remaining defendants. All refused, forcing the district attorney to admit in open court that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute seven of those accused; all charges were dismissed against the seven, and drastically reduced charges substituted for the remaining defendants. Arthur Turco, his health destroyed by ten months in jail, eventually pleaded guilty to a charge of common assault in the case (Newton 1981).

That a small chapter like Baltimore was subjected to such excessive acts of violent repression is interesting for three reasons. First, while relations between the police and the black community in Baltimore were by no means amicable, the relationship was not as volatile as it was in Oakland. Unlike the Oakland police department, Baltimore did not have a long-standing history of corruption or a reputation for excessive force and brutality against people of colour. California on the other hand had a long history of significant levels of political repression (Gibson 1988). Hence, one might expect that the Oakland Panthers would more likely be subjected to violent repressive acts than would their Baltimore counterparts. Second, repression in the United States is primarily legalistic. Given the relatively small size of the chapter, the use of massive amounts of violent repression against the Baltimore Panthers was probably unnecessary, as other tactics could have proved just as effective. Third, Isaac Balbus argues that, in the United States, élites are constrained by certain norms and procedures (Balbus 1971). One such norm is that

repression is typically implemented when there is massive intolerance of the minority group on the part of the majority. When intolerance becomes widespread there are demands for political repression, demands to which policy-makers usually accede (Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus 1982). For example, during the 1950s, the Communist Party and its suspected sympathizers were subjected to significant repression, and there seemed to be a great deal of support for such actions among the general public (Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus 1982). Another norm is that repression is supposedly usually employed only when there is a clear and present danger to that society's way of life. Even then, conventional wisdom holds that repression is meted out in accordance with the perceived or actual threat. In other words, the amount of repression should not exceed the level of threat posed by the minority group.

When government officials fail to adhere to these norms and procedures, unwanted attention is drawn to their efforts to quell dissent, which in turn increases the number of sympathizers for the subjects under attack (Balbus 1971). Such was the case in the shooting and subsequent incarceration of Huey P. Newton, the trial of the New York 21 and the Chicago raid that resulted in the deaths of Illinois Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. A major segment of the public became outraged at these overt acts of political repression and began to question government actions against the Panthers.

The same held true in Baltimore. When the community learnt of the raids of 1 May, blacks and whites were furious at the indiscriminate manner in which those raids were carried out. As a result, a group of concerned citizens under the auspices of the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance issued the following statements (The Community Talks 1970, p. 1b):

- 1 Persons who are to be apprehended should be approached and arrested without fanfare.
- 2 There should be no attempt to attribute the actions of a few to the total black community.
- 3 There should be an end to the harassment and intimidation of whole neighbourhoods in searching for alleged law violators and
- 4 The Mayor and the Governor should impress upon the Commissioner the fact that the black community is to be treated equally and fairly in matters related to police activities.

There are perhaps four reasons that could account for the excessive number of violent tactics levied against the Baltimore chapter. First, there is the possibility that raids were launched because the purge and moratorium put in place by Panther leadership proved to be an effective counterattack against government infiltration, leaving law enforcement without any clue as to what the Panthers were doing or planning.

Second, law enforcement may have feared that the Baltimore Panthers, with their programme for heightening the people's level of consciousness, were politicizing those who for many years accepted the status quo and remained dormant and docile (McDougall 1993). If this is correct, this may indicate the degree to which support for the Black Panther Party may have been growing across racial, class, gender and, to some extent, ideological lines. Students of repression argue that governments are more likely to repress those groups which give the impression of making inroads into other communities as opposed to groups whose support is confined to those who consider themselves outside the mainstream (Wolfe 1973; Stohl 1976; Goldstein 1978; Gibson 1988; Henderson 1997). At the very least there may have been some concern on the part of the powers-that-be, that with Baltimore's black population steadily increasing in size the number of Panthers as well as their allies, supporters and sympathizers would also increase (Callcott 1985). Indeed, a 1970 poll of African Americans living in New York, San Francisco, Detroit, Baltimore and Birmingham revealed that 62 per cent of blacks polled admired what the Black Panthers were doing (Foner 1970). Third, unlike California, Maryland did not have the benefit of a state law that permitted individuals to carry guns openly. Hence, raiding Panther offices in Baltimore may have proved less risky than it did for Oakland's Police Department. Fourth, unlike the Oakland office, with the exception of Coates and a few others, the Baltimore chapter did not have a large cadre of ex-servicemen in its ranks. Needless to say, ex-servicemen trained in the art of combat may have proved intimidating to potential assailants. The absence of such individuals may have made police less hesitant about raiding Panther offices and homes in Baltimore.

### **An analysis of political repression against the Panthers**

Legal harassment assisted in rendering the Baltimore chapter ineffective in several different ways. One major result of the abuse of the law was to cause the dissipation of organizational funds and the disruption of its day-to-day activities. When Panthers were arrested, the organization was forced to meet the cost of bail and legal assistance. Anthony Oberschall perceptively notes that the government's strategy appeared to be to tie down movement leaders of the 1960s in costly and time-consuming legal battles which would impede their activities and put a tremendous drain on financial resources regardless of whether the government would be successful in court (Oberschall 1978). Between 1967 and 1969, 768 arrests of Black Panthers were made nationwide. Total bail for all those arrested amounted to \$4,890,580 (Wolfe 1973). These funds could otherwise have been used for community service programmes and organizational expansion.

A second way in which law enforcement neutralized the Panthers was

by repressing the ideology of the Black Panther Party. Here, the government attempts to manipulate the public's consciousness so that they accept the ruling ideology, and distrust and refuse to be moved by competing ideologies. If the government can convince the overwhelming majority of the people in the United States that left-wing ideologies are evil and unAmerican, then dissident groups would gain few adherents and eventually die out. The idea that a form of repression could be ideological has its major expositor in the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci, those in power keep themselves there not only forcibly, but also by developing a certain set of ideas that become part of the culture, thereby making their rule seem just and inevitable (Cammett 1967; Fiori 1970).

In the case of the Baltimore Panthers law enforcement achieved this by engaging in character assassination, which created adverse publicity for the chapter. In *The Police and the Ghetto*, J. C. Cooper notes that

undercover police officers acting as informants were responsible for feeding the news media discolored information about the Black Panther Party; with the result that to this day, most white and black Americans do not know the message that the Panthers were trying to deliver (Cooper 1980).

Moreover, when news reports told of Panthers being arrested for assaulting a police officer or torturing and murdering a suspected Panther informant, understandably a segment of the public began to view the Panthers as little more than a group of small time gangsters. The alleged torture and murder of a suspected informant months earlier by Panthers in Connecticut did little to make Baltimore residents less suspicious of Panthers in their city. However, the public was often not aware of how government officials used negative media campaigns and criminal laws as a pretext to arrest Panthers for the purpose of stymieing organizational activities.

The consequence of these government practices was that the chapter lost public support from some segments of the community – both black and white. One white merchant said: 'The Black Panthers are nothing but a bunch of misfits, murderers and rapists' (Robinson 1970, p. 1). 'The Panthers act too much like a Black Ku Klux Klan. I cannot support them said one longtime veteran of the civil rights movement' (Oliver 1970a, p. 1a). In order to convince the public that the Party was a victim of malicious government repression, the chapter was forced to devote much of its time and energy to finding ways of garnering sympathy and support. The Panthers believed that they had to expose the injustices and atrocities of the system by 'educating' black people (Robinson 1970). Consequently, weekly meetings were held whereby Party members discussed Panther objectives with residents of the local community (Coates 1993).



From what this author can ascertain, the extent to which the local police and other law enforcement agencies employed covert tactics against the Baltimore chapter paled in comparison to what the National headquarters experienced. The national office was the target of a smear campaign, whereby government officials would send letters to merchants discouraging them from donating goods and services to the Panther's breakfast programme (Douglas 1992). The FBI also sent anonymous letters to members of the Oakland chapter with the purpose of exacerbating existing problems or creating new ones (Douglas 1992). Communications Secretary, Kathleen Cleaver, recalled that 'we did not know who to believe about what . . . it was a very bizarre feeling' (Davis 1992). It is well known that the FBI fuelled tensions that existed between the Panthers and other black organizations like the Black Stone Rangers in Chicago and US in Los Angeles (Karenga 1976; O'Reilly 1989; Brown 1997).

In one memo by Hoover he wrote: 'The BPP and Us, two Black extremists groups, are currently feuding . . . It is important that Black extremist groups be kept divided so that their strength is not increased through united action' (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1968). The police shot at Us and pretended the Panthers did it and shot at the Panthers and pretended it was Us (Us/Panther Conflict and the Tackwood Distortions, n.d.). The Black Panther Party and Us enjoyed a fairly amicable relationship before the FBI launched its counter intelligence programme. For a time the two groups were allies on a number of projects (Woodard 1999). Dr. Maulana Karenga, leader of Us,<sup>4</sup> recalls that 'we used to do community patrols together' (O'Reilly 1989).

As far as this author can tell the Baltimore chapter was spared the kind of assault described above. Although on November 25, 1968, J. Edgar Hoover sent a letter to an FBI field office in Baltimore stating the following:

In order to fully capitalize upon BPP and Us differences as well as to exploit all avenues of creating further dissension in the ranks of the BPP, recipient offices are instructed to submit imaginative and hard-hitting counter intelligence measures aimed at crippling the BPP. Commencing December 2, 1968, and every two-week period thereafter, each office is instructed to submit a letter under this caption containing counter intelligence measures aimed against the BPP. The bi-weekly letter should also contain accomplishments obtained during the previous two-week under captioned Program.

The letter to the Baltimore field office is interesting simply because it is not clear that there was an US chapter in Baltimore. Nevertheless, almost all of the covert activity that the Baltimore chapter encountered was of a surveillance nature. This involved monitoring Panther activities,

tracking the whereabouts of certain members and staking out Panther headquarters. Again, this kind of constant and systematic surveillance fostered paranoia and dissension within the chapter, which disrupted its everyday operations (McCutchen 1993).

Although the Baltimore chapter experienced fewer incidences of repression on the whole than the Oakland office, given the size of the Baltimore chapter the impact of this assault may have proved to be more crippling. The countless and frequent arrests of Party members served to intimidate potential members as well as current ones (Collier 1992). Unlike the Bay Area, Baltimore was not a hotbed of left-wing radicalism. Consequently, the list of potential Panther recruits was never as long in Baltimore as it was in Oakland and other cities. Panther Robert Collier sums it up best when he says that 'because of the government's abuse of power, the Baltimore chapter (like some other chapters) was unable to devote the time and resources needed to build a long lasting vehicle for social change' (Collier 1992).

### **Political repression as containment policy**

What the Baltimore Panthers were subjected to by local, state and federal law enforcement coincides with what Frederick D. Homer calls containment policy. Containment policy often means intrusion by the government to protect the majority from real or imagined violence and anarchy (Homer 1984). Containment does not mean that all people of minority or out-groups will be repressed and harassed at all times. The government is supposedly intrusive only when minorities threaten (real or imagined) the social peace of majorities. To a newly recruited Panther stopped for the first time, strip-searched and detained, government intrusion is an instrument of harassment. An activist's tenth trip to the police station and release without charges filed is an act of repression by the government. Thus, harassment from the dissident's perspective becomes repression when incidents become more repetitive. Constant detention, threats, physical violence and false accusations may all constitute tactics of repression used to reinforce containment (Homer 1984). Whether performed on the innocent or guilty, on an individual for the first time, or for the tenth time, the government practises selective random harassment by singling out members of certain minorities and out-groups for mistreatment in order to prevent contamination of the masses by a subversive anti-establishment minority.

Police Commissioner Pommerlau's words and actions represented the epitome of containment policy. Pommerlau saw himself as the saviour of Baltimore, the embodiment of righteousness. In addition to black militants, he also targeted, anti-war activists, the ACLU and journalists who were critical of police department procedure. Indeed, radio and television broadcasts were selectively screened for comments or criticism of

the Commissioner or the Department. Pommerlau viewed his office as a pulpit, and from it he denounced such evils as black militancy, judicial laxity, Communism and lack of patriotism. A case in point occurred in February 1971 when the Commissioner lashed out against participants in a broad-based anti-war demonstration, denouncing them, in a hastily called press conference, as part of 'a revolutionary movement which is communist-oriented' (Donner 1990, p. 158). Pommerlau viewed the world through Manichean lenses: the good Americans (under his leadership) doing endless battle with evil and unpatriotic subversives like the Black Panthers.

In January 1975, in response to a stream of press disclosures of widespread surveillance practices and abuse of power by Pommerlau's unit, the Maryland Senate Committee on Constitutional and Public Law conducted a series of preliminary public hearings to determine whether an investigation was warranted. On February 18, the scheduled date of Pommerlau's appearance before the Committee, the panel received a letter stating his refusal to appear on the grounds that 'the Senate is being used as an instrument to disrupt the last bastion of order in Baltimore' (Donner 1990, p. 303). Ironically, the letter further charged that the entire investigation was not only illegal but 'immoral', amounting to 'a daily rehashing of past activity solely based on the statements of those who would like to change *our* [my emphasis] system of government other than by the lawful process of the law' (Donner 1990, p. 303).

## **Discussion**

This article has presented a new source of data. It has discussed the rise of black radicalism in Baltimore and systematically demonstrated how various governmental bureaucracies worked to undermine this dissent. In the process this essay has illustrated how different measures of political repression were used to render the Baltimore Black Panther Party ineffective. Along the way this study has helped both to undermine and to give strength to a number of long-standing debates surrounding the Black Panther Party in general.

First, while police mistreatment of blacks was not the impetus for setting up a Panther chapter in Baltimore, like Oakland other factors such as high black unemployment, a poor school system, inferior health care, lack of effective black representation and a desire for black empowerment helped to give rise to the emergence of the Black Panther Party in Baltimore (Major 1971; Olson 1980; Callcott 1985; McDougall 1993). Second, this study weakens the argument made by some that the Black Panther Party was a loosely run outfit which lacked a strong infrastructure (Karenga 1977; Healey and Isserman 1990). The Black Panther Party was indeed equipped with a solid infrastructure. The foundation of which was grounded in its governing board. On this body sat eleven

individuals who carried out a number of specified duties and responsibilities. This unit was responsible for making policy for the entire organization and orders flowed from the top-down. It appears that a similar hierarchical structure and chain of command was put into place in Baltimore and other local branches. Organizationally, the Black Panther Party displayed many of the characteristics of the classic cadre party. Third, the support given to the Baltimore chapter by segments of the community, both black and white, further undermines the misguided perception that the Black Panther Party as an organization did not enjoy even moderate support from either the black or white community (Walters and Smith 1999). The various anti-repression committees formed to assist and protect the Baltimore chapter from police harassment and the donations of various kinds, given to keep the chapter afloat belies that notion. Some of the support that the Panthers engendered seemed to have been based on the belief that the Panthers could not be bought-off.

Law Professor Harold A. McDougall writes, 'the Panthers were seen by many as the only black leaders who had not in some way been co-opted by Baltimore's white city fathers' (McDougall 1993, p. 74). Fourth, although the Baltimore Panthers were more homogeneous in background and occupation relative to Panthers in Oakland, this finding still debunks the notion that the Black Panther Party consisted mainly of thugs and criminals as opposed to high school, college educated and working-class individuals mired in a legitimate search for solutions that addressed the ills that plagued black America in particular and Americans in general. Fifth, despite the claim by Hugh Pearson (1994) that law enforcement checked itself whenever activists' lives were at risk, this essay adds further evidence that the Black Panther Party was the victim of a well organized campaign on the part of local, state and federal law enforcement to ensure the organization's demise.

## **Conclusion**

Political Scientist Michael Stohl (1976, p. 91) argues that 'the major sources of political violence in America have arisen out of government attempts to suppress left-wing groups'. There is little doubt that because of law enforcement's abuse of authority, the Black Panther Party was unable to devote the time, resources and manpower needed to build a long-lasting mass political organization. Robert J. Goldstein (1978, p. 524) submits 'that the fact that the Panthers were black unquestionably added to the repression they faced'. Perhaps, the most lasting impact of state repression of the Black Panther Party was the effort of the FBI, in conjunction with state and local law enforcement, not only to disrupt the organization, but to kill and imprison many of its key members. Between 1968 and 1971 forty<sup>5</sup> Panthers were killed by local police (Churchill &

Vander Wall 1988; Parenti 1995). Moreover, there are more Black Panthers in prison than there are from any other left-wing group. Michael Parenti argues that many activists remain in prison not for what they did but for the political beliefs they still hold (Parenti 1995). Nearly one-third of all those who have been identified as political prisoners by various human rights groups are former panthers (Can't Jail the Spirit 1988). Baltimore Panther Marshall Eddie Conway remains in prison thirty years after he was convicted of allegedly killing a police officer (Jones 1998).

Although repression took its toll on the Black Panther Party it was not the sole reason for the organization's demise. Other factors include the recruiting of individuals with criminal records and a history of violent behaviour; attrition at both the leadership and rank-and-file level; infighting and waning community support (Moore 1981; Booker 1998; Johnson 1998). Individuals with criminal records were especially susceptible to government coercion. For instance, some individuals who happened to be on parole would be pressured by law enforcement to divulge inside information about Panther activities, and in turn law enforcement would agree not to sabotage their parole status (McCutchen 1992; Wickwire 1993). Admittedly, this issue was more problematic for the Oakland chapter where a number (but certainly not all) of the members were ex-cons, former gang members and petty criminals (Hilliard 1993; Henderson 1997; Booker 1998).

Clearly, political repression played an instrumental role in the destruction of the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party. The harassment of the Baltimore chapter was mainly due to the irrational fear of those in positions of political and economic power that their way of life would end if black rage resulted in the realization of black advancement (Wickwire 1993). Surprisingly, years later when Paul Coates was asked to comment on the repression that he and other Baltimore Panthers were subjected to he gave no indication of holding a grudge. 'Pommerlau was a soldier, like me' he observed. 'We were in a war. The people he represented felt threatened by me and people like me. He had the advantage because he had more men, who were better trained. We were young, didn't have a large arsenal, and didn't have a lot of combat experience. The outcome was predictable. In the Panthers, we understood that going in. And we did it anyway' (McDougall 1993, p. 75).

Political repression in America has been consequential; it has had major, long-term effects. Wolfe notes that repression in America contradicts the rhetoric of society and leads to the intellectual stultification of the masses, not to mention physical harm and even death to some of the most perceptive and sensitive members of society (Wolfe 1973). Unfortunately, repression has occurred throughout the twentieth century in the actions of local, state and national governments including the administrations of liberal presidents (Schultz and Schultz 1989). The repressive tactics described in this study are inimical to democratic

practice. Yohuru R. Williams submits that ‘while many of the pronouncements of the BPP warranted investigation, the take no prisoners attitude at all levels of government resulted in a web of harassment, violence and disinformation that totally disregarded the United States constitution’ (Williams 1998, p. 6).

Indeed, laws cannot prohibit speech or political activities without compromising democracy. For example, censoring the Panthers’ newspaper was in direct violation of the First Amendment right protecting the freedom of the press. When laws are used to arrest those who attempt to politicize the dormant, to imprison those who advocate alternatives to the established power relationships and to jail those who oppose capitalism, democratic principles are among the victims. To say that the Panthers represented a clear and present danger to the internal security of the United States is to say that conditions were so deplorable and miserable that people in ghettos and barrios everywhere were prepared to adopt the Party’s proposals and erupt in armed insurrection. If conditions were that bad, logic would imply that government would concern itself with eliminating such conditions, rather than those who brought them to the public’s attention (Jeffries 2002).

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> An affiliated supporter of the Black Panther Party would be someone who may have served as the chapter’s religious adviser or someone who served on a committee that was designed to lend support to the Panthers’ cause, but not an actual member of the organization.

<sup>2</sup> The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was a civil rights organization founded in 1960 by students to help organize and coordinate sit-ins and voter registration drives.

<sup>3</sup> The Republic of New Africa, founded in Detroit in 1968 by Milton and Richard Henry, was a black nationalist organization that called for the United States to carve out six southern states for blacks where they could live and prosper away from whites.

<sup>4</sup> Us is a radical black cultural nationalist organization founded by Dr. Maulana

Karenga in 1965 in Los Angeles, California. Contrary to popular belief Us does not stand for United Slaves.

5 This number has been disputed by some who argue that the police did not kill half as many Panthers as the Panthers and their lawyers claimed.

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**JUDSON L. JEFFRIES** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Purdue University, Indiana.

ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Purdue University, 1363 LAEB, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907–1363, USA.