CIVIL RIGHTS & SELF-DEFENSE: THE FICTION OF NONVIOLENCE, 1955-1968

by

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Preface

If we must die--let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die--oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

--"If We Must Die" by Claude McKay, 1922

For much of its history, the southern United States was a terrible and terrifying place for black people to live. In the antebellum period, slavery relegated Africans in America to a life under the lash. In the 1880's, white racists engineered and fine-tuned the mechanisms of racial separation and applied them enthusiastically to black folk in order to institutionalize inequality; they also systematized a program of racial violence, including assaults and lynchings, to insure their place above black people in the region's social hierarchy. Implicit and extreme violence held the mechanisms of segregation in place through the 1960's. As one scholar has recently observed, "Negroes were so far outside the human family that the most inhuman actions could be visited upon them . . . Black life could be snuffed out on whim, you could be killed because some ignorant white man didn't like the color of your shirt or the way you drove a wagon."[1]

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[1]Charles M. Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15.

It was not until the 1950's and 1960's that cracks began to appear in the South's racial hegemony, and black activists used nonviolent tactics to widen these cracks into full-blown civil rights reform. During this period, nonviolent activists challenged Jim Crow segregation in the United States by nullifying the stultifying violence that had come to define the region. Leading the nation to a new understanding of responsible citizenship and biracial unity, these activists offered black and white Americans alike a new way of living their lives: not only as citizens of a multicultural nation-state but also as members of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called a "beloved community" in which diverse peoples could come together and live in harmony. They also helped to mask the deep scars left on the South by the region's "peculiar institution": slavery. Nonviolence, as both a protest tactic and a way of life, provided the means to a better way of human interaction.

But most Americans, including many civil rights activists, were slow to embrace what nonviolence required. Wary of such a self-sacrificing concept, they shied away

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Another historian has noted:

> Perhaps the most important characteristic of American race relations in the early 1950's was the degree to which terror reigned in the black community and in the black mind. Black Southerners lived in a police state, a place where violence—officially sanctioned violence—could be visited upon them in a moment, and for no reason at
> all . . . And the oppressors could do anything they wanted and get away with it.

Fred Powledge, Free at Last?: The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 33.

from the implications of a nonviolent way of life.[2] Nonviolence seemed "un-American" on some level to many and, indeed, it was a foreign idea, imported in its most recent form from the Indian subcontinent.[3] Many white Americans, perplexed by the rapidity of social change in the 1960's, saw nonviolence as communist-inspired and deviant; some black activists did not trust it to correct the accumulated evils of four hundred years of racial discrimination and prejudice. To many black people, striving for freedom and equality in the southern United States, it seemed much more in keeping with traditional American ideals to strike back at those who kept swinging at them. Accordingly, the question of whether or not to defend oneself became a critical question for the students, ministers, and others—mostly black, some white—engaged in civil rights protests.

Scholars have written extensively about the theory of nonviolence in the civil

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[2]If nonviolence seemed strange, odd, irrational, disturbing, exotic, unexpected, and unlikely to many Americans, then these perceptions helped nonviolence to be a successful method of social protest in the American South. As many of its practitioners have pointed out, the violence elicited by nonviolent protest helped to create a public spectacle that dramatized the plight of Afro-Americans, and ultimately brought about reform.

[3]Staughton and Alice Lynd have detailed a continuous tradition of nonviolence in American culture and society since the nation's beginnings in Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History rev. ed. (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis, 1995); however, I tend to agree with Inge Powell Bell in emphasizing the newness of nonviolence as related to civil rights reform. She has written: "The philosophy of nonviolence brought a new and essentially alien viewpoint into American politics. In attempting such an innovation, the movement was diverging markedly from the pragmatic, nonideological character of most American social movements." See Bell, CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence (New York: Random House, 1968), 32. The Lynds concede the originality of the civil rights movement when they write: "With the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956 and still more with the student sit-ins of 1960, nonviolence became a more significant social force than at any earlier period in the history of the United States." See Lynd & Lynd, xxi.

rights movement, including: redemptive suffering; satyagraha (a Hindu concept meaning, roughly, "truth-strength" or "love-power")[4]; peaceful resistance; the influence of Gandhian philosophy as adopted by Martin Luther King; and civil disobedience through nonviolent protest, as exemplified by the 1955-56 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, and the sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. They also have written widely on the growing militarism among activists after 1965, the rising tide of black nationalism of the period, the introduction of Black Power, and the injection of violent rhetoric into the latter stages of the movement. Most scholars tend to frame any discussion of the civil rights movement in terms of a dichotomy between "violence" and "nonviolence": descriptive categories for antithetical modes of protest, with nonviolence being normative. The prevailing and generally accepted consensus maintains that nonviolence shaped and directed the movement up until roughly 1965, when the movement—thrown off course by frustration, impatience, disillusionment, and combativeness—"turned" violent. Hinging on Stokely Carmichael's famous "Black Power" speech during the 1966 march in Greenwood, Mississippi as a marker of discontinuity, a clear dichotomy seems to exist between the pre-1965, nonviolent movement and the post-1965, violent movement.[5]

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[4]For more on the concept of satyagraha, see Gandhi's autobiography: Mohandas K. Gandhi, The Story of My Experiments with Truth 2d. ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1940).

[5]The term "violent" here refers to the behavior of activists, not counter-protestors. Clearly, violence was a well-worn implement in the toolbox of segregationists long before 1965. A typical example of the dichotomy in question may be found in August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, and John Bracey's definitive Black Protest in the Sixties 2d ed.

Certain findings have led me to question the authenticity of this dichotomy. My research suggests that this apparent transformation from nonviolence to violence was neither quick nor clean nor ordered; in fact, it was hardly a transformation at all. Incongruities exist which do not fit this otherwise serviceable view of the civil rights movement, namely: Robert F. Williams, who organized armed resistance in 1957 against the Ku Klux Klan in Monroe, North Carolina, and wrote Negroes with Guns (1962), an affirmation of armed self-defense by blacks; and the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed guard unit in Bogalusa, Louisiana, which also combated the Klan and provided protection for civil rights activists pledged to nonviolence. Historians have treated Williams and the Deacons—if they have treated them at all—as irregularities: aberrations in the wider context of the movement, or as harbingers of groups like the Black Panther Party, which used the gun as both a rhetorical tool and a weapon to bring about revolution.

Consequently, the myth of the nonviolent movement has persisted to this day. Suggestions that something other than a nonviolent consensus existed have gone

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(New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc., 1991). They write:

> Disillusionment with the national administration and with white liberals, the fragmentation of the Negro protest movement, the enormous difficulties that stood in the way of overcoming the problems of the black masses, and the riots that erupted spontaneously in 1964 and 1965 as a consequence of the anger and frustration of the urban slum dwellers—all set the stage for the dramatic appearance of the black power slogan in the summer of 1966 . . . If the spirit of redemptive love seemed to characterize black protest during the first half of the decade, a spirit of rage seemed to be the hallmark of the second.

See Meier, Rudwick and Bracey, 17, 127.

unnoticed, unbeknownst, or simply ignored by many scholars and students of the movement. Were Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defense and Justice indeed anomalies, or did they represent an underlying ambiguity within the movement? How did these activists fit within the accepted nonviolent paradigm defined by "mainstream" civil rights activists? I hope to answer these questions by examining the mindset of civil rights workers employing armed self-defense during the late 1950's and early 1960's, before the advent of Black Power, when self-defense became something of an assumption by those within the movement. "Very little attention has been paid to the possibility," another scholar recently suggested, "that the success of the movement in the rural South owes something to the attitude of local people toward self-defense."[6] This study offers a corrective.

Focusing on the movement itself, it situates the seemingly aberrant ideas of activists such as Robert Williams and Charles Sims—black men who advocated armed self-defense during the early phases of the movement—into a broader historical context. Chapter I treats Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and how he sometimes rationalized, but ultimately eschewed self-defense. Chapter II explores the life of Robert F. Williams, who has been customarily overlooked by civil rights historiography. Filtered through an analysis of the activism of Malcolm X, famed Nation of Islam minister, Chapter III discusses the means scholars have traditionally used to discuss the civil rights movement in the United States, or what I have termed the violent/nonviolent dichotomy. Chapter IV treats the Deacons for Defense and Justice, while Chapter V, focusing on the Black

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[6]Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom, 205.

Panther Party, illustrates how some activists used self-defense to justify other kinds of violence. As a reprise, the epilogue offers some conclusions and presents a new model for conceptualizing the struggle for black equality; it also treats Robert Williams' life in exile, his return to the United States, and the surprising eulogy Rosa Parks delivered at his funeral.

The central questions of this study are: How did a position of "violence," which to many included the use of force in self-protection, become marginalized when in fact most black people saw self-defense as common sense? What part did self-defense play in the civil rights movement during the years 1955-1968? To frame this inquiry, I have included a number of events and personalities familiar to students of black history, such as the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, and Rosa Parks, who courageously launched the modern-day civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. While they have been written about and discussed thoroughly in other sources, these inclusions, as recognizable signposts along the circuitous path of black equality, help to emphasize the importance of self-defense. Specifically, Parks' actions in Montgomery in 1955 and her words forty-one years later at Robert Williams' funeral symbolically bracket the story of civil rights and self-defense.

In addressing what this dissertation attempts, it might prove fruitful to address what it does not attempt. It is a treatise on armed self-defense by black Americans in the 1950's and 1960's. While it deals with themes of violence and its consequences, it is not a generalized discussion of violence in the movement: neither that done to protestors nor by them. It is not a full-scale analysis of the doctrines and ethical dimensions of

nonviolence. It is not a complete treatment of the civil disturbances (or uprisings, or urban rebellions, or riots, as they have been incongruously labeled) in America's metropolitan areas during this time, nor is it a full discussion of revolution in the 1960's. It is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis of the civil rights movement; rather, it is intended to fill in what I see as gaps in the existing historiography, particularly with regard to the question of self-defense. Discussions of these other topics are limited to the extent that they relate to self-defense. In many ways, this study picks up where Harold Cruse's Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (1967) leaves off.[7] My intent is to supplement, not replace.

A few definitions may also prove helpful here. Self-defense "is about repelling

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[7]See Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967), 347-401. In this epochal work on black thought in the 1960's, Cruse includes a chapter entitled "The Intellectuals and Force and Violence," which briefly discusses the phenomenon of armed self-defense. "The issue of armed self-defense," he writes, "as projected by [Robert] Williams in 1959, presaged the emergence of other factors deeply hidden within the Negro movement," namely latent revolutionary nationalism. Cruse at one point mischaracterizes self-defense as "retaliatory," but shrewdly points out that, as essentially a "holding action," it cannot be revolutionary by itself. He also includes a chapter entitled "From Monroe to Watts," in which he asserts (without explanation) that the "Watts uprising carried the concept of armed self-defense to its logical and ultimate extreme." Cruse calls for a scholarly treatment of the subject. "The faulty analysis of the meaning of armed self-defense has encouraged an extreme form of one-sided activism that leads to blind alleys and dead ends." He suggests that a failure to understand the implications of self-defense contributed to the undoing of the civil rights movement itself. "Faulty analysis of self-defense as a tactic has served to block a serious consideration of the necessity to cultivate strategies on the political, economic, and cultural fronts," he writes. "It has inspired such premature organizations as revolutionary action movements and black liberation fronts, which come into being with naively one-sided, limited programs, all proving to be abortive and short-lived."

attacks"; broadly considered, it also concerns "fending off possible violation of rights."[8] It is fundamentally a matter of legal and ethical concern. The Model Penal Code, a standardized American legal reference drafted in 1962, declares that "the use of force upon . . . another is justifiable when the actor believes that such force is immediately necessary."[9] Throughout history, philosophers, legal scholars and even some pacifists have tended to agree that self-defense is permissible; controversies surrounding it have centered on whether the impending violation was sufficient to trigger a legitimate response. Self-defense is traditionally understood as a legal defense of justification as opposed to a defense of excuse (insanity, for example); therefore, a person justified in self-defense who is otherwise guilty of an egregious wrongdoing such as murder has, in the eye of the law, done nothing wrong.

Justifiable self-defense necessitates three considerations: imminence, necessity, and proportionality.[10] The attack must be imminent, which means that it is about to

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[8]George P. Fletcher, "Domination in the Theory of Justification and Excuse," University of Pittsburgh Law Review 57 (Spring 1996): 556. I have adopted Fletcher's definition of self-defense as my own. The University of Pittsburgh Law Review has devoted an entire issue to self-defense as related to battered women; much of what I have learned about the modern legal aspects of self-defense stems from this source. See "Symposium: Self-defense and Relations of Domination: Moral and Legal Perspectives on Women Who Kill," University of Pittsburgh Law Review 57 (Spring 1996): 461-824.

[9]Model Penal Code § 3.04(1).

[10]For an overview of traditional self-defense doctrine, especially in relation to minorities, see Cynthia Kwei Yung Lee," Race and Self-defense: Toward a Normative Conception of Reasonableness," Minnesota Law Review 81 (December1996): 377-398; see also "Symposium," supra note 5, and the Model Penal Code, supra note 7. See also Suzanne Uniacke, Permissible Killing: The Self-Defense Justification of Homicide (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

happen, and the time for defense is now. A pre-emptive strike against a feared aggressor is illegal force used too soon, and retaliation against an assailant who has already harmed but no longer poses a threat is illegal force used too late; therefore, justifiable self-defense must be neither too soon nor too late. If a defender confronts an attacker who no longer poses a threat, he or she in effect becomes the attacker. Justifiable self-defense also presumes that the defendant has no other means of escape from the assailant.[11] Finally, the defense must be proportional to the attack: a defender who shoots someone who has punched him risks using excessive force, thereby negating the claim to self-defense.[12]

In a pre-emptive strike, the "defender" calculates that the enemy is planning to attack or most likely to attack in the future. The defender then reasons that it is wiser to strike first than to wait until the actual aggression. Such pre-emptive strikes are universally illegal because they are not based on actual aggression: they are based on a forecast of how the enemy is likely to behave in the future. These considerations bear crucially upon understanding the mindset of activists who armed themselves for defensive purposes during the civil rights movement. They also bear on how the claim to self-defense was sometimes abused.

By "civil rights movement," I mean the period roughly from the landmark

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[11]In English common law, this concept is known as "duty to retreat." See Richard Maxwell Brown, No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

[12]A her, on the other hand, might well be justified. Because of the respective difference in genders, a woman who resorts to shooting a male assailant might legitimately claim self-defense. See University of Pittsburgh Law Review, supra note 3.

Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education (1954) through an undefined time in the late 1960's, during which black Americans made significant strides toward political equality with white Americans. I am aware that this periodization of the movement is fairly arbitrary, and that other scholars have argued persuasively for a redefinition of what the movement entails. Some have demonstrated that a "movement" existed in the 1930's and 1940's. Others have argued that the latter sixties marked not the end but rather a new phase of the movement. Still others have observed that what we normally consider to be the civil rights movement was actually a series of movements by different, special-interest groups; but, because I am focusing largely on the trajectory of Martin Luther King's career, as well as reactions to his value system, the definition above works well for my purposes. As various writers have noted, King did not equal the movement; that is, the civil rights movement, as a bottom-up, grassroots struggle, did not rely on the top-down leadership of one single person. But he was an important personage in it, and his lifespan charted the peaks and valleys of public opinion regarding self-defense; therefore, his story runs as a constant thread through this dissertation.

This study uses the years 1955 and 1968 as terminuses: 1955, because it marked the popularization of nonviolent direct action in the Montgomery bus boycott, and 1968, because it signified not only the symbolic death of nonviolence with the assassination of Dr. King but also the mutation of self-defense into something terrible and strange. In setting the period, I should make clear that I am not wholly convinced that "the movement" is over (the struggle certainly is not); however, it seems to me that the organized protest, biracial unity, and spirit of reform which defined black-white relations

during this period currently lie dormant.

"Violence" is much more difficult to pin down; in fact, much of this study aims to arrive at a suitable explanation of what this term means. Generally speaking, by violence I mean bringing force, or the threat of force, against a person to initiate something against his or her will. The significance of this definition should become apparent in assessing how some activists justified their actions. During the sixties, violence meant a multitude of things. For example, a staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence noted in 1969 that the term "violence" had been used "to discredit forms of behavior considered improper, reprehensible, or threatening by specific groups which, in turn, may mask their own violent response with the rhetoric of order or progress."[13] In other words, it was a term laden with political considerations, presumptive of a pre-existing state of order; therefore, its meaning shifted shape and changed over time. Those in positions of power tended to define what constituted violent behavior.

"Nonviolence" is a bit easier, meaning the abstention from violence as a matter of principle. "Nonviolent direct action" refers to the practice of nonviolence in demonstrations to secure political ends. Finally, I have chosen the terms "black" and "Afro-American" to refer to those people of African descent living in the United States because these terms reflect the spirit of protest that carried the movement during this

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[13]Jerome H. Skolnick, The Politics of Protest: Violent Aspects of Protest & Confrontation (A Staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence) (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 4.

time.

I have borrowed the subtitle of this dissertation from Dr. George Lipsitz, Professor of Ethnic Studies at UC San Diego. He and I were discussing the tactics of the movement after a panel discussion at the annual convention of the Organization of American Historians in San Francisco in 1997 when he mentioned something about the "fiction of nonviolence." The phrase lodged in my mind. While he might disagree with my appropriation of it, the phrase makes sense with regard to the role of self-defense in civil rights agitation because it reflects the notion that the ideology and practice of self-defense, from 1955 to 1968, stemmed from a larger tradition of resistance in Afro-American communities nationwide. Nonviolence, as espoused by Dr. King and others, represented a break in that tradition. The word "fiction" here implies something more apocryphal than fictitious. In other words, the phrase "fiction of nonviolence" is not meant to suggest that nonviolence was something imagined or feigned; it is instead meant to suggest that the impulse to defend oneself, using force if necessary, was much more common than nonviolence among most black Americans during this period. To understand the importance of self-defense to many black Americans, one must consider it not only in relation to the civil rights movement but also within the greater context of Afro-American history.

Undoubtedly, my ambivalence concerning the legitimate use of violence infuses every aspect of this project. Like most Americans, I profess to deplore violence; like most Americans, I am simultaneously and paradoxically enthralled by it. I am neither pacifist nor pugilist. I like to think that I would fight, when confronted with injustice, for

what is right, but I am not sure how.

It is not my intention, in treating the subject of self-defense in the civil rights movement, to glorify violence, nor is it my intention to disparage nonviolent direct action; in fact, I am as equally intrigued by the awe-inspiring use of nonviolence during the civil rights movement as I am by Americans' traditional reliance on self-protection in the pursuit of constitutional freedom (here I am thinking of the colonial-era "Gadsden flag," depicting a coiled snake, ready to strike, with the slogan "Don't Tread on Me"). My irresolute approach, which hopefully yields a higher degree of objectivity, probably derives from a notion introduced to me by several of the activists studied in this project: that is, that nonviolence and self-defense were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Few would question the effectiveness of nonviolent direct action in the American civil rights movement. I certainly do not. It worked where other methods failed. In spite of the utility of nonviolence (or perhaps because of it), this study proceeds from the assumption that human nature does not normally dictate the absorption of punishment. Afro-Americans are no different in this regard. Historically, most Christians have seemed to prefer the Old Testament's crude maxim "an eye for an eye" instead of Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek."[14] If one considers how prone people have been throughout human history to retribution and revenge, nonviolence becomes that much more extraordinary, particularly within the cultural matrix of what one scholar has called

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[14]The proportionality theory of the former, as one scholar has noted, requires much less charity than the latter. See Roger Lane and John J. Turner, eds., Riot, Rout, and Tumult: Readings in American Social and Political Violence (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), xi.

the "most violent nation in the Western world."[15] In the 1960's, as now, nonviolence necessitated a counter-intuitive response that subverted an attacker by effectively nullifying his actions. Like an asexual microbe replicating itself, violence causes retributive violence, which in turn leads to more violence; however, nonviolence was, and continues to be, capable of breaking this destructive reproduction. For this reason, it remains a thing of wonder, sublime in its possibilities. I tend to agree with James Hanigan, who has noted that the importance of nonviolence is that it points us to certain human possibilities, holds out a vision of human life, and charts a way to the realization of those possibilities and vision. "Above all else," he has written, "it makes lucidly clear the central question of the nature and extent of human responsibility for our own growth in humanness."[16]

Poking a subject with the analytical trident of race, class, and gender can yield terrific results. In this study, the racial tine is implicit; the other two are less obvious. For example, it would be simple to argue that middle-class values naturally conformed to nonviolent direct action, whereas working-class values seemed readily to adhere to self-defense; however, this was not necessarily the case. In Monroe, North Carolina, a certain blue-collar roughness launched the Union County NAACP out of its stagnant complacency into cutting-edge reform; Charles Sims and Percy Lee Bradford were men who worked with their hands in Bogalusa and also advocated self-defense. Conversely, it

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[15]Ibid.

[16]James P. Hanigan, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence

could be argued that King's middle-class sensibilities might have made him more receptive to the requirements of nonviolence, whereas Malcolm's rough-and-tumble life as a pimp and street hustler left him predisposed to the necessities of self-defense. But, apart from these observations, the analogy <nonviolence: middle-class :: self-defense: working-class> proves weak. Nonviolence, which straddled class lines as a unifying civil rights philosophy, defies classification as a bourgeois concept; similarly, too many upper- and middle-class blacks, particularly among the intelligentsia, embraced self-defense for it to be labeled "working-class."

With regard to gender, self-defense represented a man's responsibility and duty: a male prerogative. Being a man required resorting to force, if circumstances required it. Women were not expected to engage in any sort of violent behavior, even in self-defense. Men were supposed to be ready and available to defend women if the need arose. Southern males, black and white alike, accepted a certain vision of womanhood that celebrated women as vessels of virtue, but also denied them agency. Women needed men to defend them and men—in order to be men—needed to defend the women who depended upon them. But many black women, out of necessity, rebelled against these restrictive expectations. Women such as Mabel Williams, Rebecca Wilson, Angela Davis, and Elaine Brown rejected their expected gender roles to take up arms in defense of their families, their bodies, and their homes.

While I have maximized considerations of race, class, and gender in this study, I have tried to submerge them in the text: to make them implicit rather than explicit. I have

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(Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984), 20.

attempted to convey the story of what happened, intermingled with my analysis and impressions, in a straightforward, narrative style. While certain debris remains, I trust the narrative to filter out the political biases, extraneous fluff, and nonsense that creep into any academic writing.

Four key themes recur in each of the following chapters. First, activists expressed self-defense as a prerogative of gender: a duty of black men. Activists consistently defined self-defense in gendered—rather than political or economic—terms. In doing so, they equated power with manhood. Self-defense, in addition to protecting one's family, is a traditionally masculine value in many cultures; black America in the 1960's was no different. Second, Afro Americans associated self-defense primarily with a communalist impulse toward social change. The word "communalist" here infers loyalty to a sociopolitical group based on racial identity. For Americans in general it was more associated with anti-communalist values of individualism and personal freedom; that is, outside Afro-American communities, self-defense carried few reformist or socially conscious overtones. As the civil rights movement progressed, it became easier and easier for black people to view self-defense as a gesture of protest. Third, talk of self-defense by blacks during this time illuminated the racial double standard of self-defense in the United States: while whites could legally defend themselves against attack, blacks who did so risked being labeled "violent," "crazy," or aggressive, and could expect no recourse from the law. Fourth, and finally, what little actual violence occurred in the movement on the part of blacks (and there was very little) almost universally reflected a response to white violence. When violence occurred during civil rights protest, white

people customarily initiated it.

Finally, in offering a tentatively favorable assessment of the use of armed self-defense by certain activists in the civil rights movement, I am aware that such a position accommodates some pretty strange bedfellows, including militiamen, survivalists, patriotic zealots, pro-gun extremists, and various other right-wing polemicists and reactionaries. It seems important to emphasize, lest this analysis become politicized and used for purposes other than those intended, that the historical situation in which armed self-defense arose has changed considerably. The need for black people to defend themselves during the civil rights movement arose from a set of specific historical circumstances. These circumstances have changed radically in the past thirty years, and the South, with the rest of the nation, has changed. No longer do any of us live in a society in which side arms play a necessary function. In 2000, the need to address the issue of gun violence, which has reached epidemic proportions in this country, has superceded most all other considerations. The right to fear arms now substantially outweighs the right to bear arms.

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"The Other Cheek": Relinquishing Self-Defense, 1955-1956

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

--Matthew 5: 38-39

In 1955, Winston Churchill, architect of Allied victory in World War II, resigned as prime minister of Britain. That same year, scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology produced the first ultra high-frequency (UHF) waves while their students crammed phone booths, sat atop flagpoles, and executed panty raids. Vladimir Nabokov wrote Lolita, and Salvador Dali painted his vision of the Last Supper. The AFL and CIO merged under the leadership of George Meany.

Ford introduced the Edsel, a medium-priced, gadgety car that promptly flopped; James Dean fatally crashed his Porsche into a much simpler Ford on a lonely California highway. Sugar Ray Robinson won the world boxing championship from Carl "Bobo" Olson, and the Brooklyn Dodgers beat the New York Yankees in a seven-game World Series, 4-3, after losing the first two games. Charlie "Bird" Parker, legendary jazz saxophonist, died, as did two other notable black Americans: Mary McCleod Bethune and Walter White. And in Montgomery, Alabama, a tired black seamstress named Rosa Parks started a revolution when she refused to give up her seat on a city bus.

Local black leaders in Montgomery had been searching for the ideal time and legal excuse to challenge the city's Jim Crow bus laws, and Parks provided the opportunity for which they had been looking. On the evening of Thursday, December 1, 1955, she paid her usual fare at the front of the bus, boarded at the "black entrance" at the rear, and took a seat near the middle, in the "no-man's land" between the black and white

sections. At a later stop, when the driver picked up several white passengers, he ordered the black riders to vacate their seats and move to the back of the bus. Parks refused. Police arrested her for violating the city's public transportation laws. In similar incidents during previous months, police arrested two other women, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, and local Negro activists sought to use their arrests as test cases to challenge local Jim Crow statutes, but questions of poise and character prevented them from doing so. Parks, a dignified southern lady, soft-spoken and resolute, presented no such problem.[1]

Black community leaders rallied behind the iron will of Parks to show their support for her decision not to yield to the bus company's segregation regulations. As they probed various means of mounting a protest, violent tendencies swelled and threatened to explode. In fact, it could be argued that the Montgomery bus boycott itself was a direct result of threats of violence. The decision to launch the boycott, following Parks' arrest on Friday, December 2, allegedly stemmed from rumors that blacks were threatening to "beat the hell out of a few bus drivers" and preparing for a fight; some

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[1]Rosa Parks' arrest has been recounted in many different sources. For example, see Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 128-129. Many accounts inaccurately characterize Rosa Parks as an automaton, pushed by weariness to challenge the bus driver's abuse (when asked why she did it, she reportedly replied that her feet hurt); actually, as a Highlander Folk School participant and NAACP administrator, she exhibited not only a consciousness of the larger struggle for black equality but also a history of social activism. For more on Parks, see her autobiography Rosa Parks: My Story (New York: Dial Books, 1992); see also Jo Ann Robinson, The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

expressed an urge to "give as good as we get."[2] Black community leaders such as E. D. Nixon and Jo Ann Robinson realized that they had to act quickly and proactively to capitalize on the situation and to prevent bloodshed.[3] To avert violent retaliation by local blacks, and to maintain resolution in the face of white disapproval, they agreed to endorse a boycott on Monday, December 5. Local blacks would decline to ride the city's buses for one day: an action that would grow into an extended, nonviolent protest lasting over a year. Over the span of a weekend, Parks, already a respected figure within the black community of Montgomery, became a symbol of the years of injustice and indignity blacks had suffered there, and her friends and neighbors rallied to her cause.

Like an insect trapped in amber, Montgomery was a place entombed by its past. Known as the "Cradle of the Confederacy," it was the capital of Alabama and, on February 4, 1861, the birthplace of the Confederate States of America. The city boasted not only a large livestock market but also diversified industry, which developed after the Civil War. It also served as marketing center for the region's fertile, black-soil farms. But one-crop farming and sharecropping had brought poverty to Montgomery and its

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[2]Stephen Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 65.

[3]E. D. Nixon was a civil rights activist and former Pullman car porter who founded not only the Montgomery branch of the NAACP in 1928 but also the local chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1938. Jo Ann Robinson was an English professor at Alabama State and stalwart of the Women's Political Council. Both played key roles in organizing the Montgomery Improvement Association, as did Ralph David Abernathy, pastor of the First Baptist Church. Abernathy, who would become King's closest personal friend in the movement, was arrested nineteen times with King between 1955 and 1968. For brief biographical sketches, see Ralph E. Luker, Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, No. 11 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1997).

environs in the first half of the twentieth century. The city had done its best to survive the triple ravages of the War, Reconstruction, and boll weevil, and its people remembered each vividly.

White Montgomerians, like other white Southerners, generally took pride in their city's heritage and distrusted change. For black residents to challenge segregation was neither easy nor without risk. Black community leaders steered Martin Luther King, Jr., the new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and a freshly minted Ph.D. student from Boston University, into the boycott's vacant generalship as director of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), an organizing committee created to facilitate the boycott. They knew the hazards involved in overturning the status quo in Montgomery, not the least of which meant incurring the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan. They needed someone to take the heat: a bellwether for their cause.

King, one of many cogs in the machine that would make the boycott succeed, met their needs. As a student leader and promising young scholar, he had already demonstrated considerable charisma, and did not take long to make his presence known as the new minister in town. He had the least to lose in relation to the local, established, black leaders there. He was, in a political (and very physical) sense, expendable; moreover, he was an excellent public speaker. He seemed like a natural choice to lead the boycott.

Understandably apprehensive about his leadership role, King moved cautiously. Fresh from graduate school and unsure of his abilities in the real world, he did not want to jeopardize his standing with his new congregation, an atypical assemblage of

professionals and faculty members from Alabama State College who suited King's needs for intellectual development and propriety. Yearning for direction, he leaned heavily on his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., for advice and guidance, as he always had when faced with difficulty. A product of a privileged, middle-class upbringing, King believed, like his father, that moderate politics was the best path for Negro advancement.[4] But in taking the helm of the MIA, he took the first step in what proved to be a distinguished career in radical politics.

King did not employ non-violent direct action in the early stages of the civil rights movement as a matter of protocol; in 1955, it was not a codified element of organized social protest. He learned the power of nonviolence comparatively late in his short life. How King came to embrace nonviolence is essential in understanding the larger movement, which relied in large part on nonviolent protest for its successes. It is also essential in understanding the complex role self-defense played in this struggle. To understand self-defense, one must first understand nonviolence, which came to be seen as the normative method of protest in the civil rights struggle.

Unfortunately, apprehending King's ontology can be tricky. His philosophy of nonviolence synthesized the teachings of Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi, but King never detailed his ideas in a rigorous or systematic way. It is therefore rather difficult to assemble the eclectic components that comprised his philosophical framework. Theologians and historians face the challenge of piecing together how King understood

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[4]See Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992 rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 43.

nonviolence, and Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955—the genesis of nonviolence in the black struggle for equality—provides a logical place to start.[5]

With much personal hardship, to the paradoxical delight of local blacks, the boycott dragged on. After the first few mass meetings, his friends and peers, mostly Dexter members, decided it was too dangerous to let King drive around town by himself anymore. Recognizing the threat of white retribution, they offered to escort him to and from meetings. They organized into a corps of drivers and bodyguards, using what weapons they had; for example, the Reverend Richmond Smiley toted his tiny .25-caliber Beretta.[6]

As the activists worked out a strategy for the boycott, outside forces complicated matters. On the evening of January 30, 1956, dynamite rocked King's home. An angry crowd gathered at the scene. One black man challenged a policeman who attempted to push him aside: "I ain't gonna move nowhere. That's the trouble now; you white folks is always pushin' us around. Now you got your .38 and I got mine; so let's battle it out."[7] King intervened, speaking to the crowd:

> I want you to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence . . . We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out across the centuries, "Love your enemies." This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.[8]

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[5]Adam Fairclough has pointed out the difficulties in disaggregating King's philosophical tenets. See Fairclough, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change," Phylon 47 (Spring 1986): 3.

[6]Branch, Parting the Waters, 161-62.

[7]Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound, 89.

[8]Ibid, 89-91. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1958; reprint, 1986), 137-138.

But while King defused the volatile situation with a message of peace, he prepared for war. Armed sentinels guarded the parsonage at night as repair work got underway. One of King's friends from college offered to guard him personally with a shotgun. King and the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, minister of the First Baptist Church, decided to arm themselves with side arms. "We felt we ought to be ready," Abernathy later recalled. "I asked King if he had any means of protection for him and his family. He said the only weapon he had was a butcher knife. He asked, 'What do you have?' I said, 'The only thing I have is a razor.' We decided that we should go downtown together and buy some weapons for our protection."[9] King's words and actions sent conflicting messages, reflecting a mind uncomfortable with senseless violence, yet unprepared to succumb without a fight.

The day after the bombing, King called on Alabama Governor James E. ("Big Jim") Folsom for state protection. Folsom offered to have state officers watch King's home, but King pressed further. "What we would like to have is to have you issue a

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[9]Abernathy, quoted in David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1986), 62. It was this matter-of-fact decision which led to the uneasy scene at King's house, two months later, in which Worthy almost sat on a handgun. See supra note 1. In late 1963, King would admit to having a gun in Montgomery. "I don't know why I got it in the first place," he mused. "I sat down with Coretta one night and we talked about it. I pointed out that as a leader of a nonviolent movement, I had no right to have a gun, so I got rid of it." King, quoted in Time (Jan. 3, 1964): 27; see Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 62, 642 note 48. Despite his insistence that he had banned firearms at the parsonage, a visitor in late February 1956, reported that King's bodyguards possessed "an arsenal." Letter from Glenn E. Smiley to John Swomley and Al Hassler, February 29, 1956; Clayborne Carson, ed. The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. (3 volumes, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994-) 3: 14 note 60. In further notations this source will be referred to as The King Papers.

permit to keep a gun in my car," he told Folsom.[10] The governor responded that he would have to speak with the sheriff about the matter. Folsom did not inform King, who had no knowledge of local gun laws, that he did not need a permit: it was perfectly legal to carry a firearm in a vehicle, so long as it was in plain view. Folsom then pigeonholed the request, which was eventually forgotten. Accompanied by the Reverend H. H. Hubbard, King and Abernathy went to the county sheriff's office on Wednesday, February 1, 1956, to request permits to allow the night watchmen at King's home to carry guns.[11] They apparently completed the required paperwork, though authorities denied the application.[12]

That very night, a bomb exploded at E. D. Nixon's house; again, luckily no one was injured. In the aftermath of the bombings, representatives of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) rushed to Montgomery to speak with King, who found himself in need of guidance. FOR, a pacifist group founded by Quakers and Episcopalians during World War I, had followed the story from afar, and sensed an opportunity to apply Gandhian strategy in Montgomery.

Alabama gets cold in the winter and early spring. The wind howls. The night comes down hard, flooding the valleys where the Tallapoosa, Tombigbee, and other rivers drain the darkness. Sometimes it snows. It was just such an evening in early March 1956, when Bayard Rustin, an ambassador of the Fellowship of Reconciliation

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[10]King, quoted in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 62.

[11]The King Papers 3: 40.

[12]"Negro Leader Fails to Get Pistol Permit," Montgomery Advertiser (February 4, 1956): 3B.

(FOR), and William Worthy, a black journalist, rapped on the front door of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at his parsonage in Montgomery.[13] Shivering from the chill, the two men waited apprehensively, hands crammed in their pockets. Armed guards, protecting the home against further terrorist attack, stood in the shadows nearby. Only a few weeks earlier, on January 30, someone had tossed a single stick of dynamite onto the King family's porch. It was now as bright as day: floodlights strung around the perimeter of the roof illuminated the yard. It was hardly a welcoming atmosphere.

But their anticipation outweighed any uneasiness they felt. Rustin and Worthy had heard a lot about the young preacher, especially in regard to his dynamism, his charisma, and his presence. He had stood up to the white establishment in Montgomery, addressed impassioned crowds at local mass meetings, and led successfully a black boycott of white-owned businesses. He was, by all accounts, a special person, and they looked forward to meeting him.

King's wife Coretta ushered the men inside while the young reverend fumbled with his tie in front of the bedroom mirror. He, too, was anxious. He anticipated talking with these men who sought to counsel him on the practical applications of nonviolence. Only four or five people in the United States knew—really knew—how to teach nonviolent direct action, and two of them were coming to his home. King was already familiar with the theory

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[13]The story of Rustin and Worthy's meeting with King has been retold in several sources. See Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 59-62, 72-73; Branch, Parting the Waters, 173-180; and Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound, 89-92.

behind it; after all, he had heard about Gandhian philosophy during his studies at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University. But he wanted to learn how it actually worked in practice, on the street, in everyday life. He was uneasy, even a little doubtful, but willing to listen. He knew he needed help in engineering the bus boycott that had paralyzed Montgomery's public transit system the past few months. Coretta told King that their visitors had arrived. He hurried to finish lacing up his shoes.

Meanwhile, Rustin took a seat on the living room sofa. Worthy sat, too, but as he lowered himself into an inviting, over-stuffed recliner, Rustin hissed, "Watch out, Bill! There's a gun in that chair!" Worthy halted in mid-squat and swivelled; indeed, a handgun lay in the seat. He pinched the grip between his thumb and forefinger, and gingerly moved the pistol to one side.

When King entered the room, he saw that his two visitors were visibly upset. Worthy gestured toward the gun and sternly asked King if he felt that firearms were compatible with a nonviolent movement. Surprised and embarrassed, King answered affirmatively, saying that he intended to harm no one unless violently attacked. The three men stayed up all night as Rustin attempted to persuade King that guns could hinder the success of their cause and that even the presence of guns ran counter to the philosophy developing behind what became the modern civil rights movement.

King defended his precaution. He was trying to practice nonviolence, he told Rustin, but he did not subscribe to the kind of pacifism championed by A. J. Muste, a labor-union organizer during the Great Depression. As a student at Crozer, King had heard Muste speak. "I was deeply moved by Dr. Muste's talk," he later wrote, "but far from convinced of the

practicability of his position."[14] He had written a paper while at Crozer which challenged Muste's notions of pacifism.

Rustin, who would become King's right-hand man, was adamant. He was most bothered by King's apparent lack of philosophical commitment. Rustin's first advice to King was to get rid of the guns around his house. He also encouraged him to think of the situation in Montgomery less as a boycott and more as a protest movement, to think of the method less as passive resistance and more as nonviolence. In Rustin's mind, Montgomery held the promise of becoming an international showcase for the power of nonviolence. King was thinking in less grandiose terms; however, to both men, the boycott meant more than a choice of seats on a city bus. It symbolized a direct challenge to racial injustice in the South.

Despite his theological acumen, King knew little about the practical implementation of nonviolence. "Like most people, I had heard of Gandhi," he reminisced, "but I had never studied him seriously."[15] Rev. Glenn Smiley—a white Southerner, Methodist preacher, and FOR worker—remembered his first meeting with King on February 27, 1956. Arriving with an armload of books on the subject, Smiley asked King about his familiarity with nonviolent doctrine. "I said to Dr. King," he later recalled, "'I'm assuming that you're very familiar [with] and have been greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.' And he was very thoughtful, and he said, 'As a matter of fact, no. I know who the man is. I have read some statements by him, and so on, and I will have to truthfully say'--and this is almost a direct quote--'I will

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[14]King, quoted in Staughton Lynd, ed., Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1966), 385.

[15]King, Stride Toward Freedom, 96.

have to say that I know very little about the man.'"[16] King wondered if Gandhi's methods could be transposed to the American South. Smiley inundated him with books such as Richard Gregg's Power of Nonviolence (1938) to show that they could be.[17]

The Power of Nonviolence used a clever metaphor to explain nonviolence. Gregg, who had studied Gandhi's methods while living in the Mahatma's ashram in India, conceived of nonviolence as "a sort of moral jiujitsu." Jiujitsu is an Eastern martial art that relies on throwing an opponent off balance. As an unexpected reaction to attack, nonviolence, like jiujitsu, would cause an opponent to falter. The person attacked would then control the situation as the assailant was "thrown" into a reassessment of his values and moral assumptions.[18]

Smiley saw King as a skeptical initiate of nonviolence. Writing to colleagues in the Fellowship of Reconciliation soon after his arrival to Montgomery, he told them that King

> wants to do right, but is too young and some of his close help is violent. King accepts, as an example, a body guard, and asked for [a] permit for them to carry guns. This was denied by the police, but nevertheless, the place [King's house] is an arsenal. King sees the inconsistency, but not enough. He believes and yet he doesn't

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[16]Smiley, quoted in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 68.

[17]Carson, The King Papers 3: 19.

[18]Richard Gregg, The Power of Nonviolence rev. ed. (London: George Routledge, 1938). King would maintain a vibrant correspondence with Gregg. The two exchanged ideas regarding their books. In 1959, Gregg instructed King on the particulars of travel in India, including bedding, eating, and dealing with mosquitoes. Gregg, letter to King, January 23, 1959, Box 27, IV, 1, Correspondence "G," Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University. Gregg also educated King with regard to Gandhi, sending him a copy of Joan Bondurant's Conquest of Violence (1958) and a two-volume set by Gandhi's secretary, Pyarelal, who chronicled the Mahatma's last years. Gregg, letter to King, December 20, 1958, Box 27, IV, 1, Correspondence "G," Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University.

> believe. The whole movement is armed in a sense, and this is what I must convince him to see as the greatest evil . . . If he can really be won to a faith in nonviolence there is no end to what he can do.[19]

Additionally, Bayard Rustin reported to some members of the War Resisters League, a coalition of conscientious objectors and pacifists, that there existed in Montgomery "considerable confusion on the question as to whether violence is justified in retaliation to violence directed against the Negro community."[20] Both Smiley and Rustin saw King's grasp on nonviolent doctrine as tenuous and sought to educate him. "For being so new at this," Smiley wrote in another letter, "King runs out of ideas quickly and does the old things again & again. He wants help."[21]

Appropriately, the young minister turned to Mohandas K. Gandhi for inspiration. In his struggle against British imperialism in India, Gandhi had insisted that a struggle against oppression must appeal to activist and non-activist alike, not only to a discontented minority but also to the majority of the community. He felt that a social movement relying on the tactics of nonviolence could not succeed without convincing a full majority of the people that its cause is just.[22]

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[19]Glenn Smiley, letter to Swomley and Hassler, February 29, 1956; The King Papers 3: 20.

[20]Rustin, "Report on Montgomery, Alabama," March 21, 1956; The King Papers 3: 20.

[21]Smiley, letter to Swomley, March 2, 1956; The King Papers 3: 18.

[22]See Bayard Rustin, Strategies for Freedom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 24.

Gandhi had revolutionized traditional Hindu teachings.[23] The concept of God as absolute truth is ubiquitous to Hindu philosophical thought; however, Gandhi made the subtle distinction that Truth is God, rather than vice versa. Struggling for an English word to describe his conception of enlightenment and salvation, he landed on the word "nonviolence," a term which proved somewhat puzzling to most Westerners. "To find Truth as God," he wrote, "the only means is Love, i.e. nonviolence . . ."[24] As one scholar has explained (quoting both Gandhi and King):

> In its active role nonviolence is a positive state of love, of doing good to the evil doers, of mercy; it "means the largest love, greatest charity." "It is the extreme limit of forgiveness." It is more akin to the Greek concept of agapé, of what Martin Luther King call[ed] "understanding goodwill."[25]

Gandhi equated love and nonviolence. Violence could lead only to brutishness, never truth; therefore, it held no utility for him. His uniqueness lay in the fact that he not only preached nonviolence but also practiced it to the exclusion of almost everything else in his life.

Conscientious objectors in America put a slightly different spin on Gandhi's teachings while remaining true to their spirit. According to Rustin, Gandhi also taught that in such an atmosphere, where the majority accepted the objectives of a social movement as valid, "protest becomes an effective tactic to the degree that it elicits brutality and oppression from

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[23]For more on Gandhi's teachings, see C. Seshachari, Gandhi and the American Scene: An Intellectual History and Inquiry (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Ltd., 1969), 83-101.

[24]Ibid, 84.

[25]Ibid, 89.

the power structure."[26] In other words, it was not the abstract injustice of the segregated South that later stirred the nation's conscience, but rather the spectacle of small children escorted by bayonet-wielding troops at Little Rock, protestors in Birmingham assaulted with police dogs and high-pressure water hoses, and marchers beaten and trampled at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.

Gandhi intrigued King, who devoured his writings. He also read War Without Violence, written by Krishnalal Shridharani in the late 1930's. Shridharani, a follower of Gandhi, conceptualized satyagraha--the power of truth, or "soul force" as it came to be known during the civil rights movement--as a weapon more formidable than anything oppressors could wield.[27] King would later reflect upon his reluctant acceptance of Gandhian philosophy and satyagraha. He wrote that, during seminary, he felt that the "turn the other cheek philosophy" and the "love your enemies philosophy" were valid "only when individuals were in conflict with other individuals"; when racial groups and nations were in conflict "a more realistic approach seemed necessary."[28] As he "delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi," his "skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished"; but, he confessed to having "merely an intellectual understanding and appreciation of the position, with no firm determination to organize it in a socially effective situation."

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[26]Rustin, Strategies for Freedom, 24.

[27]Krishnalal Shridharani, War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and Its Accomplishments (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939).

[28]King, "How My Mind Has Changed in the Last Decade," undated manuscript draft, Box 4, I-21, Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University.

Satyagraha he explained as a combination of ideas. "Satya," he wrote, "is truth which equals love, and agraha is force; 'satyagraha,' therefore, means truth-force or love force."[29] Promoted by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, satyagraha was an essential element of nonviolence.

Ideologically, King was receptive to the concept of nonviolence, yet far from fully committed to it at this stage in his life. His theological acumen was formidable; like most seminary students, he had wrestled with weighty, unanswerable questions about God and human nature and good and evil, and knew something about nonviolent theory from his studies at both Crozer and Boston University. Perhaps the most potent intellectual influence on King was that of theologian Reinhold Niehbur, who emphasized that those who were oppressed could not be free if they relied on moral persuasion while eschewing power and pressure. Niehbur also criticized Gandhian nonviolence on the grounds that it was often impractical, impossible, and exclusive; he emphasized that both nonviolence and violence involved coercion, and so one was not necessarily "more moral" than the other.[30]

As the Montgomery protest unfolded, King worked through his strategy of social change. "I had come to see early," he later wrote, "that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons

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[29]Ibid.

[30]See Seshachari, Gandhi and the American Scene, 127, 130. Clayborne Carson downplays the extent of King's intellectual engagement with Niehbur; however, he also concedes that King had not only written about Niehbur in graduate school but also corresponded with him in 1953. See Carson, ed., The King Papers 2: 139-140, 141-151, 222.

available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom."[31] King brought to the theory of nonviolence a concern with love and compassion, a benevolent worldview, and a theological background solidly grounded in Christian beliefs. To him, Jesus Christ exemplified love in its highest form, agapé, which transcended human difference and lent redemption to nonviolent activism. Rustin approached nonviolence from a moral but distinctly unreligious background; for him, nonviolence was a matter of right and wrong. King, by comparison, saw nonviolent direct action as an ultimate expression of faith in humanity, of charity towards all, of spiritual nonviolence--in short, of Christian love. As King explained, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi provided the method."[32]

Nonviolence, for King, worked on several basic premises. First, it connoted courage, not cowardice. It was active resistance to evil, not passive non-resistance. Second, it was redemptive, looking toward the creation of what King called "the beloved community," and what Gandhi had referred to as sarvodaya, the ideal society. Nonviolence sought to win over the opponent through reconciliation. Third, it attacked an unjust system itself rather than

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[31]King, Stride Toward Freedom, 85.

[32]Ibid. For more on King's understanding of nonviolence, see Lewis V. Baldwin, To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 61-62. David Garrow has pointed out that King's published works were heavily edited and partially ghostwritten, and has warned against scholars' "naive overreliance" on these texts. According to him, the "King" portrayed in many scholarly works is a "spiritual stick-figure" compared to "the actual man," and he has implored scholars to use only King's unedited, unpublished writings as primary sources. Garrow's scholarship is valuable (he has written the most comprehensive and insightful biography of King to date in Bearing the Cross), though I see little reason to treat King's edited, published works as anything other than King's own testimony. Certainly King's personality and the heart of his philosophy are expressed in his published books and essays, as well as in his extemporaneous writings. For a full explanation of this controversy, see Lewis V. Baldwin, There is a Balm in Gilead (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 11-14.

those living within that system. Hate the evil deed, King would say, not the evildoer. Fourth, it required "a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation." Unearned suffering was redemptive. Finally, nonviolence eradicated not only physical violence but "violence of the spirit": it created peace and spread love.[33]

Additionally, certain universal truths informed King's protest. He believed that people, within their own destinies, are good and free. He believed that God is both "toughminded" and "tenderhearted": a powerful but loving God. He believed that humankind fell from God's grace when Adam and Eve overstepped the bounds of their freedom, and that individuals continued to create problems for themselves when their actions impinged on the freedom of others. He believed that an imbalance of justice

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[33]One can actually see the development of King's philosophy of nonviolence by reading his notations in the margins of his copy of William Stuart Nelson's article "Satyagraha: Gandhian Principles of Non-Violent Non-Cooperation"; see Box 82, Folder 58, Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University. The marginalia reveals King's impressions while reading Nelson's article, published in the Autumn-Winter issue, 1957-58, of The Journal of Religious Thought. Here King first jotted down his notions of the supremacy of truth, and of nonviolence as a way of life; he also recorded how nonviolence avoids both external and internal violence, and how it distinguishes between evil and the evildoer. A more polished articulation of King's understanding of nonviolence may be found in Martin Luther King, "Pilgrimmage to Nonviolence," Stride Toward Freedom, particularly pages 102-104. See also Allan Boesak, "Coming In Out of the Wilderness: A Comparative Interpretation of the Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X," (Masters thesis, Kampden, Netherlands: J.H. Kok, 1976), 36, reprinted in David J. Garrow, Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Pub., 1989), 94; and James A. Colaiaco, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Paradox of Nonviolent Direct Action," Phylon 47 (1986): 18, reprinted in Garrow, King: Civil Rights Leader, 191. For more on sarvodaya, see Bondurant, Conquest of Violence, 6.

(toughmindedness) and love (tenderheartedness) caused disharmony. And he believed that persons must be respected because God loves them as individuals; that is, people are sacred.[34]

King's appeal to Christian sensibilities would allow his words to germinate in the South, a bastion of religious conservatism and Christian belief. Here, the union of Christianity and black protest was strong. The South provided the ideal setting for his message, and the black church provided the ideal vehicle for his strategy of nonviolent protest. He recognized not only the centrality of religion in southern black life and culture, but also the church as the vanguard of social revolution in the South; he saw that religion gave meaning and significance to spirituality and community.[35] King worked within the larger Afro-American tradition of protest through religious channels. Furthermore, the rhetoric of Christianity made his words more palatable to otherwise hostile white Southerners; that is, if it did not convert them to King's position, it at least eased some of their fears.[36]

In adopting nonviolence, King followed in the footsteps of William Whipper, Frederick Douglass, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Urban League, all of whom had emphasized nonviolence and moral suasion as the most practical methods for achieving integration and basic constitutional

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[34]See Otis Turner, "Nonviolence and the Politics of Liberation," Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center, 4 (Spring, 1977): 49-60, reprinted in Garrow, King: Civil Rights Leader, 985-999; Steinkraus, "The Dangerous Ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Scottish Journal of Religious Studies, 6 (1985): 20, reprinted in Garrow, King: Civil Rights Leader, 925. See also Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 927.

[35]Baldwin, Balm in Gilead, 175.

[36]Ibid, 186.

rights for black Americans. In other words, he was not the first black American to recognize the merits of nonviolence in addressing black needs. The philosophy of nonviolence especially influenced the organizing principles of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). CORE grew out of a series of actions by earlier movements and organizations, particularly the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist group founded by Quakers and Episcopalians during World War I. In February 1942, James Farmer, race relations secretary of FOR, suggested the creation of a group composed of pacifists and nonpacifists alike to utilize nonviolent direct action against racial discrimination. That same year, against segregated facilities in Chicago, Farmer and others used the sit-in techniques devised by labor organizers during the Great Depression. CORE established chapters in other major cities; by 1960, it was the oldest and most established of the direct action groups active in the United States.[37]

King's faith in nonviolence ran counter to the pervasive, if sometimes unspoken, sentiment among black Americans that freedom should come "by any means necessary." There existed a persistent and undeniable strain in Afro-American thought and history that championed the effectiveness of self-defense. For example, before the Civil War, Henry Highland Garnet, a black Presbyterian minister and one of the country's most militant spokesmen for equal rights and antislavery, survived by defending himself. He made

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[37]For more on the founding of CORE, see Inge Powell Bell, CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence (New York: Random House, 1968); Lynd, Nonviolence in America; and August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

compelling arguments for the moral justification of violent resistance to slavery, and felt that death in resistance was superior to life in obeisance.[38]

Frederick Douglass, the most outspoken and well-known abolitionist, also heralded self-defense, even though he abided by Garrisonian principles of nonviolence and challenged Garnet's militancy. He suggested that carrying guns would be a good practice to adopt as it would give blacks a better sense of their own manhood. When presented with a large cane in 1853, Douglass noted that "a good stick" could be as useful as a good speech "and often more effective."

> There are among the children of men, and I have gained the fact from personal observation, to be found representatives of all the animal world, from the most savage and ferocious to the most gentle and docile. Everything must be dealt with according to its kind. What will do for the Lamb will not do for the Tiger. A man would be foolish if he attempted to bail out a leaking boat with the Bible, or to extinguish a raging fire by throwing in a Prayer Book. Equally foolish would he look if he attempted to soften a slave-catcher's heart without first softening his head.[39]

Douglass hoped he would never have need of the cane, but resolved that if he ever met "a creature requiring its use," he would use the cane "with stout arm and humane motive."[40] For slave hunters he recommended, "A good revolver, a steady hand, and a determination to shoot down any man attempting to kidnap."[41]

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[38]Henry Highland Garnet, quoted in Steven H. Shiffrin, "The Rhetoric of Black Violence in the Antebellum Period," Journal of Black Studies 2 n 1 (September 1971): 45-56.

[39]Frederick Douglass, "A Terror to Kidnappers," Frederick Douglass' Paper (November 25, 1853); reprinted in Philip S. Foner, ed., The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 302.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Frederick Douglass, "The True Remedy for the Fugitive Slave Bill," Frederick Douglass' Paper (June 9, 1854); reprinted in Ibid, 326.

Southern laws, customs, and mores insured neither police protection nor assurance of pardon for blacks faced with the dilemma of defending themselves against violent attack. Then as now, using a weapon could bring as much harm to the defender as to the aggressor. For a black person, it could bring down the white power structure including the full weight of the judicial and legal systems, upon his or her head, as well as set into motion the extralegal mechanisms of repression such as mob vigilantism and lynching. It meant possible retribution not only to the person using the weapon but also to that person's household and community. But for many, the honor and self-esteem gained in self-defense counterbalanced these risks.

As a fundamental right protected by the Second, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Amendments, self-defense assumed a constitutional role seminal to the struggle for black equality. When self-defense entered congressional debates over these latter amendments and, in effect, became a privilege of whiteness during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it became a matter of principle concern for black Americans seeking the recognition of first-class citizenship.[42] Many black leaders advocated self-defense during this golden age of rope

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[42]See Robert J. Cottrol, Gun Control and the Constitution: The Courts, Congress, and the Second Amendment (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993); Stephen J. Halbrook, That Every Man Be Armed: The Evolution of a Constitutional Right (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984); and Clayton E. Cramer, For the Defense of Themselves and the State: The Original Intent and Judicial Interpretation of the Right to Keep and Bear Arms (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1994); see also Robert J. Cottrol and Raymond T. Diamond, "'Never Intended to be Applied to the White Population': Firearms Regulation and Racial Disparity—The Redeemed South's Legacy to a National Jurisprudence?" Chicago-Kent Law Review 70 (1995): 1307-1335, and Clayton E. Cramer, "The Racist Roots of Gun Control," Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy 4 (1995): 17-25.

and faggot.[43] For example, in 1889, John E. Bruce, a prominent black journalist, articulated the need for self-defense when he wrote:

> Under the present condition of affairs the only hope, the only salvation for the Negro is to be found in a resort to force under wise and discreet leaders . . . The Negro must not be rash and indiscreet either in action or in words but he must be very determined and terribly earnest, and of one mind to bring order out of chaos and to convince southern rowdies and cutthroats that more than two can play at the game with which they have amused their fellow conspirators in crime for nearly a quarter of a century.[44]

T. Thomas Fortune, the preeminent Afro-American editor of the early twentieth century, also urged blacks to use physical force to defend themselves and retaliate for outrages.[45]

Similarly, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, whose anti-lynching campaign stemmed from the deaths of three of her friends in Memphis, advised in Southern Horrors (1892) that "a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home."

> [I]t should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American friend does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life.[46]

Her first action after the Memphis lynchings was to arm herself. "I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched, because I expected some cowardly retaliation from

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[43]Also see August Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1966), 73.

[44]Peter Gilbert, ed., The Selected Writings of John Edward Bruce: Militant Black Journalist (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 31, 32.

[45]See Emma Lou Thornbrough, "T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Editor in the Age of Accomodation," J. H. Franklin and August Meier, eds., Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 22-23.

[46]Ida B. Wells, Southern Horrors and Other Writings, Jacqueline Jones Royster, ed. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 70.

the lynchers," she recalled in her autobiography. She felt that she had better "die fighting against injustice" than to "die like a dog or a rat in a trap." She had already determined "to sell my life as dearly as possible" if attacked. She felt it would "even up the score a bit" if she could take one lyncher with her. "The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs," she maintained, "the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged, and lynched."[47]

King disregarded this tradition with great effect. Nonviolence, for him, made self-defense obsolescent. But if he quickly became convinced of the virtues of nonviolence, others needed more convincing. Even the most committed leaders in Montgomery seemed reluctant to put all of their eggs into a nonviolent basket. In his autobiography Ralph Abernathy would later quote King as saying: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth will only end up in a blind generation and a toothless people"; however, he too was slow to warm to nonviolence.[48] Abernathy recalled when things "turned ugly" in Montgomery.

> We began to get threatening phone calls, many of them obscene. Virtually every one of MIA [the Montgomery Improvement Association]'s known leaders received such calls; and no matter how often you told your wife that anyone making anonymous threats would be too cowardly to carry them out, you never quite convinced her or yourself. You knew that in the past blacks had been gunned down from cover of darkness or else dragged to obscure wooded areas by masked men and then lynched. So violence was always a very real possibility, even when your demands were modest and expressed in the most moderate of terms.[49]

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[47]Aflreda M. Duster, ed., Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 62.

[48]Ralph David Abernathy, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 162.

[49]Ibid, 160.

His first impulse when threatened was to arm himself.[50]

Others relied on self-protection, too. Rosa Parks' husband kept a gun by his bed because of the threats and harassments his wife endured as an indicted boycott leader.[51] King recalled in Stride Toward Freedom that members of the executive board of the MIA would occasionally approach him in private to advocate a "more militant" approach. Some felt that "at least a modicum of violence" would convince whites that they "meant business and were not afraid." He told the story of a member of his church who suggested that they should "'kill off' eight or ten white people" to show they were no longer afraid. Such a sacrifice would also involve the federal government in an advantageous way.[52]

If King was tempted, he did not show it. Aware of some dissent, he remained convinced of the power of nonviolence. To Bayard Rustin's question "What is the attitude in the Negro community?" in Montgomery in the fall of 1956, King replied:

> The people are just as enthusiastic now as they were in the beginning of the protest. They are determined never to return to jim crow busses. The mass meetings are still jammed and packed and above all the busses are still empty. Every now and then we will hear some complaint, but the vast majority of the people are dedicated to sacrificing and sticking out to the finish. I think also there is a growing commitment to the philosophy of nonviolence on the part of the Negro community. Even those who were willing to get their guns in the beginning are gradually coming to see the futility of such an approach.[53]

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[50]See supra note 12.

[51]See The King Papers 3: 122 note 7.

[52]King, Stride Toward Freedom, 88.

[53]King, letter to Bayard Rustin, September 20, 1956, Box 67, VIII, 34, Correspondence "W," Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University.

"I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world," he preached on November 6, 1956, just seven days before the U.S. Supreme Court's decision against Alabama's bus segregation laws.[54]

A milestone of success, the Montgomery bus boycott represented a shining moment for King. Activists in Montgomery showed that non-retaliatory action for a cause could promote solidarity, build morale, and even bring victory against segregationist forces. King decided, under the tutelage of activists such as Rustin, that justice could prevail without force, without hatred, and without firearms. With nonviolence, King replaced his pistol with a more powerful weapon that effectively "outgunned" his adversaries. The boycott exposed the true power of nonviolence, which did not depend solely on the moral force of protest or love but used love as a fulcrum: a means of levering the majority culture toward justice and equality.[55] It was also in Montgomery that King committed himself not simply to attacking Jim Crow segregation but to changing the racial preconceptions of white Americans.[56]

In Montgomery, King realized that moral suasion alone did not suffice. In subsequent protests, he sought to upset the complacency of middle-class, white America. Indeed, he consciously designed his method of social protest to generate change by initiating conflict within the existing political system. His demonstrations were designed to provoke and

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[54]King, "The Most Durable Power," The Christian Century, 74 (June 5, 1957): 708.

[55]See Adam Roberts, "Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nonviolent Resistance," The World Today (June 24, 1968), 232; reprinted in Garrow, King: Civil Rights Leader, 765.

[56]See Mulford Q. Sibley, "Negro Revolution and Non-violent Action: Martin Luther King, Jr.," Political Science Review, 9 (1-6/70), 181; reprinted in Garrow, King: Civil Rights Leader, 805.

aggravate; that is, his politics of confrontation sought to generate a crisis. They were intended to prod a hesitant government to re-structure its legal system, and to coerce an indifferent society to look inward and reconsider its values and ideals. King's methods were not designed to mollify or conciliate.

But many Americans, in processing the revolutionary changes along the South's racial front, tended to confuse nonviolent direct action with "passive resistance," a term which devalued King's novel and powerful approach to social protest. The term "passive resistance" connotes non-cooperation with, or inert resistance to, a government or occupying power; King advocated a much more proactive and confrontational stance. This misrepresentation helped to translate the issue at the heart of the movement into one of "violence" versus "nonviolence." Activists had to choose between acquiescence (a non-option), violence, or nonviolence: stymied by the media's oversimplifying influence, most could not break out of the either/or rationale defining the place of violence in the movement. If one disregarded the centrality of self-defense in protecting black interests throughout Afro-American history, then black people seemingly had a single choice: they could go berserk, lashing out at white people and the symbols of white supremacy in a blind rage, or they could "passively" protest their grievances in a sober, non-threatening way. Thinking of the movement in such dualist terms could not explain how self-defense (or any sort of violence) had little to do with militance; it also underscored the difficulties King encountered in justifying his brand of nonviolent resistance.

As King envisioned it, nonviolence was simply an expression of Christian love: a re-articulation of the Golden Rule. When he began his crusade in 1955, self-defense, as an

accepted part of the American character, represented the normative reaction for an individual faced with antagonistic behavior. He offered Afro-Americans a means of supplanting this tradition with a far more conciliatory response. For a short time, nonviolence became—in large part due to the selflessness of those Montgomerians involved in the bus boycott—the normative method of civil rights protest. A report from Martin Luther King to Bayard Rustin summed up the state of affairs in Montgomery in 1956:

> The people are just as enthusiastic now as they were in the beginning of the protest. They are determined never to return to jim crow buses. The mass meetings are still jammed and packed and above all the buses are still empty. Every now and then we will hear some complaint, but the vast majority of the people are dedicated to sacrificing and sticking out to the finish. I think also there is a growing commitment to the philosophy of nonviolence on the part of the Negro community. Even those who were willing to get their guns in the beginning are gradually coming to see the futility of such an approach.[57]

The question of protecting himself from harm King relegated to the realm of faith. From the beginning, he had resolved that what he was doing was extremely dangerous and, in giving his care to God, he had devoted himself to a greater cause. The issue was not his life, "but whether Negroes would achieve first-class treatment on the city's buses." His safety was a distraction from more important issues; dwelling on it was "too great a burden to bear." King concluded that violence, "even in self-defense," ultimately created more problems than it solved. The beloved community, "where men can live together without fear," was within reach, but only through "a refusal to hate or kill" in order to "put an end to the chain of violence"; the beloved community would require "a qualitiative change in our souls" and "a

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[57]Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter to Bayard Rustin, September 20, 1956, Box 67, VIII-34 (Correspondence "W"), Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University.

quantitative change in our lives."[58]

Given that King was attracted to the Hegelian synthesis as "the best answer to many of life's dilemmas," it is curious that he was not more vocal on the subject of self-defense.[59] It was, after all, a true hybrid, a combination of violence and nonviolence. It was responsive and answering, not aggressive. It was (by definition) reactive, not offensive. In this sense, self-defense was not "violence," but a kind of unique subcategory of violent behavior, moderated by ethical considerations. It was "good violence" in that it was morally justifiable. But King did not concentrate on the ethics of self-defense because, in his view, the moral imperative of nonviolence was so much greater.

Many black people, impressed with the results of nonviolent direct action, questioned their own ability to adhere to its stringent demands. Others simply remained skeptical. J. Pius Barbour, editor of The National Baptist Voice, wrote a letter to King (addressing him by his childhood name) that simply asked:

Dear Mike,

Can you overthrow a social system without violence?

Your friend,

J. Pius Barbour[60]

Such questions prompted a highly pitched debate within the civil rights community over the

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[58]King, "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," Ebony 21 (October 1966): 27-30.

[59]King, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper and Row,1967), 53.

[60]J. Pius Barbour, Letter to Martin Luther King, Jr., January 11, 1957, Box 63, VIII-16 (Correspondence "N"), Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections,

merits of self-protection during 1957-1962.

The Montgomery bus boycott succeeded gloriously. The boycott ignited a generation of young black Americans who had no plans to live under segregation as their parents had done. It demonstrated that legal challenge, as the NAACP practiced with partial success, was not the only method for bringing results. It allowed individual blacks to get involved and make a difference. It also seemingly established a precedent for nonviolent direct action as a new device in the struggle for black equality. But that precedent was soon to come under assault from a number of fronts.

Boston University.

"People With Strength": Questioning the Nonviolent Ideal, 1957-1962

"In other communities there were Negroes who had their skulls fractured, but not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins. We had less violence because we'd shown the willingness and readiness to fight and defend ourselves . . . We appeared as people with strength, and it was to the mutual advantage of all parties concerned that peaceful relations be maintained."

--Robert Williams, describing sit-in campaigns in Monroe, North Carolina, 1962

By the middle of 1956, Martin Luther King's ideas regarding nonviolence and self-defense had congealed; however, in the next few years, each new crisis within the burgeoning civil rights movement compelled him to explain his thoughts on self-defense in order to justify nonviolence. Not everyone involved in the struggle for black equality subscribed to the sensibilities girding nonviolence, and disagreements with King's methods cropped up periodically. These were not always personal responses or reactions to King, but parallel currents within the movement: part of a larger dialogue regarding the best path toward black equality. During the late 1950's and early 1960's, many activists felt that nonviolence was yet to be established and proven in an American context, and many questioned its efficacy. Many expressed reservations about nonviolence, each of which seemed to center on the question of self-defense.

For example, P. L. Prattis, a columnist for The Pittsburgh Courier, took aim at King in 1957 in a five-part series on the virtues of nonviolence. A black man writing for a leading black newspaper, Prattis was not only a respected journalist but also director of the Youth Education Project and a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. He questioned the relevance of nonviolence to the plight of Afro-Americans, and differed with King on several points. He saw nonviolence as little more

than a "diversionary tactic," and wondered how appropriate it could really be in Montgomery. "I do not know of any instance where a racial group or minority, so situated as we are here in the United States, has ever won full freedom or full citizenship by simply using the tactic of nonviolence," he wrote. He lauded the rebellious Hindustani for "twisting the lion's tail" in India in the 1930's, and admired nonviolence as "a most valuable tactic" in liberating the Indian subcontinent from British domination; but the American South, he surmised, was quite different from the Near East.[1] "Figuratively, he [the Negro] must be prepared when the occasion demands to put his fist in somebody's face if he is going to win respect."[2]

He wondered, while listening to King speak at a convention of the National Council of Negro Women in Washington, how many of those present, all cheering King, "would actually offer his life, his home, or his church."[3] Blacks, he felt, could not adhere to true nonviolence; that is, the kind Gandhi advocated. "The zeal, self-sacrifice, and training necessary to make a program of peaceful resistance . . . simply does not seem to exist among Negroes, North or South," Prattis stated. "Nor is there the unity required."[4] He felt that King overestimated his people's capacity to persevere. "Despite his most extraordinary achievements in one community [Montgomery], the Negroes there are not

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[1]P. L. Prattis, "Nonviolence [first of a five-part series]," The Pittsburgh Courier, November 30, 1957.

[2]Prattis, "Nonviolence--II," The Pittsburgh Courier, December 7, 1957.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Prattis, "Nonviolence--III," The Pittsburgh Courier, December 14, 1957.

united behind him."[5] Comparing his own people with Native Americans, he wrote: "We like to gloat that the American Negro has lived and the American Indian has died. This is not true. Indians fought almost to extinction, but in so doing they won respect."[6] He predicted his own actions in a tight situation.

> What am I going to do if the white man strikes me? I am going to kick him in his teeth, regardless of what Dr. King exhorts. If my white fellow Americans are decent with me, I'll meet them more than half-way. But I'm not going to let them boot me around and then expose more surface. I don't think such behavior will win them from or for my people.
>
> I'll be a bit patient, but all the time I'll know that glory and freedom in this world await those who fight. The white man bleeds just like anybody else. He'll stop, think and listen if he has learned that he will and must account for every blow he strikes.[7]

In conclusion, he asked, "Is it better to be tolerated and despised, or hated and respected?"[8] For Prattis, the answer was obvious.

The Pittsburgh Courier columnist pinpointed the greatest objection for most black people with regard to nonviolence: while nonviolent direct action might work effectively within the context of organized social protest, nonviolence itself did not transfer well into other facets of daily life. Self-sacrifice might help to de-segregate a public facility, but who was willing, in his own neighborhood, away from the newspaper reporters and flashbulbs, to sacrifice his own family without a fight? Of course, practically no one

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Prattis, "Nonviolence--V," The Pittsburgh Courier, December 28, 1957.

[8]Prattis, "Nonviolence--IV," The Pittsburgh Courier, December 21, 1957.

involved in challenging Jim Crow would have suggested abnegating self-defense in one's own home, but most black people, listening to Martin Luther King and the other apostles of nonviolence, had difficulty disaggregating the practice of nonviolence in a private sphere from the practice of nonviolence in a public sphere. The result was a backlash against King's methods of protest. As one man would explain, claiming to voice the views of many blacks toward nonviolence:

> All those who dare to attack are going to learn the hard way that the Afro-American is not a pacifist; that he cannot forever be counted on not to defend himself . . . Those who doubt that the great majority of Negroes are not pacifists, just let them slap one. Pick any Negro on any street corner in the United States of America and they'll find out how much he believes in turning the other cheek.[9]

The words and deeds of Robert F. Williams would signify a departure from the precedent set in Montgomery, and a return to traditional methods of self-protection in the face of white aggression.

During the five-year period, 1957-1962, the locus of civil rights activity shifted away from Martin Luther King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded in 1957 to continue civil rights agitation after the Montgomery bus boycott. For example, in the fall of 1957, the attention of a nation shifted to Little Rock, Arkansas, where Governor Orval Faubus vowed to block the desegregation of the all-white Central High School. In what proved to be the most serious domestic crisis of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency, "Ike" ordered 1100 army

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[9]Robert F. Williams, Negroes With Guns, (New York: Marzani & Munsell, Inc., 1962), 122.

paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock and federalized the Arkansas National Guard to insure desegregation. For the first time since Reconstruction, federal troops were sent into the South to protect the civil rights of black Americans.[10]

In the wake of the Little Rock crisis, the floor seemed open for debate within the pantheon of civil rights leadership with regard to how to deal with rabid segregationists. Some national figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois openly challenged the nonviolent ideal. Indeed, Du Bois held many reservations about the viability of nonviolence in the South. He felt that the rehabilitation of white Southerners with regard to racial prejudice was largely impossible. As he pointed out, from the end of Reconstruction until the 1950's, the nation had widely refused to regard the killing of a black person in the South as murder, or the violation of a black girl as rape. Airing these views, Du Bois criticized Martin Luther King in a review of Lawrence Reddick's Crusader Without Violence (1959), an early biography of King. The review, published in the National Guardian in 1959, described Reddick's portrayal of King as "interesting and appealing but a little disturbing."

> His [King's] application of this philosophy in the Montgomery strike is well-known and deserves wide praise, but leaves me a little in doubt. I was sorry to see King lauded for his opposition to the young colored man in North Carolina who declared that in order to stop lynching and mob violence, Negroes must fight back.[11]

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[10]For more on Little Rock, see Wilson and Jane Cassels Record, eds., Little Rock U. S. A.: Materials for Analysis (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., Inc., 1960).

[11]W. E. B. Du Bois, "Martin Luther King's Life: Crusader without Violence," National Guardian 12 n 4 (November 9, 1959): 8.

Du Bois used the book review as a means of critiquing not only Reddick's writing but also King's policy. Interestingly, Du Bois also interpreted nonviolence as "submission," which reinforced the notion that nonviolent direct action was something less than militant protest.

The "young colored man in North Carolina" to whom Du Bois referred was Robert F. Williams, an ex-Marine from Monroe, North Carolina. King quickly learned that his own personal conviction that suffering unanswered violence to wear down an enemy defied the logic and common sense of many blacks. It was a most implausible proposition, requiring extraordinary courage and willpower. Some, like Robert Williams, regarded it as debasing, as not so much a moral imperative but a political tactic; others regarded it as an impossible solution. Williams would lead the attack against "cringing, begging Negro ministers" committed to "turn-the-other-cheekism"; he was one of the few, like Prattis and Du Bois, who publicly challenged the idea that blacks should rely on nonviolent tactics. "Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized," he argued, "but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist."

> I believe Negroes must be willing to defend themselves, their women, their children and their homes. They must be willing to die and to kill in repelling their assailants. Negroes must protect themselves, it is obvious that the federal government will not put an end to lynching; therefore it becomes necessary for us to stop lynching with violence.
>
> It is instilled at an early age that men who violently and swiftly rise to oppose tyranny are virtuous examples to emulate. I have been taught by my government to fight. Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone.[12]

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[12]Robert F. Williams, "Should Negroes Resort to Violence?," Liberation (September 1959), Schomburg Center Clipping File, 1925-1974, New York Public Library.

Williams respected what he called "pure pacifism," but saw it as less effective than displaying a "willingness to fight." By endorsing self-defense, Williams claimed he could not be nonviolent.

Robert Franklin Williams was born the son of a boilermaker's helper in Monroe, North Carolina, on February 26, 1925.[13] Few details of his childhood survive, but it is easy enough to imagine his life as a young black boy growing up in the segregated South: Williams' childhood was not unlike that of other black children in small towns. After completing a National Youth Administration (NYA) training course at the age of eighteen, he went to Detroit to work as a machinist and to help pay off his father's debts. Williams' tenure in Detroit marked the beginning of an incessant search for steady employment and fulfillment: a migratory quest that carried him all over the United States. After a hitch in the Army, another in the Marines, and countless jobs in Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and California (as well as North Carolina), he returned to Monroe in 1955. "When I got out of the Marine Corps," Williams remembered, "I knew I wanted to go home and join the NAACP."[14] His experience in the armed services, tainted by segregation and discriminatory practices, spurred him to political activism. His ardor found outlet in Monroe's anemic chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

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[13]For more information on Williams' youth, and his experience in the armed services, see Robert Carl Cohen, Black Crusader: A Biography of Robert Franklin Williams (Secaucus, New York: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1972), 1-83.

[14]Robert Williams, "1957: The Swimming Pool Showdown," Southern Exposure 8 n2 (Summer 1980): 70-72.

At mid-century, blacks comprised about one-quarter of Monroe's population. In the late 1940s, most middle-class blacks living in Monroe had been either teachers or preachers. Many belonged to the NAACP; however, the branch was still relatively small and ineffectual, more symbolic than threatening. Local whites tolerated its limited activities until 1954 when it came under attack. Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas (1954), which overturned the "separate-but-equal" precedent of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and mandated school desegregation in the South, fomented stirrings for integration throughout the country; "massive resistance" to these stirrings by whites was swift and severe. White Citizens Councils joined forces with local Ku Klux Klan affiliates to pressure the officers and members of NAACP branches into non-action. Economic sanctions by employers, banks, and finance companies threatened to stifle NAACP branches throughout the South; so, too, did the specter of beatings and lynchings. The Union County NAACP, like other branches, lost members and became inactive. In late 1955, when Williams joined, it was already in decline; by 1956, only six members remained.[15]

Faced with the ignominy of folding their branch, Union County NAACP officers called a meeting to elect new leadership; much to his surprise, they nominated Williams for president. Along with Dr. Albert F. Perry as vice-president, Williams was elected. After the election, when only Perry chose to renew his membership, Williams began a personal crusade to enroll new members. Rather than recruit professionals, to whom the

[15]Cohen, Black Crusader, 46, 90.

NAACP had always appealed, he scoured the local pool hall. In the course of one month, he drummed up fifty members, the requisite number to keep the branch open.[16]

Williams' NAACP branch was unique in two aspects. First, it was integrated; second, it was comprised mainly of working-class blacks. He had recruited an atypical, motley bunch, including construction workers, day laborers, farmers, domestics, and the unemployed. There were some whites, and a few black professionals. Additionally, it had a strong representation of returned veterans.[17] He recognized their will and determination, forged in service of their country, to fight for a better standard of living for blacks in Monroe.

Williams had become aware of the ardent militancy of Monroe's black veterans during a peculiar episode in which he participated ten years earlier: the burial of Benny Montgomery, a high-school classmate. Seriously wounded in Europe in World War II, Montgomery had returned to Monroe with a steel plate in his head after a long hospitalization. Mentally impaired, he managed to hold down a steady job on a local dairy farm. Shortly before Williams returned from the Army in 1946, Montgomery stabbed another man to death after a drunken argument. Disregarding both his mental instability and the possibilities of psychiatric treatment and rehabilitation, an all-white jury found him guilty and sentenced him to death. Despite pleas for clemency, the

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[16]Ibid, 90-91.

[17]See Williams, Negroes With Guns, 51, 66.

governor of North Carolina refused to stay the sentence. Montgomery died in the gas chamber.[18]

His family wanted to bring him home for burial, but the chief of police visited the black undertaker and told him there would be trouble if anyone tried to bury Montgomery, especially in his Army uniform, in Monroe. Local whites, the police chief said, would not stand for it. Black veterans learned of the threat and complained loudly. Montgomery had won medals for bravery while the chief of police had stayed home during the war, they pointed out. The veterans, Williams included, felt Montgomery had paid society's debt for killing another man and deserved a decent burial. They vowed to support the undertaker and the family.[19]

As the undertaker retrieved Montgomery's body at the state prison and prepared it for burial in his medal-bedecked uniform, the vets organized armed patrols to guard the funeral parlor and patrol the black neighborhood. Many black veterans owned souvenir guns--war trophies such as the German-made, 9-mm Luger pistol Williams himself acquired in Detroit in 1948--for which ammunition was readily available. "I have come here as a concerned citizen to warn you against permitting any attempt to interfere with the burial of Benny Montgomery," a black preacher warned the police chief. "The black veterans have armed themselves and are walking the streets ready to kill."[20]

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[18]Cohen, Black Crusader, 46-47.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

Montgomery was buried without incident. The readiness of these men to defend their fellow veteran's honor symbolized a new phase of militancy in the black struggle for equality. Williams would describe this event as "one of the first incidents that really started us to understanding that we had to resist, and that resistance could be effective if we resisted in groups, and if we resisted with guns."[21] Many vets, battle-hardened and worldly-wise, returned home after World War II to initiate and lead what would become the modern civil rights movement. They had experienced an egalitarianism in combat overseas unknown in the racially bisected South. They had managed their duties as servicemen with élan, and they yearned for similar satisfaction from their lives at home after the war. Whether sitting alongside whites in Parisian cafés or enjoying the company of white women in London, they had tasted freedoms in Europe forbidden in their homeland.[22] Ten years later, under Williams' leadership, some of these same veterans would organize in Monroe to stand down the Klan. "Fresh out of the armed forces," they

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[21]Williams, interviewed by James Mosby, July 22, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[22]Numerous authors have treated this trend, and have disagreed as to whether World War II was an interruption of legal battles and direct action in the 1930s or a catalyst of black protest in the post-war years. For more on this debate, see Harvard Sitkoff, "African-American Militancy in the World War II South: Another Perspective," in Neil McMillen, ed., Re-Making Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 661-681. The national and international climate following World War II made the 1940s ripe for civil rights reform. After a war to defend democracy against Nazism and fascism, and in the beginning stages of a "Cold War" against Communist totalitarianism, segregation seemed an increasingly unacceptable part of the American landscape. The return of black soldiers who had participated in these struggles highlighted the irony of second-class citizenship at home. Most importantly, Afro-American veterans returned to the United States with a new sense of militancy.

felt they could match the local police and Klansmen with their gun-handling skills. "When a man learns to use arms," Williams noted, "he gets more self-confidence in himself, and the fact that he knows what to do with arms, he knows the power of arms."[23]

With the support of local white Unitarians, Williams and his constituents began a campaign to integrate various public facilities around Monroe in 1957. They desegregated the public library without any friction at all, " according to Williams.[24] In one of his first moves as NAACP president, Williams organized a cadre of men devoted to self-defense and protection of the black neighborhood in Monroe. "Since the city officials wouldn't stop the Klan, we decided to stop the Klan ourselves," he later explained.[25]

Tensions peaked in 1957 when the group actually engaged nightriders in combat, repelling a Klan raiding party sent to terrorize Dr. A. E. Perry on the evening of October 5. Perry, vice-president of the local NAACP, had been outspoken in petitioning the city council for the construction of a swimming pool in the black section of town. Monroe's only swimming pool, built with federal funds and municipally maintained, was for whites only; black children swam in "swimming holes": unsafe ponds and drainage ditches, where several had drowned. When local Klan members threatened to "get" Perry, Williams posted watch at his house from dusk till dawn. Guards dissuaded a KKK

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[23]Ibid.

[24]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 51.

[25]Ibid, 54.

motorcade with gunfire when the cars advanced on Perry's house.[26] The incident received little press. Only three publications reported the fight: the Baltimore Afro-American, the Norfolk Journal and Guide, and Jet magazine, which published a feature-length article on October 31, 1957, entitled "Is North Carolina NAACP Leader a Marked Man?"[27]

A year later, a strange drama unfolded which not only centered international attention on Monroe, but also underscored the hysterical tendencies of white Southerners when confronted with issues of race and sex. On October 28, 1958, two boys, seven-year-old David Simpson and nine-year-old Hanover Thompson, were playing with a group of white girls, including seven-year-old Sissy Sutton. As part of a game, she kissed Hanover on the cheek. Later that afternoon, Sissy told her mother about the incident. Incensed, her mother called the police, who later arrested the boys with their service revolvers drawn. The girl's father had allegedly armed himself with a shotgun and went searching for the little boys. Sissy's mother later told a reporter: "I was furious. I would have killed Hanover myself if I had the chance."[28]

Police held the boys incommunicado at the jail for questioning. Their mothers, frantic with worry over their missing children, had no idea where they were for six days,

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[26]"What Happened in Monroe, North Carolina," undated manuscript, printed by the Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants; "'Kidnapping' Papers" Folder, Box 3, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[27]For example, see "Citizens Fire Back at Klan," Journal and Guide [Carolina Edition] (October 12, 1957): 1.

[28]George L. Weissman, "The Kissing Case," Nation 188 n 3 (January 17, 1959): 46-49.

until November 4, when Judge Hampton Price found the boys guilty of assault, and sentenced them to a reformatory, the Morrison Training School for Negroes, for indeterminate terms: if they behaved well, the boys might be released before they turned twenty-one.[29]

Williams was outraged. Enlisting the help of Conrad Lynn, a civil rights attorney from New York, he mounted a campaign to free the boys. Traveling widely around the United States, he publicized what became known as the "Kissing Case." Despite international pressure, the national office of the NAACP, under Roy Wilkins' leadership, hesitated to become involved. During his travels, Williams became known outside the greater Charlotte area. His tireless crusading paid off when, three months after their ordeal began, the boys came home.[30]

The following summer, in the midst of a nervous peace, Williams began publishing his newsletter, The Crusader. The premiere issue was a hodge-podge assortment of rants and news clips, including reflections on how far blacks had progressed since slavery, on court bulletins, and on politics. One of the most interesting passages from the inaugural issue explored the notion of black manhood:

> Unless a man has some measure of pride, he is not worthy of the dignity to be called MAN. A true man feels himself to be superior to no man and no man to be superior to him. A true man will protect his women, children, and home. He will not walk with a chip on his shoulder, nor will he allow himself to be subjected to

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[29]Ibid. See also Williams, Negroes With Guns, 21-24.

[30]For more on the "Kissing Case," see "Lesson of the Kissing Case," Afro-American (February 28, 1959): 7; and "Tragic Plight of Negroes in Monroe, NC: Town of the 'Kissing Case' Involving a White Girl and 2 Negro Boys," Jet (February 12, 1959): 12-15.

> slavery and oppression. The Negro is never going to be respected in this nation as a man until he shows a willingness to defend himself and his women. The so-called big men of the race are called boys by their white masters, because the master knows that he wouldn't dare treat a man the way he treats the old black boy.[31]

Williams would return to this typology again and again, comparing activism to black manhood. For him, methods of protest and the way in which blacks lobbied for social change were closely linked to the responsibilities of gender. Black manhood denoted equality with white men, but, in order to gain access to that status and "be a man," one must protect not only himself but also those female and juvenile charges under his care. Self-protection, for Williams, was the key to manhood. Continuing another theme in his writing, the third issue of The Crusader cited Jehovah in frightening capital letters:

> WHEN I WHET MY GLITTERING SWORD, AND MY HAND TAKETH HOLD ON JUDGMENT: I WILL RENDER VENGEANCE UNTO MY ENEMIES, AND THOSE THAT HATE ME WILL I REQUITE.
>
> I WILL MAKE MY ARROWS DRUNKER WITH BLOOD, AND MY SWORD SHALL DEVOUR FLESH; FROM THE BLOOD OF THE SLAIN AND OF THE CAPTIVES, FROM THE CRUSHED HEAD OF THE ENEMY.[32]

In passages such as this one, Williams displayed his knowledge of the Bible, his ability to quote scripture, and his preference for the fire-and-brimstone retribution of the Old Testament. Apocalyptic in nature, his words recalled those of Nat Turner and other nineteenth-century slaves who rebelled, claiming righteousness in the eyes of God. Early issues of The Crusader like these reflected Williams' immaturity as an essayist; but they also conveyed the righteous anger that fueled his writing.

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[31]The Crusader 1 n 1 (June 26, 1959): 1.

[32]The Crusader 1 n 3 (July 11, 1959): 2.

Frustrated with the inequity of southern justice, Williams lashed out in 1959 after becoming ensnarled in two frustrating legal battles. The first trial involved a white hotel guest who had kicked a black maid down a flight of stairs for disturbing his sleep. The judge dropped all charges against the man, who failed to appear for his court date. The second trial proved even more exasperating. Williams angrily responded to the acquittal of a white man accused of attempting to rape an eight-month-pregnant black woman, Mary Ruth Reid. In an impassioned speech, he declared that blacks should "meet violence with violence":

> We cannot rely on the law. We can get no justice under the present system. If we feel that injustice is done, we must then and there on the spot be prepared to inflict punishment on these people. Since the federal government will not bring a halt to the lynching and since the so-called courts lynch our people legally, if it's necessary to stop lynching with lynching, then we must be willing to resort to that method. We must meet violence with violence.[33]

His fiery rhetoric garnered the attention of not only the national media, but also Martin Luther King, Jr., who challenged Williams' call to violence in 1959.

In a "debate" published in Liberation magazine in 1959, King responded to Williams' ire, which included personal charges against King and his brand of nonviolence.[34] In writing this article, King benefited from the editorial assistance of Bayard Rustin, who helped him to articulate his attitudes toward self-defense. King took a stand against Williams by attempting to rectify the paradoxical role of nonviolence within a possibly violent movement; he did so by de-emphasizing self-defense, which cut

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[33]Williams, quoted in "The Robert Williams Case," Crisis 66 n 6 (June-July 1959): 326.

[34]See supra note 12.

at the heart of his nonviolent message. To explain his philosophy, he divided violence into three discrete categories: pure nonviolence, self-defense, and "the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously." Of these three, only the third did King condemn as damaging to a "real collective struggle." He preferred nonviolence as a method of mass social protest, but readily admitted that it was the most difficult to perpetuate. He felt that the general populace could not adhere to the strict discipline required of true nonviolence. Even Gandhi, King noted, sanctioned self-defense for those unable to adopt pure nonviolence; as Gandhi had done, King refused to condemn self-defense outright. "When the Negro uses force in self-defense," King wrote, "he does not forfeit support--he may even win it, by the courage and self-respect it reflects." King's tentative regard for self-defense grew out of his pragmatism, his conception of black manhood, and especially his understanding of the Christian tradition that, under the mantra "an eye for an eye," historically permitted retaliatory violence.[35]

Williams and King had a stormy relationship. In the press, each attacked the other's approach to protest, but only to a certain extent: both realized that they were involved in the same struggle and complemented each other's efforts; both understood that the threat of violence could be used as leverage. For example, Williams wrote: "When our people become fighters, our leaders will be able to sit at the conference table

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[35]King, "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," Liberation 4 n7 (October 1959): 5-6.

as equals, not dependent on the whim and generosity of the oppressor."[36] Williams claimed that he and King were not ideologically dissimilar. "I wish to make it clear," he wrote, "that I do not advocate violence for its own sake, or for the sake of reprisals against whites. Nor am I against the passive resistance advocated by the Reverend Martin Luther King and others. My only difference with Dr. King is that I believe in flexibility in the freedom struggle."[37]

Consistently, the two men misunderstood one another. As a spokesman for nonviolent direct action, King mistook Williams' call to "meet violence with violence" as an invitation to kill white people with impunity. He noted:

> Mr. Williams would have us believe that there is no collective and practical alternative [to violence]. He argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms. To so place the issue distorts the whole problem. There are other meaningful alternatives.[38]

Williams, for his part, failed to understand the militance of King's nonviolent direct action, and sometimes equated nonviolence and pacifism. In Negroes With Guns, he would later write that if student protesters could show him the gains of nonviolent methods, then he too would "become a pacifist."[39] Williams' equating nonviolence with pacifism denied nonviolent direct action its forcefulness. He characterized self-protection as the only manly response to violent attack, but King redefined nonviolence as a manly

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[36]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 41.

[37]Ibid, 40.

[38]King, "The Social Organization of Nonviolence, Liberation 4 n 7 (October 1959): 5.

[39]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 78.

act: anyone who would utilize nonviolent direct action "will need ample courage and willingness to sacrifice." Nonviolence "needs the bold and the brave because it is not free from danger. It faces the vicious and evil enemies squarely."[40] The rivalry between followers of the two men became so great that the first published biography of King seemingly took its name--in a gesture meant to refute Williams--from the newsletter, The Crusader. Published in 1959, the hastily compiled biography was entitled Crusader Without Violence.

King's failure to back Williams in his tribulations in Monroe helped to ostracize the latter at a time when he most needed public sympathy. After his admonition to "meet violence with violence" in 1959, the national board of the NAACP denounced and suspended Williams.[41] Many, including Robert A. Fraser, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, protested the suspension.[42] The branch voted to make Williams' wife, Mabel, president in his place (he was later re-elected unanimously, in absentia). Her election in her husband's stead suggests that the couple were popular in Monroe and enjoyed widespread support in the local black community, but "five years ago when I started

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[40]King, "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," Liberation 4 n7 (October 1959): 6.

[41]For the official account of Williams' suspension (provided by the NAACP), see "The Robert Williams Case," Crisis 66 n 6 (June-July, 1959): 325-329; for another version, see Julian Mayfield, "Challenge to Negro Leadership," Commentary 31 (April 1961): 297-305.

[42]Robert A. Fraser, letter to Roy Wilkins, May 29, 1959, "Correspondence 1959" Folder, Box 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

talking about self-defense," Williams confessed in 1961, "I would walk through the streets and many of my black neighbors would walk away to avoid me."[43]

Understandably, many of the black citizens of Monroe warmed slowly to his call to arms in the late 1950's. They were afraid, and rightly so: Williams posed a very real danger to them all. Repercussion for speaking out against the status quo, let alone taking steps to change it, could be swift in the South. In the past, some blacks had lost their jobs, while others had lost their lives, and those whites bent on "justice" were not discriminative in how they allotted it. Williams was inviting censure--or worse--by his words and deeds; but, there was something appealing about his example, and many in the black community quickly saw him as more brave than insane. The respect he commanded from whites was empowering for the black people of Monroe.

White Southerners lived their lives by the laws of tradition; that is, the way things had always been was the way things should be.[44] Clearly, whites in Monroe, like other white Southerners, yearned for stability in their lives. They believed that change, if at all necessary, should take place gradually and peaceably within the existing laws and

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[43]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 111.

[44]Andrew Myers has best illustrated the reticence of Monroe's white citizenry to embrace change. "Although Monroe whites took pride in their modernity," he has written, "they still happily regarded their town as an isolated, conservative, southern community. They feared the recent, rapid changes which had taken place. Their insecurity was reflected in the 1949 enactment of an alcohol prohibition law. A year later, during the height of the Red Scare, thirty-five Monroe businessmen took out a four-column advertisement in the [Monroe] Enquirer entitled 'Americanism and Christianity or Communism and Atheism?' Soon afterwards, they replaced the courthouse weather vane with a neon cross." Myers, "When Violence Met Violence: Facts and Images of Robert F. Williams and the Black Freedom Struggle in Monroe, North Carolina" (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1993), 12-13.

folkways. Because they believed that assimilation by blacks would disrupt the existing social and political order, they feared it. This fear often manifested itself in strict adherence to tradition; in this case, unyielding Jim Crow laws. Segregationists, racial supremacists, and those whites otherwise unsympathetic to the goals of the movement feared agitated "nigras," running amuck.[45]

For example, when Williams formed a rifle club and spoke of the need for blacks to defend themselves, whites became alarmed. They ignored the fact that his club, the Union County Rifle Club, resembled the white rifle clubs already in existence in Monroe, just as they ignored that Williams had applied for a charter from the National Rifle Association (which he received, after passing off the organization as a white group).[46] Apparently, they did not like the idea of Afro-Americans' responding to violence "with anything more vigorous than spirituals."[47] White Monroeans became afraid, but whatever

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[45]Fred Powledge has described the many faces of white-resistance by categorizing the different, oratorical rationales of white resistance, from "integration-will-close-our-schools" to "federal-government-as-ogre" to "outside-agitator" to "they're-going-to-marry-your sister" to "our-colored-are-happy" to "we-must-protect-our-way-of-life." Perhaps most intriguing is the "blood-in-our-streets" rationale of southern politicians, who argued under the auspices of law and order that rapid desegregation would prompt violence by whites resorting to vigilanteism. See Powledge, Free at Last?: The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 151-152.

[46]The NRA was apparently unaware that its new chapter was primarily black because Williams aggrandized occupational data on his application. For example, on the NRA charter application, Williams listed brick masons as "contractors," and dishwashers as "restauranteurs." Williams, interviewed by James Mosby, July 22, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[47]William McCord, et. al., Life Styles in the Black Ghetto (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), 239.

fear they felt did not outweigh their complacency with the status quo. No matter how frightened they might have been of the monumental changes brought to their world by the civil rights movement, their fear did not translate into a collective effort to change along with it. Instead, their fear hardened into an intransigent resignation to keep things as they were.

The suspension of Williams as NAACP president goaded him to make more extreme comments. In a debate moderated by A. J. Muste, famed pacifist and labor activist, he challenged Bayard Rustin and Dave Dellinger on the merits of self-defense.[48] He suggested that freedom might necessitate deliberate violence on the part of blacks. The NAACP permanently expelled him, but Williams continued to agitate locally, incurring the wrath of local whites.[49]

As racial tensions mounted in Monroe, the attention of the nation again shifted to a new arena. On February 1, 1960, four black college freshmen from North Carolina A & T protested the Jim-Crow practices at Woolworth's in Greensboro by "sitting-in" at the drugstore's lunch counter. Like Rosa Parks' refusal to relinquish her seat, it was a minor gesture of major consequence. Within two weeks, the sit-ins spread to eleven cities in five southern states. By the end of the month, young people, conducting sit-ins all over

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[48]"400 Hear Debate On 'Violence'," The [Baltimore] Afro-American (October 17, 1959): 1.

[49]One article, published in 1961, cited four attempts on his life during the previous few years. See "Monroe, N. C. Editor Defies Bigots Who Threaten Life," The Pittsburgh Courier (August 4, 1961): 2.

the South, found themselves spearheading a movement to desegregate national chain stores in southern towns.

Two months later, some of the students founded an organization to marshal these efforts. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as its name reflected, was also an organization born in nonviolent theory. The group's statement of purpose, originally adopted in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1960, read:

> We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from the Judaeo- [sic] Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.
>
> Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overcomes injustice. The redemptive community supercedes systems of gross social immorality.
>
> Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.
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> By appealing to the conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.[50]

Highly idealistic, the statement reflected the high-mindedness and optimism of the young activists involved. Piggy-backing on the successes of the lunch-counter sit-in movement, SNCC offered an alternative to the complacent stagnancy of middle-class life. The youthful organization mirrored CORE in its admiration of Christian pacifism and direct action; nonviolence joined the two concepts, and the two organizations, together in

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[50]Reprinted in Staughton Lynd, Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 398.

spirit.[51]

Meanwhile, Williams had begun stockpiling arms. Circulation of The Crusader grew. In April 1961—in the wake of the unsuccessful U.S. invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs—he sent a telegram to the United Nations that read:

> Now that the United States has proclaimed military support for people willing to rebel against oppression, oppressed colored people in the South urgently request tanks, artillery, bombs, money, use of American airfields, and white mercenaries to crush racist tyrants who have betrayed the American Revolution and Civil War. We also request prayers for this noble undertaking.[52]

Relentlessly, Williams continued to needle the sensibilities of those around him by trying to promote change. News of his efforts, and of the tense atmosphere between blacks and whites there, slowly seeped out of Monroe. One white man wrote to Williams from Syracuse, New York: "If it comes to violent defense against the attacks of the segregationists, there will be many of us with you, just as there were in the time of John

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[51]Clayborne Carson has provided the most comprehensive and insightful analysis of SNCC to date in In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[52]"Robert Williams asks U. S. To Support War on South," The [Baltimore] Afro-American (April 29, 1961): 1.

Brown."[53] That same month, Williams confided to an interviewer: "What some people don't understand is that in the South we're fighting for our lives."[54]

For five years, Williams and his constituency had enforced a strained peace in Monroe. Williams' efforts antagonized local white supremacists, and when the NAACP decided to picket the town's swimming pool in June 1961, local white supremacists swung into action.[55] By pressuring for de-segregation, Williams evoked the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan, which rallied at the pool in counter-protest. Looking for trouble, white ruffians milled about the picket line. When the crowd closed in on Williams and other protestors (mostly young students), an armed showdown ensued between the protestors, police and crowd members. Williams brandished a .45-caliber automatic, waving it at both police and counter-protestors. He and the other protestors managed to escape unscathed. "Goddamn, goddamn," an elderly white man cried through his tears, "what is this goddamn country coming to that the niggers have got guns, the niggers are armed and the police can't even arrest them!"[56]

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[53]John Boardman, letter to The Crusader, January 10, 1961; Correspondence, Jan.-Sept. 1961, Box 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[54]Williams, quoted in Julian Mayfield, "Challenge to Negro Leadership: The Case of Robert Williams," Commentary 31 (April 1961): 300.

[55]The NAACP used the threat of a lawsuit to pressure local officials to desegregate. According to Andrew Myers, this incident shows that Williams "initially tried to work within the traditional NAACP framework of change through legal action." See Myers, "When Violence Met Violence," 18.

[56]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 46.

After the pool showdown, Williams received national and international support. Unlike earlier incidents, Williams' actions now began to receive coverage in the mainstream press. This fact, combined with the dissemination of his newsletter, made him a national celebrity, of sorts. Supporters wrote from California and Illinois; letters also poured in from faraway locales such as Scandinavia and the Netherlands. Other supporters sent clothing for needy blacks in and around Monroe. As the result of a front-page story in the Baltimore Afro-American, which reported a meeting in Harlem that had raised $260.00 to purchase rifles for the embattled black populace of Monroe, Williams began to receive invitations from all over the United States to come help other Afro-American communities set up rifle clubs.[57]

Circumstances in Monroe spiraled toward chaos, devolving when Freedom Riders came to town on August 21, 1961. Among them was James Forman, who would soon become president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He and the other Freedom Riders sought to make a nonviolent stand on Williams' home turf. Williams claimed that the Freedom Riders weakened his own position in Monroe because of their "pacifist philosophy." He wrote: "Their turn-the-other-cheekism inspired the KKK to resort to the use of violence again."[58] Williams resented the racially one-sided nature of nonviolent philosophy. "White liberals who claim to abhor violence are

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[57]See William Worthy, "Black Muslims NAACP Target: Raise Funds for Arms for Carolinian," The [Baltimore] Afro-American (July 22, 1961): 1. The Williams article overshadowed an article on Martin Luther King, Jr. in the headlines.

[58]Williams, "Freedom Struggle in the 'Free World', Part II," unpublished manuscript, Box 2, Undated Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

pumping hundreds of thousands of dollars into Afro-American communities in a frantic effort to convert the restless black masses to pacifists," he wrote. "Nonviolent workshops are springing up throughout black communities. Not a single one has been established in racist white communities to curb the violence of the Ku Klux Klan."[59] He explained his position further, writing:

> There is an air that approximates latent racism and white chauvinism about these nonviolent moralists who cannot stand the thought of oppressed Afro-Americans violently defending themselves against white racist brutality, and yet being able to stand motionless and mute while black Americans are being raped, maimed, legally framed, murdered, starved, and driven into exile. What is more brutal? What is more violent?[60]

Unlike many other activists, Williams did not engender a natural abhorrence of violence. He saw it as an analog of progress; indeed, of life itself.

> Social change is violence itself. You cannot have progress without friction and upheaval. For social change [to occur], two systems must clash. This must be a violent clash, because it's a struggle for survival for one and a struggle for liberation for the other. And always the powers in command are ruthless and unmerciful in defending their position and privileges.[61]

One telling incident, which occurred at the height of tensions in Monroe, dramatized the rift between proponents of self-defense and proponents of nonviolence. Mistaking an

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[59]Williams, "Neo-Barbarism: Inside the U.S.A.," unpublished manuscript, Box 2, Undated Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[60]Williams, "Reflections of an Exiled Freedom Fighter," unpublished manuscript, Box 2, Undated Folder 2, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentely Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[61]Williams, "An Interview with Robert F. Williams," Studies on the Left (1962) 2: 3, 57, Box 2, "Published Articles" Folder, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

eight-year-old boy for Williams' son, three white men "stomped him" and "almost killed him," according to Williams. The following day, black high school students cornered some white toughs cruising in their neighborhood and attacked them. One student hurled a brick into the face of a white tough, which prompted a white Freedom Rider named Thompson to intervene, shielding the white rider from the black youths. Williams later challenged Thompson, who chastised Williams and his followers for "dropping to their level" and being "brutes" like the riders. Williams, furious about the attack on the little boy, responded:

> Thompson, let me tell you one thing . . . if you can't stand to see a white man hurt, if you can't stand to see white blood flow, you better get your suitcase and get out of here . . . I'm going to tell you one thing: the next time you jump in front of a car to protect a white man who is attacking us, you know what we are going to do? . . . we going to shoot so many holes through you going to look like a screen wire . . .[62]

Monroe came under intense scrutiny by those in the civil rights movement who distrusted his angry rhetoric and his decree of self-defense. "That Rob Williams and his adherents are brave and admirable people, I have no doubt," assured one critic. "But I do doubt that they are revolutionaries. For the violent and destructive way in which they would counter their opponents . . . is none other than the violent and destructive way that the reactionaries of all ages have countered their opponents; and it has little or no chance of

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[62]Williams, interviewed by James Mosby, July 22, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

making better men either of themselves or their adversaries."[63] For him, and others who accused Williams of vigilantism, it was a question of means versus ends.

If what he advocated was vigilantism, Williams countered, then it was of a sort justified by the absence of protection for all segments of the American population, namely blacks. "Self-defense is not a love of violence," he explained. "It is a love of justice."[64] He disagreed with the notion that any form of violence is immoral. He both "used and approved" nonviolent resistance as a tactic; however, he also believed that "a man cannot have human dignity if he allows himself to be abused."[65]

He later argued that the Monroe sit-ins "proved that self-defense and nonviolence could be successfully combined."[66] To support this argument, he pointed out that there had been less violence in the Monroe sit-ins than in any other sit-ins in the South and, indeed, Williams could substantiate this claim. In March 1960, the Monroe NAACP had attempted to integrate the lunch counters at Jones' and Secrest's drug stores. Secrest's agreed to the protestors' demands "without incident," though the manager of Jones' had Williams arrested for trespassing. No violence occurred. Furthermore, while he had not been openly armed, Williams had made his "meet violence with violence" speech in May

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[63]Ernest R. Bromley, "Two New Publications: Pacifist, Nonpacifist," The Peacemaker 15 n12 (September 8, 1962): 3.

[64]Williams, "U.S.A.: Revolution Without Violence?," Revolution (March 1964), 112.

[65]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 121.

[66]Ibid, 68.

1959 (almost an entire year before the March 1960 sit-ins), and local whites undoubtedly knew of his advocacy of self-defense at that time.[67]

Williams' philosophy was not complicated. He felt that nonviolence could be dogmatic, inflexible, and "mechanically deceptive."[68] He believed in a flexible approach to the black freedom struggle, one that utilized what worked, and events in Monroe proved to Williams that it was self-defense that worked. "I am not opposed to nonviolence per se," he wrote. "I am opposed to it only when it becomes an object of dogmatism. I am opposed to it when it denies the logic of flexibility."[69]

From the outset of his activism, Williams emphasized that his personal struggle was against white supremacy, not for integration. "The struggles of the Freedom Riders and the sit-in movements have concentrated on a single goal: the right to eat at a lunch counter, the right to sit anywhere on a bus," he noted. "These are important rights because their denial is a direct personal assault on a Negro's dignity." Such protests against segregation were "an important part of the overall Negro struggle," but useful only until "they shift attention from the basic evils" of racism and economic injustice.[70]

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[67]For more on the sit-ins in Monroe, see Myers, "When Violence Met Violence," 27.

[68]Williams, "U.S.A.: Revolution Without Violence?," Revolution (March 1964), 110.

[69]Williams, "Reflections of an Exiled Freedom Fighter," unpublished manuscript, Box 2, Undated Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[70]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 75, 77. Stokely Carmichael noted in a speech at the University of California at Berkeley in 1965: "People ought to understand that we were never fighting for the right to integrate, we were fighting against white supremacy." See Carmichael, Stokely Speaks: Black Power/Back to Pan-Africanism (New York: Random House, 1965), 56.

He likened racism to a disease, a mass psychosis treatable like any other mental illness. "I've read that one of the best treatments for some forms of mental illness is the shock treatment," he noted wryly, "and the shock treatment must come primarily from the Afro-American people themselves in conjunction with the white youth." He did not reject the aid of white liberals in the civil rights movement, but saw their monetary contributions as a massive effort to convert blacks to pacifism. "We realize that there must be a struggle within our own ranks to take the leadership away from the black Quislings who betray us," he wrote. "Then the white liberals who are dumping hundreds of thousands of dollars into our struggle in the South to convert us to pacifism will have to accept our understanding of the situation or drop their liberal pretensions."[71]

The real enemies, as far as Williams could tell, were poor whites, flaunting the one thing southern society allowed them: their superiority over blacks. "[M]ost of the people who were sympathetic toward us were either intellectuals, upper class or middle-class people," he recalled, "and the children, their children, but I did not know any workers, in fact any farmers in the South when I lived there who were sympathetic."[72] "Rednecks" were a lifelong source of annoyance for Williams.

In response to the charge that fighting back would bring only extermination to blacks in America, he replied that his race was already being exterminated. "It is being

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[71]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 112-113.

[72]Testimony of Robert F. Williams, U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, Subcommittee on Internal Security, 91st Congress, Second Session, February 16, 1970 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 4. In subsequent notes, this testimony will be referred to simply as U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings.

exterminated by economic strangulation, by mass unemployment, poor housing in ghettoes that breed disease and violence, by impotent education, by police brutality, kangaroo courts and inadequate medical attention that produces a higher-than-natural mortality rate. Every Afro-American is being short-changed out of a part of his life because of [such] conditions . . ."[73]

Williams also thought of the freedom struggle as a kind of war. He conceptualized the movement in terms of net gain on the "battlefield," of strategic wins and losses. "We [black veterans] had been taught to fight and you expect casualties in war, you expect casualties in the Army, so pretty soon you start thinking in terms of casualties." They had learned, as soldiers, that they could expect to become casualties, and this expectation "took away some of the fear," and led to "more resistance."[74]

By August 1961, Monroe resembled a vial of nitroglycerine, ready to explode at the slightest jog. The presence of the Freedom Riders galled local whites. These "outside agitators," comprised of northern-educated, white, college students (many of whom were Jewish), as well as "uppity Negroes," played on a number of stereotypes, and led many white southerners to perceive a conspiracy to undercut the "southern way of life." Politeness turned to viciousness as townspeople heckled demonstrators. Violence

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[73]Williams, untitled, unpublished manuscript, Box 2, Undated Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[74]Williams, interviewed by James Mosby, July 22, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

escalated. Rioting broke out. Then, as serious conflict seemed unavoidable, a bizarre saga unfolded, causing Williams to flee Monroe and leave the country.

As night fell on Sunday, August 27, 1961, carloads of whites began pouring into Williams' neighborhood. Local blacks armed themselves. A white couple from nearby Marshall drove within a block of Williams' house before they were stopped at gunpoint and escorted to Williams' residence. What happened next is unclear. Authorities charged that Williams kidnapped the couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Stegall. Maintaining his innocence, Williams claimed that he ushered the couple into his house for their own protection during a firefight with the Klan, and in doing so saved their lives. Regardless, on Monday, the Union County Grand Jury indicted Williams for kidnapping. Police raided his home; however, he and his family escaped to Cuba by way of Canada.[75]

What happened in Monroe on August 27, 1961, was so distorted by official sources, as well as by various witnesses, that one person complained: "[T]he American public needs to be informed of the facts in the case, for so rarely in the history of U. S. journalism has such shameful treatment been given to a story."[76] A number of local blacks and Freedom Riders were subsequently arrested, including John Lowry and Mae Mallory, a mother from Harlem; the group became knows as the Monroe Defendants. Outrage among those who sympathized with Williams led to the formation of the Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants, an organization formed to provide legal

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[75]See "Jury Indicts Williams on Kidnapping Charge," The Charlotte Observer (August 29, 1961): 1; see also Williams, Negroes With Guns, 83-90.

[76]Berta Green, "Monroe Needs Help [letter to the editor]," The [Baltimore] Afro American (October 21, 1961): 4.

counsel and to pay court expenses for those remaining in Monroe who needed aid. Conrad Lynn was the group's chief legal advisor. Dr. A.E. Perry, former vice-president of the Union County NAACP, chaired the committee, which counted Norman Mailer and W. E. B. Du Bois among its ranks.

After he fled Monroe, the United States government targeted Williams for character assassination. FBI wanted posters, tacked in post offices around the country, portrayed Williams as a criminal and fugitive from justice. They described him as "heavily armed and dangerous" and diagnosed him as mad. Detailed (and inaccurate) descriptions of scars depicted Williams as a stereotypical, razor-fighting black man. The government did its best to discredit Williams in the public eye. Such vilification completed his evolution "from reformer to radical to revolutionary."[77]

In Cuba, Fidel Castro granted Williams and his family political asylum as "refugees from the United States," and the Cuban government became responsible for their welfare. They survived on an allowance of 300 to 400 pesos each month. The government also provided them with a house and car. Williams received such privileged treatment as a result of his meeting Castro the previous year, when he had accompanied a group of black newspapermen to Cuba. Officials welcomed him then and encouraged him to stay, but Williams wanted to "go home." Never did he entertain notions of expatriation or defection.

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[77]The U.S. Justice Department, in collarboration with Monroe Chief of Police A. A. Mauney, released 250, 000 circulars describing Williams as "schizophrenic." Williams, of sound mind, had never undergone psychiatric evaluation; nor had he ever been diagnosed with schizophrenia. See Williams, Negroes With Guns, 91-92; see also Truman Nelson, "The Resistant Spirit," in Negroes With Guns, 18.

Williams' ideas came to fruition in 1962 with the publication of Negroes With Guns, in which he gave his version of what had happened in Monroe, and also outlined his philosophy of self-defense. Marc Shaeffer of NBC News arranged for the publication of Negroes with Guns with Marzani and Munsell. The book was later translated into French (Des Nègres avec des fusils) and published by François Maspero in 1966. Muhammad Speaks, the voice of the Nation of Islam, called the book "powerful," "provocative," "inspiring," and "fascinating," in addition to "the most significant and prophetic book since The Souls of Black Folk."[78] Ahead of its time, the book was received quietly, but grew to become an underground classic, particularly among black militants. Renewed interest in the book would lead to a second edition published in 1973 by Third World Press.

As evidenced by the review of Negroes With Guns in Muhammad Speaks, Williams' ideas resonated with the Nation of Islam, whom C. Eric Lincoln would characterize in 1961 as "America's fastest growing racist sect."[79] The "Black Muslims," as they were known, comprised a church-based movement founded in Detroit in 1930 by the self-proclaimed prophet Wallace D. Ford. Ford was quickly succeeded by Elijah (Poole) Muhammad, who mixed the church's message of African pride with black separatism and hostility toward whites. The Black Muslims were soon to produce a spokesman whose words regarding self-defense would ring in the ears of black and white

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[78]Sylvester Leaks, "'Negroes With Guns' Powerful, Provocative: Author Attacks Credo of Passive Resistance," Muhammad Speaks (January 31, 1963): 14-15.

[79]C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 4.

Americans alike in a way that Robert Williams' pronouncements had not. His name was Malcolm X.

In the late 1950's, Williams' position had seemed incongruent with prevailing sentiments within the civil rights movement; however, by the early 1960's, the social and political climate of the South had changed, and Williams' radical ideas did not seem so far-fetched. Activists had been beaten and bloodied, and nonviolence, for many, did not hold the appeal it once had. Younger activists, fresh to the struggle, seemed especially open to his ideas, and accounts of Williams' influence abound. For example, in 1961, after the murder of Herbert Lee, a young activist in McComb, Mississippi, local blacks appealed to the Department of Justice and FBI with no results. Learning of what Williams had done in Monroe, they formed a "defense guard," and publicized its existence. They had no further trouble with voter registration. "That is the lesson of Monroe," claimed Conrad Lynn, Williams' attorney.[80] That same year, James Forman of SNCC was visiting Williams in Monroe the night he was accused of kidnapping. Williams made a tremendous impact on Forman, who would devote over fifty pages of his autobiography to Williams and the Monroe story.[81]

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[80]Morris Renek, "Portrait of a 'Wretched' Man: Robert Williams--Wanted by the FBI," The New Republic (September 30, 1967): 12, Box 4, "Articles Concerning Robert Williams--1967" Folder, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[81]See James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 158-211.

When juxtaposed with the ideas of Martin Luther King or Roy Wilkins, Williams' ideas made the militancy of the SCLC and NAACP seem moderate. To the civil rights movement, Williams contributed (in the eyes of most whites) an unpleasant alternative to the peaceable strategy of someone like King, and made King's plans and ideas seem more acceptable to the majority of Americans.[82] Furthermore, King's verbal sparring with Williams forced the SCLC minister to sharpen his own understanding of nonviolence and its role in the movement.

He was a well-known figure in the inner city, particularly in the latter 1960's when revolution seemed possible to many black nationalists. Entrepreneurs capitalized on Williams' stature (and contributed to it) by marketing merchandise embossed with his image. "Power Posters," a Philadelphia company, offered posters of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Muhammad Ali, and LeRoi Jones, but Williams topped the inventory list, and the firm's magazine advertisements featured a photograph not of these other celebrities, but of Williams, holding a cocked pistol.[83]

He foreshadowed the black radicals of the 1960's who answered his call to arms. Militants like Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver looked to the past for precedent and stumbled upon Williams as a man willing to defend his civil rights with

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[82]With Malcolm X, Williams "provided a sharp cutting edge to the black struggle. They kept the pressure on civil-rights leaders to be bolder, more militant," according to Harvard Sitkoff. "Simultaneously, their radicalism made the movement's leadership and objectives appear responsible and moderate. And they scared some white leaders into accepting the civil rights demands as the only effective way to avert potential disaster." Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992 rev. ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), 143.

[83]For example, see Liberation 9 n 2 (February 1969): 11.

force if necessary. Malcolm X noted that "Robert Williams became an exile from this country simply because he was trying to get out people to defend themselves against the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist elements."[84] On another occasion, he called Williams "a very good friend of mine" (though the two never met) who was "just a couple of years ahead of his time"; Williams, Malcolm X attested, "laid a good groundwork," and "will be given credit in history for the stand that he took prematurely."[85] Huey Newton reported that "Negroes With Guns . . . had a great influence on the kind of party we developed."[86] And Eldridge Cleaver confirmed Williams's impact on the Black Panthers. "Robert Williams and Malcolm X stand as two titans, even prophetic figures who heralded the coming of the gun, the day of the gun, and the resort to armed struggle by Afro-America . . . Williams has made just as much impact as Malcolm."[87]

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[84]Malcolm X, interviewed by A. B. Spellman, March 19, 1964, New York, reproduced in Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 11.

[85]Malcolm X, interviewed by Joe Rainey, March 8, 1964, WDAS Radio, Philadelphia, transcript, reprinted in David Gallen, ed., Malcolm X: As They Knew Him (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), 164.

[86]Huey Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1973), 112.

[87]Eldridge Cleaver, "The Land Question and Black Liberation," Post-Prison Writings and Speeches (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 71. According to William McCord, Williams "had some roots in the black community" (unlike earlier blacks associated with the radical left) and "did not deal solely in esoteric ideology." He evolved "a set of strategies and tactics intended for the here and now." For these reasons, his immediacy appealed to the revolutionary outlook of the Panthers. McCord et. al., Life Styles in the Black Ghetto, 240, 242.

But if Williams "made just as much impact as Malcolm," he would seldom be found alongside Malcolm X in history textbooks. National media attention tended to focus exclusively on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as the sole determinants of black protest. Because whites preferred King's message of nonviolence to the exclusion of all other alternatives, instances of black self-defense during the civil rights movement were defined as "violent," and therefore aberrant, behavior; as such, they did not warrant serious attention. Historical records tended further to obfuscate those who did not conform to King's way of thinking. The most detailed historical records from the proceedings of courts, police departments, and various government agencies working to suppress black militancy tended to support the views of those who held power, not those of activists.

But Williams' influence was too great to go unnoticed. Despite being censored from the mainstream media, he left a paper trail around the globe, and many records of his life remain. His collected papers, for example, include a letter from a college student at the University of Redlands in California. The student, C. Timothy Heaton, praised Williams' efforts and affirmed his tactics:

> You are right: violence should not be used for aggression, for this only gives the racists an excuse to beat the people down--but there is no reason why the people should not defend themselves against murderous mobs and Nazi-like officials. Fascists, white-supremac[ist] idiots, and "let-the-blood-spill, we-are-not-responsible" government agents will not be won to truth and justice with prayer--they must be shown that an aroused people will no longer tolerate injustice, and will no longer allow governments which ignore or promote it to force them into submission.[88]

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[88]C. Timothy Heaton, undated letter to Robert F. Williams, Box 1, Undated Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

As Heaton's letter illustrates, Williams won support at home and abroad, from white and non-white alike. For example, ten thousand Japanese, from different prefectures all over the Japanese mainland, joined in a signature campaign to petition President Nixon for Williams' fair treatment in early 1972. By that time, Williams had become more celebrated overseas than at home: numerous, non-English periodicals, from Sweden to Tanzania, published front-page exposés about his plight. In the United States, outside Afro-American circles, Williams remained either relatively unknown or infamously reviled.

Those students of history who remember Williams and his activism in Monroe generally tend to remember him "as a transitory phenomenon, a mere glitch in the chronology of those years--the exception to the rule."[89] More specialized monographs in recent years have been kinder to him.[90] Such revisionist scholarship should secure Williams' rightful place in the pantheon of twentieth-century civil rights leaders.[91]

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[89]Fred Powledge, Free at Last?, 311. General histories of the civil rights movement tend to marginalize Williams. For example, Harvard Sitkoff has provided an accurate synopsis of Williams' activism, describing both his counterpoint to King and his fearful image in the media; however, Sitkoff, like most civil rights historians, treats him as tangential to the larger movement. See Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992, 141, 143.

[90]A close examination of the Williams case, such as that found in Andrew Myers' Masters thesis, forces both a re-consideration of Williams' role in the civil rights movement and a re-evaluation of prevailing assumptions about this early phase of the movement. Myers has pointed out that Williams' militant image in the press caused more moderate civil rights leaders to define their own limits of acceptable protest, and that the waves Williams sent through the international community as a dissident helped to "shame" the United States government into confronting the problem of the color line.

Whatever his place in prevailing histories, Williams' contribution to the struggle for black equality is undeniable. His example inspired the formation of the Deacons for Defense and Justice in 1965, as well as a policy shift by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from nonviolence to armed self-defense. He, along with Malcolm X, provided the inspiration for subsequent organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, in addition to the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Africa, and countless other black militant groups.

Williams saw the quest for civil rights by his fellow black Southerners as complementary to his own, quixotic crusade against white supremacy. He believed civil liberties would come only after white racists had been compelled to see the error of their ways. His was a more visceral struggle: a gritty, tooth-and-nail war waged in violent terms violent whites could understand. Undoubtedly, he was enormously threatening to white supremacists because his own quest ballooned beyond the scope of the civil rights struggle of the 1950's and 1960's: he sought not simply equality, but also respect; not an end to segregation, but an end to racism. Most importantly, he seemed less concerned

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See Myers, "When Violence Met Violence," 82, 86.

[91]The soon-to-be-published study of Williams by Professor Timothy Tyson promises to be the most comprehensive study of Williams yet. Tyson characterizes Williams as the founding father of Black Power. See Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, NAACP Warrior and Rebel," Crisis (December/January 1998): 14-18, and Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African-American Freedom Struggle," Journal of American History 85 n 2 (September 1998): 540-570.

with civil and political rights than with fundamental human rights; consequently, he recognized "the right of self-preservation" as "the most basic of human rights."[92]

His ideas did not stem from his formal education.[93] Instead, they sprouted directly from his personal experience as a black man living in the American South. As an "organic intellectual," he was one of the most influential theoreticians the civil rights movement produced.[94] Unlike some of the other orators and writers commenting on race relations in the United States, his ideas had a plain, unpolished quality, originating in his daily trials in Monroe.

Despite the wild trajectory of his life in exile, Robert Williams was not particularly unique in Afro-American history.[95] Certainly his courage and forward

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[92]Williams, "Reflections of an Exiled Freedom Fighter," unpublished manuscript, Box 2, Undated Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[93]Williams did attend college. Taking advantage of the G.I. Bill, he decided to go to college near Monroe to be near his family. After brief stints at both West Virginia State College and North Carolina College at Durham, he settled at Johnson C. Smith College in Charlotte until his GI benefits ran out in 1952. Financial necessity forced him to leave college and find work to support his family. See Cohen, Black Crusader, 47-56.

[94]In describing the life of civil rights activist Ivory Perry, George Lipsitz has applied the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Italian theorist and Marxist, to the civil rights movement. Using Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual," Lipsitz has described how Perry held no formal status as intellectual or theorist, but still shaped the ideas and actions of an entire population group through his activism, and by involving people in "social contestation." Organic intellectuals learn about the world by trying to change it. Like Perry, Williams personifies the quintessential organic intellectual. See Lipsitz, A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 9-11; see also Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 9, 10.

[95]As Marc Schleifer pointed out in the epilogue of the second edition of Negroes With

thinking merit special attention by historians and students of the civil rights movement, but, on one level, Williams was simply a man who stated the obvious: that black people should be able to defend themselves as white people could. That such an idea had revolutionary implications speaks much about the restrictive folkways of the South.

King effectively parried Williams' attacks, but nonviolence continued to come under assault. Voter registration and desegregation efforts were already well under way in Albany, Georgia, when King became involved there in 1961. Targeting selected stores, he helped to coordinate a boycott, largely ineffective due to poor planning. Nonviolent protest fizzled in Albany, where Sheriff Laurie Pritchett met nonviolence with nonviolence. Rather than attack protestors, Pritchett met them peaceably, packing them into jail by the hundreds. The struggle continued in Albany throughout the summer of 1962, when city commissioners refused further concessions. Rather than integrate city parks, they closed them. They also closed the public library. Arrested and jailed, King, Abernathy and Dr. William G. Anderson, a local physician and head of the efforts in Albany, expected stiff sentences; instead, they were given suspended sentences and released. Finally, city officials succeeded in getting a federal injunction against a major demonstration, which, because of his friendly dealings with the federal government, King

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Guns (1973): "He [Williams] is unique only in that sheltered white consciousness that never read of the slave revolts in its history textbooks, and knows exactly who Booker T. Washington is, but only vaguely if at all of W.E.B. DuBois." Marc Schleifer, "Epilogue," in Robert F. Williams, Negroes With Guns 2d ed. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1973), 127-128.

hesitated to violate.[96] Many felt that King's efforts in Albany flopped, and that nonviolent direct action had failed. King did not get the media event for which he had hoped. Meanwhile, Robert Williams had been forced to leave the country. On September 5, 1961, King received a note from a J.W. Oakley, Sr. editor of The Centreville [Alabama] Press, which read, "I see were [sic] that bearded Monroe Negro is on the lam. Wishing to hear you were the same."[97]

As "that bearded Monroe Negro" continued from abroad to enjoin his friends and neighbors to prepare to defend themselves, other Afro-Americans stood up for themselves by asserting their right to self-defense. Unlike Williams, no one publicized or celebrated their cases, and few people outside of their immediate areas would learn of their individual ordeals, but it was these personal moments of courage that inspired activists to continue their struggles, and that served notice to white Southerners that sizable cracks had appeared in the monolith of white supremacy.

Other cracks would take longer to appear. For example, self-defense took place within carefully prescribed gender roles. Local black women, such as Williams' wife Mabel, learned how to shoot, but Williams, by his own testimony, "kept them out of most of it." The women volunteered and "wanted to fight," but Williams and his male cadre insisted that they "stand by" in order to "render medical services" and to "help organize."

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[96]Coretta Scott King provides a good synopsis of the Albany movement in her autogiography My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr. rev. ed. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1969), 187-192.

[97]Oakley, letter to King, September 5, 1961, Box 7, I, 47, Martin Luther King Collection, Department of Special Collections, Boston University.

The women prepared food, and served in the communications grapevine to alert the community of impending threats.[98] ed for self-defense, too.[!!!] In one of the glaring discrepancies of the struggle for black equality, the men involved in soliciting civil rights reform often ignored the rights of women in their midst. As the movement evolved, this creeping sexism would become more and more apparent. Self-defense was clearly a man's responsibility and duty; whether it was a woman's right too was less cut-and-dry.

Women did not fit into Williams' conception of self-defense as a male prerogative. To him, being a man required resorting to force, if circumstances required it. He did not expect women to resort to force, particularly when men were willing and able to do so for them. Indeed, his vision of manhood, like other males involved in the movement, seemed to rely on a certain objectified vision of womanhood: virtuous, retiring, and dependent. Women needed men to defend them and men—in order to be men—needed to defend their women. But, of course, black women had need for self-defense, too. In one of the glaring discrepancies of the struggle for black equality, the men involved in soliciting civil rights reform often ignore the rights of women in their midst. As the movement evolved, this creeping sexism would become more and more apparent.

Ironically, it was a woman who came to model Williams' idealized requisites for black manhood. On a sweltering evening in early September 1962, twenty-one-year-old Rebecca Wilson was staying in Georgia at the house of her mother, Kate Philpot, with her

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[98]Williams, interviewed by James Mosby, July 22, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

ten younger brothers and sisters. All of the children but one were at home when seven men, wearing stocking masks, walked onto the porch. It was after 10 p.m.

Hearing footsteps, Wilson called through the door and asked what they wanted. The men replied that they wanted to "sell a little politics and leave you a card." She replied that she wasn't interested in what the men had to offer, and waited for them to leave. When she did not hear them leave, she armed herself with a .22-caliber revolver. After waiting for a long while, she cautiously opened the door a crack to see if the men had left. One of the men immediately stuck a shotgun barrel through the space and fired. Mrs. Philpot screamed. The other children were crying and screaming. Wilson fired through the cracked door five times. "It was the idea of the masks, I guess," she later explained. "I was scared. I didn't know what I was shooting at. I just had my hand out the door."[99]

One of Wilson's shots instantly killed one of the men, Leroy Parks, with a bullet through the heart. Another, Gene Ables, was wounded in the forearm. With Parks dead and Ables wounded, the other men fled to their cars. The two youngest men, Billy Gamel and Jimmy Humphreys, ages eighteen and nineteen, later returned to pick up Parks' body and take it to the hospital. Jerome Clay, sheriff of Paulding County, arrested all of the men shortly afterward, including: Franklin Parker, the son of the publisher of the local paper; Hoyt Prather, an automobile mechanic; and M. A. Nichols, an automobile plant worker. Parks, the man who was killed, worked for Billy Joe Jones, the county manager for Marvin Griffin's re-election campaign as governor of Georgia; Parks himself was a

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[99]The [Baltimore] Afro-American (September 15, 1962), 1.

candidate for county representative. Ables, the wounded man, was clerk for the city of Dallas. The men were charged with attempted murder and violation of the state's anti-masking law, designed to curtail illegal activity by the Ku Klux Klan.

Mrs. Philpot closed up her house and moved her family to the home of relatives. Rebecca Wilson, who was taken into protective custody for a few days to protect against possible retaliation, later joined her husband in Indianapolis. She was not charged in the incident. It was a clear-cut case of self-defense.[100]

Similar assaults on black people occurred with alarming frequency in the South. The perpetrators were not only white riff-raff but also civic leaders, politicians, and businessmen. Incidents like this one were not unusual, but what happened at Kate Philpot's house bears mention for a number of reasons. First, the attack was singular in terms of its viciousness and seemingly arbitrary nature: poking a shotgun through the cracked door of a stranger's home and pulling the trigger gives new meaning to cold-blooded malevolence. Second, it was unusual because formal charges were brought against the nightriders; more often than not, such attacks went unprosecuted. But the incident is most notable, not because of the men's actions, but because of Rebecca Wilson's response. In 1962, before Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech at the March on Washington, before black southerners reaped the full-blown successes of civil rights agitation, in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, and long before the concept of Black Power engendered a new and healthy sense of impertinence among black Americans, Rebecca Wilson, like

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[100]Ibid.

Robert Williams, fought back against white racists forcibly and swiftly. In the eyes of those accustomed to immediate deference, her use of a weapon to defend her mother's home must have seemed completely foreign. By staking a claim to life, she was asserting her civil rights.

The philosophy of self-defense began to influence not only individuals but also organizations. Some members of CORE edged away from the nonviolent ideal. In 1962, two CORE field operatives, working outside the South, confessed that in meetings with other CORE workers "we don't talk about nonviolence anymore."[101] Wilfred Ussery, head of the San Franciso CORE chapter, told the local school board in September 1962, "The crucial point for the Negro is that . . . with respect to violence, he is not starting anything . . ."[102] SNCC's fascination with nonviolence also proved to be rather fleeting. Many young members of SNCC seemed ready to break from nonviolence in the early 1960's, soon after the organization's inception. Don Harris, a SNCC worker in southwest Georgia during that group's early involvement there, estimated that between fifty and seventy percent of the staff in 1961 and 1962 were opposed to strict adherence to nonviolence.[103] With many nonviolent marches and protests, and the desegregation of countless public accommodations in the South, the period 1957-1962 marked the high

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[101]Inge Powell Bell, CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence (New York: Random House, 1968), 57.

[102]San Francisco Chronicle (September 19, 1962). [ARTICLE TITLE?]

[103]Emily S. Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1968), 38.

tide of nonviolent direct action; paradoxically, this same period signified a return to the well-established tradition of armed self-defense by black Americans.

"Pure Fire"[1]: Self-Defense Finds a Spokesman, 1963-1964

"We assert and affirm the right of self-defense, which is one of the most basic human rights known to mankind."

--Embossment, Organization of Afro-American Unity membership card

On the first day of school in 1963, Jasper Brown dropped off his children at the Bartlett-Yancey Elementary School in Yanceyville, North Carolina; they were four of sixteen black children enrolled at the formally all-white school. Brown had been one of the original plaintiffs in the school's integration suit, begun in 1956. As he returned to his home in the Blanche community, a few miles away, several carloads of young whites harassed him. They jammed his car in front, in back, and alongside, boxing him in so he could not pass. He drove directly to the office of Caswell County Sheriff Frank Daniel and asked for protection. The sheriff refused, telling him to "get off the street and go ahead on home." The youths continued to harass Brown, who pulled into a grocery store to telephone Sheriff Daniel again. Cursing Brown and threatening to kill him, the youths crowded into the store. Members of the state highway patrol chanced upon the scene and dispersed the crowd.[2]

Four friends volunteered to ride home with Brown. Yelling threats, racial slurs, and obscenities, the youths again surged around the car. In desperation, Brown wheeled into a stranger's driveway along the rural road. At the house, owned by a white man, Brown called

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[1]A white interviewer once asked Malcolm X, "Why do you teach black supremacy and hate?" He replied, "To pour on pure fire in return." See Manning Marable, Race, Reform and Rebellion (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 97.

[2]"See His Gun, Seggies Run," The [Baltimore] Afro-American (February 2, 1963): 1.

the sheriff again and told him that the youths were blocking both exits of the semi-circular driveway. Sheriff Daniel promised to send someone to investigate. When, after a long period of waiting, no one showed up, the white homeowner called the sheriff again. Two deputies arrived. They cleared out the youths but refused to escort Brown the rest of the way home.

When the deputies left, the youths reappeared. As Brown sped toward his house, the youths hemmed in his automobile again. Eventually one cut in front of Brown's car and slammed on the brakes. Brown's car hit the rear bumper of the car in front as the two cars squealed to a halt. Two white youths jumped out of the front seat and started toward Brown. As he got out of his car, the other cars pulled up, and over a dozen angry youths advanced on him with curses and threats. Then the surprise came.

Brown pulled out a pistol and fired twice, hitting the two youths from the car in front. The others abandoned their cars and wounded friends and fled the scene on foot, running into the nearby woods and fields in all directions. Brown reloaded his pistol, got into his car, and drove back to town to the sheriff's office. Because the sheriff had refused him protection earlier, he chose instead to surrender to state highway patrolmen, who took him to an undisclosed jail outside Caswell County. He was freed on bond of $3000.00 posted by Charles McDean, NAACP field secretary in Winston-Salem.

Jasper Brown's actions against his tormentors signified a new trend in black southern history: a return toward recognizing the virtues of self-defense. Sizable tremors had occurred along the region's racial fault lines. Activists had made significant gains in desegregating public facilities in the South. They achieved what they did largely because of nonviolent

direct action, but self-defense had proved successful in the struggle, too: a fact eclipsed by the reductionist simplicity of the "violent/nonviolent" dichotomy.

When discussing the civil rights movement, journalists, scholars and activists all used violence to define nonviolence, and vice versa.[3] This tradition stemmed from a natural tendency to understand a difficult concept in terms of its opposite. Imported from Hinduism, nonviolence was, literally, a foreign concept to most Americans; violence, on the other hand, was something which most could understand. Accordingly, a dichotomy of sorts came into play which offered a relatively simple way to describe the actions of protestors: nonviolent or violent, which was to say, Gandhian or not. Activists were either willing to take up arms to ensure black equality or they were not. In their assessments of the movement, the American public would come to embrace the violent/nonviolent dichotomy.

If Americans would use violence to define nonviolence in the mid-late 1950's, then they would conversely use nonviolence in the early-mid 1960's to define violence and its place in the civil rights movement. Etymologically, "violence" meant the opposite of nonviolence (at least in relation to organized protest). That is, if nonviolence meant abstaining from violence as a matter of principle, then violence meant using force; if nonviolence required loving one's enemies, then violence was anti-nonviolence, presumably

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[3]For an example of this dichotomization, see J. H. Griffin, "On Either Side of Violence," Saturday Review 45 (October 27, 1962): 38. For examples in black periodicals, see "Violence versus Non-violence," [photo editorial] Ebony 20 (April 1965): 168-69; C. Oglesby, "Revolution: Violence or Nonviolence," Liberation 13 (July/August 1968): 36-37; see also A. J. Muste, "Rifle squads or the beloved community," Liberation 9 (May 1964): 7-12.

characterized by hatred or meanness of spirit.[4]

But the original definitions of these words became confused through misuse. In their quest for simplicity, fed by the demands of their readerships, journalists who tracked the movement often failed to grasp the nuances involved and used words such as "nonviolence" and "pacifism" interchangeably.[5] Nonviolence, to them, meant passive resistance, gradualism, or sometimes even acquiescence. Conversely, they interpreted violence within the movement to mean murder, or retributive action against whites.[6] The word "violence,"

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[4]Nonviolence, as conceived by Martin Luther King, Jr., meant love or purity of heart. He often reinforced the notion of anti-nonviolence when criticizing violence rhetorically. For example, in 1967 he wrote: "Violence is the antithesis of creativity and wholeness. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible." Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), 61. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," Ebony 21 (October 1966): 27-30+. Mahatma Gandhi took great pains to distinguish between satyagraha (what he sometimes called "non-violence") and passive resistance, which he termed "the reverse of resistance by arms." See Louis Fischer, The Essential Gandhi: His Life, Work, and Ideas (New York: Vintage, 1962), 87-88.

[5]For an example of nonviolence as pacifism, see "Negro Tries Passive Resistance," [photographic essay] New York Times Magazine (May 28, 1961): 12-13. Martin Luther King, Jr. initially referred to nonviolence as passivity himself. "He didn't even use the word [nonviolence] at first," the Reverend Glenn Smiley has noted. "He used 'passive resistance' almost entirely." Smiley, quoted in David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: Vintage, 1986), 72.

[6]David Hilliard, Chief of Staff of the Black Panther Party, would describe this phenomenon expertly in his autobiography, in which he discusses a press conference in 1968:

> The reporters think we'll shy away from our allegiance to self-defense. Aren't you violent? they ask, over and over again. No, we're not violent, we consistently answer. Violence is what is being done in Vietnam, where napalm burns the innocent to death. Violence is people going unemployed six months of the year, living with drugs and alcohol in their community. Violence is most assuredly a police force that harasses, terrorizes, and kills the people it is being paid to protect. But violence is not us standing with our guns saying simply, No, you can't come in here like you used to and

bandied about by the press, became bastardized and used as something of a catchall description for any kind of interpersonal violence, whether visited upon activists or espoused by them; the term also encompassed the employment of self-defense by activists. In many media accounts, the word "violence" often referred ominously to some vague notion of revolution.[7] Accordingly, "violence," like nonviolence, seemed to mean different things to different people.

A kind of moralization also came into play. Because of white fear of any sort of violence on the part of blacks—and because most white people were willing to attribute the successes of the movement to the peaceable methods of nonviolence, not the spirited tradition of Afro-American resistance—nonviolence was "good," and violence in any form was "bad." Nonviolence worked, whereas violence did not. The dichotomy proved helpful—particularly to everyone struggling to understand the far-flung changes along the nation's color line—but deceptively simplistic. In particular, it left no room for the role of justifiable self-defense in combating aggressive white supremacists.

The custom of conceptualizing the tactical strategy of the civil rights movement in

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shoot and maim and brutalize people at your will. So we're not violent. We're opposed to violence, opposed to war. But we are for self-defense.

But the distinction is lost on the press. Say the same thing over a hundred times and they come back with the predictable question once more: Are you violent?

David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993), 162.

[7]For example, see R. Moley, "Pattern of Revolution," Newsweek 68 (August 8, 1966): 84; and R. Sackett, "Plotting a War on Whitey: Extremists Set For Violence," Life 60 (June 10, 1966): 100-100B+.

terms of "'violence' versus 'nonviolence'" also derived from the stark difference in beliefs between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the same way Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois represented two different approaches to the "uplift of the race" at the turn of the century, so too did Martin and Malcolm come to represent a two-pronged attack on the nation's racial dilemma. To many Americans, Malcolm X embodied a violent approach to civil-rights activism.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little, the son of a Baptist preacher in Omaha, Nebraska. He believed that Black Legionnaires, members of a white racist organization akin to the Ku Klux Klan, murdered his father when he was six years old. His mother went insane, and authorities subsequently placed him and his siblings in foster homes. He dropped out of school in Detroit after the eighth grade. Making his life on the street, he became a hustler, a thief, and a pimp. Convicted of burglary at the age of twenty-one, he went to prison, where he learned of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam. Muhammad preached an unorthodox mixture of Afrocentrism, nationalism, and eschatology, all of which combined to harness Malcolm's formidable intellect. His anger and eloquence quickly propelled him to the pulpit of Temple No. 7 in Harlem, where he became minister.[8]

Malcolm X spoke best in Harlem before black audiences; within the safety of his mosque, he truly relaxed and let fly his most terrible harangues against whites. He condemned white crimes against blacks, and lambasted the "blue-eyed, white devils" who

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[8]For more, see Malcolm X with Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

had long tormented his people. The venom of his speeches attracted the attention of the media: in 1959, WNDT-TV, Channel 13 in New York broadcast "The Hate That Hate Produced," a five-part report by Mike Wallace which brought the Black Muslims, including Malcolm X, to the attention of the general American public. Three years later, Muhammad dispatched Malcolm to the NOI mosque in Los Angeles, where police shot seven Muslims; one of the victims, Ronald Stokes, died. Malcolm again captured the spotlight. At this time, rumors of Muhammad's sexual indiscretions were beginning to circulate, and Malcolm's faith in his leader was tested.

A series of interviews and public appearances confirmed Malcolm's position as a public figure. Without becoming directly involved, he emerged as an outspoken critic of the civil rights movement and its leadership. After increasingly strained relations with Elijah Mohammad, he split with the Nation of Islam, and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he underwent a religious conversion, recognizing the humanity of whites. He founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity upon his return in June 1964. On February 21, 1965, three assassins shot Malcolm to death while he spoke at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. Elijah Muhammad quickly denied complicity in the murder; but, on March 11, 1966, the New York Supreme Court found three Black Muslims guilty of the crime. It was rumored that Louis Farakhan helped orchestrate the assassination.

In his death, as in his life, comparisons to King were common. There were many obvious differences between the two men. One advocated integration, the other separation. One was Christian, the other Muslim. The biggest difference seemed to be that one lauded nonviolence, and the other did not. Looking at the two as halves of the same whole, rather

than as separate entities, seemed quite natural, and led to an easy dichotomization.

Furthermore, the teachings of Elijah Muhammad reinforced a tendency to view the world in Manichean terms. Muhammad's message was "couched in starkly fundamentalist terms, in extremes and contrasts—black versus white; sin versus righteousness, utter depravity versus pure holiness."[9] In the Nation of Islam, there were few gray areas. The Black Muslims' stern moral code and conservative appearance led many civil rights activists to conclude that they were fundamentalist and austere. For example, James Farmer observed: "The Muslims are all black and CORE is interracial. The Muslims are separationists and CORE is integrationist. The Muslims do not reject violence as a solution; CORE does."[10]

The press and the American public contributed to the same bifurcation. Either unwilling to disseminate the complexities of the movement or unable or both, the media produced easily digestible information for whites trying to understand what was happening on America's troubled racial front.[11] It was much simpler for most Americans, black and white alike, to know that King was nonviolent and integrationist, and that Malcolm was violent and segregationist. As a result, the public's impressions of each man became binary; that is, they became reflective of the other, and more true to a publicly manufactured image than to the ideas and personalities of the men themselves. This mirror-effect represented another manifestation of the "violent/nonviolent" dichotomy.

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[9]Thelwell, quoted in David Gallen, ed., Malcolm X: As They Knew Him (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1992), 33.

[10]Farmer, quoted in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 206.

[11]See supra note 4.

The public's desire for simplicity, as reflected by his treatment in the media, consistently cast Malcolm X in a posture of aggression. He never advocated wanton violence, but it seemed that the American public—whites in particular, but many blacks, too—could understand him only in opposition to what they perceived as the pacifism of Martin Luther King, Jr. This juxtaposition with King made Malcolm seem, to many white observers, a violent and unreasonable ogre. The violent/nonviolent dichotomy tended to box King into a defense of nonviolence as it constrained Malcolm within a figurative cage of violence.

For each, the question of violence boiled down to a question of ends and means. For Malcolm, self-defense was a matter of "plain, common sense."[12] For King, any form of violence was as much immoral as it was impractical. Violence was evil. The end is always pre-existent in the means; therefore, for King, violence could never serve a good end. King's deep commitment to the brotherhood of man clinched his adoption of nonviolence, but a certain degree of pragmatism and cold realism also drove King to nonviolence. As a numerical minority, violent revolution was an impossibility for black Americans in the United States. Numbers and material resources prohibited long-term violent rebellion by black Americans.[13] King was aware of these variables, as was Malcolm; therefore, there had to be another way. The key for Malcolm, as it was for Robert Williams and others, was self-defense.

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[12]John Henrik Clarke, ed., Malcolm X: The Man and His Times (New York: Collier Books, 1969), 197.

[13]For more on King's sense of the futility of revolution, which he called "blatantly illogical," see King, Where Do We Go From Here?, 58-59.

The best descriptor of Malcolm X was, not surprisingly, Malcolm X. None who followed has captured his essence better than the man himself.[14] Perhaps the combined strengths of his autobiography (written in collaboration with Alex Haley, author of Roots) and his collected speeches have hampered the creation of a definitive work about him. He was a pragmatic orator; that is, he said what worked at a given time for a given audience. Like many great extemporaneous speakers, he contradicted himself and, under close scrutiny, his speeches do exhibit a number of incongruencies. Nonetheless, considering the number of

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[14]Published works concerning Malcolm X constitute a mixed bag of elegy, recollection, sensationalism, and scholarship. The definitive work by and about Malcolm X remains his autobiography; see Malcolm X with Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, 1964). An essential work of American autobiography, it has been reprinted numerous times. Other works about Malcolm X include Louis Lomax, To Kill a Black Man (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968); John Henrik Clarke, ed., Malcolm X: The Man and His Times (New York: Collier Books, 1969); George Breitman, et. al., The Assassination of Malcolm X (New York: Pathfinder, 1976); Peter Goldman, The Death and Life of Malcolm X 2d. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); James H. Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991); Bruce Perry, Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1991); David Gallen, Malcolm X: As They Knew Him (Carroll & Graf, 1992); Joe Wood, ed., Malcolm X: In Our Own Image (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Michael Eric Dyson, Making Malcolm: The Myth & Meaning of Malcolm X (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Theresa Perry, Teaching Malcolm X (New York: Routledge, 1996). Of these, Goldman's Death and Life of Malcolm X, Gallen's Malcolm X: As They Knew Him, and Clarke's Malcolm X: The Man and His Times are the most helpful. Goldman's book is the single best work about Malcolm. Well-written and incisive, it nicely complements the Autobiography; however, the author cannot resist dipping, in the second half of the book, into the speculative intrigue surrounding the unanswered questions of Malcolm's assassination. His annotated bibliography, "Notes on Sources," is quite helpful to those researching Malcolm's life; see Goldman, Death and Life of Malcolm X, 437-442. Gallen provides first-hand reminiscences of Malcolm; Clarke's collection of essays, more academic in tone, grope for an understanding of his legacy. Clarke and Gallen both include important primary sources such as speeches and interviews; Gallen also includes a chronological timeline of Malcolm's life. This list contains only a sampling of the works about Malcolm X; it is by no means exhaustive.

times he spoke, for the variety of different audiences both at home and abroad, his rhetoric was remarkably consistent. This consistency stemmed from his conviction in a number of core ideas that he preached again and again.[15]

First, he maintained that white people were the enemy. It is difficult to ignore this theme in his speeches and writings.[16] Second, he demonstrated that black people living in America faced systemic racism, built into the nation's institutions and political framework. Because the dominant culture had failed them, black people should withdraw from that culture and tend to their own needs. Third, he preached that Afro-Americans were beautiful, creative, and strong during a time when black people were just beginning to rediscover these

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[15]Many of Malcolm X's speeches were collected and published posthumously. See Malcolm X, Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (New York: Merit Publishers, 1965); Malcolm X, Two Speeches by Malcolm X (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1965; reprint, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); Malcolm X, The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard (New York: William Morrow, 1968; reprint, New York: Paragon House, 1991); Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); Malcolm X, Malcolm X and the Negro Revolution (London: Owen, 1969); Malcolm X, Malcolm X on Afro-American History (New York: Merit Book, 1970); and Malcolm X, The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches (ed. Benjamin Goodman (New York: Merlin House, 1971).

[16]According to Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad was the first black leader with the courage to identify the enemy of black people. "Our enemy," Malcolm reiterated, "is the white man!" Malcolm X, Autobiography, 251. Some scholars have noted that Malcolm's racial preconceptions changed during his pilgrimage to Mecca; however, this realignment can be overemphasized. As one historian has noted,

> his racial philosophy had changed in Mecca, but only to the extent that his brother Muslims of every color had treated him like a human being; he saw little possibility of anything like that happening in America, short of a mass conversion to Islam, and in the meantime the chance that there might be a few "good" whites wasn't going to alter his judgment that, collectively, the lot of them was bad.

See Goldman, Death and Life of Malcolm X, 183.

qualities in themselves. Finally, and most importantly, he insisted not that blacks should take up arms against whites, but that an individual has the right to protect the integrity of his life, home, and property, using force if necessary.

All of Malcolm's ideas were rooted in a message of self-defense. Every speech and every sermon alluded, in some way, to the need for black people to protect themselves from a world aligned against them.[17] For example, in "Message to the Grass Roots," one of his best-known speeches, delivered in 1963, he equated redemptive suffering with Uncle Tom-ism. "The white man does the same thing to you [as a dentist] . . . when he wants to put knots on your head and take advantage of you and not have to be afraid of your fighting back," he declared. "To keep you from fighting back, he gets these old religious Uncle Toms to teach you and me, just like Novocain, to suffer peacefully. Don't stop suffering--just suffer peacefully." Suffering in any form was onerous, not redemptive. "There is nothing in our book, the Koran, that teaches us to suffer peacefully," he offered. The Koran teaches one to be intelligent, respectful, peaceable, and courteous; "but," he warned, "if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery." To Malcolm, such was the mark of "a good religion." In this way, Malcolm X used the appeal of self-defense to try to draw new converts to the Nation of Islam.[18]

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[17]Malcolm X was aware of Robert Williams. See chapter 2, notes 83 and 84.

[18]Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots," speech, Northern Grass Roots Leadership Conference, King Solomon Baptist Church, November 10, 1963. This speech has been reproduced in a number of formats, including a recording published by the Afro-American Braodcasting and Recording Company, Detroit; see also Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (New York: Pathfinder, 1965) and John Henrik Clarke, ed., Malcolm X: The Man and His Times (New York: Collier Books, 1969). In his famous interview with Alex Haley for Playboy magazine, Malcolm said, "Islam is a religion that

Another speech, entitled "Communication and Reality," he delivered to the Domestic Peace Corps on December 12, 1964. The speech, purportedly about revolutions in Africa, quickly turned to self-defense. "Whatever weapon they [racists] use, that's the one I'll use," he said. "I go for talking the kind of language he talks." Racists could not understand nonviolence, which Malcolm believed beyond their schematic reference. "If a man is speaking French, you can talk German all night long, he won't know what you're talking about." Violence was a common tongue which all could understand. Reciprocity, he felt, was the key to combating racism.[19]

If the government wanted peace, he argued, then it should do its job in affording black people protection and equal opportunity. The onus of responsibility for peace should not fall upon black activists who did not start the violence in the first place. Defending oneself did not cause violence: it was simply a response to a pre-existing state of disorder. Malcolm worked to undermine the violent/nonviolent dichotomy perpetuated by the media by redefining self-defense as something other than violent behavior.

> Because this is the situation, you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense. I call it intelligence.[20]

He explained the phrase "by any means necessary" as a measure of last resort. "Whenever

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teaches us never to attack, never to be the aggressor--but you can waste somebody if he attacks you." Malcolm X, interview by Alex Haley, Playboy (May 1963), reprinted in David Gallen, ed., Malcolm X: As They Knew Him (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), 109-130.

[19]Malcolm X, "Communication and Reality," Speech to Domestic Peace Corps, December 12, 1964, reprinted in Clarke, ed., Malcolm X: The Man and His Times, 307-320.

[20]Ibid.

someone is treating you in a criminal, illegal, or immoral way, why, you are well within your rights to use anything at your disposal to bring an end to that unjust, illegal, and immoral condition," he stated. He homed in on the racial double standard of self-defense, and on the difficulty in defining violence. "When it comes time for a black man to explode," he argued, "they call it violence, but white people can be exploding against black people all day long and it's never called violence." When the rest of the nation abandoned its violent ways, then black people could become nonviolent, too—but not before then.[21]

The rest of the nation proved slow to abandon its violent ways. Seeking to galvanize public opinion and prod the federal government to action, SCLC chose Birmingham in 1963 to highlight the clear record of brutality there, embodied by the city's public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor. Connor's reputation for cruelty extended beyond the borders of Jefferson County, and King knew Connor would provide the spectacle of violence Pritchett had not. Officials such as Connor personified the city's reputation among blacks as violent, harsh, and repressive.

SCLC designed "Project C" (for "confrontation"), as it called its campaign in Birmingham, to cripple the city economically. Demonstrations, including an economic boycott, featured a full-scale assault on racist employment practices and segregated public accommodations. The drama that unfolded included marches, demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, jailings, beatings, and general chaos. The mayhem culminated May 3-7 when Connor instructed police with clubs and attack dogs and firemen with high-pressure water hoses, capable of stripping bark from trees, to charge demonstrators. The resulting

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[21] Ibid.

mayhem, televised before a national audience, prompted not only desegregation in Birmingham but also a wave of national sympathy, and a rash of similar protests across the South. The civil rights movement climaxed on August 28, 1963, when a quarter million people participated in the March on Washington, where King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

The victory of Birmingham was short-lived. Less than three weeks later, on September 15, 1963, someone bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The explosion killed four black girls. Many saw the bombing as an end to the nonviolent phase of the movement. As King prepared to deliver the eulogy at a joint funeral service for the little girls, novelist John Killens alluded that this tragedy marked the end of nonviolence in the movement. "Negroes must be prepared to protect themselves with guns," he said.[22]

Malcolm X agreed. He first went on record as a naysayer of nonviolent direct action in the spring of 1963, when he accused Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of "disarming" southern blacks in their struggle for rights. Two television interviews—one with Dr. Kenneth Clark, one with James Baldwin—confirmed his thoughts on nonviolence in the civil rights movement. "King is the best weapon that the white man, who wants to brutalize Negroes, has ever gotten in this country," he told Clark, "because he is setting up a situation where, when the white man wants to attack Negroes, they can't defend themselves."[23] Malcolm denounced King in the wake of the Birmingham protests, when many protestors were injured.

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[22]Killens, quoted in Coretta Scott King, My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 226.

[23]Malcolm X, interview by Kenneth B. Clark, June, 1963, reprinted in John Henrik Clarke, Malcolm X: The Man and His Times (New York: Collier Books, 1969), 168-181; see also "Malcolm X Disputes Nonviolence Policy," New York Times (June 5, 1963): 29.

"You can't take a black man who is being bitten by dogs and accuse him of advocating violence because he tries to defend himself from the bite of the dog."[24] The "dogs" to which he referred were both literal and metaphorical.

For Malcolm, as for many Americans, Birmingham in 1963 was a definitive juncture in the struggle for civil rights. The televised confrontations, water hoses, and German Shepherds elicited powerful reactions in those who saw them. For the general public, the drama of what transpired in Birmingham fixed Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the American consciousness. King himself realized in Birmingham that the nation needed new civil rights legislation. The meaning of Birmingham for Malcolm lay not in the mass marches or dime-store boycotts but in the ominous night of rioting on May 10 when city leaders and protestors reached an agreement to begin desegregation and end demonstrations. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15 upset him terribly, and he referred to it often in his speeches, and in conversation.[25] When journalists suggested his call for rifle clubs might lead to armed revolution, he responded, "What would you prefer? Civil war or more Birminghams?"[26] More than any other factor, what happened in Birmingham convinced Malcolm of the correctness of his position.

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[24]Ibid.

[25]For example, in his famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," delivered on April 3, 1964, at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Malcolm encouraged his audience to take up arms "any time you and I sit around and read where they bomb a church and murder in cold blood, not some grownups, but four little girls while they were praying to the same god the white man taught them to pray to . . ." See Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (New York: Pathfinder, 1965; reprint, 1993), 23-44.

[26]Malcolm X, quoted in Goldman, The Death and Life of Malcolm X, 135.

As in Montgomery, civil rights agitation in Birmingham raised the possibility of not only retaliation by blacks but also violent revolt by them. King exploited this fear to advance the movement. In a newspaper column in New York Amsterdam News, he cautioned that blacks would remain nonviolent "only so long." His famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," written on scrap paper and smuggled out of the jail, similarly warned that without progress toward eradicating segregation, "a frightening racial nightmare" could arise from blacks resorting to "black-nationalist ideologies."[27] King again redefined nonviolence as a surrogate for wanton violence, and in doing so, reaffirmed the either/or rationale of the violent/nonviolent dichotomy. Nonviolence originally represented an expression of theological commitment to peace, but King, in pleading for reconciliation and brotherhood in Birmingham, redefined it as an alternative to violence by blacks toward white aggressors.

The events in Birmingham—along with the assassination of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi on June 12, 1963—sparked debate regarding the role of self-defense in the struggle for black equality among civil rights activists in the Deep South. Indeed, self-defense became a focal point in Mississippi during the Summer Project of 1964 (Freedom Summer). Activists rankled at the prospect of being locked into King's plan for nonviolent resistance in any locale, under any circumstances. For example, Bob Zellner and Clarence Robinson, both members of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), debated the virtues of self-defense at Greenwood's Friendship Church. "It has been proven time and time again," Robinson argued, "that when a man fights back he is not

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[27]King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Why We Can't Wait (New York: Signet, 1963), 87. This letter has been reprinted numerous times in various sources.

attacked. Now, I've never been the one to start a fight. But if someone is pushing me, I have to defend myself. You got to learn to stay flexible, to fight when you have to, but only when you have to." Zellner conceded Robinson's viewpoint by paraphrasing Gandhi: "If you can't be nonviolent, be violent rather than a coward." But he had also pledged himself to nonviolence, whatever that entailed. "The way I am," Zellner said, "I'd flatten anybody who came at me on the street. But when you're pledged to the discipline of a mass movement, you got to behave as you promised."[28] Gun-toting was pervasive in rural Mississippi communities, as evidenced by a memorandum Mary King, a SNCC organizer, wrote in August, 1964, in regard to Hartman Turnbow, a local activist from Holmes County.

> Mr. Hartman Turnbow represents the landed gentry of the movement. Holmes County is 70 percent Negro, and 70 percent of the land in this county is owned by Negroes. Coming south from Tchula, his house is across railroad tracks just before you turn left to the Mileston community center . . . get directions or an escort as he may shoot.[29]

It was SNCC's policy to conform to local custom, and let local people steer organizing efforts in a given community; but, because many SNCC workers considered themselves to be "nonviolent," the issue of self-defense proved problematic in this regard. The central question facing SNCC, as Mary King explained in her autobiography, was: should SNCC organizers follow a policy of nonviolence or have permission to arm themselves for self-defense when necessary?[30]

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[28]Sally Belfrage, Freedom Summer (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 174-176.

[29]Mary King, Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1987), 319.

[30]Ibid, 322.

On a sweltering day in June 1964, the leadership cadre of SNCC—about two dozen core staff members, state directors, and field secretaries—gathered in the basement of Frazier's Lounge in Atlanta to discuss the Mississippi Summer Project. Seated around pitchers of iced tea, the discussants quickly turned to questions of self-defense and nonviolence.[31] Charlie Cobb, a Howard University graduate and son of a United Church of Christ minister, reported:

> Threats of violence have been made to five of our Negro staff in Greenwood. Two of them had guns given to them. One gun was placed in the office and two guns were placed in the Freedom House. Dick Frey, the only white member of our staff, is the only nonnative Mississippian against guns.[32]

This information sparked an attempt to clarify SNCC's policy on nonviolence. Revealing the day-to-day difficulties in living out a commitment to nonviolence, Willie Peacock, a local youth from the Delta, told of asking a local man to fire on anyone who broke into the Freedom House. The man refused, and Peacock placed guns there "so that we could at least guard the Freedom House at night." He was convinced that whites in Greenwood "are more convinced than ever that they can kill a Negro and get away with it."[33] Don Harris described the six shootings in eighteen months in southwest Georgia where he was organizing. "At a mass meeting two nights after the last shooting," he said, "we talked about nonviolence but the people walked out angry and frustrated." What right did he and the other staff members

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[31]The entirety of this discussion can be found in King, Freedom Song, 311-323.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

have, he wondered, to stop the local people from doing whatever they wanted to do?[34] "You should decide," Frank Smith countered brusquely, "that if you go to Mississippi, you're going to get your ass whipped, go to jail, and get shot. You'll be functionally useless if you can't decide this. If you get hung up on your own personal safety, we're not going to get anything done."[35] Courtland Cox agreed. "The question of arming ourselves is larger than Mississippi," he stated. "To the extent that we think about self-defense, we are immobilized."[36] Such rationale allowed SNCC volunteers to function in the hostile climes of Mississippi.

The debate raged on. Various members asked if it were appropriate for local people to defend organizers with guns. The group could not reach a consensus as individuals came to grips with the possibility of dying. Bob Moses weighed in. "Self-defense is so deeply ingrained in rural southern America that we as a small group can't affect it," he explained. "It's not contradictory for a farmer to say he's nonviolent and also to pledge to shoot a marauder's head off. The difference "is that we on staff have committed ourselves not to carry guns."[37] Ella Baker concluded with an apparent endorsement of self-defense when she noted that an individual "would not be operating outside of SNCC" if he opted to "pick up the gun."[38]

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[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid. Civil rights scholars have noted that almost every SNCC worker in the Deep

Meanwhile, Malcolm was becoming increasingly interested in the civil rights movement. He was troubled by the struggle for civil rights in the South: specifically, he was troubled by integration, by acquiescence, and by the necessity of asking. Only when he could comprehend the movement as part of a larger struggle for human rights could he accept its aims. Those who knew him attest that Malcolm wanted to be involved in the civil rights movement. "He wanted to be involved with black people," said Ossie Davis, "whenever and wherever they were involved."[39] He monitored the doings of SNCC and CORE, visited the SCLC headquarters in Atlanta, and even showed up on the fringe of various protests and demonstrations. "He would just go and look," his lieutenant Charles Kenyatta said. "He wanted to do it so bad."[40]

Despite this yearning, he recognized the impossibility of his participation in the movement. Three reasons precluded his involvement. First, as Elijah Muhammed insisted, and as Malcolm initially conceded, the Nation of Islam was not a civil rights organization: it was a religious movement. Muhammad insisted that Malcolm refrain from participating in protests not directly involving the NOI.[41] Second, Malcolm felt his views on nonviolence

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South was carrying a firearm by the time of the Mississippi Summer Project (1964). To gauge how many SNCC workers were armed, Stokely Carmichael asked those who were carrying guns at an executive committee meeting in Holly Springs, Mississippi to place their weapons on the table. Most present did. See Carson, In Struggle, 164 and Herbert Haines, Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 53-54, 157-159.

[39]Davis, quoted in Gallen, Malcolm X: As They Knew Him, 95.

[40]Ibid, 94.

[41]With Elijah Muhammad's approval, Malcolm and hundreds of other Muslims protested the arrest of two Muslims selling Muhammad Speaks in Times Square on December 25,

precluded him from being involved. The movement, which seemed to Malcolm to be under King's direction, was a self-described "nonviolent movement," and Malcolm was self-avowedly "not nonviolent."

Third, and perhaps most importantly, he saw his role as that of a critic. He worked better by offering a searing counterpoint to the comparatively mainstream viewpoints offered by King and others, and he knew that this was where his strength lay: as a commentator, rather than as a direct participant. He often referred to "them Uncle Toms," meaning the mainstays of the SCLC, NAACP, and Urban League: Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young. In turn, the mainstream civil rights leadership ostracized Malcolm. Indeed, he existed on the periphery of the movement like dark storm clouds, building. His anger grew, and with it, the impetus to effect change immediately.

Like King and Robert Williams, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X freely attacked one another without seeming to understand fully the other's position. While they met in person only once, they responded and challenged one another—sometimes by name, sometimes in veiled references—throughout their public lives. King was invariably more magnanimous with Malcolm than the other way around. Malcolm called nonviolence "foolish."[42] On different occasions, he referred to Dr. King as "an Uncle Tom," and "a chump not a champ." "Coffee with a cracker," he scoffed, "that's success?"[43] Malcolm X

1962; however, the following year Muhammad instructed Malcolm not to help or join in any demonstrations sponsored by the various civil rights organizations--including the upcoming March on Washington. See Davis, Malcolm X: The Great Photographs, 55, 92.

[42]"Malcolm X Disputes Nonviolence Policy," New York Times (June 5, 1963): 29.

[43]Goldman, Death and Life of Malcolm X, 75, 101.

used King as a patsy to define his own militance.

Conversely, King used Malcolm to illustrate the alternative to legislative reform: chaos. Again, the dichotomy came into play, as King and Malcolm conformed to their media-crafted images. While Malcolm was still alive, King rarely acknowledged that there were multiple alternatives to legislative reform.[44] Instead, his rhetoric allowed only one alternative: death and destruction, courtesy of Malcolm X and his ilk. King would usually present the matter in terms of a choice: "We can deal with [the problem of second-class citizenship] now, or we can drive a seething humanity to a desperation it tried, asked, and hoped to avoid."[45] In his famous "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," he suggested that if white leaders failed to heed him, "millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair" will "seek solace" in Malcolm X: a development that "will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare."[46] While King helped to demonize Malcolm, what this exchange really proved was how self-fulfilling prophecies work: by treating him as a doomsayer, King—in a sense—forced Malcolm to become one.

King's and Malcolm's personalities dictated how they handled the issue of self-defense. King recognized that talking about self-defense needlessly agitated white audiences; therefore, he avoided doing so. Malcolm also recognized that talking about self-defense agitated white folks—which was exactly why he did it. In championing self-defense,

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[44]Chicago represented a turning point for King in this regard. After the open-housing protests in Chicago in 1966, he increasingly recognized that legislative reform was not enough.

[45]King, "In a Word: Now," New York Times Magazine (September 29, 1963): 91-92.

[46]King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

Malcolm "proved" his detractors to have been right all along. He was a violent, dangerous man to those who threatened him.

Despite their differing opinions, both men recognized that their brands of activism were complementary, serving to shore up the other's weaknesses. King used Malcolm X to illustrate the alternative to his own proscriptions for racial justice, and Malcolm allowed King to use him this way. For example, Malcolm once told Coretta Scott King that he was not trying to make her husband's job more difficult, but rather was trying to show whites "what the alternative is."[47] King and X were not enemies, but cautious partners, involved in bettering the lot of Afro-Americans.

One series of incidents, in particular, illustrates how Malcolm understood that he and King were part of the same struggle. Elijah Muhammad invited George Lincoln Rockwell and other members of the American Nazi Party to participate in a NOI convention in June 1961, to discuss the establishment of a black separatist state within the existing United States. Such an impossible alliance arose from the tacit understanding between both groups that black separatism was desirable: the Muslims wanted to segregate, and the Nazis were more than happy to oblige. Malcolm X rankled at the idea. Uncomfortable with such unlikely bedfellows, he privately complained to Muhammad about meeting with Rockwell; however, he presided at the conference after the latter feigned illness, as Muhammad often did to avoid public speaking engagements. Four years later, in 1965, Malcolm made public a telegram he had recently written to Rockwell, saying, "I am no longer held in check from fighting white

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[47]Coretta Scott King, My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr., 259.

supremacists by Elijah Muhammad's separatist Black Muslim movement," and warning "that if your present racist agitation against our people there in Alabama causes physical harm to Reverend King or any other black American, that you and your Ku Klux Klan friends will be met with maximum physical retaliation from those of us who . . . believe in asserting our right of self-defense--by any means necessary."[48] Malcolm publicly defended King, in effect acknowledging King's successes in Alabama. He pledged to come to King's aid should Rockwell physically threaten him. This pledge reinforced Malcolm's role as understudy to King as principal player in the events unfolding in the South; but, conversely, it also gave testimony to Malcolm's willingness to involve himself fully, in a manner of force, should the need arise. Furthermore, in pledging to defend King, Malcolm introduced the idea that self-defense was transferable; that is, if you are unwilling or unable to defend yourself, others more inclined or more capable might, in a manner of speaking, defend yourself for you. The Deacons for Defense and Justice would later build their organization on this concept, as would the Black Panthers.

The telegram also illustrates how even Malcolm, normally consistent in his understanding of self-defense and what that phrase meant, could blur the distinctions between true self-defense and aggressive, retaliatory violence. He used the phrase "maximum physical retaliation" in conjunction with his affirmation of "our right to self-defense--by any means necessary" and in doing so, equated the two. In the name of self-defense, he promised to destroy Rockwell should harm come to King.

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[48]Malcolm, quoted in Thulani Davis, Malcolm X: The Great Photographs (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1992), 44.

Malcolm reveled in ambivalence, and particularly enjoyed the consternation his metaphors and double-entendres caused among white audiences. Self-defense, to many whites, seemed like a synonym for revolution, and Malcolm did nothing to clarify his meaning to nervous whites. His words induced fear, a powerful emotion. It was his way of carrying the war to the enemy.

Nor was he above suggesting retaliation. The way in which Malcolm spoke ambivalently, using metaphors to make his point, led him to cloud the distinction between self-defense and retaliation on more than one occasion. For example, he told an audience at the Audubon Ballroom on December 20, 1964:

> If I were to go home and find some blood on the leg of one of my little girls, and my wife told me that a snake bit the child, I'd go looking for the snake. And if I found the snake, I wouldn't necessarily take time to see if it had blood on its jaws. As far as I'm concerned the snake is the snake. So if snakes don't want someone hunting snakes indiscriminately, I say that snakes should get together and clean out their snakey house. If snakes don't want people running around indiscriminately chopping off the heads of snakes, my advice would be to keep their house in order.[49]

The message, as Malcolm intended, existed between the lines. If white people could not restrain violent racists, then all whites were at risk of random retribution. Malcolm cloaked the threat in metaphor, thereby protecting himself from charges of inciting violence. Referring to the men who killed Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman in Philadelphia, Mississippi during the summer of 1964, he said, "Now those twenty-one snakes that killed those three brothers down there . . . those are snakes. And there is no law in any society on earth that would hold it against anyone for taking the heads of those

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[49]Malcolm X, "At the Audubon," Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (New York: Pathfinder, 1965; reprint, 1993), 135-136.

snakes"; in fact, he suggested, "the whole world would honor you or honor anyone who did what the federal government refused to do . . ."[50] It was these oblique suggestions at which Malcolm excelled.

In this same speech, Malcolm suggested how white liberals, eager to prove their commitment to the cause, could help out. "When they tell me that they're liberal, I tell them, 'Great, go get me one of those snake heads.'"[51] He believed that many white college students were sincere in their desire to help blacks, but he felt that "encouraging our people to be nonviolent" was misguided. He induced liberals to act, not talk:

> I'm telling you how to do it: You're a liberal; get you a sheet. And get you something up under that sheet that you know how to use, and walk right on in that camp of sheeted people with the rest of them. And show how liberal you are. I'll come back and shake your hand all day long.[52]

If a white person were sincere in his commitment to aiding blacks, let him infiltrate a Ku Klux Klan meeting with a gun and start firing. Dressed as a Klansman, with a weapon secreted under his robes, a white person could do much to further the cause. Actions, after all, spoke louder than words.[53]

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[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid.

[53]He presented a similar scenario to Robert Penn Warren in 1965, saying: "If I see a white man who was willing to go to jail or throw himself in front of a car in behalf of the so-called Negro cause, the test that I would put to him, I'd ask him, 'Do you think Negroes--when Negroes are being attacked--should defend themselves even at the risk of having to kill the one who's attacking them?' If that white man told me, yes, I'd shake his hand." Malcolm X, quoted in Robert Penn Warren, Who Speaks for the Negro? (New York: Random House, 1965), 258.

While his views on integration, whites, and other issues evolved and changed over time, his opinions regarding self-defense remained static: they were a mainstay of his political theory and rhetoric. So intractable was his commitment to self-defense that he embossed it on the membership card of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. The single declaration of purpose on the card did not mention justice or Pan-African solidarity. It simply read, "We assert and affirm the right of self-defense, which is one of the most basic human rights known to mankind."[54]

At no time after his conversion to Islam, until the days immediately before his death, did Malcolm carry a weapon of any sort; even then, he carried a non-lethal teargas pen. While he did possess a rifle and pistol for home defense,[55] the famous photograph of Malcolm peering out from behind a drawn curtain with a rifle in his hand is somewhat misleading. Different sources have heralded the photo, taken by Don Charles, as an example of the man's hatred and connivance to bring war to society. More accurately, it was a staged demonstration of his commitment to self-defense.[56]

On December 16, 1964, Alan Dershowitz introduced the featured guest speaker at the Harvard Law School Forum. The speaker, who had recently become the second most popular lecturer on college campuses (behind Presidential hopeful, Barry Goldwater), strode to the

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[54]Goldman, The Death and Life of Malcolm X, 187.

[55]Clarke, ed., Malcolm X: The Man and His Times, 90.

[56]Peter Goldman has surmised that Malcolm posed for this photo "precisely for melodramatic effect, as a deterrent to his enemies." Goldman, The Death and Life of Malcolm X, 155.

podium of a packed auditorium. Adjusting his eyeglasses, which gave him a learned, ascetic quality, the man leveled his gaze at the white audience. Tall, athletically built, and smartly dressed, he exuded strength and self-confidence. Without any notes, the lecturer spoke fluently and forcefully.

While the slated topic for discussion was "The African Revolution and Its Impact on the American Negro," "Brother Malcolm," as his fellow Black Muslims knew him, covered a number of issues in his speech. He explained his preference for the term "Afro-American" rather than "Negro." He explained his religious beliefs. He also explained why, to him, self-defense was such an essential part of the struggle for black equality. "The reason we never received the real thing ["education, housing, employment, everything"] is that we have not displayed any tendency to do the same for ourselves which other human beings do: to protect our humanity and project our humanity." White people would never "sit idly by" and tolerate "what we black men have been letting others do to us." Whites would not remain "passive, peaceful, and nonviolent." As soon as black people—black men, in particular—show that they "are willing to die just as quickly to protect our lives and property as whites have shown, they will "be recognized as human beings." It is "inhuman, absolutely subhuman," not to fight back. As part of a struggle for humanity—indeed, as part of a civil rights movement—how could one not defend himself? "[T]oday the black man in America has seen his mistake and is correcting it by lifting his struggle from the level of civil rights to the level of human rights."[57]

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[57]Malcolm X, The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard (New York: William Morrow, 1968; reprint, New York: Paragon House, 1991).161-75.

He summed up his speech by declaring that his organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, believed that black people should no longer be victims. He wanted the Ku Klux Klan to know that "bloodshed is a two-way street . . . dying is a two-way street," and "killing is a two-way street." He concluded by evoking Shakespeare's Hamlet, who tried to decide whether it was nobler "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," or whether it was nobler "to take up arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them." Malcolm felt that Hamlet's soliloquy answered itself: fretting about whether one should use slings and arrows could only bring suffering.[58]

Though many within the civil rights movement would disavow his involvement, Malcolm X helped set the tone of protest, and dictated theory and tactics from the periphery. He advocated a kind of non-nonviolence, reflected in his praise of self-defense. But many people, particularly in the mid-late 1960's, heard his words not as an exhortation of self-defense, but as a coded invitation to participate in aggression toward whites. That which did not fit readily within the violent/nonviolent dichotomy, including Malcolm's insistence on self-protection, was lost to a bifurcated view of not only the civil rights struggle but also violence itself. Accordingly, a man like Jasper Brown, forced to protect himself, would seem—to many whites, at least—to be less an American exercising his constitutional right to self-defense than a crazy black man threatening whites with a gun. Even more disturbing than an individual acting alone would be those groups of blacks who heeded Malcolm's advice: organizing to arm themselves for self-protection. One such group was the Deacons for Defense and Justice.

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[58]Ibid.

"A Brand New Negro": Self-Defense in Action, 1965-1966

"[T]here were a lot of night-riders riding through the neighborhood. We stopped them. We put them out and gave them fair warning . . . So the white man right away found out that a brand new Negro was born. We definitely couldn't swim and we was as close to the river as we could get so there was but one way to go".

--Charles Sims, Bogalusa, Louisiana, 1965

On a muggy night in July 1965, a parade of cars driven by members of the Ku Klux Klan raced into the black neighborhood of Bogalusa, Louisiana, as they had done many times before. Leaning out of car windows, Klansmen taunted residents, hurled racial epithets, and insulted women while brandishing pistols and long guns. The Klansmen fired randomly into the homes of Bogalusa's black residents; then, unexpectedly, a fusillade of bullets met them in return. The unwelcome visitors sped out of the neighborhood. It was the Klan's first encounter with the Deacons for Defense and Justice.[1]

Shrouded in mystery, the Deacons defied definition, though several journalists have tried. Roy Reed, a correspondent for the New York Times, described them in 1965 as "the newest of the Negro civil rights organizations . . . an armed, semi-secret, loosely organized federation"; he also described them as "a tough-minded league of Negroes, formed to defend members of their race from white terrorism."[2] Howell Raines, another

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[1]Joanne Grant, Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analyses: 1619 to the Present (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1968), 359.

[2]Roy Reed, Atlanta correspondent for the New York Times, was the only writer to take an interest in the Deacons during their heyday. I have relied heavily on his insight into the Deacons' activities. Reed respected and understood the Deacons, but paradoxically viewed them as misguided and "foolhardy." Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 10(L++) and Roy

journalist, labeled them "the South's first organized black vigilantes." Sepia magazine called them "a sort of Black KKK."[3] Cleveland Sellers, a SNCC activist, effectively described them as "a group whose responsibility was to defend their communities or themselves against attack."[4] Charles Sims, president of the Bogalusa chapter, called his organization "a defense guard unit."[5] Most recently, Adam Fairclough has deemed them "a legend in the civil rights movement and an object of worried fascination to whites."[6] While all of these definitions help to fix the group's identity, the Deacons' raison d'être was self-protection; accordingly, any reasonable definition of the Deacons should emphasize their status as a self-defense advocacy group.

The origins of the Deacons trace to Jonesboro, Louisiana, in the summer of 1964, when young field workers for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) came to Jonesboro to organize de-segregation efforts and voter registration. After white toughs visited the CORE headquarters and threatened to return with reinforcements, word spread through the black neighborhood, known as "The Quarters," which consisted, according to one observer, of "rows of unpainted frame houses with tin roofs, set closely together on

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Reed, "Armed Negro Unit Spreads in South," New York Times (June 6, 1965):1 (L++).

[3]"Murder in Mississippi," Sepia (May 1967): 78.

[4]Sellers, quoted in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 286.

[5]Grant, Black Protest, 357.

[6]Adam Fairclough, Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 358.

poorly paved streets." Dozens of black men carrying guns spontaneously assembled on the street and averted trouble.[7]

The Jonesboro group incorporated, in March 1965, as a nonprofit corporation after increased Klan activity. After a KKK parade in which Klansmen drove through town with an escort of local police cars, a handful of local black men, all U.S. Army veterans, decided that if the white power structure would condone and abet such activity, they must do something to help themselves. The next day, the men met to discuss how to protect their community. They purchased citizens-band radios and ammunition, and began to patrol the black community at night. The men elected Percy Lee Bradford, a stockroom worker, to serve as president of their new organization.[8] "We pray a lot," he explained in February 1965, "but we stay alert, too."[9]

The men, many of whom were religious, agreed on the name "Deacons" as a reflection of their background in the church. The name also represented their self-perception as servants of the community and defenders of the faith. The Deacons grew and expanded simultaneously in both Jonesboro and Bogalusa, Louisiana. Though Jonesboro remained the official headquarters of the Deacons, the locus of power quickly

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[7]Fred Powledge, "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro an Unusual Town," New York Times (February 21, 1965): 52.

[8]Reed, "Armed Negro Unit Spreads in South," New York Times (June 6, 1965): 25; Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 10-11.

[9]Ibid.

shifted from Jonesboro to Bogalusa, where the Deacons garnered media attention and minor fame.

To understand such activists, seemingly anomalous in a nonviolent movement, students of history must turn to the environment and circumstances that created them. The Deacons reacted reflexively to the open hostility they encountered from violent whites in Louisiana. Their formation paralleled the buildup in Klan strength and activity in their area. The local press largely ignored the Deacons; but, when they did pay attention, journalists often portrayed them as gun-slinging vigilantes: an image both misrepresentative and inaccurate. Taking a closer look at the climate of violence which surrounded the movement in Bogalusa, Louisiana, in the mid-1960's and how the Deacons developed within this milieu allows better understanding of their symbolism within the national civil rights movement.

Bogalusa, a small, inland town approximately two hours by car from Biloxi, Mississippi, boasted 22,000 people in 1965. It was originally a sawmill town, which accounted for its location on the edge of the Pearl River swamps, though in 1965, a paper mill operated by the Crown-Zellerbach Corporation dominated the town's economy and landscape, giving it an unmistakable appearance and odor. Otherwise, the town was unremarkable and indistinguishable from other Louisiana towns its size.[10] One visitor unflatteringly characterized Bogalusa as "a rarity among the small towns of the South in that it has no redeeming touch of grace, beauty, or elegance to surprise the eye or rest the

[10]"Negroes Demonstrate in Bogalusa," Southern School News 11 n 11 (May 1965): 5.

spirit."[11] It was here that Charles Sims and the Deacons for Defense and Justice made their indelible mark on the struggle for black equality in America.[12]

The civil rights movement came to Bogalusa, as it came to other small towns around the South, which is to say it arrived rather quietly in the form of local, grassroots activism, without the fanfare and bluster of nationally recognized organizations and the media attention they brought with them. Local blacks protested segregation and sought to integrate local facilities. They also criticized the lack of economic opportunities, police brutality, "separate-but-equal" public services and accommodations, and poor educational opportunities. White Bogalusa resisted stubbornly and the black activists met little success, but their efforts attracted the attention of outside parties.

The mettle of local activists lured the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to Bogalusa in January 1965, though other factors enticed CORE as well. Bogalusa held a reputation as a bastion of white supremacy. The Ku Klux Klan tyrannized the area and CORE, like other national civil rights organizations, relied on massive white resistance to advance its cause. White opposition galvanized protest, focused media attention, generated sympathy, and inadvertently propelled the movement toward success--but at a

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[11]Howell Raines, My Soul Is Rested (New York: Penguin, 1977), 416.

[12]According to George Lipsitz, the Deacons "made Bogalusa one of the places in the South where armed self-defense supplemented tactical nonviolent direct action in the civil rights movement . . . Their discipline and dedication inspired the community, their very existence made black people in Bogalusa think more of themselves as people who could not be pushed around." George Lipsitz, A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 96.

cost. The struggle for black equality in Bogalusa uprooted what little racial harmony existed there.

Tension mounted as CORE stepped up its demonstration marches in early 1965. Several hundred protestors, mostly local high school students, marched on April 9 to advocate equal educational opportunities in local integrated schools, among other issues. When marchers reached the downtown area, police ordered them to return to the local union hall after white spectators manhandled a white journalist and several marchers as well. Blacks sporadically picketed downtown businesses as negotiators mediated the conflict. The United States Community Relations Service along with businessmen listened to black protestors as negotiations lurched forward unpromisingly. The United Conservatives of Louisiana, akin to the White Citizens' Council, staged a rally in early May which attracted thousands and featured Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma, Alabama (though Clark withdrew at the request of the governor). City officials augmented the city's police force of thirty-four men with twelve deputized firemen and an equal number of county sheriff's deputies. The governor sent some three hundred highway patrolmen to the area, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation also sent approximately thirty agents to the scene. Bogalusa geared up for a large-scale, violent confrontation.[13]

On May 23 Mayor Jesse H. Cutrer, Jr. announced the repeal of all city segregation ordinances. He also promised that blacks would be hired by the police force, and possibly other government agencies. "Everyone must recognize the fact that federal laws

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[13]Southern School News 11 n 11 (May 1965): 5; "Bogalusa Mayor Announces End of City Segregation Ordinances," Southern School News (June 1965) 11 n 12: 14.

supercede city and state laws in the field of civil rights," he stated. "We must obey the law, no matter how bitter the taste." Reaction to Cutrer's proclamation ranged from lukewarm to openly hostile. Pressuring for follow-through, James Farmer of CORE cautiously praised the action. "The fight is not ended," Farmer prophetically warned. "The most difficult part is ahead." Local white citizens sought to remove Cutrer from office and moved for a recall election. White youths attacked a newspaper photographer sent to cover a pro-integration rally and destroyed his equipment. State and city police quelled street fights that broke out between blacks and whites in downtown Bogalusa. Police also arrested two white men for attempted arson outside the local Baptist church where James Farmer was to speak. The policemen expropriated a two-gallon can of gasoline from the suspects, as well as an unrepentant confession.[14]

The victory of desegregation turned out to be a Pyrrhic one. On June 2, newly-hired deputy sheriff O'Neal Moore was shot to death in his patrol car by a gunman in a passing pick-up truck in Varnado, outside of Bogalusa. He and his partner, Creed Rogers, who was wounded in the shooting, were two of Washington Parish's first Afro-American peacekeepers. Authorities arrested a white Bogalusa resident, Ernest Ray McElveen, and charged him with murder.[15]

It was this electrically-charged atmosphere of animosity and hair-trigger violence, fueled by white hatred and black frustration, which animated the Deacons. Up to this

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[14]"Bogalusa Promises," Facts on File (May 1965): 197; Southern School News (June 1965): 14; Cutrer and Farmer quoted in New York Times (May 24, 1965): 1, 18.

[15]"Bogalusa Killing," Facts on File (July 1-7, 1965): 246-7.

point, the Deacons had been quietly making their presence known: watching events from a safe distance, formulating their policies, bolstering membership, and supplementing their growing arsenal of firearms. After announcing the repeal of city segregation ordinances, Mayor Cutrer warned in a veiled threat to the Deacons: "Anyone, white or Negro, who attempts to violate the rights of another or cause bodily harm will be promptly arrested, charged and prosecuted." After Moore's murder, several Deacons, in their first public display of arms, guarded the homes of local black leaders.[16]

Moore's death prefaced the Deacons' rapid acceleration to the forefront of the movement in Bogalusa. Friends and family scheduled Moore's funeral for June 9, the following week, and James Farmer planned to speak at the service. He arrived at the New Orleans International Airport, where four state police detectives and four Deacons met him. The detectives warned Farmer of a Klan plot to assassinate him in Louisiana, and offered to provide protection for him, though Charles Sims, who did not fully trust the detectives, insisted that Farmer ride with him. Sims, along with three other Deacons, chauffeured Farmer from New Orleans to Bogalusa--a distance of approximately 65 miles--with a pistol on the car seat beside him. Upon safe arrival, Farmer praised the Deacons. "CORE is nonviolent," said Farmer, "but we have no right to tell Negroes in Bogalusa or anywhere else that they do not have the right to defend their homes. It is a constitutional right." An estimated fifty Deacons attended Moore's funeral.[17]

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[16]Cutrer, quoted in New York Times (May 24, 1965): 1, 18; Facts on File (July 1-7, 1965): 246-7.

[17]Roy Reed, "Armed Negro Unit Spreads in South," New York Times (June 6, 1965): 25; James Farmer, Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement

The Deacons organized and spread with speed, silence, and secrecy. By early June, the group had organized in Homer and Tallulah, Louisiana, and had bridged the Mississippi River to Mississippi and Alabama. One of the most perplexing mysteries of the Deacons revolved around the question of membership. No one knew, and no one knows today, how many men joined the Deacons. Ernest Thomas, Jonesboro chapter vice-president and full-time organizer for the Deacons, claimed in June 1965, that the group had upwards of fifty chapters in various stages of organization in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, though he declined to disclose the number of members. Estimates ranged from five thousand to fifteen thousand, though these numbers were probably inflated. Thomas said that "with hard work" the organization could spread to every southern state in "six or seven months." Part of the Deacons' strategy was to conceal membership and blur actual numbers. "It would not make sense to tell you we got four hundred men here," Thomas said in June of the following year, "and let 'the man' bring eight hundred." The Deacons limited public knowledge of membership for tactical purposes: surprise, intimidation, and self-preservation. They cultivated the image of a fraternal, underground organization that permeated the entire South. Officially, only a handful of Deacons ever existed. Known members included Charles Sims, Ernest Thomas, Percy Lee Bradford, Bogalusa vice-president Royan Burris, and director of public relations Robert Hicks.[18]

(New York: Plume, 1985), 287-291.

[18]New York Times (June 6, 1965): 25; "Marchers Upset by Apathy," NewYork Times (June 14, 1966): 19; Grant, Black Protest, 63.

Under the aegis of their charter and by-laws, the Deacons reaffirmed the principles of American democracy, and resembled other civic-minded agencies. Their charter, recognized under Louisiana state law, commissioned the group "to instruct, train, and teach citizens, and especially minority groups, in the principles of democracy." The group required each man to study and understand its by-laws before he could join. Each member took an oath, and pledged his life "to the defense of justice" and the defense of Negroes and civil rights workers wherever they required protection. Members paid ten dollars to join and two dollars each month thereafter.[19]

The organization provided ammunition, which it purchased in bulk quantities through an NRA-sponsored discount, though members provided their own guns. "Everybody owns his own piece," explained Ernest Thomas. Owning a gun, or two or three, was not uncommon among blacks in rural and small-town Louisiana during the 1960s: it was an old southern custom among whites and blacks alike. Louisiana was known as the "Sportsman's Paradise," and as Charles Sims pointed out, "they do a lotta huntin' around there." Sims further explained that "having a weapon's nothing new. What bugged the people was something else--when they found out what was the program of the Deacons."[20] Of course, what made the Deacons novel was their use of guns to counteract white aggression. The national media later zeroed in on the Black Panther

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[19]Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 11; Grant, Black Protest, 359; New York Times (June 6, 1965): 25.

[20]Thomas, quoted in New York Times (June 6, 1965): 25; Sims, quoted in Raines, My Soul is Rested, 418 and in Grant, Black Protest, 361.

Party in Oakland, California, as the first blacks in America to arm themselves; clearly, blacks were always armed--even before the Panthers--though perhaps not openly.[21]

When the Deacons first organized, they used what they had--primarily shotguns, and a few handguns. Ernest Thomas sought to standardize weaponry for further savings, and favored .30 M-1 carbines and .38 Special revolvers. How well they were armed is a matter of speculation and conjecture. Thomas surreptitiously hinted that the Deacons stashed grenades in Jonesboro, and that they had contacts in Houston and Chicago to acquire machine guns. Local police fretted that the Deacons possessed automatic weapons. While Governor John J. McKeithen ordered the seizure of guns found in cars belonging to both Deacons and Klansmen, Louisiana state police recognized that confiscation of guns was illegal. Protected by the Second Amendment and the constitutional right to bear arms, the Deacons operated within the law. Of course, machine guns and hand grenades were a different matter: under the National Firearms Act of 1934 and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938, these items were illegal contraband, subject to seizure. For this reason, it seems unlikely that the Deacons would have owned

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[21]Sonia Sanchez, formerly associated with the Black Panther Party, has noted:

> The whole image that went around the world of Panthers going into the [California state] assembly with guns was something that said, simply, "Don't mess with me." And I remember talking to some old folks at the time. They said, "Well, girl, that ain't nothing new. We always owned guns. We just kept them in our top drawer, you see." The whole point of the newspaper articles was simply that this was a new phenomenon, that we never thought black men had guns. But if you went south or out west, black folks always had guns someplace in the house.

Sanchez quoted in Hampton, Voices of Freedom, 370.

them; they were attuned to the law, and would have done nothing to jeopardize unnecessarily their organization or its mission.[22]

Importantly, the Deacons did not advocate using their guns for anything other than self-defense: they sought to use their guns defensively, not offensively. Sims assured anyone who would listen that the Deacons would not start a fight, but would fight back "in concert" if attacked by whites. "They [whites] bring the fight to us," Sims maintained. "We don't take it to them."[23] One reporter noted that the Deacons practiced "the kind of practical self-defense that Malcolm X advocated."[24] They used their guns solely for self-protection, and for the protection of those working for the civil rights cause, many of whom were pacifists. Given their menacing public image, it was surprising for the public to learn that the Deacons reaffirmed the principle of nonviolent direct action. Many Deacons participated in nonviolent protest without weapons. Charles Sims felt that political and economic progress for blacks in America would be achieved through negotiations, not violence. When asked in an interview in August 1965, how activists could best advance the movement, or achieve its aims most quickly, without the use of nonviolence, Sims said, "I believe nonviolence is the only way."[25]

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[22]New York Times (June 6, 1965): 25; Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 10-11.

[23]Sims, quoted in "Rights Activities Spread in South," New York Times (August 1, 1965).

[24]"Jonesboro 'Deacons' Offer Example for Rights Forces," The Militant 29 no. 9 (March 1, 1965): 8.

[25]The Deacons never picked up their guns in the name of the civil rights movement; i.e., they never used their weaponry as official representatives of the movement. They did

Sims ignited the Deacons' rise to prominence. His charisma and leadership anchored the organization, and his persona symbolized the Deacons' no-nonsense approach to the struggle for black equality. Unlike many other civil rights leaders, Sims did not hail from a middle-class background. He was a part-time insurance salesman and a tough, hard-nosed man with a pre-movement police record that included assault and carrying a concealed weapon. If his pistol jabbed him in the ribs when he sat down, Sims would nonchalantly toss it—along with his car keys and cigarettes—onto the nearest table with a clatter, often alarming anyone near. With disarming forwardness, and mock intimacy, Sims called prominent civil rights leaders (as well as white reporters) by their first names, calling well-known black author Louis Lomax "Louis," and CORE national president James Farmer "Jim." Showing that he was not within the circle of accepted civil rights leadership, Sims mistakenly referred to SNCC's Julian Bond as "Julius," though he respectfully called King "Dr. King." Stiff-necked and brooding, with a dark sense of humor, Sims did not take the civil rights movement or his role in it lightly.[26]

Under Sims' watchful eye, the civil rights movement in Bogalusa and the tension that accompanied it came to a head in July 1965. During a civil rights march on a downtown street on July 8, a flying bottle struck seventeen-year-old Hattie Mae Hill in

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not target whites for retaliatory violence, or advocate disruption of the white community through violent means. The Deacons' guns were, in a sense, secondary to their promotion of personal self-defense. "I want to say [that] when I confront a white man," warned Sims, "I would be just as dangerous to the white man without a weapon as I would be with a weapon, if he didn't treat me right." Sims, quoted in Grant, Black Protest, 358; see also "Deacons Organize Chicago Chapter," New York Times (April 6, 1966): 29.

[26]For Sims' misnomers, see Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 22 and Raines, My Soul is Rested, 420.

the head, causing a gash. Leneva Tiebeman, a white nurse, rushed Hattie to a car driven by two Deacons, Henry Austan and Milton Johnson, who monitored the march from their automobile. White toughs hassled the girl and the nurse, who sought to take Hattie to a first-aid station in the black community. Miss Tiebeman hustled Hattie into the backseat of the car. When Austan and Johnson leaned from the car window, twenty-five-year-old Alton D. Crowe, Jr. of nearby Pearl River struck them both repeatedly in the face. Austan shot Crowe in the chest and neck. Police yanked both Austan and Johnson from the car, cuffed them on the car's hood, and took the two men to an undisclosed locale for protection from angry whites, who shouted at policemen and attacked news photographers.[27]

That same night, again, two rallies occurred: one held by the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League, which coordinated black protest in Bogalusa, and one held by the National States Rights Party. The latter rally featured J. B. Stoner, an Atlanta attorney and outspoken racist who declared the "nigger" the "enemy" of his organization. "The nigger is not a human being," he told the crowd of 2,000 men, women, and children. "He is somewhere between the white man and the ape." He observed that black people were taking white jobs. "Every time a nigger gets a job," he cautioned, "that's just one more job that you can't have." He urged whites to fire their black domestic help to speed black emigration from the South. Finally, Stoner played the trump card of southern phobias, saying, "You notice the niggers are singing, 'I Love Everybody.' They sure do love

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[27]Roy Reed, "White Man is Shot by Negro in Clash in Bogalusa, La.," New York Times (July 9, 1965): 1, 13. See also "Tension in Boglausa, La.," Facts on File (July 7, 1965): 255.

everybody, and especially our white women. What the nigger really wants is our white women."[28]

Over the next few days, pressure built, tension increased. Bigots and extremists prevailed as moderate voices hushed, fading into the background. Gunplay and sporadic street violence occurred between blacks and whites. Then, on July 10, Federal Judge Herbert W. Christenberry enjoined Bogalusa police from using threats or violence to prevent blacks from exercising their civil rights, ordered police to protect civil rights activists from harassment by whites, and refused to grant city officials a restraining order temporarily stopping demonstrations. City attorney John C. Martzell reaffirmed the right of the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League (BCVL) to march, "but if it does," he warned, "as conditions now exist in Bogalusa, it may result in gang warfare." Agreeing with Martzell, A.Z. Young, president of the BCVL, voluntarily called off a march scheduled for that day, but rescheduled it for the following one.[29]

Although they professed nonviolence, major civil rights organizations such as CORE refused to criticize the Deacons; to do so would have robbed them of the local support needed for their own agendas. James Farmer of CORE was able to accept the Deacons publicly by differentiating between the functions of the Deacons and his own organization. "CORE is in the rights business and the Deacons are in the protecting business," he determined. Farmer continued.

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[28]Roy Reed, "Moderates Fail to Aid Bogalusa," New York Times (July 11, 1965): 46.

[29]John C. Martzell, quoted in Roy Reed, "U.S. Court Enjoins Bogalusa Police," New York Times (July 11, 1965): 1, 46.

> One thing is apparent in this year of our Lord 1965--Negroes in this nation are down to about their last ounce of patience. For all the hoopla and the speechmaking and legislation, very little has changed in the reality of Negro life in this country . . . rats still bite kids and citizens of Bogalusa still don't have the vote.
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> Now if you accept that as fact--then it's clear that violence may be on the horizon. And if violence is on the horizon, I would certainly prefer to see it channeled into a defense discipline than the random homicide and suicide of rioting.[30]

A. Z. Young and the BCVL welcomed protection from the Deacons. "I know the Klan would have already come in here and killed or whipped the leaders of the movement if it weren't for the Deacons," Young noted. "The Deacons give them something to think about."[31] Even some staff members of SCLC, known for its conservatism and strict adherence to nonviolence, carefully acknowledged what the Deacons were doing. "There is such a thing as the cup of endurance running over," said one of King's aides, who wished to be anonymous. "Dr King's position makes a distinction between defensive violence and aggressive violence. I think the Deacons come in the category of defensive violence." But he quickly added: "The goal of a nonviolent movement is to create a community where people can live in harmony and I don't think guns help that."[32]

Other organizations, desirous of peaceful integration, condemned the Deacons outright. "If the Deacons really catch hold," warned Paul Anthony, field director of the

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[30]James Farmer, "Deacons for Defense," New York Amsterdam News (July 10, 1965): 15.

[31]A. Z. Young, quoted in Lipsitz, A Life in the Struggle, 95.

[32]Fred L. Zimmerman, "Race & Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against White Attacks," The Wall Street Journal 73 no. 7 (July 12, 1965): 1, 15.

Southern Regional Council, a moderate biracial committee on race relations, "it could mean the end of nonviolence in some areas of the South. Potentially, this is an extremely serious development, which could cause a wave of violence with national repercussions." Ozell Sutton, associate director of another moderate group, the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, said: "Someday there's going to be a real bloodbath somewhere. I hate to say it, but by nature Negroes aren't any more nonviolent than anybody else."[33]

Segregationists shared the same sentiment. For example, W. J. Simmons, National Coordinator of the Citizens Councils of America, predicted: "The Deacons will move southern whites toward more violence, besides costing the civil rights movement a lot of liberal sympathy in the North." A local Klansman offered: "If violence has to settle this, then the sooner the better." With regard to the Deacons, he said, "I don't care how many guns that bunch of black Mau Maus has, they don't have the prerequisite--guts."[34]

On July 13, Governor John J. McKeithen, concerned with the damaging effect of demonstrations on the state's effort to attract northern industry to Louisiana, flew to Bogalusa to make a personal appeal for the cessation of protest activities for a thirty-day "cooling off period." Promising that demonstrations would be "stepped up," Bogalusa's black leaders rejected the plea, saying that the governor offered "nothing in return."[35] McKeithen washed his hands of the matter and lamented, "I think they have made a tragic

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[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Roy Reed, "Negroes Reject Bogalusa Truce," New York Times (July 14, 1965): 1, 22.

mistake"; the presence of the Deacons, in his mind, would only "increase the possibility of violence."[36] United States Vice-President Hubert Humphrey and John Doar, head of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, participated in the negotiations--to little avail--via telephone. With stop-gap reform and apparent stalemate, protest efforts in Bogalusa ironically succeeded in that they finally garnered complete attention from state and national officials.[37]

As the Deacons extended their reach, reaction to them extended too. On August 2, both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Deacons prepared to move into the Greensboro, Alabama area. Two weeks prior, a small delegation of Deacons from Bogalusa visited Eutaw, twenty miles northwest of Greensboro, to talk with local blacks about establishing a Deacons chapter there. Like SNCC and CORE, the Deacons sought to organize where the Ku Klux Klan was strong. Their move into Greensboro foreshadowed not only future conflict with the Klan, but also with Martin Luther King, Jr.[38]

By August 1965, the Deacons had moved into Arkansas and Texas, with plans to organize in Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida. A group calling itself "The Committee to Aid the Deacons" formed in Austin, Texas.[39] In every instance, the formation of

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[36]Zimmerman, "Race & Violence," The Wall Street Journal (July 12, 1965): 15.

[37]Roy Reed, "Negroes Reject Bogalusa Truce," New York Times (July 14, 1965): 1, 22.

[38]See "Deacons Defy Whites, Stay Armed Thruout, [sic]" New York Amsterdam News (July 24, 1965): 9.

[39]See "Form New Group to Aid 'Deacons,'" New York Amsterdam News (August

Deacon chapters resulted from parallel buildups in Klan strength and activity in those areas.[40] The organization mobilized later that month in Mississippi locales: Natchez, Greenville, Columbia, and Jackson, where Charles Sims led a ten-man delegation invited to discuss the possibility of organizing there. Sims told a crowd of three hundred black men at the Negro Masonic Hall on Lynch Street: "It is time for you men in Jackson to wake up and be men." Sims claimed he had been "shot five times and shot at about ten," and he was not afraid to come to Jackson.[41]

Sexist language often shaped the burgeoning debate over the place of guns in the movement, as well as the ongoing argument concerning self-defense, and Sims' rhetoric reflected this trend. The original chapter in Jonesboro included women in its ranks[42]; however, subsequent chapters of Deacons excluded women from their male-only clubs. The Deacons became, in many ways, an expression of manhood.[43] "Everything we

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14, 1965): 13. Auxiliary groups, such as the Austin group and, later, the "Friends of the Deacons" in New York City, cropped up outside the South. See "Deacons Organize Chicago Chapter," New York Times (April 6, 1966): 29.

[40]Zimmerman, "Race and Violence," The Wall Street Journal (July 12, 1965): 1.

[41]Sims, quoted in Roy Reed, "Deacons, in Mississippi Visits, Implore Negroes 'to Wake Up,'" New York Times (August 30, 1965): ?.

[42]Akinyele Umoja has researched the role of women in the Deacons. See Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement" (Ph. D. diss., Emory University, 1996), 188.

[43]Some form of chauvinism often characterized discussion of self-defense within the movement. Self-defense became a function of manhood. For example, Bishop Charles Eubank Tucker blessed marchers in 1966 and re-assured, "Any Negro or white has the right to defend himself with arms. Any man who didn't ought to take off his pants and wear skirts." See "Marchers Upset by Apathy," New York Times (June 14, 1966): 19. The Deacons, too, used similar language. "It's time for black men," Ernest Thomas

done," Sims said, "we walked like men."[44] Royan Burris, after repelling Klan invaders in Bogalusa, explained: "They finally found out that we really are men, and that we would do what we said, and that we meant what we said."[45]

Dr. Stephen E. Salenger of Los Angeles, a psychiatry resident who spent time in Jonesboro as a member of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, offered his own perspective on the Deacons' gendered expression. He said that he believed a white segregationist called a black man "boy" to disrespect and "de-sex" him, or at least to deny that the black man was a physical or sexual threat to his own supremacy. To combat this slander, Salenger claimed, the Deacon flaunted the gun--a phallic symbol--to assert his own sexual competence and his contempt for the white man's power. Such psychological evaluations of the Deacons' were highly questionable; however, the Deacons' assertion of themselves in terms of masculinity was not.[46]

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implored, "to start taking care of their black women and children." Thomas, quoted in "Marchers' Ranks Expand to 1,200," New York Times (June 20, 1966): 20. Charles Sims expressed himself in much cruder terms:

> See, the southern white man is almost like Hitler in the South. He been dictating to the Negro people, "Boy, this," and "Uncle, that," and "Granma, go here," and people's been jumpin'. So he gets up one morning and discovers that "boy" was a man, and that he can walk up and say something to "boy" and "boy" don't like what he say, he tell him to eat himself--you know?

Sims, quoted in Grant, Black Protest, 362.

[44]Sims, quoted in Raines, My Soul Is Rested, 421.

[45]Burris, quoted in Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 11.

[46]Salenger, quoted in Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 22.

Although they were denied official positions in the organization, local women carved out a niche for themselves with regard to protecting themselves. For example, rather than busying themselves with "wifely chitchat" at a tea party, ' the wives of Deacons discussed the threat of violence. "I'm going to get me a machine gun or some hand grenades," one claimed, as Robert Hicks, public relations director of the Deacons, offered a .30-30 Winchester for her inspection.[47] Public and private spaces defined women's spheres of influence with regard to self-defense; in other words, how they behaved at home differed from how they behaved in public. For example, women such as Ora Bryant, Annie Reeves, Laura McGhee, Unita Blackwell, and others regularly participated in the defense of their homes; however, they rarely participated in community patrols.[48]

In an interview in November 1965, Henry Austan, a young member and organizer for the Deacons, explained how he understood the Deacons. "The Deacons are not just a gun-battling organization," he cautioned. "They are set up to participate in a wide-range of activity--from voter registration to transporting civil rights workers in safety into 'hot spots'." Echoing one of Malcolm X's famous catch-phrases, he declared: "We are dedicated to freedom and we're willing to use any means necessary to obtain our freedom." His words announced a self-conscious, self-styled emulation of the NOI minister's admonition for black people to arm themselves for their own protection. Indeed, he continued: "Malcolm X is my idol . . . [He] had not yet reached his peak [when

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[47]Quoted in Wall Street Journal, July 12, 1965.

[48]Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 189.

he was killed], but I believe he was on the right road. The road I'm on is the one I think he was on."[49]

"Wherever they have organized," Austan boasted, "the Deacons have acted as a deterrent to Klan aggression and white hoodlum activity." He cited one incident in particular as an example. When an eighteen-year-old girl from St. Louis was arrested along with other civil rights activists in Bogalusa, a crowd of white men assembled outside the jail yelling that they wanted to "rape the nigger bitch." Perhaps the sheriff could find no legal reason to detain her, or perhaps he was scared of the angry assemblage outside; perhaps even his sympathies lay with the lynchers. Regardless, he decided to release her while the crowd was there, in effect turning her over to the howling mob. She went straight to the nearest pay phone and called the Deacons, who were monitoring a nearby demonstration. Five of them rushed to her aid. When they arrived to confront the mob, according to Austan, "you could have heard a pin drop." She got in the car with the Deacons and drove away, unimpeded.[50]

Austan emphasized the dignity and respect to be gained in fighting back. "The Deacons have given the Negro throughout the nation an organization they can point to with dignity," he said. He saw little dignity in nonviolent direct action, and even less

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[49]Herman Porter, "An Interview With Deacon for Defense," The Militant 29 no. 42 (November 22, 1965): 1-2.

[50]Ibid.

"when a Negro woman is attacked." He felt certain that white aggressors "have little respect for the nonviolent."[51]

Austan also offered a different view of violence itself by comparing the civil rights movement to the war in Vietnam:

> If violence is right in Vietnam, then surely violence is right in Mississippi. If violence can be a righteous tool for the white man then surely it can be just as righteous for the black man. If violence can be used to murder defenseless women and children in Vietnam, then certainly it can be used in Louisiana to defend Negroes' lives and property.[52]

By comparing the morally compromised killing fields of Vietnam to the embattled South, he sought to show the righteousness of the Deacons' position: if the government could use violence in an arguably unjust cause, why could southern Afro-Americans not use it in a just one? By questioning the notion that violence is by nature problematic, he sought to legitimate the Deacon's "violent" solution to the aggression they encountered in Bogalusa. Most people living in the United States in the 1960's shared a certain, common-sensical understanding that violence was somehow "bad"; however, Austan tried to show that force, in the guise of self-defense, could be a tempting solution to individual and group predicaments. For him, it was a means of suppressing even greater violence and a method of righting great wrongs. This notion of suppressing violence through the use of force held more and more appeal to activists as the list of egregious acts piled up against them.[53]

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Austan's notion that violence must at times be restrained by force has grounding in

Events picked up across the border in Mississippi in June 1966. Civil rights leaders flocked to the Meredith March Against Fear after James Meredith was shot from ambush on the highway. The march from Memphis to Jackson--a lone crusade begun by Meredith on June 5 as a display of defiance against white oppression--gained momentum as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Floyd McKissick and James Farmer of CORE, Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and others picked up where Meredith was gunned down (near Como) and spearheaded the demonstration as it pressed deeper into Mississippi. The Deacons were there, too, but only after much debate, and much tumult. It was there in Mississippi, during the Meredith March Against Fear, that the Deacons exploded onto the national scene.[54]

Charles Sims and his Deacons played a pivotal role in the Meredith March Against Fear (also known as the Greenwood March), which stands as a watershed of the national civil rights movement, and the flashpoint for the ongoing debate concerning the place of violence within the movement. Because of the Deacons' controversial image and

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Christian teachings. Thomas Merton, a Christian theologian, argued in 1968 that denying force in all instances is immoral, and that sometimes the only way to protect human life and rights effectively is by "forcible resistance" against unjust encroachment. Merton questioned placing the onus of responsibility for utilizing nonviolence on oppressed minorities struggling for equality. "Instead of preaching the Cross for others and advising them to suffer patiently the violence which we sweetly impose on them, with the aid of armies and police, we might conceivably recognize the right of the less fortunate to use force, and study more seriously the practice of nonviolence and humane methods on our own part...." Thomas Merton, Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 3-10.

[54]Gene Roberts, "Mississippi March Gains Momentum," New York Times (June 10, 1966): 1, 35.

use of guns, civil rights leaders disagreed as to whether or not the Deacons should participate in the Greenwood March. SNCC opted to continue Meredith's march across Mississippi. According to Cleveland Sellers, a SNCC activist, Stokely Carmichael argued that the march should "de-emphasize white participation, that it should be used to highlight the need for independent black political units, and that the Deacons . . . be permitted to join the march." Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young were "adamantly opposed" to Carmichael. "They wanted to send out a nationwide call to whites; they insisted that the Deacons be excluded and they demanded that [SNCC] issue a statement proclaiming . . . allegiance to nonviolence." Martin Luther King, Jr. held the deciding vote. While he favored mass white participation and nonviolence, he was committed to the maintenance of a united front. King sided with Carmichael. Wilkins and Young withdrew their support and did not participate in the march.[55]

Sellers' account of the debate seems reliable, though historians have disagreed over what transpired, particularly over King's involvement in the discussion. King apparently attempted to dissuade the Deacons from making a show of force at the march. Representatives of SNCC and CORE concurred with the Deacons, but King "pressed on":

> He was not saying that Negroes shouldn't protect themselves and their houses when attacked. Yet self-defense was not the point here. The point was whether they should carry guns in an organized demonstration. To do so would only confuse and obscure the moral issues, and it would not expose Mississippi injustice. If Negroes came marching through the state brandishing .38s and rifles,

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[55]Cleveland Sellers, The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), 162.

> they were bound to precipitate a calamitous confrontation. Whites from the governor down would use it as an excuse to start shooting Negroes at random.[56]

Carmichael and Floyd McKissick disagreed with King. McKissick asserted that "nonviolence had outlived its usefulness in this racist country" and that "Negroes ought to break the legs off the Statue of Liberty and 'throw her into the Mississippi'."[57]

Biographer David J. Garrow's account directly contradicts those of Sellers and Oates. Garrow has contended that King remained "largely silent throughout the long and contentious discussion." Carmichael antagonized Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, yet King kept quiet:

> King's silence gave assistance to Carmichael's goal of dissuading the NAACP and the National Urban League from taking part . . . [B]y remaining silent King allowed SNCC's divisive desires to run their course. Carmichael interpreted King's silence as either intentional or unintentional support for SNCC. "When we were acting really impolite . . . King made no move at all. He kept quiet."

If King indeed did remain silent during the discussion, and did not "plead" for nonviolence and the exclusion of the Deacons, how might his close-mouthed reaction be interpreted? King's silence could be seen as tacit approval of the Deacons and what they represented. Sellers said, "Everyone realized that without [the Deacons], our lives would have been much less secure." Perhaps "everyone," including King, appreciated the

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[56]Stephen Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 397-398. According to Oates, King "pleaded with his Deacon brothers to remain true to nonviolence," but "the Deacons didn't 'believe in that naked shit no way'," and would not be swayed by King.

[57]Ibid. King confirmed this account of the contested debate in his final book. See Martin Luther King, Jr. Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

Deacons' protection, and recognized their participation as complementary, rather than antithetical, to the larger movement.[58]

Charles Sims' own testimony holds the key to unlocking the mystery surrounding the Deacon debates and King's enigmatic behavior. Sims claimed "a lot of things happened on the Meredith march that was never told." For example, he described the funeral of Armstead Phipps, an elderly participant who collapsed and died of a heart attack during the protest, "marchin' for his freedom." King was asked to preach at his funeral "way up in the Delta." King agreed to go to the service, but he would not go unless Sims "carried him."

> And he knowed the only way for me to carry him in the Delta, I had to carry him with my gun and my mens, not his. He can let his men trail along at the tail end, but in front and behind, it was gon' be me. And that was the only way he'd go. So, when the chips were down, I won't say the man woulda picked up a gun, but I'll say this, he didn't run one away, 'cause I was with the man.[59]

Sims had spurned King just a year before. When asking civil rights leaders to come to Bogalusa in 1965, Sims said, "I want everybody here except Martin Luther King. If he came and they gun him, I couldn't protect him, because he don't believe in me." Sims apparently changed his opinion of King after the two men discussed self-defense and the

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[58]David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1986), 477; Sellers, 166. Adam Fairclough has suggested that Carmichael encouraged animosity between King and Wilkins "to ensure that SNCC did not become absorbed in a broad coalition that watered down its more radical aims." He also has suggested that King allowed his long-standing dislike of Wilkins to influence his judgment regarding the Deacons. See Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 313-15.

goals of the movement. A year later, during the Meredith March, Sims told King, "Now you do yo' thing and I'm gonna back you up in doin' yo' thing, cause this is my job." Sims admitted that he respected and admired King as a "brilliant" man. According to Sims, King recognized a place for the Deacons within the movement. Both of them, he felt, saw the complementary nature of civil rights activism and armed self-defense by blacks.[60]

During the march, the Deacons provided protection for the marchers, serving as "bodyguards." They stopped suspicious whites loitering near the march route and demanded that they state their business. They walked the ridges of hills adjacent to the road. Ernest Thomas observed the march from his car (complete with a windshield sticker that read "Friends of the Deacons"). Thomas and the Deacons guarded the campsites at night with rifles, pistols, and shotguns, and provided armed escorts for marchers who travelled at night to the airport in Memphis.[61] Reverend Theodore Seamans, pastor of Woodbridge Methodist Church in Woodbridge, New Jersey, saw weapons in Deacons' cars. He spoke for many when he said, "I was astounded and made my views known. The movement is no place for guns."[62]

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[59]Sims, quoted in Raines, My Soul is Rested, 422.

[60]Sims quoted in Raines, My Soul is Rested, 421-422, and in New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 24.

[61]Gene Roberts, "Mississippi March Gains Momentum," New York Times (June 10, 1966): 35. See also Sellers, The River of No Return, 165-6.

[62]"Marchers Upset by Apathy," New York Times (June 14, 1966): 19.

Trading shots, whites and blacks skirmished later that month in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three young civil rights activists--James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman--were slain exactly two years before, on June 21. There is no evidence to suggest that the black gunmen were Deacons. The Deacons came under fire figuratively later that day when King lashed out at the Deacons in a speech in Yazoo City. In a thinly veiled reproof directed toward the Deacons, King admonished those who used the same methods of violence as "our oppressor"; he did so to reassure the public of the movement's commitment to nonviolence. Also that same day, James Meredith announced that he would rejoin the march in Canton, and evaded a direct reply to the question of whether he would carry a gun. Cocksure and maverick as ever, Meredith disavowed the Deacons, saying, "I don't know them. I don't know that they have any capabilities. I don't favor any group. I don't favor the Deacons."[63]

During the Meredith March, Stokely Carmichael introduced the phrase "Black Power" in a speech in Indianola, birthplace of the White Citizens' Council. The day after the Greenwood rally, SNCC printed up leaflets and placards with the Black Power slogan at the SNCC print shop in Atlanta.[64] Historians have noted Greenwood as a divisive turning point in the movement during which the concept of Black Power split the radical and moderate factions within the movement. While the introduction of Black Power did drive a wedge between some younger and older activists, it united others. Cleveland

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[63]"Philadelphia, Miss. Whites and Negroes Trade Shots," New York Times (June 22, 1966): 1, 24, 25.

[64]Ibid.

Sellers noted that while King was forced by "political circumstances" to distance himself and SCLC from Black Power, the Meredith March confirmed King as a "staunch ally" of SNCC and a "true brother."[65] Notably, Sims did not condone Black Power and the multivalent ideas for which it stood. "The slogan Black Power didn't do a damn thing but hurt the movement," argued Sims. "I don't wanna live under Black Power. I don't wanna live under white power. I want equal power, and that's what I push." He saw not only the mentality of black supremacy but also the phrase "Black Power" itself as divisive. "How can you work with a son of a bitch that every time you look up he's thowin' up his fist talkin' 'bout Black Power? . . . Put too much power in any one son of a bitch's hands, it's too much." To Sims, Stokely Carmichael's brand of Black Power was only rhetoric; real "Black Power" grew from vigilant self-protection.[66]

As quickly as they soared to notoriety, the Deacons faded from fame. After the Meredith March, they all but disappeared from the national media.[67] The Deacons made one last major news splash in September 1967 before they slipped into obscurity. The

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[65]Sellers, The River of No Return, 169.

[66]For a full treatment of Black Power ideology, see Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (New York: Vintage, 1967). The concept of Black Power as expressed by Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks truly angered Charles Sims. For Sims, Black Power had a different meaning. "[T]he cats that was hollerin'Black Power, I was protectin' and guardin' they damn ass. I don't see nothin' they was doin' to even be talkin' 'bout no Black Power. The Black Power, we had it. In them thirty rounds of ammunition on a man's shoulder, we had the Black Power." Sim, quoted in Raines, My Soul is Rested, 423.

[67]Robert Rester, the city attorney of Bogalusa, called for a grand jury investigation of both the Deacons and the BCVL to determine "whether they have possible violated any state laws pertaining to possession of firearms." See "Bogalusa Official Asks Investigation," New York Times (September 17, 1966): 26.

local NAACP led a march in Woodville, Mississippi to protest Negro teachers who did not favor blacks running in Democratic primaries. At the march, police disarmed Deacons who were present.[68]

Curiously, as the Deacons faded from the scene, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, with characteristic untimeliness, targeted the organization to be "disrupted" and "neutralized," along with SNCC, SCLC, CORE, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Nation of Islam. Director J. Edgar Hoover addressed a memo headed "Personal Attention to All Offices" on August 25, 1967 concerning what he termed "Black Nationalist Hate Groups." The Deacons were later downgraded as a primary target, displaced by the other groups because of the national scope of these organizations and their "most violent and radical" orientations.[69]

Contrary to FBI sources, the Deacons tried to avoid provoking a clash of arms, though their opponents argued that by arming themselves in the first place, the Deacons instigated conflict in an already explosive situation. Did possessing weapons create violence? Sims and his cohorts felt that having weapons at hand effectively deterred violence. Discussing armed self-defense and exhibiting a proclivity to fight back seemed to fuel progress in the struggle for black equality in Bogalusa. Sims found that merely showing a weapon could often avert violence. "The showing of a weapon stops many

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[68]"Mississippi March by Negroes Halted," New York Times (September 5, 1967): 31.

[69]The Declassified Documents, FBI Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) File (August 27, 1964-April 28, 1971), Deacons for Defense and Justice File, serial 5; see also Kenneth O'Reilly, Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972 (New York: The Free Press, 1989).

things," he said. "Everybody want to live and nobody want to die."[70] Simply being seen with Sims was insurance enough for many local blacks. "I'm one of the few peoples who is really known as a Deacon and anybody that I associate with, they [whites] just take for granted they are Deacons," Sims explained. "I show up, then ten, twelve more mens show up, whether they Deacons or not, they branded." In this case, being "branded" as a Deacon meant freedom from molestation by whites.[71]

A fine line existed, and still exists, between self-defense and aggressive violence. The position where an aggressor threatened another's right to life, thereby legitimating self-defense, and where a defender no longer acted purely in self-defense, switched quickly in hot spots such as Bogalusa. The Deacons could have slipped across the precipice of legitimacy at any time, crossing into the morally questionable realm of aggressive violence. Where the two planes intersected was not always clear, as Charles Sims illustrated:

> See, we had made up our mind on one thing. I know where just about every honkie here live. If he'd attacked any my mens, he couldn't go to his house and sleep no more, 'cause if he do, I don't know what woulda happened to him. I won't say we'da killed him. I got more sense than to use those words, but I'm not sure what would have happened.[72]

Sims came perilously close to promising retributive violence, but did not. Undoubtedly, the threat existed, whether he verbally expressed it or not. The Deacons seemed aware of their precarious position, and took pains to avoid the labels "aggressive" or "violent."

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[70]Sims, quoted in Grant, Black Protest, 361.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Sims, quoted in Raines, My Soul is Rested, 419.

They stressed that whatever force they used was defensive, rather than offensive. They did not see their advocacy of self-protection as "violence," per se.[73]

The Deacons' rapid disappearance begs an explanation. Perhaps they dissipated as the character of the movement became more "violent" and more militant. In other words, it is possible that the movement outgrew the Deacons. Perhaps as the goals of the larger movement incorporated the ideals of the Deacons, the group no longer had a place within the movement; no longer needed for protective purposes, the Deacons became obsolete. In the mid-to-late 1960s, fewer and fewer activists had qualms about self-defense, which became a common assumption for blacks, or about picking up a gun to further the aims of the movement--a trend due in large part to activists such as the Deacons. It is also possible that the Deacons recoiled from public view because of ideological differences with other activists, exemplified by King's repudiation of the group and their own disillusionment with Black Power advocates.

Sims claimed that the group had chapters all across the country, though COINTELPRO FBI files do not confirm organization on a national level. The FBI carefully monitored black militant groups in major U.S. cities from 1967 on, and the Bureau did not record Deacons' activity in their files. Of course, absence from FBI files does not indicate that the Deacons did not exist in these areas. The FBI of the 1960's was thorough but imperfect, and simply because the FBI could not detect them does not mean the Deacons no longer existed. The Deacons' leadership insisted on the pervasiveness of

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[73]Noting that the Deacons toed the line of aggressive violence, Roy Reed termed the Deacons' means of dealing with the oppressor "noble belligerence." See Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," New York Times Magazine (August 15, 1965): 22.

the group. For example, an interviewer asked Robert Hicks in 1969 if the Deacons were still in existence, and how long they might continue. Hicks replied, "Well, I think this will probably be as long as black people are oppressed and the white man is still trying to use force to keep the black man down . . . The Deacons are still in existence today . . . still on call if anything would happen to a black person in the community."[74] Speculation regarding the disappearance of the Deacons points to the possibility that the organization did not disappear outright, but merely became translucent, incarnate in the black struggle for equality. Secrecy and indeterminate membership pertaining to the Deacons fortify this theory. Sims ominously surmised, "If push hadda come to shove, we were well covered."[75]

Essential in understanding their origins, defining the Deacons becomes essential in determining their fate as well. "Anytime a Negro and a white man have any kind of round up and the Negro decide he going to fight him back," Sims once said, "he's a Deacon."[76] The Bogalusa president further complicated defining the organization by extending its membership to all those who stood up to "the man."[77] The Deacons

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[74]Robert Hicks, interviewed by Robert Wright, August 10, 1969, Bogalusa, Louisiana; Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[75]Sims, quoted in Raines, My Soul is Rested, 421. Adam Fairclough has noted that the Deacons deliberately inflated their numbers and armament for the purpose of deterring the Klan. He estimates their membership to be "in the dozens rather than the hundreds, and certainly not in the thousands." See Fairclough, Race & Democracy, 359.

[76]Sims, quoted in Grant, Black Protest, 363.

[77]Compare with Malcolm X's definition of a Muslim: "A Muslim to us is somebody who is for the black man: I don't care if he goes to the Baptist church seven days a week."

became—in an abstract sense—a mindset: a broad concept of empowerment and self-protection.

The Deacons, as the nine days' wonder of the civil rights movement, waxed and waned in a strikingly short period of time, but their impact was considerable. They punctured the double standard of self-defense in America. They homed in on the lesser amounts of protection offered blacks by southern polity and made a conscious effort to change the discrepancy. "I think the Louisiana state law says a man can carry a weapon in his car as long as it is not concealed," said Sims. "We found out in Bogalusa that that law meant for the white man, it didn't mean for the colored. Any time a colored man was caught with a weapon in his car, they jailed him for carrying a concealed weapon. So we carried them to court."[78] Sims noted that police only interfered when empowered black men and women asserted their civil rights. For example, the police in Philadelphia, Mississippi made no move to interfere in black-white clashes "until half a dozen Negroes began to fight back."[79] Sims also observed, "in the southern states, the police have never done their job when the white and the Negro are involved--unless the Negro's getting the best of the white man."[80] James Farmer summed it up best when he explained:

Malcolm X, "The Playboy Interview: Malcolm X Speaks With Alex Haley," Playboy (May 1963), reprinted in David Gallen, ed., Malcolm X: As They Knew Him (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), 112.

[78]Sims, quoted in Grant, Black Protest, 358.

[79]"Philadelphia, Miss., Whites and Negroes Trade Shots," New York Times (June 22, 1965): 25.

[80]Sims, quoted in Grant, Black Protest, 364.

"Understand, the Deacons don't replace legal law enforcement—there is no such thing as legal law enforcement in much of the South that will protect a Negro citizen."[81] The law eventually helped the Deacons, who helped themselves in a situation where inclusive law and order had broken down.

Farmer's interest in the Deacons was more than rhetorical. The Deacons' stand on self-defense profoundly influenced many CORE operatives, and caused a deep rift within the organization. CORE's "Rules for Action" included the assertion: "He [a CORE member] will meet the anger of any individual or group in the spirit of good will and creative reconciliation: he will submit to assault and will not retaliate in kind either by act or word."[82] But as the movement evolved, CORE edged away from the nonviolent ideal, and co-opted the Deacons' philosophy of self-defense. A CORE worker in Ferriday, Louisiana, stated in 1965 that self-defense in protection of one's home and person was "taken for granted," and most of CORE's headquarters in dangerous areas of Louisiana and Mississippi had weapons on the premises to protect against attack.[83]

The debate between armed, southern field workers and long-time pacifists split CORE, which almost rescinded its official policy on nonviolence at its national convention in 1965. The push for rescinding CORE's commitment to nonviolence was so strong that it was defeated only by the intervention of Deacon leader Ernest Thomas,

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[81]Farmer, quoted in "White Man is Shot by Negro in Clash in Bogalusa, LA," New York Times (July 9, 1965): 13.

[82]Staughton Lynd, Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 397.

[83]Haines, My Soul is Rested, 54.

who surprisingly urged CORE members to maintain their traditional adherence on nonviolence. Farmer also helped to kill the issue by carefully distinguishing between nonviolent direct action in demonstrations and the constitutional right to self-defense.[84] Still, CORE's Northeast Region resolved that "CORE accepts the concept of self-defense by the Deacons, and believes that the use of guns by CORE workers on a southern project is a personal decision, with the approval of that project's and the Regional directors."[85]

Strikingly self-aware, Charles Sims and the Deacons were acutely conscious of their role in history. Sims felt that standing up to white supremacists by defending their homes and by participating in rallies signalled the birth of "a brand new Negro." He explained, "We told [the southern white man] that a brand new Negro was born. The one he'd been pushin' around, he didn't exist anymore . . . We definitely couldn't swim, and we was as close to the river as we could get so there was but one way to go."[86]

As part of a concerted, organized effort on the part of local blacks to challenge Klan ascendancy, the Deacons helped to flush out white resistance to civil rights reform. Symbolic of the mounting frustration and increasing militancy of blacks in America in the mid-1960s, the Deacons spearheaded the search for alternative methods of struggle in the

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[84]August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 402.

[85]Resolutions for the Resolution Committee of the National Convention of CORE, July 1 to July 4, from the Northeast Region, Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality (microfilm), Reel 9, Doe Library, UC Berkeley.

[86]Grant, Black Protest, 359, 362.

quest for black equality, and changed the role of self-defense within Afro-American history. As means supplanted end, what had begun as a complement to civil rights protest had become a vehicle of reform itself.

"Blood to the Horse's Brow": Self-Defense Abused, 1967-1968

"Blood to the horse's brow, and woe to those who can't swim!"

--Caption, The Black Panther newsletter, 1969

After the Watts riot of 1965, local blacks formed a Community Action Patrol to monitor police conduct during arrests. The following year, two students at Oakland City College (now Merritt College) carried the idea slightly further by instituting armed patrols in Oakland, California. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale penned a ten-point program of their beliefs in the fall of 1966 and began to police the police on an ad hoc basis. A few months after Newton and Seale officially established the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in early 1967, their organization gained national attention and notoriety by protesting a proposed gun-control law at the California state capitol in Sacramento. Dressed in black leather jackets and berets, and carrying shotguns and pistols, they purposefully strode into the capitol, where they accidentally entered the assembly floor and caused a major uproar, stunning all who witnessed the event. Soon after, the Panthers grew to become one of the most formidable, most terrifying, and most misunderstood expressions of black political power in American history. If Martin Luther King symbolized the hope and affirmation of civil rights agitation, then the Panthers, to many white Americans, symbolized a darker side of black protest.

So long as the Panthers abided by the written and unwritten codes of self-defense, they were successful. When they did not, crossing the line of self-protection into the ethically questionable realm of violent aggression, their organization teetered and collapsed. Because of this fact, the subtle name change of the Panthers, who dropped the

self-defense denotation from the official name of the group soon after its inception, becomes crucial in understanding the paradigmatic shift in the group's ideology and tactics. The title of the organization was shortened from "Black Panther Party for Self-Defense" to "Black Panther Party" (or sometimes the acronym "BPP") because, according to Huey Newton, they wanted to make clear that the group was recognized as a "political organization" and not merely a paramilitary group or a cadre of bodyguards[1]; however, the Panthers' name change also coincided with a devolution from their legitimate claim to self-defense.

To understand Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and the organization they founded in 1966, it helps to examine the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) and its adjunct political party, the Black Panther Party. There were, in fact, many Black Panther Parties in 1965 and 1966[2], but only two of considerable historical significance: first in the desolate, rural environs of central Alabama; then, only a few months later, on the equally

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[1]The Black Panther (March 16, 1968): 4; see also "The Black Panther Party: Its Origin and Development as Reflected in Its Official Weekly Newspaper The Black Panther Black Community News Service," A Staff Study by the Committee on Internal Security, U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Congress, Second Session, October 6, 1971 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 3.

[2]Stokely Carmichael and other SNCC activists consciously promoted and publicized the Black Panther name and logo. As a result, before Newton's organization in Oakland became the Black Panther Party, many organizations, inspired by the Lowndes County group, carried the name "Black Panther." For example, see "Black Power Goes Political: Pouncing Panther Portrays Power," New York Amsterdam News (September 10, 1966): 1 [on Harlem group]. Another such group, the Black Panther Party of Northern California, operated in San Francisco. In a joint action, the two Bay Area groups briefly combined forces to provide armed protection for Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz; afterward, Huey Newton would force the San Francisco-based group to change its name. See Hugh Pearson, The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 97, 108, 119-126.

desolate but formidably urban streets of Oakland, California. The former represents the birthplace not only of "Black Power" but also of the black panther symbol; the latter made the symbol famous worldwide.[3] Co-opting the name and image of the LCFO's political wing, Newton and Seale "founded" the Black Panther Party, but this connection between Alabama's Black Belt and the San Francisco Bay Area was more than symbolic. When Newton and Seale imported the name and symbol of the black panther to the West Coast and popularized it, the civil rights movement became a national struggle; indeed, the symbolism of the black panther united the South with the rest of the country.[4] This transplantation of tactics, ideas, and visual images to the West Coast made the rioting outside of the South in 1964 and 1965 seem both more and less aberrant by comparison. It was less so because now blacks and whites all over the nation could agree that the nation's racial woes were not unique to the South; it was more so because the Panthers represented direct action in the finest tradition of the southern freedom struggle, but with a foreboding twist.

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[3]While the Black Panther Party was born in Oakland in 1966, its symbol was born in Lowndes County, Alabama, in 1965. Clayborne Carson has noted that SNCC inspired Newton and Seale who, after reading a pamphlet about "how the people in Lowndes County chose to arm themselves," adopted the black panther symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization as their own. See Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 278.

[4]In fact, a number of factors changed the civil rights movement from a regional struggle to a national one. The Watts riot of 1965, Martin Luther King's campaign in Chicago in 1966, and the formation of the Black Panther Party in 1967 all combined to shift the locus of civil rights activity to a national scale.

Lowndes County lies in the heart of Alabama's so-called Black Belt: the fertile region whose black soil produces abundant and bountiful crops and where, not so coincidentally, many of the state's black inhabitants live. In 1966, the land there produced cotton, corn, and profits--little of which went to the black folks who worked it. A handful of whites lived, as one observed surmised, like "a class of feudal flies in amber, fixed in a permanent state of moral decay and financial advantage"[5]; of course, most whites suffered from the same staggering poverty as blacks. In Lowndes, there were four times as many blacks in 1966 (12,000 to 3,000) but eighty-nine white families owned ninety percent of the land. Most blacks were sharecroppers or tenants; a few owned small plots of land, and fewer still owned small farms. Half of the black women who worked did so as maids in Montgomery, more than twenty miles distant, for about $4.00 a day. The median family income for blacks was $935.00; for whites, it was $4,440.00. The median educational level for blacks was slightly over five years of schooling; eighty percent, black and white alike, were functionally illiterate. The schools and other accommodations for blacks were inferior to comparable facilities for whites.[6]

Hungry for change, blacks in Lowndes County created what was called at the time "one of the most broadly democratic political parties in the country" with the help of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose aid they solicited as

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[5]Andrew Kopkind, "The Lair of the Black Panther," The New Republic 155 (August 13, 1966): 10-13.

[6]Ibid.

preferable to that of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.[7] SNCC was "the only organization that came into the county and began to move around that issue: getting people registered to vote and developing something for themselves," according to John Jackson, a Lowndes County resident who became state project director of SNCC in Alabama.[8] The first SNCC workers active in Lowndes included Robert Mants, Stokely Carmichael, Judy Richardson, Willie Vaughn, and Scottie B. Smith.

Violence strengthened the black people of Lowndes County and forged their determination to see justice. Viola Liuzzo, a white woman from Detroit and mother of five children, was shuttling marchers from Montgomery to Selma when she was shot to death in her car. Jonathan Daniels, a twenty-six-year-old white seminary student, was gunned down in Hayneville on August 20, 1965.[9]

To mobilize voters, John Hulett, Jesse Favors, and other local blacks founded the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights, which was quickly eclipsed by its "political parallel," the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). They began organizing in October 1965; eight months later, in May, they were ready to enter the political arena. Their immediate aim was to gain access to the levers of local government with the initial election of seven county officials in November 1966; then, it became to

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[7]Ibid.

[8]John Jackson, interviewed by Robert Wright, August 3, 1968, Hayneville, Alabama, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[9]For more on Liuzzo, see Mary Stanton, From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

"take over the courthouse" with subsequent elections. To enact such a revolution, the LCFO and SNCC began a massive voter registration drive. Inspired by gains made in the nearby cities of Montgomery and Selma, black folks living in the county knew that any kind of political activity in Lowndes, where the Republican Party did not even exist, would mean trouble for them, but many participated anyway. What they attempted was "black power" at its most basic level.

Black Power later became a querulous abstraction in the North and in the minds of those who intellectualized the movement; in places like Lowndes County, it was fairly straightforward. The right to vote was now the law of the land under the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but for many their struggle was just beginning. Lowndes illustrated the power of the vote because so much was at stake there: jobs, land, education, and more. Andrew Jones knew that becoming registered meant becoming a citizen. "I went out and let people know," he said, "they wouldn't be free until they were registered."[10]

On May 3, 1966, nine hundred people attended the LCFO's nominating convention; this group nominated seven of their ranks to run in the county's general election for the offices of sheriff, coroner, tax assessor, and tax collector, in addition to three positions on the board of education. Sidney Logan would be sheriff; Frank Miles would be tax collector. Alice Moore, candidate for tax assessor, promised that if she

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[10]Jones, in Lowndes County Freedom Organization: The Rise of the Black Panthers, video recording, University of Alabama Center for Public Television, reproduced by Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1995.

were elected she would "tax the rich and feed the poor"; she felt that poor blacks and whites reaped no benefits from their tax money.[11]

The seven were to run under the banner of the Black Panther Party, whose image symbolized the empowerment of those involved. As John Hulett said, "He [the panther] never bothers anything, but when you start pushing him, he moves backwards, backwards, and backwards into his corner, and then he comes out to destroy everything that's before him."[12] Some claimed that the vivid image of the black cat derived from Courtland Cox, a SNCC activist said to resemble a panther. More practically, the symbol of the panther served to identify candidates for those voters who could not read and write, but who could pull the lever in the voting booth for those candidates on the ballot with a panther icon by their names: ballots actually had representations of black panthers imprinted on them.

The nominating convention did not go unchallenged. The county sheriff refused to let the LCFO use the courthouse, and deputized 550 white men to carry out his order. John Hulett, chairman of the LCFO, said that the blacks would come armed too. At the last minute, Attorney General Richmond Flowers, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice, worked out a compromise to avoid bloodshed, and Hulett agreed to hold the convention at a nearby church.

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[11]Moore, in Lowndes County Freedom Organization, video recording.

[12]Hulett's description of a panther's behavior when backed into a corner mirrors conventional justifications of self-defense, which presume that the defendant has no other means of escape from the assailant.

On Monday, November 7, 1966, the night before the historic election, seven hundred gathered at the Mt. Mariah Baptist Church to receive final instructions on what to do on election day. Campaign signs, emblazoned with the snarling cat, read: "VOTE NOV. 8TH / PULL THE LEVER FOR THE BLACK PANTHER AND GO HOME." Armed guards, ready for trouble, stood near the polls.

Most felt victory was at hand, but in a devastating defeat, none of the LCFO candidates were elected. SNCC workers suspected that white landowners had forced their black tenants to vote against the LCFO. The defeat was not total. Bob Mants, a local SNCC worker, claimed (somewhat erroneously) that the LCFO altered the nature of state politics by forcing some southern Democrats, such as George Wallace, to run later as independent candidates; it also brought about a "cohesiveness," according to him, among blacks "throughout the Alabama Black Belt."[13]

Stokely Carmichael, who combined novel ideas with "old-time religion" to encourage the people of Lowndes, had left the county after his election in May as president of SNCC, and had taken with him a new understanding of what was important in the struggle for equality. Lowndes showed him the political power of the vote, but it also showed him the possibilities of juridical power backed by a show of force. He had known such power in the hands of whites, but Lowndes County was the first place he had ever seen blacks exercise such prerogative. John Jackson credited Lowndes with transforming Carmichael's views on nonviolence. "When he [Carmichael] was staying here," remembered Jackson, "my father had guns and that's why white people didn't mess

[13]Mants, in Lowndes County Freedom Organization, video recording.

with him when he was here."[14] The spectacle of armed black men going to the polls was not wasted on Carmichael, who began to think about the implications of power, and about what this concept really meant.

When Carmichael and Willie Ricks introduced (or, more accurately, resurrected) the phrase "Black Power" at the 1966 Meredith March, they "touched a nerve in a very nervous white America."[15] Carmichael, who would later pioneer SNCC's merger with the Panthers in early 1968, tapped the same reservoir of white fear that Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defense and Justice had tapped, though again, whites largely misunderstood the concept of Black Power. For most blacks, the appeal of Black Power lay in its excitement and energy, not its threat. Linda Bryant Hall, a young activist, noted that Carmichael "came with the same kind of energy Malcolm X came with. That's what we liked, not that we wanted to overthrow our government . . . and not that we wanted to

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[14]Jackson, interviewed by Wright, August 3, 1968.

[15] As the Meredith March progressed, Ricks began to promote the slogan "Black Power"; it was Carmichael's use of the phrase at a rally in the latter stages of the March that electrified the media and popularized the phrase. As Clayborne Carson has pointed out, "Ricks provided Carmichael with a new weapon in his ideological struggle with King when he demonstrated the enormous appeal of the slogan 'Black Power'--a shortened version of 'black power for black people,' a phrase used by SNCC workers in Alabama." "Black Power" had been used before as a political expression. Novelist Richard Wright used "Black Power" as the title of his book on African politics written in the 1950s. Black activist Paul Robeson spoke of black power during the 1950s, as did Harlem political leaders Jesse Gray and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell even earlier. "But combined with Ricks' infectious contempt for Mississippi's white authorities," Manning Marable has observed, "and in the context of the Meredith March, the slogan captured the mood of the majority of CORE and SNCC activists and most rural blacks as well." Carson, In Struggle, 209; Manning Marable, Race, Reform and Rebellion (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 104.

do anything violent."[16] But as the notion of Black Power expanded and took on a life of its own, some black activists used its ominous overtones as a loosely veiled threat to whites.[17]

Stokely Carmichael challenged proponents of nonviolent direct action with the rhetoric of power; they responded in turn. He argued:

> We cannot be expected any longer to march and have our heads broken in order to say to whites: "Come on, you're nice guys." For you are not nice guys. We have found you out. We had to work for power, because this country does not function by morality, love and nonviolence, but by power.[18]

SCLC activist Andrew Young replied: "In a pluralistic society, to have real power you have to deny it. And if you go around claiming power, the whole society turns on you and crushes you." With little irony, his words prophesied the inception and ultimate demise of the Black Panther Party.[19]

Definitions of Black Power, as understood by various blacks and whites, ranged from an ideology of cultural nationalism to a commitment to killing white people.

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[16]Hall, quoted in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 305.

[17]Black Power became tightly entangled in what one historian has termed "white fears and black fantasies." See Clayborne Carson, In Struggle, 288-9.

[18]Carmichael, Stokely Speaks: Black Power/Back to Pan Africanism (New York: Random House, 1965), 18.

[19]Young, quoted in Hampton, Voices of Freedom, 299. Henry Hampton has written: "The Panthers insisted that 'picking up the gun' was a political act designed to galvanize the black community. But the image of young black men carrying guns on the streets of American cities also galvanized the white establishment." Hampton, Voices of Freedom, 351.

Conceptions of Black Power were hazy at best, downright confusing at worst.[20] Clearly, Black Power meant different things to different people. The press attached implications of violence to the phrase. Many whites saw Black Power as the bastard child of hatred and violence: a ploy to grab white power and resources and use them against whites. Carmichael observed, "to most whites, Black Power seems to mean that the Mau Mau are coming to the suburbs at night."[21] But to him, Black Power entailed, at its most basic level, self-defense:

> From our viewpoint, rampaging white mobs and white nightriders must be made to understand that their days of free head-whipping are over. Black people should and must fight back. Nothing more quickly repels someone bent on destroying you than the unequivocal message: "O.K., fool, make your move, and run the same risk I run—of dying."[22]

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[20]Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton offered the most comprehensive (though still cloudy) interpretation of Black Power in Black Power (1967); unfortunately, this book complicated what Black Power meant to the civil rights movement in the United States by incorporating Third World nationalist movements and ideology, and by defining Black Power in terms of international struggle. See Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). Other helpful works, written at the time, include Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede, The Rhetoric of Black Power (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969). For white perspectives, see Charles E. Fager, White Reflections on Black Power (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1967); and Joseph C. Hough, Jr., Black Power and White Protestants: A Christian Response to the New Negro Pluralism (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[21]Carmichael, quoted in Sitkoff, Struggle for Black Equality, 202.

[22]Carmichael, Black Power, 52.

To Carmichael, the Deacons for Defense and Justice provided an illustrative example. "The Deacons and all other blacks who resort to self-defense represent a simple answer to a simple question: what man would not defend his family and home from attack?"[23]

Black Power was indispensable in so far as "pride in being black proved invaluable in aiding blacks to discard the disabling self-hatred inculcated by white culture."[24] Most importantly, Black Power was an Afro-American expression of political and social empowerment, rather than an ideology of racial supremacy. It is worth noting that, for most activists, being pro-black did not mean being anti-white. Carmichael advised SNCC sympathizers wary of Black Power that they had to understand that the Afro-American wanted "to build something of his own, something that he builds with his own hands. And that is not anti-white. When you build your own house, it doesn't mean you tear down the house across the street."[25]

A variety of other interpretations sprouted up. For example, King wrote in Where Do We Go From Here?:

> One of the greatest paradoxes of the Black Power movement is that it talks unceasingly about not imitating the values of white society, but in advocating violence it is imitating the worst, the most brutal and the most uncivilized value of American life . . . Violence has been the inseparable twin of materialism, the hallmark of its grandeur and misery. This is one thing about modern civilization that I do not care to imitate.[26]

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[23]Ibid, 53.

[24]Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 202.

[25]Carmichael, quoted in Carson, In Struggle, 205.

[26]King, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 64, 66.

John Oliver Killens, a novelist, articulated Black Power in language not unlike that of Charles Sims, president of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. "If you [whites] practice violence against me," Killens wrote, "I mean to give back to you in kind . . . Maybe this will help whip some sense into your head[s]."[27] Others disagreed, turning this notion of reciprocal violence on its head. Ed Vaughn, bookstore owner and member of Detroit's Forum Movement, applied an interesting perspective of Black Power to rioting in 1967. "It wasn't Black Power that caused the rebellion," Vaughn observed. "It was the lack of power that caused the rebellions around the country. People did not see any hope for themselves."[28]

Swept up in the rising tide of militancy encouraged by Black Power ideology, Huey Newton enlisted the help of an older classmate, Bobby Seale, to create a new organization in Oakland. The two classmates had been involved in various groups such as the local chapter of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Soul Students Advisory Council. They bounced from organization to organization as they searched for a cadre of people to energize and inspire them. They could not find one, and so started their own. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was born.

First and foremost, the Black Panther Party advocated self-defense. Before they were community activists, political spokesmen, or revolutionaries, the Panthers were advocates of self-defense. This emphasis on self-defense shaped their political platform,

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[27]Killens, quoted in William McCord et. al., Life Styles in the Black Ghetto (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1969), 281.

[28]Ibid.

their perception in the media, and their response from government agencies, especially the police. Guns became sine qua non to the Panthers' image; but, originally, they were simply a function of the members' personal needs for self-protection. Clearly, understanding the priority the Panthers placed on armed self-defense predicates full understanding of the Black Panther Party itself.

Working within the established tradition of armed self-defense by Afro-Americans, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale traced their organization to similar groups before, such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice. They consciously followed the precedent set by Robert Williams and Charles Sims. "Negroes with Guns by Robert Williams had a great influence on the kind of party we developed," explained Huey Newton. "We also had some literature about the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Louisiana . . . One of their leaders had come through the Bay Area on a speaking and fund-raising tour, and we liked what he said."[29] Seale claimed to have learned of Robert Williams in 1962.[30] What the Panthers did--brandishing weapons in public--seemed unprecedented to most everyone who knew nothing of Williams or the Deacons and who, with Americans' characteristically selective historical memory, remembered little of the David Walkers and Henry Highland Garnets of the nineteenth century. But the Panthers

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[29]Huey P. Newton with J. Herman Blake, Revolutionary Suicide (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), 112. Newton listed Robert Williams among his "idols," including Marcus Garvey, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah, Regis Dubray, and Mao Tse-Tung; see Rush Greenlee, "A Revolutionary Talks From Cell," San Francisco Examiner (June 30, 1968): 1.

[30]Bobby Seale, A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale (New York: Times Books, 1978), 130.

were not really saying anything new. In their belief in self-defense, the Panthers were much more evolutionary than revolutionary.[31]

The founding members of the Black Panther Party also heeded Malcolm X, who encouraged black people to arm themselves to thwart racist police brutality. Bobby Seale envisioned "a black community group" of some kind "to teach brothers like Malcolm X said"; that is, "to righteously defend themselves from racists."[32] Seale later recalled his friend, Isaac, who was anxious about Seale's yelling at a policeman. "What you did back there, hollering at that cop," Isaac moaned. "They'll put us in jail. They'll kill us." Seale responded by cursing and flipping through the pages of a pamphlet "trying to find where Malcolm said every man had a right to keep a shotgun in his home."[33] Newton considered Malcolm's influence "ever-present" in the existence of the BPP, and

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[31]Afro-Americans had traditionally carried weapons (usually in anticipation of attack by other blacks), but the Panthers were the first to carry weapons in anticipation of attack by police. "In essence," explained John Howard, "[the Panthers] have simply taken over the 'self-defense' position advocated by Robert Williams a decade earlier. Most whites would view the Panthers as revolutionary because they choose to arm themselves, but many of their goals are distinctly nonrevolutionary." McCord et. al., Life Styles in the Black Ghetto, 241. Reginald Major recognized the Panthers as "a logical development of earlier black revolutionary programs, particularly that of Robert Williams, the Muslims, Malcolm X, and the more activist civil rights organizations like SNCC." See Reginald Major, A Panther is a Black Cat, (New York: William Morrow & Co. Inc., 1971), 63. Clayborne Carson has argued that while Newton and Seale claimed to have been inspired by SNCC's accomplishments in the Deep South, "their evolving attitudes about SNCC revealed little understanding of its history." Carson, In Struggle, 278.

[32]Seale, A Lonely Rage, 151.

[33]Ibid, 135.

considered the Panthers "a living testament to his life work."[34] He also emphasized the parallels between the Panthers and the Nation of Islam. "Our program we structured after the Black Muslim program," Newton explained, "minus the religion."[35]

Self-defense was the cornerstone of the Panthers' manifesto, the Ten Point Program, written by Newton and Seale, which enumerated the Panthers' beliefs and goals. The Ten-Point Program constituted the warp and woof of the BPP. As a living constitution, it shaped the Panthers' daily actions. To highlight blacks' inferior social and economic status and to emphasize self-defense, the Ten-Point Program drew heavily on the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and Bill of Rights. The seventh point read, "We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people."

> We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for self-defense.

It was this point that always received the largest applause from audiences.[36] The Panthers based their armed patrols on the legality of the Second Amendment. "We don't use our guns, we have never used our guns to go into the white community to shoot up white people," Seale later explained. "We only defend ourselves against anybody--be

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[34]Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 113.

[35]Newton, quoted in Hampton, Voices of Freedom, 353.

[36]For example, see Huey (Chicago: International Historic Films, 1984), video recording.

they black, blue, green, or red--who attacks us unjustly and tries to murder us and kill us for implementing our programs."[37]

The right to bear arms was a constitutional right; like the Fourteenth Amendment, it became reflective, through the Panthers' actions, of Afro-Americans' battle to determine their identity as Americans. When the Panthers provided security at a conference to commemorate Malcolm X in San Francisco on February 21, 1967, Newton integrated self-defense with politics. The conference was planned by the "other Panther group," the Black Panther Party of Northern California, who asked Newton and his group to provide armed protection for the guest of honor: Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow. When asked if he would like to speak on the occasion, Newton answered affirmatively. He was told he could lecture on the history of self-defense. "I'll be talking about politics," Newton responded. "Do you want to speak on self-defense or politics?" they queried. "It doesn't make any difference, they're both one and the same," he replied. "If I'm talking about self-defense, I'm talking about politics; if I'm talking about politics, I'm talking about self-defense. You can't separate them." Newton became frustrated with the "paper Panthers" who could not understand this tenet of revolution.[38]

Similarly, by marching on the state capitol in Sacramento to protest the Mulford Act on May 2, 1967, the Panthers politicized the issue of self-defense for blacks in America. The bill in question, written by Donald Mulford, a California Republican state

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[37]Bobby Seale, Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton (New York: Random House, 1968), 71.

[38]Ibid, 116-117.

legislator from Piedmont, specifically targeted the Panthers. It would prohibit the carrying of loaded firearms in public places, and was designed to disarm the Panthers in their provocative showdowns with Oakland cops. In a display of protest, nineteen Panthers walked into the capitol in Sacramento with their guns and read a statement to a shocked throng of assemblymen, photographers, cameramen, and reporters. The nation was electrified. All eyes were focused on the Panthers' guns.[39]

Apart from their functionality, guns represented a critical element of the Panthers' rhetoric, representing both a recruiting device and an exclamation point at the end of any declaration of their political agenda. Elaine Brown used an interesting choice of words when she explained this function of the Panthers' weaponry in her autobiography. "Guns were the natural accessory of the new black militants," she wrote, "who were determined to claim their manhood 'by any means necessary.'" [emphasis added][40] Indeed, the Panthers used firearms as some used scarves or jewelry: to accessorize their wardrobes. Guns, like leather jackets and black berets, were an essential part of the Panther uniform, which conveyed strength, power, and unity. Bobby Seale described an instance in 1966 when he and Newton carried guns into a party. One of the partygoers curiously questioned the two men, and asked why they were armed. "These guns represent a new

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[39]See Jerry Belcher, "Oakland Black Panthers Wear Guns, Talk Revolution," San Francisco Examiner (April 30, 1967).

[40]Elaine Brown, A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 107.

black organization, brother," Newton replied.[41] Their weaponry was not only an empowering accoutrement but also a billboard to advertise the Panthers and their ideas.

The Panthers did not carry their weapons everywhere, and at times were conspicuously unarmed.

> We don't take guns with us to implement these programs [e.g., the Free Breakfast program], but we understand and know from our own history that we're going to be attacked, and that we have to be able to defend ourselves. They're going to attack us viciously and fascisticly [sic] and try to say it was all justifiable homicide, in the same manner they've always attacked black people in the black communities.[42]

Whether Newton and Seale were justified in their fears or simply paranoid seems relatively clear. Their personal histories certainly bear out their claims of police harassment and brutality. As youths, both were repeatedly incarcerated and, according to their autobiographies, menaced by police. The two men perceived a serious threat from police not only to their personal survival but also to the survival of the race, and armed themselves accordingly.[43] The seventh point in the Ten-Point Program specifically addressed police brutality and the "murder of black people" by police. For Newton and

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[41]Seale, A Lonely Rage, 154.

[42]Seale, Seize the Time, 418.

[43]Sterling Tucker, Executive Director of the Urban League in Washington, D.C., argued in 1971 that "no discussion of black violence can be undertaken without reference to white America's shield and defender: the police." He noted: "In virtually every situation where blacks have advocated the carrying of arms, it has been for the purposes of self-defense against the violence of white America's cops. In consequence, the issue of black 'violence' cannot be understood separately from that of the police, their practices and policies, and their relations with the ghetto community." Sterling Tucker, For Blacks Only: Black Strategies for Change in America (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 40.

Seale, the police were the enforcement agency of a racist power structure that sought to subjugate, if not exterminate, Afro-Americans. They justified their own resort to arms as a result of violence initiated by police.[44] Like Robert Williams, the Panthers approached self-defense pragmatically, and their conception of self-protection had less to do with books and theory than with the immediate, personal danger posed by the Oakland Police Department, notorious for its brutality and highly questionable methods in dealing with the city's black ghettos.[45] Undoubtedly, their use of guns stemmed from a very real need to protect themselves.

In defining the Panthers, Newton addressed the growing trend of cultural nationalism, with which he flirted and ultimately rejected. Cultural nationalism involved turning traditionally racist understandings of black inferiority upside-down by celebrating blackness in a new sense of spiritual and cultural awareness. Such awareness was symbolically represented in "afro" or natural hairstyles, traditional African dress made of kente cloth, and the adoption of African names. Newton rejected cultural nationalism for four main reasons. First, it failed to recognize the specific historical circumstances which

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[44]Kenneth O'Reilly has noted: "For many of the young men and women who joined the Party, all social ills could be traced back to the police who patrolled the ghettoes . . . 'Off the pig!' became the Black Panther slogan, and it suggested to some, [J. Edgar] Hoover included, that the party had assumed the right to liberate black people from a police army of occupation by murdering anyone who wore a badge." O'Reilly, Racial Matters, 296.

[45]"[The Panthers'] ideas about self-defense grew out of the realities of their own lives," explained John Howard, professor of sociology at City College of New York in 1969. "That they reached the position [Robert] Williams had come to a decade before was due more to circumstance than design." Williams, who evolved "a set of strategies and tactics intended for the here and now," appealed to Newton's impetuous nature. McCord et. al., Life Styles in the Black Ghetto, 242, 240.

differentiated African-Americans and Africans. Second, it detracted from the task at hand: namely, bringing about revolution. Third, it was theoretically deficient. As he explained: "We have to realize our black heritage in order to give us strength to move on and progress. But as far as returning to the old African culture, it's unnecessary and it's not advantageous in many respects. We believe that culture itself will not liberate us. We're going to need some stronger stuff."[46] Finally, Newton believed that it was impossible to resolve the problems of black people under the structure of American capitalism. Newton's disenchantment with cultural nationalism led him to rebuke the group that shared his moniker: the Black Panther Party of Northern California, a group of cultural nationalists in San Francisco.

The same factors which might have given Newton and Seale a proclivity toward criminal activity instead made them social activists. As lower-class kids growing up in Oakland, they were blocked from conventional middle-class opportunities by the burdens of poverty and urban decay. They lived, poor, in close proximity to the wealthy neighborhoods of the Berkeley and Oakland hills, as well as Piedmont, an affluent community. They obeyed the rules of street life, which put them in conflict with the dominant culture. Finally, they adopted the goals of mainstream society but lacked the means to attain them.

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[46]Newton, quoted in Earl Ofari, Black Liberation: Cultural and Revolutionary Nationalism (Detroit: Radical Education Project, 1970), pamphlet, Bancroft Collection on Social Protest Movements, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

They also displayed a propensity towards violence that stemmed from their upbringings. David Hilliard, Chief of Staff of the Black Panther Party and Huey's childhood friend, explained his growing up in Mobile, Alabama, and later Oakland:

> Quick, powerful hands are something to respect; and there is nothing strange about people being beaten, cut, even killed. Violence is an accepted condition of life. If you go to the store or clubs you run the risk of a fight. On Friday nights, and whenever there's a family argument, and especially when people start pouring their alcohol, you can be fairly certain that somebody's going to do something before too long. There's going to be some shit, as the saying goes. Violence is the norm; because of this, violence is part of my personality, part of my value system. I grow up expecting it, always on the alert, never relaxed, never lowering my vigilance.[47]

Hilliard shared this culture of violence with other Panthers, like Seale and Newton, who grew up poor and black in the city. Violence, particularly self-defense, came quite naturally to them. Hilliard's family encouraged him, as a boy, to act violently; on one occasion, his mother bought a handgun for him at a local pawnshop and encouraged him to hunt down his tormentor, another schoolboy.[48] After another altercation with a white boy, she told her son, "I don't care what color that boy was. If he hit you first you had a right to fight him. In fact, if you hadn't hit him, I would have hit you."[49] His father felt the same way, expecting his children to stand up for their self-respect. "[I]f you got hit, you'd better hit back. That was the rule we grew up with."[50] Hilliard's parents punished

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[47]David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993), 40.

[48]Ibid, 97.

[49]Ibid, 51.

[50]Ibid, 23. Huey Newton's father encouraged similar behavior. "You can take a killing," he would say, "but you can't take a beating." Ibid, 71.

him physically, whipping him with a leather belt or the thin branches of a peach tree ("switches"). He carried a knife for protection; his sister carried a Coke bottle ("to coldcock any guy"), and his brother's girlfriend "a razor soaked in garlic and lemon juice."[51]. "For us," he explained, "fighting's like words: a way to work things out. We fight to make friends, get rid of our frustration and boredom, assert our identities. Fighting is a creative outlet."[52] Violence was everywhere in Hilliard's world. "Everything that surrounds me," he wrote, "encourages me to believe in the rule of force."[53]

As a way of understanding the world, violence made sense to most of the Panthers. Seale conceived of two kinds of violence: that kind "perpetrated against our people by the fascist aggression of the power structure," and self-defense, "a form of violence used to defend ourselves from the unjust violence inflicted upon us."[54] Newton added several other forms of violence, too:

> We also wanted to show that the other kinds of violence poor people suffer--unemployment, poor housing, inferior education, lack of public facilities, the inequity of the draft--were part of the same fabric. If we could organize people against police brutality . . . we might move them toward eliminating related forms of oppression. The system, in fact, destroys us through neglect much more often than by the police revolver. The gun is only the coup de grâce, the enforcer. To wipe out the conditions leading to the coup de grâce--that was our goal. The gun and the murder it represented would then fade away.[55]

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[51]Ibid, 41.

[52]Ibid, 69.

[53]Ibid, 97.

[54]Seale, Seize the Time, 418.

[55]Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 188-189.

Newton viewed violence as not simply a matter of particular acts, but as a condition of human relationships. He argued that starving people is a kind of violence, robbing them of their dignity and self-respect is violence, denying them their political rights or discriminating against them is violence. Such a definition grossly inflated any conventional understanding of the term "violence," generally considered to mean bringing force, or the threat of force, against a person to effect something against his or her will; however, by defining violence in such terms, Newton would be able to justify his own violent tendencies as being not only in the best interest of oppressed people, but also completely justified. Violence, in any shade or form, necessitated defense from that violence.

Rhetorically, the two founding members disavowed violent conflict. "We aren't hungry for violence," Seale declared. "Violence is ugly. Guns are ugly." But he and Newton felt that the police left them little peaceful alternative. They felt that the government persecuted the Black Panther Party specifically because the Panthers' community programs "exposed" the government as hypocritical and prejudiced.[56]

The founding members of the Panthers recognized the practicality of self-defense. They relied on it regularly as children, and later as adults. The Party's stand on self-

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[56]Seale, Seize the Time, 418. Reginald Major attempted to express the Panthers' mindset: "Few people can reasonably be expected to engage in warfare with police. But anyone, if he has any self-respect, recognizes that there is some form of provocation, some threat to his person, that will elicit a furious response. No one--a legislature, a court, a police department, or an army--can take away or confer the right to self-defense. This is part of the message of the gun." Major saw the superior firepower of police as "another way of saying that black people are poor." Major, A Panther is a Black Cat, 32.

defense was a logical extension of their own personal experience into the political realm; however, their understanding of self-defense was different from legal, ethical, and moral norms embraced by the majority culture. The Panthers justified any number of marginal actions in the name of self-defense, and they ultimately strayed from any common understanding of self-defense in justifying nominally criminal activities.

If the black panther symbolized fighting back when backed into a corner, then not all of the members of the Black Panther Party fully grasped its meaning. One Party member admired how the panther "moves quickly and quietly, how it strikes before anyone realizes what has happened."[57] His understanding of self-defense, and of the panther, resembled the unjustifiable logic of the preemptive strike. Don Cox assented:

> "[F]or us to talk about survival we must talk about self-defense against this brutality and murder that is defined by the racist power structure as justifiable homicide. So when a self-defense group moves against this oppressive system, by executing a pig by any means, sniping, stabbing, bombing, etc., in defense against 400 years of racist brutality and murder this can only be defined correctly as self-defense . . . all self-defense groups must strike blows against the slavemaster until we have secured our survival as a people and if this takes shooting every pig and blowing up every pig sty then let's get on up.[58]

Nor did all of the members necessarily share Newton's original vision of an essentially defensive organization. "We'd been in the Army, we were armed," explained Landon

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[57]Anonymous, as told to Chuck Moore, I Was A Black Panther (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 90. The author of this book concealed his identity for fear of reprisals for telling his story.

[58]Cox, quoted in "The Black Panther Party: Its Origin and Development as Reflected in Its Official Weekly Newspaper The Black Panther Black Community News Service," A Staff Study by the Committee on Internal Security, U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Congress, Second Session, October 6, 1971 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 26.

Williams, a Panther. "We'd read Nat Turner. We said, look--maybe it is just a black-white thing, and so what we gotta do is just take as many of 'em with us as we can. And so we armed up."[59] Huey Newton himself would later declare: "We're not a self-defense group in the limited fashion that you usually think of self-defense groups."[60]

Like Charles Sims, the Black Panthers sometimes confused self-defense and aggressive violence. Newton's understanding and justifications of self-defense, like David Hilliard's, grew out of the marginal and sometimes violent settings of his adolescence: street corners, parties, local clubs, and bars. For example, he explained:

> [Y]ou may go to a party and step on someone's shoes and apologize, and if the person accepts the apology, then nothing happens. If you hear something like "An apology won't shine my shoes," then you know he is really saying, "I'm going to fight you." So you defend yourself, and in that case striking first would be a defensive act, not an offensive one. You are trying to get an advantage over an opponent who has already declared war.[61]

Within these broad parameters, self-defense evolved into an offensive weapon. "To show them [bigger guys] I was as 'bad' as they were," Newton told of his youth, "I would fight at the drop of a hat. As soon as I saw a dude rearing up, I struck him before he struck me, but only when there was going to be a fight anyway." He struck first "because a fight usually did not last very long," and because "nine times out of ten the winner was the one

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[59]Landon Williams, panel discussion, Berkeley Graduate Assembly, Booth Auditorium, Boalt Hall, University of California, October 25, 1990, video recording, Media Resource Center, UC Berkeley.

[60]Huey, video recording.

[61]Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 89. Newton was paraphrasing Seale; see Seale, Seize the Time, 15.

who got in his first lick."[62] Don Cox, a Panther field marshal, declared, "it's time to intensify the struggle. We must broaden our self-defense tactics and counterattack." David Hilliard concurred: "We know that the only way to stop these _____ is by picking up the guns and killing those _____before they get a chance to kill us."[63]

The Panthers' self-perception as revolutionaries also complicated the legitimacy of their claim to self-defense. The group had difficulty fusing self-defense—immediate, counter-violence to stop an attack—and revolution, defined as a sudden political overthrow or seizure of power. "Revolutionary strategy for Black people in America begins with the defensive movement of picking up the Gun, as the condition for ending the pigs' reign of terror by the Gun," announced one article in The Black Panther. "Black people picking up the gun for self-defense is the only basis in America for a revolutionary offensive against Imperialist state power."[64] To a legal scholar or philosopher, the contradictions in this statement might appear glaring: "revolution" is hardly a "defensive movement," and "picking up the gun for self-defense" cannot logically be a "revolutionary offensive," if offense and defense are diametrically opposed. Newton's explanation of his philosophy of self-defense raises the question: Can an action be offensive and defensive at the same time?

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[62]Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 74.

[63]Cox and Hilliard, quoted in "The Black Panther Party: Its Origin and Development as Reflected in Its Official Weekly Newspaper The Black Panther Black Community News Service," A Staff Study by the Committee on Internal Security, U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Congress, Second Session, October 6, 1971 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 17. Expletives deleted in original text.

[64]The Black Panther (April 25, 1970).

Newton, Seale, and Cleaver had all studied Frantz Fanon,[65] as well as Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, a contemporary of Karl Marx who advocated "the science of destruction" in his Catechism of the Revolutionist: a textbook for would-be anarchists, and one of a number of pieces which various student groups plagiarized, published, and circulated in pamphlet form in the 1960's and 1970's. Revolutionists, Bakunin instructed, must forego conventionality and devote themselves to "mechanics, physics, chemistry, and possibly medicine," in so far as they contribute to their sole interest: "the revolution." The revolutionist, "merciless toward the state," should delight solely in "inexorable destruction." He may befriend only those who "prove themselves by their actions" to be revolutionists like himself. "He is to consider himself as capital," Bakunin wrote, "fated to be spent for the triumph of the revolutionary cause"; however, "he has no right to personally and alone to dispose of that capital, without the consent of the aggregate of the fully initiated." Bakunin encouraged those involved in the struggle to "join hands" with outlaws and bandits, "the only genuine revolutionists." In a preface to the pamphlet, Eldridge Cleaver, minister of information of the Black Panther Party, called the Catechism "one of the most important formulations of principles in the entire history of revolution"; however, Bakunin, whose notions of violence were direct and immoderate,

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[65]Fanon, a black psychiatrist from Martinique who worked in Algeria for the National Liberation Front in its fight against the French, considered violence a necessary function of the liberation of the oppressed. Newton and Seale digested Fanon's theories of violence and, in the BPP's latter stages, argued that spontaneous violence educates those "who are in a position with skills to lead the people to what needs to be done." See Frantz Fanon, Les damnés de la terre [The Wretched of the Earth] (Paris: François Maspero, 1961; reprint, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968); see also Seale, Seize the Time, 25-26, 34.

had little to say about self-defense.[66] The only way for the Panthers to incorporate theorists such as Bakunin into their own ideology, which exonerated violence in the name of self-protection, was to widen their definition of self-defense; therefore, Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver found it relatively easy, in order to justify a violent response, to equate violence with any form of oppression or injustice.[67]

It was this logic that transformed the Panthers' defensive violence into offensive violence. David Hilliard further explained Huey Newton's implementation of offensive violence. "Fear is what makes him [Newton] fight so desperately," he explained, "be so severe and extreme. He always imagines that what he does to you, you're going to do to him. So he beats you to it."[68] The March 23, 1968, issue of The Black Panther made it clear, in capital letters, by addressing the police:

> HALT IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY! YOU SHALL MAKE NO MORE WAR ON UNARMED PEOPLE. YOU WILL NOT KILL ANOTHER BLACK PERSON AND WALK THE STREETS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY TO GLOAT ABOUT IT AND SNEER AT THE DEFENSELESS RELATIVES OF YOUR VICTIMS. FROM NOW ON, WHEN YOU MURDER A BLACK PERSON IN THIS BABYLON OF BABYLONS, YOU MAY AS WELL GIVE IT UP BECAUSE WE WILL GET YOUR ASS AND GOD CAN'T HIDE YOU.[69]

The Panthers exploded conventional notions of self-defense and re-defined them to include retaliation and revenge.

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[66]Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, Catechism of the Revolutionist (Oakland: Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, 196?), pamphlet, Bancroft Collection on Social Protest Movements, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

[67]For example, see supra note 52.

[68]Hilliard, This Side of Glory, 180.

Simultaneously, they shouldered the burden of defending the black community of Oakland, and in doing so, transformed self-defense from a personal prerogative to a civic duty. With the ascendance of the Panthers, self-defense was no longer an individual act, but rather a collective measure of survival. Historically, civilians defending themselves and their families were exercising what is at best a personal privilege serving only the particular interests of those defended, not those of the community at large; but, as the Panthers understood it, self-protection was defense of the community. Without apparent consciousness of any difference, Panther rhetoric addressed issues of community defense as if it were only individual self-protection writ large. To illustrate, a cartoon by Emory Douglas depicted a Godzilla-sized black panther chasing a giant, white rat (wearing Uncle Sam's top hat) out of a black neighborhood as flames engulf the surrounding buildings. "DEFEND THE GHETTO," the caption boldly entreats.[70] Antagonistic toward their protectorate, white police officers in Oakland often failed to assume the primary responsibility of law enforcement: protection of the community. Only black citizens, such as the Panthers, could assume this responsibility.

The Panthers' conceptualization of self-defense had a political dimension as well. Newton explained:

> To be political, you must have a political consequence when you do not receive your desires--otherwise you are nonpolitical.
>
> When Black people send a representative, he is somewhat absurd because he represents no political power. He does not represent land power because we do

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[69]The Black Panther (March 23, 1968).

[70]Philip S. Foner, ed., The Black Panther Speaks 2d. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 180.

> not own any land. He does not represent economic or industrial power because Black people do not own the means of production. The only way he can become political is to represent what is commonly called a military power--which the BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF-DEFENSE calls Self-Defense Power. Black people can develop Self-Defense Power by arming themselves from house to house, block to block, community to community, throughout the nation. Then we will choose a political representative and he will state to the power structure the desire of the Black masses. If the desires are met, the power structure will receive a political consequence.[71]

The "political consequence" to which Newton referred was force, or what he called "Self-Defense Power," which offered blacks political leverage. In this way, the Black Panther Party politicized the issue of self-defense at the same time as it made self-defense a matter for public, not private, concern.

In some sense, claiming self-defense against police aggression as a black person was revolutionary, particularly considering the state of affairs in Oakland; however, self-defense generally requires some element of innocence, if not an absence of wrongdoing, and the Panthers' public personas was far from pristine. Their aggressive rhetoric, specifically, gained them little sympathy in the public eye. Certain slogans, such as "Off the pig" and "Guns baby guns" did little to ingratiate them to the white public, and the use of coarse language also offended many whites. David Hilliard alarmed and frightened many when he announced that the Panthers would "kill Richard Nixon" if he "stood in the way of our freedom."[72]

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[71]The Black Panther (January 17, 1969).

[72]Hilliard, quoted in "The Black Panther Party: Its Origin and Development as Reflected in Its Official Weekly Newspaper The Black Panther Black Community News Service," A Staff Study by the Committee on Internal Security, U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 91st Congress, Second Session, October 6, 1971 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 17. For more on this incident, see "U.S. Agents

The Deacons for Defense and Justice sailed between the Scylla of self-defense and the Charybdis of aggressive violence and emerged unscathed; however, the Black Panthers were not so lucky. The Panthers ultimately fell prey to the same brand of offensive self-defense they lauded. Their concept of self-defense was "seen by many as a thinly disguised exhortation to take pot shots at cops."[73] The local law enforcement community, with abundant assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, responded to this personal threat from the Panthers with extreme prejudice. They cracked down on the Black Panther Party with a vehemence reserved only for the most dangerous enemies of the public: cop-killers.

After Newton allegedly shot and killed patrolman John Frey of the Oakland Police Department in 1967, local, state and federal law enforcement agencies marked the Panthers for extinction.[74] Police arrested Newton on October 28, 1967, for Frey's murder, and Seale on February 25, 1968, after a raid on his home. Police killed Bobby Hutton, teenage treasurer of the Black Panther Party, on April 6, 1968; Eldridge Cleaver was wounded in the same firefight. Expressing her condolence, Betty Shabazz, widow of Malcolm X, wrote in a Western Union telegram to Hutton's family, "The question is not

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Hold Hilliard--'Threat to the President'" San Francisco Chronicle, December 4, 1969; see also Hilliard, This Side of Glory, 264-65.

[73]Reginald Major, A Panther is a Black Cat, 61.

[74]On June 15, 1969, J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Director, declared, "the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." Hoover, quoted in Major, A Panther is a Black Cat, 300. Kenneth O'Reilly has observed: "Hoover's pursuit of the Black Panther Party was unique only in its total disregard for human rights and life itself." O'Reilly, Racial Matters, 294.

will it be non-violence versus violence but whether a human being can practice his God-given right of self-defense."[75] In August 1968, the LAPD raided Panther headquarters in Los Angeles; this action resulted in many arrests and purging from within the Party by Panthers hunting for police informants; that same month, police firebombed the office in Newark, and skirmished with Panthers in Detroit. In the most notorious example, on December 4, 1969, police raided an apartment in Chicago where they killed Mark Clark and shot Fred Hampton to death in his bed. Police systematically harassed, arrested, and killed off the Panthers in a coordinated, nationwide effort, managed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.[76]

Combined with its members' own weaknesses, the pressure from law enforcement agencies proved more than the Party could bear, and the final years of the Black Panther Party became quite bleak. "The Party engaged in fratricide," explained Landon Williams.

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[75]The Black Panther (May 4, 1968): 17.

[76]By September 13, 1968, the FBI had infiltrated the Party and begun collecting informant reports; by early 1969, it was running wiretaps on the BPP. See Series 4, Box 5, Folder 51, Huey P. Newton Foundation Records, 1968-1994, Black Panther Party Research Project, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University; see also Series 4, Box 1, Folder 1. For more information on the detrimental effect of the FBI on the Black Panther Party, see Leroy F. Aarons and Robert C. Maynard, "Panther Leadership Hurt by Sweeping FBI Raids," Washington Post (June 25, 1969) and "How the FBI Poked and Pried at Dissidents," San Francisco Examiner [City Edition] (March 9, 1976). Books on the subject include Kenneth O'Reilly, Racial Matters, Ward Churchill, Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement (Boston: South End Press, 1988), and Roy Wilkins and Ramsey Clark, Search and Destroy: A Report by the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and the Police. Published by the NAACP and the Metropolitan Applied Research Center, Inc. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

"The army turned on itself . . . That's what killed the Black Panther Party."[77] There was much intra-fighting. Party leaders purged the rank-and-file for police informants. Undisciplined Panthers resorted to extortion and other strong-arm tactics to fund their activities. Allegations of murder and contracted assassinations swept the black community. Like gangsters, many Panthers ran wild, terrorizing the community; consequently, the Party alienated much of Oakland. Chapters in other cities fared no better.

In the early 1970's, Huey Newton succumbed to drugs, paranoid delusions, and increased reliance on criminal activity to subsidize the Black Panther Party. He turned on those closest to him: expelling David Hilliard, beating Elaine Brown, and brutalizing Bobby Seale. He expunged Party members with increasing frequency for trifling reasons; others he "disciplined" by pistol-whipping. He ordered beatings, and worse, such as "mud holing" (gangland-style, group stomping). Newton pistol-whipped his tailor, spattering the ceiling of his Lake Merritt penthouse with blood. In 1974, he was arrested for the murder of a seventeen-year-old prostitute, Kathleen Smith; he was later acquitted. The "revolution" which unfolded in Oakland in the 1970s was hardly the stuff of sixties' activism, but it was swift and violent: "blood to the horse's brow, and woe to those who can't swim."

As the Party devolved and strayed from its original mission of self-defense, Newton attempted to shore up the organization with theory. He explained his vision of

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[77]Landon Williams, panel discussion, Berkeley Graduate Assembly, Booth Auditorium, Boalt Hall, University of California, October 25, 1990, video recording, Media Resource Center, UC Berkeley.

the Panthers in an essay entitled "The Original Vision of the Black Panther Party," published as a thin pamphlet in 1973. "The original vision of the Black Panther Party," he explained, "was to serve the needs of the oppressed people in our communities and defend them against their oppressors." In this document, Newton presented the Ten Point Program as an expression of revolution, which is itself a process; therefore, he explained, he had designed the Program as an evolutionary document which would change and adapt to the people's needs, rather than as a manifesto.[78]

The rhetoric of the pamphlet, like that of many Panther speeches, was wooden and doctrinal. It referred to oppressed blacks in typically Marxist terminology as the "lumpenproletariat," and decried taxes, war, ethnocentric education, malnutrition, poverty, and sickle cell anemia, among a host of other ills plaguing blacks in Oakland. But it also revealed much about how Newton wanted the Panthers to be remembered. He noted that democracy in America "means nothing more than the domination of the majority over the minority"; upsetting this power balance was an appropriate response for any minority. In response to such activism, Newton wrote that he and Seale "expected repression" from the government; accordingly, they prepared to meet force with force.[79]

Newton delineated the causes of the evils afflicting Afro-Americans. Since all institutions were aligned against him, a black man has a right to arm himself for self-

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[78]Huey Newton, The Original Vision of the Black Panther Party (Oakland, CA: Black Panther Party, 1973), pamphlet, Bancroft Collection on Social Protest Movements, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. In actuality, the Ten Point Program contained twenty points, with practice expressed in the section "What We Want" and theory expressed in "What We Believe."

[79]Ibid.

defense. He believed that no ruling class ever surrendered its privileges voluntarily, and urged organization for planning and carrying out rebellion. White supremacists would not capitulate except by force. "The Black Panther Party," he wrote, "was born in a period of stress when Black people were moving away from the philosophy and strategy of nonviolent action toward sterner actions" and "stronger stuff." Openly displaying weapons and talking about "the necessity of the community to arm itself for its own self-defense" was, according to Newton, "above-ground action" which identified the Black Panther Party as a progressive political movement, not an underground terrorist organization. The gun itself was not political power, but a preliminary step towards it.[80]

Theory translated into action. The positive deeds of the Panthers—including the Free Breakfast Programs, Free Health Clinics, Clothing and Shoe Programs, and Buses-to-Prisons Program—always spoke louder than their words, but their words announced a new kind of black militancy which fit squarely within the student radicalism of the time; however, by the early 1970s, the scurrilous deeds of some Panthers had eclipsed whatever good the group had accomplished in Oakland. By November 26, 1973, the FBI had ascertained that the Black Panther Party was "a thing of the past," and reported that Huey Newton is "now attempting to create an organization-type of movement in the area to control, among other things, dope pushers, prostitutes, and private social clubs."[81]

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[80]Ibid.

[81]FBI report, November 26, 1973, Series 4, Box 14, Folder 20, Huey P. Newton Foundation Records, 1968-94, Black Panther Party Research Project, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

But, as some defenders have observed, to focus on any "bad seeds" within the organization, or to highlight the criminal tendencies of some members (which unquestionably existed), would be to reduce the Black Panther Party to its worst element. After all, the drugs and alcohol, and law-breaking and violence, were only part of the story. Carl Miller, a reader of the East Bay Express, reacted to news of Huey Newton's murder by a drug dealer in 1989 in a letter to the editor:

> Sure the Huey Newton some riffraff shot was probably a murderer, thief, alcoholic, and drug addict . . . But the man we remember was much more than just another thug. We remember the Huey Newton who stood up strong and black, who faced down the pigs and scared shit out of racists whose worst nightmare seemed about to come true . . . We knew in our heart of hearts that they [the Black Panthers] never really had a chance. And that the tactic of armed resistance was contradictory, at best counterproductive, and for sure downright dangerous. But oh what a rush Huey gave us . . . The Huey we remember was a tonic that at the time our community sorely needed . . ."[82]

As Huey's brother, Melvin Newton, noted, the Black Panther Party was about "ideals." It was about "a social movement." It was about "social change."[83]

The original name of the Panthers—the "Black Panther Party for Self-Defense"—was clunky and cumbersome, but it captured the spirit of the organization. The Panthers began, like Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defense and Justice, as self-defense advocates; however, the group rapidly became the vanguard of a social revolution, moving away from the goal of self-defense (that is, immediate self-protection) at the same time that they justified their actions using the rhetoric of self-defense. In becoming a revolutionary vanguard, the Black Panthers ceased staving off attacks and began

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[82]Carl Miller, quoted in Pearson, The Shadow of the Panther, 328.

[83]Melvin Newton, quoted in Hilliard, This Side of Glory, 6-7.

formulating their own. Coincidentally, the name change to "Black Panther Party" signified more than a change of appellation. It marked a symbolic shift toward a new kind of civil rights movement: offensive, belligerent, and warlike. It was a change that most people—including the Panthers—were ill prepared to face.

In the late 1960's, confrontations between the Panthers and police officers became a feud verging on open warfare. Policemen and Panthers shared the blame for escalated violence. The police sometimes unfairly targeted political activists; the Panthers, for their part, sometimes pinned all of their hostility and frustration on hapless policemen just trying to perform what they understood to be their duties. Studies of the police showed that their attitudes and behaviors toward blacks differed greatly from their attitudes and behaviors toward other whites. Similar studies showed that Afro-Americans tended to perceive the police as hostile, prejudiced, and corrupt.[84]

Racial prejudice blended with a skewed sense of duty in some law enforcement officers to create a strain of policemen ill-equipped for duty in black communities. These policemen often saw blacks as people who wanted something for nothing, as a lesser race, as "the enemy," or as the dupes of a foreign power determined to eradicate the "American way of life." There were "good guys," they reasoned, and there were "bad guys": they, as

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[84]For more on these studies, see the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, Task Force Report: The Police (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), especially chapter 6; see also Jerome H. Skolnick, The Politics of Protest: Violent Aspects of Protest & Confrontation (A Staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence) (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 97-135.

policemen authorized to protect and serve the public, were clearly "good guys." Because of the power vested in them by the state, some police officers assumed that they could do no wrong. Implicit in this assumption was the diffused notion that a person who "stepped out of line" deserved the worst of any encounter—if only to re-establish a proper respect for the law. Policemen trusted this attitude because of the latitude it granted them in dealing with suspects.[85] It was a rare police department that counseled restraint when an officer himself was under direct attack. Above all, policemen respected authority, and expected others to do so.

Furthermore, white society generally condoned the rough tactics of the police in the ghetto because whites felt policemen were acting in the best interest of the community. Drug use and crime needed to be eradicated, and these activities proliferated in the nation's slums. Many whites even carried this logic to an oversimplified and spurious extreme: white policemen dealt with an inordinate number of criminals who were black; therefore, many blacks must be "bad guys."

But black residents living in these areas rejected the notion that they were more felonious than other Americans. They saw the police presence in their neighborhoods as selective and invasive. By 1968, policemen were no longer (if they had ever been at all) a neutral symbol of law and order in black communities. Activists such as the Panthers had

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[85]On June 13, 1966, the Supreme Court extended Escobedo v. Illinois (1964) by ruling that due process obliges police to tell suspects that they may remain silent, that any statements made can thereafter be used against them in court, and that they can consult an attorney, before any interrogation may begin. The ruling marked a new era of consciousness with regard to the civil rights of those accused of a crime, which became known as "Miranda rights."

exposed the actions of some policemen to be excessive and discriminatory. What little respect the typical ghetto dweller had for white cops ebbed in the riots of the mid- to late 1960s.[86]

In Newark, New Jersey, on the other side of the country from the Black Panthers' national headquarters, LeRoi Jones gave voice to this mistrust of law enforcement officers in his one-act play Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself: A Message of Self-Defense to Black Men. The play, published as a pamphlet in the late 1960's, dramatized the new mentality of self-defense in a concise, easily digestible form, meant for widespread distribution.

The front cover of the play depicts a helmet-wearing policeman shooting an unarmed black man in the back; the back cover depicts two policemen, revolvers drawn, saying "Open up, or we'll shoot!" They stand at the door of a black man, who clutches a small boy and replies, "I haven't done anything! Leave me alone!" The dialogue consists of a conversation between two men, one of whom is trying to convince the other of the merits of self-defense:

> First Brother: Kill us off like crazy-ass animals. Nothin' but us on the ground getting stomped and beat and shot down. Cain't do nuthin. Cain't do nuthin . . . I'm sick of this muthafuckin shit . . .
>
> Second Brother: You ain't sick as I am, man [takes out his piece, pulls back the hammer]. Ain't no devil on this planet gonna put his bloody claws on me, brother. Not no more, my man . . . not no more.

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[86]The literature concerning riots in the 1960's is too expansive to discuss in this context. For an introduction, see the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam, 1968) and Robert Conot, Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness (New York: Bantam, 1967).

First Brother: Man, what you talkin' bout??

Second Brother: I'm talking fire. Can you dig it? Fire of Allaahhhh! And protecting my family and surviving past these soulless savages. Surviving, man.[87]

The second brother berates the first brother for being a "goddam negro" [sic] and failing to take up arms. They quarrel and fight; while scuffling, the cops come upon them and shoot them both. The play served not only as a plea for black men to defend themselves, but also as a critique of intra-racial quarreling: fighting among themselves when they should be fighting white racism could get black men killed.[88]

Like the Panthers, LeRoi Jones became enamored with the idea of revolution in the late 1960s. Revolution appealed to many black militants even though it was never a viable possibility. Several factors inhibited violent revolution in the United States in the 1960s. First, the United States government had not lost the allegiance or control of its armed forces--a key factor in internal revolutions. Second, Afro-Americans lacked a revolutionary majority; quite simply, there were not enough black people in the United States to carry off a coup d'état. Third, and most importantly, few blacks were willing to give up what they already had; only a handful were willing to trade the certainty of what America had to offer for the uncertainty of revolution. "A great number of blacks fail to see that there is any necessity to arm," a Black Panther informant would explain in 1971. "Others, awed by the obvious superiority in firepower available to the police, refuse to

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[87]LeRoi Jones, Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself: A Message of Self-Defense to Black Men, Bancroft Collection on Social Protest Movements, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

[88]Ibid.

think in terms of armed conflict."[89] Furthermore, the self-defeating nature of violent revolution convinced many exponents of its fallacy. It was widely believed by many whites that black revolutionaries were engaged in playing a game, or acting out a fantasy, and that they represented little danger to the community.

Whatever misgivings whites had about the earnestness of black revolutionaries vanished on the evening of July 23, 1968, when shooting erupted in the Glenville area of Cleveland's predominately black east side. Before the evening had ended, seven people were dead and fifteen wounded; three of the dead and eleven of those injured were police officers. In the next five days after the shooting, sixty businesses were destroyed or damaged by looting and arson. Property damage exceeded one million dollars.

Cleveland had been the first major American city to elect a black mayor, Carl B. Stokes. Personifying Black Power, Stokes symbolized a new breed of civil rights leaders, taking the helm of public service. Plagued with the characteristically urban problems of choked thoroughfares, insufficient public transportation, crime, racial strife, poverty, inadequate housing, and corrupt politics, Cleveland was ripe for a leader sensitive to these issues.

Involved in the shooting were Fred (Ahmed) Evans and from fifteen to twenty of his group, the Black Nationalists of New Libya. Evans, like Robert Williams, was a soldier: a decorated Korean War veteran and two-hitch volunteer. Policemen characterized the incident as a "planned ambush" while black Clevelanders saw it as a classic example of police brutality. It came to light that Evans had received funds from a

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[89]Major, A Panther is a Black Cat, 31-32.

grant earmarked for an urban renewal project, "Cleveland: NOW!". Bureaucrats within Stokes' administration had allocated the grant money, and Stokes became known as a benefactor of cop-killing revolutionaries. The embarrassing incident tarnished the mayor's legacy.[90]

It is unclear why and how the shooting in Cleveland really began. No one knows who fired the first shots.[91] Because a situation existed in which any catalyst could have triggered bloodshed, it does not really matter. Both sides were primed for violence. Each expected a confrontation; each, to a certain degree, desired it. Cleveland's police officers, like those in Oakland, were white. Some had emigrated from the southern states, and brought with them all the racial assumptions associated with that region; or, they had descended from immigrants who had worked their way out of the slums. Many were not predisposed to empathize with the plight of blacks living in the ghetto.

On the other side, Ahmed Evans and his comrades-in-arms were itching for a fight. The shootout in Cleveland seemed to bear credence to the notions that merely having weapons at hand created an impetus to use them, and that those who go looking for trouble often find it. It is certainly within the realm of possibility that Ahmed Evans

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[90]For more on Mayor Stokes and the Ahmed Evans incident, see Estelle Zannes, Checkmate in Cleveland: The Rhetoric of Confrontation During the Stokes Years (Cleveland: Case Western University Press, 1972).

[91]An exhaustive investigation by the Civil Violence Research Center at Case Western Reserve University, under the direction of Louis H. Masotti and Jerome R. Corsi, proved inconclusive. Masotti and Corsi's report soundly condemned police conduct in Cleveland's black neighborhoods. See Masotti and Corsi, Shootout in Cleveland: A Report Submitted to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).

and his band waylaid the Cleveland police. If so, this incident marked the complete metamorphosis of self-defense into an offensive action, or non-defensive assault. Evans' actions represented a severe deviation from the kind of defensive measures recommended by Malcolm X, and by the Deacons for Defense and Justice a few years before. Perhaps the brand of self-defense practiced by Evans represented a necessary step toward a revolutionary consciousness. But it subsequently compromised any legitimate claim to self-defense, as understood in most legal and ethical frameworks, and marked the end of an era of relative progress in black-white relations, especially compared to what would follow.

By 1968, self-defense as understood by the civil rights vanguard had come to signify something quite different than it had in 1955, and it only partially related to conventional notions of self-protection. Guns were flooding not only black communities but also white communities around the country, which geared up on both sides of the racial divide for a race war that never came.[92] The rhetoric of self-defense had assumed an ominous tone by 1968. A resolution adopted at the Black Students' Conference at Central State University of Ohio declared:

> We assert the right of Black students who are experiencing political and violent suppression to respond in kind. We see the Orangeburg Massacre as a lesson which teaches the necessity of self-defense. Our motto is: Avenge Orangeburg.[93]

Black nationalists outlined "black survival curriculums" which detailed self-defense and

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[92]See "Guns!," Sepia 17 (August 1968): 22-26.

[93]Reprinted in C. Eric Lincoln, ed., Is Anybody Listening to Black America? (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 150.

weaponry courses for children.[94] Even religious figures subscribed to a jaundiced philosophy of self-defense. Father James Groppi, a black priest and youth advisor in Milwaukee, declared in Ramparts magazine: "I believe, with Malcolm X, in the absolute necessity of self-defense. I believe in what you might call the 'right to brick.'"[95] Self-defense, in 1968, offered a license to "burn the mother down," or rebel openly.

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[94]Ibid, 122-23.

[95]Ibid, 225.

Epilogue: The Only Tired They Was

"[T]he only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

--Rosa Parks, 1992

Self-defense, in relation to black history and black thought, underwent a transformation during the period 1955-1968. In conjunction with a heightened interest in the possibilities of nonviolence, the period in question delineated the re-establishment of self-defense as an operating principle in the souls of twentieth-century black folk. In a relatively short time, nonviolent direct action gained favor as the preferred method of protest by black activists during 1955-56. It also became sacrosanct within civil rights circles as a morally righteous demonstration of faith in humanity; however, resistance to nonviolence concurrently grew from 1957 to 1962. In the next two years, 1963-64, Malcolm X launched a frontal assault on the nonviolent ideal that led many to question openly its sacrosanct nature. In the following two years, 1965-66, the practical virtues of self-defense became apparent with the actions of the Deacons for Defense and Justice; however, by 1968, other nationalist groups such as the Black Panthers had clambered along the slippery slope between justifiable self-defense and naked aggression, and fomented the politicization of self-defense. Intensified by the two-steps-forward, one-step-back progress of civil rights agitation, the frustration of battered activists, and the emotional energy of Black Power, self-defense became even more imperative in the quest for black equality during this period. If it became more central to the black freedom struggle at this time, then it also strayed from conventional notions of what self-defense

entailed. It became less a defensive measure than an offensive precaution, justified in light of the unrelenting aggression of white bigotry.

Consistently, male activists expressed this self-defensive impulse in terms of gender roles and sexual divisions of labor. Self-defense represented a man's prerogative and man's duty. It was a manly response to white transgressions. Most black men felt it was their responsibility to protect the women in their lives; in fact, they guardedly viewed self-defense as their domain, and theirs alone. Out of necessity, and to their credit, women often subverted these expectations and implemented defensive measures themselves to protect their homes, bodies, and families.

Nonviolence ultimately brought about what successes the civil rights movement achieved, but it did so in large part due to the contrapuntal influence of self-defense. Before the camera, in the public forum, and on the town square, nonviolence could and did work. In the alleyways, along the backroads, and behind closed doors, nonviolence, which depended in part on public display, could prove ineffective. Furthermore, in places where nonviolent direct action was not an option, the practice of self-defense actually worked better than any other strategies; however, it would be a mistake to regard places like Bogalusa or Monroe as unique or anomalous. The prevalence of demonstrators and ordinary citizens who advocated and practiced self-defense during the period 1957-1962 effectively destroys the notion of a pre-1965 "nonviolent" movement and post-1965 "violent" movement: self-defense existed and thrived throughout the period in question, in conjunction with nonviolent direct action.

Activists who were able to believe in both self-defense and nonviolent direct

action did so through a redefinition of each. To them, self-defense represented a direct means of combating disrespect—an assertion of self—while nonviolence represented a tactic of protest and social reform, independent from moral discipline or piety. By being willing to fight and showing it, they felt they might not have to. Two points bear stress here: first, the nonviolent ideal was just that—an ideal, something toward which to strive. In practice, nonviolence presented a number of problems easily solved by pragmatic remedies such as the practice of self-defense. The question for civil rights activists centered upon what could be gained by abnegating self-defense. Second, not all Afro-Americans shared the vision of a nonviolent world in which blacks and whites could come together to mend their broken past. The rhetoric of Malcolm X, and his adamance regarding self-defense, brought these two points into sharp focus, particularly during the period 1963-1964.

During this same period, the use of guns for self-protection by civil rights activists raised a question singularly important to all social movements—namely, whether or not the denial of basic civil and human rights legitimates the use of violence. Certainly by 1964, but also well before (indeed, since the initial stirrings of the struggle for black equality), the question of violence anchored all debate regarding what the course of resistance should be. It remains, in many respects, an unanswered question.

Self-defense, like nonviolence, had its own moral ascendancy. While not as superior as nonviolence in its claim to morality, self-defense fit within a Western tradition of natural law and constitutional acceptability. On the other hand, excusing the violent acts of the oppressed might have robbed these same individuals of the dignity they sought

through protest.[1] Here again, the distinction between revolutionary violence and self-defense assumes crucial importance. As one writer has observed:

> Sustained, massive social injustice produces revolutionists. This is a truism made luminous by men like Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. But just proclaiming himself a revolutionary doesn't win a man immunity from the consequences of violent nonsense.[2]

Accordingly, civil rights scholars must inquire, from a moral standpoint, as to the willingness of activists such as the Deacons or Black Panthers to exhaust every peaceful alternative open to them before taking up arms. Similarly, if one considers violence to be wrong or evil in any manifestation, then two "wrongs" (that is, oppression and violent response) cannot make a "right" (that is, liberation).

After 1964, self-defense became more and more of a communal concern, rather than an individual one, and armed groups raised certain complications that armed individuals did not. In 1965, there was no such legal concept as collective self-defense, but it did exist in reality, as the Deacons demonstrated; that is, collective self-defense, in the guise of citizens' patrols, represented a de facto expression of black self-determination. The very act of defending themselves and protecting their interests transformed ordinary men like Charles Sims, Robert Hicks, and Henry Austan into activists, as self-defense was becoming a vehicle for civil rights reform. Defending the black community in Bogalusa seemed to be the only recourse for the Deacons, confronted

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[1]James C. Dick, a philosopher, has fully explored the moral complications of violence by the oppressed; see Dick, Violence and Oppression (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 7.

[2]Norman Cousins, in Lincoln, Is Anybody Listening to Black America? (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 230.

with police personnel who were often indifferent to their plight and sometimes complicit in injustices directed against them.

In 1967, the Black Panthers not only witnessed the abuse of police privileges in Oakland but also perceived their own rights to self-defense to be infringed by law enforcement personnel. The Panthers, in effect, became a law unto themselves while stretching the concept of collective self-defense to its legal and jurisdictional extremes. Their actions made many Americans question whether rights ordinarily and justly belonging to individual citizens may be extended to ethnic groups as a whole, and whether in law as in fact there exists such a thing as collective self-defense.

The political postulations of the Panthers only further complicated their stand on self-defense. In their early years, the Panthers claimed that they did not arm as a group but only as individuals, exercising their constitutional right to bear arms. As their ideology evolved, they claimed to be an oppressed colony with the United States, to which they owed no allegiance. Thus, their guards, ostensibly armed for purposes of self-defense, also constituted a military corps, of sorts: a paramilitary army under direction of a Minister of Defense.

Because it is by definition an individual course of action, it was difficult before 1967 to discuss self-defense as a strategy for a social movement. The actions of Robert Williams, and of the Deacons, and particularly of the Black Panthers, all helped to transform self-defense from an individual prerogative into a socially conscious gesture. As a quintessential freedom, the right to self-defense encompassed qualities of natural,

civil, and human rights, and as such, represented a crucial dimension of any civil rights agenda, as some activists realized. The simple act of defending one's person in many ways came to symbolize the larger quest for Afro-American rights and racial equality. In defending oneself, one was helping to uplift the race.

In this sense self-defense took on aspects of communalism within Afro-American communities during this period; however, Robert Williams, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Ahmed Evans also illustrated the difficulties in transforming self-defense from a course of individual prerogative into a programmatic course of action. When activists began to organize around the concept of self-defense, the threat of violence inherent in such an agenda eclipsed its own practicality, because few Americans--black or white--could distinguish between the violence of racial animosity and the necessary force of self-protection. At the time, only a few activists seemed to realize the falseness of the violent/nonviolent dichotomy, including Fred Brooks of SNCC, who said in 1967:

> Before, we went into the South with nothing but prayers and love, and they burned our churches down, they burned our houses down. But when people decided that they no longer would accept the philosophy of nonviolence but would begin to protect themselves, things changed. They stopped burning down our churches, they stopped harassing us, they stopped beating us because they knew that if they hit us we were gonna hit back. So I think as far as the technique goes, violence versus nonviolence--in fact, I don't even like to look at it like that, I like to look at it: nonviolence versus self-protection, and I think from that change, we benefited tremendously.[3]

Brooks shrewdly discerned the difference between self-defense and what others called "violence." A CORE worker, Mike Lesser, writing to a friend, described the arming of

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[3]Fred Brooks, interviewed by John Britton, November 29, 1967, Nashville, Tennessee, audiotape; Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

blacks in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana:

> But the really beautiful thing to see and be a part of is the movement—the spirit, the people, the courage, and the shotguns [emphasis added]. We hold instruction clinics in a Masonic Hall . . . two evenings a week, and if any hostile white folks should ever try to approach the place without warning they would find themselves faced by 15-20 high-powered, long-range shotguns . . . At first when we started going to the courthouse some of our people were beaten and threatened. Bust as soon as Negroes started carrying shotguns . . . the attacks stopped and haven't resumed . . . Incidentally, so you don't get the wrong idea, we are preaching nonviolence, but Ronnie Moore and I and the other workers can only preach nonviolence, and practice it. We cannot tell someone not to defend his property and the lives of his family, and let me tell you, those 15-20 shotguns guarding our meetings are very reassuring.[4]

Both Brooks and Lesser seemed to recognize and value the nuance between aggressive violence and the use of force in self-protection; however, many demonstrators had difficulty distinguishing between the finer points of self-defense and retributive violence. They refused to consider the use of force on a continuum, preferring instead the either-or choices of violence or nonviolence, Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, war or peace. Compounded by the insistent portrayal of nonviolence by many media sources as "passive resistance" and self-defense as "violence," the dichotomy of violence versus nonviolence became entrenched in civil rights lore.

Furthermore, armed self-defense presented a number of sticky problems—four, in particular, in addition to the seemingly glaring contradiction of the use of firearms by activists in a self-described "nonviolent movement." First, in certain situations, resorting to force in self-defense was gratuitous, shading into retribution, retaliation, and revenge. In their latter years, the Black Panthers exemplified this misappropriation of self-defense.

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[4]August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 263-264.

It is important to emphasize that why people own firearms is, at best, an imperfect indicator of how they actually use them.[5] Though the Panthers claimed they were defending themselves against racist police officers, at times their actions belied the requisite innocence necessary to the claim of self-defense. They acted not only from need but also from bravado, braggadocio, and anger.

The best defense, as the old football aphorism goes, is a good offense. It is far better, according to this line of reasoning, to keep someone from attacking in the first place than to stop him once he has started; therefore, strike first and strike hard. As attractive as this option may be, the obvious flaw in its logic is that such "defense" is no longer defense: it is an offensive precaution. From a legal standpoint, such action is hardly justifiable; therefore, the pre-emptive actions of the Panthers, and of Ahmed Evans, are highly questionable from a defensive standpoint. At best, Evans may be accused of defensive solicitation--at worst, cold-blooded ambush.

Second, claiming one carries a gun for self-protection does not preclude criminal intent, malevolence, or the intention of violence. A burglar might honestly claim to carry a gun for protection, even though he is committing a crime and "defending himself" against a frightened homeowner wielding a firearm. Accordingly, self-defense in many cases was an excuse rather than a justification. In the latter stages of the movement, concurrent with the burgeoning of Black Power, black militants often sanctified

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[5]As one British journalist has noted, "A marital quarrel can have a very speedy end indeed if both parties know that there is a loaded revolver 'to protect against burglars' in the top drawer of the bureau." Max Hastings, The Fire This Time: America's Year of Crisis (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1969), 125.

revolutionary war in terms of self-defense by treating violence as inclusive of every sort of social evil; that is, if poverty and malnutrition and unemployment and judicial inequity were "violent," then these things, by the revolutionaries' logic, could be reciprocally fought with violence. As one militant argued, "We have been assaulted by our environment."[6] Such a position neutralized any counter-arguments that held that violence was unjustifiable. Under these criteria, it was impossible for black militants to act aggressively: liberation "by any means necessary" was merely a defensive recourse. The history of the struggle for black equality put contemporary appeals for self-defense in their proper context. "You see, we've been backed into a corner for the last four hundred years," one Panther explained, "so anything we do now is defensive."[7]

This expanding conception of violence preordained the violent response of law enforcement personnel, desirous of order, who in turn expanded their own definition of violence to include the violence of rhetoric. In this way, merely talking about violence could get a black person killed; again, the Panthers are a demonstrative example. The vast majority of white Americans, and the police who served them, neither identified with nor sympathized with violent posturing. It was this trend, in fact—the move from self-defense toward a position of more aggressive violence—that contributed to the devolution of the movement in the late 1960's. With the introduction of violent rhetoric, whites could no longer support the movement, and black activists could not seem to articulate the distinctions between self-defense and violent revolution. The civil rights

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[6]Skolnick, The Politics of Protest, 116.

[7]Ibid.

movement could not coalesce around such theoretical inconsistencies. Without clarifying the relationship between nonviolence, self-defense, and revolution, those involved in this phase of the movement were doomed to fail.

It is quite plausible, thirdly, that the presence of weapons served not to deter, but to heighten tensions and nourish violence. Interrogating David Hilliard in a television interview for CBS's "Face the Nation" in 1969, Bernard Nossiter wondered if storing caches of firearms was not "an invitation for the police to take action."[8] Hilliard denied stockpiling guns. By carrying guns, the Panthers' critics argued, they put themselves in a position where sooner or later they would have to use them. When Henry David Thoreau wrote in his famous "Plea for Captain John Brown" in 1859 "the question is not about the weapon but the spirit in which you use it," he meant to imply that Brown's motives were respectable; however, his words might also serve as a failsafe for the motives of anyone who would carry a firearm. Guns equal power over life, and even when equipped with the best intentions, people who carry them often seem to invite conflict. Only assassins intend to kill, but they are not the only ones who do.[9]

Fourth, and finally, the security gained from carrying guns was quite possibly more illusory than real. A firearm offers a defensive chance only if it is carried

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[8]Nossiter, quoted in David Hilliard, This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993), 272.

[9]In discussing Bob Moses's appreciation for Albert Camus, Eric Burner captures the giddy lure of the gun when he writes that "violence in good causes has within it a capacity for oppression," and "within the rebel there lurks the oppressor." See Burner, And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 7.

everywhere a person goes, even inside one's home, and only if an adversary somehow squanders the advantage of surprise. It can be argued, as many pundits did in the late 1960's, that guns were more serviceable as rhetorical appendages than as tools of revolution, or even devices of self-protection. The defensive purpose of any handgun is to discourage criminal activity. Indeed, in the absence of legal order, the handgun may be the most immediate means of thwarting criminal activity; however, in a civilized society, physical security is a collective responsibility, not an individual one. Protesters did what they did to gain state protection that would preclude the need for carrying a gun in the first place. In other words, part of why the civil rights movement took place was to make "Negroes with guns" obsolete. Every American has the right to live without fear, and without relying upon firearms for security. As one scholar has noted, civilization is characterized by "the gradual perfection of respectful procedure for moral violence [i.e., self-defense]." It is "the formalizing of moral violence under rule of law."[10] The civil rights movement itself represented a step toward a more civilized United States.

But self-defense had a positive side, too, perhaps best exemplified by the Deacons for Defense and Justice in 1965-1966. Self-defense meant something else, apart from its own practicality or feasibility. It meant showing fight. Self-defense brought about a radical re-alignment in Afro-American thinking, causing—to borrow Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolution—a "paradigm shift" in black consciousness. Self-defense

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[10]Robert Ginsberg, "The Paradoxes of Violence, Moral Violence, and Nonviolence," in V.K. Kool, ed., Perspectives on Nonviolence (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990), 162.

can be an analog of self-reliance.[11] Within the black struggle for equality, it became an expression of self-determination. Whether armed black Southerners were safer than those who did not arm themselves seemed to matter less than whether they felt safer. Security was, more often than not, a state of mind, but self-defense was effective in a way violent political protest never could be, because the latter was all-too-successfully repressed. Violent expressions were simply illegal, beyond the pale of law and order, but self-defense, within the social and political matrices of American life, was both legal and justifiable, and it lent a sense of self-empowerment to those who employed it.

When whites subjected blacks to harsh, physical punishment, it often stemmed from some transgression in the region's unwritten code of etiquette: failing to yield the sidewalk, not averting one's eyes quickly enough or, in the case of Emmett Till, admiring a white woman. To be black and southern in the mid-twentieth century meant having to live in a state of constant watchfulness, if not fear. It meant being in constant awareness of racially defined prescriptions of behavior; however, the practice of self-defense in the 1950's and 1960's brought a new sensibility to these morés.

The true utility of self-defense reached beyond the mere need to protect one's person. Adopting a mindset of self-defense reflected an individual ultimatum, a kind of personal Maginot line, drawn in the sands of white southern contempt and hostility. It

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[11]As Preston K. Covey, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics at Carnegie Mellon University, has observed: "The actuarial success of armed self-defense is one matter; the residual moral value of having the personal responsibility and prerogative of armed self-defense is quite another." Covey, quoted in Clayton E. Cramer, For the Defense of Themselves and the State: The Original Intent and Judicial Interpretation of the Right to Bear Arms (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994), viii.

represented a quantum leap in the ability to define one's own space and identity and, when more than one black person decided on a course of self-defense, it represented a watershed in race relations. Deciding that one would fight back against racist intimidation meant an empowerment heretofore unknown among a people pestered by the lingering notions of self-doubt, reinforced by centuries of involuntary servitude.

At the heart of the issue of black self-defense was the issue of respect, or more accurately, disrespect. It addressed the refusal of whites to see Afro-Americans as individuals. Self-defense essentially represents an affirmation of self. As part of the civil rights struggle, it allowed black Southerners to reaffirm their own humanity in a social order that repeatedly effaced the self-worth and individuality of black people. Black Southerners were concerned not only with their status as American citizens with civil rights but also with their treatment as human beings with human rights. For example, blacks in the South had to struggle for the use of "courtesy titles" such as "sir," "ma'am," "mister," and "missus" in lieu of the more common (and often falsely familiar) "uncle" or "auntie." The disrespect implied in these latter terms represented one of many practices intended to reinforce the inferior status of Afro-Americans. In this sense, the quest for civil rights was part of a larger struggle for black equality, black freedom, and human dignity.

Accordingly, the greatest challenge facing black people in the civil rights movement might not have been white racism or indifferent politicians or violence, but what one observer called "the gnawing inbred suspicion that they really are unqualified to make important decisions for themselves and must depend, in the end, on the

benevolence of whites."[12] It was a time when even blacks, who so recently had been "coloreds" or "Negroes," were themselves barely getting used to being called black. W. E. B. Du Bois once illustrated this component of the black freedom struggle when he explained what made slavery so onerous. "It was in part psychological," he wrote,

> the enforced personal feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master; the standing with the hat in hand. It was the helplessness. It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual.[13]

Du Bois aptly captured the pain of deference to the white man's (and woman's) will, and his words spoke to the subservience that outlasted slavery and lived into the modern era.

If the need for self-defense grew out of the reality of being attacked—a danger that increased as the civil rights movement intensified—then the mentality of self-defense infused more than the immediate ability to defend oneself. As one observer described the feeling in Robert Williams' hometown in 1961, after Williams had promised to "meet violence with violence":

> The morale of the Negroes in Union County is high. They carry themselves with a dignity I have seen in no other southern community. Largely vanished are the slouching posture, the scratching head, and the indirect, mumbled speech that used to characterize the Negro male in the presence of whites. It is as if, in facing up to their enemies, they have finally confronted a terrible reality and found it not so terrible after all.[14]

Self-defense influenced multiple aspects of Afro-American culture. It affected how

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[12]Frank Millspaugh, "Black Power," Commonweal 84 n 18 (August 5, 1966), 502.

W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 8-9.

[14]Julian Mayfield, "Challenge to Negro Leadership: The Case of Robert Williams," Commentary 31 (April 1961): 297-305.

people carried themselves in public, talked to white employers, confronted authority; in short, it affected how they interacted with the majority culture. Self-defense engendered confidence and self-esteem as it negated fear. It gave people "the courage to talk back." For example, Williams recalled a college football player from Nashville named Leroy Wright who had come to Monroe to participate in demonstrations there. In an altercation outside a local drugstore, some "crackers," according to Williams, mistook Wright for a "pacifist nigger," and slapped him. Wright struck back. He was arrested and fined for assault. When he got out of jail, Wright came to Williams with his hand bandaged and sore and said:

> Man, let me tell you something . . . they put me in jail and it cost fifty dollars for hitting that cracker . . . but I never felt so good in all my life. I've been all over the South with these fellows [SNCC activists], and they've been beating my ass and putting cigarettes on me, and chains, and I have seen them hit girls, and this the first place I've been where you can hit a cracker . . . [M]an, I hit that cracker with all my might, and when I hit that cracker . . . I damn near broke my hand . . . but it felt so good to see that cracker fall on his knees and his teeth fall out . . . [M]an, you know what . . . I think you are right. I sure like Monroe.[15]

There had always been stereotypical "bad niggers": self-assured black men of folklore (such as Stagolee) and history (such as Nat Turner) who "brooked no shit" from anyone, including whites. But during this period this same sort of mentality—that no white man could lay a finger on you—began to infuse the racial consciousnesses of everyday men and women who were far from bad. Representing a sea change in black-white relations,

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[15]Williams, interviewed by James Mosby, July 22, 1970, transcript, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Civil Rights Documentation Project), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. James Forman has also described this incident. See Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 190.

the resurgence of self-defense did nothing short of re-ordering race relations in the United States. More than a physical act, self-defense was a frame of mind. As Carl Washington of Long Beach, California, expressed in 1968: "There's a place for the Rap Browns and the Stokely Carmichaels. They've instilled a lot of pride and dignity in a lot of Negroes--especially the young Negroes. These guys have given many Negroes the courage to talk back." [FOOTNOTE?]

In this respect, self-defense, like nonviolence, represented a critical dimension of the fight for civil rights. A mentality of self-defense infused the struggle for black equality: it went hand-in-hand with the spirit of civil rights protest. Indeed, nonviolence itself was a kind of collective self-defense. It offered the best means for black Southerners not only to advance their struggle for civil rights but also to preserve and sustain their own existence. If fists, knives, or guns represented self-protection on a personal level, then nonviolent direct action represented self-protection on a mutual level for black Americans living as a numerical minority in the United States. In this sense, nonviolence was neither a tactic nor a conviction, but a defensive response to white aggression.

This rediscovered appreciation among black Southerners for self-defense did not meet an enthusiastic reception from their white counterparts. Ironically, white Southerners have always exhibited a unique tolerance of, if not admiration for, violent behavior. In "Below the Smith and Wesson Line," a chapter from his book <u>One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture</u> (1982), John Shelton Reed has noted that, despite natural aversions to violence, some things are worth fighting for.

> There can be an exaggerated distaste for violence, it seems to me, which is as unwholesome in its own way as bloodlust. The pacifist merits our respect, but the coward does not. One says fighting is immoral (a defensible position, although we may disagree); the other say fighting is scary, or nasty, and nothing is worth fighting for, anyway. Whatever Southerners' faults in the matter (and they've usually been obvious), our people, black and white, have witnessed with some consistency and often at great cost to the belief that there are enemies who cannot or should not be appeased, conflicts that cannot or should not be negotiated, affronts that should not be ignored--in short, that there are things worth fighting for. We may disagree about what those things are, but I think we can use the reminder that they exist.[16]

By denying that violence is one way out of an unfavorable situation, rationalists fail to provide constructive channels for minimizing its effects.[17] As a white southerner attuned to what C. Vann Woodward has called "the burden of southern history," Reed would seemingly agree that civil rights fall into the category of "things worth fighting for." They represent safeguards of political power and social equality.

In the well-armed South, with its frontier heritage of self-reliance and extralegal conflict resolution, self-defense for blacks in effect meant carrying a gun: a practice representing a naturally reflexive response to the white gun culture. Perhaps Hartman Turnbow, a black sharecropper in the Mississippi Delta, explained the philosophy of self-defense best when he explained his cautious dealings with the white man. "Meet him with ever what he pose with," he told an interviewer. "If he pose with a smile, meet him with a smile, and if he pose with a gun, meet him with a gun."[18] Turnbow recognized the

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[16]John Shelton Reed, One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 153.

[17]Bruno Bettelheim, "Violence: A Neglected Mode of Behavior," in Shalom Endleman, ed., Violence in the Streets (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), 42.

[18]Turnbow, quoted in Howell Raines, My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil

prudent, if necessarily reactionary, relationship of self-defense to power.

Whether power represented a function of moral or physical strength during the civil rights era is still somewhat unclear. The answer to this question depended on whom one asked.[19] Dr. King would most likely have argued the former; Huey Newton, citing Mao Tse-Tung's famous quotation about political power growing from the barrel of a gun, probably would have argued the latter. King refused to be driven to a Machiavellian cynicism with regard to power. He envisioned it, at its best, as "the right use of strength." He equated nonviolence with power, and took faith in the notion that it could save not only black people but whites too.[20] "Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose," he wrote in 1967. "It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes."[21]

Undoubtedly, like most things in life, the answer to whether power is metaphysical or corporeal lay somewhere between the two extremes; that is, power most likely shares attributes of both physical and moral strength. As Frederick Douglass told an audience in New York in 1857:

> This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a

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Rights Movement in the Deep South (New York: Viking Penguin, 1977), 266.

[19]Hannah Arendt has carefully distinguished between "power," "strength," "force," "authority," and "violence," in her treatise On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969). She has also challenged the notion "that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power." See Arendt, On Violence, 35-56.

[20]Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here?, 59.

[21]Ibid, 37.

demand. It never did and it never will.[22]

How one viewed the manifestations of power in the world affected how one met an unjust adversary: with a prayer, or with a gun; by appealing to his conscience, or by appealing to his fear; with open arms, or firearms. Regardless, as Douglass recognized, the proof was less in how one did it than in the fact it was done at all.

Did self-defense prove effective in the struggle? The bottom line remains that few white supremacists were willing to die over whom they saw as a bunch of crazy, gun-wielding black men. Malcolm X recognized this fact. "Whites will never correct the problem [of the color line] on moral, legal, or ethical reasons," he told Peter Goldman in the backroom of Michaux's National African Memorial Bookstore, a Harlem landmark. "But they're realists enough to know that they don't want Negroes running around with rifles."[23] On the disadvantaged side of the South's racial divide, a significant proportion of blacks felt they had little to lose and everything to gain in arming themselves and preparing to defend themselves in the name of protecting their constitutional freedoms.

The fascinating tale of Robert Williams' exile and return to the United States concludes the story of civil rights and self-defense in a way nothing else can dramatize. His saga ends with a strange twist that not only encapsulates the importance of self-

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[22]John W. Blassingame, ed., The Frederick Douglass Papers: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 204.

[23]Malcolm X, quoted in Peter Goldman, The Death and Life of Malcolm X 2d. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 156.

defense in the struggle for black equality but also symbolically brings the civil rights movement full-circle to its humble beginnings in Montgomery, Alabama. While in exile, Robert Williams associated with Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Alberto Pineira, Blas Roca, and other Cuban governmental officials, all of whom tried to convince him that "the race issue is due to class oppression . . . rather than racial struggle."[24] Cuban officials argued that the only chance for black advancement was for black and white workers to unite across racial boundaries. But Williams continued to see the greatest threat as coming from the same working-class whites championed by Communist doctrine. In 1964, when an interviewer asked him if he "preached hate" like the Muslims, Williams replied: "Yes, I teach and advocate hate. I teach and advocate hatred of all forms of oppression, tyranny, and exploitation. I teach and advocate hatred of the haters. Why should we be required to love our enemies?"[25]

Williams continued to agitate from abroad, using radio transmissions from Havana ("Radio Free Dixie") and his monthly newsletter The Crusader to encourage Afro-Americans to fight white oppression actively. He also sought to clear his name. His rhetoric took on an increasingly revolutionary, Marxist tone.[26] Such rhetoric prompted the editor of The Charlotte Observer to decry Williams' "scurrilous propaganda" and

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[24]Testimony of Robert F. Williams, U. S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, Subcommittee on Internal Security, 91st Congress, Second Session, February 16, 1970 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 3-4, 12.

[25]Williams, "An Interview with Robert Williams," Marxist Leninist Quarterly 2 (1964): 1, 60.

[26]For example, see Williams, "USA: The Potential for a Minority Revolution," The Crusader 7 n 1 (August 1965): 1-8.

"anti-American diatribes of the rankest kind."[27]

After three years, Williams left Cuba for China. He had had his differences with the Communist Party in Cuba, which maintained that the race problem in the United States was strictly a class issue, and that once the class problem had been solved through a socialist administration, racism would be abolished. For these reasons, Cuban officials could not fully embrace black nationalism, which centered race rather than class. Believing racism encompassed "more than just a class struggle," Williams left Cuba on relatively sour terms with government officials there.[28]

He traveled extensively in the People's Republic of China in 1964. He met with China's top-ranking officials (including Chairman Mao Tse-Tung), and studied Chinese economic development.[29] Though he claimed no political affiliation, his enemies in the United States would associate him with communism in an attempt to tarnish his reputation further. One article in the New York Times emphasized the "lessons of discipline, commitment, and 'true militancy' he had learned in China." According to the article, he apparently "expressed much admiration for China's 'cultural revolution'."[30]

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[27]"Moment of Truth for Williams?," The Charlotte Observer (February 2, 1965); "Articles Concerning Williams, 1965" Folder, Box 4, Bentley Collection.

[28]Williams, "The Black Scholar Interviews: Robert F. Williams," The Black Scholar 1 (May 1970): 7, 5.

[29]See "Inside China: The Odyssey of Robert Williams," Muhammad Speaks (June 5, 1964): 11-15; see also William Worthy, "The Red Chinese American Negro," Esquire (October 1964): 132 ff.

[30]Thomas A. Johnson, "Militant Hopeful On Racial Justice," New York Times (September 15, 1969): 67.

But Williams, honoring anti-communist fervor in the United States, disavowed any association with the Communist Party. "I am not interested in promoting ideologies or philosophies. I am interested in justice and freedom . . . It is not a matter of socialism, or what they call socialism or communism."[31] He denied any formal affiliation with the Communist Party. "This movement that I led was not a political organization," he repeated. "It had no political affiliations whatsoever. It was a movement of people who resented oppression."[32] Forced into exile, Williams became an expatriate, decrying American imperialism at home and abroad. During these years, he was not only a fugitive, but also a patriot: throughout this trying time, he still considered the United States "home."

Williams became more notorious as a refugee than as a militant activist at home. During his exile, a number of domestic groups usurped his name and image to advance their own causes and to keep his alive in the United States. The Peace and Freedom Party suggested he run for President of the United States while in exile; he respectfully declined. He also served briefly as the honorary Prime Minister of the Provincial Government of the African-American Captive Nation, a short-lived separatist group advocating a separate nation within the U.S. for black Americans. While in Cuba, the Revolutionary Action Movement asked Williams to become its chairman; while in China, the Republic of New Africa did the same. Both titles were honorary, and Williams

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[31]Williams, quoted in Robert C. Maynard, "Williams Says Duty Called Him Back," Washington Post (September 15, 1969): 1, A4.

[32]Williams, Negroes With Guns, 119.

allowed both RAM and the RNA to use his name. Allowing these groups to use his name again put Williams on the radar screens of agencies such as the FBI, Justice Department, and CIA. Although he later resigned, and despite the fact that (according to his testimony) he was active neither in RAM nor the RNA, the government shadowed Williams' every move thereafter.[33]

RAM was a Detroit-based, self-styled fusion of the Nation of Islam and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that "favored" Williams and his notions of armed self-defense. Max Stanford of RAM called for a self-defense-oriented "National Youth Movement," or "Black Guard," to "protect the true interest of Black America" by "cleans[ing] itself of the Black Nation's enemies."[34] The group made a media splash in 1965 when it bungled plans to blow up the nation's most symbolic monuments, including the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell.

Like the Provincial Government of the African-American Captive Nation, the RNA sought to create a separate political state for blacks within the United States by occupying northern cities and the southern Black Belt. Strong neither in numbers nor in resources, the RNA came into existence on March 31, 1968, when over two hundred black people from all over the United States met at the Twenty-Grand Motel in Detroit to sign a "Declaration of Independence." Its leaders included, among others, Betty

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[33]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 10, 18, 29, 44-45. Williams claimed no affiliation; however, his papers collected at the Bentley Historical Library contain a number of items from his personal files related to both RAM and the RNA.

[34]Max Stanford, "Calling All Black People," undated pamphlet, published by the Black Liberation (RAM) Party, Box 3, "Republic of New Africa" Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Shabbazz and H. Rap Brown.[35]

Hoping to clear his name and tired of living in exile, Williams returned to the United States in 1969. He lived in Michigan and faced extradition to North Carolina. Williams testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, chaired by Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, after being subpoenaed by its "Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws." The subcommittee, with Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina presiding, grilled Williams for three days in February and March 1970. In an amazing exchange, the details of Williams' exile slowly emerged. Thurmond asked Williams a series of pointed questions. Hinting at treason, Thurmond asked: "Were you advocating or did you suggest that they [black Americans] initiate a revolution?" Williams responded:

> No. I advocated that they resist violence, racist violence and racist oppression, that they resist it with violence, but some people thought that I had advocated revolution, but the fact was that they did not read the pamphlets very well because I had always stipulated that I was for the support of the U.S. Constitution, that you would see if you read these all the way through from the very beginning that my complaint was because the Constitution was not being extended to us and that we should fight for the enforcement of the Constitution of the United States. And I also stated that what would happen, what could possibly happen in America, if these changes for justice and these changes for righteousness did not come about.[36]

When asked if he abetted communists "to conspire against the United States," he replied: "When I was in Cuba I was probably having more trouble out of the Communists than the

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[35]For more on the Republic of New Africa, see William L Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 144-149.

[36]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 9.

United States was having."[37] Exasperated, Thurmond again asked if Williams "had taken any steps to inspire or foster a black revolution in this country while you were within the country or without the country?"

> No. Not to inspire black revolution, but I did do everything I could to inspire black men to defend their homes, their women and children when there is a breakdown of law, and I always specified in everything I wrote and everything I said that this was the last resort when the law fails to protect our people, when the law fails to protect our women and children, and I hoped to inspire black men to defend themselves, their families, and to defend their communities against aggression, and this is what I advocated.[38]

To the exclusion of all other interests (including the Communist Party), Williams was totally absorbed with his own sense of mission during the proceedings. This self-involvement matched a pattern he had already established in dealing with the press and the government. He was loyal only to the cause of challenging white supremacy when and where he found it: beyond this immediate cause, he seemed oblivious to political ideology or social activism.

Through this process of dialectic exchange, a composite of Williams' beliefs gradually evolved. "I see self-determination not as just a separation of the races, but I see it as the right of a people to determine their own destiny," he explained. "I think people who are oppressed have a right to relieve themselves in whatever measure. I think it should be legal if possible, but if they can't do it legally I think it is the American way to do it with violence." Williams observed: "If I had been white in America I never would have been hounded and harassed and treated the way I have been treated. And I resent

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[37]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 11.

[38]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 12.

this. And there are some whites, whether they are in the law or on the outside, that just hate black people. And they hate me most of all. They hate me more . . . because I have resisted, and also because I have constantly advocated the enforcement of the Constitution."[39]

Williams was quick to associate gun owning with hunting and the outdoors. "I organized a charter group for the National Rifle Association there," he testified, "and we used to do quite a bit of shooting in the South . . . And also I did quite a bit of hunting, and now I am a licensed hunter in Michigan."[40] Williams evoked the nation's most revered gun club, the National Rifle Association, to show how his own gun ownership was more mainstream than marginal. He realized how threatening black gun ownership remained to the white public, and respected the power of the committee to persecute him further. He hoped to impress them as a red-blooded American.[41]

During the Senate hearings, Williams fell back on his two primary beliefs: first, that a double standard existed in the United States with regard to self-defense, and second, that white supremacy was the prime catalyst for this double standard. He retreated from the embittered pronouncements he had made abroad, fearing legal reprisals from the committee. Instead, he reiterated those ideas which he had clung to all along,

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[39]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 83, 84, 89.

[40]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 76.

[41]In an interview published in the Marxist Leninist Quarterly, Williams drew parallels between his bearing arms and soldiers' bearing arms while fighting for the United States in Vietnam. See "Interview with Robert Williams," Marxist Leninist Quarterly 2 n 1 (1964), 53.

hammering home the notions of self-defense and constitutional rights.

While the Senate hearings did not break his spirit, they certainly deflated Williams' defiance. Afterward, he shifted his energies in different directions. He took a position as an expert on Chinese-American relations at the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Michigan. Shortly thereafter, a book about Williams went to print. Williams had had a falling out with his ghostwriter, Robert C. Cohen, after the recording of forty-six hours of interviews taped while in exile. Cohen had power of attorney over the book, and proceeded with plans to publish the autobiography with Bantam Books while Williams was out of the country. According to Williams, Cohen failed to get the book out on schedule (upon Williams' return to the United States in 1969); therefore, Williams repudiated their agreement. At the time of the Senate Judiciary hearings, he had received no royalties (agreed at eight cents per copy) for the book.[42] The book, entitled Black Crusader (1973), essentially became an unauthorized biography.

Williams served as a research associate in the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan from 1970 to 1971. Drawing from his first-hand experience in China, he advised Allen Whiting, a political scientist who in turn advised Henry Kissinger shortly before Kissinger's first trip to China. He also served as director of the Detroit East Side Citizens Against Drug Abuse Clinic. Klan members marched in Monroe in 1972, when the Grand Dragon, Virgil Lee Griffin, said they wanted "to bring that nigger Robert Williams back so we can hang him."[43] Williams returned briefly to

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[42]U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearings, 24-28.

[43]Griffin, quoted in Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) newsletter, Feb.

North Carolina in December, 1975, after Governer William Milliken of Michigan extradited him to face the 1961 kidnapping charges; by then, the state of North Carolina had lost interest and dropped all charges against him. He resided in Baldwin, Michigan, until his death on October 15, 1996, at the age of 71.[44] Rosa Parks delivered the eulogy at his funeral, and a tribute at Wayne State University honored him on November 1. Enjoying a final homecoming, Williams had returned to Monroe to lead a parade in 1995, thirty-four years after being forced to leave.[45]

To someone not attuned to the seminal importance of self-defense in the struggle for black equality, Rosa Parks' eulogy of Robert Williams would seem to be the most discordant note in the final coda of the civil rights movement. Here, after all, was the paragon of the civil rights movement—a woman who had come to symbolize nonviolence itself—eulogizing a man who had come to symbolize violence in racial matters. But Rosa Parks, unbeknownst to many, had never wholeheartedly endorsed nonviolence, and the solidarity she felt with Williams represented a kind of quiet assurance in the power of self-defense.

It was plain to anyone who bothered to read her autobiography. "We always felt that if you talked violently and said what you would do if they [aggressors] did something

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4, 1972, Box 3, Miscellenea Folder 1, Robert F. Williams Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

[44]See "Robert F. Willliams, 71, Civil Rights Leader and Revolutionary [obituary]," New York Times (October 19, 1996): 52.

[45]"Community Gives Rights Activist Hero's Welcome," The Charlotte Observer (August 20, 1995), 1B, 4B.

to you, that did more good than nonviolence," she explained. "Most of the black people in Montgomery had similar feelings . . . To this day I am not an absolute supporter of nonviolence in all situations."[46] In recounting her famous arrest, she included a most telling remembrance, which reveals her thoughts on self-defense. Thirty-seven years after the bus driver instructed her to give up her seat and "make it light on yourself," she remembered:

> I could not see how standing up was going to "make it light" for me. The more we gave in and complied, the worse they treated us.
>
> I thought back to the time when I used to sit up all night and didn't sleep, and my grandfather would have his gun right by the fireplace, or if he had his one-horse wagon going anywhere, he always had his gun in the back of the wagon. People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.
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> The driver of the bus saw me still sitting there, and he asked was I going to stand up. I said, "No." He said, "Well, I'm going to have you arrested." Then I said, "You may do that."[47]

Mrs. Parks included the seemingly random remembrance of her grandfather's gun in her recollection of her arrest because, in her mind, civil rights and self-defense were indistinguishable. In considering her own activism, she could not help but think of her grandfather and his preparedness to defend himself and his family. "Dr. King used to say that black people should receive brutality with love, and I believed that was a goal to work for," she stated. "But I couldn't reach that point in my mind at all, even though I

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[46]Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, Rosa Parks: My Story (New York: Dial Books, 1992), 174-175.

[47]Ibid, 115-116.

know that the strategy Dr. King used probably was the better one for the masses of people in Montgomery than trying to retaliate without any weapons or ammunition."[48]

[48]Ibid, 178.

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