

## Black Nationalism and Black Power

At the same time that such civil rights leaders as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for racial integration, other black leaders emphasized separatism and identification with Africa. Black Nationalist sentiment was not new. During the early 19th century, black leaders such as Paul Cuffe and Martin Delaney, convinced that blacks could never achieve true equality in the United States, advocated migration overseas. At the turn of the century, Booker T. Washington and his followers emphasized racial solidarity, economic self-sufficiency, and black self-help. Also, at the end of World War I, millions of black Americans were attracted by Marcus Garvey's call to drop the fight for equality in America and instead "plant the banner of freedom on the great continent of Africa."

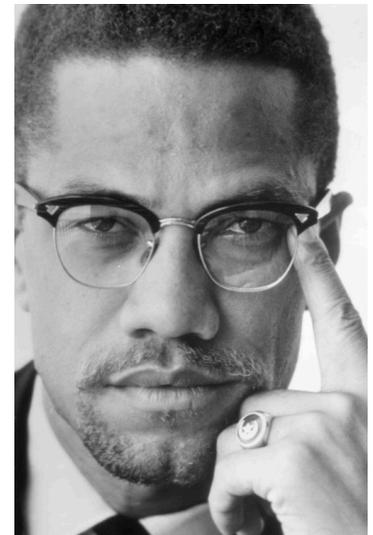


*Elijah Muhammad*

One of the most important expressions of the separatist impulse during the 1960s was the rise of the Black Muslims, which attracted 100,000 members. Founded in 1931, in the depths of the depression, the Nation of Islam drew its appeal from among the growing numbers of urban blacks living in poverty. The Black Muslims elevated racial separatism into a religious doctrine and declared that whites were doomed to destruction. "The white devil's day is over," Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad cried. "He was given six thousand years to rule ... He's already used up most trapping and murdering the black nations by the hundreds of thousands. Now he's worried, worried about the black man getting his revenge." Unless whites acceded to the Muslim demand for a separate territory for themselves, Muhammad said, "Your entire race will be destroyed and removed from this earth by Almighty God. And those black men who are still trying to integrate will inevitably be destroyed along with the whites."

The Black Muslims did more than vent anger and frustration. The organization was also a vehicle of black uplift and self-help. The Black Muslims called upon black Americans to "wake up, clean up, and stand up" in order to achieve true freedom and independence. To root out any behavior that conformed to racist stereotypes, the Muslims forbade eating pork and cornbread, drinking alcohol, and smoking cigarettes. Muslims also emphasized the creation of black businesses.

The most controversial exponent of Black Nationalism was Malcolm X. The son of a Baptist minister who had been an organizer for Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, he was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, and grew up in Lansing, Michigan. A reformed drug addict and criminal, Malcolm X learned about the Black Muslims in a high security prison. After his release from prison in 1952, he adopted the name Malcolm X to replace "the white slave-master name which had been imposed upon my paternal forebears by some blue-eyed devil." He quickly became one of the Black Muslims' most eloquent speakers, denouncing alcohol, tobacco, and extramarital sex.



*Malcolm X*

Condemned by some whites as a agitator for such statements as "If ballots won't work, bullets will," Malcolm X gained widespread public notoriety by attacking the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a "chump" and an Uncle Tom, by advocating self-defense against white violence, and by emphasizing black political power. Malcolm X's main message was that discrimination led many black Americans to despise themselves. "The worst crime the white man has committed," he said, "has been to teach us to hate ourselves." Self-hatred caused black Americans to lose their identity, straighten their hair, and become involved in crime, drug addiction, and alcoholism.

In March 1964 (after he violated an order from Elijah Muhammad and publicly rejoiced at the assassination of President John F. Kennedy), Malcolm X withdrew from Elijah Muhammad's organization and set up his own Organization of Afro-Americans. Less than a year later, his life ended in bloodshed. On February 21, 1965, in front of 400 followers, he was shot and killed, apparently by followers of Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad, as he prepared to give a speech in New York City.

Inspired by Malcolm X's example, young black activists increasingly challenged the traditional leadership of the Civil Rights Movement and its philosophy of nonviolence. The single greatest contributor to the growth of militancy was the violence perpetrated by white racists. One of the most publicized incidents took place in June 1964, when three civil rights workers--two whites, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, and one black, James Chaney--disappeared near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Six weeks after they were reported missing, the bodies of the men were found buried under a dam; all three had been beaten, then shot. In December, the sheriff and deputy sheriff of Neshoba County, Mississippi, along with 19 others, were arrested on charges of violating the three men's civil rights; but just six days later the charges were dropped. David Dennis, a black civil rights worker, spoke at James Chaney's funeral. He angrily declared, "I'm sick and tired of going to the funerals of black men who have been murdered by white men.... I've got vengeance in my heart."

In 1966, two key civil rights organizations--SNCC and CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality)--embraced Black Nationalism. In May, Stokely Carmichael was elected chairman of SNCC and proceeded to transform SNCC from an interracial organization committed to nonviolence and integration into an all-black organization committed to "black power." "Integration is irrelevant," declared Carmichael. "Political and economic power is what the black people have to have." Although Carmichael initially denied that "black power" implied racial separatism, he eventually called on blacks to form their own separate political organizations. In July 1966--one month after James Meredith, the black Air Force veteran who had integrated the University of Mississippi, was ambushed and shot while marching for voting rights in Mississippi--CORE also endorsed black power and repudiated [rejected] nonviolence.



*Stokely Carmichael speaking about black power*

Of all the groups advocating racial separatism and black power, the one that received the widest publicity was the Black Panther Party. Formed in October 1966, in Oakland, California, the Black Panther party was an armed revolutionary socialist organization advocating self-determination for black ghettos. "Black men," declared one party member, "must unite to overthrow their white 'oppressors,' becoming 'like panthers--smiling, cunning, scientific, striking by night and sparing no one!'" The Black Panthers gained public notoriety by entering the gallery of the California State Assembly brandishing guns and by following police to prevent police harassment and brutality toward blacks.



Separatism and Black Nationalism attracted no more than a small minority of black Americans. Public opinion polls indicated that only about 15 percent of black Americans identified themselves as separatists and that the overwhelming majority of blacks considered Martin Luther King, Jr. their favored spokesperson. The older civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, rejected separatism and black power, viewing it as an abandonment of the goals of nonviolence and integration.

Yet despite their relatively small following, black power advocates exerted a powerful and positive influence upon the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to giving birth to a host of community self-help organizations, supporters of black power spurred the creation of black studies programs in universities and encouraged black Americans to take pride in their racial background and to recognize that "black is beautiful." A growing number of black Americans began to wear "Afro" hairstyles and take African or Islamic surnames. Singer James Brown captured the new spirit: "Say it loud--I'm black and I'm proud."

Born in the Black Panther's Oakland, California headquarters in 1968, their free breakfast program was one of the first organized school breakfast food programs in the country. By the end of 1969, the Black Panthers were serving full free breakfasts (including milk, bacon, eggs, grits, and toast) to 20,000 school aged children in 19 cities around the country, and in 23 local affiliates every school day. The breakfast program was just one of many programs the Panthers ran to address the needs of the poor. In fact, they developed more than 60 Serve the People programs, including efforts to provide free clothing and shoes, medical services—including drug and alcohol awareness,—legal aid education, and what was thought to be some of the first true early childhood education programs in the nation, preceding Head Start.

But the Panthers' image and focus on self-determination drew the attention of then FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover. He singled out the Black Panthers as national hate group, and the breakfast program as an act of subversion. The Black Panthers were an easy target, "because the public wanted to believe that we were just thugs with leather jackets and guns." Hoover perpetuated that image when he declared all out war on the Black Panthers. In May of 1969 Hoover sent a memo to all FBI offices that read:

The BCP (Breakfast for Children Program) promotes at least tacit support for the Black Panther Party among naive individuals and, what is more distressing, it provides the BPP with a ready audience composed of highly impressionable youths. Consequently, the BCP represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.

Once Hoover went after the Breakfast Program, the handwriting was on the wall. Even though the organizers were careful to consult with nutritionists to make sure the children got high quality, balanced meals, and made sure they had the necessary permits from the health and fire departments for the kitchens and halls where they served meals, they became regular targets of local officials. The children they served were caught in the middle. But after the Black Panther Party and its programs were summarily dismantled, the Breakfast for Children program found new life and a new champion in the federal government. Inspired in part by the ideas and actions of the Black Panthers in the 1960s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture started the School Breakfast Program. It now feeds nearly 13 million students every single day.

In an effort to maintain support among more militant blacks, civil rights leaders began to address the problems of the black lower classes who lived in the nation's cities. By the mid-1960s, King had begun to move toward the political left. He said it did no good to be allowed to eat in a restaurant if you had no money to pay for a hamburger. King denounced the Vietnam War as "an enemy of the poor," described the United States as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," and predicted that "the bombs that [Americans] are dropping in Vietnam will explode at home in inflation and unemployment." He urged a radical redistribution of wealth and political power in the United States in order to provide medical care, jobs, and education for all of the country's people. And he spoke of the need for a second "March on Washington" by "waves of the nation's poor and disinherited," who would "stay until America responds ... [with] positive action." The time had come for radical measures "to provide jobs and income for the poor."



*Charles Burse hands a plate of food to a child seated at a Free Breakfast Program.*