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If We Must Die:

Armed Self-Defense during the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1967

by

Martin Palomo

November 25, 2018

History 91: Senior Thesis

Abstract

This paper looks over the Civil Rights Movement between 1954 and 1967 and analyzes the role that armed self-defense played during this period. By looking at the violence that erupted following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court Case, it becomes evident that African Americans, both men and women, used arms to protect their communities while simultaneously challenging Jim Crow through nonviolent civil disobedience. By the mid-1960s, armed self-defense groups, which had typically been small and informal, began to evolve into more organized paramilitary groups that defended nonviolent protesters and openly challenged white violence.

Introduction

On January 30, 1956, the home of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama had been bombed. Following this terrorist attack on his home, Dr. King applied for a permit to carry a concealed weapon at the sheriff's office. Although he had been denied the permit, Dr. King still kept firearms in his home. During his first visit to King's home, journalist William Worth almost sat on two pistols while attempting to rest in an armchair. Accompanied by nonviolent activist Bayard Rustin, Worth was warned about the pistols on the chair. "Bill, wait, wait! Couple of guns on that chair! You don't want to shoot yourself." After nearly witnessing Worth shoot himself, Rustin questioned Dr. King on his possession of the two firearms. Dr. King succinctly responded: "Just for self-defense." This episode of armed self-defense was not an isolated event. In fact, Dr. King was in possession of more firearms. Fellow activist and advisor Glenn Smiley, who had provided counsel to Dr. King during the Montgomery bus boycott, described Dr. King's home as an arsenal. Guns were also wielded by fellow neighbors who took it upon themselves to defend Dr. King's home and family. In truth, there were few black leaders who declined armed protection from within the black community. Dr. King was no exception.[1] Commenting on the prevalence of armed self-defense during the Civil Rights movement, Hosea Williams, Dr. King's top aid, had stated that "nonviolence as a way of life was just as foreign to blacks as flying a space capsule would be to a roach."[2]

In this paper, I will explore armed self-defense and the role that it played in the Civil Rights movement. I will begin by outlining the history of black self-defense prior to the Civil Rights movement and explain how white violence pushed African Americans to take up arms to defend

[1] Charles E Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 7.
[2] Simon Wendt, Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights, (Gainesville: University Pr Of Florida, 2010), 3.

themselves during the 1950s. In addition, I will explain how the existing literature discusses the Civil Rights movement and armed self-defense and expand on it by identifying the role of gender in the struggle for black freedom. Lastly, I will discuss how armed self-defense in the 1950s transformed from informal individual acts of resistance into organizational efforts to defend communities and push back against white violence by the mid-1960s.

The characterization of the Civil Rights movement as a movement of pacifists is inaccurate. Many organizations and activists who practiced non-violence acknowledged the right to self-defense and many Southern African Americans did actively defend themselves and non-violent activists. The Civil Rights movement was largely a success in part due to the incorporation of armed self-defense in nonviolent activism that deterred white racists from attacking black communities. In many instances, armed self-defense was informal and typically involved one person or a small group. As the movement progressed, black southerners began to evolve their armed defense efforts into more coordinated organizations that challenged white violence and pressured the federal government to enforce civil rights legislation in local and state communities. Black women throughout the Civil Rights movement also openly challenged nonviolent civil rights organizations to adopt armed self-defense, advocated on behalf of activists who adopted armed self-defense, and on many occasions practiced self-defense themselves. While *Brown v. Board of Education* and civil rights legislation during the 1960s was a victory for the movement, the victory was largely symbolic given that Southern states refused to abide by these changes and the federal government failed to enforce this legislation. The collective effort of nonviolent activists and armed black communities provided the momentum that ensured that civil rights legislation was faithfully applied. Without armed self-defense, many black communities and civil rights activists

would have been left exposed to the wave of white terror that plagued the United States following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case.

Armed Self-Defense before the Civil Rights Movement

Dr. King's response to violence was not out of the ordinary. While Dr. King would later in his activist career come to regret his relationship with guns, he understood that his decision to devote his life to pacifism was not in conflict with other people's right to self-defense. He demonstrated this when he maintained his support for the Deacons for Defense when other sectors of the nonviolence movement disregarded its organizing as an embarrassment to the cause of black liberation. The Deacons of Defense and Justice was a private armed organization of black men who advocated for gun rights while defending civil rights activists. Dr. King's view of the Deacons for Defense, according to fellow activist Andrew Young, was that "you can never fault a man for protecting his home and his wife. He saw the Deacons as defending their homes and their wives and children. Martin said he would never himself resort to violence even in self-defense, but he would not demand that of others."[3] Dr. King understood the desire to seek security and the potential that self-defense provided black communities for obtaining security. Dr. King's and the Deacons for Defense and Justice's relationship with guns are part of larger history of black armed self-defense, which has continually been applied in response to white violence dating back to the days of American colonial slavery.

The first written call for self-defense in black history can be traced to David Walker. Walker was the son of a black slave and a free black woman born in North Carolina in 1785. While he inherited his mother's free status, Walker still held a deep hatred towards slavery. In 1830, Walker issued a call for self-defense in his pamphlet *Appeal*, where he declared that armed self-

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[3] B. K. Marcus, *ARMED AND BLACK: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SELF –DEFENSE*, (Freeman, Summer, 2015, 32-37), 35.

defense is the only way to attain freedom.[4] Frederick Douglass shared Walker's view on armed-self-defense. An escaped slave and arguably the most influential black leader of the 19th century, Douglass was at odds with his white abolitionist supporters who preached pacifism. He would refute white pacifism by suggesting that a good revolver was the black man's best response to slave catchers. Harriet Tubman also lived up to this rich tradition of armed self-defense. She would offer escaped slaves armed protection as she led them towards freedom. Ironically, Tubman provided armed protection to slaves while working with Quakers and pacifist abolitionists.[5]

As demonstrated by Harriet Tubman, calls for self-defense were not exclusive to men. Female slaves relied heavily on self-defense since they were most vulnerable to sexual assault by their masters. Since their men could not protect them and due to the lack of access to the justice system, black women would adopt self-defense which would come to define black womanhood under slavery. In Arkansas, there was a case where an overseer made an example of a black slave named Lucy by whipping her. Her son recalled that Lucy "jumped on him and like to tore him up." Lucy was eventually sold after stories surfaced of her resistance.[6]

Instances of self-defense were also not exclusive to resistance against slavery nor was it only exercised in the South. In the early 20th century, black New Yorkers living in Harlem were plagued with white civilian violence and police brutality. The black experience in New York consisted of high rents and segregated housing, which pushed communities to relocate out of densely populated black areas. Attempts to move out of black areas were met with violence from territorial whites that felt that their living spaces were being invaded. Irish gangs and the white

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[4] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 11.

[5] B. K. Marcus, *ARMED AND BLACK: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SELF –DEFENSE*, (Freeman, Summer, 2015, 32-37), 36.

[6] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 11.

community battled against black encroachment into their neighborhoods. This racial violence was made even more deadly by a repressive police force that constantly targeted and abused black residents. Under the guise of law and order, police officers routinely beat black New Yorkers who were detained with some even being shot during arrest attempts. Fueled by these daily exposures to racial violence, black New Yorkers armed themselves. By arming themselves, black New Yorkers were challenging the constant threat of racial violence, which were exacerbated by the failure of the police to protect the local black communities. It was clear during these violent interactions with white citizens that police officers were complicit by cooperating with the white mobs.[7]

Civil rights organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), also spent a significant amount of time and resources to expand second amendment rights to African Americans.[8] This is not very surprising given that second amendment rights are closely associated with American-ness. For African Americans, self-defense was an essential part of the struggle for citizenship.[9] W.E.B. Du Bois, a cofounder of the NAACP, shared the view that self-defense is an important tool for the black community to address racial violence. In 1909, he wrote in response to the white race riots in the South: "I bought a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and two dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot. If a white mob had stepped on the campus where I lived I would without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass."[10] In the years leading up to the Civil Rights movement, defense groups formed consisting of black

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[7] Shannon King, *Ready to Shoot and Do Shoot: Black Working-Class Self-Defense and Community Politics in Harlem, New York, during the 1920s*, (Journal of Urban History Vol 37, Issue 5, pp. 757 – 774 First Published August 8, 2011), 761.
[8] B. K. Marcus, *ARMED AND BLACK: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SELF –DEFENSE*, (Freeman, Summer, 2015, 32-37), 36.
[9] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 3.
[10] B. K. Marcus, *ARMED AND BLACK: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SELF –DEFENSE*, (Freeman, Summer, 2015, 32-37), 36.

veterans returning from World War II and the Korean War. The struggle for self-defense was also a struggle over gender identity where black men would reclaim their manhood by protecting their communities.[11] This does not invalidate instances of black women who also engaged in self-defense. For example, voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, who advised black activists to confront white rage with compassion, described that the only reason she survived against violent white racists was due to her shotgun. "I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamites on my porch won't write his mama again."[12]

In many cases, black Americans were unable to defend themselves. This was particularly true during times of slavery. The case of Lucy whipping the overseer was not very common. Self-defense is heavily racialized in the United States. Historically, white Americans have a right to defend themselves while black people do not.[13] This was true when Lucy attacked the overseer and it was true when Dr. King was denied his gun permit. Asserting the right to defend themselves was asserting the right to full citizenship. The role of armed self-defense has been integral in the struggle for civil rights and this trend continued into the Civil Rights movement. The purpose for highlighting the historical application of armed self-defense in the struggle for black liberation is due to the fact that it is largely ignored, primarily during the Civil Rights movement. In fact, I would go as far as to argue that black armed self-defense, when it is not ignored, is denounced, condemned, and delegitimized as part of the black freedom struggle. It is important to revisit the

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[11] Simon Wendt, Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights, (Gainesville: University Pr Of Florida, 2010), 3.
[12] B. K. Marcus, *ARMED AND BLACK: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SELF –DEFENSE*, (Freeman, Summer, 2015, 32-37), 35.
[13] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 11.

Civil Rights movement and acknowledge the important role that armed self-defense played in the successes of the movement, particularly in local struggles for security and civil rights.

Historians have also largely overlooked armed self-defense during the civil rights movement. Typically, armed black communities are only associated with the emergence of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s. To begin addressing why historians have overlooked the role of guns during the late 1950s and early 1960s, it helps to look at what civil rights literature has said thus far and explore how the literature has evolved since the civil rights movement. Steven Lawson broke down the scholarship on the movement into three distinct generations. The first generation of work written about the Civil Rights movement focused primarily on the movement as a national phenomenon where judicial and legislative victories were achieved. This approach can be dubbed the top-down approach, where victories and events are tracked and prioritized over grassroots efforts. This is very different from the second generation of work on the Civil Rights movement where local communities and grassroots organizing became the main approach to looking at the movement. The shift from the first- generation interpretation of the Civil Rights movement to the second generation occurred in the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s.

The third generation of work occurred in the 1990s and it prioritized interactions between "the local and the national, the social and political".[14] It is important to note that the parameters of the third generation is fairly vague since Steven Lawson's review of the Civil Rights movement historiography was in 1991 when the third generation of scholarship was beginning to emerge.[15] Building off of Lawson's overview of the Civil Rights movement, the third generation simply looked at the body of work produced by the second generation and incorporated insights on how

[14] Charles M. Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 414.
[15] Ibid, 413.

the national and local movements influenced each other while also trying to identify how the political and social climate of the movement influenced the historical actors and their decisions. While Lawson did not provide a very comprehensive understanding of the third generation, his work is an important place to begin exploring the Civil Rights movement literature and serves as a good framework to examine why incidents of black armed resistance during the movement are often ignored and replaced with an interpretation that characterizes the movement as completely nonviolent.

Given how instances of black armed resistance tended to occur on the grassroots level during the Civil Rights movement, it is easy to see how the first generation's top-down approach actively ignored black armed self-defense completely since it does not prioritize grassroots efforts. However, the second generation also failed to address armed self-defense despite a stronger focus on grassroots efforts. Literature on armed self-defense does not begin being produced until the later portion of the 1990s and continues into the 2000s. One reason for the second generation's failure to discuss armed self-defense is due to civil rights scholars' tendency to divide the Civil Rights movement into the pre-1965 phase and the post-1965 phase. The pre-1965 phase tends to be described in terms of nonviolence while the post-1965 phase is described in terms of violence. The transition from nonviolence to violence is explained by the appearance of nonviolent activists who grew disillusioned and adopted more militant approaches to achieve equal rights.[16] To make matters worse, when discussing non-violence in the pre-1965 phase the conversation is King-centric. The King-centric scholarly works tend to be the most visible and produce an image of the Civil Rights movement that is not consistent with reality. In fact, this emphasis on Dr. King creates a narrative that embraces the idea that King was the Civil Rights movement; he was viewed as the

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[16] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 3.

critical part of the movement, led it, and it ended when either legislation was achieved or when King became a martyr.[17]

By viewing the Civil Rights movement as either nonviolent or violent and focusing primarily on Dr. King when discussing nonviolence, there is a lost opportunity to explore human agency in the Civil Rights movement. This pre/post-1965 approach overestimates the national consensus about the goals of the movement and frames radicalness as irrational.[18] An example of this is how civil rights literature on Rosa Parks describes that she more openly discussed support for militancy in the late 1960s. However, she had already been engaging with the idea of armed self-defense even prior to 1965. She had a connection and deep respect for fellow NAACP member Robert F. Williams whose advocacy of armed self-defense conflicted with the NAACP's position on how to best conduct civil rights activism. The Rosa Parks example helps demonstrate that clearly there was no tradition of pure non-violence in the Civil Rights movement. Nonviolence and armed self-defense coexisted during the Civil Rights movement. In addition, there is no clear year when the non-violent movement became a violent movement.[19] Therefore, using 1965 as the year that the movement changed is absurd since it has already been established that at no point was there any national consensus that the Civil Rights struggle was completely non-violent.

The literature that does exist on armed self-defense tends to go in many different directions. In some of the literature, armed self-defense during the Civil Rights movement is described as an expression of American-ness where it was practiced to make a point that African Americans have a right to bear arms like any other American citizen.[20] Through this perspective, armed self-defense

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[17] Charles M. Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 418.
[18] Ibid, 421.
[19] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 4.
[20] Ibid, 6.

was used to gain civil liberties. In addition, many scholars make it very clear that armed self-defense has existed way before the Civil Rights movement and that armed self-defense is closely tied to the black tradition in America dating back to the antebellum period and even prior to this as evidence by David Walker's *Appeal* in 1829 to people of color to resist.[21] The literature on this subject also discusses extensively the climate of white terrorism that fueled instances of armed self-defense and how armed self-defense as a tactic of self-preservation also became tactic for long-term fighting against American racism. Local studies on the subject describe the role of black veterans returning from World War II to fight racism at home, the divide between young non-violent activists and older "non-nonviolent" black Americans who took it upon themselves to defend the young student practioners of non-violence from what could only be described as an American blitzkrieg, and the fact that many armed black struggles were waged on the local level in the absence of state protection from white violent with a fair amount of successes.[22]

How nonviolence and violence coexisted during the Civil Rights movement varied and the literature on this relationship tends to emphasize different approaches with no clear dominating approach. Some activists practiced non-violence as a way of life while others used it as a tactic. Some practiced non-violence while believing in armed self-defense. While others in primarily rural Southern areas tended to view non-violence as a self-defeating strategy against white terrorism. The movement was always debating what was the best way to achieve its goals and, more importantly, how do we best protect ourselves. The role of armed self-defense occurs both in discussions and practice. It happens on the individual level and it also manifested in the form of paramilitary groups. The best example of this is the Deacons of Defense, which organized in

[21] Chana Kai Lee, *Guns, Death, and Better Tomorrows: New Work on Black Militancy*, (American Quarterly 67, no. 2 (06, 2015): 517-528,543).
[22] Ibid.

Jonesboro, Louisiana to protect civil rights activists from white mobs in 1964. They also clashed with white mobs and police forces during this time. The literature also tends to emphasize a lot the role of figures in the movement, particularly Robert F. Williams since he played a huge role in the debate of armed self-defense. Lastly, the literature tends to sometimes touch upon armed self-defense as a practice in masculinity.[23]

Expanding on the existing literature, I will try to outline the context that forced African Americans to adopt armed self-defense, how armed self-defense began to change by the late 1960s, and the generally forgotten role of women in the debates of armed self-defense. I agree with many scholars that the Civil Rights movement succeeded in large part due to armed self-defense. While many scholars address masculinity as a reason for black communities to arm themselves, they neglect to incorporate the role of black women in promoting armed self-defense and, in many instances, arming themselves. Some authors cite the lack of writings from black women during the movement as reason for the gap in historical coverage.[24] However, I will try to address this gap by compiling examples of women who took up arms to defend themselves from violence and pull from writings of women who did express the need for armed self-defense in the Civil Rights movement. While it may not be a very comprehensive account of the role of black women in the armed defense movement, it will at the very least acknowledge that black women played a role in the success of the Civil Rights movement that is not limited to their involvement in the nonviolence activism only.

The Hate that Bred Resistance

[23] Ibid.

[24] Charles E. Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 12.

On September 2, 1957, thirty four year old African American Edward Judge Aaron walked with his wife along a country road when he was attacked by Klansmen in Union Springs, Alabama. Known among the local community as a "white folks' nigger," Aaron was berated by the Klansmen before being pistol-whipped to the ground. The Klansmen continued shouting at Aaron as one of them pulled his pants off. Concluding their vicious attack on Aaron, they pulled a razor blade and proceeded to grab Aaron's scrotum and sever his testicles.[25] In that same year, Klansmen in Montgomery, Alabama randomly stopped Willie Edwards accusing him of being sexually involved with a white women. Their information was nothing more than an unsubstantiated rumor, but it was enough for the Klansmen to force Edwards to the edge of a bridge where he was forced to jump to his death.[26] It is important not to downplay the violence that African Americans faced during the Civil Rights movement. While many instances of violence involved vigilante white terrorism, the violence experienced by black communities took many forms. The two cases above demonstrate random attacks fueled by racist fears of the black rapist that emerged from the Reconstruction Era. However, local governments and the federal government contributed greatly to this violence through police brutality and FBI surveillance.

Sexual violence during the Civil Rights movement, particularly towards black women, also served as a catalyst for many activists' radicalization. On May 5, 1959, Mary Ruth Reed, a pregnant black sharecropper, testified in court that a white mechanic attempted to rape her in front of her five children. Trying to escape the assault, she picked up her youngest child and ran across a field. The white mechanic, Lewis Medlin, proceeded to beat Reed until a neighbor heard her screams and called the police. Medlin's lawyer defended his client by stating that Medlin was

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[25] Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 121.
[26] Ibid, 122.

drunk and "trying to have a little fun". He also compared Reed to Medlin's wife and concluded that he would never dare rape Reed since his wife was "God's greatest gift". Within ten minutes, the jury broke into deliberation and declared a not guilty verdict.[27] Local black women were outraged and directed that outrage towards civil rights activist Robert F. Williams for preventing them from going to Medlin's house and gunning it down. Robert. F Williams, in turn, directed his outrage at the judicial system. "We cannot rely on the law. We got no justice under the present system. If we feel that injustice is done, we must right then and there on the spot be prepared to inflict punishment on these people. If it's necessary to stop lynching with lynching then we must willing to resort to this method."[28]

In the context of the Reed case, there were two distinct grievances that led to the group of black women and Williams to turn towards violence as a method for addressing sexual violence. The first grievance was with the attempted rape of Mary Ruth Reed. The black women accompanying Williams to the court were already willing to engage in violence even before the verdict was released. They were outraged at the rape and wanted to use violence to punish and deter future sexual violence. The second grievance was with the justice system itself, which Robert F. Williams expressed through his lynching comment following the verdict. The Reed case demonstrates how African Americans were being radicalized both by the violence they faced and the failure of the justice system to protect them from that violence.

The Reed case was not the first exposure to violence that Robert F. Williams had been exposed to nor would it be the last. By the time of the Reed case, Williams had already established himself as the president of the NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina. He was an outlier in

[27] Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 142.
[28] Ibid, 143.

the NAACP since he had adopted and practiced a doctrine of armed self-defense. While Williams respected young activists who practiced nonviolence to appeal to the moral conscience of white supremacists, he ultimately believed that nonviolence emboldened racists to use violence. This position was informed by his experience working with nonviolent Freedom Riders, who went to Monroe in 1961 to assist him and local activists in pushing for a ten point program that would expand equal rights to African Americans particularly in employment.[29] The Freedom Riders believed that the reason that the ten-point program had failed was due to Williams' militant stance. Within days of making this critique, the Freedom Riders were beaten and arrested by the police, berated by the local white crowd, and beaten by white mobs. By the fifth day, a white Freedom Rider was shot in the stomach by a high powered air rifle while standing in front of the police.[30]

The FBI also posed an obstacle to equality. In some instances, the FBI did little to prevent violence. In the context of Monroe, the Freedom Riders would call the FBI each time they were planning on going to a picket line requesting protection. The FBI would reply to the request with a confirmation, yet they would never show up; this left the nonviolent protesters exposed to a tempest of violence both from local white mobs and police forces.[31] In other stances, the FBI played an active role in the violence by systematically targeting civil rights leaders. Robert Williams was one of the civil rights leaders that the FBI was surveilling especially after 1961 when Williams had to flee to Cuba due to the riot that erupted in Monroe in 1961. He would remain in exile following a federal warrant charging him for the crime of kidnaping.[32][33]

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[29] Robert F. Williams, Negroes with Guns, (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), 39.
[30] Ibid, 43.
[31] Ibid, 45.
[32] "Radio Free Dixie Broadcast Typescripts, May 01, 1965 - Jun 30, 1965." Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 1, Series 7: "Radio Free Dixie" Broadcasts, 1962-1966. From Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams, (accessed September 16, 2018).
[33] "Robert F. Williams Chronological Files Jan 01, 1965- Dec 31, 1996." Federal Bureau of Investigation. Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 2, Series 4: Government Files, 1951-1981,

It is important to note that during 1961 Monroe became a warzone. As violence erupted following the arrival of the nonviolent Freedom Riders, the local black community in Monroe began to arm themselves in order to defend their community from white mobs accompanied by local police that began to fire upon black residents. During this white siege, planes flew over black communities threatening to bomb homes. It was unclear whether the planes belonged to the Klan or the local Sherriff's office. However, that did not stop fifteen armed black men from opening fire. During this terror campaign, a local white couple known as Mr. and Mrs. Stegall drove through a black community. Known for their racist banner a day earlier that read "Open Season on Coons," the Segalls were removed from their car by armed black men and taken to Robert Williams. Acknowledging that the crowd was prepared to execute them, Williams offered refuge for the white couple, which they would later report as a kidnapping.[34] Williams would later clarify that he fled Monroe due to the violence in Monroe and due to his own efforts to report the events in Monroe to the world.[35] Yet he would remain in exile in Cuba for several years due to his indictment. During his exile, the FBI would continue to report on him in an effort to subvert his activism and calls for self-defense.[36]

The violence that engulfed black communities during the Civil Rights movement radicalized many black activists. While lynchings were a common form of violence, sexual violence was also used quite often particularly towards black women. It is important to note however that sexual violence was also used against men as demonstrated by the castration of

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Subseries 2: FBI Files, Chronological. From Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams.

[34] Robert F. Williams, Negroes with Guns, (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), 49.

[35] Ibid, 51.

[36] "Robert F. Williams Chronological Files Jan 01, 1965- Dec 31, 1996." Federal Bureau of Investigation. Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 2, Series 4: Government Files, 1951-1981, Subseries 2: FBI Files, Chronological. From Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams.

Edward Judge Aaron. In other stances the threat of violence was enough to push nonviolent activists to adopt self-defense doctrine in their activism. In addition, violence was not always spontaneous. While there were many instances of random Klan sieges and white mobs attacking black communities, there were also coordinated attacks and terror campaigns by local police departments and federal law enforcement agencies, primarily the FBI, which often allowed white violence to continue unimpeded and included instances where they actively participated in the attacks.

On Non-nonviolence

It is difficult to categorize black activists by whether they were nonviolent or militant. This is partly due to the fact that there were ongoing debates and discussions on the use of violence during the Civil Rights movement. It was not uncommon for people to identify as nonviolent and engage in armed self-defense. For example, take the case of Hartman Turnbow, who was a black farmer active with the civil rights movement in Mississippi. During a skirmish, night riders shot at him which he responded with gunfire. It is assumed that during the exchange of bullets Turnbow managed to kill one of the assailants. The morning after the shootout he explained his actions to the nonviolent organizers by stating that he wasn't being violent or nonviolent. "I wasn't being non-nonviolent. I was just protecting my family."[37] In addition, activists who did embrace armed resistance, like Robert F. Williams, saw merit in the nonviolent tactics of groups like SNCC. There was rarely any clear way to identify a person as being non-violent or violent.

There were also disagreements about whether to use violence to defend or to use violence as a form of retribution. The Reed case, for example, demonstrates this conflict. Recalling that the case was about the sexual assault of Mary Ruth Reed and how the white assailant evaded

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[37] Charles E. Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 138.

conviction, the local black women were ready to unleash a tempest of gunfire upon the rapist's home. By the end of the case, Robert Williams was also calling for retaliatory violence.[38] However, the use of firearms was much more cautious than what is expressed by more militant activists. In the South, for example, there was a recognition that without protection from the government there would be a need for armed self-defense to protect both people and property. Yet southern black residents who owned guns and black community leaders were aware that retaliatory violence would not be allowed. This is partly due to the recognition that using their guns could provoke a negative response that could usher in even more violence while also alienating potential allies.[39] There is a distinct difference between punitive violence and violence for self-defense; most black communities used their guns for self-defense.

Despite concerns that guns would not stop violence and could provoke more hostile responses from white terrorists, they were still owned by many black activists including activists that identified as nonviolent. Medgar Evers, field secretary for the NAACP, was known for traveling to Mississippi armed. In his trunk was a rifle while a pistol lay beside him on the front seat. The NAACP did not question Evers' arsenal since it was understood that he had them in order to keep him alive.[40] This example demonstrates how nonviolent activists understood the limits of nonviolence. While many activists acknowledged that nonviolence as an organizing tactic was effective in challenging Jim Crow policies, the practice of nonviolence did not translate well to everyday life. Many activists were willing to use nonviolence publicly and sacrifice themselves to desegregate public spaces, but very few were willing to use nonviolence away from media

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[38] Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 143.
[39] Charles E. Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 129.
[40] Ibid.

attention to address gunfire and bombings directed at their families and communities.[41] Thus, self-defense was not necessarily used as a tactic to address Jim Crow, but rather was used as a way for black communities to defend themselves and their property. For this reason, it was common for activists to practice self-defense to deter violent attacks while also purposefully using nonviolent civil disobedience to challenge Jim Crow segregation directly. Defending oneself from violence was reactive and for this reason very few activists during the Civil Rights movement would call themselves either violent or nonviolent.

Coordinating Self-Defense

In the South, many black people owned guns prior to the arrival of civil rights activists like SNCC and CORE. There was never a movement to arm black communities since it was already a tradition to own guns and for this reason many black homes already had access to guns. Despite white fears, there were never any instances of black militias rising up to directly destroy white supremacy using arms. Many black gun owners felt that it was counterproductive to use their guns to attack racist white communities.[42] Instances of African Americans using their guns to defend themselves occurred in times of immediate danger. If their bodies or their property were not in immediate danger, then armed self-defense was coordinated thoughtfully when it was evident that white violence was imminent.

Usually armed self-defense was practiced within moments of an attack occurring. Whenever white violence engulfed communities and threatened the lives of black people, the decision to respond with defensive gunfire had to be made in the moment. Robert Cooper, a Southern black resident living in Mississippi who supported SNCC and CORE activists, became

[41] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 51.
[42] Charles E. Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 139.

the next victim of Klan violence. At least, that's what the Klan assumed when they attacked his home in 1965. Cooper responded to the siege on his home with a hail of gunfire. Cooper later described what he was thinking when he decided to defend his home. "I felt that you're in your house, ain't botherin' nobody. The only thang you hunting is equal justice. An' they gonna sneak by at night, burn your house, or shoot in there. An' you gonna sit there and take all of it? You got to be a very li'l man with no guts at all."[43]

Guns were not only used to respond to violence, they were actively used to deter violence. On June 1961, the NAACP pushed to desegregate the local swimming pools in Monroe, North Carolina. This desegregation campaign led to a fierce response from the Ku Klux Klan which decided to close in on the student protesters. Robert F. Williams, who was present at the protest, began to see a confrontation forming between the protesters, the racist crowd, and the police forces present. In response, he began to brandish his .45 caliber automatic in front of the police and the crowd. His gesture allowed the protesters an opportunity to exit the protest unharmed. To truly appreciate the role that Williams' gun waving played in securing a safe retreat, a local elderly white man began to cry following the incident. Through his tears he stated," Goddamn, goddamn, what is this goddamn country coming to that niggers have got guns, the niggers are armed and the police can't even arrest them."[44]

To be clear, the pool incident was not a spur of the moment. Unlike Cooper's response to the siege on his home, Williams expected white violence at the pool protest. In fact, by the time the pool showdown occurred, Williams had already organized a black rifle club to promote the idea of armed self-defense.[45] Williams anticipated white terrorism at organizing events and

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[43] Ibid, 142.
[44] Christopher B. Strain, Pure Fire: Self-Defense As Activism in the Civil Rights Era, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 63.
[45] Ibid, 62.

expected guns to deter these violent attacks. In addition, he cited pacifism philosophy as the reason for white violence and classified calls for nonviolence as inherently racist. He elaborated this position in his writing: "White liberals who claim to abhor violence are pumping hundreds of thousands of dollars into Afro-American communities in a frantic effort to convert the restless black masses to pacifists. 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."[46] Williams' critique of nonviolence as ineffective in ending racism and his view that it invited white violence led to the establishment of a black rifle club to curb white violence. As demonstrated by the pool confrontation, the organized effort worked. The success of the pool standoff resonated with many black communities; shortly after the incident, Williams received support nationally and internationally and was even invited all around the United States to help establish rifle clubs in other black communities.[47]

It is important to note that William's efforts to organize around the idea of armed self-defense did not stop at establishing rifle clubs. In the summer of 1959, the NAACP moved to suspend Williams due to his stance on armed self-defense and given his recent comments which were interpreted as inciting violence. While Williams argued that his comments expressed self-defense, the leadership in the NAACP, including Martin Luther King, proceeded with their suspension.[48] Following his suspension, Williams devoted himself to pushing for the militant freedom struggle. Acknowledging that he could not access the white press or the black press, he established his own weekly newsletter, *The Crusader,* on July 26, 1959. *The Crusader* continued Williams' militant philosophy, which was cultivated from Southern radicalism and the black

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[46] Ibid, 64.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 190.

tradition of resistance, and applied that approach to provide commentary on American politics and international affairs typically associated with the growing decolonization movements abroad.[49]

As early as 1959, *the Crusader* touched on armed self-defense, decolonization, black pride, and economic liberation; subjects typically associated with the Black Power movement in the late 1960s were clearly being read and consumed during the Civil Rights movement in the late 1950s. During William's exile to Cuba in 1961 and later to China in 1965, *the Crusader* continued to write about Chinese exceptionalism, fascist America, racist Americans, the foolishness of white liberals, the out-of-touch bourgeoisie Afro-American leadership, and the need for armed self-defense. Shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X, *the Crusader* acknowledged his work in trying to unify the African American struggle "with our brothers in Latin America, Asia, and Africa."[50] Robert Williams would go on to elaborate on this point: "We steadfastly maintained, in the face of vigorous opposition from white liberals and the black bourgeoisie, that our struggle for black liberation in imperialist America was part and parcel of the international struggle."[51]

When Robert Williams explains the difference between his approach and Dr. King's approach, he explains that King had theological training while he had military training. "This is why I never criticized Dr. King very much on his tactics, just the fact that he said violence would demean a person and reduce him to the level of the enemy. Well, I didn't go along with that, but he was trained in a school of divinity so it would only be natural. My training had a military background."[52] Williams explicitly stated that his military training influenced his position on

[49] Ibid, 193.
[50] *The Crusader*. 1959-1969. Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 1, Series 6: The Crusader (Newsletter), 1959-1969, 1980-1982. From Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams (accessed September 14, 2018).
[51] Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 196.
[52] Ibid, 213.

armed self-defense; he was not alone. Jonesboro, Louisiana like Monroe, North Carolina had a local black community that was being targeted relentlessly by Klansmen, white mobs, and the local police. In 1964, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had a strong presence in Louisiana since the sit-ins of the early 1960s, was preparing a nonviolent direct action summer project. CORE, a civil rights group composed of mostly young activists, was committed to nonviolence.[53] By the summer of 1964, it was clear that the black community of Jonesboro was not entertaining CORE's strategy of nonviolence without the security of arms. The local black men took it upon themselves to guard the CORE activists that flooded their community that summer. Among them was military veteran Earnest Thomas who would play a vital role in forming the Deacons for Defense and Justice.[54]

Earnest Thomas served in the air force during the Korean War, where he was able to develop leadership skills and awareness of the power of coordinated collective action. He also developed a strong hatred of Jim Crow. While he respected the CORE activists, he regarded their approach to change as naïve. Thomas took it upon himself to protect the CORE activists from violence and quickly became the leader of his small defense group. His military training provided him with organizational skills and the ability to maintain order in the armed group; during the day, his defense group concealed their weapons, but at night they openly displayed their weapons to ward off Klan violence.[55] Keep in mind that during this time the Jonesboro black community had also established a black volunteer police squad that assisted the police with monitoring Klan violence. The Chief of Police, Adrian Peevy, provided support for the volunteer squad by

[53] Lance E. Hill, Deacons for Defense, (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 16.
[54] Ibid, 25.
[55] "Robert F. Williams, 1959-1969." Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Black Power Movement: Papers of the Revolutionary Action Movement, 1962-1996. Series 8, Files of Individuals, 1959-1998. From Personal Papers: Papers of RAM founder and National Field Chairman Muhammad Ahmad and of RAM members John H. Bracey Jr. and Ernie Allen Jr. 1962-1996, (accessed September 16, 2018).

providing them with police equipment and giving them the power to arrest whites.[56] However, on October 9, 1964, Chief Peevy disbanded the black squad due to pressure from the aggressive white community.[57] This left a power vacuum for the small defense groups defending the CORE activists. Feeling angered and betrayed by Chief Peevy, the local community began to look for a new way to reorganize. With the help of CORE activists who provided organizational structure, the Deacons for Defense and Justice officially became a political organization by November 1964.[58]

By 1964 self-defense groups were fairly common throughout the South. In Mississippi, for example, a young SNCC organizer by the name of Hollis Watkins was living with Dave Howard and his wife. The two farmers took it upon themselves to protect Watkins throughout the night. They had two shifts: from dark to midnight and from midnight to daybreak. Feeling indebted to the farmers, Watkins eventually volunteered to take a night shift despite his views on nonviolence.[59] This would be classified as a fairly small-defense group, but an armed self-defense group nonetheless. These types of armed groups were common throughout the South; most were small and informal, which provided them the security of anonymity. By taking the name Deacons for Defense and Justice, they were breaking away from the traditional anonymity. The obvious drawback to this approach was that Klan and police violence could easily identify the group. However, the strength of the group lay in the fact that it could now expand recruitment and more effectively organize armed self-defense initiatives.

[56] Lance E. Hill, Deacons for Defense, (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 32.
[57] Ibid, 42.
[58] Ibid, 45.
[59] Charles E. Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 140.

Born from a lack of police protection, the Deacons for Defense and Justice quickly began to expand as a political organization. The initial goal of the Deacons was to protect civil rights activists, like CORE and SNCC, from the Ku Klux Klan and other forms of white terrorism. As the organization grew, their goals began to expand. They began to take on the responsibility of guarding marches, patrolling throughout the night in an effort to ward off white assailants, challenging local racist police forces, and shooting back at Klansmen. By 1966, the Deacons expanded to include twenty-one chapters with hundreds of members throughout Louisiana and Mississippi.[60] Two of the Deacon's most significant accomplishments were the destruction of the Southern myth that black people will not fight back and forcing the Justice Department to address segregationists in the South. Both of these were achieved with only three bullets in 1965.

In the summer of 1965, CORE activists began to plan seven large marches that would take place in Bogalusa, Louisiana for seven days. Segregationists hosted a rally a few days before the CORE marches; the turnout was 4,500. This was significantly larger than the first CORE march on July 7, 1965 that only had a turnout of 350. Regardless of the turnout, the July 8th march continued. During this July 8th, two young Deacons, Henry Austin and Milton Johnson, were tasked with guarding the rear of the march.[61] As the march continued, the police began to lose control of the white mob that initially directed their attacks at the car that Austin and Johnson were in. A brick that was directed at them instead hit a nearby black teenager; the white mob redirected their bloodlust onto the young black girl and began to savagely beat her. Johnson stepped out of the car to get the girl, but he was quickly pinned against the driver door. Austin pulled out his .38 caliber pistol and aimed it at the white mob. Using his military training, he yelled at the mob to disperse. When his yelling failed, he fired a warning shot. As the mob began to descend upon him,

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[60] Lance E. Hill, Deacons for Defense, (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

[61] Ibid, 140.

Austin unleashed his firearm upon the crowd and managed to land three of his bullets in the chest of one of the white attackers.[62]

The July 8th March shooting accomplished several things. First, the huge white mobs vanished nearly overnight. The shooting sent a clear message to the Klan and Segregationists that black people will get equality by any means necessary. The Klan never recovered from this and their faltering influence among Segregationists made them fall back onto isolated terrorist attacks as opposed to mass organizing.[63] The shooting also bolstered black morale by having the shooting symbolize a reclaiming of black manhood and honor.[64] Lastly, the shooting had finally brought attention to racial injustices in Louisiana. Prior to the shooting, the Justice Department avoided confronting southern law enforcement fearing a confrontation with Southern Segregationists that would result in an imaginary guerilla war with racists. The shooting forced attention on Louisiana and the Justice Department threatened city officials in Bogalusa with small fines and small jail sentences on July 26, 1965. By the next day, white supremacists were being targeted and city officials began to uphold the law.[65]

As demonstrated by the Deacon's accomplishments, armed self-defense went through a significant shift during the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1950s, many black people, families, and communities organized small and informal armed defense groups to protect themselves and their property. The introduction of Robert F. Williams and his militant approach to self-defense began to push armed defense groups to grow and become more organized. While Williams was

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[62] Ibid, 142.

[63] Ibid, 144.

[64] "Radio Free Dixie Broadcast Typescripts, May 01, 1965 - Jun 30, 1965." Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 1, Series 7: "Radio Free Dixie" Broadcasts, 1962-1966. From Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams, (accessed September 16, 2018).

[65] "Robert F. Williams, 1959-1969." Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Black Power Movement: Papers of the Revolutionary Action Movement, 1962-1996. Series 8, Files of Individuals, 1959-1998. From Personal Papers: Papers of RAM founder and National Field Chairman Muhammad Ahmad and of RAM members John H. Bracey Jr. and Ernie Allen Jr. 1962-1996, (accessed September 16, 2018).

unable to reach the level of organizing that the Deacons for Defense and Justice achieved, he laid a foundation for other revolutionary groups in the late 1950s. The Deacons managed to become the first large-scale armed self-defense organization in the United States during the Civil Rights movement and demonstrated how armed self-defense is a viable tool for ensuring equal rights. As a testament of how these groups and organizers shook the foundation of white supremacy in America, the FBI spent a vast amount of resources trying to target and discredit these groups. They failed to protect Civil Rights activists on numerous occasions.[66] They also persecuted Williams and continued to document him even after his exile to Cuba and China.[67] The Deacons were not spared from surveillance either. Countless documents were made by the FBI trying to infiltrate the group and surveillance their activities.[68] Ultimately, the efforts of these armed groups ensured the safety of nonviolent activists and held local and federal governments accountable for enforcing civil rights protections.

The Missing Stories

Two months after the Detroit riot of 1967, Montgomery Bus Boycott veteran and Civil Rights leader Rosa McCauley Parks expressed her views in an interview on nonviolence and the necessity of self-defense. Having grown disillusioned with the nonviolent direct action that had characterized the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, she expressed support for black self-defense as a strategy for self-protection. "If we can protect ourselves against violence it's not actually violence on our part. That's just self-protection, trying to keep from being

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[66] Robert F. Williams, Negroes with Guns, (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), 45.

[67] "News clippings on Robert F. Williams, Jan 01, 1961 - Dec 31, 1984." Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 2, Series 2: Clippings, 1961-1996. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams., (accessed September 22, 2018).

[68] "Radio Free Dixie Broadcast Typescripts, May 01, 1965 - Jun 30, 1965." Black Power Movement, Part 2: The Papers of Robert F. Williams. Group 1, Series 7: "Radio Free Dixie" Broadcasts, 1962-1966. From Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Copyright, 2014: Mabel Williams, (accessed September 16, 2018).

victimized with violence."[69] Following the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Rosa Parks expressed to a reporter that she could not be as strong and forgiving as Dr. King. "Sometimes I think it's asking too much, in the face of all the oppression and abuse we have to bear. We shouldn't be expected not to react violence. It's a human reaction and that's what we are, human beings."[70] While Rosa Parks expressed these views in the context of the growing Black Power movement, she held these views prior to the emergence of the Black Power movement. During the Civil Rights movement, she had developed a close friendship and admiration for Robert F. Williams who had constructed a militant working-class NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina during the 1950s.[71] Rosa Parks was not an anomaly. She was one of many brave black women during the Civil Rights movement who believed in armed self-defense, advocated for it, and practiced it.

To begin, it is important to note that armed self-defense is closely associated with manhood during the Civil Rights movement. Many African Americans gained a sense of pride protecting civil rights activists and black communities from white terrorism. Being able to protect their homes, their families, and their communities was seen as an affirmation of black manhood. During the 1870s and 1880s, white men used violence, such as lynching, as a form of social control and rationalized this violence by citing the need to protect white women from black rapists. For white men, violence was equated to manhood. By the 1950s and 1960s, black manhood was defined by responding to white violence that for decades had emasculated them.[72] When Robert F. Williams was being suspended from the NAACP in 1959, he defended himself by citing his duty as a man

[69] Jeanne Theoharis, Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks, (New York: Random House Publisher Services, 2015), 213.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Simon Wendt, *They finally found out that we really are men': Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era*, (Gender & History 19, no. 3 (11, 2007): 543-564. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2007.00487.x.)

to defend women. "We as men should stand up as men and protect our women and children. I am a man and I will walk upright as a man should. I will not crawl!"[73]

Even though Williams failed to convince leaders of the NAACP to not suspend him in 1959, he still received a lot of support for his position on armed self-defense from black women. One woman wrote to the *Amsterdam News* defending Williams. She openly mocked "the Negro men of America" for being "mice" and even challenged their manhood by discrediting their military service. "You just went because the white man told you to go. When are you going to learn that you went to war so that the white man could keep his freedom?" The scathing critique continued by comparing black men to white men, where she argued that white men protect white women while black men do not protect black women. "White men take the law into their own hands. Our Negro men stand by and let the white man do anything they want to our women. You will never have your freedom until you learn to stand up and fight for it. You expect us women to respect you. Why should we? I am taking sides with Mr. Robert Williams. To fight violence with violence now is to show that Negro men are not mice. If the NAACP men are afraid to the job, why don't they move over and let the Negro women do the job?"[74] Unknowingly, the women who wrote to the *Amsterdam News* described exactly what would happen throughout the Civil Rights movement. When black men failed to protect their communities, black women would take it upon themselves to defend their own lives and the lives of countless others.

In Mississippi, members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) faced constant harassment from the police department in Canton. By October 1963, rumors spread that the local white police officers were planning to raid the CORE office in town. Instead of raiding the office,

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[73] Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 164.
[74] Ibid, 159.

the police coordinated a terror campaign that prioritized intimidation as a tactic for harassing the activists. It was reported that the police would flash the lights on their police car at the building where three female CORE workers were staying. This would go on for several nights. Following several days of police intimidation, the three workers began to have guns at their office ranging from rifles to pistols. "We just kinda figured that we needed protection around the house. After all, three young women just don't live in Mississippi alone without protection." Within the span of a few months, the three CORE activists reported that they would jump in panic at the slightest sound. During this time period, they slept with a rifle near the corner of the bed and a pistol on the night stand.[75] The threat of violence was enough for young activists in the South to reconsider using firearms to protect themselves.

Another example of a woman who heeded the call to arms during the Civil Rights movement was Mae Mallory. Having grown up in Macon, Georgia, Mallory would constantly have violent confrontations with white kids. During one incident, she was roller-skating in a white neighborhood since her neighborhood did not have pavement. She was challenged by the local white kids who blocked her path. "A fight ensued and I fought back. I took off my skates and I bloodied their heads." Her upbringing was defined by an impenetrable will to fight back. When Mallory was slapped by a white girl and returned home with tears streaming down her face, she was ordered by her mom to go back and slap the white girl "or I wasn't going back into that house."[76] She eventually relocated to New York City and during the 1950s led a successful desegregation case against the New York school system with a group dubbed the Harlem Mothers.

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[75] Simon Wendt, Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights, (Gainesville: University Pr Of Florida, 2010), 110.

[76] Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 189.

In 1959, she heard Robert Williams' speech to the NAACP on the radio and instantly she became one of his strongest supporters.[77]

While in Harlem, Mallory raised money to support Williams and quickly joined his chapter. Within two years, she developed a close relationship with Williams. She played a significant role in the 1961 Monroe campaign. She helped Williams protect the SNCC activists from white violence. As violence began to rage through Monroe, Mallory was responsible for leading a black crowd towards the white couple that would later charge her and Williams with kidnapping.[78] Clutching her machine gun, she watched over the white couple while wondering if they would make it through the night.[79] Eventually, she served time in prison from 1961 to 1965 for her role in the Monroe incident; she was the only woman who was charged.[80] The charge against her did not make her surrender her battle for equality. In 1964, she wrote a statement entitled *Let it be Known and Understood* where she doubled down on her militant activism. "We are in this fight to the very finish: win, lose or draw. My allegiance is to the struggle, the complete freedom of my people, and a decent way of life for all. My committee has proven its ability and dedication. Let all who are likewise dedicated join us. Those who oppose us and tend to hamper our work we will consider our enemy and fight with equal fervor."[81]

In the NAACP, Robert Williams found a peculiar opponent by the name of Daisy Bates. Daisy Bates was the leader of the Little Rock, Arkansas NAACP chapter. During the NAACP

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[77] Ibid, 190.
[78] Ibid, 278.
[79] Ibid, 190.
[80] "Robert F. Williams, 1959-1969." Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Black Power Movement: Papers of the Revolutionary Action Movement, 1962-1996. Series 8, Files of Individuals, 1959-1998. From Personal Papers: Papers of RAM founder and National Field Chairman Muhammad Ahmad and of RAM members John H. Bracey Jr. and Ernie Allen Jr. 1962-1996, (accessed September 16, 2018).
[81] "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee files on Committee to Aid Monroe Defendants." Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Subgroup B. New York Office. 1960-1969. Series 1. Fund Raising, 1960-1968. Administration Files, 1960-1968. From Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta Georgia, (accessed November 13, 2018).

convention in 1959, Bates condemned Williams for betraying their nonviolent philosophy and for endangering their movement. Soon after her condemnation of armed self-defense, her house was bombed with dynamite. Bates guarded her home with a .45 automatic, which Williams used in Monroe. She eventually also employed private guards, which Williams took notice of. He would later write to her saying, "I deeply regret that you took the position you did on my suspension. It is obvious that if you are to remain in Little Rock you will have to resort to the method I was suspended for advocating."[82]

Bates' condemnation of Williams was interpreted as hypocrisy by Williams. However, Bates had not stirred up as much controversy as Williams did. Her response to Williams' approach was not actually disapproval of armed self-defense but merely a political stunt. In fact, Bates had advocated and practiced armed self-defense just as long as Williams had. The difference in their gender meant that Bates was not taken seriously, but her attitude towards armed defense was not much different from Williams'. When Daisy Bates was seven years old, her mother was brutally raped and murdered by three white men. Her experience led her down a path of vengeance. She wanted more than anything to find the men responsible for her mother's murder and described her rage as a "little sapling, which, after a violent storm, puts out only gnarled and twisted branches." She devoted the rest of her life to the struggle for equality; by 1952 became president of the Arkansas State Conference of NAACP branches.[83]

As the leader of the NAACP in Arkansas and the heroine of Little Rock, Daisy Bates had significant influence that not even Robert Williams possessed. Under her leadership, she would travel around the country and boast that she carried a pistol and knew how to use it. In 1959, a

[82] Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 164-165.
[83] Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 114.

black girl by the name of Elizabeth Eckford was being tormented by white mobs on her way to school. Bates praised Eckford's mom for instructing her husband to go buy her a gun with plenty of bullets and even went as far as comparing her to Harriet Tubman.[84] Bates' stand on armed self-defense and her praise for Mrs. Eckford demonstrated that she clearly saw potential in black women to arm themselves and defend their communities. She was not alone. The Deacons for Defense and Justice had trouble reconciling the fact that although armed self-defense is traditionally for men, women also wanted to participate. Many black women rejected nonviolence because they also felt that self-respect came from defending one's way of life. While the Deacons would not formally include women, many black women still forced their way into the organization and played an active role. There were even rumors that some women had started organizing their own target practice in several chapters.[85]

Historian Charles Payne described women as the backbone of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle by acknowledging their work housing and feeding activists, participating in meetings, participating in voter registration initiatives, and demonstrating more than men.[86] He acknowledges that there are gaps in the historical narrative about women taking up armed self-defense and cites a lack of prolific writing and interviews.[87] However, there are still plenty of anecdotes written by men about the important role that women played during the Civil Rights movement as it related to armed self-defense. Black women, in many instances, were ardent supporters of the right of black men to defend their communities. When armed self-defense was

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[84] Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 159.
[85] Lance E. Hill, Deacons for Defense, (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 45-46.
[86] Simon Wendt, *They finally found out that we really are men: Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era.* (Gender & History 19, no. 3 (11, 2007): 543-564. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2007.00487.x.)
[87] Charles E. Cobb, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, (Basic Books, 2014), 12.

being condemned by national civil rights groups, many black women made it known that they were not behaving like men. By doing this, many black women supported armed self-defense by reinforcing the idea that armed self-defense is closely tied to black masculinity. Meanwhile, there were several accounts of black women throughout the South challenging the notion that self-defense is not just for men by advocating and practicing armed self-defense. While black women's support for armed self-defense differed, it is important to recognize that they played a major role in promoting the use of armed self-defense which moves away from the traditional view that black women were only pacifists who provided support for the nonviolent freedom struggle.

Conclusion

In 1919, Claude McKay channeled the spirit of resistance into verse. His poem, "If We Must Die", made a connection between black martyrdom and black liberation. Armed self-defense is the method for reclaiming black honor, black masculinity, and black autonomy. The poem ends with the following lines:

> 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![88]

McKay's poem depicted an alternative method to resisting white supremacy in America. Not only does it recognize that importance of reclaiming integrity, but it also examines that dying in the name of self-defense is also a victory. Ultimately, the poem examines the value of resistance, even if it seems futile. Since the historical accounts of African Americans, from their arrival on

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[88] Claude McKay, *If We Must Die*, (Liberator, July 1919).

slave ships to their oppression under Jim Crow, is typically depicted as a history of violence, there is sometimes little room to examine the agency that many black communities exercised. The history of black resistance is rich and the struggle for equality and liberation could not have existed without recognizing the power of self-defense.

Prior to the introduction of the Civil Rights Movement, black leaders and communities were known for advocating and exercising armed self-defense informally. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education,* declared school segregation unconstitutional, which triggered white violence that engulfed the South and many parts of the United States. The violence also prevented the integration of black Americans into society.[89] Continuing the tradition of armed self-defense, many African Americans in the South took it upon themselves to defend themselves, their families, their property, and nonviolent civil rights activists. Many black male and female leaders advocated for armed self-defense and organized communities to defend against encroaching white violence that at times threatened to suffocate black communities into nothing. As the Civil Rights Movement began to make progress on a federal level with the passage of the Civil Rights act of 1964, local black communities continued organizing armed squads to ensure that the legislation was faithfully implemented. Over time, organizing became more complex and spread across numerous counties in the South as demonstrated by the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Without the continued pressure from local black communities and their weapons, the progress made on the federal level and judicial level would not be introduced in the South as demonstrated by Louisiana's failure to implement faithfully the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The legacy of armed self-defense during the Civil Rights movement is one that ought to be remembered and celebrated. The combination of armed self-defense and nonviolent activism

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[89] Simon Wendt, Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights, (Gainesville: University Pr Of Florida, 2010), 25.

provided the momentum that allowed the Civil Rights movement to succeed in passing legislation during the 1960s and created an environment where black communities could reclaim self-respect that had been eroded by decades of white terrorism. It would also begin laying the foundation for the emerging Black Power movement of the late 1960s. The tradition of armed self-defense continues onto the present day as well. In Dallas, Texas, the Huey Newton Gun Club organized in recent years to protest police brutality; they would go on to chant "Black Power" and evoke the spirit of resistance that characterized much of the armed struggle during the Civil Rights movement.[90] Even some of the organizers from the 1960s continued to push for armed self-defense after the Civil Rights movement ended. Many of the members of the Deacons for Defense and Justice would go on to insist that the group never disbanded, but instead are waiting for their moment to return. Having led the struggle for civil rights, the Deacons were aware that rights were no more secure than our willingness to defend them. During the 1960s, one Deacon cautioned the need to continue armed self-defense into the future: "In 1965 there will be a great change made. But after this change is made, the biggest fight is to keep it. My son, his son might have to fight this fight and that's one reason why we won't disband the Deacons for a long time. How long, Heaven only knows. But it will be a long time."[91]

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[90] B. K. Marcus, *ARMED AND BLACK: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SELF –DEFENSE*, (Freeman, Summer, 2015, 32-37), 34.
[91] Lance E. Hill, Deacons for Defense, (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 257.

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