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Eldridge Cleaver



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Eldridge Cleaver

Leroy Eldridge Cleaver
(August 31, 1935 - May 1, 1998)
was an American writer and political activist who became an early leader of the [Black Panther Party](#).

In 1968, Cleaver wrote [Soul On Ice](#), a collection of essays that, at the time of its publication, was praised by [The New York](#)

Eldridge Cleaver

Times Book Review as "brilliant and revealing". Cleaver also wrote in *Soul on Ice*: "If a man like [Malcolm X](#) could change and repudiate racism, if I myself and other former [Muslims](#) can change, if young whites can change, then there is hope for America."

Cleaver went on to become a prominent member of the Black Panthers, having the titles Minister of Information and Head of the International Section of the Panthers, while a fugitive from the [United States](#) criminal justice system in Cuba and Algeria. He became a fugitive after leading an ambush of Oakland police officers, during which two officers were wounded. Cleaver was also wounded during the ambush and Black Panther member [Bobby Hutton](#) was killed. As editor of the official Panther's newspaper, *[The Black Panther](#)*, Cleaver's influence on the direction of the Party was rivaled only by founders [Huey P. Newton](#) and [Bobby Seale](#). Cleaver and Newton eventually fell out with each other, resulting in a split that weakened the party.

After spending seven years in exile in [Cuba](#), [Algeria](#), and [France](#), Cleaver returned to the US in 1975, where he became involved in various religious groups ([Unification Church](#) and [CARP](#)) before finally joining [the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#), as well as becoming a [conservative Republican](#), appearing at Republican events.



Eldridge Cleaver in 1968

Born	August 31, 1935 Wabbaseka, Arkansas, U.S.
Died	May 1, 1998 (aged 62) Pomona, California, U.S.
Occupation	Writer, political activist Black Panther Party (1967-1971)
Political party	Peace and Freedom Party (1968) Republican Party (1980s)
Movement	Black Power Movement Black Liberation Movement Kathleen Cleaver (m. 1967; div. 1987)
Children	2

Early life

Eldridge Cleaver was born in [Wabbaseka, Arkansas](#); as a child he moved with his large family to [Phoenix](#) and then to [Los Angeles](#). He was the son of Leroy Cleaver and Thelma Hattie Robinson. He had four siblings: Wilhelima Marie, Helen Grace, James Weldon, and Theophilus Henry.

As a teenager, he was involved in [petty crime](#) and spent time in [youth detention centers](#). At the age of 18, he was convicted of a [felony](#) drug charge (marijuana, a felony at the time) and sent to the adult prison at [Soledad](#). In 1958, he was convicted of [rape](#) and [assault](#) with intent to [murder](#), and eventually served time in [Folsom](#) and [San Quentin](#) prisons. While in prison, he was given a copy of [The Communist Manifesto](#). Cleaver was released on parole December 12, 1966, with a discharge date of March 20, 1971. In 1968 he was arrested on violation of parole by association with individual(s) of bad reputation, and control and possession of firearms Cleaver petitioned for [habeas corpus](#) to the Solano County Court, and was granted it along with a release of a \$50,000 bail.

Black Panther Party

Cleaver was released from prison on December 12, 1966. He was writing for [Ramparts](#) magazine and organizing efforts to revitalize the [Organization of Afro-American Unity](#). At this time, President [John F. Kennedy](#) and [Malcolm X](#) were dead. The Black Panther Party was only two months old. He then joined the [Oakland](#)-based Black Panther Party (BPP), serving as Minister of Information, or [spokesperson](#). What initially attracted Cleaver to the Panthers, as opposed to other prominent groups, was their commitment to armed struggle.

In 1967, Cleaver, along with Marvin X, [Ed Bullins](#), and Ethna Wyatt, formed the Black House political/cultural center in [San Francisco](#). [Amiri Baraka](#), [Sonia Sanchez](#), [Askia Toure](#), [Sarah Webster Fabio](#), [Art Ensemble of Chicago](#), Avotcja, Reginald Lockett, [Emory Douglas](#), Samuel Napier, [Bobby Hutton](#), [Huey Newton](#), and [Bobby Seale](#) were Black House regulars. The same year, he married [Kathleen Neal Cleaver](#) (divorced 1987) with whom he would have son Ahmad Maceo Eldridge (b. 1969, Algeria) and daughter Joju Younghi (b. July 31, 1970, [North Korea](#)).

Cleaver was a [presidential](#) candidate in [1968](#) on the ticket of the [Peace and Freedom Party](#). Having been born on August 31, 1935, Cleaver would not have been the requisite 35 years of age until more than a year after Inauguration Day 1969. (Although the [Constitution](#) requires that the President be 35 years of age, it does not specify if he need have reached that age at the time of nomination, or election, or inauguration.) Courts in both [Hawaii](#) and [New York](#)

held that he could be excluded from the ballot because he could not possibly meet the Constitutional criteria. Cleaver and his running mate Judith Mage received 36,571 votes (0.05%).

In the aftermath of the assassination of the April 4 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. there were riots across the nation. On April 6 Cleaver and 14 other panthers led an [ambush](#) of [Oakland police officers](#), during which two officers were wounded. Cleaver was wounded during the ambush and 17-year-old Black Panther member [Bobby Hutton](#) was killed. They were armed with M16 rifles and shotguns. In 1980, he admitted that he had led the Panther group on a deliberate ambush of the police officers, thus provoking the shootout. Some reporters were surprised by this move, because it was in the context of an uncharacteristic speech, in which Cleaver also discredited the Black Panthers, stated "we need police as heroes", and said that he denounced civilian review boards of police shootings for the "bizarre" reason that "it is a rubber stamp for murder". Some speculated his admission could have been a pay-off to the Alameda County justice system, whose judge had only just days earlier let Eldridge Cleaver escape prison time; Cleaver was sentenced to community service after getting charged with three counts of assault against three Oakland police officers. The PBS documentary A Huey Newton Story claims that "Bobby Hutton was shot more than twelve times after he had already surrendered and stripped down to his underwear to prove he was not armed."

Charged with [attempted murder](#), he [jumped bail](#) to flee to [Cuba](#) in late 1968. There, he received red-carpet treatment. Cleaver was set up in a Havana penthouse with his own personal maid and cook. The penthouse was stocked with all the food, rum, and cigars he would need. The hospitality soon ended. Having received information that the [CIA](#) had infiltrated the Black Panther Party, Castro could no longer trust them. Cleaver then decided to head to Algeria, sending word to his wife to meet him there. Cleaver had set up an international office for the Black Panthers in Algeria. Following [Timothy Leary's Weather Underground](#)-assisted [prison escape](#), Leary stayed with Cleaver in Algeria; however, Cleaver placed Leary under "revolutionary arrest" as a [counter-revolutionary](#) for promoting drug use.

Cleaver also cultivated an alliance with [North Korea](#) in 1969, and BPP publications began reprinting excerpts from [Kim Il Sung's](#) writings. Although leftists of the time often looked to Cuba, [China](#), and [North Vietnam](#) for inspiration, few had paid any attention to the secretive [Pyongyang](#) regime. Bypassing US travel restrictions on North Korea, Cleaver and other BPP members made two visits to the country in 1969-70 with the idea that the *juche* model could be adapted to the revolutionary liberation of African-

Americans. Taken on an official tour of North Korea, Cleaver expressed admiration at "the DPRK's stable, crime-free society which provided guaranteed food, employment, and housing for all, and which had no economic or social inequalities".

Byron Vaughn Booth (former Panther Deputy Minister of Defense) claimed that, after a trip to the DPRK, Cleaver discovered his wife had been having an affair with Clinton Robert Smith Jr.. Booth told the FBI he had witnessed Cleaver shoot and kill Smith with an AK47. Elaine Mokhtefi, in the *London Review of Books*, writes that Cleaver confessed the murder to her shortly after committing it.

In his 1968 book *Soul on Fire*, Cleaver made several claims regarding his [exile](#) in Algeria, including that he was supported by regular [stipends](#) from the government of [North Vietnam](#), which the United States was then bombing. Cleaver stated that he was followed by other former criminals turned [revolutionaries](#), many of whom (including Booth and Smith) [hijacked planes](#) to get to Algeria.

Split and new directions

Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton eventually fell out with each other over the necessity of armed struggle as a response to [COINTELPRO](#) and other actions by the government against the Black Panthers and other radical groups. Also Cleaver's interest in North Korea and global anti-imperialist struggle drew ire from other BPP members who felt that he was neglecting the needs of African-Americans at home in the US. Following his expulsion from the Black Panthers in 1971, the group's ties with North Korea were quickly forgotten. Cleaver advocated the escalation of armed resistance into [urban guerilla warfare](#), while Newton suggested the best way to respond was to put down the gun, which he felt alienated the Panthers from the rest of the black community, and focus on more pragmatic reformist activity by lobbying for increased social programs to aid African-American communities and anti-discrimination laws. Cleaver accused Newton of being an [Uncle Tom](#) for choosing to cooperate with white interests rather than overthrow them.

Cleaver left Algeria in 1972, moving to Paris, [France](#), becoming a [born again Christian](#) during time in isolation living underground. He turned his hand to fashion design; three years later, he released codpiece-revival "virility pants" he called "the Cleavers", enthusing that they would give men "a chance to assert their masculinity".

Cleaver returned to the United States in 1977 to face the unresolved attempted murder charge. By September 1978, on bail as those

proceedings dragged on, he had incorporated Eldridge Cleaver Ltd, running a factory and West Hollywood shop exploiting his "Cleavers", which he claimed liberated men from "penis binding". He saw no conflict with his newfound Christianity, drawing support for his overtly sexual design from 22 [Deuteronomy](#). The long-outstanding charge was subsequently resolved on a plea bargain reducing it to assault. A sentence of 1,200 hours' community service was imposed.

Later life

In the early 1980s, Cleaver became disillusioned with what he saw as the commercial nature of [evangelical Christianity](#) and examined alternatives, including [Sun Myung Moon](#)'s campus ministry organization [CARP](#). He later led a short-lived [revivalist](#) ministry called Eldridge Cleaver Crusades, "a hybrid synthesis of [Islam](#) and [Christianity](#) he called 'Christlam'", along with an auxiliary called the Guardians of the Sperm.

Cleaver was then later [baptized](#) into [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) (LDS Church) on December 11, 1983, periodically attended regular services, lectured by invitation at LDS gatherings, and was a member of the Church in good standing at the time of his death in 1998.

By the 1980s, Cleaver had become a [conservative Republican](#). He appeared at various Republican events and spoke at a California Republican State Central Committee meeting regarding his political transformation. In 1984, he ran for election to the [Berkeley](#) City Council but lost. Undaunted, he promoted his candidacy in the Republican Party primary for the [1986 Senate race](#) but was again defeated. The next year, his 20-year marriage to [Kathleen Neal Cleaver](#) came to an end.

In 1988, Cleaver was placed on [probation](#) for [burglary](#) and was briefly jailed later in the year after testing positive for [cocaine](#). He entered [drug rehabilitation](#) for a stated [crack cocaine](#) addiction two years later, but was arrested for possession by Oakland and [Berkeley Police](#) in 1992 and 1994. Shortly after his final arrest, he moved to [Southern California](#), falling into poor health.

Death

On May 1, 1998, at 6:20 A.M., Cleaver, aged 62, died at [Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center](#) in [Pomona, California](#).[CNN Obituary](#) He is buried at Mountain View Cemetery in [Altadena, California](#).

Soul on Ice (1968)

While in prison, he wrote a number of philosophical and political essays, first published in Ramparts magazine and then in book form as *Soul on Ice*. In the essays, Cleaver traces his own development from a "supermasculine menial" to a radical black liberationist, and his essays became highly influential in the black power movement.

In the most controversial part of the book, Cleaver acknowledges committing acts of rape, stating that he initially raped black women in the ghetto "for practice" and then embarked on the serial rape of white women. He described these crimes as politically inspired, motivated by a genuine conviction that the rape of white women was "an insurrectionary act". When he began writing *Soul on Ice*, he unequivocally renounced rape and all his previous reasoning about it.

The essays in *Soul on Ice* are divided into four thematic sections: "Letters from Prison", describing Cleaver's experiences with and thoughts on crime and prisons; "Blood of the Beast", discussing race relations and promoting black liberation ideology; "Prelude to Love - Three Letters", love letters written to Cleaver's attorney, Beverly Axelrod; and "White Woman, Black Man", on gender relations, black masculinity, and sexuality.

"[W]hen I considered myself ready enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. I did this consciously, deliberately, willfully, methodically -- though looking back I see that I was in a frantic, wild and completely abandoned frame of mind. Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women...I felt I was getting revenge. From the site of the act of rape, consternation spread outwardly in concentric circles. I wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race."

Eldridge Cleaver, 1968

References

- ¹ [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e ^f [Gates, Henry Louis; Higginbotham, Eveleyn B. \(2004\). *African American Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 173-175. ISBN 019516024X. Retrieved 2012.](#)
- ² [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e ^f ^g [Kifner, John \(May 2, 1998\). "Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Who Became G.O.P. Conservative, Is Dead at 62". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2012.](#)
- ³ [^] [Patterson, Lindsay \(April 27, 1969\). "Eldridge Cleaver; Post-Prison Writings and Speeches". *The New York Times*. Retrieved June 10, 2013.](#)
- ⁴ [^] ^a ^b ^c [Cleaver, Eldridge \(1991\) \[1968\]. *Soul On Ice*. Dell/Delta. ISBN 0-385-33379-X, p. 106.](#)

Further reading

- Rout, Kathleen (1991). *Eldridge Cleaver*. Boston: Twayne Publ. ISBN 0805776206.
- Young, Benjamin R. (2013), *North Korea and the American Radical Left, Washington, D.C.: North Korea International Documentation Project*

See also

- [*The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*](#), a documentary about the Black Panther Party released in 2015.

External links

- ["Cleaver, Eldridge"](#), *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition. 2001-07
- [From Muslim to Mormon: Eldridge Cleaver's Rhetorical Crusade](#)
- [Guide to the Eldridge Cleaver Papers at The Bancroft Library](#)
- [PBS Interview with Eldridge Cleaver, Frontline](#)
- [Interview with Eldridge Cleaver, Reason Magazine](#)

	<u>Peace and Freedom</u>	
	nominee for	
Preceded by None	<u>President of the United States</u>	Succeeded by <u>Benjamin Spock</u>
	<u>1968</u>	

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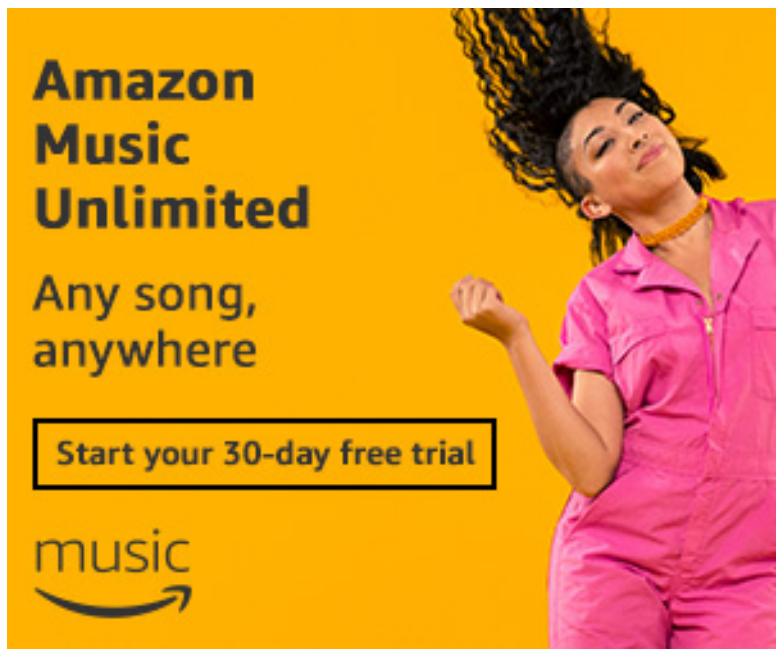
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