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USA

Nonviolence and Black Self-Defense

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WHILE THE POST-World War II Southern Civil Rights Movement is viewed as a nonviolent movement, reality is more complicated. Charles Cobb, Jr., who was a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary from 1962-67, points out that mass marches and other forms of direct action necessitated nonviolence in the face of government officials and the presence of a well-armed KKK.

“Sit-ins at lunch counters, Freedom Rides, walking picket lines — these were all direct actions at and inside white-owned facilities, and for tactical and strategic reasons, required an acceptance of nonviolent discipline,” Cobb observes in *This Nonviolence Stuff’ll Get You Killed* (2014). But, he continues, “as the Freedom Movement began to emphasize work in rural communities, it became clear that nonviolence—both the practice and the idea—had its limits.”

While some central movement figures like James Lawson were committed to a pacifist framework, someone like the late John R. Salter, Jr. (Hunter Gray) who sat in with his students at Jackson lunch counters, was definitely not.

In fact, many direct actions were supported by defense squads that discretely stayed in the background, defending activists after the sun went down. This was especially true in Mississippi.

Most defense squads in Mississippi arose from kinship groups or circles of friends who belonged to the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), the state’s largest civil rights organization. Despite its usual hesitation about activism, the NAACP never formally disavowed self-defense. Indeed its most celebrated martyr, Mississippi state chairman Medgar Evers, kept a pistol and a rifle in his car.

Defending Mass Action with Guns

Robert F. Williams, with his wife Mabel, organized to defend their community against Klan activities, and were forced to flee the country.

The controversy over nonviolence and self-defense began when Robert F. Williams, a World War II Marine, returned to his hometown, Monroe, North Carolina (pop. 10,882), in 1955. He joined a small NAACP chapter, and within two years became president, expanded its membership and persuaded it to take an activist turn. First, “without any friction at all,” they won the right for Blacks to use the municipal library.

The NAACP chapter then set its sights on a whites-only swimming pool, built by Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration and maintained with city funds. The NAACP did not demand integration, but instead asked that a pool be built in Newtown, Monroe’s small ghetto, or if not, that the existing pool be reserved on two days each week for Black swimmers. When local authorities refused, the Monroe chapter began months of protests around the pool’s perimeter.

The Ku Klux Klan staged counterdemonstrations; on some days hundreds of white people turned out. Scuffles broke out, guns were flashed and sometimes fired. Williams responded by chartering a National Rifle Association club and recruiting a coterie of veterans as members. Nights were tense as many as 20 stood guard at his house or that of the

NAACP chapter's vice-president, physician Dr. Albert E. Perry.

During the summer of 1957, participants in a Klan motorcade through Newtown fired into Perry's house. According to Williams, who recounted his story five years later in *Negroes with Guns*, "We shot it out with the Klan and repelled their attack and the Klan didn't have any more stomach for this type of fight."

But the Kluxers didn't cease their counterdemonstrations and motorcades. During what can only be described as an interracial free-for-all on Aug. 27, 1961, some 300 angry African Americans halted a car that they believed had been seen bearing a banner with the legend "Open Season on Coons."

Inside was Bruce Stegall and his wife, both white. When the mob threatened the couple, Williams offered the Stegalls refuge in his home. For taking them in, he and several others were later indicted on trumped-up state kidnapping charges.

Forced to flee, Williams, his wife, Mabel, and son were spirited out of the country by defense committees in the United States and Canada.

When to Employ Self-Defense?

The difference between violent and nonviolent actions often took surprising or unpredictable forms. Cobb recounts an August, 1962 incident after he drove 18 people from Ruleville (1960 pop. 1,902) to Indianola (pop. 6,714), the county seat, so they could take the required literacy test. [\[1\]](#) But they were refused permission and returned home. That night raiders fired into the house of Joe and Rebecca McDonald, both in their 60s. Although they had a shotgun, they chose to protect themselves by lying down in a cast iron bathtub.

One the other hand, one afternoon in early August, 1964, the sons of Janie Brewer — Veto, Jesse, Luther and Haden — attempted to register to vote in Tallahatchie county, Mississippi. Because she expected nightriders to assault her house that night, Brewer, then in her 90s, ordered her sons and a couple of visiting civil rights activists to lie in surrounding cotton fields, shotguns and rifles at the ready.

Meanwhile she and Margaret Block, a SNCC organizer, prepared Molotov cocktails in Brewer's kitchen. Block told Cobb that Brewer was "spilling gas everywhere. And I'm like 'Dam[n] if we get burned up in here, everyone was going to swear the Klan did it [and] it's going to be Mrs. Brewer burning us up.'"

Block reported that "As the sheriff and a 'truckload' of Klansmen approached the farmhouse ... someone shown a floodlight on them. Others fired into the air. Brewer stood on the front porch ready hurl a Molotov cocktail. Everyone, including the county sheriff, fled. Night riders never returned to the Brewer farm."

These two stories illustrate some of the complications of the doctrines of nonviolence and self-defense in the movement. Nonviolence meant finding a way to endure. Self-defense meant using fists or firearms — even Molotov cocktails — to force assailants to desist. But the two were often intertwined; split-second decisions had to be made. And this was particularly true in the rural Deep South.

In his 2013 *We Will Shoot Back* Akinyele Omowale Umoja, a professor at Georgia State University, recounts the history of armed self-defense in Mississippi. Like Cobb, he does not ignore its perils, as when, with others, Johnnie

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Nobles of McComb (1960 pop. 12,020) spent a night on guard in a dry cleaning shop that was a refuge for activists.

During their vigil, an unseen figure stopped outside and the guard force heard a thump on the porch. Thinking it was a bomb, Noble told Umoja, “we throw the door open and had guns on him.” It took a few seconds for the guards to recognize the presumptive bomb-thrower — as a neighborhood newspaper carrier. Fortunately, no shot was fired.

“Black defenders who could have opened up with killing gunfire usually refrained. In place after place, a few rounds fired into the air were enough to cause terrorists to flee,” Cobb notes.

Organizers found that older Mississippians were especially averse to the idea of passive resistance. David Dennis, the state director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a national group dedicated to pacifist means, had an early experience when he first visited Canton (pop. 9,707).

A local CORE organizer asked him to speak to a supporter, C.O. Chinn, who habitually sat, armed, in his pickup truck outside the church where mass meetings were held. Dennis recalled:

I went outside to talk to him. He's sitting in the back of his truck with a shotgun across his lap and a pistol by his side. I introduced myself; told him about CORE's nonviolent philosophy. He listened. Then, very calmly he told me: 'This is my town and these are my people. I'm here to protect my people and even if you don't like this I'm not going anywhere. So maybe you better leave.'

Although defense squads did not prevent dozens of assassinations, both Cobb and Umoja argue that they repelled nightriders and prevented assaults on demonstrators.

Despite the formal profession of pacifism by the organizations that organized widely across the state, armed self-defense became orthodox in 1966, when those who sponsored the Meredith March invited the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed group from northern Louisiana, to provide protection.

After Medgar Evers' assassination in 1963, his older brother Charles [who just died in July 2020, age 95 — ed.] came back from Chicago to become the NAACP's state director. He tapped as an aide Rudy Shields, a Chicago friend, former paratrooper and Mississippi native. Umoja pays particular attention to Shields because he sees him as a transitional figure in the Movement's mid-'60s shift from pacifism to self-defense, from civil rights to Black Power.

In Natchez (pop. 24,000) the pistol-toting Shields formed a group composed mostly of middle-aged military veterans to protect a 1965 voter registration campaign and a consumer boycott that Evers called. Shields also deployed a squad of younger men, mostly in their late teens, to harass people who ignored boycott orders.

The names of those who didn't observe the boycott were read in NAACP meetings. According to a local activist whom Umoja cites, “Folks go shop, break the boycott, they didn't get home with the damn groceries...’cause somebody was waiting for them when they got there.”

Umoja probably overstates the charge by asserting that “The Natchez Movement resorted to terror within the Black community to enforce its decisions.” But enforcement worked. After three months “twenty-three White businesses conceded to hiring or promoting Black workers to the position of clerk,” he notes.

Shields subsequently became legendary for boycotts in some two dozen smaller — and seemingly hopeless — towns. These included settlements like Belzoni (pop. 4,142), Centreville (pop. 1,229) Fayetteville (pop. 16,250), Port Gibson (pop. 2,861), Woodville (pop. 1,856) and even Byhalia (pop. 702).

The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, whose job was spying on the movement, reported that the 1968 Belzoni boycott was 80% effective. Conservatives in the movement, who initially regarded enforcement not as self-defense, but as “retaliatory violence,” soon held their tongues. But boycotts were not telegenic, and they usually took months to win. In 1969 the Mississippi legislature outlawed them.

“For the strategy of nonviolence to work in Mississippi, the federal government would have to intervene with force to provide to provide security from the forces of white supremacist terrorism,” Umoja observes.

Dr. King wrangled National Guard protection from President Johnson for at least portions of the Selma and Meredith marches, but when organizers in the South reported threats to FBI agents, they were usually denied assistance.

Even field staffers for CORE and SNCC turned for protection to armed volunteers. Shields transformed informal self-defense groups into militias, setting up makeshift rifle ranges, establishing discipline and chains of command. He sometimes organized them under the aegis of the Deacons.

Often merely the sight of the Deacons defused dangers, as in 1967 in Centreville, when parties to a white mob trained guns on a voting rights demonstrators. Twenty-five members of the Wilkinson county Deacons showed up. “We pulled in here and started unloading all of this heavy artillery and they loaded up and left,” former Deacon James Young told Umoja.

Defense in the Delta

Most of the actions that Cobb and Umoja chronicle happened in the Mississippi Delta. That designation is geographically accurate, but leftists from an earlier generation would have instead applied a demographic term, the Black Belt, the zone where some 200 contiguous counties once had an African-American majority.

Mississippi in 1960 was divided into 82 counties, 29 of them with Black majorities. Twenty-five of those were in the Delta, a stretch running as many as four counties deep along the Mississippi River, the state’s border with Louisiana. Of three dozen towns Cobb and Umoja mention as sites of movement campaigns, at least two-thirds were in the Mississippi Black Belt.

Repression had always been more severe in the Black Belt. Self-defense was a tradition there, not anything new. I learned this as a civil rights worker in Alabama. Most Black Belt families kept a shotgun or rifle in their home.

In 1966, a Black farmer in Marengo county — Mr. Agee as I knew him — was sent to Washington D.C. to testify about discrimination in the federal agricultural programs. Teddy Kennedy led him to his Senate office, let him rock in JFK’s chair, and introduced him to an FBI agent, who gave Agee his card, saying “Call us if you have any trouble when you get home.”

Agee did have trouble, the night after he returned. A car passed his house and its occupants fired shorts in its direction. Relatives and civil rights’ workers gathered in the wake of the shots — the relatives with weapons in their

hands.

One of the civil rights workers telephoned Kennedy's FBI man. He said that the drive-by was "a local matter" in which the Bureau couldn't intervene. The agent then called the county sheriff's office. None of the locals would have called there because its deputies were rumored to be Klansmen.

Sure enough, deputies came out, four of them. They roughed-up and arrested a pair who had gathered to prevent the shooters' return: a nephew of the farmer and me.

Changing Circumstances

The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, eliminating poll taxes and literacy tests, made Black Power plausible in the Black Belt. Black Power meant sweeping what had been White Power out of municipal and county offices, especially police and sheriff's departments. By the close of the '60s, most of the doctrine's proponents were so weary and wary of whites that both SNCC and CORE had jawboned their white staffers into leaving the Movement.

Although most African Americans in the counties where Shields organized wanted civic and income parity, many did not welcome desegregation across the board. Among other things, it promised to decimate Black-owned businesses and institutions that had struggled for solvency for a century, including the public schools.

Lewis Williams, an army veteran and self-defender, told Umoja that "Rudy felt like if we were separated, we were better and we were stronger, because when you have white people teaching your children, then what they get is the white concept of life."

In 1974 Shields took his talents to the United League, a Mississippi organization headed by Alfred "Skip" Robinson, a bricklayer and longtime figure in the Black Belt. Robinson's home had been bombed in 1965, but the following year he'd fearlessly organized a boycott in Holly Springs (pop. 5,621).

As an independent grassroots group, the UL wasn't incorporated and was therefore immune to civil suits. That gave it an advantage over the NAACP, which by then had been shackled by suits brought under the anti-boycotting law.

Thanks to the UL, the Mississippi Movement thrived during the '70s, when liberation efforts were flagging in the rest of the South. But in 1981 Robinson left the United League to join the Nation of Islam. Umoja writes that the UL was unable to survive "the division created in its ranks by the conversion of Robinson and his associates to the NOI and their repudiation of insurgent activism."

Envisioning a Black Republic

Given the existence of a majority-Black section of the South, the idea of building an independent government there seemed to be an alternative to humiliation and repression. One section of the Northern Black Power movement called for a Republic of New Africa. At its founding convention in 1968 it chose Robert F. Williams as its president.

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Through the years of exile, hosting the short wave program “Radio Free Dixie” and publishing his book and monthly magazine *The Crusader*, Williams had become known as the intellectual author of Black Power. As he wrote in *Negroes with Guns*,

“...We must create a black militancy of our own. We must direct our own struggle, achieve our own destiny. ... The traditional white liberal leadership in civil rights organizations, and even white radicals, generally cannot understand what our struggle is about.”

Umoja sees the Republic of New Africa as an embodiment of the Black Power idea. Several members living in Detroit moved to Mississippi and began the process of building the economic and political framework to carry out their program. Chokwe Lumumba, a movement lawyer, was a key player who moved to Jackson, Mississippi with his family.

Elected to city council, Choke worked to develop and publicize the Jackson Program, whose basis was self-determination. But shortly after being elected mayor in 2013, he died. Today his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, is mayor. The current Jackson Plan has both electoral and non-electoral components. A group called Cooperation Jackson coordinates several cooperatives. [2]

Robert F. Williams returned to the United States in 1969, but it took six years for the charges against him to be dismissed. He settled near Detroit and spoke on several occasions to political meetings as a Black revolutionary. But he didn't find a way to work with the Republic of New Africa, and died in Michigan 25 years ago. Rosa Parks gave the eulogy at his funeral, saying:

“The sacrifices he made, and what he did, should go down in history and never be forgotten.”

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[1] *Unless otherwise noted, all population figures cited are from the 1960 Census.

[2] See "[Building a solidarity economy in Jackson, Mississippi, anchored by a network of cooperatives and worker-owned, democratically self-managed enterprises.](#)".