

University of California, Santa Barbara

Welfare Reform, It's What's for Lunch
How the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program
Changed School Lunch Across America

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Introduction

Food is complicated. Our diets are inextricably linked to our social class, to our upbringing, and have the capacity to inform others of our income level. That being said, there exists an anomaly within the study of food and American history: school lunch. School lunch may seem like a mythical “great equalizer” within American culture because everyone who chooses to get lunch from the cafeteria on a given day will receive identical meals, but school lunch is only responsible for offering a surface-level sense of equality in cafeterias across the country. Though it is usually represented by fish sticks and pizza and may seem like nothing more than a shared childhood memory, school lunch is actually a complicated study in welfare economics, government intervention, and grassroots activism. This widespread misunderstanding of the history and implications of school lunch is rooted in the idea that the act of crossing campus to the cafeteria at lunchtime is one that nearly every child in America has experienced, and it is this general commonality that has led us to fully ignore the weight that such a ritual carries as a nation.

With that in mind, one must understand that until 1946, the federal government did not accept responsibility for feeding young Americans throughout the school day. Even after the National School Lunch Act was implemented, the very first proposition drawn up was done in defense of American farms, not for the purpose of aiding the hunger problems running rampant through the United States at the time. In contrast, the very first public school established to serve America’s youth was opened in 1653, so it took nearly three centuries for the federal government

to acknowledge that nourishing children during the school day was a crucial part of the learning process.¹

Taking that background information into consideration, we shift our attention to the Black Panther Party. Typically, when the Panthers are addressed in historical texts it is for their decision to abandon the wholly nonviolent activist strategies popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, but the group was much more dynamic and far-reaching than certain texts make them seem. Painted as the thuggish, vigilante fighters of the civil rights movement, the Black Panther Party were constantly pitted against the aggressive image that mainstream media wanted white communities to internalize, and as a result, the founders' true motivations and hopes for the Party were drastically overlooked. The main aspects of the Party that are constantly forgotten are the multifaceted and incredibly successful survival programs. These programs touched on nearly all aspects of community life, from education to safety to nourishment, but this thesis particularly focuses on the Party's Free Breakfast for Children Program. The Free Breakfast Program began in 1968 while the federal government was struggling to feed students in low-income neighborhoods. So, while the federal government grappled with how to feed American children at lunchtime with a multi-million dollar budget, the Panthers managed to serve breakfast to hundreds of thousands of participants almost exclusively with donations.

It was through the Free Breakfast Program that the Black Panther Party was able to inadvertently shape the National School Lunch Program as we know it today. The Panthers understood something that the federal government consistently neglected: the strength of community. The Free Breakfast Program was the Party's direct response to the childhood malnutrition that plagued the communities they served. At the same time, even though the

¹ Caryl-Sue National Geographic Society, "First Public School in America," National Geographic Society, October 28, 2013.

federal government was aware of these issues, elected officials continued to ignore the simple task of feeding children nutritious meals at low or no cost in the pursuit of somehow striking the best deal possible with agricultural lobbyists. The Panthers were truly community servants committed to establishing programs that were in the best interest of the people, and the epic growth achieved by the Free Breakfast Program is a testament to the success that lies in the simple fact that people will tell you what they want, it is just up to those in positions of power to listen.

There were a number of bureaucratic hurdles that stifled the development of a country-wide free lunch program, a phenomenon that grew evident when the National School Lunch Act first crossed the threshold of Congress in 1946 as nothing more than a good idea. In reality, it took decades for that piece of legislation to come to fruition as something that actually fed hungry children. In contrast, the Free Breakfast Program was established two years after the Black Panther Party began, and just one year later twenty thousand children came to rely on the Party for a balanced breakfast. The Black Panther Party did what the federal government continuously told Americans was impossible and managed to make it happen in a timeframe that legislators could barely fathom.

In chapter 1, I focus mainly on the history and historiography surrounding the creation of the National School Lunch Program and the establishment of the Black Panther Party. In terms of school lunch, there were decades of grassroots movements and various attempts at formal lunch legislation that preceded the eventual establishment of the NSLP, the likes of which are necessary to understand how school lunch has developed into its present iteration. Similarly, the historiography that surrounds the Black Panther Party is much more dynamic and nuanced than most history textbooks make it seem, thus rendering the establishment of a baseline

understanding of the Party and its founders', Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, motivations necessary to coming to terms with the main focus of this thesis. Furthermore, chapter 1 ends with a deep dive into the relationship between the federal government and the Panthers, and its portrayal in popular media. The connection between the Panthers and the National School Lunch Program is not something that has been analyzed widely throughout the last fifty years, and that is partially due to the ways that the J. Edgar Hoover-led FBI utilized the media to manipulate the beliefs held by white Americans about the motives of the Black Panther Party. That being said, this paper places no fault on individual readers regarding certain preconceived notions that they may have about the Panthers, it is simply important to understand the ways that our biases have been influenced by larger institutions throughout history and come to a place of educated questioning.

Later on, in chapter 2, I expand upon the successful nature of the Party's Free Breakfast Program in contrast with the failure of the National School Lunch Program. The Free Breakfast Program came to be during a time of incredible social unrest across America, with many groups across the country pushing for welfare reform and increasingly socialist policies. It was this communal desire for change that positively affected the Panthers' survival programs, and directly contributed to the speed at which the Free Breakfast Program managed to grow. That growth was obvious to the federal government and, at first, it was terrifying. Law enforcement groups as high up as the FBI were sent to Party branches across the country and told to destroy and threaten almost everything Panther-related in their wake, and the children who relied on the Party for breakfast every morning were not spared from this sight. Eventually, though, the federal government realized that the Panthers' strategies for feeding hungry children were more effective than anything elected officials had come up with, and they slyly began to work with Panther

leaders and adopt those same strategies in lunchrooms across the country, beginning in Staten Island in 1969. The government needed the Panthers, but for the last fifty years, that reliance has been ignored by both historians and mass media outlets.

Finally, the epilogue ventures into the present day and exposes the lasting inequalities that have persisted in American cafeterias. The existence of the Free Breakfast Program and the change that it inspired did not suddenly fix all of the institutional issues that have plagued lunchrooms for decades. Thankfully, contemporary scholars have been working to expose those issues in the hopes that more people will take notice of the ways that school lunch is representative of so many other unequal aspects of American life. That being said, there are still so many transformations that have occurred in the modern era that represent movement toward the kind of change that Panther leaders hoped for.

The Black Panthers pointed out the holes in America's welfare systems, and without their loud calls for change, it is likely that the free and reduced-price lunch program as we know it would not exist. Publicly, the Panthers were unafraid to remind the government of its failures, and while the embarrassment that the federal and state governments suffered as a result immediately manifested itself into violent attacks against the Party, those powerful reminders eventually led to positive change. For years, childhood hunger in America was ignored and legislators did not believe lunch to be an important part of the school day, and that perspective did not shift overnight. To foster change, even a gradual one, a catalyst is necessary – and the Panthers gladly shouldered this task.

Chapter 1: The National School Lunch Program, the Black Panther Party, and the Shifting Perception of Both Throughout Twentieth-Century America

The History of the National School Lunch Program

According to Jennifer Gaddis, author of *The Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools*, the history of school lunch has been ignored by policymakers for a century, which can be partially attributed to the program's deeply feminist origins, though the women who pioneered the earliest twentieth-century school lunch programs would never have declared themselves anything other than concerned mothers. The idea of school lunch as a public welfare program began with Emma Smedley, a woman who firmly believed that lunchtime was not a "private, gendered responsibility," but simply a necessary part of the school day.² Smedley's intentions were noble and in 1909 she began a decade-long successful grassroots campaign for free lunch in the city of Philadelphia, but due to her status as a housewife at the turn of the century, she struggled to convince city officials that what was once considered exclusively domestic work, packing a lunch, now deserved public funding.³ Women across the country attempted to start similar programs in the spirit of Smedley's reform efforts, but most met a similar fate. For example, the Women's School Alliance of Wisconsin began a penny lunch program based on donations and volunteer support in 1904, but when they wanted to expand in 1910, the group was unable to convince the local government to take on ownership of the program and the program had to be disbanded.⁴ Unfortunately, the nature of

² Jennifer E. Gaddis, *Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools* (University of California Press, 2020), page 18.

³ Ibid, page 30.

⁴ Ibid, page 31.

socialism-averse American bureaucracy made sure that any community-focused free lunch programs established around the turn of the twentieth century were nearly all doomed to fail.

Following the aforementioned disbanding of numerous local lunch programs, the devastating inequalities that plagued lunchtime across the country were now exposed by the same women who, years before, had attempted to craft creative solutions and grew frustrated by the lack of government support. First of all, nearly every school lunch program that existed between 1910 and 1920 required a concessionaire, the vintage equivalent to individuals who are now known as cafeteria workers. Unlike modern cafeteria workers, those concessionaires had no guaranteed minimum wage despite the fact that their services were required to cook and serve enough food for entire elementary schools.⁵ In addition, the conditions in which they worked were left wildly unregulated by both federal and state governments. For example, it was not until groups of concerned parents in many rural areas took it upon themselves to organize cooking equipment drives that cafeterias in historically provincial regions finally began to receive the tools they truly needed to adequately cook and serve hundreds of meals every day.⁶

It was during the year 1921 that the kind of district-sponsored school lunch programs that most Americans are familiar with today began to take shape. That year, the Los Angeles Board of Education sponsored what was arguably the most expansive school lunch program in the country, one that spanned nine high schools, eight middle schools, and thirty-one elementary schools. Members of the LA Board of Education were immediately shocked at the high volume of participation in the program, and it was later discovered that the students within the LAUSD had been suffering for years from overwhelmingly defective nutrition. This program must also be lauded for its approach to serving low-income students: since its inception, “lunches were sold at

⁵ Gordon W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), page 9.

⁶ Ibid, page 11.

cost, but were given free to those unable to pay. The deficit in the elementary program was taken care of by the PTA.” This program was inclusive, successful, and was ahead of its time by decades. To compare, it was not until 1937 that the first provisions requiring free or reduced-price lunches for students living below state-defined poverty levels were authorized by a handful of state governments, and even then, said provisions were passed in just Indiana, Missouri, Vermont, and Wisconsin.⁷

With that in mind, the 1930s marked a time of distinct transition in regards to the way that the federal government viewed school lunch. When attempting to help the nation recover from the incredible economic setback that was the Great Depression, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) realized that both families in need and federally-sponsored school lunch programs could function as outlets for various commodities purchased by the government. As a result, the Federal Surplus Committee took over the purchase and redistribution of these goods, and by 1935 school lunchrooms began to act as American farmers’ saving grace. This federal maneuver was peddled to hungry families as the answer to all of their prayers: their undernourished children could be the lucky recipients of agriculture that was in dire need of redistribution. Children were starving across the nation and through this dissemination of agricultural products they would finally be able to go to school well-fed. It must be noted that this system, while it did eventually grow to serve over five million children less than a decade after it began, was deeply flawed. Until the year 1946, schools were forced to operate on year-to-year budgets appropriated by their state’s congress, and were never able to establish a reliable system for school lunch given the fact that administrators never knew how much money they would have to work with. The level of uncertainty that lunchrooms across

⁷ Ibid, page 12.

America were forced to face led to students and teachers alike wondering if they would be able to rely on the cafeteria at the end of every school year.⁸

That being said, it was not just the USDA that pushed for school lunch reform; the Department of Defense played a pivotal role in encouraging the federal government to place a greater emphasis on satisfactory nutrition in the lives of America's youth. In the spring of 1945 at the start of the Cold War, General Lewis B. Hershey approached the House Agriculture Committee with what he deemed a "warning."⁹ Hershey was in charge of the national draft and he warned Congress that within that year, forty percent of the draftees who had been rejected had been released purely due to their poor diets.¹⁰ The General stood before the House and stated that "whether we are going to have war or not, I do think that we have got to have health if we are going to survive."¹¹ Hershey understood that in order to encourage lawmakers to fix the dietary issues plaguing America's youth, the problem needed to be framed as a threat to national security, particularly given the stress, uncertainty, and aggression that America was facing at that time.

So, it was the aforementioned sense of uncertainty in combination with the involvement of the Department of Defense that led to the passage of the National School Lunch Act. The NSLA was proposed at the tail end of the New Deal by a handful of staunch southern Democrats, the strongest proponent of the program being Senator Richard Russell of Georgia.¹² Russell believed that the NSLA would support American agriculture while also assisting the poverty-stricken children of his region. While those motives sound outwardly noble, Russell's

⁸ Ibid, page 13.

⁹ Nicholas Confessore, "How School Lunch Became the Latest Political Battleground," The New York Times (The New York Times, October 7, 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton University Press, 2011), page 3.

version of the act was structured in a way that allowed for its unequal nature to be largely hidden from the public. Though the act directly states that “meals shall be served without cost or at a reduced cost to children who are determined by school lunch authorities to be unable to pay the full cost of the lunch,” USDA officials believed that it should be up to the states themselves to distribute funding and various school lunch-related commodities as they saw fit, thus allowing for widespread funding discrepancies.¹³ Furthermore, even though the Act declared that it would “safeguard the health and wellbeing of the nation’s children and... encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by ... the establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of nonprofit school-lunch programs,” individual states were also given the ability to determine their own free lunch eligibility requirements.¹⁴ What many Americans failed to realize at the time was that Congress turned to the National School Lunch Act during a period of drastic racial segregation and unrest because, as noted by historian Susan Levine, “in many ways, hunger was an easier issue to address than the seemingly intractable inequities of race in American life. Tackling food policy called less for a radical restructuring of American society than for a more equitable distribution of existing resources and opportunities.”¹⁵ So, even though the National School Act claimed to be anti-segregationist, millions of low-income families and children growing up in predominantly minority communities were still forced to go to school hungry.

With this information in mind, one must reflect upon the portion of the National School Lunch Act that directly states that Congress planned to assist “the States, through grants-in-aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of foods and other facilities of the

¹³ Ibid, page 104.

¹⁴ “PL 79-396 - Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act,” PL 79-396 - Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act | Food and Nutrition Service, June 4, 1946.

¹⁵ Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton University Press, 2011), page 127.

establishment, maintenance, operation, and expansion of nonprofit school-lunch programs.”¹⁶

This piece of legislation was developed out of a thinly-veiled desire to resuscitate the American agricultural industry, therefore it ultimately failed to make accommodations for the brutal realities faced by American public schools in the 1940s, namely insufficient cafeteria construction, unfair distribution of funds, and overt abandonment by state school board officials. There was no clear pathway established for Congress to assess the state of lunchrooms across America, thus rendering the majority of the Act’s passage nothing more than lip service. Additionally, though the NSLA claimed to disavow segregation and discrimination, by allowing each state to distribute funds according to their own discretion with little to no oversight, the schools in low-income neighborhoods that would have benefitted from free lunch the most were forced to wonder when their district would finally make good on the promises made by Congress.

As noted by the *New York Times*, the federal government still framed the development of the National School Lunch Program as a major success for almost all areas of the country in spite of its devastating flaws. In the decades that followed the initial passage of the act, “the Department of Agriculture would send billions of dollars to states and school districts to help cover the costs of school meals and spend billions more to purchase surplus farm products for the schools.”¹⁷ It was this relationship rooted in mutually beneficial financial gain that led to cafeterias being constructed like corporations; author Nicholas Confessore noted that “the average school-nutrition director is not unlike the chief executive of a medium-size catering business, but with a school for a landlord and a menu regulated by the government. With lower

¹⁶ “PL 79-396 - Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act,” PL 79-396 - Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act | Food and Nutrition Service, June 4, 1946.

¹⁷ Nicholas Confessore, “How School Lunch Became the Latest Political Battleground,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, October 7, 2014).

subsidies, the lunch ladies... turned to the increasingly efficient processed-food industry to find [cheaper nutritional substitutes].”¹⁸ Eventually, leaders in the corporate food industry became deeply invested in lunchrooms across America, and some even ended up assuming positions within the School Nutrition Association in order to achieve enough influence to ensure their product would be on the plates of America’s youth.¹⁹

The years following the passage of the act only exacerbated the inherent inequalities in America’s school system and proved that the program was woefully underfunded and underprepared for one of the most demographically influential phenomena in American history: white flight. Increased suburbanization across the United States in the mid-1950s led to overcrowding in public schools, a major problem that was made even worse by the fact that the federal government refused to increase school lunch budgets.²⁰ As a result of this national disconnect between state needs and federal desires, only a third of America’s public school population was being fed at lunchtime by the year 1960.²¹ When it became obvious that the act had distinctly fallen short on its promises, Congress claimed that the legislation was designed to allocate a larger portion of funds to schools in higher-need regions and immediately placed blame on the individual states for improper distribution. To this, the majority of state representatives claimed that taking the time to ensure appropriate need-based distribution was a burden on their school districts. As a result, in 1962, Congress proposed the idea of special food assistance for particularly needy schools, a program that did not continue beyond the 1961-1962 school year.²²

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jennifer E. Gaddis, *Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools* (University of California Press, 2020), page 54.

²¹ Ibid, page 55.

²² Gordon W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), page 19.

In summary, it took decades for the federal government to understand that children and school districts across the country needed greater assistance in regards to lunchtime. Yet, even still, federal officials were unwilling to invest the time and money necessary to establish a lunch program that would last and continue to feed the millions of children who relied on the school cafeteria for a balanced meal for generations. The National School Lunch Program was flawed, and Americans have continued to endure the consequences of those faults for decades.

The History of the Black Panther Party

The legacy of the Black Panther Party has been forced to shoulder the burden of an unfairly negative and aggressive reputation, the likes of which is astoundingly inaccurate and the result of long-lasting racist media coverage. The following section works to dismantle that unjust image.

Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the original Oakland branch of the Black Panther Party began after the image of the black panther had become emblematic of the global Black Power movement, and it quickly evolved into a diverse network of local branches that spanned the entire United States. Both Newton and Seale were students at Oakland's Merritt College and members of the Afro-American Association at UC Berkeley prior to founding the revolutionary group, and it was this community involvement coupled with the rise in Black Power sentiment across America that inspired the Party's inception.²³ In the 1960s, Oakland's demographic was in the midst of a fascinating transformation; "in 1940, Oakland's Black population was about 3%... by 1960, it had risen to about 23%. The number would keep going up until the 1980 census when Oakland would become majority Black."²⁴ Surrounded by other

²³ Rund Abdelfatah et al., "The Real Black Panthers," NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 7.

²⁴ Ibid, page 10

Black folks who desperately wanted Oakland to undergo an ideological transition that positively correlated with this demographic transformation, Newton and Seale officially established the Oakland branch of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in October 1966. Both men had a clear goal: “they wanted to mobilize the ghetto the way that the Civil Rights Movement had mobilized Blacks in the South. They dreamt of creating an unstoppable force that would transform the urban landscape forever.”²⁵ In the spirit of the beliefs popularized by Malcolm X, Party members were armed and routinely patrolled their neighborhoods on the lookout for police brutality and aggression. It was this use of weapons that turned the Party into a nationally polarizing group even though “[the children of Oakland’s nonwhite population] grew up feeling surveillance of the police, housing discrimination, violence in schools. And the Panther party was a direct reflection of that experience.”²⁶

That being said, while the Panthers did not eliminate violence as an option in the pursuit of a changed system, they were not active dissenters in regards to the kinds of nonviolent protests popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King. In fact, the founders of the Party looked to achieve a peaceful transition first, and actively worked to establish an allied relationship with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as noted in the following telegram from Huey Newton to SCLC leaders:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
The four years that have passed since the assassination of our beloved Dr. Martin Luther King, a great leader of our people, teacher and mentor, have served not to make us forget but in fond memory help us resolve to push forward his struggle for the freedom of all humankind.

²⁵ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 37.

²⁶ Rund Abdelfatah et al., “The Real Black Panthers,” NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 10.

The programs our organization, the Black Panther Party, sponsors, programs to provide Black and poor people with basic survival needs are in keeping with his very ideas, the feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned.

We cannot calculate Dr. King's contribution with any mere measure, for his work, his ideals, remain one with and part of the struggle of all poor and oppressed people and therefore with our victory over that oppression. All power to the people.²⁷

Though the mission of the Black Panther Party varies slightly in phrasing from one member to another, I believe former member Ericka Huggins' words offer the clearest, and most succinct description: "[the Black Panthers] were the vanguard of the revolution. Our job was to encourage the revolution that would bring true freedom to Black people. The goal of the revolution was to overthrow the racist US government and institute socialism in the United States of America."²⁸ The Black Panther Party had a national, and arguably global, reach, strength in incredible numbers, and the attention of the federal government, all of those components being major contributors to their impressively unique political reimagination and revolution. A key part of this revolution was the creation of community outreach groups.

It has been noted by Party leaders that the Black Panthers' goal was to "forge a coalition of all 'oppressed' people as the basis for an interracial revolutionary movement towards a socialistic form of government in the US."²⁹ In order to do this, Newton and Seale created a newspaper, schools, and a daycare center in order to ensure that the next generation of Black children in their community would continue the revolution. Both men wholeheartedly believed in the idea that "he who controls language controls power," so they made a conscious effort to educate younger community members about their power as young Americans of color at all opportunities possible.³⁰ Members of the party were instructed from the beginning that the

²⁷ Huey Newton, n.d.

²⁸ Elaine Brown, *Taste of Power* (S.I.: Penguin Books, 1992), page 136.

²⁹ David McClintick, "The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the 'Pigs,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1969.

³⁰ Rund Abdelfatah et al., "The Real Black Panthers," NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 1.

survival of their community hinged on the success of this revolution, and in order to further support this general survival, they created a collection of aptly named survival programs, of which the Free Breakfast for Children Program was arguably most successful.

In September, 1968, Bobby Seale made the decision to shift the party's focus to increased community programming, and weeks later the original Oakland branch of the Party announced the Free Breakfast for Children Program, the first of many food-based survival programs. Just four months after the initial announcement, in January of 1969, the very first iteration of the program was launched at Father Earl A. Neal's St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in West Oakland and coordinated by parishioner Ruth Beckford-Smith.³¹ On the program's inaugural day, 11 children were served, but by the end of that same week the number rose to 135. The Free Breakfast Program captivated Oakland and the surrounding cities; the *San Francisco Chronicle* covered the program and reported "the 'unspoken lesson' children would learn: 'power in a community begins with people who care.'"³² It was the idea of using food as a tool to build community that the Panthers so expertly fixated upon, and as a result, the Party quickly noticed incredible growth in respect to the number of children being served. According to *Black Against Empire* "the party claimed to have fed twenty thousand children in the 1968-69 school year and said it hoped to feed one hundred thousand in 1969-70."³³ Keep in mind that the Panthers managed to satisfy these masses without any of the government assistance and funding that the National School Lunch Act was supposedly providing America's public schools at the same time.

³¹ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 183.

³² Ibid, page 182.

³³ Ibid, page 184.

When analyzing the history of the Free Breakfast Program, one must acknowledge Elaine Brown's autobiography *A Taste of Power* as one of the most honest, dynamic, and uncensored retellings of what it meant to be a Panther; her experience as a high-powered woman in the party making her perspective profoundly unique. Though she had a hand in a number of different aspects of the Party's community outreach programs, she was one of the minds responsible for the expansion of the Free Breakfast Program. A student at UCLA in 1968, Brown was motivated by the daily waste created at the university's dining halls, and figured there had to be a way to deliver those food scraps to the communities that the Panthers served. There was already a relatively large Panther presence on UCLA's campus, so with help from her comrades, Brown was able to extract "a commitment from the director of Weyburn Hall to give [the Party] the dormitory's leftover food, along with all the dented canned goods [they] could handle," this commitment acting as the beginnings of the Party's first free-food program in Los Angeles.³⁴

Though Brown was pleased with this initial win, she knew that the Panthers needed to remain persistent in the pursuit of actually properly distributing these donated goods. By 1969, the Panthers finally found a home for the Los Angeles Free Breakfast for Children Program at a Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Los Angeles, the only rent-free facility they could find. Interestingly, the pastor who welcomed them had one requirement: no meat could be served. At that stage, the program was heavily funded through donations from high-powered Hollywood executives plagued with white guilt, so former member Joan Kelly used that money to "find something called 'vegeburgers.'"³⁵ The very first LA-based iteration of the program was exclusively dependent upon a relatively random assortment of vegetarian non-perishables.

³⁴ Elaine Brown, *Taste of Power* (S.l.: Penguin Books, 1992), page 159.

³⁵ Ibid, page 181.

The Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program was one of their most successful community outreach programs, and it was born out of the general understanding that "attacking the serious problem of childhood hunger was a way to win people's hearts and minds," as noted by *Washington Post* journalist Ross K. Baker.³⁶ As directly noted by the Panthers themselves, the Free Breakfast Program was "designed to 'feed children a free, hot breakfast before school in the mornings' because 'children cannot function in a classroom situation if they are hungry.'"³⁷ However, the FBI viewed Free Breakfast as a way of "indoctrinating" children into the Party and chose to unleash concerted attacks against the Program because it was noted in an internal memo from J. Edgar Hoover that one specific goal of his was "to prevent the long-range growth of black nationalist organizations, specifically among youth."³⁸ However, once community members saw the Panthers feeding their children and then watched the federal government try to continue to starve them, there rose a greater sense of distrust for federal welfare programs and greater dependability upon the Panthers.



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³⁶ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 186.

³⁷ Ross K Baker, "The Transformation Of the Panthers," *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1972, pp. B1-B2, page B1.

³⁸ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 202.

³⁹ "Panthers serving children free breakfast, Sacred Heart Church, San Francisco," photo by Ducho Dennis.

Certainly, the creation of a program that feeds hungry children is not an act of domestic terrorism, is not born out of anger, and is most definitely not a signifier of the beginnings of an aggressive rebellion. In sixty years since the inception of the Free Breakfast for Children Program, former Panthers have been incredibly vocal about the ways that that survival program in particular is a prime example of all that the federal government got wrong about the Panthers as a group. Katherine Campbell joined the Party when she was 16 against her family's wishes but quickly ignored their warnings because "the more I heard about us being a militant organization and a communist organization, the more I thought they were wrong. I thought, I'm in this, but I'm not militant. My grandmother taught me to love people. People are hungry, feed them. People need clothes, if you've got any clothes to spare, give it to them."⁴⁰

Campbell was not the only Panther who found the Free Breakfast Program to be enlightening; a handful of members were drawn in by the aggressive reputation and came from an initial place of anger, but upon seeing all of the good that the Party did through the various survival programs, their perspective on how to contribute to the revolution changed. Former Party member Richard Brown said it best when he admitted that "I joined because of the macho bullshit, but I became a servant of the people. One of the greatest things I did was participate in the Breakfast for Schoolchildren Program to help feed children every morning and take care of the elderly. Before that I was just a regular brother on the block, surviving day to day... told that [I] would never amount to anything."⁴¹ The issue that the Free Breakfast Program attempted to solve was simple and reduced larger issues of inequality down to what was truly important: as noted by Flores Forbes, "kids who go to school and are hungry don't learn as well as kids who

⁴⁰ Bryan Shih and Yohuru R. Williams, *The Black Panthers: Portraits from an Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), page 26.

⁴¹ Ibid, page 152.

go with a full stomach.”⁴² The Panthers understood that it was the children in their communities who would be the ones to continue the revolution after the original members’ eventual demise, so it was imperative that they remain well-nourished and taken care of.

Mutual Distaste: The Relationship Between the Black Panthers and the Federal Government

In spite of the widespread success of the aforementioned Free Breakfast Program, the federal government refused to recognize the Black Panther Party as anything other than a militant, rebel organization. It was the belief of many a Panther that the deep-seated hatred for their organization came from a place of racist preconceptions and the idea that “they hated the fact that little brothers and sisters, little thugs standing on the corner, organized and beat their ass to a certain extent. That’s something that they have to live down, and they hate [the Panthers] for it.”⁴³ The federal government was constantly attempting to shut the Party down using any means necessary, from armed raids to FBI-driven sting operations. Therefore, members of the Party were taught to internalize the idea that while the actual organization may not last, the revolutionary mission needed to persist. Flores Forbes remembers being told by Huey Newton at the beginning of his time in the Party that “because of where we are and what we’re doing... the organization is probably going to be destroyed. But what’s important is what you do as an individual to keep the struggle alive.”⁴⁴

With that in mind, the federal government failed to acknowledge any good being done by the Black Panther Party, while their own welfare programs, specifically the National School Lunch Program, were achieving little success across the country. Children were simply not being appropriately fed, and by 1960, it was clear to parents across America that the NSLP was an

⁴² Flores Forbes on the history of the Free Breakfast Program, November 2, 2021.

⁴³ Bryan Shih and Yohuru R. Williams, *The Black Panthers: Portraits from an Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), page 155.

⁴⁴ Flores Forbes on the history of the Free Breakfast Program, November 2, 2021.

objective failure. By 1967 a handful of frustrated mothers, in collaboration with Jean Fairfax of the NAACP, formed the Committee on School Lunch Participation and designed a nationwide lunch program survey.⁴⁵ The survey received thousands of responses, and the one thing that rang true among them all was the fact that the entire structure of the NSLP was biased against poor people and people of color.⁴⁶ Soon after, the federal government attempted to begin a project titled the Pilot Breakfast Program for the 1966-1967 school year in order to respond to the widespread backlash. The federal government informed all public districts that schools would be required to serve breakfast free of charge to children who came from families unable to pay and there could be no discrimination in the serving process.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, soon after this program was rolled out it was quietly cut from school cafeterias with no public reasoning provided, and the Pilot Breakfast Program's new policies failed by 1968.

This failure could have been a moment of epic embarrassment for the federal government, and an opportunity for the media to do a deep dive into all that made the Panthers' Free Breakfast Program a contrasting success, but no such journalism was published. Even in the face of objective failures committed by the federal government, in Forbes' words, "the media were ideological lackeys. They printed what the power structure wanted. They were never going to publish anything nice about you because they wanted you to perish."⁴⁸ Panthers everywhere understood that they were never going to be awarded the credit they deserved for creating and sustaining successful welfare programs in areas that the federal government had neglected to reach, and that was not why they joined the Party. As noted by Flores Forbes, most Party members simply wanted to let community members know that "we're trying to educate you and

⁴⁵ Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton University Press, 2011), page 59.

⁴⁶ Ibid, page 60.

⁴⁷ Gordon W. Gunderson, *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), page 22.

⁴⁸ Flores Forbes on the history of the Free Breakfast Program, November 2, 2021.

your families that you live in an unjust society. People shouldn't have to do this.”⁴⁹ “This” being create food systems from the ground up with no funding in order to ensure that American citizens are well fed.

On August 23, 1969, *Chicago Daily Defender* staff writer Faith C. Christmas published a two-page article entitled “Panther Chief Fred Hampton Tells Party’s Goals.” This piece is one of the few Panther-related articles published in the 1960s by a mainstream, national newspaper that allowed a member of the Party to speak for themselves, and that is because it was a publication coming out of a predominantly Black community. Christmas aimed to provide the *Defender*’s readers with an easy-to-understand overview of the Black Panther Party’s survival programs, specifically the Free Breakfast Program and the health center that was under construction at the time. In order to do so, Christmas interviewed Fred Hampton, Deputy Chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party and notable orator. Hampton seized the opportunity presented to him by Christmas; during their time together he made sure to broadcast the core beliefs of the Party and express everything that he believed the federal government to have gotten wrong about his community. Hampton wanted to steer public opinion away from seeing the Panthers as a rebel group and instead encouraged *Daily Defender* readers to understand that they’re ““the vanguard of the people... the people are our first and most important concern.””⁵⁰ The main goal of the Party’s Survival Programs was to provide aid to the parts of America that had traditionally been overlooked by federal welfare programs.⁵¹ However, mainstream media was typically unable to overlook their guerilla tactics and thus, the Panthers’ positive influence was rarely awarded credit. Additionally, Christmas was unafraid to go into detail about the Panthers’ critiques of the

⁴⁹ Flores Forbes on the history of the Free Breakfast Program, November 2, 2021.

⁵⁰ Faith C Christmas, “Panther Chief Fred Hampton Tells Party's Goals,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 23, 1969.

⁵¹ The Panthers predominantly served inner-city communities, and large swaths of rural America were forgotten by federal welfare programs as well

federal government, one example being Hampton's notion that "while the buffoons were busy going to the moon, [the Panthers] were down here on earth giving free food and medical services to oppressed people."⁵² Christmas' article hinted at the idea that the Panthers were simply offering support to communities that the government had ignored for generations, and the intimidation claims issued against them, like those noted previously from J. Edgar Hoover, were wholly unimportant when compared to the fact that they were feeding hungry children.

Furthermore, in a 1969 *Wall Street Journal Piece* titled "The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the 'Pigs'" author David McClintick notes that "to most Americans, whatever their race, the Black Panthers are a frightening phenomenon- a symbol of social disruption and of the potential for racial violence... and... the destruction of American capitalism."⁵³ McClintick's statement is par for the course in terms of the typical perception of the Panthers in white America, but what makes this article more intriguing is the author's choice of interview subjects. All of the families that the author interviewed had taken advantage of the Party's survival programs at one point and had nothing but pleasant things to say about the Black Panthers' impact on their community. McClintick then went on to estimate that the "Panthers serve breakfast to more than 15,000 children a day in most of the cities where the party has branches," a statistic that is outwardly positive, noting that 15,000 more children are being fed thanks to the Panthers rather than missing a meal entirely.⁵⁴ In addition, the author attempted to weaponize the most basic aims of the party in a statement sarcastically claiming that "the party seeks to forge a coalition of all 'oppressed' people as the

⁵² Faith C Christmas, "Panther Chief Fred Hampton Tells Party's Goals," *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 23, 1969.

⁵³ David McClintick, "The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the 'Pigs,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1969, page 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 12.

basis for an interracial revolutionary movement towards a socialistic form of government in the US,” when in reality, that was truly one of the things that the Party’s founders wished for, and such a claim was difficult to be held against them when it was so plainly true and resolute.⁵⁵

It was this kind of language that weaponized the socialist tactics used by the Panthers against the capitalist ideals that white America held so dear at the time that was meant to pit readers against the group, but Party founders Newton and Seale refused to let these ideological labels be used against them. Instead, the men chose to clarify their exact goals for the Panthers. Newton and Seale “were self-identified Marxists. They believed in class struggle as well as the right of Black people to organize and form their own institutions. And most importantly, they believed in organizing not only within the Black community but using coalition politics based on anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism.”⁵⁶ Fred Hampton stated in an interview that rather than fighting fire with fire, the Panthers choose to “fight fire with water.... So, we're going to fight racism not with racism, but we're going to fight with solidarity. We said we're not going to fight capitalism with Black capitalism, but we're going to fight it with socialism.”⁵⁷ To the Panthers, socialism was not a dirty word, and as a result, Party leaders never attempted to convince onlookers that their acts of service were born out of anything more than a deep desire to build equitable and powerful Black communities since white people had already been given that same opportunity for centuries. That being said, the Panthers understood that they had to be accepting of capitalism as long as their organization was operating in the United States, and as a result “Newton argued in this reassessment [of the Party’s relationship with capitalism] that small Black capitalists are the victims of the large corporate capitalist structures dominated by whites.

⁵⁵ David McClintick, “The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the ‘Pigs,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1969, page 1.

⁵⁶ Rund Abdelfatah et al., “The Real Black Panthers,” NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid, page 3.

He drew an analogy between the role of the Black capitalist in the United States and that of the ‘national bourgeoisie’ in the wars of national liberation in Vietnam and China.”⁵⁸ In addition, Bobby Seale himself clarified that the Panthers did not hate white communities, but instead “hate the oppression that we live in. We hate cops beating Black people over their heads and murdering them. That’s what we hate.”⁵⁹ Young Panthers and Panther supporters viewed even the negative media coverage of the Party and its tactics as a “victory for all those fighting against U.S. racist capitalism, it will enable the people to step up the struggle against war, racism, oppression, and the growing danger of fascism.”⁶⁰ While the media attempted to paint the Panthers as irrational aggressors, it was these logical, measured responses to the assumptions that were hurled at the Party that slowly unraveled the violent image that the government-controlled media wanted people to have of the Black Panther Party.

In that same vein, historian Mary E. Potorti noted in her Ph.D. dissertation titled “Food for Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle and the Politics of Food” that Black Panther Party ally Angela Davis stated “revolution may be mandated and justified by the starving masses, but it certainly could not be waged by them.”⁶¹ Potorti then went on to summarize the Party’s efforts simply:

The Party’s food and other survival programs thus linked capitalism and capitalist enterprises with racist economic oppression in concrete ways. Food producers and distributors—white or black—were, the Panthers declared, key agents and beneficiaries of the people’s suffering. The Marxist politics of Newton and his followers lay at the root of this worldview, which declared that freedom and capitalism could not coexist, for as Seale and others repeatedly asserted, a people could not be free unless they had access to basic provisions for survival at no cost.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ross K Baker, “The Transformation Of the Panthers,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1972, pp. B1-B2, B2.

⁵⁹ Rund Abdelfatah et al., “The Real Black Panthers,” NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 18.

⁶⁰ Jarvis Tyner, n.d.

⁶¹ Mary Potorti, “Food for Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle and the Politics of Food” (dissertation, Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2015), page 204.

⁶² Mary Potorti, “Food for Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle and the Politics of Food” (dissertation, Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2015), page 206.

Just as the Free Breakfast Program was not solely focused on eggs and pancakes, the Panthers as an organization were not only concerned with racist neighbors on certain blocks. The Party and all that was associated with it were the product of a larger system of institutionalized oppression against people of color, and the reactions that Party members were forced to endure throughout the organization's tenure were the result of centuries of white fragility. By feeding all of the hungry children who relied on the Free Breakfast Program every day, the Party was able to formally establish a general sense of power and community. It was this feeling of power drawn from a sense of community rooted in shared experiences that terrified the federal government; there is a sense of strength that can be extracted from the experience of providing one's partner or family or neighborhood with what they need in spite of institutionalized oppression, and by giving strength to groups that had been forcibly weakened throughout history, the entire country's power structure could be thrown off.

Chapter #2: An Era of Transformation

Welfare Reform Now!

The latter half of the 1960s marked a time of epic transformation across America and saw radical groups with vastly different origin stories coming together to fight for change of all kinds, from anti-war protests to welfare reform. Food historian and journalist Jonathan Kauffman describes the years between 1968 and 1975 as a distinctly “revolutionary period,” and believes that the changes made during this era have had some of the most lasting impacts on our nation today.⁶³ It was during that period that unprecedented and important alliances were formed; by 1969, the Black Panther Party had formed unions with other local community-based organizations fighting for similar change, thus making welfare reform, equality, and socialist movements more intersectional than ever before.

During that period, The Panthers became allied with the Red Guard Party (a Chinese-American youth radical group), The Brown Berets (a Chicano leftist communist group), the Young Patriots (a white working-class group), and feminists, or “gay radicals” as some were called at the time.⁶⁴ Fred Hampton deemed the earliest iteration of this alliance “The Rainbow Coalition”.⁶⁵ To many young Black radicals at the time, this sense of intersectionality was a crucial factor in their decision to join the party. Former Panther leader Ericka Huggins noted that while the “Black Panther Party started with two young African American men” when Seale and Newton said that it was “for all poor and oppressed people,” they “meant Indigenous people,

⁶³ Jonathan Kauffman, *Hippie Food: How Back-to-the-Landers, Longhairs, and Revolutionaries Changed the Way We Eat* (New York, NY: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2019), page 11.

⁶⁴ Rund Abdelfatah et al., “The Real Black Panthers,” NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 18.

⁶⁵ Jesse Jackson brought this idea to the national stage in the 1980s.

Latinx people, Asian people, and also poor White people. [Huggins] wanted to be a part of such a huge movement, such a huge collaboration among human beings.”⁶⁶

Both scholars and activists acknowledge that it was partially the establishment of these intersectional alliances that drove the FBI to perceive the actions of the Panthers as legitimate terrorist threats. The FBI believed that all of the aforementioned groups, working as one, would mean the establishment of a common vision, “a vision that could serve as a point of unification, trying to knit together these disadvantaged groups inside the United States to oppose capitalism and expose U.S. expansionism... a vision that [could be used] as an analogy for understanding the United States' colonizing presence around the world.”⁶⁷ It was this fear of community, of creating a unifying identity stronger than just national ties, that struck fear into the hearts of the federal government. Historian Donna Murch continues to emphasize this point by noting in an interview with NPR that “one of the things [the FBI] were most afraid of is that they were going to create a kind of self-perpetuating institutions that could have a much larger base in community.”⁶⁸

In regards to school lunch specifically, it was during this revolutionary period that concerned parents across the country began to push for a complete overhaul of the version of the NSLP that had, at that point, remained intact, unchanged, and inadequate for over twenty years in America's public schools. That being said, parents did not realize that the issues they had with their childrens' lunches were a national issue until a small coalition of mothers took it upon themselves to seek out the truth about how well America's youth were being fed at lunchtime. In 1967, Philadelphia's Committee on School Lunch Participation partnered with Jean Fairfax of

⁶⁶ A Former Black Panther Party Leader Reflects on Her Revolutionary Work , *Zora* (Medium , July 15, 2020).

⁶⁷ Rund Abdelfatah et al., “The Real Black Panthers,” NPR: Throughline (NPR, April 15, 2021), page 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid, page 22.

the NAACP and published a nationwide lunch program survey.⁶⁹ The findings of this survey were abhorrent; across the country, hungry children were being fed incredibly unhealthy meals or being denied lunch entirely because of their parents' inability to pay. Once these discoveries became public information, American parents everywhere were up in arms. For example, just a few months after the survey came out in New York, a group of Puerto Rican mothers and their allies, a group known as the United Bronx Parents, went so far as to dump "full plastic garbage bags of food collected from school trash bins after lunch at a federal government building in downtown Manhattan."⁷⁰ Such a display was meant to shock their district's legislators, the amount of food that was wasted in their schools every day was a travesty and could have fed so many hungry students coming from low-income families.

Furthermore, it was not just concerned parents who were pushing for changes within the NSLP: "in the fall of 1967 Congress directed the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) to survey and identify the prevalence, magnitude, and distribution of malnutrition and related problems within the United States: an effort that became the Ten State Nutrition Survey of 1968–1970."⁷¹ Eerily similar in structure to the previously mentioned Committee on School Lunch survey, the findings of the Ten State Nutrition Survey were published in a report entitled *Hunger USA: A Critical Review* which became highly criticized given its obviously biased reporting. Additionally, the bipartisan Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs was put together at the start of 1968, and under the leadership of South Dakota democrat Senator George McGovern the committee quickly began to champion hunger-related issues. Soon after,

⁶⁹ Jennifer E. Gaddis, *Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools* (University of California Press, 2020), page 59.

⁷⁰ Ibid, page 60.

⁷¹ Eileen Kennedy and Johanna Dwyer, "The 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health: 50 Years Later," *Current developments in nutrition* (Oxford University Press, May 15, 2020).

the presence of hunger in one of “the richest countries in the world” captured the nation’s attention.⁷²

Members of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs were quick to take note of congressmen whose states had high levels of indicated hunger in spite of the federal government’s unwillingness to accept responsibility for any school lunch-related shortcomings. At this point, even elected officials were actively pointing out the holes in the United States’ plan to feed hungry children. On November 26, 1970, *The New York Times* published a scathing exposé of the current state of the NSLP in the piece titled “McGovern Scores Lunch Program: He Says School Plan Lags – Officials Dispute Him.” McGovern revealed to the *Times* that “the Nixon administration’s pledge to provide subsidized lunches to all needy school children by Thanksgiving ‘has turned out to be about 3 percent food and 97 percent empty promise.’”⁷³ Given his status as head of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, Senator McGovern had access to the statistics that the federal government would typically never dare to publish. According to him, “only 74,000 more children were being fed than when the [Nixon] administration made its pledge” less than a year prior in December 1969.⁷⁴

When the *Times* asked the Nixon administration for a response, the President’s representatives directly contradicted Senator McGovern’s statements, claiming that the senator was using outdated numbers. According to the Nixon administration, McGovern had underestimated the number of hungry children being fed by millions, and once the Department of Agriculture issued the final increases in funding for the end of the year the total number of children being served by the NSLP would approach 6.6 million.⁷⁵ In spite of these contrasting

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Jack Rosenthal, “McGovern Scores Lunch Program: He Says School Plan Lags-Officials Dispute Him,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 26, 1970).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

numbers in regards to the number of children being fed at the time of the article's publication, McGovern estimated that there were still approximately ten thousand low-income schools with no kitchens to make lunch in. Apparently, it would cost the federal government around 75 million dollars to install all of the equipment needed to solve this devastating problem, but the funding increase mentioned by the Nixon administration representative prior was actually only 15 million.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the food stamp expansion program that the Senator was pushing for at the time of this article's publication would cost the federal government an approximate 1.65 billion dollars while offering an unprecedented number of Americans access to hunger assistance programs, and yet the Nixon administration would only go so far as to request 400 million dollars for the same thing. It is clear that Senator McGovern was speaking for low-income families across the nation when curtly criticizing the President's anti-hunger efforts by shining a light on the "disturbing gap between promise and performance."⁷⁷

As noted in the above article, underfunded anti-hunger campaigns and school lunch programs affected families on an incredibly personal and local level, but the solutions required drastic changes to be made federally. Local governments in low-income areas did not want to dedicate their already meager budgets to changing school lunch protocol when other issues were higher on their priority lists. They were hesitant to do so unless the federal government offered them a budgetary increase with distinct instructions. What federal officials like those in the Nixon administration needed to realize was that feeding hungry children should have been a priority; the fact that it took grassroots movements like those started by the Committee on School Lunch Participation in addition to the scathing critiques offered by lawmakers like Senator

⁷⁶ Jack Rosenthal, "McGovern Scores Lunch Program: He Says School Plan Lags-Officials Dispute Him," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 26, 1970).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

McGovern for changes to even begin to occur is a testament to how little the problem of hunger in America has historically weighed in the minds of lawmakers.

Free Breakfast Success

While parents across the country were up in arms about the state of the NSLP, the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program was achieving incredible things. The Party expanded the Free Breakfast Program far beyond the small Episcopal church where it started and had managed to adapt it to nearly every community that the Party served. Similar to the origins of the first version of the program started by the Oakland chapter, Free Breakfast Programs across America had to be adaptable to three major variables that were susceptible to change from city to city: available locations, amount of funding, and acceptable food donations. For example, in Staten Island children were served hot breakfast out of a single small, diner-style restaurant across the street from the Party's local branch office, while just miles away in Harlem, the same program operated out of "the basement of an All-Saints Roman Catholic Church" and served "grapefruit juice and a paper plate filled with scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, strawberry jam and grits."⁷⁸

While there are some similarities between these examples and the descriptions of the very first Free Breakfast Programs in chapter 1, namely the use of faith-based centers to serve out of and the close proximity to major Party landmarks, it was incredibly difficult to find two iterations of the Free Breakfast Program that were identical to one another. In addition, local Free Breakfast outposts were subject to change; eventually, the same Los Angeles site begun by Brown expanded and started to serve "bacon, sausages, grits, eggs (fried somedays, scrambled eggs, omelets), pancakes, and oatmeal sometimes" as noted by former Panther Flores Forbes.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ David McClintick, "The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the 'Pigs,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1969, page 12.

⁷⁹ Flores Forbes on the history of the Free Breakfast Program, November 2, 2021.

The drive to establish a survival program as necessary and successful as the Free Breakfast Program did not come out of nowhere; former Panther Norma Mtume noted in an interview that at the beginning of any Party member's journey in the program, they were told that their job was to "serve the people body and soul."⁸⁰ The ability to create something so necessary to so many small communities across the United States is a testament to the Panthers' dedication to their mission. Additionally, part of the success of the Free Breakfast Program was due to the specialized influence of individual local members, something that the Panthers understood well. Creating a large, blanket program that can fit the needs of every low-income community in America is an impossible task, so instead the Panthers focused on one large shared problem that all of those communities faced – in this case it was child hunger – and attempted to craft remedies that could be installed within specific communities individually. Members of the Black Panther Party knew that because "[they] had substandard housing, education, healthcare. [They] were the most that got beat up by the police. [They] were going to prison more than anybody else" that they would have to be the ones to "address" those systemic problems because the federal government had already given up on the communities they served.⁸¹

Furthermore, while the Free Breakfast Program was achieving major success across the nation, a number of the Party's other survival programs were gaining traction as well. The idea of serving both one's body and soul is well-represented in the Party's extensive list of survival programs, one that includes but is not limited to: a free food program ("pre-food bank type of situation"), free clothing/free coats programs, Seniors Against the Fearful Environment (SAFE), community clinic outreach programs, legal programs, free educational programs, and the creation of a Black Panther school and nursery.⁸² It is imperative that when studying the Black

⁸⁰ Norma Mtume for the Civil Rights Oral History Project, Jun 27, 2016.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

Panthers, one attempts to craft a multifaceted understanding of the group, a type of understanding that is aware of the Party's perceived aggression, while also celebrating the community welfare triumphs that were the products of systemic inequality, oppression, and deep need. The branches of the Black Panther Party had a local focus with global aspirations; leaders hoped to "make some changes in this country because we know if we can make them here, hopefully, that'll be able to extend out through the rest of the world where people are oppressed like they are here."⁸³



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One aspect of the Survival Programs' successes worth understanding, specifically in relation to the Free Breakfast Program, is the reason why the Panthers were able to create something so expansive and helpful while the federal government simply watched from the metaphorical rafters. In "Feeding the Revolution: the Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival" author Mary Potorti ruminates on this precise phenomenon and begins the

⁸³ Norma Mtume for the Civil Rights Oral History Project, Jun 27, 2016.

⁸⁴ "Two women partake in the Black Panther Organized People's Free Food Program, Palo Alto, Calif, 1972," *Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture*.

piece by decisively noting that “in the context of the Party’s work in the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly in the East Bay communities of Oakland and Berkeley, the food programs revealed a nuanced, bold vision of the relationship between systemic deprivation, social welfare, community building, and revolutionary politics.”⁸⁵ The Panthers were able to use food as a means of both connection and political rebellion, a sign to both those who were hungry and those who were casting a watchful eye on each and every one of the Party’s members that the Panthers were going to take charge in their communities and people could either join their revolution or get angry that children were being fed. Potorti then goes on to reveal that, in the eyes of the Party, “the federal government – namely the FBI and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) – colluded with American food industries to carry on the tradition of American genocide against peoples of color.” So, the choice to organize programs centered around food was a distinctly defensive measure.⁸⁶

Additionally, when reflecting upon the larger inspirations behind the creation of the Free Breakfast Program, it is crucial to reflect upon Party’s founding Ten Point Platform, more specifically the tenth point: “we want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.”⁸⁷ In Oakland in 1967, just a few years after the Black Panther Party was founded, a University of California study found that 1 in 10 residents had been without food of any kind for days on end, and 16% of the city’s impoverished population was forced to exclude meat and vegetables from their diet for several days as well.⁸⁸ The Panthers saw and experienced these issues firsthand and did not need an official university study to inform them of what a detrimental problem hunger was in Oakland. But, the study in combination with the success of

⁸⁵ Mary Potorti, “‘Feeding the Revolution’: The Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival,” *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): pp. 85-110, page 4.

⁸⁶ Ibid, page 4.

⁸⁷ Ibid, page 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid, page 7.

the Party's food programs proved to the rest of America that urban hunger was a legitimate problem in the United States. It was this success that pointed out "what the Party called 'the basic contradictions' of a society boasting unparalleled wealth and power while millions upon millions lived in poverty."⁸⁹

In a 1969 radio program recorded in Berkeley, interviewer Jeff Kamen traveled to both the Los Angeles and San Francisco branches of the Party and sat down with breakfast recipients in addition to Party leaders to discuss the benefits of the Free Breakfast Program. The program began with the interviewer asking the question: "if you didn't come here for breakfast, would you be getting the same kind of good breakfast at home?"⁹⁰ Every child interviewed said no. Additionally, when asked about how they felt about having breakfast with the Panthers, every child came up with resoundingly positive answers, statements like "I'm just gonna say it in one word: it's beautiful."⁹¹ The interviewer then went on to mention that the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children Program far exceeds the federal nutrition guidelines for breakfast that had been released just months before the radio program came out. Furthermore, the interviewer followed up the soundbites from the children with a statement from Joan Kelly, the National Coordinator of the Free Breakfast Program and just twenty years old at the time. Kelly framed the Breakfast Program as something simple: "the concept of the breakfast program originated with Huey; he thought that was one of the better ways to educate people in terms of what socialism was, what it was like, and also served one of the basic needs of the people because that's part of our ten-point program platform."⁹² The issues that the Free Breakfast program attempted to address were multifaceted and the product of centuries of structural inequality, thus

⁸⁹ Mary Potorti, "'Feeding the Revolution': The Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival," *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): pp. 85-110, page 25.

⁹⁰ "Revolution for Breakfast," *Pacifica Radio Archives* (Berkeley, CA, August 14, 1970).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

resulting in the fact that when asked about the survival programs, Party leaders needed to also touch on a number of different ideas.

With all of that in mind, there is one passage of Potorti's that remains most striking:

The extent to which government operatives worked to undermine Panther food programs revealed that they, too, understood what was at stake in permitting communities to see the direct connection between strong bodies and strong minds, between healthy children and healthy communities, between free food and free people. The consequences of official repression inevitably extended beyond Party members, affecting the lives and endangering the safety of those who volunteered for, contributed to, and benefited from the programs.⁹³

While the federal government attempted to paint the Black Panthers as an army of vicious, violent people, those in the highest positions of power were secretly fearful of what their success meant: as their Survival Programs gained traction, it became clear to Americans and the rest of the world that the United States was less capable of providing for its citizens than a guerilla civil rights organization. Should this be made too obvious, international embarrassment was at stake; international superpowers like the United States should be capable of feeding every child in need, and since a young grassroots group was able to fulfill that role better than the federal government it almost as if the US was rendered undeserving of such a moniker. Through their food programs the Panthers reframed mealtime; hunger became "an issue of power and inequitable resource distribution rather than a fleeting condition wrought by personal misfortune or ineptitude."⁹⁴ For generations, the communities served by the Panthers had been told they were hungry because they were lazy, unlucky, and generally been made to feel single-handedly responsible for the troubles actually forced upon them by a laundry list of systemic inequalities

⁹³ Mary Potorti, "'Feeding the Revolution': The Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival," *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): pp. 85-110, page 17.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, page 25.

that were implemented to directly oppress low-income Americans and residents of color for years.

As a former leading member of the Party, Ericka Huggins spent a significant amount of time helping build up the Free Breakfast Program throughout her tenure as a panther. Huggins shared in an interview the sensation that kept her coming back to the Program every morning, noting that her experience was simply rooted in joy. Huggins revealed the following:

We felt joy when we saw the gratitude and the faces of people with all of our community survival programs. Or when the elders would come to free food giveaways and just smile and nod at us, as if to say, “You are doing good work.” We knew their conditions. We didn’t blame them for their own poverty. That’s something that has been a really ugly theory throughout the history of the United States: If you’re poor, it’s your fault. And there are even people of color who believe that that’s true, who believe in the bootstrap theory. But we knew that people didn’t have boots, or they would be pulling themselves up.⁹⁵

With that sense of selflessness and joy in mind, it is important to note that Free Breakfast Programs across America were still forcibly subjected to violence by law enforcement of all levels. From local police all the way up to the FBI, operatives everywhere were aware of the “threat” of the Free Breakfast Program and made it their mission to forcefully stop thousands of children from being fed a meal they so desperately needed. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover believed that “of all the violence-prone Black extremist groups in the US, the Black Panther party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of our country,”⁹⁶ and under his watch “the FBI took extensive measures to undermine support for the Panthers’ breakfast program... agents sent forged letters and incendiary propaganda to supermarkets to dissuade them from providing food and impersonated concerned parishioners to dissuade

⁹⁵ A Former Black Panther Party Leader Reflects on Her Revolutionary Work , *Zora* (Medium , July 15, 2020).

⁹⁶ David McClintick, “The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the ‘Pigs,” *The Wall Street Journal* , August 29, 1969, page 1.

churches from providing space for the program.”⁹⁷ The idea that the FBI would waste resources on ensuring that children were not served breakfast simply because of the fear that the Panthers struck into the hearts of the federal government may seem ridiculous now, but the aforementioned propaganda was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the strategies that were used by law enforcement in the late 1960s.

Historian Franziska Meister notes in *Racism and Resistance: How the Black Panthers Challenged White Supremacy* that FBI agents went as far as to personally visit clergymen in order to “convince” them “either by intimidation or through fabricated facts about the local Panthers” to sever their ties to the Black Panther Party.⁹⁸ It was not just this one instance in which the FBI utilized creative fabrication in order to undermine the Panthers’ efforts: “routinely the FBI and the local police also spread rumors that the Panthers were teaching the children to kill or that they were poisoning their food.”⁹⁹ Because the Panthers were already providing a service that parents in low-income neighborhoods perceived as so genuinely helpful, the FBI needed to find the few things that would make such an act seem insidious, and evidently, they were willing to stoop as low as suggesting poisoning their own communities. Beyond spreading lies, the police did not shy away from demonstrating blatant force around the children in the Free Breakfast Program, for example in Baltimore “the police disrupted the children’s breakfast, barging menacingly onto the premises. A witness recalled that ‘they walked around with their guns drawn and looked real mean. The children felt terrorized by the police. [the police] were like gangsters and thugs.’”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 211.

⁹⁸ Franziska Meister, *Racism and Resistance How the Black Panthers Challenged White Supremacy* (Columbia University Press, 2017), page 113.

⁹⁹ Ibid, page 114.

¹⁰⁰ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 186.

These actions by the police were inevitably counterintuitive; by displaying such aggression in front of the children, the children ended up more terrified of law enforcement than ever before. In the *Revolution for Breakfast* radio program, former Panther Bobby Rush noted that “the children can see the harassment. They can see the true nature of the pigs.”¹⁰¹ They understand very clearly that our party is a party that meets the basic desires and needs of the people. And they know that we feed them a nourishing breakfast every morning. They understand that the pigs are their enemies, because this is their historic experience with pigs. They are occupying our communities like an army and they don't have the same general attitudes.”¹⁰² The FBI believed that the Party was “indoctrinating” young children with the belief that law enforcement was made up of bad people when in reality it was actually the unjust actions of law enforcers that taught those same children to be fearful from a young age.

In addition, the ways in which the Party managed to acquire the food required to feed such a large swath of people proved to be a point of contention among business owners in the communities they served, and the FBI noticed and latched on to that phenomenon quickly. Local businesses that did not donate to the Free Breakfast Program became the victim of long-term community protests, the likes of which could eliminate tens of thousands of dollars of revenue in any given month. For example, the Panther newspaper routinely labeled unsupportive business owners as “capitalist pigs” or “lying merchants” in print.¹⁰³ Because of this, some local businesses felt obligated to donate purely in the hopes of saving face. It was this fact that contributed to the Panthers’ already aggressive reputation and led to an even more ruthless string

¹⁰¹ Police in all forms were referred to as “pigs” by members of the Black Panther Party because Panthers viewed the animal as a foul-natured beast who paid no mind to actual law and order.

¹⁰² Ricky J. Pope and Shawn T. Flanigan, “Revolution for Breakfast: Intersections of Activism, Service, and Violence in the Black Panther Party’s Community Service Programs,” *Social Justice Research* 26, no. 4 (December 2013): pp. 445-470.

¹⁰³ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), page 185.

of attacks by local police forces. The tactics used against the Detroit branch of the BPP is a prime example of the ways that the FBI managed to turn the Party's donation tactics against them: "the Bureau sent forged letters to local business people- supposedly coming from the BPP-, threatening them if they did not contribute to the breakfast program."¹⁰⁴ After reading through this collection of tactics used by the FBI to undermine the Panthers, just a taste of everything that the Bureau did at the time, a question hopefully burns in the mind of the reader: why was it that the federal government chose to dedicate millions of dollars of federal funds to stopping this guerilla group from feeding children instead of just using that money to feed those same children themselves?

What the federal government neglected to realize was that the only real way they would be able to completely undermine the Free Breakfast Program was by doing the same thing as the Panthers, just on a larger scale (which should be simple given their vastly larger scale of operations and resources). But, because government officials ignored this seemingly obvious solution and instead continued to choose violence, the Panthers' legacy persists and the J. Edgar Hoover-led FBI appears to be nothing more than a hateful, insecure gang with too much time and money on their hands.

Why the Federal Government Needed the Black Panthers

When reflecting upon the relationship between the Free Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program, one overwhelmingly confusing phenomenon remains looming: The National School Lunch Act explicitly declared the National School Lunch Program to be a form of national security, yet considered the Panthers a terrifying threat to that same sense of security even though they were inadvertently assisting the federal government with their mission

¹⁰⁴ Franziska Meister, *Racism and Resistance How the Black Panthers Challenged White Supremacy* (Columbia University Press, 2017), page 113.

of feeding hungry children across the nation. While still defaming them publicly, it was this realization that led to the federal government subtly forming an alliance with the Panthers.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the federal government gravely underestimated the positive impact that a possible alliance or even just a meeting between the leaders of the Black Panther Party and the President's cabinet could have had. The Panthers had a deep, personal connection to the issues plaguing the communities they served, and most members of the federal government would never be able to achieve that. When Party members discussed problems like malnourishment and substance abuse it was not just hypothetical but something occurring in front of their eyes. For example, in the case of substance abuse problems, the Party's free clinics had been treating overdoses and assisting recovering addicts for years before the federal government took notice. But, once the government realized what an important job the Panthers were doing, they began requiring individuals with official nursing degrees and federal training to take over the roles once filled by Party members. Those who worked tirelessly in the Party's Free Clinics agreed that "it's good to have integrative care. It's just we're really concerned that they're now going to be excluding the people that have done the treatment services for so long and upping the requirements for them to have degrees. And a lot of these folks are recovering people who have, they've learned from certain sets of skills," a direct reference to the community-based service that was the backbone of the Panthers' survival programs.¹⁰⁵ The federal government was unwilling to see the value in the Panthers' programs as they were, and were determined to turn them into something the US government was familiar with, a phenomenon that represented everything the Party hoped to move away from.

Interestingly, while the Party's survival programs were experiencing incredible growth and success in 1968, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover continued to tell white America that the

¹⁰⁵ Norma Mtume for the Civil Rights Oral History Project, Jun 27, 2016

Panthers were the greatest threat to America's safety. To many white Americans, the Panthers were nothing more than a terrorist group forcing their once "safe" communities to be constantly on high alert, this being the exact reputation J. Edgar Hoover had attempted to perpetuate for years. With that in mind, it was at the same time that the FBI was pushing this violence-focused agenda out to the public through major media outlets that the federal government was slyly beginning discussions with Panther leaders in regards to adopting their Free Breakfast strategies.

As mentioned prior, the Staten Island Free Breakfast Program was run out of a small diner adjacent to the area's Party offices, but unfortunately, it failed in less than a year due to a decrease in merchant support. Fortunately, the children who once relied on the Program did not have to go without meals for long because "the local public school district decided to start a similar program for about 200 elementary school children after the Panthers discussed their program with district officials."¹⁰⁶ According to the Staten Island records, the district's "new" program began on October 15, 1969, just three months after the Panthers' version of the program ended.¹⁰⁷ It was not until the Panthers' Staten Island branch began serving breakfast that the region's leaders in education were made aware of the malnourishment, extreme hunger, and food insecurity issues that plagued their district. So, while the federal government was instructing white citizens to be fearful of all that the Panthers were capable of, they were secretly planning to adopt the same outreach strategies popularized by the group and embrace them as their own.

Years later, it was finally clear that the development of a more expansive free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch program in Staten Island was only the beginning of a long string of long-awaited changes. In 1972 Congress finally passed the much anticipated School

¹⁰⁶ David McClintick, "The Black Panthers: Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution, Anti-Capitalist Indictment Comes After Breakfast; Many Leaders Are Jailed Teaching Hatred of the 'Pigs,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29, 1969.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Lunch Bill and appropriated more than 185 million dollars more than the bill's original authors had budgeted. Senators McGovern and Humphrey spearheaded the bill and, as noted in archived official White House correspondence, were ecstatic to learn that "\$85 [million] of that goes to fund an increase in the lunch subsidy from 6 cents to 8 cents, which we privately were more than willing to accept. In addition, the bill authorizes expenditures for non-food subsidies such as the purchase of cafeteria equipment and initiates a pilot program for feeding aid for lactating mothers."¹⁰⁸ It took decades, but McGovern was finally able to convince Congress to take the appropriate actions to mend the legislative holes in the original National School Lunch Act.

Furthermore, the topic of increasing school lunch funding for expanded free and nutritious meal policies did not run out of the news cycle with the end of the Nixon administration. In an official statement made to the American people on September 26, 1974 President Ford revealed his administration's plans for the United States' first National School Lunch Week (NSLW). Ford acknowledged that "providing nutritious lunches for millions of American schoolchildren is a concrete way of investing in our future well-being as a nation," and called on the public to devote attention to specific activities focused on ensuring proper nutrition for America's young people during the first NSLW in October.¹⁰⁹ According to the memo, the executive and legislative branches were in agreement in regards to the idea that "only healthy, well-nourished students can realize their fullest mental and physical potential and transform equality of opportunity from an idea into a reality," and the President officially credited lunchroom workers for helping "realize this goal."¹¹⁰ Recognizing the role that cafeteria workers play in ensuring America's children are entering the classroom well-fed and replenished is a

¹⁰⁸ John C Whitaker (Washington D.C. , n.d.).

¹⁰⁹ National School Lunch Week: A Proclamation, 1974.

¹¹⁰ National School Lunch Week: A Proclamation, 1974.

drastic departure from any of the acknowledgments made by past presidents, and in many ways is a nod to the work done decades before by concerned parents like Emma Smedley.¹¹¹

Evidently, it took decades for the federal government to be convinced that feeding hungry children was something worth devoting resources to, but it was not until the aforementioned White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health (WHC) that a few of the groups who brought the problem to the forefront of people's minds were acknowledged. Before, during, and immediately after the WHC, the government seemed to be having the same arguments about how to appropriately offer access to lunch "particularly for poor children, because historically the programs at the turn of the 20th century on which it was based were designed to feed poor immigrants and other children in cities like New York."¹¹² Legislators then went on to note that the task of feeding poor children could only be completed by expanding the NSLP and adding on additional legislation, the likes of which turned out to be the "National School Breakfast Program targeted specifically to poor children."¹¹³ This idea of serving hungry children at no cost simply because it is distinctly beneficial to society as a whole is something that the Panthers understood long before the United States government did, yet they received no mention during the WHC. This outward acknowledgment is not something that Party officials ever expected from the same government they were working together to stand up to, but by leaving the Panthers out of this conversation the government was yet again ensuring that the Party's philanthropic efforts continued to be ignored by historians and the public.

¹¹¹ Noted in chapter 1.

¹¹² Eileen Kennedy and Johanna Dwyer, "The 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health: 50 Years Later," *Current developments in nutrition* (Oxford University Press, May 15, 2020).

¹¹³ Ibid.

Epilogue: A Note on Nutrition

It has been noted throughout this paper that, above all else, America's national school lunch policy must be broad enough to be applicable to every public school in America. Generally, this idea makes sense because children in all areas of the country deserve to be well-fed and healthy, but when reflecting further upon the variation in climates, income levels, and proximity to fresh produce between states like California and South Dakota, or Florida and Massachusetts, the aforementioned requirement grows increasingly difficult to enforce. As a result of states' differing access to the components of an arbitrary "well-balanced" meal in addition to the government's unwillingness to dedicate more than the bare minimum amount of funds to the NSLP, the USDA has been forced to get creative when outlining the necessary requirements for school breakfasts and lunches.

Initially, the National School Lunch Act instructed that "lunches served by schools participating in the school lunch program under this Act shall meet minimum nutritional requirements prescribed by the Secretary on the basis of tested nutritional research" in order to ensure that the malnourishment problems that swept the country decades prior were truly a thing of the past. But, those nutritional requirements turned out to be both incredibly broad and incredibly whitewashed. It must be noted that even though one goal of the USDA's mission was to "bring good food to others," and the foods considered "good" were overwhelmingly American (read: white) and the people considered "other" were overwhelmingly nonwhite, thus confirming the history of the free lunch movement as one blinded by patronizing ethnocentrism.

¹¹⁴ Greater federal intervention was necessary, but it took decades before Americans began to

¹¹⁴ Jennifer E. Gaddis, *Labor of Lunch: Why We Need Real Food and Real Jobs in American Public Schools* (University of California Press, 2020), page 20.

realize that it was not just their school district's lunch program that was falling short of the promises made by Congress.

Unfortunately, the link between the economic interests of the agricultural sector and the National School Lunch Program dictated cafeteria menus for the majority of the mid-twentieth century and paid little mind to the actual nutritional needs of each child served. The National School Lunch Act, the 1949 Agricultural Act, and the 1935 Agricultural Adjustment Act allowed the USDA to make “discretionary purchases” for the school lunch program that were designed to fit the needs of the market, not nutritional standards.¹¹⁵ Since the NSLP's inception, the USDA answered to requests made by industrial groups and lobbyists, thus proving that the program failed to “recognize the social value of food as commensurate with the nutritional value of food,” so the program, whether it was inadvertent or purposeful, created a “culturally homogenizing force.”¹¹⁶ By responding to the financial demands brought about by the capitalist force that is the agricultural industry, rather than simply listening to recommendations made by pediatricians and nutrition scientists, the USDA turned school lunch into a poorly veiled money-making and money-saving scheme rather than a true effort to feed America's hungry children.

Furthermore, one of the main focuses of the 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health was establishing a blanket set of nutritional guidelines for school meals to follow, but the guidelines established in the sixties were not proven able to stand the test of time, and the Conference administrators were forced to reconvene in 1981 and amend the issues that had emerged in the prior twelve years. It was during this 1981 meeting that a seemingly ridiculous provision was proposed by officials: “crediting or counting ketchup as one of the

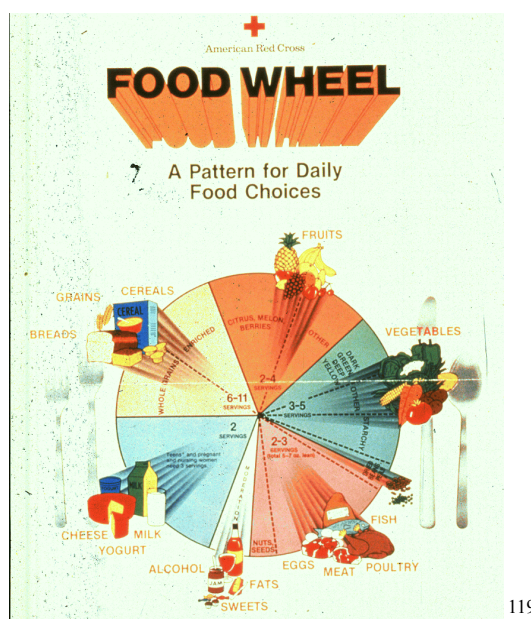
¹¹⁵ Melissa Mortazavi, “Consuming Identities: Law, School Lunches, and What It Means to Be American,” *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy* 24, no. 1 (n.d.), page 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, page 4.

vegetables allowed in the vegetable category rather than leaving it simply as a condiment.”¹¹⁷ In order to make this seem less far-fetched, the provision noted that the amount of ketchup on one’s plate had to hit a specific threshold in order to be considered equivalent to a vegetable. Once this news was released to the public, uproar ensued. The USDA became the subject of cross-country derision; “headlines ridiculing ketchup as a vegetable appeared in national newspapers.

Advocates viewed the proposed changes in school lunch regulations as taking food away from children. The Food Research Action Center... developed a cartoon showing half of a hamburger and a dollop of ketchup with the headline, ‘This will be your child's school lunch.’”¹¹⁸

Eventually, the USDA officials responsible for approving this choice were fired, but the choice to consider ketchup a vegetable made parents across the country incredibly wary of the department’s nutritional recommendations, thus rendering the USDA’s guidelines nearly unbelievable.



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¹¹⁷ Eileen Kennedy and Johanna Dwyer, “The 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health: 50 Years Later,” *Current developments in nutrition* (Oxford University Press, May 15, 2020).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “American Red Cross food wheel, circa 1984,” photo courtesy of the National Agriculture Library.

Moving forward, it must be noted that the tradition of school lunch carries greater weight than just sustenance; the lunchroom is a community and has the capacity to be one of the most universally unifying experiences in American culture. But, if children are unable to afford a meal then they are immediately singled out, and if they are served something unfamiliar and unappetizing, then they are being subtly forced to choose between their heritage or not eating at all. School lunches are inherently exclusionary and whitewashed, one major example being the program's reliance on dairy products, something that is particularly problematic for Black, Native American, Latino, and Asian children who show high levels of lactose intolerance.¹²⁰ This milk requirement was established in an effort to support American dairy farms while also satisfying one's daily recommended serving of calcium, but it completely ignores other calcium-dense alternatives that are more suitable for lactose intolerant students. Herein lies the internal quandary faced by children of color who rely on the NSLP: should they eat what the NSLP claims is healthy "because eating healthfully is viewed as virtuous and moral" in spite of differing dietary, religious, cultural norms, or should they abstain and risk being seen as a "bad" person instead of a "good" one?¹²¹ Lawyer Melissa Mortazavi claims that white students are not typically faced with this choice, and it is this dichotomy that reinforces the idea that white students are "good, virtuous people making good choices, while people of color are not."¹²² Furthermore, around the same time as the aforementioned ketchup scandal was made public, the USDA also released the now-ubiquitous food pyramid. A graphic that nearly every child in the public school system is now familiar with, the choice to rank food groups against one another and firmly encourage grade-schoolers to limit their consumption of certain foods has only further

¹²⁰ Melissa Mortazavi, "Consuming Identities: Law, School Lunches, and What It Means to Be American," *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy* 24, no. 1 (n.d.), page 22.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, page 24.

¹²² *Ibid*, page 24.

contributed to this polarizing idea of “bad” food versus “good” food. Specific rituals surrounding food quietly create and reinforce class distinctions, and many people in American society view etiquette at mealtime as a signifier of one’s upbringing and social status. The lunchroom is the first place that many children are exposed to these Americanized behaviors, thus perpetuating the idea that the mealtime rituals that children of color may have been exposed to at home are low-class, inferior, and obviously different.

Finally, it is imperative that we as a country, as a communal mind, reframe the way we think about mealtimes. They are a time for meditation, whether that be sitting alongside someone else or by your lonesome. It may look different for everyone but it is impossible to continue one’s day-to-day routine without any time to meditate and recharge. Ericka Huggins took it upon herself to remind the public that “the human body is a little ecosystem. We can’t keep pushing it without giving it nutrition, water, and rest, without giving it a way to clear the emotions that accumulate over time, especially when you’re out there on the front lines. If we don’t recharge our batteries by taking care of our minds, our hearts, our bodies, we won’t be able to be in it for the long haul.”¹²³ The Panthers understood the value of mealtimes, and as a result, funneled money and time into creating safe spaces to enjoy them as a community. Just because it may be limited to a forty minute period and may happen in a stuffy cafeteria, school lunch is an important time to reset, to build relationships, to decompress, and refuel. The federal government needs to treat it as such.

¹²³ A Former Black Panther Party Leader Reflects on Her Revolutionary Work, *Zora* (Medium , July 15, 2020).

Conclusion

As I reflect upon the historical findings detailed in this piece and my experience over the last nine months, I feel an immense sense of pride in the work that I put in, and yet I have also realized that there is still so much more to do. This paper touched on ideas of classism, racism, socialism, and inequality, all of which are integral parts of American history. The story I told here is one that, to be told appropriately, requires an entire career's worth of research, but these fifty seven pages are a good place to start if you're in search of a basic understanding of the Black Panther Party's influence on the National School Lunch Program.

Limitations

It must be noted that this paper, while extensive and rich in detail, does not adequately address all of the nuances that lie within the relationship between the Black Panther Party and the National School Lunch Program. Given the fact that all of the research for this project was conducted during the Coronavirus pandemic, there was a host of primary and secondary source material only physically available in museums that I was unable to travel to, learn from, and eventually cite. Frankly, after spending nine months deeply engaged in the research process I am now even more motivated to uncover more materials related to both the Panthers and school lunch in America. Federal meeting records, USDA archives, and additional interviews with former Panthers are all examples of sources I attempted to obtain in the last few months but could not eventually procure given the timeline for this project.

Furthermore, I had hoped to lean on other historians' accounts of the Free Breakfast for Children Program, but there was a disappointing lack of resources regarding the Program's history. It was for this reason that I found the interviews I conducted in addition to the interviews

conducted by journalists particularly helpful; I struggled to find any detailed accounts about life in the Party formally published in books and journals, so gaining those primary insights required the exploration of decades-old newspaper archives. I was disappointed, but not surprised, to discover this informational discrepancy between the NSLP and the Free Breakfast Program given the Panthers' relationship to the mass media. It is for this reason precisely that I urge more historians to reach out to former Panthers and continue to tell the stories of the Party so that future students can obtain the information they're searching for with ease.

Taking that into account, I do wish that I had more time to forge relationships with former Panthers and lunchroom workers and possibly meet with them in person throughout my research process. I was only able to personally interview one Party member, Flores Forbes, and while he was incredibly generous with his time and I am so grateful for the wisdom he shared, I feel as though I could have told a much more dynamic version of the story of the relationship between the Free Breakfast Program and the NSLP had I been able to connect with more individuals for hyper-specific reasons. The questions that guided my research only got more pointed as I learned more about my subject, and I wish I could have proposed some of them to real people who lived through the eras I covered.

Moving Forward

When I consider the ways that I hope to continue this research further, there are a number of directions that I wish to go in. First of all, I am deeply fascinated by the aspects of the Black Panther Party that haven't been told as widely as their use of guns and various self-defense tactics. Should I choose to move forward with studying the Party as a research subject, I would love to seek out more firsthand accounts of what it was like to be a Panther, and compile those

stories in a near-literary fashion. Also, it would be fascinating to move away from describing the Free Breakfast Program as a comparison to the parallel National School Lunch Program, and instead, dive deeper into the ways that each Free Breakfast Program differed between cities. The description offered in this thesis is one that is broad and overarching, but I would love to learn more about what it took to get the program off the ground in specific areas across the country.

Next, I would love to find an opportunity to present these stories in a more public-facing arena; finding the appropriate museum or gallery to combine the words of former Party members along with art, photos, and various paraphernalia seems like an amazing way to showcase the Party's history. It has been a dream of mine to curate an exhibition at a history museum, and I would love for it to be centered around this subject that I have grown so close to over the last nine months. The beauty of museums is the inherent accessibility that comes with visual storytelling; while someone may not be willing to dedicate themselves to reading a four hundred page book about Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, they will likely still be able to walk past a sequence of captioned photographs, listen to a recorded interview, and walk away learning something new. I know there are already a handful of Black Panther-focused exhibitions around the country, but if I could create a Free Breakfast-specific experience at a food museum like the Southern Food and Beverage Museum, for example, it would add a fascinating new element to patrons' experiences.

Final Points

It is my greatest wish as a historian and researcher that, more than anything, this piece has opened your mind to the possibility that the major historical characters you have learned about through your elementary and secondary curriculums are much more dynamic and

multi-faceted than those history textbooks may have made them seem. As readers, I implore you to go one step further when confronted with complicated aspects of American history; in the case of this paper, it is likely that I would never have learned about the truly impressive nature of the Black Panther Party's survival programs if I had not taken it upon myself to spend nine months doing independent research. This project was a testament to the fact that groups and individual figures are not always as violent or as terrifying as the media wants you to think, yet it is not until you shoulder the individual burden to learn more that you can truly construct an informed opinion. It is the responsibility of historians and informed thinkers to reframe the inappropriate, one-sided narratives occasionally assigned to complex historical characters in order to tell a story about the past that is honest and representative of nearly every group involved, not just the supposed "winners".

Furthermore, I ask that you reflect on your own experiences in the school cafeteria. How do you feel they align with the critiques offered by Melissa Mortazavi? Were you someone who relied on your cafeteria workers for comfort and nourishment, or did you bring a packed lunch from home? Did you find the meals served at your school to be familiar and enjoyable, or did you find them confusing and peculiar? There is no wrong answer to these questions, just the realization that opposing answers represent extremely different experiences within the American public school system. It is crucial to understand that while school lunches may seem simple, they are still the result of decades of hard work and activism, and the familiar hamburger and fruit cup that once sat in front of you is emblematic of a hard-fought battle against malnutrition in America. One of the reasons I found the history of school lunch as a research subject so fascinating is because of its familiarity; even though I went into the research project with virtually no knowledge of the program's origins, I could still visualize nearly every meal and

every cafeteria that was described and because of that I felt as though readers would also feel bonded to the subject. To so many, pizza day at the cafeteria is not a special treat or break from their mother's carefully packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but one of the only times in the day they can count on being handed a nutritious meal. California in particular is a prime example of a state that is finally making expansive school lunch policy a priority: every child across the state is eligible for free lunch in the 2021-2022 school year regardless of familial income.¹²⁴ The fact that the California state government took the issue of school lunch seriously and dedicated the funds necessary to make such expansive policy possible is a testament to the idea that was central to the Free Breakfast Program's success: children are hungry, so you should feed them. Welfare reform: it's what's for lunch.

¹²⁴ The Associated Press, "California Will Launch the Nation's Largest Free Student Lunch Program," NPR (NPR, July 20, 2021).

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