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Civil Rights History
from the Ground Up

*Local Struggles,
a National Movement*

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"It wasn't the Wild West"

Keeping Local Studies in Self-Defense Historiography

The earliest scholarship on the movement—with its focus on Martin Luther King Jr., major media events, and legislative victories—tended to foreground and overemphasize nonviolence, highlighting it as the driving force behind the movement. It is this version—which typically ignores self-defense and downplays the role of force or coercion—that continues to dominate the "movement narrative" in the popular culture (in its most oversimplified form) and even much of the scholarship (in its more sophisticated forms). To some extent this is related to the top-down lens: nonviolence is more prominent if the focus is on King and dramatic demonstrations. It is probably also connected to the ways some people find an emphasis on nonviolence appealing and reassuring, as a story of the triumph of morality and high ideals, along with individual and national redemption.¹

In shifting the lens, local studies unearthed self-defense and called into question the extent to which philosophical nonviolence dominated the movement. Away from the media spotlight in the rural communities of the Deep South, activists tended to emphasize voter registration more than direct action protest. Though attempting to register to vote (alone, in small groups, or as part of an organized Freedom Day) always held the potential for confrontation, direct challenge wasn't necessary or even desirable. Much of the work of voter registration—canvassing, Citizenship School classes, and mass meetings—took place within the black community. Here, open conflict with

segregationists was less likely than during direct action protests, both because organizers tried to move quietly and because blacks routinely protected themselves, something whites were well aware of.²

The most important early scholarship on self-defense came in the local and state studies of Mississippi and Louisiana published by John Dittmer, Charles Payne, and Adam Fairclough in 1994 and 1995.³ Although Dittmer, Payne, and Fairclough did not focus on self-defense as much as some subsequent authors, their groundbreaking monographs, together with Timothy Tyson's biography of Robert Williams published a few years later, make it crystal clear that during the movement self-defense was pervasive, essential, and closely tied to other kinds of activism.⁴ Dittmer's and Payne's books are filled with details about individual and collective self-defense. We learn that during the 1950s and 1960s, every NAACP leader in Mississippi was armed at some point, including presidents Emmett Stringer and Aaron Henry, well-known Delta activist Amzie Moore, and state field secretaries Medgar and Charles Evers. Most of these men periodically relied on armed guards. Others, including C. C. Bryant and his sister-in-law Ora Bryant, Laura McGhee (and her sons), Hartman Turnbow, and Vernon Dahmer fired back at attackers. Dahmer's stand enabled his family to escape their burning home, although he died the next day of burns and smoke inhalation. In contrast, many Holmes County blacks believe Turnbow killed one of his attackers and "whites covered it up by saying the man had a heart attack." Turnbow's wife, Mrs. "Sweets" Turnbow, carried her gun along in a paper bag when she went to the 1964 national Democratic Convention in Atlantic City and had it with her as she lobbied the Oregon delegation to support the Freedom Democrats.⁵

All of these people, and many more, were prepared to defend themselves. In fact, Dittmer's and Payne's accounts make it clear that you would be hard pressed to find a native Mississippi movement activist who did not, at some point, carry a weapon or stand guard. For all of these people and many others, self-defense came *after* and *because* they joined the movement and were involved in other kinds of activism. That is, they turned to self-defense not as a primary means of organizing or challenging white supremacy but because they were under attack for using other tactics. Many tried to register to vote and engaged in canvassing, encouraging others to make the registration attempt. A few enrolled children in the formerly whites-only schools. Some initiated sit-ins or went on marches. Others joined and organized the Missis-

The title quote comes from Charlie Cobb. Charles (Charlie) Cobb Jr., July 2009, speaking at "Landmarks of American Democracy: From Freedom Summer to the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike," NEH Institute for Community College Teachers, Hamer Institute, Jackson State University; Charles (Charlie) Cobb Jr., e-mail to author, June 17, 2010.

ssippi Freedom Democratic Party, taught Citizenship School classes, housed and fed civil rights workers, and attended mass meetings.

For the most part, John Dittmer lets self-defense speak for itself. His text incorporates extensive examples in a matter-of-fact way that reinforces how absolutely ordinary and commonplace it was. He does explain, however, that in Holmes County, white vigilante "violence was not as severe . . . in part because black residents set up nightly patrols, letting it be known that they had weapons and were prepared to use them." Self-defense is part of the fabric of Charles Payne's text as well, though he offers more speculation about the positive roles it played. He suggests, for example, that "the success of the movement in the rural South" might owe "something to the attitude of local people toward self-defense." Observing that vigilante violence became more clandestine and less deadly, Payne credited self-defense, noting that "the old tradition of racist violence was coming to mean that you really could lose your life or your liberty." Adam Fairclough found a similar pattern in Louisiana, observing, for instance, that "many ordinary blacks regarded strict nonviolence as nonsensical. In rural Louisiana the ownership of guns was commonplace, and here, where blacks were isolated and most vulnerable, guns were often seen as the *only* deterrent to white violence." Fairclough also profiles the well-organized and highly visible Deacons for Defense. Founded in Jonesboro in late 1964, the best-known chapter emerged in Bogalusa in 1965 where their insistence on protecting the movement and refusal to back down from the Klan helped convince the federal government to aggressively intervene.⁶

In 1998, Timothy Tyson first published his influential work on Robert Williams, one of the best-known advocates of what he called "armed self-reliance." Situating Williams within the local Monroe, North Carolina, movement and the broader national and international context, Tyson's work straddles the forms of community studies and a subsequent generation of self-defense scholarship. He argues that Williams's commitment to self-defense was "more ordinary than idiosyncratic" and demonstrates that in some cases self-defense could do more than keep people alive. In 1957, when "a large, heavily armed Klan motorcade attacked" the home of a prominent NAACP leader, "Black veterans greeted the night riders with sandbag fortifications and a hail of disciplined gunfire. The Monroe Board of Alderman immediately passed an ordinance banning Klan motorcades, a measure they had refused to consider before the gun battle." Drawing on Robert Williams's life and beliefs, Tyson used the topic of self-defense to explicitly challenge

the "cinematic civil rights movement" that focused exclusively on "nonviolent civil rights protest," insisting that during World War II and after, there was a "current of militancy" among African Americans "that included the willingness to defend home and community by force. This facet of African American life," he argued, "lived in tension and in tandem with the compelling moral example of nonviolent direct action."⁷

Collectively, Dittmer, Payne, Fairclough, and Tyson laid out the basic contours and identified most of what is significant about self-defense in the movement. They demonstrated that self-defense was widespread and commonplace; it was closely tied to and complemented the "nonviolent" movement. Women, men, and sometimes children regularly used self-defense to protect their families and property. In some instances, self-defense was more organized and formal. Here men dominated and typically worked together to patrol black communities, monitor lawmen, guard mass meetings, and protect the most visible leaders. More rarely, self-defense extended to public spaces and demonstrations. All of these aspects of self-defense were necessary because of widespread white vigilante violence and because there was essentially no viable law enforcement for African Americans. Local, state, and federal governments openly conspired with or utterly failed to control white terror. Occasionally, as with the incident in Monroe, self-defense itself led to changes in policy or practice. Moreover, as Adam Fairclough noted, few blacks had any problems with the practice of self-defense. Charles Payne found that "[i]n rural areas particularly, self-defense was just not an issue among Blacks. If attacked, people were going to shoot back."⁸

Despite this pervasive acceptance among rural activists, these books also point to some internal movement conflicts over self-defense. Adam Fairclough explains that at times some of the national staff of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), with their commitment to philosophical nonviolence, were at odds with local activists in Louisiana. National leaders tended to be particularly uneasy when support for self-defense was visible and forceful. Tyson chronicles one of the best-known examples when, in 1959, Robert Williams angrily asserted that blacks should "meet violence with violence" and "lynching with lynching." NAACP head Roy Wilkins immediately suspended him and was unmoved when, the next morning, Williams clarified his views, explaining that he was simply insisting on the Constitutionally-protected right to self-defense. A few months later, Martin Luther King Jr. debated the relative merits of nonviolence and self-defense with Williams in

the pages of *Liberation* magazine. King's task was challenging since the sit-ins had not yet turned nonviolent direct action into a viable tactic and he, too, accepted self-defense. Tyson explains that "the philosophical position from which King centered his argument—preferring nonviolence but endorsing the principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed—was in fact, the same position that Williams had taken."⁹

A second generation of scholarship that is more explicitly focused on self-defense has sought to reinforce and build on these insights to further challenge the pervasive stereotype of a nonviolent movement.¹⁰ In 1996, two years before Tyson previewed his biography of Robert Williams with an article in the *Journal of American History*, Akinyele Umoja completed his dissertation, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement." A year later, Lance Hill finished a dissertation on the Deacons for Defense. Christopher Strain added an insightful article, also on the Deacons, that was based on the research for his dissertation, "Civil Rights and Self-Defense: The Fiction of Nonviolence, 1955–1968," defended in 2000. Umoja's dissertation produced several important articles on armed resistance, published in 1999, 2003, and 2004, and is the basis for a forthcoming book. Hill and Strain published their dissertation-based books, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* and *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* in 2004 and 2005, while Simon Wendt weighed in with his 2004 dissertation (completed in Germany) and his 2007 book, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*.¹¹ A number of newer local studies also make important contributions to the ongoing conversation about self-defense. These include Greta de Jong's *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900–1970*; Peter Levy's *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland*; Todd Moye's *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986*; and Hasan Kwame Jeffries's *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*.¹²

Akinyele Umoja and Lance Hill both focus on relatively narrow geographical areas. Starting with a nuanced overview of self-defense in the Mississippi movement, Umoja argues that events in 1964, including the Freedom Summer project, were pivotal in marking the "beginning of the end of nonviolence as the Southern freedom movement's philosophy and method." Moreover, based on a close study of Natchez and other southwest Mississippi communities in the post-1964 era, he insists that "the capacity of the move-

ment to protect itself and the Black community and to retaliate against White supremacist terrorists gave . . . Black leaders more leverage in negotiating with local White power structures." Lance Hill adds an organizational history of the Deacons for Defense, focusing primarily on Jonesboro and Bogalusa, Louisiana, where the Deacons were founded and had their biggest impact. Concluding his book with a chapter each on the Deacons in other parts of Louisiana, in Mississippi, in the North (meaning not South), and during the emergence of Black Power, especially the 1966 Meredith March, Hill goes further than any other scholar in framing nonviolence and self-defense as opposing tactics. He argues that the Deacons represented a working-class rejection of nonviolence, asserting, for example, that "the Deacons reflected a growing disillusionment of working class blacks with the pacifistic, legalistic, and legislative strategies proffered up by national civil rights organizations. Many African Americans, men in particular, refused to participate in nonviolent protests because they believed that passive resistance to white violence simply reproduced the same degrading rituals of domination and submission that suffused the master/slave relationship."¹³

Christopher Strain and Simon Wendt both contribute broad overviews, situating self-defense in the larger context of the movement by addressing key people and events, including Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defense. Both authors also distinguish between philosophical and tactical nonviolence and highlight the ways self-defense supplemented the nonviolent movement. Strain's is an intellectual history, and he emphasizes that throughout African American history, blacks' use of self-defense was "an essential part of the struggle for citizenship." He insists that in the context of white supremacy, even "individual acts of defiance" had "important political and constitutional roles in black empowerment." Wendt's most original contribution is attention to the connection between civil rights organizations' fund-raising and their public projections of nonviolence. Like Umoja, he highlights the relationship between nonviolence and self-defense in the Mississippi organizing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He also adds a case study of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, that reinforces much that we learned about self-defense from earlier local studies.¹⁴

Umoja, Hill, Strain, and Wendt all stress a number of important aspects of self-defense, most of which were at least implicit in earlier studies. However, in these studies, their forcefulness and centrality give them greater visibility and demand engagement by other historians. Collectively, they argue

that historians must more fully acknowledge the crucial role of "armed resistance" and what they tend to characterize as "militancy." In his 1999 article "The Ballot and the Bullet," Umoja asserts that we "must revise the definition of the civil rights movement to include the role of armed militancy as a complement and alternative to nonviolent direct action." Wendt and Strain would likely agree. According to Wendt, "[A]rmed resistance served as a significant auxiliary to nonviolent protest," while Strain notes that "the traditions of armed self-defense and nonviolence co-existed."¹⁵

These authors also highlight the importance of rejecting a racial double standard related to violence, whether perpetuated by those present during the movement or by subsequent commentators. Strain, for example, takes issue with journalists and early movement histories that portrayed a pre- and post-1965 dichotomy framed as a negative shift from nonviolence to violence, insisting that they "have perpetuated a historical double standard regarding the use of violence by black and white Americans (i.e., whites can, blacks cannot)." (Activist Robert Williams made this same argument in his 1962 *Negroes with Guns*.) Though Hill, in particular, frames nonviolence and self-defense in fairly oppositional ways, he also emphasizes the importance of challenging the double standard, pointing out that "[t]he Deacons boldly flouted the age-old southern code that denied blacks the right of open and collective self-defense, and by doing so they made an implicit claim to social and civil equality."¹⁶

This recent generation of self-defense scholarship has done invaluable service by drawing attention to the basic outline of self-defense, especially as it relates to the national story, and by insisting that historians confront its significance and role. At the same time, there are ways that some of this scholarship has, in moving away from the complexity of community studies, gone too far in overemphasizing the centrality of self-defense, in and of itself, without enough attention to the ways it was always part of a larger movement that utilized a range of tactics (not all of which fit either nonviolence or self-defense). One result is that the self-defense focused books have, in some ways, created a new top-down, media-driven narrative that, even as it replaces or stands alongside the King-centric one, still largely follows visible people, organizations, and events. It typically includes King and Montgomery as a way to explore the contested nature of early nonviolence, turns to Robert Williams to illustrate the competing or alternative ideology of assertive armed resistance, and chronicles SNCC's encounter with black Mississippians, like Hartman Turnbow, as context for the organization's internal de-

bates about self-defense during the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964. The Deacons represent the high point or epitome of southern self-defense and then the story shifts North, including some or all of the following: Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, urban rebellions (or riots/conflagrations, depending on the author), and the Oakland-based, southern movement-inspired Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Although there are variations, most of the new self-defense scholarship fits within and contributes to this framework.

Moreover, in their efforts to correct the blindspots and perversions of the traditional narrative, these works can sometimes slip into caricaturing nonviolence while glorifying guns and violence. This has a number of implications. It can overstate the effectiveness and primacy of self-defense in generating change, while obscuring the dynamic interactions of multiple tactics. It can also translate into a disproportionate focus on men and manhood that obscures quite a bit about men and women. Similarly, while most of these scholars highlight the limitations of the strict nonviolence versus self-defense dichotomy, stressing that these were more complementary than contradictory, it is a difficult dichotomy to leave behind. At times, they still have a tendency to perpetuate this analytical framework. And yet, to some extent, the categories of nonviolence and self-defense, whether set up as contradictory or complementary, are too limited and imprecise to fully capture the flexibility and complexity of the freedom struggle.¹⁷ In addition, while all of these works point to changes over time (especially around 1964) and the distinctiveness of the Deacons, many questions about the nature of and reasons for these changes remain unanswered, especially as they relate to the specifics of chronology and location. Finally, we need more precision around the definition of "armed resistance" and more clarity about the role of violence (broadly defined) within the movement, including those aspects that are not so easily categorized as self-defense.

Thus, while these books have collectively helped reinforce the significance of self-defense and begun the work of creating a synthesis of key events, people, and topics, much work remains. In particular, we need to reconsider and reframe our understanding of movement tactics so that we can move beyond the persistent nonviolence/self-defense framework; revisit gender and militancy; examine the role of "other" forms of violence or resistance, not easily categorized as self-defense; and analyze the nature and extent to which self-defense changed in 1964 (in general and in relation to the Deacons for Defense).

Self-defense is an important topic in its own right, one that is crucial to a complete and accurate picture of the civil rights movement. By revisiting local studies and developing new conceptual frameworks—ones that avoid the either/or traps and overstatements of both the nonviolence- and self-defense-oriented frameworks—we can more precisely bring self-defense into the narrative of movement history. As this suggests, self-defense also offers a useful case study for illustrating both the challenges and importance of revising and reorienting “the movement narrative” to reflect what we know from local studies and bottom-up history.

NONVIOLENCE AND SELF-DEFENSE, MOVING BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY

Part of the conceptual problem is that too often “nonviolence” has been used as a catchall for every strategy that did not involve self-defense or violence. That simply does not work. In his study of Sunflower County, Mississippi, Todd Moyer notes that “[f]ew local people made the commitment to nonviolence as a way of life.” Drawing on a framework articulated by SNCC worker Worth Long, Moyer argues “the term ‘un-violent,’ as opposed to ‘nonviolent,’ may best describe the movement.” In a 1983 interview, SNCC activist Robert (Bob) Moses, who worked in Mississippi from late 1961 through the end of the 1964 Summer Project, described the Mississippi movement in similar terms, telling the interviewer, “I don’t think violence versus nonviolence is such a good dichotomy.” He added that during the movement, the discussion about nonviolence, self-defense, and guns “had a lot of negative qualities because the emotional pitch was so high,” making it difficult to address the “practical issues.” In his view, openly carrying weapons could be counterproductive, making it more difficult to “move as quietly as possible among people so that you could work. Because the strategy was not to pick a fight and just throw yourself into the wave of mechanisms.” At the same time, he asserted that none of the local Mississippians “were practicing nonviolence . . . and while they sometimes acknowledged that we ourselves were practicing nonviolence . . . they would not buy it. And we weren’t selling it.” In fact, he explains that the attempt to initiate a nonviolent movement in Mississippi failed in the aftermath of the 1961 Freedom Rides and, instead, the movement organized around the “more practical program of voter registration . . . which didn’t require either on the part of the staff or the people

a commitment to nonviolence.” He elaborates, “There is nothing in the federal government that says you have to be nonviolent to go register.”¹⁸ Because the Mississippi movement was organized around voter registration with few public demonstrations, for the most part tactical nonviolence was neither necessary nor appropriate.

Most authors who focus on self-defense miss this nuance. Even those who argue that nonviolence and self-defense were complementary, not antagonistic, still tend to reinforce a dichotomy and overlook or mischaracterize “un-violent” tactics.¹⁹ Although a number of authors contribute to sustaining this dichotomy, Lance Hill is distinct in arguing forcefully that there was an explicit conflict between nonviolence and self-defense that went well beyond public relations. In this regard, Hill’s influential work on the Deacons reflects some general shortcomings, while also being somewhat at odds with other scholarship. Because of this, his arguments are worth exploring in some detail. In his determination to argue for the significance and primacy of self-defense, Hill caricatures much of the movement, ignores considerable scholarship (especially local studies), and makes huge generalizations about national organizations.

For example, he insists that national organizations tried to impose nonviolence, which he characterizes as passive and emasculating, on local activists. He asserts that “[f]rom the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, opposition to black armed self-defense was an article of faith for national organizations.” He includes the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in this group, though he does note that “SNCC and CORE moderated their official positions near the end of the movement.” Contending that “the national organizations took a stand against self-defense that placed them at odds with local movements besieged by police and Klan violence and hobbled by passive stereotypes,” Hill asserts that the Deacons became a “symbol of the revolt against nonviolence.” He also argues that the Bogalusa movement proved the effectiveness of self-defense, especially in contrast to what he terms “nonviolence.”²⁰ In making these claims, Hill disregards variations among the national civil rights organizations, their internal conflicts, the reality of local movements, and shifts over time. For example, while the national NAACP *did* suspend Robert Williams for assertively insisting that blacks had the right to self-defense, at the same convention, the membership passed a resolution reaffirming the right to self-defense. Moreover, as Dittmer, Payne, and others have illustrated, at the local level NAACP

activists across the South routinely armed themselves, something national staff must have known. And the same Roy Wilkins, who earlier suspended Robert Williams, authorized a fund to pay bodyguards for Charles Evers (who also troubled Wilkins with his periodic public statements threatening black retaliation).²¹

Whatever the NAACP's positions were on self-defense, the national staff was never particularly excited about philosophical or tactical nonviolence. Both were more important in the creation and early histories of SNCC and CORE. Yet by the time the Deacons were founded in the fall of 1964 and emerged on the national scene in Bogalusa in 1965, SNCC and CORE, both in terms of the beliefs and practices of individual organizers and broader organizational debates and policies, had long since abandoned any single-minded devotion to nonviolence. In fact, nonviolence was always contested within SNCC, and by 1962 field staff were living and organizing in local Mississippi communities where, as Dittmer and Payne illustrate, white terror and black self-defense were givens. Payne claims that "[w]hatever they felt about non-violence personally, SNCC workers seem to have almost never tried to talk local people into putting down their guns" and concludes that black "farmers may have done more to change the behavior of SNCC workers in this respect than vice versa." Bob Moses explained to Akinyele Umoja, "Local people carried the day. They defined how they and the culture was going to relate to the issue of using guns."²²

CORE's approach to self-defense is particularly relevant because it was the primary national civil rights organization in the Louisiana communities that Lance Hill studies. Compared with SNCC, CORE had a longer, more explicitly nonviolent history. It was also more hierarchical and included a number of national staff who more insistently promoted nonviolence. And yet, Adam Fairclough and Greta de Jong illustrate that by 1963 CORE field staff in Louisiana (including some who remained personally committed to nonviolence) had come to accept and appreciate self-defense. Many CORE workers welcomed the presence of armed men at meetings, some staff carried guns, and there was even discussion of possible retaliatory violence. In 1963, white CORE worker Miriam Feingold captured both the pull of violence and the conflict between the national staff and CORE workers on the ground, writing in her diary, "[CORE leader] Jim McCain says CORE can't afford to advocate retaliation. But [field staff] Dave Dennis, [and] Jerome Smith say to hell with CORE, we're with the people."²³

Greta de Jong, especially, details how CORE's national staff and some volunteers attempted to influence local people to accept nonviolence, though she notes that they had very limited success. Fairclough explains that in 1964, the "director of CORE's southern regional office, sent staff members a memo directing them to cease carrying weapons or resign." When they failed to comply, however, "he turned a blind eye to the practice." As this suggests, local realities and preferences typically trumped the official line coming from the national office. In Louisiana, as in Mississippi, local people did more to influence CORE workers than the other way around. In 1963, Feingold wrote her family, "Most everyone, especially the kids who have been most active, are disillusioned with non-violence, & see the situation very much turning toward violence. They think that we must do as the masses feel—& if it means violence, then that's what we do." Akinyele Umoja and Simon Wendt also detail how black southerners' insistence on their right to self-defense had an increasing impact on CORE at the national and policy level. At the 1963 national convention, field staff warned about the possibility of a "violent racial explosion." Though the group reaffirmed its commitment to nonviolence, it did so in more practical and less idealistic terms. The debate continued in subsequent conventions until, in 1966, CORE publicly asserted what had long been practiced in the field, that self-defense was a "natural, constitutional, and inalienable right" and that "nonviolence and self-defense are not contradictory."²⁴

Hill's narrative fails to acknowledge that national organizations did not always speak with one voice and the national view did not always prevail. Local studies make it clear that black southerners *always* brought their realities and priorities to the table. In varying degrees, they shaped not only their own local movements but the experiences and attitudes of those civil rights organizers they worked with most closely *and* broader national trends and priorities. Interestingly, the specifics of the Deacons' own history, including much of Hill's account, point to the ways that local communities influenced the national organizations. They also suggest that Hill overstates the conflicts between the Deacons (self-defense) and CORE/national organizations (nonviolence). In both Jonesboro and Bogalusa, the men who founded and belonged to the Deacons worked closely with CORE, participated in a wide range of movement activities (including nonviolent demonstrations), and in some instances, publicly articulated their support for nonviolence. Here, as in other communities, self-defense supplemented and supported

other, nonviolent *and* unviolent, forms of protest, including direct action, voter registration, boycotts, litigation, and negotiations. Ironically, according to Hill and Fairclough, two white, philosophically nonviolent CORE workers actually facilitated the establishment of the Deacons, originally in Jonesboro and then in Bogalusa. Moreover, at the 1965 CORE convention, Deacon Earnest Thomas urged CORE delegates to continue their support for tactical nonviolence.²⁵

In attempting to stake out a place for the Deacons and what he considers black militancy, Hill also overstates the Deacons' singular role in the Bogalusa "victory." The victory that Hill attributes almost solely to the Deacons was also based on the work of CORE, the Bogalusa Voters League, and other activists, as well as assertive federal intervention (in response to open racial conflict). Without CORE workers (and others, including some Deacons), demonstrating and insisting on their right to congregate, picket, enter restaurants, and use parks, there would have been no one for the Deacons to protect. Self-defense was just that, *defensive*, and while in many cases it was *essential*, it was never the primary organizing tactic in Bogalusa or the movement as a whole. Moreover, even in Bogalusa where the Deacons escorted activists, guarded the black community, and exchanged gunfire with the Klan, they were unable to effectively protect public demonstrations. With inadequate protection from local lawmen and extensive Klan violence and intimidation (even with the Deacons' determined stand), the significant break in Bogalusa came when a federal judge, with Justice Department urging, took steps to dismantle the Klan and ordered local officials to protect demonstrators. Thus, Hill's effort to stress the Deacons' significance and place self-defense front and center comes at the expense of other aspects of the movement and a nuanced understanding of the interplay of numerous factors.²⁶

Although Hill uses most of his book to emphasize the Deacons' rejection of nonviolence and their centrality in challenging the existing civil rights movement leadership, in his conclusion, he backtracks a little and puts forward an interpretation that is much more in line with the general consensus on self-defense. He writes,

The Deacons did not see their self-defense activities as mutually exclusive of nonviolent tactics and voter registration. Viewing themselves as part of the broader civil rights movement, they did not oppose nonviolent direct action—indeed, they supported it, employed it as a tactic, and expended most of their

energy defending its practitioners. What the Deacons opposed was the dogmatic idea that nonviolent direct action precluded self-defense. . . . The choice confronting the black movement was not, as Martin Luther King and his disciplines maintained, strictly a choice between nonviolence and violence.²⁷

Hill is right. The choice was not strictly "between nonviolence and violence." Moreover, few people really saw it that way. His decision to employ this dichotomy ignores and dismisses the realities of Jonesboro and Bogalusa, along with quite a bit of movement history. It obscures the pervasiveness of self-defense, its essentially complementary nature, its acceptance by many CORE activists and others within national organizations, and the wide range of movement tactics that are not easily categorized as either nonviolence or self-defense. Though direct action was important to Bogalusa, so were many other tactics that were *unviolent*, like voter registration, boycotts, and litigation. In perpetuating this dichotomy, Hill loses an opportunity to explore more precisely the tensions that did exist over nonviolence, the ways that self-defense in Bogalusa was distinct, how the local/national interactions evolved over time, and how the organized, assertive, and visible nature of self-defense in Bogalusa actually did impact the movement more broadly. Moreover, by constructing a framework that equates the Bogalusa Deacons' form of self-defense with an evolution toward militancy and manhood for black men, Hill implies that it was somehow a natural development, rather than a response to a particular set of circumstances.

GENDER AND MILITANCY

The nonviolence/self-defense framing also has implications for understanding the topics of gender and militancy. During the movement and since, many activists, bystanders, commentators, and historians have perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes whereby militancy is defined primarily in terms of guns and violence (or the potential for violence) and nonviolence is denigrated as passive and humiliating, especially for men. While this does reflect a particular view, as a framework for understanding the movement it has severe limitations. It overlooks the coercive and positive elements of nonviolence, obscures activism that was essentially "unviolent," and largely ignores women's experiences, while distorting those of many men. In the end, although a few self-defense scholars give some attention to gender and occasional lip

service to women, for the most part they keep the lens on men. With this approach, both women and men appear somewhat one-dimensional and much of the scholarship accepts too much at face value—be it the gendered language, assumptions, and claims of the 1960s or the unsupported speculations of participants and scholars. In part this reflects the reality that within the movement, men *were* typically more vocal about self-defense and clearly dominated self-defense efforts as they became more organized and formal. Ultimately, though, it seems more connected to stereotypes and an unquestioning acceptance of the idea that self-defense is a “male prerogative.”²⁸

In 1959, before the sit-ins and Freedom Rides illustrated the potential effectiveness of nonviolent action, Robert Williams “denounced the ‘emasculated men’ who preached nonviolence while white mobs beat their wives and daughters.” Many other black men shared these attitudes (including many who remained outside the southern movement), but the Deacons were among the most assertive proponents of self-defense in terms of masculinity. Christopher Strain titled his 1997 article on the Deacons “We Walked Like Men” and argues that the organization became “an expression of manhood.” Simon Wendt insists, “The Deacons’ armed militancy also reflected southern black men’s determination to assert their manhood.” Hill claims that the Deacons offered “black men a way to participate in the movement while maintaining their concept of male honor and dignity” and that in Jonesboro, Deacons’ meetings “became a pulpit for the new creed of manhood.” According to Hill, for the Deacons, “[f]reedom for black men depended on manhood, and manhood meant the willingness to use force to defend one’s family and community. Black men could not attain manhood through the strategy of nonviolence, since nonviolence prohibited the use of force. And without manhood status, rights were meaningless. For black men to be free, whites had to fear as well as respect them.” Wendt, too, asserts that for Deacons “there was no freedom without dignity, and sometimes, dignity could only come from the barrel of a gun.”²⁹

Following this line of thinking, some authors insist that the “nonviolence” supposedly required by the movement was a major factor in limiting male participation and that the supposed “passivity” of nonviolence was somehow more problematic for men than women. (The unspoken corollary is that it was somehow problematic that more women than men joined the movement.)³⁰ For example, Simon Wendt observes that “[t]o the primarily working-class men who joined the Deacons, Martin Luther King’s idea

of nonviolence was degrading to their notion of male identity.” Even as he observes that women regularly used self-defense, he expresses surprise that “women practiced what most men considered a male prerogative” and speculates that “[o]ne explanation could be that white supremacy had traditionally impeded the ability of black men to defend themselves and their community.”³¹ Lance Hill offers a blanket description of nonviolence as a “pacifistic” attempt at moral suasion that required blacks to cater to whites’ fears and preferences. He also contends it was “emasculating,” leading black men to “boycott” the movement rather than “passively endure humiliation and physical abuse.”³² Hill asserts that “the physical and emotional risks that black men assumed when they joined a nonviolent protest far outweighed what black women and children suffered.” Moreover, he continues, “Bound by notions of masculine honor, black men had much more to lose than women and children: what was at stake was their pride, their manhood, and, very likely, their life.” Wendt adds, “Men were generally more reluctant to become involved in civil rights activism. Many were afraid of losing their job or of white retaliation. Others refused to participate because of their opposition to nonviolence.”³³ Though Wendt acknowledges that a range of factors influenced black men’s participation or lack thereof, neither he nor Hill offer much evidence to support their broad claim that antipathy to nonviolence, more than other factors, kept black men (and men more than women) out of the movement. Instead, they speculate about the psychological impact of white supremacy on black men and rely heavily on the rhetoric of a few men, most of them Deacons, to make the connection to manhood.³⁴ Unfortunately, they and others too often fail to go beyond such relatively superficial characterizations.

Here again, some of the earlier local studies offer useful insight and point to the possibilities for a more nuanced, complex assessment. Through an accumulation of details, it is clear that black women in the Mississippi movement were actively involved in defending themselves and their families. In Dittmer’s and Payne’s accounts, the ways women and men used and understood self-defense do not appear so starkly different and do not easily fit with the gendered stereotypes that populate some of the self-defense oriented books. Moreover, in an entire chapter devoted to considering women’s disproportionate movement participation, Payne’s focus is ultimately on efficacy: what does it take for women and men to have the courage and faith to act in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds? Neither he nor any

of those he quotes so much as speculate that nonviolence was a factor in the participation rates of women or men. Payne analyzes and discounts the somewhat-related “differential-reprisal theory” offered by some, that women joined the movement because they were somehow less vulnerable to violence or economic retaliation. Furthermore, in his counter-example of Holmes County—where men joined the movement early and in large numbers, bucking the pattern of neighboring Delta counties—Payne points to the significance of high rates of contiguous black landownership, along with a history of working in cooperatives. Thus, he speculates that it was these positive experiences that led to increased efficacy, and increased movement participation, among Holmes County men. Nonviolence—its presence or absence—appears irrelevant.³⁵

Even more than Dittmer and Payne, Timothy Tyson gives particular attention to the intersection of gender and self-defense in the Monroe movement where women and men used and advocated armed self-defense. Tyson argues that black women “both deployed” and “defied” gender stereotypes. For example, women urged Robert Williams and other men to stand up and protect them, while simultaneously insisting on weapons training and agitating to participate in the self-defense network. In one instance, a crowd of armed women crowded into the police station and demanded the release of Dr. Albert Perry, a jailed movement leader. In another, Mabel Williams, Robert’s wife, used a .12-gauge shotgun to keep police at bay when they came to arrest her husband. And yet, women and men both had gendered expectations related to self-defense. Robert Williams recalled that although women “wanted to fight[,] . . . we kept them out of most of it.” For their part, black women “turned on Robert Williams” when two white men were acquitted of crimes against black women and “bitterly shamed him for failing to provide for their protection.” Earlier, Williams had discouraged them in their calls for extralegal revenge. Grounding his analysis in the context of race and gender in the 1950s, Tyson explains that black men considered it their duty and right to protect black women “not as an abstract rhetorical commitment to black patriarchy but as a deep and daily personal responsibility.” At the same time, Tyson argues that “[t]he rhetoric of protecting women was an integral part of the politics of controlling women” and that protecting “‘their’ women” was also as much about black men’s identities as it was about “the security” of women.³⁶ Taken together, Tyson’s examples and analysis offer a complex

picture of self-defense and gender that extends to the attitudes and actions of men and women.³⁷

More recently, historian Steve Estes challenges the stereotype that nonviolence was inherently unmanly, claiming that the “young men in the movement created militant new models of black manhood.” In fact, he argues that despite its passive connotations, nonviolence “could be courageous and even manly.” Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), who introduced the “Black Power” slogan to the nation during the 1966 Meredith March, takes up the nonviolent stereotype in his posthumously published memoir, *Ready for Revolution*. He carefully explains the differences between tactical and philosophical nonviolence and asserts that both required considerable discipline and were anything but “passive.” Moreover, according to Carmichael, rather than limiting participation, strategic nonviolence “gave our generation—particularly in the South—the means by which to confront an entrenched and violent racism. It offered a way for *large* numbers of [African Americans] to join the struggle. Nothing passive in that.” He also explains that he “gloried” in “*direct action*” because although it was nonviolent, it was also “directly confrontational, even aggressively so.” He reiterates that one of the important aspects of nonviolent action was that it allowed “the entire community, everyone who would, [to] be a part and hope to survive.”

In talking about the Albany, Georgia, movement, Bernice Johnson Reagon describes the “sense of power” that she and others got from “confronting things that terrified you, like jail, police, walking in the street—you know, a whole lot of Black folks couldn’t even walk in the street in those places in the South.” Though she does not define her experience in terms of nonviolence, direct action was a key component of the Albany Movement and was one way that African Americans actively resisted segregation and challenged white authority. Reagon explains that, for her, the central aspect of the Albany Movement was that it gave her a “real chance to struggle” and “the power to challenge *any* line that limits me.”³⁸

At times, it seems that scholars accept (or project) facile characterizations of nonviolence as a way to excuse or justify women’s more widespread participation in the movement, while failing to offer a compelling argument for why men might have found “nonviolence” more problematic than women. Thus, the idea that nonviolence was both passive and emasculating, along with the corollary that self-defense was a crucial antidote, particularly essential to black “manhood,” remains a powerful theme in the work of self-

defense scholars. However, in many ways this issue of “nonviolence” is a red herring since many men and women used it assertively in ways that enhanced their feeling of dignity, while others joined the movement without submitting to the discipline of nonviolence or giving up their right to armed self-defense. It is hard to seriously consider the Mississippi movement, just to take an example, and conclude that it was based on a cringing form of nonviolence that was emasculating and geared toward appeasing whites. And certainly, as Dittmer and Payne make clear, the *men and women* who tried to register to vote or participated in the Mississippi movement in any way, were prepared to and did defend themselves with guns. I cannot think of one single cringing emasculated man who *joined* the movement. A facile glorification of guns and disparagement of nonviolence becomes a substitute for careful analysis of gendered differences in movement participation. Thus, these scholars miss the opportunity to contribute to a fuller understanding of the reasons both men and women chose to join or not join.

In fact, anyone joining the movement had to consider the likelihood of job loss, violence, and other forms of repression. This certainly extended to men as well as women. Hill himself notes that there was actually widespread fear among black men, fear and passivity (unrelated to nonviolence) that the Deacons tried to combat. He explains, for example, that the Jonesboro Deacons sought to “shock black men out of the lethargy of fear.” Umoja, who avoids these gendered stereotypes, notes that actively engaging in armed resistance helped many men overcome fear. In 1964, when SNCC’s Charles McLaurin was leading a demonstration composed of “kids and women,” he urged the black men watching from the sidelines to join and accused them of being “afraid.” A number of movement activists (including those who believed in self-defense) suggest, in fact, that men (and women?) sometimes tried to cover up their fear and inaction through disparaging nonviolence. Stokely Carmichael recalls listening to Malcolm X assail “the ‘unmanliness’ of leaders who would watch white men brutalize their women and children while professing ‘nonviolence.’” This gave Carmichael pause, but he also observed that “all the brothers in the room who’d never been on our picket lines suddenly found justification for their absence.” Similarly, SNCC organizer Worth Long explains that “people who were afraid would say ‘I would go out with you and march with you . . . except that I’m violent. I might hit somebody.’ Basically they’re saying they’re afraid. So I would say things like, ‘Well, I’m scared too.’ Get to the heart of the matter.”³⁹

Most of the assessments of men and masculinity are too superficial, but the attention to women is even more cursory, with little or no analysis of how they understood their use of self-defense, what they thought of nonviolence, what they wanted from the men they lived and worked with, or any other of the many questions we might ask. The self-defense scholarship also tends to ignore the possibility that the explanation for women’s more frequent movement participation might lie in something positive related to women, rather than something negative related to men.⁴⁰ Hill does note that women joined the Jonesboro Deacons and that women in both Deacon strongholds, Jonesboro and Bogalusa, held target practice and contemplated a women’s auxiliary. Moreover, in all these communities, even after self-defense became organized, women continued to wield and use weapons. In Bogalusa, Jackie Hicks pulled a pistol out of her purse to “fend off” a mob during an attempt to desegregate a public park. Despite these important snippets, Hill fails to offer much detail or any analysis, simply observing in one endnote that “[t]here are no studies of the role of women in the self-defense movement, though it would be a fascinating and useful subject.” Similarly, Hill gives a nod to the fact that some women, like some men, had problems with nonviolence, writing, “[L]arge numbers of women refused to participate in nonviolent activities for some of the same reasons as men.”⁴¹ Although this is an important point, it remains buried, included as an aside. There is no systematic analysis of the responses, attitudes, and actions of men and women in relation to nonviolence, self-defense, and a wide range of movement tactics—an approach that might offer some insight and one that is certainly relevant to Hill’s gendered conclusions.

Wendt also focuses on the meaning of self-defense for men and defines men’s use of self-defense in terms of masculinity, even when their explanations appear gender neutral. In one instance, Wendt argues that “[i]n assuming the protection of women and children, [Medgar] Evers, [Hartman] Turnbow, and other black Mississippians regained part of their manhood that whites had long denied them.” While there is undoubtedly some truth to the idea that black men believed that they should protect black women and children, this assertion includes a number of blindspots. One, it assumes that, separate from self-defense, these men felt unmanly. Two, it ignores the long-standing history of self-defense among African Americans. As Payne and others have pointed out, self-defense did change and was different when it was connected to an organized political movement, but there were *always*

African Americans who used weapons to protect themselves and their families.⁴² In addition, given the number of women among the black Mississippians who used self-defense, it is problematic to imply, as this does, that self-defense was the province of men. Did women's use of self-defense help them regain their manhood? Their womanhood? Though Wendt follows up with quotes by a number of male activists, their explanations for self-defense appear fairly universal and it is not clear why they would not apply just as well to women. Comparisons are difficult, however, since Wendt did not include the voices of any women on their use of self-defense. The logic seems to go like this: self-defense is somehow inherently masculine; therefore, no matter the explanation, men who use it do so in order to assert their manhood.

Self-defense was undoubtedly gendered. For some, it was almost certainly related to ideas of manhood, masculinity, and the male "prerogative" of protecting one's family and community. Yet it is important not to read "manhood" into every instance of self-defense or every explanation of it. Did women and men understand self-defense differently? Why did self-defense become more male as it became more organized? Does it follow the typical pattern in the movement, where women are most visible and apparent at the grass-roots level, while men tend to dominate more formal and visible leadership positions? Or is there something different at work here? Were there men who participated in the movement only through organized self-defense efforts? If so, who were they? How did they differ from men who also (or only) participated in other movement activities?

Women are a significant part of this story, too, and we need to acknowledge that and bring them into the narrative in meaningful, not superficial, ways. How did Laura McGhee understand her use of self-defense? (Not only did she and her sons shoot back at violent night riders, she punched a police officer in the Greenwood jail.)⁴³ Did protecting her family mean something different to McGhee than it did to Hartman Turnbow? Did Turnbow feel more manly after shooting back at the men who firebombed his house? Or was it security in his manhood that brought him into the movement and made him a target in the first place? Did joining the Deacons mean something different to women than men in Jonesboro? Why do we know so little about these women? And what about Jackie Hicks in Bogalusa? She consistently defended her home and pulled a gun on lawmen in a public park. According to Hill, she organized target practice for women and tried to form a Deacons' auxiliary. How did she feel about being excluded from the group?

Did it matter to her? Did she feel discriminated against? Proud of the men who stepped forward? Disgusted at the chauvinism that limited the pool of participants? And what of her Deacon husband? How did he feel about her active self-defense? He is unarmed at the park, while she has a gun. Does he feel unmanly? Or proud? Would he feel safer if she was in the Deacons? Or is he emasculated by her assertiveness?

FIGHTING BACK IN THE "NONVIOLENT" MOVEMENT

One of the problems with this kind of superficial and flawed gender analysis, especially when combined with the persistence of the nonviolence and self-defense dichotomy, is that it actually makes it more difficult to acknowledge and fully grapple with the experiences, perspectives, and impact (on the movement) of the people, *men and women*, who chose not to join the movement or who limited their participation because they were unable or unwilling to submit to nonviolent discipline.⁴⁴ Timothy Tyson gives a glimpse of this complexity through his profile of Mae Mallory, who became an avid supporter of Robert Williams after hearing his outspoken insistence on armed defense. Though Mallory was "among those who would never enlist in the armies of nonviolence," she was a movement activist in Harlem and as a supporter of Williams and the Monroe movement. In 1961, when a group of freedom riders went to Monroe and escalated demonstrations, Mallory came immediately to help Mabel Williams with "household chores." Once in Monroe, she stayed away from demonstrations because of her unwillingness to "submit to nonviolent discipline." In fact, Robert Williams recalled that several times he had to discourage her interest in initiating violence.⁴⁵

This is just the tip of the iceberg and another problem with the nonviolence/self-defense framework. Just as many tactics did not require nonviolence, many people broke nonviolent discipline and/or used, considered, reacted with, or threatened violence in ways that stretched the boundaries of self-defense. The example of Judy Richardson, a nineteen-year-old SNCC activist who had spent a year at Swarthmore, is probably somewhat typical. During an arrest at a January 1964 demonstration in Atlanta, she reacted angrily to the rough handling of another demonstrator by police. Struggling to get away and help, she unintentionally kicked an officer in the groin. According to the *New York Times*, several others "sought to tear off a policeman's jacket." Many of the personal accounts in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*,

a collection of autobiographical narratives by SNCC women, feature self-defense, while a few describe similar incidents of breaking discipline during ostensibly nonviolent protests. For example, Mildred Forman, wife of SNCC's executive secretary James Forman, fought with a police officer in Atlanta who was determined to drag her on the ground during an arrest. She reflected later that "nonviolence was only a tactic, not my Chicago way of life." She also remembered Martin Luther King Jr. teasing her husband about seeing the incident on the news and suggesting to Forman that he "keep [his] wife in the office" so she would not "ruin our nonviolent concept!" In another instance, a "group of black youngsters . . . brandishing sticks and . . . shouting 'Freedom! Freedom!'" saved her and other picketers from a Klan attack in front of the Atlanta restaurant owned by Lester Maddox, later an aggressively segregationist governor. Fay Bellamy recalls being shocked to find herself "locked in mortal combat" with a state trooper who knocked her down the Capitol steps during another Atlanta demonstration. When a police officer refused to stop pinching her arm after a later arrest, she hit "him with all the power I could muster." After the second incident, she decided that "being nonviolent" during demonstrations was not one of her "strengths" and she would have to focus on other ways to be part of the "nonviolent struggle."⁴⁶

Nashville is often held up as an ideal for nonviolence, in part because it was home to James Lawson's nonviolent workshops. These fostered disciplined and effective sit-ins, while producing a committed group of philosophically nonviolent practitioners. These influential activists insisted the Freedom Rides continue, even in the face of extreme violence and federal demands for a cooling off period, and many became leaders in SNCC and SCLC. Despite this, SNCC activists James Forman and Stokely Carmichael both recall that in the summer of 1961, there were heated debates in Nashville over the appropriate role of nonviolence in the movement and considerable resistance to strict nonviolence from some segments of the black community. Neither Forman nor Carmichael embraced philosophical nonviolence, though both saw it as an important tactic. For example, Forman writes that he viewed nonviolence "as a means to build a mass movement and to build the self-confidence of our people as a whole." Despite reservations about his ability to maintain nonviolence, Forman joined a picket line (part of an ongoing protest) and recalls that when he "faced" the "hecklers" he "had to steel" himself, noting that "I didn't want to break the discipline of the group by striking back." Though he found this a "terrible test of my nerves," Forman's

belief in "collective discipline" kept him in "the nonviolent group." He recalls, however, that Bill Hargrove, a freedom rider who had abandoned nonviolence, was among a group of "young blacks" who stood watch across the street, prepared to battle whites if they attacked the nonviolent demonstrators. Writing in 1972, Forman characterized this group as "forerunners of the Deacons" who themselves, he argues, were "an inevitable parallel to the development of nonviolence."⁴⁷

Carmichael, probably describing the same protest (that extended over several weeks), recounts a conversation with "a group of brothers off the corner" who expressed support for the movement, but said, "We don't go for none a' that nonviolence stuff." Carmichael responded that "nonviolence is hard, it ain't for everybody." With fellow SNCC activist Dion Diamond, he asserted that they did not have to be nonviolent, but urged them to "find a way to struggle." According to Carmichael, they did. A few nights later when a white heckler knocked him into a plate glass window and the police moved in to arrest him, "the young brothers on the corner" responded by "throwing bricks and bottles and whatever else they had stockpiled." Carmichael found that not everyone was happy with his ecumenical organizing and at a "heavy, heavy meeting," leaders of the Nashville movement accused him of "causing the violence at the demonstration" and threatened to expel him from the "nonviolent movement."⁴⁸ As these examples suggest, there were people who supported the movement, but had trouble with the idea or practice of nonviolence. At least some of them still found ways to act.

Moreover, as these examples illustrate, violence or its potential was always present in the movement. In a 2001 essay, Jenny Walker argues that the media (followed by many historians) "often seemed inclined to ignore, downplay or de-politicize incidents of black violence and inflammatory rhetoric in civil rights protests." Revisiting the well-known bombing of King's home during the Montgomery Bus Boycott when "an angry and armed crowd . . . gathered outside intent on revenge," she notes that many "journalists and historians in telling this story have focused on the fact that King persuaded the seething mob to return home peacefully. Thus, the departure from nonviolent discipline is reduced to a parable" about King's commitment to nonviolence and his ability to "revitalize the black community's own momentarily wavering passion for nonviolence." More recently, those focusing on self-defense have shifted the focus a bit, often analyzing the Montgomery Bus Boycott to illustrate King's own wavering and slow conversion to nonviolence as well as

the fluidity of nonviolence and self-defense. Christopher Strain, for example, notes that "while King defused the volatile situation with a message of peace, he prepared for war." He concludes that although King came to embrace nonviolence in a way that "made self-defense obsolete," other African Americans "needed more convincing." In fact, Strain insists, King's "faith in nonviolence ran counter to the pervasive, if sometimes unspoken sentiment among black Americans that freedom should come 'by any means necessary.'"⁴⁹

Walker makes a similar argument, though she turns her lens even more purposefully away from King and toward the angry crowd and their counterparts in black Montgomery. In her view, the incident is less a parable about the triumph of nonviolence than a warning about the potential for violence. She argues that the crowd reflects "a willingness to take up arms to resist white aggression, sometimes spilling over into a desire for vengeance . . . [that] lurked permanently beneath the respectable surface of the nonviolent boycott." She then devotes several paragraphs to effectively illustrating this point, including examples of black women threatening retaliation if King should come to harm. In her 1992 memoir for young adults, Rosa Parks, often used as a symbol of respectable nonviolence, reinforces Walker's conclusions. She explains that for most blacks in Montgomery, "On an individual level, nonviolence could be mistaken for cowardice. The concept of mass nonviolent action was something new and very controversial. Some people thought it was risky and would invite more violence." Though she and others came to see "that the tactic could be successful," Parks concluded that she was never "an absolute supporter of nonviolence in all situations."⁵⁰

As with self-defense, the local studies by Dittmer and Payne provide considerable detail and context for the ways that black violence was woven into the fabric of the ostensibly nonviolent movement. For example, in late 1954, after an inaccurate rumor that black leader T. R. M. Howard's wife had been assaulted, fifteen carloads of armed blacks offered their assistance. Also in the 1950s, Medgar Evers followed news of the Kenyan liberation movement and seriously considered the possibility of guerilla warfare. Laura McGhee, like Evers, was assertive and open to options. After one attack on her farm, she called the sheriff to warn him that next time she called, he would be "picking up bodies." In another incident, she punched a police officer who was harassing her as she tried to bail out one of her sons. John Dittmer observes that in the months before the 1964 Summer Project, Justice Department head Burke Marshall was concerned that blacks and whites were arming themselves and

"preparing for confrontation." In Natchez in late 1965, NAACP state field secretary Charles Evers explicitly threatened retaliation in response to white violence. He also encouraged the harassment of African Americans who violated an NAACP-sponsored boycott in Natchez (and elsewhere). In a more recent local study of Cambridge, Maryland, Peter Levy makes it clear that self-defense was widely accepted and practiced among local blacks. Black men kept regular watch, firing back at white vigilantes who rode through the black community shooting at African American homes and residents. He also observes that, anticipating violence, black protesters sometimes carried weapons on demonstrations. In June 1963, in the midst of considerable tension, several white-owned businesses were burned in the black neighborhood, blacks and whites exchanged gunfire, and when the police entered the black community, they "were met with a barrage of bricks and bottles."⁵¹

John Dittmer details a number of instances in which black Mississippians engaged in or considered collective retaliation. When police stopped Medgar Evers's funeral procession in 1963, "angry blacks fought back, showering the police with bricks, bottles, and other available missiles." In February 1964, after a black woman was hit by a car, more than seven hundred students at Jackson State "went on a rampage, throwing rocks, bricks, and bottles at cars driven by whites." A few months later, when Greenwood activist Silas McGhee was shot in his car, a crowd of armed black men converged on the movement office. Dittmer describes McComb, Mississippi, after a series of bombings in fall 1964, as an "armed camp." The late September bombing of movement activist Aylene Quin's home was, apparently, one bombing too many. "Several hundred angry blacks stormed into the streets. . . . Some were carrying guns, while others made molotov cocktails by pouring gasoline into empty beer bottles."⁵²

In describing the Greenwood incident, Dittmer notes that these were "new faces." These were "black men in their late twenties and thirties who had not previously been involved in the movement." CORE worker Dave Dennis makes much the same point about many of those who reacted violently in response to the repression at Medgar Evers's funeral. He explains, "There was a different element of people who had never participated in the movement before. They didn't want to have anything to do with us, because they felt that they could not cope with the nonviolence. It's not that they disagreed with the movement, but with the tactics that we used. These guys off the street were just angry, you know, and that day they decided to speak up." During Evers's

funeral march, Dennis was among those trying to calm the angry crowd. SNCC workers did the same in Greenwood and McComb. In each of these cases and others, activists tried to limit violence and control crowds, not because they had any inherent objection to violence or desire to cater to whites, but for fear that black attackers would bear the brunt of the violence. Dittmer notes, for example, that after McGhee was shot SNCC workers convinced the armed newcomers, along with "several hundred other angry local people," to engage in "peaceful protest and thus avoid a bloodbath."⁵³

In this respect, Mississippi was typical. Movement history is full of examples of spontaneous collective retaliation (or potential retaliation) that highlight the point that should be clear—nonviolence was never universal or inevitable. Many blacks were prepared and willing to fight back. Some incidents are fairly well-known. In July 1962 in Albany, Georgia, for example, African Americans threw bricks and bottles at white police officers and passing motorists. In May 1963 in Birmingham, bystanders did the same after police attacked nonviolent protesters with fire hoses and police dogs. The violence in Birmingham was even more extensive a few weeks later when an angry crowd poured into the streets after the bombing of the Gaston Motel, where King and other SCLC leaders had been staying. Outraged African Americans attacked police cars and fire trucks, looted and burned businesses, and assaulted passing motorists.⁵⁴

Black citizens and movement activists did have disagreements over the role and appropriateness of both nonviolence and violence. In some instances, black retaliation or advocacy of violence explicitly reflected or caused friction within the movement and the larger community. At times these tensions were related to pragmatic concerns about fund-raising and public relations. For example, James Forman, who had his own difficulties with nonviolence, chastised Judy Richardson for kicking the police officer (at least partially because she did it in front of a *New York Times* reporter). Simon Wendt contends that civil rights organizations purposefully misrepresented their work, projecting "King's philosophy" as "the movement's official creed" and promoting "a false polarity between nonviolence and armed resistance as a tactical ploy to nurture and sustain white support." He insists that even as SNCC and CORE became less and less committed to philosophical nonviolence, they continued to highlight it to the media and in their promotional and fund-raising materials.⁵⁵

Some of the internal conflicts were more serious and reflected strongly

divergent philosophical beliefs. Carmichael's experience in Nashville, for example, exemplified disagreement both within the movement and between some activists and the larger black community. In fall 1961, some of the Freedom Riders who went to Monroe, North Carolina, to support the local movement there "considered themselves philosophical if not personal adversaries" of Robert Williams and came "to prove that Williams was wrong about [the limitations of] nonviolence." One explained to reporters that what happened in Monroe was crucial to the future of "nonviolence" and "will determine the course taken in many other communities throughout the South." In July 1962 when blacks in Albany, Georgia, threw "rocks and bottles" at police officers, Martin Luther King was "deeply upset." At a news conference, he emphasized that those who were involved in the disorder were "onlookers" and not "part of our movement." He also announced a "twenty-four-hour moratorium on all demonstrations" and a "day of penance" to serve "as a symbolic apology." Historian Wesley Hogan describes a different incident in Albany, Georgia, in 1964 after a white policeman shot a young black child. She writes, "1200 people showed up to a mass meeting." However, "when SNCC people began to talk about nonviolence, it had a chilling effect on many in attendance."⁵⁶

SNCC activist Prathia Hall witnessed another conflict between SCLC leaders and angry local residents. At a meeting in the wake of the January 1965 Bloody Sunday violence in Selma, Alabama, she recalled that because SCLC staff "were afraid that the anger would turn to violence," they were emphasizing love and nonviolence, even to the extent of trying to manipulate the religious faith and singing of those present. Although Hall came into the Movement embracing nonviolence as a way of life, she was upset in this context by what she felt amounted to "spiritual extortion," explaining, "If a person has spent all of his or her life living and suffering in the expectation of seeing Jesus at the end, it is troubling to be told if you cannot sing this song right now, you will not be saved. . . . Folks were not feeling very loving and they were not singing. This was a theological crisis for me."⁵⁷

Who were the people who threw rocks and bottles or showed up armed, ready to retaliate for white violence? They appear in the fringes of movement histories, sometimes as foils or threats to King's nonviolence, sometimes as evidence of the limits of nonviolence, and sometimes as the sources of an implicit (or explicit threat) that forced white concessions. But we know very little about who they were, how they related to the movement, or how their actions impacted the movement as a whole. There is evidence to suggest that

some may have rejected “nonviolence,” but this tells us little. If we move beyond the framework of nonviolence versus self-defense/violence dichotomy, we have the potential to see a much more complex picture. In Albany, for example, we might shift our focus from King’s response and the media’s coverage and turn toward those who threw the rocks. Though one historian notes that SNCC workers considered the “day of penance” humiliating, we know little about how local blacks (the “bystanders” and those in the movement) felt about the retaliation or King’s response to it. And why did blacks in Albany choose that day, after months of demonstrations, to fight back? Was it triggered by the beating hours earlier of Marion King, the pregnant movement supporter whose husband was a prominent leader? And how did the retaliation and King’s response impact the local movement? Several historians note that SCLC subsequently had difficulty recruiting local blacks to go to jail.⁵⁸ Was there a connection? In Albany and later in Selma, how did SCLC’s insistence on “nonviolence” impact those struggling to come to grips with the violence against themselves, their families, and their community? And similarly, what did SNCC’s calls for “nonviolence” mean to the angry crowd after the 1964 police shooting in Albany? Did it prevent retaliation and more violence? Or did it undermine the possibility for other types of protest or action? And how did movement tactics and the projection of nonviolence impact those who joined the movement and those who did not? This is particularly important to understand when it is clear that only a small fraction of movement participants believed in philosophical nonviolence and many people found ways to participate, with or without engaging in tactical nonviolence. Thus, attitudes toward nonviolence seem far too simplistic as a singular explanation for whether one chose to participate or not.

HOW DOES SELF-DEFENSE CHANGE IN 1964? WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ARMED RESISTANCE?

One of the key historiographical issues that needs more attention and clarity is the precise nature of the ways self-defense changed (and didn’t) in the mid-1960s. Through local studies, especially, we have a good sense of how self-defense worked at the level of individuals acting alone or with close friends and family. We also know that by 1964 armed self-defense was more visible, more organized, and there was a general shift toward more open and collective efforts to protect demonstrations and public space, not just private

homes, leaders, and meeting spaces. Though the Deacons are the most visible manifestation of this trend, it was well under way when they burst onto the national scene in Bogalusa in the summer of 1965. Before the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, many individuals in SNCC and CORE accepted self-defense and both organizations were debating their official policies. By July 1964 there was an armed self-defense group in Tuscaloosa committed to protecting the movement, including nonviolent demonstrators who were testing enforcement of the newly passed Civil Rights Act. Throughout that summer, a number of collective, though still somewhat informal, groups protected well-known activists and the rural Mississippi communities of Harmony and Mileston. That fall, the Deacons organized in Jonesboro, expanding to Bogalusa in February 1965. With the Deacons, movement-related self-defense gained more national attention, offered a more explicit public challenge to double standards (surrounding race, violence, and law enforcement), frightened some whites, and helped inspire many African Americans.

Beyond these basics, historians disagree on the extent to which the Deacons precipitated (or reflected) a major shift in self-defense and overall movement tactics; the nature of (and reasons for) their success in Bogalusa; and the degree to which they expanded beyond Jonesboro, Bogalusa, and the 1966 Meredith March. There are also major differences in how historians assess the impact of self-defense and the ways scholars use the phrase “armed resistance.”

For Wendt and Fairclough, the Deacons’ most important contribution came in Bogalusa, as part of that particular movement. They both emphasize the positive interplay between the Deacons’ self-defense and nonviolent tactics (especially in prompting federal intervention), stress the similarities in the self-defense of the Deacons and others in the movement, and reject claims (by the Deacons and other scholars) that the group experienced any significant expansion beyond Louisiana. Fairclough concludes, for example, that “the emergence of the gun-toting Deacons for Defense and Justice, regarded by many at the time as a harbinger of deadly armed conflict throughout the South, turned out to be less important than it first seemed. Contrary to exaggerated press reports, the Deacons never grew into a statewide, let alone a southwide, organization, and by 1967 it was defunct.”⁵⁹

In different ways, Christopher Strain, Akinyele Umoja, and Lance Hill see the Deacons as representing significant shifts in the movement and tend to emphasize the organization’s expansion and relevance beyond Bogalusa.⁶⁰

Strain evaluates the Deacons in the context of broad national developments, rather than primarily within a southern movement context. He argues that the Deacons “combined Robert Williams’s pragmatic real-world approach to self-defense with Malcolm’s insistence on” its “constitutional significance.” He sees the Deacons, then, as representing a stage in the “politicization of self-defense” and part of a “trend [that] would reach its zenith with the actions of another group, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.” For his part, Umoja emphasizes the ways the Deacons served as an important model within a larger shift from nonviolence to armed resistance, specifically within the context of the southern movement. He asserts that, given the massive failure of federal, state, and local law enforcement officials to protect African Americans, “the paramilitary organization of the Deacons seemed to be the natural progression.”⁶¹

In assessing the Deacons’ overall impact, Hill’s claims are, again, somewhat atypical. For one, he appears to overemphasize the role of the Deacons in almost single-handedly achieving an unambiguous victory in Bogalusa. (Ironically, given his seeming disdain for those activists who he characterizes as appealing to the federal government for change, he concludes that the victory came through forcing the “Yankee government to invade the South once again.”) For Hill, however, the Deacons’ real significance is that they precipitated a sharp break *in the movement* and, building on that, they successfully expanded throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, and beyond. In highlighting the Deacons’ distinctiveness, Hill hammers a number of interrelated, recurring themes: that the Deacons’ version of self-defense was unique; that only the Deacons’ public, organized, and visible version of self-defense had political meaning; and that the Deacons represented an explicit challenge to (and victory over) the existing “nonviolent” movement. Like Umoja, he appears to see a shift toward “armed resistance” as a natural progression, but unlike Umoja, he sees it as an entirely new development that included an explicit rejection of previous approaches. For example, Hill asserts that the Deacons “transformed self-defense from a clandestine and locally restricted activity into a public and wide-ranging organization capable of challenging the entrenched movement leadership and its creed of nonviolence.”⁶² (Here and elsewhere, Hill’s emphasis implies that the Deacons’ primary concern was contesting movement tactics and ideology—presumably nonviolence—not defying white supremacy and protecting movement activists under attack for challenging the status quo.)

These divergent assessments of the Deacons reflect considerable difference in the ways scholars frame and evaluate self-defense. Wendt and Strain are somewhat restrained and ambivalent in their conclusions about the extent to which self-defense and other forms of violence and coercion were productive and contributed to the movement’s success. After chronicling the emergence of the Deacons, Strain focuses largely on events outside the South. To some extent he emphasizes continuity, arguing that Malcolm X’s rhetoric, the Watts “conflagration,” and the early work of the Oakland Black Panther Party could all be considered self-defense, but he also sees these as stages through which self-defense develops and evolves. Though he insists that African Americans’ use of self-defense “represented a watershed in race relations” and was a “form of empowerment,” he also concludes that “armed self-defense offered few easy solutions” and may have helped undermine the movement. He concludes, “If self-defense proved effective in the struggle and complementary to nonviolence, then it did so at no small cost, and one must be careful not to romanticize the practice of self-defense. . . . Armed self-defense provided no panacea capable of curing four hundred years of racial transgressions.”⁶³

Wendt devotes most of his book to the South and more explicitly contrasts southern self-defense, which he sees as largely effective, with northern self-defense (based largely on a study of the Black Panther Party), which he argues was primarily symbolic and ultimately self-defeating. In contrast to Umoja and, especially, Hill, he argues that self-defense did not replace nonviolence but that in fact, self-defense disappeared along with nonviolence. “Given the symbiotic relationship between protest and protection in the southern civil rights struggle, the demise of nonviolent demonstrations also led to the end of the region’s era of armed black resistance.” Though he largely accepts self-defense as a necessary and useful corollary to the southern “nonviolent” movement, especially in providing protection, reducing white violence, boosting morale, and adding a coercive element to black efforts to negotiate, Wendt does express caution in his assessment, arguing that self-defense sometimes led to increased white repression and that it could undermine the movement’s “moral power in the eyes of white moderates.”⁶⁴

Although Umoja and Hill differ in their interpretations of how nonviolence and self-defense evolved, they both insist that after 1964 and the Deacons there was a dramatic change toward more “militant” action by African Americans. Umoja argues that after 1964, “armed resistance would take on a more institutionalized and paramilitary character.” Dismissing pre-

Deacons self-defense efforts, Hill asserts that “[a]rmed self-defense had no political significance until it became collective and public and openly challenged authority and white terror.” Moreover, for Hill this shift was singularly responsible for the movement’s victories. He concludes, “Only after the threat of black violence emerged did civil rights legislation move to the forefront of the national agenda. Only after the Deacons appeared were the civil rights laws effectively enforced and the obstructions of terrorists and complicit law enforcement agencies neutralized.”⁶⁵

To bolster their arguments, both Hill and Umoja turn to events in southwest Mississippi where, starting in Natchez in late 1965 and extending throughout southwest Mississippi over the next few years, NAACP state field secretary Charles Evers used a combination of economic boycotts, self-defense groups, boycott enforcement, and confrontational rhetoric to mobilize black communities and force concessions from the local white power structure. Hill uses this as evidence that the Louisiana Deacons were effective in using “the gun” as their “principal organizing tool” to successfully expand beyond Jonesboro and Bogalusa. He further argues that Evers “employed the strategic model for community organizing that the Louisiana Deacons perfected before the Natchez campaign. It was a strategy that eschewed appeals to northern conscience and instead forced local concessions through a combination of legal protest, economic coercion, and most importantly, militant force—in the form of armed self-defense and community discipline.”⁶⁶ For Umoja, who emphasizes that these southwest Mississippi self-defense groups had no formal affiliation with the Louisiana Deacons, the “Natchez model” (his name for what Hill attributes to the Deacons) is also important, but as evidence of the emergence of armed resistance (which he defines as including but going beyond self-defense) as a primary strategy in Mississippi. He highlights the new prominence of “confrontational and inflammatory rhetoric,” along with “the open threat of violent response.” He asserts, moreover, that paramilitary groups in these communities were responsible for protection and boycott enforcement, while representing the possibility of retaliation against whites. Thus, in his view, the Natchez model was significant for “using the threat of coercive response to defeat external and internal enemies of the Mississippi freedom movement.”⁶⁷

The Port Gibson/Claiborne County self-defense group is crucial to both Hill’s and Umoja’s arguments. They describe the Port Gibson “Black Hats” (the most common local name) as one of the “strongest Deacons chapters in

Mississippi” and as being “among the best organized and most effective paramilitary organizations in the state.”⁶⁸ For both, then, the Port Gibson/Claiborne County Black Hats (and the overall local movement) represent a new brand of organized, paramilitary black militancy that differed significantly from the earlier movement. In drawing their conclusions about Claiborne County, they both tend to focus on a few visible, dramatic events and emphasize the movement’s use of boycott enforcement (a form of internal policing against African Americans), which they see as evidence of coercive force and increased militancy. (According to Umoja, boycott enforcement should be considered “armed resistance” because it helps “undermine the authority of white supremacy and establish the power of movement forces.”)⁶⁹

There *are* ways that the Claiborne County movement differed from earlier movements in Mississippi, but these variations had little direct connection to the Deacons or an explicit move toward “armed resistance.” Instead, they were primarily related to its timing—after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965—and its connection to Charles Evers, rather than SNCC (or its local organizational affiliates, COFO and the MFDP). Moreover, if we acknowledge the extent to which self-defense was ubiquitous in the southern movement and the extent to which the movement was unviolently as well as nonviolent, then the shifts in 1964 and with the Deacons are not nearly as stark as they have been portrayed. In Claiborne County, as in most places, self-defense was supplemental, augmenting other, more proactive tactics and activities, like voter registration, mass meetings, marches, and boycott picketing. In fact, outside of the spotlight and away from the insistent arguments about armed resistance, self-defense in Claiborne County looks much like the self-defense practiced throughout the movement, *but* with a few twists that were almost certainly inspired by the Deacons and facilitated by broad shifts in context.⁷⁰

Throughout the Claiborne County black community, most people greatly admired Martin Luther King Jr., strongly identified with the NAACP, perceived the movement as essentially nonviolent, and saw no contradiction in the simultaneous use of weapons and threats. Here, as elsewhere, activists typically made strategic decisions based on practical, common-sense considerations. Self-defense was widely, maybe even universally, accepted. It was most often used by individuals defending their homes and families. A relatively informal group did take on the responsibility of protecting mass meetings and movement leaders and, for several months starting in June 1966, this group

employed psychological warfare (through adopting the name Deacons, wearing uniforms, drilling in public, threatening retaliation, and creating a fake minutes book that included inflated numbers and references to imaginary weapons caches). For most, utilizing armed self-defense and trying to scare whites into backing off made good tactical sense. They did not, however, see these actions as first steps in an armed revolution or even as distinguishing them in any significant ways from the larger movement (that most associated with King). Therefore, when the Sheriff answered their escalation with a plea to disarm, they responded positively, believing it was worth a try.⁷¹

Moreover, the Claiborne County movement was very much shaped by the intersection between the broader movement's accomplishments and the specific local context. For example, by the time the Claiborne County movement began, the Mississippi movement had, as John Dittmer and Charles Payne illustrate, "won the right to organize." The Claiborne County movement itself was actually precipitated by the 1965 Voting Rights Act and organized around voter registration, not by the Deacons or around guns/self-defense/armed resistance. Similarly, while the Deacons were significant to Claiborne Countians as a source of inspiration and a useful threat, the most important local influences were Charles Evers and Rudy Shields, his close ally and key organizer. Shields and Evers, not the Deacons, spearheaded the voter registration campaign. Shields and Evers, not the Deacons, introduced and encouraged boycott enforcement against African Americans. (The use of boycott enforcement was typically one of the things that distinguished movements led by Evers and appears in Jackson as early as fall 1963, after Medgar Evers was murdered.)⁷² Shields and Evers, not the Deacons, were behind the local effort to heighten white fears by making the existing self-defense efforts more visible and explicitly threatening. Instead of joining or being organized by the paramilitary Deacons, local activists, influenced by Shields and Evers, recognized and used white fears of those Deacons for their own ends.⁷³

Self-defense, public confrontations, and assertive language were all very important to the Claiborne County movement. High school student activists, in particular, reflected on how proud the "Black Hats" (Deacons) made them feel, and how safe. The students and others recall gaining courage from Rudy Shields when he would stand up to whites, refusing to be intimidated, talking back, and staring down guns. They laughed and stood tall as Charles Evers insulted and challenged white officials and merchants. Clearly, African American assertiveness and willingness to fight back were fundamental

to the movement and its success.⁷⁴ This is important history and a compelling story. But it does not easily fit either the traditional saccharine account of nonviolent love and moral transformation *or* the narrative of a movement defined by militant gun-toting paramilitaries. Umoja's and Hill's assertions that the Claiborne County self-defense group was an especially well-organized paramilitary organization fighting internal and external enemies as part of a larger shift toward "armed resistance" (with the implication that this was a distinct break from the earlier movement) simply does not fit.

The Port Gibson, Claiborne County movement does, however, offer some insight into the Deacons' broad significance beyond Bogalusa. The Deacons' vocal, aggressive insistence on the right to self-defense, their willingness to exchange gunfire with Klansmen, and their highly visible, well-organized, and collective move into public spaces frightened whites and served as an inspiration for blacks. Virtually everyone who studies the Deacons highlights their psychological impact. In a 1988 account, George Lipsitz wrote that the Deacons' "discipline and dedication inspired the community, their very existence made black people in Bogalusa think more of themselves as people who could not be pushed around." Christopher Strain asserts that "[t]he Deacons became . . . a mindset, a broad concept of empowerment and protection." This idea was put forward earlier by Deacon Charles Sims, who insisted that whenever "the Negro decide he going to fight . . . back, he's a Deacon." The importance of the Deacons in generating black pride and white fears is reflected in the ways that other, unrelated self-defense groups, like the Port Gibson Black Hats, adopted their name. Wendt, who argues that the Deacons were unsuccessful in their efforts to expand, suggests that this failure was at least partially related to the pervasiveness of self-defense. Downplaying the Deacons' distinctiveness, he asserts that "expansion proved unnecessary since the gospel that [Deacon Earnest] Thomas and others preached was already widely practiced across the region."⁷⁵

More than reflecting a sharp break with the previous "nonviolent" movement, it seems that the Deacons took the already existing tradition of self-defense, combined it with an assertive, confrontational attitude, and brought both into the public eye. They contributed to making black assertiveness and armed self-defense more visible—to whites and blacks. With regional and national visibility came a more explicit challenge to the double standard that whites somehow had more right to use violence than blacks. The Deacons, then, may have contributed broadly to breaking down black fears (of

white violence), while increasing white fears (of race war) and giving law enforcement officers more incentive to protect African Americans. Strain sums this up, writing that the Deacons "punctured the double standard of self-defense in America. They honed in on the lesser amounts of protection offered blacks by southern polity and made a conscious effort to change the discrepancy."⁷⁶

The Deacons' visibility was a significant development in self-defense, but it seems clear that there was a broader related shift in 1964 as organized self-defense moved into public spaces. The Deacons were part of this trend, though they did not initiate it. We know that for most people, whether or not to defend oneself at home was never an issue. The question, really, was whether to defend oneself in public or on a demonstration. Why did people begin to answer this question differently in 1964? Why did some local movements utilize organized, public self-defense while others did not? Akinyele Umoja offers a partial answer to the first question by focusing on internal movement dynamics and arguing that because of their experiences with segregationist terrorism and federal inaction, many activists were moving away from nonviolence. It may also be that late 1964 and into 1965 provided an unusual opportunity for the freedom struggle because of the national movement's accomplishments. Although many activists were disgusted with the federal government's many failures, this period saw the most significant legislation (the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts), unprecedented national awareness and sympathy, and an increase in federal intervention. Given this, the movement of self-defense into public space and the Deacons' ability to survive and support the movement may have actually been an illustration of the larger, ostensibly nonviolent movement's achievements, not, as Hill argues, a rejection of nonviolence and "passivity."⁷⁷

From this perspective, the Deacons' ability to organize openly could be understood as evidence of the movement's success in creating more legitimacy and protection for open resistance. Adam Fairclough, for example, believes the Bogalusa movement signaled "a transition," but not "between a mild movement and a militant one, or between nonviolence and Black Power." Instead, he speculates that "it was a transition . . . between a movement that had been struggling for recognition and one that had just achieved a political breakthrough."⁷⁸ Robert Williams's experiences offer a useful counterexample. In many ways, he and others in Monroe, North Carolina, foreshadowed the Deacons, vocally articulating their right to self-defense, while

aggressively organizing and utilizing defense at home and in public. Unlike the Deacons, however, Williams and the local movement were unable to withstand the combined repression of white vigilante violence and the white-controlled legal apparatus. In 1961, Williams fled the country and the local movement was destroyed.

The timing of collective, organized self-defense in public spaces, coming almost exclusively *after* the 1964 Civil Rights Act, points to a number of significant factors. The Civil Rights Act, by putting the force of law behind demands for desegregation, helped stimulate a new wave of direct action protests as African Americans used the law as an additional tool. And as activists moved into public spaces, self-defense groups sometimes organized to protect them.⁷⁹ In fact, most public self-defense was closely connected to nonviolent protest. One result is that organized self-defense groups were typically associated with local movements that utilized direct action (as opposed to those that focused more exclusively on things like voter registration). Part of the explanation, then, for the 1964 and 1965 emergence of armed self-defense in public space, may be related to African American assertiveness in demanding that the Civil Rights Act be implemented. In fact, one might even see the Deacons and others utilizing self-defense in public as extending, not rejecting, tactical nonviolence. Their insistence on their right to public space and on their right to protection in public spaces, from the formal law or from themselves, could easily be understood as a form of direct action, a way of claiming rights that, while different, is very much in the tradition of the early direct action movement to desegregate public space. The Civil Rights Act also gave the federal government more explicit tools for intervening on behalf of the movement. Activists were quite willing to use this to their advantage. Rather than back down in the face of white threats and violence, they often pushed harder, insisting the government intervene or deal with the possible consequences of open racial violence (by blacks as well as whites).

Furthermore, by 1964, the movement was moving increasingly in the direction of parallel institutions, including the Freedom Schools and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, organized as part of the Summer Project. African Americans who used self-defense always claimed it as a human and Constitutional right. They also acted on their own, rather than depend on white lawmen. It may be, then, that organized self-defense is yet another example of African Americans stepping up to develop creative alternatives to mainstream institutions. In this case, they responded to the flagrant absence

of meaningful protection by acting as a parallel law enforcement group that, in Umoja's words, "represented the forces of the Movement." At least some activists understood their actions in this light. For example, several Claiborne County "Black Hats" compared themselves to a "police department" or "state troopers." In fact, it appears that the concessions won through collective, visible self-defense or retaliation were most often connected to law enforcement or protection. By fighting back, African Americans *persuaded* white officials to take steps to provide at least a modicum of protection and consideration for black citizens. Moreover, in Claiborne County (and perhaps elsewhere) a significant number of the men involved in self-defense eventually held jobs in law enforcement. By organizing around self-defense, African Americans won some measure of protection and took steps toward claiming larger movement goals of jobs and full participation in government.⁸⁰

There are also other general patterns that offer partial explanations for the ways self-defense varied from place to place. Self-defense appears to have been most organized in relatively compact or cohesive spatial communities, mostly urban but also rural areas where black landowning farmers were clustered together or living on contiguous land, places that Akinyele Umoja characterizes as "haven communities."⁸¹ Organized self-defense also seems to have been more prevalent when white violence was perpetrated by an organized, active Klan, rather than by individuals acting alone or in loosely organized groups. In part then, black organization matched white organization.

It appears that the movement's political successes, its access to additional tools, and its increased attention to parallel institutions, along with the federal government's increased authority for intervening (supplemented by its old fears of race war), may have contributed to the development of the more public and collective version of self-defense that emerged in 1964. Thus, the Deacons' founding in Jonesboro, and especially Bogalusa, may be due less to the working-class revolt against nonviolence that Hill sees than to the particulars of time and place, which include the juxtaposition of movement successes with a relatively compact black community using direct action protest and facing extensive Klan repression. This combination of factors may have contributed to the need for the Deacons, the space that made them possible, and the context for their successful contribution to the local and national movements.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries's local study of the Lowndes County, Alabama, movement, organized by SNCC following the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery

march, also helps illustrate the freedom struggle's wide-ranging, flexible use of self-defense. Building on their Mississippi experiences and trying to make the Voting Rights Act meaningful, SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael and others set out to develop an all-black independent political party in the rural, majority-black county. In addition to their usual canvassing, SNCC organizers developed extensive political education workshops and used comic books to explain voting and politics. Because of its black panther emblem, its association with Stokely Carmichael, and its refusal to participate in the (white supremacist) Democratic Party, many in the press and around the country connected the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) to Black Power and vilified the group as violent.⁸²

In Lowndes, where the movement was built around voter registration and political organizing, tactical nonviolence was nonexistent and self-defense was commonplace. Activists defended their homes and mass meetings. They traveled in armed convoys and provided weapons to SNCC organizers. After a white volunteer was murdered, black leaders "sent word to whites that they were prepared to meet violence with violence." When the local sheriff and a Justice Department lawyer discouraged the LCFO from using the courthouse lawn for its nominating convention, insisting it was too dangerous, local leader John Hulett assured both that the Freedom Organization would meet. If necessary, they would provide their own protection. They might not be able to stop white violence, but they were ready to answer it. Talking to the Justice Department attorney, Hulett added, "If shooting takes place . . . we are going to stay out here and everybody die together. . . . There's no place to hide, so whatever happens, you can be a part of it." Afraid of a race war, the Justice Department lawyer quickly negotiated with Alabama state officials to allow the LCFO to hold its nominating convention at a nearby church instead of at an official polling place (as required by Alabama law).⁸³

Despite the pervasiveness of self-defense and Hulett's threat to engage in a shoot-out, Jeffries observes that in Lowndes, African Americans "did not use guns as organizing tools" and had "no need for suicidal displays of bravado." He explains, "Everyone in the black community knew of their commitment to armed self-defense, and each time they repulsed an attack they made whites aware of their pledge to meet violence with violence." In fact, because white violence was decentralized and typically executed by neighbors, rather than the Klan, blacks in Lowndes made a "conscious decision to decentralize armed resistance" instead of organizing a "paramilitary group."



Figure 10 Lowndes County, Alabama, woman with a typical weapon used for self-defense (1965). Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, *Look* magazine, Photograph Collection, LC Look-Job 65-2434.

Lowndes activists had no hesitation in standing up to violent whites *and* no interest in escalating tension or precipitating a confrontation. Furthermore, Jeffries argues, because Lowndes African Americans had no interest in nonviolence, there was no need to protect nonviolent protests and no need for a division of labor between those who demonstrated and those who defended them.⁸⁴

The Lowndes example suggests the need for different ways to categorize and evaluate the role of self-defense locally and nationally. By Hill's definitions, for example, because self-defense in Lowndes was not handled by a paramilitary organization, it should be considered apolitical.⁸⁵ Because it was not accompanied by assertive public rhetoric, it could be dismissed as being intentionally obscured or, perhaps, accommodating. And yet, you would be hard pressed to find a local movement that was more explicitly political or more widely considered militant. The local movement spent no time on moral appeals and was always focused on securing power, something many whites, including the national media, found quite threatening. In fact, the LCFO and the promise of independent political organizing became the basis for SNCC's policy shift to Black Power and led to a widespread critique and backlash from white liberals. In terms of self-defense specifically, African Americans in Lowndes were comfortable using it to protect their homes and families *and* to demand access to formerly white-only public space as part of an explicit effort to secure political rights.⁸⁶

The idea that there was a natural progression whereby self-defense became more militant and political as it was organized and visible falls apart when we examine it through the lens of local studies. While there are some identifiable trends and patterns, it is also evident that to a considerable extent African American activists made choices based on their priorities, the tools available to them, and the specific contexts of their local circumstances. They took advantage of opportunities and drew inspiration from others as they crafted approaches that made sense in their communities. The Lowndes example, for instance, suggests that it might make sense to evaluate the extent to which self-defense was political, not based on a level of formal organization, but on whether it was part of a broader political movement. There are similar issues with visibility. Hill refers to self-defense before the emergence of the Deacons as the "movement's family secret" and implies that to some extent the secrecy was about appeasing whites.⁸⁷ Among other things, it is important to distinguish between national visibility and local visibility.

When activists used self-defense, local whites and blacks almost invariably knew about it. White editor Hazel Brannon Smith warned her newspaper readers in Holmes County, Mississippi, to avoid Hartman Turnbow's farm at night if they did not want to be shot.⁸⁸ In Leflore County in 1962 and in Claiborne County in 1966 African Americans publicly articulated their plans to shoot back, hoping that by making their intentions clear, whites would have sense enough to back off. In Lowndes and other places, it is also evident that the Justice Department and other federal officials knew about black threats.

The question of visibility then, must be addressed and analyzed more specifically and in terms of the particular audiences involved. As discussed earlier, Simon Wendt suggests that, for some, downplaying self-defense was a strategic decision related to fund-raising among northern liberals. This seems to be another important arena for additional research. To what extent did civil rights organizations and local activists consider the ways their actions in the rural South would play in the liberal North? What impact did that have on tactical decisions? Charles Payne, for example, observes that in planning "Freedom Summer," SNCC consciously used the nation's racism to try to expose and protect themselves from Mississippi's racism.⁸⁹ How did the white supremacist context impact movement decision making? Can we distinguish between pragmatic considerations and appeasement? For historians, rather than trying to rank levels of militancy, it might be more useful to analyze the nature and uses of self-defense in particular communities at particular times. Was self-defense limited to protecting individuals and their property? Did it extend to meeting places or into public space? Was self-defense handled by family and friends or was it collective and part of a division of labor? Was the right to self-defense (at home or in public) simply claimed by action or was it articulated? Did the local movement include breaks in non-violent discipline? Confrontational rhetoric? Threats of retaliation? Aggressive violence?

There are other questions related to the effectiveness and impact of self-defense, including its limitations. The Deacons, for example, found it difficult or impossible to protect picketers during demonstrations in Bogalusa and, in at least one instance, decided to "temporarily withdraw the pickets and file a complaint with city officials." During the 1966 Meredith March from Memphis to Jackson the Deacons' self-defense was a point of contention within the movement, and journalists consistently contrasted their use of weap-

ons with King's nonviolence (though some journalists and historians have also emphasized that, despite King's opposition to violence, he accepted and was grateful for the Deacons' protection as he and others walked along highway 51 through the Mississippi Delta). Yet it is not clear where the Deacons were or what role they played when white lawmen launched a vicious attack on marchers setting up tents in Canton, Mississippi. Hill ignores this attack, asserting in a somewhat misleading manner that "[t]he Meredith March ended without incident."⁹⁰ The point here is not to criticize these self-defense efforts or discount the crucial role they played in countering white violence, but simply to suggest that we need to examine the role, effectiveness, and limitations of self-defense, as carefully as we do nonviolence and other freedom movement tactics. There was no single approach that guaranteed success, something that the best-known advocates of self-defense, including Robert Williams and the Deacons, knew well. There is quite a bit of evidence to suggest that activists made sensible decisions based on circumstances and goals, rather than simply adopting an ideological position and pursuing it at all costs.

We also need to know more about the broad impact of collective retaliation and visible self-defense. We have some evidence to suggest, for example, that actual or threatened public self-defense and retaliation *could*, in particular situations, influence white officials to make some concessions to movement activists.⁹¹ It is not clear, however, that coercion alone was ever responsible for these shifts. Simon Wendt, in particular, argues that "the legitimacy of the nonviolent movement remained a vital counterbalance to perceived threats of violence."⁹² It is also important to consider whether there were contexts in which black threats and self-protection translated not into some measure of relief but into escalating tensions. The example of Robert Williams and Monroe is interesting. Though Tyson makes a compelling argument that Williams was typical in his use of self-defense, Williams's very visible and assertive public claim to self-defense was unusual in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As noted, Tyson points to several instances in which self-defense won victories and created some breathing space for African Americans. And yet, by the end of August 1961 Williams had fled the country, while a number of his key supporters were eventually convicted of trumped up kidnapping charges. With Williams in exile and others in jail, what about the Monroe movement itself? How did the community that came to symbolize armed self-defense fare in terms of movement goals?⁹³

Finally, it is important that we more precisely define terms like “armed resistance” and “paramilitary.” Christopher Strain and Simon Wendt focus exclusively on self-defense and appear to use “armed resistance” interchangeably with self-defense. Lance Hill employs similar usage, though at times he appears to include boycott enforcement in his discussion of the Deacons’ “armed resistance.” Akinyele Umoja’s focus and his definition of “armed resistance” are the most expansive, including and extending beyond self-defense. The lack of consistency in the use of these terms complicates our efforts to assess the various arguments, especially in terms of those who look beyond narrowly defined self-defense.

For example, at times, both Hill and Umoja imply that the “Natchez model,” which they attribute variously to the Deacons or Charles Evers, shifted the movement in a more militant direction, one that included a willingness to use force or violence. With a close read, it is evident that this violence was essentially limited to assertive rhetoric and boycott enforcement against African Americans. Despite this, both authors still appear to imply that this “armed resistance” was something more encompassing, maybe a step away from revolution, but, at the very least, a distinct shift from what went before and a move toward something more radical.

In reality, however, the Port Gibson self-defense group had more in common with the earlier, semi-organized, informal self-defense groups than with a paramilitary organization. Aside from boycott enforcement, black violence in the movement appears almost entirely limited to self-defense, threats, spontaneous retaliation, and breaking nonviolent discipline on demonstrations. Most of the few concrete examples we have of planned, aggressive violence are from Timothy Tyson’s work. In *Blood Done Sign My Name*, he describes the military-like precision that Vietnam vets used to carry out firebomb attacks on white property in Oxford, North Carolina, in 1970. He also mentions a number of suspicious fires in his biography of Robert Williams.⁹⁴ Tyson’s work raises a number of questions for consideration. How widespread were such attacks on property? What do we know about African American considerations of guerilla war or retaliatory violence in the late 1960s and 1970s? Many scholars have noted the significance of World War II veterans to the emergence of the modern civil rights movement. What role did returning Vietnam veterans play in the southern struggle in the late 1960s and early 1970s?

Self-defense, threats, and spontaneous retaliation were present in varying

degrees throughout the movement. But they were always, from beginning to end, connected to a larger movement employing a wide range of available tactics. As Tyson observed in his biography of Robert Williams, “[F]or most black southerners nonviolence was a tactical opportunity rather than a philosophical imperative.” One could undoubtedly make a similar point about self-defense and other forms of violence. Many activists probably fit Tyson’s description of Williams as “practical, eclectic, and improvisational.” Charles Payne captures something similar in a 2006 essay, insisting that “[t]he masses were committed to change, not to particular methods. If nonviolence worked, fine; but if not, they were willing to use other methods.” Moreover, Bob Moses recalls that rather than violence or nonviolence, SNCC workers and community members were considering more nuanced and practical questions about “what you do, what the limits are, what means you take toward defending yourself.” For him, one of the important considerations was avoiding anything that would disrupt his ability to work effectively. In pointing out that Medgar Evers could simultaneously contemplate “guerilla warfare against whites in the Delta” and believe that if he spent enough time talking to “hate callers” he “might be able to change them,” Payne argues that rather than simple inconsistency, this diversity reflects the “breadth of social vision some southern blacks developed.”⁹⁵

While we *must* have self-defense in our picture of the movement, along with threats, retaliation, and other forms of violence, it is absolutely crucial that we not substitute a narrow glamorization of or overemphasis on self-defense or violence. We gain little if we lose sight of the full range of tactics and ideologies that comprised the freedom struggle. Moreover, it is important to understand these choices not simply as being about what is or was “moral” or appealing to whites, but in terms of pragmatic choices based on an evaluation of success, failure, or even survival. Local studies are crucial in helping us understand more about the intersections of “unviolent” political organizing and activism, a broad national projection of nonviolence, black willingness to take up arms in defense, and both actual and threatened black retaliation. Understanding and evaluating the role of self-defense within the movement should be connected to a broader reorientation that reassesses nonviolence and offers a more precise evaluation of tactics, how they ranged and varied and were connected to particular circumstances and contexts. This changed understanding should also give more nuanced attention to gender, examine the range of black militancy,

engage with the extent to which white lawlessness and whites' unchecked, apparently exclusive "right" to use violence against blacks impacted the movement, acknowledge federal neglect, explore the interplay between morality and coercion, and place all of these pieces within the larger black tradition of struggle.

Worth Long, the SNCC activist who contended that most of the movement was "unviolent," not nonviolent, and who suggested that often people hid their fear behind claims of opposing nonviolence, insists that "if you let someone negate your human rights . . . then you are always in danger, it seems to me. Now you can pray with them or pray for 'em, but if they kill you in the meantime you are not going to be an effective organizer."⁹⁶ In the freedom struggle, self-defense could be a tactic and a demand. It was pragmatic and ideological, a civil and a human right. It helped people survive and continue the struggle *and* it offered up a fundamental challenge to white supremacy and the enduring double standards related to violence and race. Our histories must be thoughtful and nuanced enough to engage with each of these pieces in all of their complexity as we craft an accurate and precise picture of the freedom movement.

NOTES

I would like to thank the many people who have shared this essay with me—reading, questioning, discussing, and encouraging. Geneseo students, along with the presenters and other participants in the "Local Studies, a National Movement" Conference at Geneseo in March 2006, helped me begin to think through these questions. I am grateful to friends and colleagues who discussed these ideas and read drafts of this essay, including Justin Behrend, Joseph Cope, John Dittmer, Laurie Green, Wesley Hogan, Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Steven Lawson, Timothy Tyson, Akinyele Umoja, Yohuru Williams, and especially Kathleen Connelly. Among other things, Justin saved me from a title that didn't work. Wesley and Hasan have been particularly generous in reading multiple drafts and especially helpful in pushing me to clarify these ideas. During a leisurely breakfast in Birmingham that was as productive as it was enjoyable, Hasan and I made an important start on tackling the significance of 1964. Although Akinyele Umoja and I have some differences in interpretation when it comes to this history, I remain grateful for the spirit of collaboration that has characterized our overlapping work on southwest Mississippi and for our many conversations—starting back in the early 1990s when we were both working on our dissertations. In particular, our June and July 2010 "e-mail conversation" has been extremely helpful as I have worked to clarify some of these ideas.

1. For an overview of the top-down scholarship and its orientation toward nonviolence and normative, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 413–41; Charles Payne, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches," in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968*, Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, with introduction by James T. Patterson (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 115–55. The emphasis on nonviolence persists. In a published interview following the SNCC fiftieth anniversary conference, Branch argued that the "overwhelming lesson [from SNCC's success eliminating segregation] is that they grounded themselves in nonviolence and in the notion that people will respond to the moral values of equal citizenship and democracy and basic religious morality, if it's dramatized sufficiently. And they discovered a kind of nuclear energy in nonviolent witness from the sit-ins to the voting rights era." Taylor Branch, interviewed by Susan Lehman, Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law, http://www.brennancenter.org/blog/just_books/categorytaylor_branch/ (accessed April 29, 2010).

2. Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joseph Sinsheimer, November 19, 1983, Joseph Sinsheimer papers, Duke University, transcript.

3. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

4. Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

5. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 44, 51, 59, 114, 138–39, 205, 209, 211, 213–14, 279, 287, 398, esp. 205; Dittmer, *Local People*, 47, 49–50, 106, 191–92, 267–68, 278–79, 285–86, 391.

6. Dittmer, *Local People*, 253–54; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 202–6, esp. 206; Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 341, 371.

7. Timothy Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History* 85 (Sept. 1998): 551, 570.

8. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 205.

9. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 214–16, esp. 216.

10. In 1997, Tyson asserted that an exclusive emphasis on "nonviolent civil rights protest obscures the full complexity of racial politics. It idealizes black history, downplays the oppression of Jim Crow society, and even understates the achievements of African American resistance." Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," 570. Seven years later, Lance Hill offered a similar argument, critiquing narratives that feature "nonviolence as the motive force

for change," insisting this is "a reassuring myth of American redemption—a myth that assuaged white guilt by suggesting that racism was not intractable and deeply embedded in American life, that . . . the system had worked and the nation was redeemed. It was a comforting but vacant fiction. In the end, segregation yielded to force as much as it did to moral suasion." Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 258–59.

11. Akinyele O. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement" (PhD diss., Emory, 1996); Lance E. Hill, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement" (PhD diss., Tulane, 1997); Christopher B. Strain, "'We Walked Like Men': The Deacons for Defense and Justice," *Louisiana History* 38, no. 1 (1997): 43–62; Christopher Barry Strain, "Civil Rights and Self Defense: The Fiction of Nonviolence, 1955–1968" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000); Akinyele O. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement." *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (1999): 558–78; Akinyele Omowale Umoja, "'We Will Shoot Back': The Natchez Model and Paramilitary Organization in the Mississippi Freedom Movement." *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 3 (2002): 271–94; Akinyele O. Umoja, "1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement." *Radical History Review* 85 (2003): 201–26; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*; Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Simon Wendt, "The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Radicalization of the African American Freedom Movement" (PhD diss., Freie University, Berlin, 2004); Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); Akinyele O. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," book manuscript. A 2006 article by Ohio State graduate student Annelieke Dirks illustrates that the topic continues to attract attention. Annelieke Dirk, "Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960–1965," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (2006): 71–98. See also, Emilye Crosby, "'This nonviolent stuff ain't no good. It'll get ya killed': Teaching about Self-Defense in the African-American Freedom Struggle," in *Teaching the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Julie Buckner, Houston Roberson, Rhonda Y. Williams, and Susan Holt (New York: Routledge, 2002), 159–73; Emilye Crosby, "'You Got a Right To Defend Yourself': Self-Defense and the Claiborne County, Mississippi Movement," *International Journal of Africana Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 133–63; Simon Wendt, "God, Gandhi, and Guns: The African American Freedom Struggle in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1964–65," *Journal of African American History* 89 (Winter 2004): 36–56; Simon Wendt, "The Roots of Black

Power? Armed Resistance and the Radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 145–65; Simon Wendt, "Protection or Path Toward Revolution? Black Power and Self-Defense," *Souls* 4, no. 4 (2007): 320–32. See also, Craig S. Pascoe, "The Monroe Rifle Club: Finding Justice in an 'Ungodly and Social Jungle Called Dixie,'" in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, ed. Michael A. Bellesiles (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 393–423; Harold A. Nelson, "The Defenders," in *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 163–84.

12. Greta de Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900–1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Peter B. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowrides: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). See also, Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); and Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2005).

13. Umoja, "1964," 202; Umoja, "'We Will Shoot Back,'" 291; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 3.

14. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 3, 7; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 99, 102, 110–11, 123, 124, 130, 42–65, 100–30.

15. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet," 577; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 1; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 4.

16. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 4; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 3; Robert Franklin Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962). Both Umoja and Hill argue that there was a transition from nonviolence to violence/armed resistance, but unlike most of the early commentators, they see this as a positive development. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 108–19; Umoja, "The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement."

17. Charles Payne makes essentially this point in a short essay analyzing John Dittmer's *Local People*. Charles Payne, Foreword, in *Groundwork: The Local Black Freedom Movement in America*, ed. Komozi Woodard and Jeanne Theoharis (New York: New York University Press, 2005), ix–xv, esp. x–xii.

18. Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 102, 233n35. In a tribute to Worth Long, Charlie Cobb writes that one of his "favorites" of Long's words "is 'unviolent' rather than 'non-violent' to describe the tactics of the 1960s Southern Civil Rights Movement." Charlie

Cobb (Charles Cobb Jr.) in *A Tribute to Worth Long: Still on the Case: A Pioneer's Continuing Commitment*, by Roland L. Freeman (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 2006), 43. Bob Moses observes that most people did not want to say they were "violent" or "nonviolent." Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joseph Sinsheimer, November 19, 1983, Joseph Sinsheimer papers, Duke University, transcript, 19–21.

19. Strain and Wendt explicitly argue that self-defense and nonviolence were mutually reinforcing, not antagonistic. This is, in fact, one of their key contributions. Yet they often reference these as if they are opposing categories and as if they encompass all movement tactics. In one typical instance, Strain notes that Gloria Richardson "acknowledged armed self-defense as an alternative to nonviolent direct action." In another, he explains that "there was a misunderstanding on both sides" of the nonviolence versus self-defense debate. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 80, 176. Wendt observes that "nonviolence remained the driving force behind social change in the Deep South, but armed resistance complemented civil rights protest and frequently enhanced its effectiveness at the local level." In another instance he concludes that "although violence and fear of violence might have enhanced the bargaining position of civil rights leaders, tactical nonviolence remained the driving force behind social change." Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 2, 197. In contrast, however, Hill argues that the Deacons' use of self-defense was an explicit rejection of nonviolence and that the "two strategies invariably competed." Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 44–45. Despite his argument, many of Hill's examples actually show the complementary nature of self-defense and other movement tactics. For example, Hill notes that the Deacons worked closely with the Bogalusa Voters League. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 108–10.

20. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 6, 8, 147. Other scholars who study the Deacons tend to emphasize their cooperation with and support for nonviolence. For example, Strain writes, "Given their menacing public image, it might have surprised the public to learn that the Deacons reaffirmed the principle of nonviolent direct action." Strain, *Pure Fire*, 106. Fairclough writes that the Jonesboro "Deacons insisted that they shared the same aims as CORE, differing from other civil rights groups only in their readiness to use weapons to protect the black community from attack." Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 342; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 150–64.

21. John Morsell to Henry E. Briggs, March 16, 1966, Charles Evers, 1966–68 folder, Box 58, Series C, Group 4, NAACP papers, Library of Congress; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 86–90, 189–99.

22. Umoja points out that the NAACP "never took an overt stance on armed resistance or self-defense." Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 86; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 203–5; Moses quoted in Umoja, "1964," 221.

23. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 341–43, 193–94; de Jong, *A Different Day*, 193–94.

24. de Jong, *A Different Day*, 175–76, 193; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 342; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 69–70; Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet," 563.

25. For examples of the Deacons' involvement in other forms of activism, see Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 108–10, 113, 138. For the Deacons' articulating support for or willingness to participate in nonviolent protest, see Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 132. Hill writes that CORE workers helped form a Deacons group in Ferriday, Louisiana, in the summer of 1965. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 175. For the role of the white CORE worker in the formation of the Bogalusa Deacons, see Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 357; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 44–45; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 97.

26. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 114, 123, 130–31, 156–57. My intent here is not to downplay the significance of the Deacons in prompting this federal action. Clearly the presence of armed black men willing to publicly engage with violent racists "encouraged" the government to step in. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the Deacons alone did not trigger this intervention. Strain, Fairclough, and Wendt tend to more explicitly emphasize the Deacons' collaboration with CORE and nonviolent protest. They also offer different interpretations of the Deacons' impact. For example, while Fairclough acknowledges the Deacons' role in pressuring the state and local governments to get involved in Bogalusa, he also argues that the recently passed Civil Rights Act and the public violence in Selma gave the federal government more ammunition and more incentive to intervene. The Civil Rights Act, for example, provided the legal basis for several notable lawsuits. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 377–80. Wendt stresses the importance of both nonviolent direct action and "armed resistance" in prompting federal intervention and local success. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 92–93. See also, Strain, *Pure Fire*, 106.

27. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 268. This conclusion seems at odds with the argument Hill makes throughout his book. For example, Hill notes that by 1966 the Deacons "were resolute opponents of nonviolence and, compared to the national civil rights organizations, had a radically different approach to winning equality." In another instance, Hill asserts that the Deacons "transformed self-defense from a clandestine and locally restricted activity into a public and wide-ranging organization capable of challenging the entrenched movement leadership and its creed of nonviolence." Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 166, 217; see also 11, 44, 58, 147, 217, 268.

28. Umoja and Tyson were the first historians to draw attention to a pattern that others confirm—that women actively participated in self-defense, especially of their homes and families. But, as Umoja observes, the connection between manhood and "defending the community . . . became more entrenched as the work of armed defense became more formally institutionalized." Akinyele Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 189; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 141. Strain adds, "It would seem that self-defense as a personal right was recognized regardless of gender, but that it became the domain of men once it be-

came more organized and more politicized." Strain, *Pure Fire*, 74. See also, Strain, *Pure Fire*, 111–12; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 83, 120, 121; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 45, 46.

29. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 141; Strain, "We Walked Like Men," 54; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 87, 88; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 261–62, 51, 226.

30. For example, Lance Hill writes, "Ultimately nonviolence discouraged black men from participating in civil rights protests in the South and turned the movement into a campaign of women and children." Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 28. Writing about white CORE organizer Charlie Fenton in Jonesboro, Hill asserts, "The men were not going to subject themselves to humiliation and physical abuse simply to conform to his philosophy. Without the men, Fenton's frontline protest troops would be women and children." Hill continues that Fenton was "unwilling to use children as shock troops against the police and Klan," implying that Fenton, the white CORE organizer, was making the decisions. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 44.

31. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 87, 121; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 2, 8, 44, 236–37, 268.

32. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 2, 8, 44, 236–37, 268, 27. Hill makes similar assertions throughout his book. He argues, for example, "Throughout the South, most black men boycotted the civil rights movement; the campaigns in Birmingham, New Orleans, Bogalusa, and Jonesboro became movements of women and children. Many civil rights leaders explained the absence of men as some character failing—apathy, alienation, or fear. Yet black men did participate in the black freedom movement in the Deep South—but not under the discipline of nonviolent organizations." Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 260–61; see also 28, 107.

33. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 28; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 87.

34. See for example, Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 2–3, 54, 87, 88, 101–2, 108, 115–16, 120–21; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 3, 28, 38, 46, 51, 95, 161, 260–61, 308–9, 34. Christopher Strain mentions a psychiatry resident who spent time in Jonesboro, La., and speculated that the Deacons' guns were a "phallic symbol." Strain observes, "This psychological evaluation of the Deacons might be highly questionable; however, the Deacons' assertion of their masculinity was not." Strain, *Pure Fire*, 112. In assessing self-defense, Strain also speculates on the important psychological role it played for African Americans, writing, "[T]his sense of subordination may have been particularly acute in black men, who shouldered the burden of defending not only themselves but also the women and children in their lives. Self-defense represented a man's prerogative and a man's duty: it was a manly response to white transgressions. Consistently, male activists expressed the impulse to defend themselves in terms of gender roles and sexual divisions of labor. Most black men felt it was their responsibility to protect the women in their lives; in fact, they guardedly viewed self-defense as their domain, and theirs alone. . . .

[W]omen often subverted these traditional gender roles and implemented defensive measures themselves to protect their homes, bodies, and families." Strain, *Pure Fire*, 180.

35. Dittmer, *Local People*, 268, 276–79, 285–86, 306–7; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 203–6, 209, 213–14, 265–83.

36. One of Robert Williams's most important influences was his grandmother, who left him his politically active grandfather's rifle as a final gift. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 25, 141, 259–60, 183, 141, 148–49, 142, 141–42.

37. Other historians capture bits of this. Akinyele Umoja observed that in Mississippi women were extensively involved in informal self-defense efforts, but, as in Monroe, men dominated as this work became more organized and public. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 189; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 141. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 74. See also, Strain, *Pure Fire*, 112; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 83, 120; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 45, 46. Strain reiterates a number of Tyson's observations, especially related to Robert Williams. He also suggests that sexism played a role in explaining the exclusively male nature of organized self-defense, while choosing to highlight the experiences of Rebecca Wilson, a twenty-two-year-old black woman who acted alone (and outside of a movement context) to defend her home and family from a white attack in 1962. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 73–77. For the most part, though, the details offered by Payne and Dittmer and Tyson's model of complex analysis are too often overlooked.

38. Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 62–63, 66, 67, 71, esp. 62, 63; Stokely Carmichael, with Ekweeme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 165–66, 176; Bernice Johnson Reagon and Dick Cluster, "Borning Struggle: The Civil Rights Movement: An Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon," *Radical America* 12, no. 6 (1978): 20–21. There are many possible examples to illustrate the practical possibilities of nonviolent action and the ways that it appealed to African Americans. In many cases, these activists never identified with philosophical nonviolence and were quite willing to explore a wide range of tactical possibilities. For example, Cleveland Sellers, another SNCC activist closely associated with the organization's shift toward Black Power, recalls that the early sit-in participants "looked so magnificent, the men and the women." Connie Field, Marilyn Mulford, Michael Chandler, and Rhonnie Lynn Washington, *Freedom on My Mind* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1994). A high school student at the time, he immediately helped organize sit-ins in his Denmark, South Carolina, community. Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990; reprint of 1973 edition), 20–25. As Carmichael suggests, for Sellers and many others, direct action was empowering and offered a way to act. Historian Steven Lawson, in a published review, contends that Hill "fails to understand that the kind of disciplined nonviolence that King preached and

practiced also bolstered feelings of self-confidence and self-worth in those who practiced it." Steven F. Lawson, review of *Deacons for Defense*, in *The Historian* 67, no. 3 (2005): 523–24, quote on 524.

39. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 104; see also 51, 105; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 241; McLaurin quoted in Dittmer, *Local People*, 254; see also Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 74; Carmichael, with Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 260; Molly McGehee, "You Do Not Own What You Cannot Control": An Interview with Activist and Folklorist Worth Long," *Mississippi Folklife* 31 (Fall 1998): 15.

40. For the most part, these authors tend not to engage with Charles Payne's thoughtful analysis of those differences in the Mississippi Delta. He finds that in the early 1960s, women may have been more likely than men to join the movement because of the ways they were tied into networks of family and friends. Payne also points to the significance of efficacy, for women and men, suggesting that faith and social networks may have been most important for women and landownership most important for men. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 265–83. See, for example, Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 260–61, 330n8.

41. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 127, 290n43, 45, 46, 118, 127, 161, 290, 308–9. In one example, Hill describes a woman, who he refers to not by name, but as "Jackson's wife," and notes that she "unloaded her gun" at the Klan. In addition to not naming Mrs. Jackson, Hill implies that the home is her husband's, rather than hers or theirs. "The Klan attempted to light a cross at the home of the Reverend Y. D. Jackson." Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 40.

42. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 108. In her history of the Louisiana movement, Greta de Jong does a good job of illustrating how self-defense ranged from individual protection to playing a role in political movements. de Jong, *A Different Day*, 16–17, 58–61, 111, 139, 140, 170–71, 192, 193, 195. Charles Payne points out that Fannie Lou Hamer's mother carried a gun to the fields when she expected trouble and that Medgar Evers's "standard of manhood was set by his father's refusal to kowtow to whites." Evers's great-grandfather killed two whites and escaped the community. His father fought whites in front of his sons on at least one occasion. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 233, 47–48.

43. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 213–14.

44. Though I believe many of the gendered conclusions about male and female movement participation as it relates to nonviolence are seriously flawed, there is evidence to suggest that some African Americans did object to the movement's nonviolence or nonviolent image and that they were among those who periodically reacted to white violence with collective retaliation. There is also some evidence to suggest that during the movement black men were more likely than black women to engage in spontaneous (and planned) retaliatory violence, but there has been no systematic study of this—

either for movement participants or bystanders. For example, David (Dave) Dennis, talking about those who reacted violently in response to the repression at Medgar Evers's funeral, explains, "There was a different element of people who had never participated in the movement before. They didn't want to have anything to do with us, because they felt that they could not cope with the nonviolence. It's not that they disagreed with the movement, but with the tactics that we used. These guys off the street were just angry, you know, and that day they decided to speak up." Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 156. John Dittmer observes that after the shooting of a local movement activist in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1964, young black men who had previously not been involved in the movement showed up with weapons, prepared to retaliate. Dittmer, *Local People*, 279. Before we can draw conclusions, we need to know quite a bit more about those who engaged in retaliation. How many were men? Women? What were their ages? What was their economic status? Did they interact with the movement in any way before or after their participation in violent retaliation? If they were nonparticipants, was that primarily about the movement's nonviolence or was it related to other factors?

45. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 268, 275, 278–80.

46. Claude Sitton, "Negroes to Step Up Pressure in Atlanta," *New York Times*, January 18, 1964; Judy Richardson, "SNCC: My Enduring 'Circle of Trust,'" in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Wheeler Smith Young, and Dottie Zellner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 354; Mildred Forman Page, "Two Variations on Nonviolence," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 54; Fay Bellamy, "Playtime is Over," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 479–81.

47. James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: Open Hand, 1972, 1985), 148–49.

48. Carmichael, with Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 236–40.

49. Walker argues that the media downplayed violence in the early sixties and emphasized it in the latter sixties, which helped obscure significant "continuity in the character and extent of black violence between the two eras." Jenny Walker, "A Media-Made Movement? Black Violence and Nonviolence in the Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 47, 48–49, 44.

50. Walker, "A Media-Made Movement?," 49–50, esp. 49; Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Dial Books, 1992), 195–96.

51. Dittmer, *Local People*, 47, 278, 279, 238; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 213–14; Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*, 81–83, 85–86, 92, 99.

52. Dittmer, *Local People*, 167, 238, 279, 306, esp. 307.

53. Ibid., 279; Dave Dennis, interview in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 156.

54. Glen Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 280–83, 300–1.

55. Richardson recalls that Forman “scolded me, reminding me that we were supposed to be nonviolent and that this kind of negative publicity could hurt our fund-raising efforts. I left his office feeling very hurt by his anger and guilty that I had in some way jeopardized the organization.” Judy Richardson, “SNCC: My Enduring ‘Circle of Trust,’” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 354; Claude Sitton, “Negroes to Step Up Pressure in Atlanta,” *New York Times*, January 18, 1964; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 4, 99, 102, 110–11, 123, 124, 130.

56. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 265; David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage, 1986, 1988), 208–9; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 618–19; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 61; Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 149. Hogan is quoting SNCC worker Don Harris, speaking at a SNCC meeting. Wesley Hogan, “Freedom Now: Nonviolence in the Southern Freedom Movement, 1960–1964,” chapter 6, this volume.

57. Prathia Hall, “Bloody Selma,” in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 497.

58. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 208–9; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 618–19.

59. Wendt argues that the Deacons were significant within Louisiana because of their “ability to thwart the worst forms of white terror and their inspiring effect on local African Americans.” He also stresses the importance of both nonviolent direct action and “armed resistance” in prompting federal intervention and local success. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 92–93. Fairclough focuses primarily on the Deacons’ local impact, asserting that although the Deacons were heavily outnumbered, they “enabled the Bogalusa movement to hang on” and, together with CORE, “clashed with the Klan head-on,” creating a “crisis of such magnitude that neither the state nor the federal government could afford to look the other way.” Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 359, 342, 345.

60. Hill claims that the “Deacons became organizational expansionists” and developed seventeen southern affiliates. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 167. Hill and Umoja both point to southwest Mississippi as an important site of the Deacons’ expansion. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 184–215; Umoja, “‘We Will Shoot Back.’” Strain’s interpretation falls somewhat in between. He appears to largely accept the Deacons’ claims of rapid expansion throughout the South and beyond (with approximately fifty chapters by June 1965 and more shortly thereafter), although he does suggest that the claims of a membership between 5,000 and 15,000 were probably inflated. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 104, 111, 115, 120, 122. He also notes that the organization had faded from view by 1967 and, through

his emphasis on Jonesboro, Bogalusa, and the 1966 Meredith March, reinforces these as the crucial sites for the Deacons. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 97–126, esp. 120.

61. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 97, 125–26; Umoja, “Eye for an Eye,” 194–95.

62. Hill asserts that “[t]he source of SNCC’s difficulties was its emphasis on federal intervention.” Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 197. Hill argues that the Deacons “crystallized around a challenge to the doctrine of nonviolence, which, as a matter of principle, deprived African Americans of an indispensable means of countering white terror.” Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 11, 44, 58, 147, 217, esp. 166.

63. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 179, 176, 172, 182. In the end, Strain emphasizes the psychological issues of “respect” more than practical or tangible benefits of self-defense. Strain, *Pure Fire*, 176–83, esp. 179–80.

64. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 152, 189–99, esp. 193–94.

65. Umoja, “1964,” 222; Hill also asserts that “individual acts of self-defense did not in themselves constitute a sign of militancy or a leap of consciousness. Physically defending oneself can be motivated by nothing more than common sense and the instinct to survive.” Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 276n4, 258–59.

66. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 206. Hill writes that the Natchez “Deacons” were responsible for organizing the Claiborne County “Deacons.” Ignoring Evers’s primacy in southwest Mississippi and his antipathy to other civil rights groups, Hill further ties the Deacons to Evers, writing, “Between 1965 and 1968 Charles Evers’ extensive local campaigns provided the main framework for Deacons organizing in Mississippi. The Natchez Deacons went on to organize several Deacons chapters and informal groups in Port Gibson. . . .” Moreover, although Hill acknowledges that the Natchez Deacons and most of the other active groups in Mississippi had no formal affiliation with the Louisiana Deacons, he still appears to use these groups as evidence that “the Deacons” became a “southernwide organization.” Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 206, 207, 182, 212, 214, 265, 268, and vii (Contents). He writes that the Port Gibson group was “officially a Deacons’ chapter” without explaining what that means. Furthermore, if the Deacons were a southernwide organization, they had to have a presence outside of Louisiana. However, the only southern, non-Louisiana “Deacons” that Hill gives any significant attention to are in Mississippi, especially the Natchez “Deacons” and the Port Gibson “Deacons.” The overall implication appears to be that these groups are evidence of the Louisiana Deacons’ expansion. My research suggests that, in the case of Port Gibson at least, the connections are more of inspiration than anything tangible or formal. The Port Gibson self-defense group was organized by Rudy Shields and later began using the name “Deacons” in the context of the Meredith March. For more on self-defense in Claiborne County, see Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 168–88, esp. 178–80. Hill also argues that Evers secured a major victory in Natchez and takes issue with John Dittmer for discounting it. Ironically, he praises Evers for eschewing federal intervention in

Natchez (while noting the Deacons' ability to force federal intervention in Bogalusa as key to their victory). Moreover, in comparing Natchez with the McComb movement which, he notes, registered only six voters in six months, Hill ignores the huge changes that had occurred in Mississippi and throughout the country between the 1961 McComb movement and the late 1965 Natchez movement. Among other things, activists had considerably more resources to draw on through the earlier movement's successes, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 205.

67. Akinyele Umoja defines "armed resistance" as "insurgent individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or other goals of political action." Akinyele Umoja, e-mail to author, June 24, 2010. See also, Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," Book Prospectus, summer 2010, in author's possession. Umoja notes that the Claiborne County self-defense group was "autonomous from the Natchez group." He also observes that the Natchez group did not affiliate with Louisiana Deacons and points out that Evers's advocacy for armed resistance predates the founding of the Deacons. Umoja, "'We Will Shoot Back,'" 275, 272, 287. Umoja also insists that "[t]he capacity of the movement to protect itself and the Black community and to retaliate against White supremacist terrorists gave Evers and other Black leaders more leverage in negotiating with local White power structures." Umoja, "'We Will Shoot Back,'" 291. See also Umoja, "1964," 211.

68. Hill implies that the Port Gibson, Claiborne County group was connected to the Louisiana Deacons. Umoja, more accurately, observes that they drew inspiration from the Deacons and borrowed their name, but were ultimately an independent organization. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 207; Umoja, "'We Will Shoot Back,'" 287–88; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 178–80. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 216, 217. For more on the way Hill characterizes the relationships between various Deacons' groups, see note 66.

69. Hill notes that in engaging in boycott enforcement, the Deacons were "clearly crossing the line between defensive and offensive force." Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 208. Umoja argues that "[t]he formula developed in Natchez to combat the local White power structure and win concessions toward human and civil rights was used throughout the state, particularly in southwest Mississippi communities. . . . The Natchez model had proven the necessity of using the threat of coercive response to defeat external and internal enemies of the Mississippi freedom movement." He also writes, "The Natchez model, combining economic boycotts with paramilitary defense and the potential for retaliation, proved more effective in winning concessions and social and cultural change on the local level than nonviolent direct action or voter registration campaigns depending on federal protection." Umoja, "'We Will Shoot Back,'" 287, 272, 291. See also, Umoja, "An Eye for an Eye," 186–87. The quote is from Akinyele Umoja, e-mail to author, June 23, 2010.

70. In addition to Hill and Umoja, Wendt also writes about the Claiborne County Deacons, or Black Hats. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 148–49. Of the self-defense scholars, only Strain, who turns his attention to the West Coast after the emergence of the Deacons, fails to address Claiborne County.

71. Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 178–86.

72. *Ibid.*, 139–40; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 360–61.

73. Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 89, 101–17, 178–86; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 201.

74. Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 169–88. Evers and Shields do appear to have used a more aggressive and threatening tone than many earlier activists. However, there was a long history of African Americans standing up to and challenging whites. Charles Payne writes, "Public defiance of the 'laws' was an important element in the style of many of the [SNCC] workers in the Delta, and it was certainly a part of [Sam] Block's style." Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 147. During the Hamer Institute NEH Landmarks Workshops for Community College Teachers, the oral history panels are filled with accounts of confrontational activities during the pre-1964, ostensibly "nonviolent" phase of the movement. This is particularly true of the comments by Charles (Charlie) Cobb, Judge Mamie Chinn, Hollis Watkins, and Charles McLaurin. The oral history panels and tours were recorded by the Hamer Institute. "Landmarks of American Democracy: From Freedom Summer to the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike," NEH Institute for Community College Teachers, Hamer Institute, Jackson State University, July 2009, July 2010.

75. George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 96; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 123, 178–80. Charles Sims, in *Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analyses, 1619 to the Present*, ed. Joanne Grant (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 342; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 93.

76. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 241; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 123.

77. The group in Tuscaloosa that defended nonviolent demonstrators in the summer of 1964, for example, preceded the Deacons. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 54. Umoja, "1964," 201–26. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 27, 44, 261–62, 268.

78. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 380.

79. Others have noted the importance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in providing African Americans with another tool. See Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 320; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Struggles," *Journal of African-American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 278; Nelson, "The Defenders," 163–84, esp. 163–67.

80. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 189; Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 185–88; Nelson, "The Defenders," 163–84, esp. 163–67.

81. Umoja, "1964," 210.

82. In fact, state investigators spying on the Claiborne County movement imagined Panther logos, presumably from Lowndes County, on the shirts of local men active in self-defense and expressed panic that they were forming a chapter of the "panthers." Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom*, 182. For a discussion of the media's response to the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and their distinct preference for Charles Evers, see Emilye Crosby, "'God's Appointed Savior': Charles Evers's Use of Local Movements for National Prestige," in *Groundwork*, ed. Woodard and Theoharis, 165–92.

83. Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 83, 102–4, 116, 143–44, 171–73, esp. 83. John Hulett, "How the Black Panther Party Was Organized," in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, ed. Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Penguin, 1991), 275.

84. Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 103–4, 116, esp. 103.

85. Strain, by contrast, considers all self-defense political. See, for example, Strain, *Pure Fire*, 7.

86. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964–66," *Journal of African American History* 91, no. 2 (2006): 171–93; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 103–4, 116.

87. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 58.

88. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 279.

89. Lawson and Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968*, 142.

90. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 122–23, 246–250, esp. 249. According to Hollis Watkins, who was present, the Deacons did not try to protect the group from the attack by the highway patrol. He believes this was because they were so out-gunned that to attempt self-defense in that context would have led to more violence. Hollis Watkins, conversation with Emilye Crosby, March 5, 2010.

91. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 88; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 106; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 92–93; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 342–45, 359.

92. Dittmer, *Local People*, 310, 398; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 198.

93. Wendt quotes an observer that the Monroe movement was "completely shattered" after Williams left the community. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 191. In contrast, Stokely Carmichael observes that he and others in the movement were inspired by Williams. Carmichael, with Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 225–28. James Forman, who traveled to Monroe and devotes several chapters to Williams and the Monroe movement in his memoir, makes a similar point. Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, ch. 19–28; Wendt offers some brief comments on negative responses to black retaliation, focusing in particular on northern liberal responses and repression by southern law enforcement. Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 191–92, 196–98.

94. Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), ch. 7, 9, 10, esp. 220–24; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 263.

95. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 192; Lawson and Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968*, 132; Moses, interview by Sinsheimer, transcript, 19–20; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 314.

96. McGehee, "'You Do Not Own What You Cannot Control': An Interview with Activist and Folklorist Worth Long," 18.