

WHEN THE NRA SUPPORTED GUN CONTROL

Originally called the **Black Panthers for Self-Defense**, the radical African-American group was formed in 1966 in Oakland, California, by **Huey Newton** and **Bobby Seale**, based on the ideology of the late Malcolm X. They believed that the fight for racial equality would not be won by a slow drip of nonviolent actions and protests, as Martin Luther King, Jr. preached, but that stronger actions were required to ensure black peoples' survival.

A large part of the group's campaign against racial injustice relied on gun ownership and training. Newton and Seale began collecting a variety of guns during the early years of the Black Panthers, including machine guns, rifles and handguns. New recruits were required to learn how to wield, clean and shoot guns, in addition to understanding their right to carry firearms and how to communicate that to police in California.

Newton put his own knowledge of the law to the test after he and Seale were stopped by Oakland police officers in early 1967 in a vehicle filled with weapons. When questioned about the guns Newton simply replied that the only thing he was obliged to do was give his "identification, name and address."

At the request of the officer, Newton stepped out of the car, rifle still in tow, and refused to explain why he and the other Black Panthers were carrying their weapons. As onlookers gathered, the police tried to disperse the crowd while Newton welcomed them. He knew that under California law, bystanders could legally view an arrest as long as they didn't intrude. Since there were no violations for the police to charge the Black Panther members with (and a growing pack of witnesses), they were able to leave the scene without any trouble from law enforcement.

Emboldened by their calm exchange with the police, members of the group began to follow police cars and dispense legal advice to African-Americans who were stopped by the police while legally carrying their weapons. The group referred to these activities as "**police patrols.**" (ed.note: This was the model in Southern Humboldt when the Citizens Observation Group (COG) was founded, carrying cameras but no guns.)

"*Bobby Seale and Huey Newton used the Second Amendment to justify carrying guns in public to police the police,*" says Adam Winkler, author of *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms.* "*The Panthers would stand to the sidelines with their guns, shouting out directions to the person. That they had the right to remain silent, that they were watching and that if anything bad happened that the Black Panthers would be there to protect them.*"

They also organized a march to the Capitol to draw attention to their cause of fighting against a government that sought to infringe on their right to bear arms. On May 2, 1967, 30 fully-armed Black Panthers occupied the California state Capitol. The demonstration was motivated by Republican Assemblyman Don Mulford's bill to repeal the law allowing Californians to openly carry weapons, a direct response to the Black Panthers' "police patrols."

Before entering the building, Bobby Seale read a written statement on the Capitol steps in front of Governor Ronald Reagan: "*The American people in general and the black people in particular,*" Seale declared, must "*take careful note of the racist California legislature aimed at keeping the black people disarmed and powerless.*"

The group of activists occupying the Capitol with fully loaded weapons on full display was an unforgettable sight. However, their demonstration backfired and the bill passed both the state Assembly and Senate, with the full support of the NRA. In addition to repealing open carry gun laws in California, Mulford made it illegal to take firearms into the Capitol. On July 28 it was signed into law by **Governor Reagan, who later commented that he saw "no reason why on the street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons."**



Mulford had effectively played on white America's fear of African-Americans during the 1960s, stripping away the power the Black Panthers found in brandishing their guns. **While the bill was effective in disarming the Black Panthers, it didn't have much effect in reducing criminal violence,** Winkler notes.

The 1967 bill took California down the path to having some of the strictest gun laws in America and helped jumpstart a surge of national gun control restrictions. "*The law was part of a wave of laws that were passed in the late 1960s regulating guns, especially to target African-Americans,*" says Winkler, "*Including the Gun Control Act of 1968, which adopted new laws prohibiting certain people from owning guns, providing for beefed up licensing and inspections of gun dealers and restricting the importation of cheap Saturday night specials [pocket pistols] that were popular in some urban communities.*"

The NRA fought alongside the government for stricter gun regulations in the 1960s. This was part of an effort to keep guns out of the hands of African-Americans as racial tensions in the nation grew. The NRA felt especially threatened by the Black Panthers, whose well-photographed carrying of weapons in public spaces was entirely legal in the state of California, where they were based.

The Black Panthers were "innovators" in the way they viewed the Second Amendment at the time, says Winkler. Rather than focus on the idea of self-defense in the home, the Black Panthers brazenly took their weapons to the streets, where they felt the public—particularly African-Americans—needed protection from a corrupt government.

"*These ideas eventually infiltrated into the NRA to shape the modern gun debate,*" explains Winkler. As gun control laws swept the nation, the NRA adopted a similar stance to that of the Black Panthers, with support for open-carry laws and concealed weapon laws high on their agenda.

Few aspects of the United States Constitution have been as murky and divisive as the Second Amendment. The amendment states that "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

While some view the amendment to mean that American citizens have inalienable right to guns, focusing on the right to bear arms, others take it to mean that only a well-regulated militia would have that undeniable right, with the emphasis on "well-regulated" and "militia." The Black Panthers would find themselves in the middle ground of both interpretations.

Although it may seem contrary to the ideologies of the NRA in the 21st century, this wasn't the first time that the NRA—**which was originally founded in 1871 with the intention of training Civil War veterans on marksmanship**—had supported gun control legislation. In the **1920s and 1930s**, the NRA supported restrictions on who could carry guns on the streets in order to decrease hostility towards European immigrants—who were known to openly carry weapons at the time—within the country. And after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in **1968**, the NRA backed the Gun Control Act that passed the same year, which put substantial restrictions on the purchase of guns based on mental illness, drug addiction and age, among other factors.

Ironically, it was the gun control laws that were put into effect against African-Americans and the Black Panthers that led "rural white conservatives" across the country to fear any restriction of their own guns, Winkler says. In less than a decade, the NRA would go from backing gun control regulations to inhibit groups they felt threatened by to refusing to support any gun control legislation at all.

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