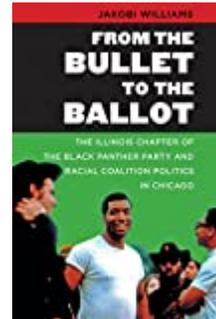




Jakobi Williams. *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 312 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3816-7.



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Panther Politics in Chicago and Beyond

Whether in academia or the wider culture, interest in the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP), formed by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, in 1966, remains intense. Notable recent publications include, for example, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr.'s *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (2013), Jane Rhodes's *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (2007), Judson L. Jeffries's *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (2007), and Curtis Austin's *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (2006). The Panthers generate so much interest not just because of the dramatic nature of their story, but also because their rise and fall has so much to say about many of the larger themes in contemporary U.S. history: race, violence and power; the impact and meaning of the civil rights and Black Power movements; government surveillance and repression; and the wider meaning of the 1960s and all that contested decade has come to stand for.

Reflecting one of the key trends of recent scholarship

on the BPP—an increasing emphasis on localism—Jakobi Williams's *From the Bullet to the Ballot* turns our attention away from Oakland and the organization's national headquarters towards Chicago and the Illinois chapter of the Party (ILBPP) under the charismatic, active, and highly effective leadership of Fred Hampton. The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 places the ILBPP in the wider context of the political and social conditions that existed for black Chicagoans between 1900 and 1970, with particular emphasis on the tactics of mafia violence and police brutality that was a part for the course for the repressive political machine of Mayor Richard J. Daley (p. 29), as well as the failure of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Freedom Movement campaign in the city. Chapter 2 examines the origins of the ILBPP, which was formed in 1968, in Hampton's early experience in the NAACP and stresses the importance of the black student movement more broadly to the development of the organization. Chapter 3 provides a detailed comparison between the activities of the Illinois and Oakland chapters of the party, thereby illustrating the still powerful gravitational

pull of BPP national headquarters, and seeks to differentiate the Midwestern group from its California counterpart in the former's (somewhat) reduced "hypermasculinity" (p. 119) and (marginally) greater awareness of gender issues; its unwillingness to abandon its commitment to, or connection with, the civil rights struggle in Chicago; and its focus on dismantling Mayor Daley's "Democratic machine's control of Chicago residents" (p. 107).

In Williams's view, the most significant and important feature of the ILBPP's attempts to resist the power of Daley machine is found in its grassroots, antiracist, anti-class Rainbow Coalition, which included groups like the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the white southern Young Patriots, Students for a Democratic Society, and members of Chicago gangs, such as the Black Disciples and the Black Stone Rangers. He examines this Rainbow Coalition in fascinating detail in chapter 4 of the book. Chapter 5 documents just how central law enforcement repression was to the Panthers's demise in Chicago (as it was elsewhere), as it highlights the work of both the Chicago Police Department's infamous Red Squad (its Intelligence Section and Surveillance Unit) and the FBI's equally infamous Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). The last chapter examines the legacy of the ILBPP not just in Chicago, but nationally, with Williams placing particular emphasis on the Panthers's survival programs—its free breakfast for children and free medical research health clinics—together with the impact of its Rainbow Coalition activism.

One of the considerable strengths of the book is Williams's access to the previously sealed records of

the Red Squad, and it would have been interesting to know more about how this access came about. At times, though, he relies a little too heavily on these sources, while at others—his discussion of the 1968 Democratic National Convention being a case in point (pp. 103-107)—more context is needed for readers who may not be as familiar with the period and its politics as the author is. A further problem, as Williams himself acknowledges, is that many of the former members of the ILBPP "refuse to be interviewed and/or are engaged in producing their own projects" such as the nonprofit Illinois Black Panther Party History Project (p. 12). One of the unfortunate results of these former members's unwillingness to engage with Williams is that it occasionally provides him with a very narrow evidence base for some of his conclusions—his discussion of why rank-and-file members joined the party, for example (pp. 85-89). Similarly, I am not sure that all readers are likely to be entirely convinced by the connections Williams attempts to make between the "racial coalition politics" of Hampton and the Panthers in 1968, the 1983 mayoral campaign of Harold Washington, the first African American mayor of Chicago, Jesse Jackson's two presidential runs in the 1980s, and the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008.

Overall, though, *From the Bullet to the Ballot* is a welcome addition—one replete with numerous illuminating photographs—to the substantive literature on the history of the Black Panther Party and on the contested legacies of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States.

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