

Twenty years later

State Murder of a Black Panther

Rob R. History

1990

Without much fanfare, another of those 20th anniversaries of the 1960s passed by recently. At 4:45 a.m. on December 4, 1969, a detail of fourteen Chicago and Illinois State's Attorney's police raided a modest apartment in the all-black near West Side ghetto, a crash pad for Black Panther Party (BPP) members.

The raiders were acting on information supplied by the FBI. Having failed in provoking street gangs to rub out Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton, they intended to do the job themselves. They took no chances.

An FBI operative supplied the information used to obtain the search warrant and drugged Hampton into unconsciousness a few hours before the attack. Hampton and Mark Clark were killed in the fusillade of police bullets. Four of the seven other Panthers present that night suffered multiple gunshot wounds. The survivors, including a pregnant woman, were beaten by the police.

Obviously an anti-authoritarian critique doesn't hold much place for the top-down purge discipline and party-determined political line that characterized the BPP, yet one can find inspiration in the courage of denying the legitimacy of an occupying police force, organizing food and medical programs within the community independent of the system, and risking death in struggle against the state. The Panthers were well aware of the heat they were drawing to themselves. Fred Hampton was only 21 when he was shot in his bed. Considering the ferocious way this execution was carried out, the armed self-defense they advocated may have been his only slim chance to survive the state killing apparatus sent after him.

On the West Side

During a recent layover at the train station in Chicago, I decided to take a walk out West Monroe Street in search of #2337, the apartment where Fred Hampton was killed. As I journeyed out from under the skyscrapers, West Monroe became businesses and older warehouses. They were bricked and boarded, but still turning out profits.

Then I passed through more open areas where whole blocks had been removed. Was it riot damage? Urban "renewal"? After passing many aging two-storey duplexes, I arrived at the 2300 block.

I walked slowly to be able to make out the faded numbers and suddenly I was upon it: 2337/2339 West Monroe, a deserted duplex on the south side of the street. Few of the homes on West Monroe were abandoned; was this some kind of hangout/shrine of the homeless or curious? The only footprints in the snow on the rotting front steps belonged to dogs.

The door was partially open, so I stepped inside. Plastic bags, a broken Night Train wine bottle, and other debris of those passing through littered the small anteroom. Being a stranger in a strange neighborhood, I deferred further exploration—maybe someone lived inside and would not appreciate my dropping by without an appointment. I found out later the only occupants are wild dogs.

I walked around back and tried to picture the events I had read about taking place right where I was standing. I could imagine hushed cops skulking through the yards, creeping up like bandits in the night to the back windows.

FBI Infiltration

The FBI had infiltrated the core of the Illinois BPP chapter. William O’Neal, head of local Panther security, was also an operative reporting to Special Agent Roy Mitchell of the Chicago FBI’s Racial Matters Squad. On November 19, 1969, Agent Mitchell drew a plan of the first floor apartment based on a description provided by operative O’Neal.

This sketch, which was made available to the raiding officers, clearly labeled the back corner bedroom Hampton slept in. It also pinpointed the location of the bed he shared with Deborah Johnson, then eight months pregnant with their child. Of the approximately 200 rounds fired by the police that morning, almost all had trajectories leading towards this bedroom and an adjacent one where five other Panthers usually slept.

Meeting a Neighbor

As I wandered back around front, lost in thought, I saw someone about my own age in the window of the house next door, watching me. I gave a friendly wave, pointed to Hampton’s apartment, and threw power with an up-raised fist.

He quickly came out the front door and down to the sidewalk. His name was George, and he now lived in the same next-door house his grandmother had lived in 20 years ago. He said the Hampton duplex had been unoccupied (by humans) for three or four years. He told me that a candlelight vigil was held out front every December 4, and that Deborah Johnson had been at the last one held three months previously.

George knew the neighbors and waved a greeting to a friend across the street, who shouted to me that if I didn’t want to buy that duplex there were more for sale down the block. I yelled out that I was looking, not buying, and looking at this one in particular. He called back, “Oh yeah, that’s where it happened.”

Then George pointed up and over about two and a half blocks through the now-empty lots to the busier West Madison Street, where the BPP office had been. “There are still bullet holes in the walls we could go see,” he said. But first we headed to the neighborhood party store for a six-pack of beer.

Back at George’s place we quaffed brew and rapped some more. He took me to his second floor back porch, overlooking the narrow walkway between the houses. He pointed to the kitchen window next to the bedroom and told me that the cops had cut their way halfway through that window when the ambush was sprung, then kicked through the remaining glass and came in shooting.

Police Assault

I knew the rest of the story. Inside the darkened apartment, the only light came from the muzzle flashes of police weapons. A State’s Attorney’s agent named Gorman was firing his .45 caliber submachine gun from the living room into both bedrooms through the cheap clapboard walls. A cop named Davies joined in with his own M1 carbine he had brought along and loaded with non-regulation hollow-point ammunition.

All 42 slugs fired through the living room wall converged on the head of Hampton’s bed. Police who had entered from the back blasted away with shotguns and pistols. A cop named Carmody shot several times through Hampton’s bedroom door, and then kicked it open. He and Davies stood in the doorway firing into the mattress where they knew the drugged Hampton would be.

A cease-fire was called, and during this lull in the shooting, Deborah Johnson and two other Panthers emerged from the bedroom. Hampton lay face-down on the mattress, seriously wounded in the chest by one of Davies' dum-dum bullets. From the kitchen, Johnson and Panther Harold Bell heard police in the bedroom discussing whether Hampton was dead or not. An unidentified cop said, "He'll barely make it."

More gunshots followed, two of which were fired point blank into the back of Hampton's head, followed by Carmody stating, "He's good and dead now." One of the cops must have removed the two slugs from the mattress for they were never recovered.

In the front bedroom, three other Panthers scrambled for cover. At this point Detective Gorman, apparently having reloaded and ready to mop up, "again appears on the scene [and] runs past the bedroom door, firing all the while. He then places his weapon on automatic fire and, in a low crouch, charges into the north front bedroom. He empties the 30-round clip at two of the three individuals in the room and all three emerge wounded." (New Republic, June 6, 1970)

In all, the four separate outbursts of shooting took about twelve minutes. Only one shot fired was ever attributed to the Panthers: a shotgun slug had blown a hole low in the inner front door of the unit and lodged into a far corner of the anteroom near the ceiling. In the first moments of the attack, Davies had burst through this front door and snapped off three quick shots with his carbine, wounding Brenda Harris and killing 22-year-old Mark Clark, whose body was found behind the door.

It seems likely that Clark was responding to police noise from the front porch, shotgun in hand. The crazy angle of the shotgun blast through the door suggests that Clark's gun went off as he fell.

A Guided Tour

George and I finished our beers and headed outside where he showed me more; rooftop positions police marksmen had taken to cover and seal off the area and patches on his back porch wall where a few stray shotgun pellets had entered the house. The city had quickly paid to fix the wall and replace a stove in which some of the buckshot had lodged, hoping his grandmother would not make a fuss.

As a grammar school kid, George played in this neighborhood and had eaten free meals in one of the three Breakfast for Children programs the Chicago Panthers had started. He had also gone through the apartment with thousands of others who had lined the block in the cold December weather. The Panthers had opened the apartment to the community the night of the raid, and kept it open for twelve days to provide concrete evidence of official lies, until the police seized and sealed it.

Attacks on the Office

I turned George onto some facts I knew of: the FBI Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), and Bureau complicity in police murder of militant blacks across the U.S. I also told him what I had read about the summer raids that had left holes in the nearby BPP office.

During a June 4, 1969 FBI attack, G-men had smashed the front door in and taken eight Chicago Panthers into custody without resistance. In the second floor office they confiscated all files, lists of contributors and supporters, and much of the office equipment itself. On July 16, Panther Larry Roberson was killed in an altercation reported by Chicago police as a shoot-out between two cops and two Panthers.

On July 31, the cops attacked the office again, by pulling up outside and opening fire. The three Panthers inside resisted. The ensuing firefight left five cops and all three Panthers wounded. On October 4, city cops hit the office yet again. They smashed typewriters and destroyed medical supplies. Not to be outdone by the feds, police then moved up to the third floor and set fire to boxes of cereal destined for the free breakfast programs. Like defoliating jungles and mining rice paddies in Vietnam, counter-insurgency has come home.

Destroying Evidence?

We walked up to West Madison to see the party office building, but on arrival all was not as George remembered it. As we stood and pondered, a well-dressed passerby heard us talking and said, "It was here. The Panther office? Here."

He pointed to a long empty lot between the two old buildings we were looking at. It was fenced off and had a fancy car parked inside. No bullet holes left to see. As we headed back toward his place, George spoke on, about Hampton's funeral, and of how cops still cruise down West Monroe and point out the apartment.

George said he had seen buildings in the neighborhood decay like #2337 before. Usually if no one bought and demolished them, the city came and did it themselves. We shrugged, agreeing that this was probably the destiny of Fred Hampton's apartment. As long as it stands, it is a visual reminder of days when threat to the status quo and the resulting reaction caused the veneer of "justice" and "freedom" to fall away and leave only brutal repression.

I had memorized the address by then, so I got George's zip and promised to send him more information as I came across it. I walked back to the train station, woozy on the experience and 32 ounces of beer in a little over an hour. Things hummed along on the city streets, big work trucks roared by and I wondered if anyone knew what had happened here. Judging from my quick stop in the neighborhood, I guess they do.

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Fifth Estate #334, Summer, 1990

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