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Biased reporting on the Black Panther Party

An open letter to Paul Gustafson and Nick Coleman of the Minneapolis Star Tribune and Shannon Prather of the St. Paul Pioneer Press

by **Larry Pinkney**



The original caption for this major media photo reads: "Fred Hampton, leader of the Black Panthers' Illinois chapter, at a recent protest rally with Dr. Benjamin Spock. Mr. Hampton was killed in a Chicago police raid last week."

Photo: Associated Press (AP)

The Minneapolis Star Tribune and St. Paul Pioneer Press' lead articles dated March 2, 2006, entitled "Sackett Killer Gets Life" and "Aging Cops Never Forget Their Fallen Comrade" in the Star Tribune and "36 Years Later, Guilty" in the Pioneer Press, reek of inaccuracy and bias through their use of innuendo and subjectivity pertaining to the grossly distorted, racist and ridiculously absurd depiction of the "national leadership" of the former Black Panther Party. What also makes the articles particularly odious is their not-so-veiled attempts to sully and distort the name and legacy of the Black Panther Party under the guise of honest, unbiased, balanced reporting. These articles are, in large measure, neither honest, unbiased nor balanced.

Reporting by the Minneapolis Star Tribune that Ronald Reed allegedly "advocated killing police in hopes of getting a Black

Panther Party chapter in St. Paul" is a complete red herring and is utterly ridiculous. Likewise, reporting by the St. Paul Pioneer Press, as fact, the fundamentally flawed and racist prosecutorial assertion that a then supposedly "angry 19-year old [Ronald Reed] killed [white police officer] Sackett to woo the national leadership of the militant Black Panther Party" is absurd and is rooted in the fertile, ignorant and/or racist imaginations of far too many people whenever reference is made to the Black Panther Party.

Clearly, this is precisely what the prosecution, with the open complicity of much of the so-called "news" media, bank upon: fear, ignorance and racism. Moreover, there was absolutely nothing presented substantiating or even linking Ronald Reed - or co-accused Larry Clark - to ever having ever been a member of the Black Panther Party, nor has Reed, based upon media reports, ever said that he was a former member of the Black Panther Party.

So why does the media, including the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune, repeatedly insist upon linking Reed to the Black Panther Party? The answer is obvious: There is virtually no surer way to discredit and/or convict a Black person of anything in Minnesota than to link him or her in some way to the Black Panther Party.

For the record: It is well documented that the national leadership of the Black Panther Party believed in adherence to the BPP Ten Point Platform & Program (see <http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/home/>)

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...bpp_program_platform.html), which included serving Black communities through programs established by the Black Panther Party, such as the Free Breakfast Program for Children, Free Shoe Program, Free Clothing Program, Free Food Programs, People's Free Medical Research Health Clinic and Free Housing Cooperative Program etc.



The original caption for this photo, also from the major media, reads: "Mourners pass the bier of slain Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, the party's Illinois deputy chairman." Photo: United Press International (UPI)

Notwithstanding and until the Black Panther Party was physically decimated through secretive, illegal, well documented and now infamous - and no doubt ongoing - nationwide Cointelpro activities (see "Cointelpro Revisited" by Brian Glick, http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/BPP_Books/pdf/Necessary_Reading.pdf) to "discredit, frame, murder, imprison, and otherwise neutralize" it, the BPP national leadership, in concert with rank and file members of the Black Panther Party, continued their efforts to serve the Black communities in this nation to the ire and chagrin of the hypocritically racist American power structure.

The sordid, biased and lopsided reporting by your newspapers, as manifested in the above mentioned articles, is totally inexcusable, especially in view of the fact that numerous well circulated books regarding the Black Panther Party are attainable, including "Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party" edited by Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas; "The Black Panther Party Reconsidered" edited by Charles E. Jones, Ph.D.; "We Want Freedom: A Life In The Black Panther Party" by Mumia Abu-Jamal; "Assata: An Autobiography" by Assata Shakur; "To Die for the People" by (Dr.) Huey P. Newton; "Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton" by Bobby Seale; "The Black Panthers" by Gene Marine, etc.



Omi, Pam Africa of the MOVE organization and Akua Njeri, widow of Chairman Fred Hampton and co-author, with their son, Prisoners of Conscience Committee Chairman Fred Hampton Jr., of the proposal to rename the block where he was assassinated "Chairman Fred Hampton Way," were walking back to the community bus with some other supporters after the Chicago City Council protest on March 29. Chicago's major media gave the protest by 700 supporters front page, prime time coverage. The street renaming proposal will finally be heard by the Chicago City Council on April 26.

Photo: JR

The reporting in this matter by the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune are playing upon fear, stereotypes, ignorance and racism, which have no place in, and nothing whatever to do with, honest or balanced journalism.

'Wannabe' or Scapegoat? Racist mockery

The Minneapolis Star Tribune had the unmitigated cheek to make smug, mocking and racist reference to "Ron Reed" as a "onetime Black Panther [Party] wannabe accused of plotting a murder that would 'put St. Paul on the map.'" What precisely does the media mean by referring to Reed as a "Black Panther [Party] wannabe?" Is there such a thing as a Democratic [Party]

"wannabe" or perhaps a Republican [Party] "wannabe" or a Green [Party] "wannabe?!" What an utterly ridiculous and racist assertion for the media to make pertaining to the Black Panther Party!

No balanced news coverage: Fred Hampton and Mark Clark

It is stunning - almost beyond belief - how the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press have managed to report on the trial pertaining to the slaying of a white St. Paul police officer in 1970, allegedly by what these newspapers inaccurately and inappropriately referred to as a "Black Panther [Party] wannabe," without providing any equally important contextual description of the officially documented brutal murders by Cointelpro and police less than a year earlier, on Dec. 4, 1969, of Black Panther Party members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago.

"Early in December, Chicago police conducted a pre-dawn raid, murdering Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in his bed. This was a part of a nationwide pattern in which that organization's [the Black Panther Party's] leadership was physically decimated" ("Saying No to Power" by William Mandel, introduction by Howard Zinn, page 418). Somehow, the wrongful and well documented police murders of these two young Black men, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, who were in fact Black Panther Party members - and similar murders nationwide - simply and conveniently escaped mention by the Minneapolis Star Tribune and St. Paul Pioneer Press, which, however, had no problem whatsoever in disseminating mythical "Black Panther [Party] wannabe" nonsense and racist hysteria in the Ronald Reed case.

This kind of whimsically sloppy, unbalanced and out-of-context journalism is constant, and it is no mere coincidence in Minnesota or in America as a whole. It demonstrates what Black people already know: that intrinsically white racist American society far prefers to have drug proliferation in Black communities and so-called "gang violence" of Black youth overwhelmingly eliminating other Black youth than to have a national, community-based, politicized, deeply concerned, disciplined, youthful political party in service to the interests of Black people nationwide, which is fundamentally what the Black Panther Party was and why it was destroyed. And its true legacy remains under assault by the majority of the white news media - and government - in this nation to this very day.

Where are your lead stories about the horrible pain, loss and grief suffered, and still being experienced, by the community, families and friends of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark? Where are your front page stories about the murderers of Hampton and Clark going to prison for their double slayings? Why has no one been convicted and gone to prison for these brutal murders - and for so many others like them nationwide - despite the fact that judicial investigations have been conducted and official findings made, that Hampton and Clark were in fact viciously and wrongfully slain by police assault?

It is the use of racist innuendo, fear mongering, unbalanced and out-of-context reporting, as repeatedly demonstrated by the Star Tribune and Pioneer Press newspaper articles, that continually and significantly serves to perpetuate injustice and "racial tension."

Enough is enough

There is a dangerous and ongoing pattern of media distortion and disinformation in Minnesota, particularly as it pertains to news coverage about

Black people. Repeatedly, as demonstrated in the Ronald Reed case and the bogus connection made to the former Black Panther Party, the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press newspapers have demonstrated a propensity for presenting malevolent innuendo and bias as if it were fact.

Apparently, like the cynically racist and hypocritical George W. Bush regime, the majority of the news media in Minnesota and nationwide have succumbed to the fallacious notion that a few well placed negro-dian surrogates - or what the late Malcolm X referred to as "house negroes" - can be substitutes for genuine justice, accurate, complete and unbiased journalistic reporting, particularly as it pertains to coverage about Black people.

As a Black political activist who has suffered wrongful imprisonment and torture at the behest of American authorities and as the only American and former Black Panther Party member (see "Saying No to Power," page 500) to have successfully self-authored a case to the United Nations Human Rights Commission under international law (see United Nations UNHRC case annex VII, comm. #R.7/27), I am only too aware of how the biased and lopsided reporting by a major segment of the so-called main stream news media in this nation continually reinforces white racism and judicial injustice and perpetuates stereotypes and in so doing helps to both rationalize and facilitate the ongoing disenfranchisement of the majority of Black people and other people of color in the United States of America.

This is precisely what the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune so insidiously achieved in these lead stories with their unwarranted and not-so-subtle attacks upon the legacy of the Black Panther Party. Enough is enough.

It is past time that Black people stop being placed on the receiving end of the most malevolently lopsided, insidious, inaccurate, innuendo-packed and biased reporting since the collapse of the racist, fascist Third Reich's Ministry of Propaganda. It is also past time for you in the media to cease and desist in your racist attacks upon the legacy of the Black Panther Party and those who were its former members. Enough is enough.

The public at large, indeed all people of every color and ethnicity, deserve so much better from the news media, including the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Minneapolis Star Tribune. Reporting by innuendo, subjectivity and imbalance maintained under a veil of integrity is not journalism with integrity; in fact, it is not honest or good journalism at all.

Larry Pinkney is a veteran of the Black Panther Party, the former Minister of Interior of the Republic of New Africa, a former political prisoner and the only American to have successfully self-authored his civil/political rights case to the United Nations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Email him at Lecconsult@aol.com.