Interview with **Elaine Brown**
Date: October 14, 1988
Interviewers: Louis Massiah (Interviewer #1), Terry Rockefeller (Interviewer #2)
Camera Rolls: 3013-3016
Sound Rolls: 306-308
Team: C

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #3013]
[sound roll #36]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speeding.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scen-scene five, mark one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, basically, [coughs] excuse me, who were the Black Panthers in, in terms of the people that joined the organization. You had talked before that they were a, a combination of classes. You know, people from the street, also people with education. Just tell me about it.

00:00:30:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, we were a combination of people. I don't know if we were a combination of classes because our analysis would have been that Black people didn't fall into for example the bourgeoisie, so it would be hard for us to have that class represented. But I would say that the party was an eclectic blend of people in terms of...but we were all unique. We were all, I think that we were all unique. We were all, we all came from different places. I mean John Huggins, for example, from New Haven, from a middle-class background. Bunchy Carter on the other hand from the streets of Los Angeles. And everywhere, you know, in between. But I would say our greatest appeal was to those people who were, who are now called the underclass or the, what we called the lumpenproletariat or people from the streets and from the poorer working classes.

00:01:21:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. What was it that brought, what was it that brought you to the Black Panther party? What, what, what caused you to join the party?

00:01:28:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, you know, obviously a question like that has, you know, a process to answer. I mean, you can't just say, well, one particular thing did it. But I would say if there was more, the most impactful thing for me was, well, there were two things. One was meeting a man named Bunchy Carter in southern California who was, he—y self-definition the mayor of the ghetto and who I referred to always as an artist and a poet, and who was the head of the Slausons Gang, who was out of the streets, who was magnificent. And you could not be around Bunchy Carter and not want to be a part of whatever it is he was apart of, in my opinion. But those times, remember, were, were very exciting, excitable and exciting, and so you wanted to do something. And I was already do, involved in something called the Black Congress. I was already do-doing some kind of peripheral work around the quote movement. But when I met Bunchy, I knew that I had to be in the Black Panther Party. I started doing some work with the party, but not until after meeting Eldridge Cleaver and after he was shot and Bobby Hutton was killed did I formally say that I was committing my life to the Black Panther Party.

00:02:37:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Could, could you talk a little bit about the philosophy, what, what was it about the—stop, stop filming for one second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:02:46:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker two.

[slate]

00:02:49:00

Interviewer #1:

What did it mean to be a Black Panther? What was a Black Panther?

00:02:53:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, as an individual, and I assume that's what you mean, it meant you really, it meant committing your life. Meaning that's how we saw it. It meant that we had to surrender up something of ourselves, our own lives, because we believed that the struggle that we were involved in, which we thought of as a socialist revolution, would take our lives. And so we had to surrender that. We had to make a kind of commitment on whether we realistically thought we would die. Most of us I think did after time. But, so it meant surrendering our lives to something greater, which was the notion of, of, of getting rid of oppression and, and all the things that oppression meant and mean in this country for Black people and other people in the country. And on a...so it meant, it meant not involved yourself in what, in, yourself in whatever you did as a human being, whatever you were about. It meant really seeing yourself as part of a whole and part of an entire process and that you were a soldier in the army. And that's how we saw ourselves, as a soldier in the army, in an army that was about bringing about revolution. A vanguard army as we considered ourselves to introduce socialist revolution into the United States of America.

00:04:07:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. You had talked about how, about how you Huey borrowed from different, different, different people in putting together the Panth, the Panther policies.

Elaine Brown:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

And so some of the Panthers stopped. Could you talk about that? Where did, what were some of the influences on Huey Newton? And talk about Huey, Huey P. Newton.

00:04:23:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, the influences that I, as I, as I know them were that for one, our uniform was of course was clearly right out of Che Guevara and that whole guerilla movement in, in South, South America, and in Cuba, and what have you. Our, our name came from a, an organization in, in Mississippi, Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which was a voter rights organization, or our symbol, the panther. Because Black people couldn't vote. And when they, they would give literacy tests so that they began to say, OK, look for this symbol, the Black Panther, at the polling place, and you'll know who to vote for. And so we used the Black Panther symbol. And we used the, borrowed a lot from the Nation of Islam ten-point program and platform for our ten-point program and platform. But what differentiated us was Huey's thrust toward the use of arms. In other words, the Black Panther Party's real, the difference between us and say everyone else in the United States in terms of, other than, you know, the Che Rivera, was that we really believed in that, that, that the struggle would, would require armed violence and armed force, and so we were prepared. And we were armed to do that. And so that was all pieced together. But it wasn't pieced together. I mean, it, it can't be seen that way. It has to be seen as part of a process. It was a time, and, and we used, these were symbolic things. These were not the substantive issues. The substantive issues came from, from the mind in many cases especially in the beginning of the party of Huey Newton. And when you ask me about Huey, of course the first thing that comes to mind to my mind was that I always thought of Huey as a genius. I always thought of him as a brilliant theoretician who really understood concepts and the concepts that we had to, that we had to engage in in order to, to win. And so in brief, I would say that Huey Newton was the guiding force behind the party because he was talking about arms, talking about socialist revolution, and putting that out there. And then of course doing certain acts, going to Sacramento. Although Huey personally didn't go to Sacramento. Defending Betty Shabazz or protecting Betty Shabazz and this sort of thing. And getting the attention of everyone. Ultimately of course the, being the center of the "Free Huey movement," having been involved in that shoot out with the police in Oakland in 1967. So, I think that Huey became not only informed but in substance the real spirit of the Black Panther Party: the drama, the dynamic, the energy that the Black Panther Party had that, that made it unique as far as I'm concerned.

00:07:07:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Last, last night, you were talking about the last temptation of Christ, and in that moment when, you know, Christ was about to die. You, you talked about it in terms of your realization that as a Panther that you might die at any time. Can, can you remember that moment when you realized that your life was in jeopardy and how that transformed you?

Elaine Brown:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

When you realized that you might die?

00:07:28:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, I don't want to backtrack too much, but I'll just say that I was a matter of probably forty, fifty seconds away from being shot when John and Bunchy was killed and, at UCLA in 1969. Although that wasn't very impactful. I mean, I didn't, I mean it just happened, and I didn't feel it. I mean, there, there were gunshots, and, and I sort of remember all of that. But it's, you know, it's, it's a mist. But that afternoon after they were killed, we went back to the house where Erica Huggins was to tell her and to sort of regroup and figure out what we were going to do. I mean, two people had been killed. And as we began to sort of organize ourselves, we had to, we felt we had to leave that particular house. We looked out the window, and there were like 150 cops coming in from, trying to come into the house, coming in from the rooftops. And there were only four women in the house at the time Erica, and Joan, and another sister named Janice, and myself. And Erica's baby, Erica and John's baby, three weeks old. And there were two men outside, and we were forced out. We just said, Well, they're coming in the doors. They're gonna kill us. They said, Oh, we'll kill—the police said, If you don't, if you don't come out of the house, we're gonna blow your heads of. And they had shotguns in Geronimo's ear and, and Nathaniel Clark's ear. Geronimo Pratt and Nathaniel Clark. And so we just hit the floor, and we said, This is it. We're gonna die today. And the first thing you realize is that you think, well, I hope I can handle this. I hope I can handle the pain. I hope I can handle whatever is gonna happen to me. But it's really a strange thing because I would never have thought I would be that brave or that, that calm. I would have thought I was, would have cried or something. And they kicked in the door, and they put the shotguns at our heads and stuff. And of course obviously I wasn't killed because here I am. But it was then, that and John Huggins whom, who was very close, who I was very close to, sort of said, There's nothing else I can do. I've, I've just got to, I've got to do this because it is, it is, is my life. That's it. So, you just do it, and you say, That's the moment. January 17th, 1969 for me was that nodal point if, I, if there's any identifiable nodal point where I said, OK, I'm gonna probably die in this stuff, but it's worth it.

00:09:39:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. How, how did you see the, the Panther Party transforming? You're talking about guys in the Slausons in LA and also folks in Oakland. You know, I mean, and around the country. How did you see it, it transforming young Black men and, and women?

00:09:51:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, you know, the Panther Party, first of all, was denominated by men, so it, there's no point talking too much about the women because there weren't a lot of women in the part-party. There weren't a lot of women, but there were a lot of men. I mean, we were, the party was denominated by male, and it was a male dominated organization in terms of attitude and everything, and, and paramilitary, you know, atmosphere and so forth. But I think that the simple fact is the Black Panther Party gave all those gang people, the Slausons in LA, P. Stone Nation in, in, in Chicago, it focused their attention away from what they were doing, went onto the more serious issue. In other words, the reason gangs formed is not just so people can have camaraderie as many sociologists would like to suggest. You know, they sort of, everybody is happy just being apart of something. Well, we could be apart of something other than a street gang and go robbing, and maiming, and mugging people and stuff and so forth. But there was that sense. And I know from Philadelphia from, from the Avenue Gang, and Norris Street, and all the gangs in my neighborhood that it was, it wasn't just a matter of belonging. It was standing for something. It was having territory. It was having a sense of your own dignity in an aren—in a—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound[

Elaine Brown:

—world that denied your existence. What the Black Panther Party said is you can do this same thing. You are a soldier in an army, and you can be a soldier…

00:10:51:00

Interviewer #1:

Stop. Stop. We're out?

Camera Crew Member #1:

We just ran out.

Interviewer #1:

OK. All right.

[cut]

[camera roll #3014]
[sound roll #307]

Camera Crew Member #1:

And mark.

00:11:13:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:11:16:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, once again, how did you see the Panthers transforming men and women who, who joined the party? I mean, and you were talking before how it gave them a sense of strength to stand up to, to, to face those questions of, of, of oppression.

00:11:31:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, I think that the Black Panther Party appealed primarily to brothers on the street because we, we wanted to. The party did not reach out and say, Well, we want to have men and women. The party reached out mostly to men, to young, Black, urban men who were on the streets who knew that there were no options somewhere in their lives, who were gang members because that was all you could be in order to find some sense of dignity of your, about yourself from, you know, as I mentioned to you the Slausons, which Bunchy Carter was a part of, to the P. Stone Nation in Chicago, to, you know, Norris Street and, and Avenue in, in, in north Philadelphia. We reached out to these people because we had something for them to do with the rest of their lives, and that was that they were, most, in most cases they were used to violence. They were used to struggle. They were used to just fighting just to keep alive. And so we were, we, we offered them the opportunity to make their lives meaningful. You know, we, Huey used to always quote Mao in saying, you know, "To die for the people is heavier than Mount Tai." Meaning to, to die for it for nothing is lighter than a feather. So we used to always say that if you're gonna die on the streets, to die for nothing,

to, but to die for the people or something heavy. And so something heavy in the sense of meaningful, weighty. And, and a lot of brothers did make that commitment with that conscious understanding that coming away from the gang was, was, was something that they were ultimately building something for, for, for themselves and for their, their community. And they, they just did. I knew people, for example, little Tommy Lewis in LA who was, who was killed by the police. Seventeen years old. And he couldn't read when he came into the party, but he wanted to be in the party so bad he learned to memorize, and he could say he could read stuff even though he couldn't. So, yeah, we had an impact on that element on that so called lumpenproletariat, on that totally alienated element in the Black community, a young Black male.

00:13:29:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. And, and you as a woman, what, what was, what was particular, what, what brought women in, into the party?

00:13:38:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, for me, it was the idea that Black men were actually deciding that they wanted to be men as I, as I put it in the sense of—I was denounced, as a matter of fact, by some of the women's groups because, you know, the question of feminism seemed to not allow for this element, this return to the, return to the community, the Black male. I had grown up in a neighborhood where there were two fathers that I could name off the top of my head that we knew of that were still in the home and married or whatever. The rest of, most people I knew and most people most Black, in many Black communities had divorced parents long before the statistics were popular or fathers who the image that we had at least was the father wasn't there or the father didn't do this, or there was the, the, the Black male who was the weak figure and so forth. ***Here were men who were saying, Listen, we are willing to take charge of our lives. We're willing to stand up.*** We're willing—***I mean, there was the appeal that Malcolm had in many ways,*** and there was the appeal that over people have had. But, but for me, the Black Panthers were the, the ultimate. And so it was the men that I saw and the sense of being part of them and being ha, so happy to see that they cared about me. And as a child who had no father at home, ***that had a certain subjective appeal to my psyche and to emotional need to say, Yes, there were men in this world who, who cared, Black men who, who cared about the community and wanted to, to do something, and we were willing to, to take it to the, to, to the last degree.***

00:15:06:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Could you talk a—

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer #1:

—stop for a second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:15:12:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark four.

Interviewer #1:

[clears throat]

[slate]

00:15:15:00

Interviewer #1:

Could you talk a little bit about Malcolm X and, and his influence on your, your, your feelings and your thoughts, and also on, on, on the party? How, how Malcolm influenced the party?

00:15:25:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, as for me, I, I didn't think about Malcolm X when Malcolm X was, was in his prime so to speak because I, like a lot of other Black people, but I can speak for myself, are totally unconscious or uncaring about what happened in any meaningful way in terms of Black people. I just wanted to get out of the ghetto that I lived in, which was north Philadelphia. And Malcolm didn't have anything to do with that. I saw myself as getting out because I would become a part of a White, you know, thing or something like this. I would be different, a different kind of negro, [laughs] you know. So, I, I didn't hear Malcolm when

Malcolm was, was, was alive. Malcolm was assassinated in 1965. And up until that point, I remember hearing him. I thought he had more to say than the civil rights people in that sense because I knew that he was not saying, Let's be nonviolent. But I didn't see him as significant one way or the other to my life at that time. As for the party itself, however, we borrowed almost everything we had in terms of our style, our substance from Malcolm. Our style at least. The, the idea for example of saying that "By any means necessary," that was Malcolm's phrase. And we used that, that Machiavellian reference and said, Yes, we would accomplish the freedom of Black people. We would accomplish the revolution by any means necessary. Of course the implication was by violence, including by violence if necessary. And there was a presumption always that there was. The other thing that Malcolm did is that he was an influence on the urban Black. I mean, Martin Luther King basically was a Southern Black. And you had brothers and sisters especially but brothers, I mean brothers more particularly running the streets of Harlem, and north Philly, and Detroit, and, you know, LA, and Oakland, and what have you who Malcolm—Martin Luther King did not reach, but Malcolm did. The voice of Malcolm reached them. And in many ways reached them through our, our efforts because that was the, those were the people that we appealed to, the Northern urban Black from the streets, and that was Malcolm's constituency, too. So, in that sense, we had a similar constituency. And then thirdly, we did a lot of other things that Malcolm would, Malcolm had certain tenets and principles that he believed in beyond just protection of women and what have you. But there were things like we never spoke independently when we were in the Black Panther Party. If, if there were ten of us, only one spoke, and only one voice was heard, so we couldn't be divided because Malcolm was very clear about how the White man would try to divide our, our, our ranks. And so we, we were very clear about not being divided. And that was a very important part of the Black Panther Party. And so I think he, his vision and his spirit were, were pervasive in, in our activities, day to, on a day to day basis.

00:18:15:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. And stop camera.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:18:18:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:18:23:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Again, the, the Huey Newton question. What, what were some of the influences that Huey Newton borrowed from or, or learned from in putting together the, the program and, and also helping to develop the style of the Black Panther Party?

00:18:36:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, the style and as I've mentioned to you before, I, I think that it's important not to be too focused on style. Although that had an impact on how people thought about the party, but it wasn't the party. The, the, the question of wearing the beret. I mean that clearly came from Che Guevara. The question of the Black Panther symbol, it came from the Lowndes County Alabama Freedom Organization, which was a voter rights organization. The, the, the initial militance, if you will, which is not to be confused with what we consider to be revolutionary activity, which we borrowed from all revolutionary or socialist revolutionary organizations throughout the world, came from the, from the Deacons for Defense, who were a group of Black men in the South who said, We, we're not going to be nonviolent. And if you come in our neighborhoods, we're going to take care of you. And basically did accomplish something in the sense of people respected them. And the Whites who were hanging people and stuff did not go into territories where the Deacons for Defense operated. So, all of that combined. And the ten-point program and platform, we virtually borrowed from the Nation of Islam, which always printed it on the back of their, their newspaper. Except that there was a final point where we differed, which was the complete and—overthrow of capitalism, which was apart of our program and not apart of theirs. But yes, we borrowed, Huey, who was the, the spirit of the party and who was the guiding force in the party, used some of those symbols for the party. But the party of course evolved to become its own, its own entity.

00:20:21:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, stop.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:20:24:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:20:26:00

Interviewer #1:

What were the, what were the expectations of women in the party? Was it any different from the expectations of men?

00:20:34:00

Elaine Brown:

No. I don't think we saw ourselves differently in the beginning at least. We thought that we were revolutionaries, and we thought that we would, we would participate in the same level as men. The one thing we did know is that we weren't real—there was really no difference in the beginning at least. At least we thought of ourselves as, as, as the same of the men in terms of our commitment and in terms of what we had to do. So, our expectations were that we really thought of course as, as did the men that, that we would introduce revolution into the United States.

00:21:08:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Cut. Change?

Camera Crew Member #1:

It was changed.

[cut]

[camera roll #3015]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:21:15:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Scene five, take seven.

[slate]

00:21:17:00

Interviewer #1:

How, how did the survival programs come about? And also you can talk, would you talk about how they were, how you got people for the food programs, how you got people to donate food? What was, and, but first beginning with the philosophy of the survival program.

00:21:30:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, Huey started out naming the programs that we, that we developed survival programs from the theory that we, this was survival to the point of revolution. So—but the breakfast program, which was not called a survival program initially but called the breakfast program…

00:21:48:00

Interviewer #1:

Let's stop, and let's just, just start once again. I'm sorry.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #1:

Make, make sure you keep eye contact here. I, I know you looked over here for a second. OK?

Elaine Brown:

Well, gee. I'm sorry. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

Oh, that's all right. That's all right. Go ahead.

Camera Crew Member #3:

I'm still rolling, OK?

Elaine Brown:

So, what do you want me to…

Interviewer #1:

Just, just continue.

Elaine Brown:

Oh—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, you stopped, OK, I'm sorry.

00:22:06:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Scene five, take eight.

[slate]

00:22:11:00

Interviewer #1:

Could, could you talk about the survival program? What was the philosophy of them? How did they come about? And how, how did you carry them out?

00:22:18:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, the survival programs were initially, the concept came from Huey in the sense that he would say that we were going to develop these programs, and their function would be for the survival of the people to the point of revolution. But the breakfast program, which was a part of that whole group of social programs, social welfare programs, was not called a survival program, but it became a part of that whole package eventually. The breakfast program of course is the most well known of the Panther programs. Breakfast, breakfast for children. And the philosophy that simply that children could not learn, and Black children were not learning in school despite the inferior educational process, they couldn't learn anything without having food. And so we started the breakfast program. The first one was started in a, a church, Father Boyle's church in San Francisco. It was funny because we couldn't get a lot of Black preachers and ministers to give us a space, and that's who we reached out to. We wanted the churches to open their doors because they didn't, they had clearly the facilities to handle cooking and having a number of children. And then other breakfast programs eventually spread from there. Father Neil in Oakland, and, and others in, in the other chapters and branches throughout the, the, the country. ***The idea was obviously twofold. For the specific purpose of serving those people who were directly benefit-benefited by our programs but also secondarily to influence the minds of people to understand not only that the Black Panther Party was providing them this but more importantly that if they could get food that maybe they would want clothing, and maybe they'd want housing, and maybe they'd want land, and maybe they would ultimately want some abstract thing called freedom.*** And so the idea of the survival program was a political organizing tool which most people misunderstood because they thought it was an end in and of itself, and it was not an end in and of itself. It was, it was the point at which people could be introduced to the political process through breakfast, through our food programs, through medical clinics, through legal defense programs, bussing to prisons, clothing, so forth. We had so many different programs, and each chapter of course reflected its own particularl-particulars. But generally speaking, we all had these kinds of programs with the intent of serving the people and with the intent of providing them a political, becoming, putting them into the political process.

00:24:33:00

Interviewer #1:

How, how did you finance it? How did you get the resources to make these survival programs work?

00:24:37:00

Elaine Brown:

Hit and miss. [laughs] I mean, we, we fin, there was no financing of anything. We, you know, we didn't get government money. We, we ultimately did at some point. But during those early years, we, we, we certainly were not interested in getting government money. But

what we did was we begged, and borrowed, and stole basically. That's how we got the money. Any way we could.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Elaine Brown:

And we got donations, just to add that. We had donations of, in kind donations as they used to say in that some kind of poverty program lingo. We would get food donated. We would get service donated. In other words, the church would donate the space, and the use of the kitchen, and we would wash dishes. And people would donate people to come and volunteer to cook one breakfast. And so we just, we did it hit and miss. We did it anyway, and it was, it was a total process of community involvement. But we literally begged, borrowed, and stole.

00:25:26:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Could you talk about the Panthers' entry into the anti-war movement and to, and taking a stand against Vietnam? Also working in alliance with White radical groups. How did that come about, and what were some of the, the events that you remember during that?

00:25:41:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, the Black Panther Party was never a nationalist organization. In the sense that we, our pur-purpose was not to build a Black nation. We felt that the oppression of Black people was our primary more subjective interest and that that interest could best be served by the freedom and the destruction of oppression for all people. So, therefore that would include other people of color, women, and anybody else who was disenfranchised and oppressed by the system that we felt was the real perpetrator of all of this harm and ill, which was the system of capitalism in the United States and ultimately of imperialism. So, when we re-recognized early on that the war in Vietnam had nothing to do with Black people and our oppression that we were doing no more than being cannon fodder. Our first position was not to take a position against the war but to suggest that Black men not go into the war. And so we promoted, if you look into some of our early papers, you will see us promoting Black men and saying, "Don't go to the war." We would never allow our own Panthers to be drafted. We would send them down to the draft boards in Panther uniforms with Panther papers and say, Yeah, I'm ready to go. And of course the draft boards would be glad to have them leave as opposed to go to Vietnam. So, generally speaking, we tried to discourage Black people from being a part of the war because we were cannon fodder, and we did not have an enemy in the Vietnamese people. We were one of the only Black organizations addressing the question of the war. But we were not anti-war activists in the sense that we

thought there should just be peace in Vietnam. Our position became very clear and very strong as it evolved, and that was victory for the Viet-Vietnamese, victory for the Vietcong, which was not a very popular position. But nevertheless, we did participate in a number of anti-war movements and demonstrations, but our line was very strong. And that was victory for the Vietnamese and destruction of, of the, the US troops in, in Vietnam.

00:27:30:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you talk about some of the times you spoke or some, some of the alliances with White radical organizations?

Elaine Brown:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

And, and some of the events maybe.

00:27:38:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, of course clearly Eldridge Cleaver was the main, main person who supported this notion of, of alliances with White radical organizations. I mean, he coined the phrase "mother country radicals." And this was something that, that went, was really in line with our thinking anyway. Because in general, the party, as I say, was not a nationalist group. So, we saw the interconnection between the various struggles. Many of the White radical groups of course were populated by more middle class in some cases even upper class if that term could be used Whites. But nevertheless, they had sincere hearts and commitment at the time to support our struggle. So, we had two kinds of White groups that we coalesced with. One, the Peace and Freedom types, various groups who we worked with on a day to day basis. And there were others who were support groups. There were many Panther, White Panther support groups, White groups of people, groups of White people who supported the Black Panther Party. And so not only financially but also politically and in their own communities. They did work within White communities, or they supported the work that we did in the Black community, or they were in coalition with us on specific issues. For example, I remember we had a United Front Against Fascism conference in which the Peace and Freedom was a cosponsor of. And we saw this as keeping in line with our position that the oppression of Black people was directly connected to capitalism and not to the question of nationalism or racism.

00:29:09:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Could you talk about your alliances with SNCC spec-specifically what influences Stokley Carmichael and Rap Brown may have had you on and influences you may have had on, on him? That is the Panther Party may have had on SNCC.

00:29:20:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, the Black Panther Party, of course, we saw ourselves as the vanguard of struggle. The SNCC organization was a civil rights organization primarily dedicated to voting rights and activity in the South. Stokley, of course, took a position that White people had no real role to play. Took a very hard line nationalist position. But the Black Panther Party was what we considered to be the vanguard of revolution, so we were to the left of SNCC if that, if you were to use a political scale, we would say that were to the left of SNCC, SNCC, and therefore we were truly what we thought of as the vanguard. We recruited Stokley Carmichael is my recollection in the sense of we said, Look, he had popularity. We had this, and we were basically talking about the same things, although he had a different perspective as the head of SNCC. So, we asked him, because he had some ties in Africa and because he had an international and a national image, to participate in the Black Panther Party, to be a kind of ambassador for the party when he went into, into Africa. And of course Rap Brown and others were part of that. The "free Huey" movement however at the time in 1968 particularly was so profound, and it was so big that everybody wanted to get on board. And so it wasn't difficult to see the coalitions forming. And there was more of, more than a coalition. It was really a uniting and a melding of, of the various Black quote militant forces in America.

00:30:41:00

Interviewer #1:

Great. Thanks. Stop camera.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #2:

Really some of the stories you were telling before.

Elaine Brown:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

If we could just—

Elaine Brown:

You'll get it.

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Elaine Brown:

'Cause I have no problem repeating it with the same emotion and passion because I feel that way.

Interviewer #2:

Let's not—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Nine.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scene five, take nine.

[slate]

00:31:02:00

Interviewer #1:

Hold it. OK.

00:31:05:00

Interviewer #2:

How do you account, when you think back on, on the impression Fred Hampton made on you, how do you account for the strength and the growth of the Chicago Panthers?

00:31:12:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, I mean clearly Fred Hampton was the, the, the essence of the, what we call the Illinois chapter focused in Chicago, based in Chicago. I mean, when you real, when you realize that Fred Hampton for the time he was in the party was only 20 and 21 years old, for the time he was alive. I met Fred the first time when, when we, I had just left a funeral, one of the many funerals out of southern California, with David Hilliard. And we had gone back to criticize Fred for his—I wasn't about to criticize him, but, but, but David Hilliard was, for having denounced the Weather, Underground Weathermen, whatever they were called at the time, for trashing parts of Black community of south, of, of, of Chicago. And Fred's line was very hard. He took a line that, that these people did not belong in that community, that they had brought the police down, that the Black Panther Party was being blamed, so they were doing two things. They were affecting the community directly and indirectly. They were affecting the relationship the community had with the Black Panther Party, and it was getting very angry. So, we went to see Fred. And, you know, and, and Fred was, you know, here he was. He was, was basically a kid. I mean, when you really think about it. I mean, but, and that night that I first met him, we came in late, and, and he had this big bed. And he and Deborah, his, his wife, they, they had got in this bed. And everybody made a big thing about this bed that, that Fred and, 'cause Fred was kinda chunky. And Brenda, rather Deborah rather was, was, was fat with his baby. And so there was a big number made about this bed because—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Elaine Brown:

—Fred Hampton didn't go to sleep anyway. And it was just funny. It was just a funny night. And he—

00:32:48:00

Interviewer #2:

We're out. I'm sorry.

Elaine Brown:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

It's good. We're gonna pick up.

[cut]

[camera roll #3016]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:32:50:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark ten.

[slate]

00:32:54:00

Interviewer #2:

What, what did you see about Fred Hampton's leadership that accounts for that? The, the growth of the Illinois Panthers.

00:33:01:00

Elaine Brown:

Fred was of course the most, probably one of the most dynamic human beings I had ever met. I met him first in Chicago when David Hilliard sort of took me there directly from the gravesite of another Panther. We were at a funeral. We got on a flight to Chicago, ran, and met Fred. The first thing you remember about Fred is that Fred really, he was down in the trenches with everyone. And his house, that house on the West Side, was, it was a horrible place to live. But he didn't live above or elevate himself above. He lived like the rest of the comrades in the party, which was pretty poorly except for by that time this unique thing which was that big bed that he and Deborah, and everybody laughed about the big bed that they had. And the other thing about Fred was that in the, during the day, we got up with him in the morning. We had come in around two in the morning. He was up all night, which was apparently typical. And around six in the morning, we, ***we go out. We drive along to some schoolyard or something. And there are like two hundred, three hundred people waiting there for Fred to show up. And the phenomenal part was that, I mean, these are all people from the streets, I mean, who are not gonna get up and go to work or anything else. And never had no discipline and never would, but there they were. It was six, six-thirty in the***

morning. Freezing Chicago weather. And Fred would have them doing pushups, and jumping jacks, and getting themselves energized for the, the, the day's work, which included making the breakfast, which included selling papers, which included working in the medical clinic, which included a bunch of stuff. It was a very day to day kind of a thing, the Black Panther Party. And you'd have Fred out there, rallying them. And he'd say, he'd say, he'd say, he said, "All right, All right, All right, power to the people." Everybody said, "Power to the people." He'd say, he'd say, "Now, I'm, I'm not gonna die on no airplane." Everyone would say, "No." He'd say, "I'm not gonna die slipping on no ice." They'd say, "No." He said, "I'm gonna die for the people 'cause I'm gonna live for the people." And they said, "Right on." He said, "I'm gonna live for the people 'cause I love the people." And they said, "Right on." And he'd say, "I love the people. Why?" And they'd say, "'Cause we're on the high people. 'Cause we're high on the people." And that was Fred Hampton. When you saw this, this was 21 years old, it was unbelievable. You could not not be moved by Fred Hampton. It was, he was like Martin Luther King. I mean, you just had to see Fred Hampton mobilize people who wouldn't have moved for anything else that I can imagine on the planet and much less to get up and cook breakfast, some big, old strong guy out there doing pushups and talking about, "I'm gonna die for the people." And that was Fred Hampton. That was the spirit that I saw in him only two months before he was assassinated.

00:35:39:00

Interviewer #2:

How did you learn about his death, and what did you do?

00:35:42:00

Elaine Brown:
I was in New Haven working for the Bobby Seale, Erica Huggins campaign for their freedom. They were in prison at the time in jail on charges in New Haven. And I was in the bathtub. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I was. I was pregnant. And, and I heard about Fred, I heard, I heard it at our office. That was later. But I heard about Fred's death, and I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it. And I didn't know what we were going to do. So, nobody knew, because this was the year that J. Edgar Hoover said he would kill us. And we all thought when Fred was killed, it was like the end of the year. And there had been so many assassinations, and so many deaths, and so many funerals. And we thought, They really are trying to close out the year their way. They really, they walked into this man's house and killed him. We all knew what had happened. There's no question about it. Fred Hampton was a political organizer. Fred Hampton was not a, an individual who was threatening anybody perse. And for them to have isolated him and killed him, we knew that we were all in jeopardy. And we all felt very sad about it, and we were all devastated by Fred's death.

00:36:48:00

Interviewer #2:

What was the funeral like? Paint a picture for me if you can of that.

00:36:51:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, as I, as I talk about it, and I've thought about it many times, the funeral, of course you have to imagine that four days, I was in Chicago four days after Fred was murdered. And, and you could touch his bed, and your finger could become moist with his blood still. And, you know, and there was Deborah. And we, she and I had talked about this. We were both pregnant. And she had been in that bed. That bed had rocked with, rocked the life out of him, blood on her. He had fallen on her. And you saw all that right there, and there, but on the streets of Chicago, everywhere, thousands and thousand of Black people coming through the house, coming through the streets. Everyone just wanting to know what do we do now that Fred is gone. And you had these, these loudspeakers the Panthers had put on these trucks, these, and running through the streets with Fred's speeches, listening to Fred organize people. People crying just unabashedly, openly in the streets. And then the funeral where you had thousands of people for blocks around listening to the speeches, listening to this one give praise to Fred, and that one give praise to Fred. Many of whom hadn't known him, but everybody wanted to be there because it was Fred Hampton. And then at, at the end, as I, as I have said many times, the most profound thing that occurred, and that was the, at least two thousand members of the P. Stone Nation, Nation in full regalia, red berets, the black jackets, whatever, and they're going by. And they're looking in Fred's open casket, and they are, they say, "To the nation, Fred." And you had to see it, because you know that these people were totally alienated from society, and they had found one person who meant that much to them. It was profound.

00:38:29:00

Interviewer #2:

There was a song.

Elaine Brown:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

"Someday We'll Be Together."

Elaine Brown:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

How did that go?

00:38:33:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, Fred, Fred liked that song. You know, I'm gonna, I'm gonna tell you. Motown, I have to tell you briefly, was, I always said to, I said once, many times that Motown was the sound of urban, urban rebellion, urban Black rebellion. It was the sound of Watts and Detroit, and Black people rising up and taking charge of their lives in urban arenas. So, when Diana Ross and the Supremes put out "Someday We'll All Be Together," [sic] Fred liked that because it had that of course double meaning. And for him, it had a political meaning. We, we did that very, we took a lot of the especially Motown songs, and we'd translate them into political terms. And so Fred loved that song. And, and after he was assassinated, all through the streets of Chicago on top of hearing Fred say, "I'm gonna die for the people 'cause I love the people," you would hear Diana Ross singing, [sings] "Someday we'll be together." And you hear that brother in the background, "Say it, say it, say it again." And it was, everybody, everybody understood we would be together, and Fred had done that. He had binded us in some way. We were all committed even more than before. And so they made a mistake assassinating him. At least at that time we felt that they did.

00:39:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Thank you. Cut. That's good. Thanks.

Elaine Brown:

Yeah. So, what else?

Interviewer #1:

[coughs] Are we—

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:39:51:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark eleven.

[slate]

00:39:53:00

Interviewer #2:

How did that year of 1969 start, and how did you grow and live through that year with the awareness of the deaths and the, the enemies you had?

00:40:03:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, it started with the assassination of John and Bunchy in, in Los Angeles. John Huggins and Bunchy Carter. And for me, every month I went to a funeral. And I became a professional singer at funerals. I mean, that's what I did. And that's what we all did. We, we even laughed about it. But when Hoover stated in the beginning of the year also that that would be the last year the Black Panther Party would exist, he just made a state—we said, He means it. We didn't think this was a joke, and we knew that we had to confront that. And we were serious about it. We had what we called Executive Mandate number one, which was that no Panther could ever allow himself to [plane flies over] lose, or herself to lose a gun.

00:40:41:00

Interviewer #2:

Hang on a second. There's, there's, there's an airplane.

Elaine Brown:

Oh. Oh.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:40:44:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark twelve.

[slate]

00:40:44:00

Interviewer #2:

Tell me how you coped with, with Hoover and the announcement, and, and the deaths.

00:40:52:00

Elaine Brown:

Well, 1969 in the Black Panther Party was a very rough year for all of us. Hoover did state without question that we were the single greatest threat to the security of the United States, internal security. And that this would be the last year the Black Panther Party would exist. We, we took it seriously, but we felt we would be able to handle ourselves. We had this, this law in the party called Executive Mandate number one issued by Huey some time before saying that Panthers, first of all, always had to be armed. And that if we were ever caught on the street or in our homes by the police that we were to defend ourselves right then and there, and we knew that, and we took that seriously. As a result of a combination of all of that activity, Hoover's part and our defense, and our ability and willingness to defend ourselves, we lost a whole lot of people. I went to a funeral even year in 19, every month in 1969. And I would have gone more often than that except that I, that was only in LA. ***There was no joke about what was going on, but we believed with our hearts that we should defend ourselves. And there were so many that did do that,*** so many that died that by the end of the year, the raid on the Los Angeles office by the Los Angeles Police SWAT team, which was introduced with the Black Panther raid, a five and a half hour attack on our office with tanks and paramilitary, I mean rifles, and so forth, we knew that we were not playing around. This was, this was serious, and we would probably all die. But that was what we were about. We knew we had to, we had to pay the price if we wanted to be the vanguard. As a matter of fact, as Fred used to always say, that we, you had to pay the cost if you wanted to be the boss. Fred used to say that. And we knew that, and we learned it. And we accepted it, and we dealt with it.

00:42:40:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. Cut. Thank you.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #2:

He said he would speak and play that song, and he'd talk about how—

Camera Crew Member #3:

We're gonna have room tone next.

Interviewer #2:

—we'd all be—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:42:50:00