

TITLE: What Was the Black Panther Party Fighting For?

DESCRIPTION: In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, police killed unarmed 17-year-old Bobby Hutton, and Aaron Dixon decided it was time to join the Black Panther Party.

Aaron Dixon was co-founder and Captain of the Seattle chapter of the Black Panther Party. As a college student at the University of Washington, Dixon played a key role in the formation of the Black Student Union (BSU) and the Seattle Chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the spring of 1968, at the funeral of Bobby Hutton in Oakland, California, Dixon met Bobby Seale and later was appointed Captain of Seattle's Black Panther Party, the first chapter outside of Oakland. He was 19 years old. Dixon led the chapter through its first four years, then moved to Party national headquarters in Oakland in 1972. There he worked with Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and served for a time as bodyguard to Elaine Brown.

Aaron Dixon's autobiography is titled "My People Are Rising: Memoir of a Black Panther Party Captain" (2012).

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TRANSCRIPT

Gabe Hostin, Host:

You are listening to UnTextbooked. This is a history podcast for the future that gives young people like us agency and voice in our education. I'm your host, Gabe Hostin.

Oziah Wilson, Host:

I'm producer Oziah Wilson.

Gabe Hostin:

And heads up to all our teachers listening. This episode includes talks of guns and surviving assassination attempts. So to effectively include this episode in your lesson plans, you can find more resources on our website at untextbooked.com. All right, let's get into it.

Oziah Wilson:

This week, we're learning about the Black Panther Party through the lens of one of its original members.

Aaron Dixon, Guest:

I am Aaron Dixon, and I joined the Black Panther Party when I was 19 years old. I was appointed captain of the first chapter outside of the state of California at 19.

Archival Tape:

The Black Panthers first made national news just a year ago when they entered the state capitol in Sacramento, armed with rifles and pistols. They were there, they said, to demonstrate opposition to the proposed legislation that would outlaw the carrying of loaded weapons.

Generation after generation of Black people in America have been born, they have worked, and they have seen the fruits of their labors and the life, liberty, and happiness of children and grandchildren of the oppressor.

Gabe Hostin:

The Black Panther Party was a political party for Black power that formed in 1966.

Oziah Wilson:

Aaron Dixon joined the Black Panthers in 1968. He became the captain of Seattle's chapter and organized in the chapter for 10 years. Aaron was 13 when he started fighting for civil rights.

Aaron Dixon:

I was one of the first Black students to volunteer to integrate the school district in Seattle.

Oziah Wilson:

I asked him specifically what radicalized him into starting a chapter.

Aaron Dixon:

Well, I got radicalized, it wasn't one single moment or one single thing. It was growing up in that time period of the '60s and living in segregation in Chicago and living in somewhat segregation in Seattle, and being close to my grandparents in Chicago and hearing their stories of their Great Migration.

Oziah Wilson:

During the Great Migration, 6 million Black Americans moved out of the South. This was one of the biggest migrations ever within the United States. People were fleeing the racism of the Jim Crow South and saw economic opportunity.

Aaron Dixon:

Hearing my father's stories of mostly when he joined the Army and went to Mississippi and what him and his fellow Black soldiers had to go through in Mississippi, which meant having to defend themselves before they had to go to war, and some of the things that happened to my father when he was in Okinawa. So those types of things radicalized me.

Oziah Wilson:

Aaron has been involved with civil rights activism his whole life. He volunteered with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. When he started college at the University of Washington, he helped create the school's first Black student union. The assassination of several political leaders had a profound impact on his generation and his worldview.

Gabe Hostin:

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963.

Archival Tape:

From Dallas, Texas. The flash, apparently official, President Kennedy died.

There's only one word to describe the picture here, and that's grief. And much of it. It's official. As of just a few moments ago, the president of the United States is dead.

Aaron Dixon:

He wasn't a perfect person, but he was somebody that a lot of Black people put a lot of hope into. Him and his brother, and they both were assassinated.

Gabe Hostin:

Robert F. Kennedy was killed in 1968.

Aaron Dixon:

And then the assassination of Medgar Evers a year later, I believe.

Oziah Wilson:

In 1963, white supremacist killed civil rights leader, Medgar Evers.

Aaron Dixon:

And then assassination of Malcolm X in '65. So all those things had a radical influence on me. But I think the one that really changed, not just myself, but my whole generation, was the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Archival Tape:

Some very sad news for all of you, and I think sad news for all of our fellow citizens and people who love peace all over the world. And that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee.

Martin Luther King, 20 minutes ago, died.

Aaron Dixon:

And for me, it was personal, because at 13 years old, I had actually marched with Martin Luther King and actually had met Martin Luther King and had actually talked with him. And I found myself wanting to protect him and asking him how come he didn't have a bodyguard? Because I had seen already so many assassinations.

Oziah Wilson:

The news of King's assassination rattled the nation. Aaron heard the news while he was sitting in a jail cell for participating in a demonstration in the weeks before.

Aaron Dixon:

There were a group of us that ended up in jail for a demonstration that we had done, and I remember when I went back to my bunk that night, I said to myself, I said, "My picket sign was going to be replaced by the gun."

Oziah Wilson:

As the nation warned the loss of Martin Luther King, people were out in the streets demonstrating, often violently, and filled with rage. People made their voices heard across 125 cities in 29 states. The New York Times declared, "Dr. King's murder is a national disaster." Two days after King's death in the wake of protests in Oakland, California, another death rocked the nation. Bobby Hutton.

Aaron Dixon:

Lil' Bobby Hutton was the first member to join the Black Panther Party and the first to die, at the age of 14. And the reason why he died was because Martin Luther King had been killed, because he had been out on the streets with some other Panthers. This was something that was not authorized by the leadership of the party, but Eldridge Cleaver took it upon himself to round up some members of the party and go out and try to have retribution for the murder of Martin Luther King. They ended up in a shootout, and that shootout culminated in the murder of Little Bobby Hutton at 17 years old.

Gabe Hostin:

Hutton surrendered unarmed when Oakland police shot him nearly 10 times.

Archival Tape:

It's 11:15 in the morning outside the Ephesian Church of God in Christ where the ceremony, the funeral of young Bobby Hutton, the young Black Panther slain by police a few days ago is about to begin.

Oziah Wilson:

Meanwhile, Aaron and his friends in the Black Student Union had the opportunity to be in Oakland for the funeral.

Gabe Hostin:

We're hearing a little bit of sound from that funeral right now. This moment feels like a turning point.

Archival Tape:

This is the family of Bobby James Hutton. The question is not will it be non-violence versus violence, but whether a human being can practice his God-given right to self-defense? Shot down like a common animal, he died a warrior for Black liberation. If the generation before him had not been afraid, he perhaps would be alive today.

Aaron Dixon:

Viewing him in the casket and going to that funeral and seeing all the Panthers that were there, and then hearing Bobby Seal's speech later on that evening.

Gabe Hostin:

Bobby Seale and Huey P Newton co-founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. They were a presence at the funeral.

Aaron Dixon:

And when he finished with the speech, my brother and another comrade of mine, we approached Bobby Seale and we told him that we wanted to have a Black Panther Party in Seattle. So a week later, we had a big meeting with a lot of people that had been in the BSU and a lot of other young organizers. I was appointed captain of the Seattle chapter. It was a beginning for me. At the exact moment, I needed a little time to myself because I knew that my life was going to change in a serious manner.

Gabe Hostin:

His life profoundly changed. Starting a chapter of the Black Panthers was unlike any of his other organizing work in the Student Nonviolent Coordinated Committee or the Black Student Union at the University of Washington.

Oziah Wilson:

He traded his college classes for Black Panther lessons in running a party chapter and political education.

Aaron Dixon:

It was a lot more serious than anything I had experienced prior to that. Matter of fact, when Bobby Seale talked with us at our first meeting, we were told we had to have 2000 rounds of ammunition and two weapons.

Oziah Wilson:

The Black Panther leadership was older and more experienced organizers. Aaron learned directly from co-founders Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale. The leadership, being in their 20s and 30s, was more experienced in organizing. Aaron's new Seattle chapter on the other hand, were college kids mostly from the BSU.

Gabe Hostin:

AKA, the Black Students' Union.

Aaron Dixon:

Most of us who joined the party were between 15 to 19 years old. So it was important that we had that older leadership to kind of guide the party. And the party was very organized. In the beginning, we were wearing the uniforms of the Black Panther Party and the national headquarters was in Oakland, and I made many trips to Oakland, Shaddock Boulevard. You were full-time. You weren't part-time. You gave up everything. When you joined the Black Panther Party, you gave up everything. I dropped out of school, as many other Panthers did, and dedicated ourselves to working in the Black Panther Party. We had sections and section leaders, and we had captains and we had lieutenants, and people were in charge of various things.

Oziah Wilson:

Women were welcome to all ranks in the party, too. They, in many cases, ran the everyday aspects of the party.

Aaron Dixon:

Women in the Black Panther... We didn't have roles for men and women. Everybody did the same thing. Women did security. They learned how to shoot. So we didn't have these roles, designated roles for women like some other organizations. And women were leaders in the Black Panther Party.

Oziah Wilson:

Aaron learned about the vision the Black Panther leadership wanted to create.

Aaron Dixon:

They had a vision. Huey had a vision. He was the chief philosopher, or the Black philosophical leader of the party. And we had to read two hours a day. We had to read the Red Book. We had PE classes once a week. We had a newspaper that came out called the Black Panther Party Intercommunal News Service, which was actually the most important weapon that we had, and every party member had to go out and sell papers. A hundred papers a day, because we were taught that power is the ability to define phenomena and make it act in the desired manner. And the newspaper allowed us to be able to define what was happening, not just in our communities, but what was happening around the world.

Oziah Wilson:

As Aaron focused on growing the Seattle chapter, more and more chapters of the party emerged across 48 states, in places like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Different organizers and leaders all had their own individual goals. However, the main focus was on Black liberation.

Aaron Dixon:

Our main focus was to change the government, was change the way the government operated. There were people in the party, particularly Eldridge Cleaver, who oftentimes espoused a lot of rhetoric regarding guerilla warfare and things like that. But he was a very practical person, and as well as most of the people on the central committee, we knew that we were in no position to fight a guerilla warfare like say, Che Guevara did. There was no mountains and no hills we could run to and go form bands of guerillas. So our struggle was in the community, organizing.

And so we organized in other ways. We created coalitions with a lot of different groups. The first coalition was with the Peace and Freedom party out of Southern California, which was a white organization. Then we created coalitions with the Brown Berets in LA and AIM, American Indian Movement, and SSDs and the Weather Underground. Fred Hampton created what was called the Rainbow Coalition with the Young Lords and the Young Patriot Party, which was a poor white organization made up of poor whites from the Appalachians.

Oziah Wilson:

The Rainbow Coalition, started in 1969, brought all of these groups with similar goals around ending racism and liberating economically marginalized people.

Aaron Dixon:

And so this was what we were doing was organizing and creating a broader coalition, because they were attacking us and they were killing us, and a lot of Panthers were dying, they were going to jail, they were going to prison. So we changed our tactics and came up what was called Survival Programs Pending Revolution.

Oziah Wilson:

Survival Programs Pending Revolution had a huge impact on the local community in Seattle.

Aaron Dixon:

So we started developing these programs to help the community, to support the community so that they would support us. So we started a free breakfast program. We opened up free medical clinics. We opened up 13 free medical clinics all across the country. We started liberation schools, we started legal aid programs. We started busing to prisons programs. And so this is where a lot of our efforts were going into.

Oziah Wilson:

These programs started in Seattle in 1970 and lasted longer than any other chapters' programs, continuing after the party disbanded.

Gabe Hostin:

The Black Panther Party rocked the city status quo. The FBI then targeted and monitored the party.

Aaron Dixon:

And in 1968, J. Edgar Hoover, Attorney General John Mitchell, and Richard Nixon decided that they should call a press conference that the Black Panther Party was the enemy number one. And so we didn't know that they said to themselves that they were going to have us wiped out. So by 1968, they started to implement the COINTEL program.

Oziah Wilson:

COINTELPRO is short for Counterintelligence Program. This was a program designed with the express purpose of targeting political groups like the Black Panthers.

Aaron Dixon:

A secret program we knew nothing about, which ended up in the deaths of two very important leaders, Bunchy Carter, first in Los Angeles, California, head of the Southern California chapter, and Fred Hampton in Chicago almost a year later. Those were two of our most important leaders, but they also began to raid offices all across the country and arrest party members, people who felt that we needed to really engage in guerrilla warfare. And that's, the party realized that that was suicide, actually. But we were an organization that believed in self-defense. We believed in protecting ourselves and defending ourselves with weapons.

Gabe Hostin:

Officers would raid the Seattle chapter's party headquarters.

Aaron Dixon:

And when they came to raid our offices, we would defend ourselves with our weapons, as in the case was with the raid on the Southern California chapter right after the murder of Fred Hampton that ended up in a shootout that lasted for six to eight hours.

Oziah Wilson:

Fred Hampton, Bunchy Carter, and John Huggins were all assassinated in 1969. Assassinations of political leaders had a profound effect on radicalizing Aaron. Now, his party leaders, his fellow city leaders, were being killed. As the heat of the '60s turned up, the threat came close to home.

Aaron Dixon:

The summer of 1968, the Seattle Police Department put a \$25,000 contract on my head and I was set up for assassination, which failed. And then I had another assassination attempt in 1971.

Oziah Wilson:

How did you find out about that, number one, and why do you believe that you were targeted?

Aaron Dixon:

Well, the FBI had decided there were three chapters that they wanted to destroy. And that was LA, that was Chicago, and the Seattle. Since I was head of the Seattle chapter, I became the number one target in Seattle, just as Fred Hampton had in Chicago, and Bunchy Carter in LA. In the summer of '68, there was a lot of firebombing, there was a lot of sniping. Seattle Time Magazine had a chart of the cities with the highest rate of sniping and the highest rate of firebombing. Seattle was number one in firebombing, number two in sniping.

The police department in Seattle was getting frustrated, because they couldn't stop these things that were happening, and so they felt that if they got rid of me, that they would be able to eliminate what was happening. So they put a contract out on my head, and I found out through my attorneys about this contract. They had tried to set me up for a so-called stealing a typewriter, and so I had a lawyer, a very good lawyer, and the whole case hinged on a secret witness, but the secret witness never showed up, so I got off on that case. So I had become a target.

Gabe Hostin:

Aaron was acquitted in this case and walked free. FBI informants infiltrated the entire Black Panther Party.

Aaron Dixon:

We had informants in the party. There were informants from the police department and there were FBI informants. So these informants had attempted to set me up and it didn't work out for them, and I barely escaped with my life.

Oziah Wilson:

The second close encounter with death came close.

Aaron Dixon:

The second time was in 1971, where some police... We got our FBI files and we found out who it was. But there was an FBI informant who got hold of my shotgun shelves, because I had my shotgun shells in an abandoned [inaudible 00:19:19], and everybody knew that those are my shells to my shotgun. And they got hold of those shells and took the gunpowder off and put high explosives in. And so when I went out with another comrade to test fire the weapon, the shotgun blew up, and it almost blew my arm off. Had I fired it from my shoulder, I don't think I would be here today. Something told me not to fire it from my shoulder. So I put it down and fired it lower. And then I [inaudible 00:19:48] my arm off and we had the shotgun shells tested and found out that they had been tampered with. High explosives had been put in their place. So that was the second attempt on my life.

Oziah Wilson:

That is incredibly harrowing. And thank you for sharing that. I know you bring up both of those cases in your book, but thank you again for resharing it here. You also talked about in your book, you dedicate a whole section to COINTELPRO, which you briefly mentioned, which was a covert operation designed by the FBI to systematically destroy progressive movements, but specifically the Black Panther Party. And you dedicate a whole chapter to the assassination of Fred Hampton. Can you talk about a little bit about the day that Fred Hampton was assassinated, and why he was such a valuable member to the party's organizing?

Aaron Dixon:

Yeah. I had a chance to meet Fred Hampton in '68 when he first put the Chicago chapter together. We spoke on the same platform, and I remember watching from the audience when he was speaking, and I was just amazed at his speaking ability and how powerful he was. And when he spoke, people just wanted to join the Black Panther Party.

Archival Tape:

We understand that they want everybody in the party in jail. And we know...

And we know.

That if we try to figure out...

That if we try to figure out...

And separate...

And separate...

And decide...

And decide...

Who should go...

Who should go...

And who shouldn't go...

And who shouldn't go...

We'll spend more time...

We'll spend more time...

Doing that...

Doing that...

Than working for the people.

Than working for the people.

So the quick solution...

So the quick solution...

The speedy one...

The speedy one...

Nobody goes.

Nobody goes.

Nobody goes.

Aaron Dixon:

Nobody goes.

Archival Tape:

We all stay right here.

We all stay right here.

With the people.

With the people.

'Cause we love the people.

'Cause we love the people.

Aaron Dixon:

They wanted to join the movement. They wanted to be part of the movement, because he was a tremendously charismatic person and he was extremely dedicated to improving the lives of Black people, but all oppressed people. So anybody who met Fred Hampton knew he was something very special. And I definitely felt that when I met him. So when he was assassinated, I was at the office in Seattle. We had fortified our offices. Most of them on the West coast, the offices had to be really fortified, and we had field marshals who came to check to make sure our fortifications were up to standards. And so our office was heavily fortified. So that morning, everybody here went out to the breakfast program, because we had to get up at 6:00 in the morning to go prepare for the breakfast program, and I was the only one that was left at the office, and I got the call from June Hilliard at national headquarters that Fred Hampton had been assassinated.

I was devastated. I was devastated. I was angry and I wanted to seek revenge. It was a sad day. It was saddest day in the time that I was in the Black Panther Party for many of us, it was the saddest day when Fred Hampton was killed, because anybody who knew him and understood him, we knew that he was destined to be a great leader in America because he could bring people together. He had the ability to bring people together from all races, all classes, all everything. At that point, he was gone. He would never be with us again. And the Chicago chapter never was the same after the death of Fred Hampton, just like the LA chapter was never the same after the death of Bunchy Carter and John Huggin.

Gabe Hostin:

These assassinations must have had a profound impact on not only the party and how they operated, but America as a whole. I just wonder what it'd be like if these or other revolutionary voices were still here.

Oziah Wilson:

I agree, and it makes me even more appreciative that Aaron is so open to telling his story and that he's still with us to tell his story.

After four years of being a captain in Seattle, he moved to party national headquarters in Oakland in 1972. He worked with co-founders, Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale. He even served for a time as bodyguard to Elaine Brown, former Black Panther Party chairwoman. After the party disbanded in 1977, he continued to work as an organizer and activist in the community. In 2002, he founded a nonprofit that provides transitional housing for homeless young adults. In 2006, he ran for US Senate under the Green Party. Since he has such a wide breadth of experience, I wanted to ask him what it meant to be a revolutionary.

Aaron Dixon:

You dedicate your life to change. You dedicate your life to making, not just your community, but America and the world as a whole a better place, a place where everybody has an opportunity to live at a standard that they should be able to live in. And also fighting against super predatory capitalism and imperialists. Right now, we see that this and capitalism and imperialism is destroying the world. The wars which come from the imperialists and the capitalists and the colonialization that happen throughout South America, throughout Africa and other places, which has led to the migrant crisis and which has led to global warming, because of the insatiable appetite of the corporations and corporate heads that's to the point where they will do anything for money, that they're some of the most greed, vilest people on this planet. And it's leading to the destruction of the environment.

And so that's what the Black Panther Party was fighting against. We knew what was coming, but we wanted to try to stop it. We wanted to try to unite people throughout the whole world. That's why Huey came up with the concept of intercommunalism, that all communities throughout the whole world, we're all the same. We should all unite against this common oppressor of the imperialists and the super predatory capitalists. So that's what it means to be a revolutionary. I can still consider myself to be a revolutionary. I still feel that we have to unite and we have to come together to try to save this planet and try to save the world, because it seems that we are really headed very quickly towards destruction.

Oziah Wilson:

I cannot stress this enough. Thank you so much for being so open to this and coming on and recording this conversation with me. I really do appreciate it.

Aaron Dixon:

Well, thank you. I appreciate your interest, and it's a story that has to be continuously be told.

Oziah Wilson:

Thanks again to Mr. Aaron Dixon. His memoir is titled, My People Are Rising: Memoir of a Black Panther Party Captain.

Gabe Hostin:

So Oziah, tell me, how did this conversation with Aaron change how you think about activism?

Oziah Wilson:

I would say it really showed me that not only can you do this dangerous work of fighting for change, but you can do it successfully and still live. And really, the main reason why I wanted to choose this book was because there aren't a lot of examples of revolutionaries who fought for change, who were leaders during this time, who are still alive, who still hold those values, and who still continue to fight for change.

Gabe Hostin:

What do you think Aaron's legacy is?

Oziah Wilson:

One of love and one of change. I see Aaron as someone who stopped at nothing to create change for his community and to fight against oppression wherever he saw it. I think his story is a reminder that if you're in the position where you can fight back and you don't, you are complicit. And I see Aaron's legacy as a call to action and a reminder of what humanity looks like.

Gabe Hostin:

Thanks for bringing us this amazing interview, Oziah. If you want to learn more about some of the topics covered in this episode, I have a few recommendations for you. Last season, we talked about the Black Panthers and gun ownership with Professor Adam Winkler. We also talked to Yale Professor Beverly Gage about her Pulitzer Prize winning biography of J. Edgar Hoover. He was the longtime director of the FBI and the person who labeled the Black Panthers enemy number one. Follow UnTextbooked on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen, so you never miss an episode.

Oziah Wilson:

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Oziah Wilson:

That's all for this episode of UnTextbooked. I'm producer Oziah Wilson.

Gabe Hostin:

And I'm Gabe Hostin. Thanks to the History Co:Lab, Fernando Rain, and CC Payne. UnTextbooked is produced by Pod People. Rachel King, Amy Machado, Danielle Roth, Hannah Paterson, Michael Aquino, and Shay Wotez.