

The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men: The Downfall of the Black Panther Party

By Samuel Smith

In October of 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale were still students at Oakland, California's Merritt College. Later that month, however, the two would jointly found the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, kick-starting their own political journeys as well as those of Eldridge Cleaver, Elaine Brown, Ericka Huggins, and countless other young black men and women who joined their cause. Just as the Panthers were quickly becoming rising stars in the media and political worlds, though, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI were launching many of their COINTEL/PROs, shorthand for counter-intelligence programs. Through these operations, the FBI launched an all out war not just on the Black Panther Party, but on the whole Black Power and Civil Rights movements as a whole. This paper explores the lengths that the FBI went to in order to either incarcerate, frame, or even murder those that did not fit its strict definition of an obedient citizen. I also discuss the effects that these FBI programs had on the Party and its structure, and how it led to organizational infighting and several different schisms. Finally, it brings in an outside perspective by looking at various popular media reactions to the Panthers during their heyday in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and how the Party was portrayed by both the establishment and counter-cultural media.