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Nicholas J. Johnson

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## *A Considered African American Philosophy and Practice of Arms*

Nicholas J. Johnson

In 1959, the Black civil rights establishment was pressed into a running public debate about the boundaries and demands of the nonviolent freedom movement. The spark was Monroe, North Carolina NAACP president Robert Franklin Williams's inflammatory statements following the acquittal of Lewis Medlin, a White man, for the attempted rape of a Black woman, Mary Ruth Reed. Medlin came to Reed's cabin while her husband was in the fields and tried to rape her in front of her children. Mary Ruth fled to the yard, where Medlin caught her and beat her until a White neighbor intervened. Medlin's lawyer capitalized on the dynamics of the place and the time, arguing that Medlin was just drunk and having a little fun. The jury of twelve White men deliberated for half an hour and then acquitted Medlin.<sup>1</sup>

The case had drawn national media attention. After the verdict was read, reporters recorded an angry Williams railing that "we cannot rely on the law. We can get no justice under the current system. . . . Since the federal government will not bring to a halt lynching in the South, and since the so-called

Nicholas J. Johnson is professor of law at Fordham University School of Law (USA).

1. Robert Franklin Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Detroit, 1998), 62; Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, MA, 1988), 459; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 86-89, 137-65.

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courts lynch our people legally, if it's necessary to stop lynching with lynching, then we must be willing to resort to that method."<sup>2</sup>

The headlines blazed "NAACP Leader Urges Violence."<sup>3</sup> In New York, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins worked to frame the organization's response. After a tense telephone call with Williams, Wilkins dispatched a telegram suspending him as president of the Monroe branch.<sup>4</sup>

Williams would appeal the decision directly to the membership at the 1959 annual convention. In the run up to the vote, Williams debated the boundaries of the nonviolent movement with Martin Luther King Jr. in a widely reprinted exchange of essays. King reconciled self-defense with the commitment to political nonviolence within the freedom movement by articulating three distinct categories of response to violent attacks and political oppression. Absolute nonviolence, King said, "cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage." The second category of response, private self-defense, was implicit in the freedom movement and should not discourage supporters from joining. Here King explained that "violence exercised merely in self-defense, all societies, accept as moral and legal. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi. . . . When the Negro uses force in self-defense, he does not forfeit support—he may even win it, by the courage and self-respect it reflects."<sup>5</sup> Finally, King described the forbidden territory of political violence where Williams had ventured, and which the movement must reject: "Violence as a tool of advancement, organization as in warfare, posed incalculable perils." Political goals would be achieved not by violence but by "socially organized masses on the march."<sup>6</sup>

King's description of how private self-defense fit within the freedom movement was only one aspect of the broad community endorsement of the same theme. Many argued that Williams's statements were on the legitimate side of the line between self-defense and political violence. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, for example, argued that Williams had simply articulated the uncontroversial view that "colored people should defend themselves if and when violence is directed at them."<sup>7</sup> Williams had strong support among the NAACP branches.

2. "NAACP Leader Urges Violence," *New York Times*, May 7, 1959.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Julian Mayfield, "Challenge to Negro Leadership: The Case of Robert Williams," *Commentary*, April 1961, 299; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 86–89, 137–65.

5. Edited versions of both essays appear in Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Eyes on the Prize: Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle 1954–1990* (New York, 1991), 110–13; see also Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 12–15.

6. Carson et al., *Eyes on the Prize*; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*.

7. *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 30, 1959.

Even W.E.B. Du Bois, then nearing the end of his life, entered the debate, using a review of a King biography to challenge King's criticism of Williams. "I was sorry," Du Bois said, "to see King lauded for his opposition to the young colored man in North Carolina who declared that in order to stop lynching and mob violence, Negroes must fight back."<sup>8</sup>

As the debate raged, Roy Wilkins defended his decision in an essay titled "The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case," which reiterated the view that Williams had advocated "aggressive, premeditated violence."<sup>9</sup> Wilkins emphasized that his decision dismissing Williams was consistent with long-held principles of self-defense. At a speech in Chicago in June 1959, he exhorted, "of course we must defend ourselves when attacked. This is our right under all known laws."<sup>10</sup>

The removal of Williams ultimately was upheld. But the decision was recorded with the caveat that "we do not deny but reaffirm the right of individual and collective self-defense against unlawful assaults." The report of the Resolutions Committee that brought the matter to the floor of the convention emphasized that, from its inception, the NAACP had vigorously supported "those who have exercised the right of self-defense, particularly in the Arkansas Riot Case, The Sweet Case in Detroit, The Columbia Tennessee Riot cases, and the Ingram case in Georgia."<sup>11</sup>

The Williams episode is remarkable for two reasons. First, it belies the glib popular narrative of nonviolence in the freedom movement. Second, it distills a considered philosophy of self-defense developed organically over generations that undergirds a rich Black tradition of arms in America.

\* \* \*

The distinction between political violence and self-defense ultimately becomes the defining theme of the Black tradition of arms. But in the early stages, under slavery and extending into Reconstruction, avoiding political violence was only a secondary concern. Some of the earliest activists in the freedom movement worried little about maintaining the distinction between self-defense and political violence. Indeed, much of the early violence and advocacy of violence in the freedom movement was distinctly political. Violent capture

8. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Martin Luther King's Life: Crusader without Violence," *National Guardian* (New York), November 9, 1959, 8.

9. Roy Wilkins, *The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case* (New York, 1959).

10. Roy Wilkins, address, Freedom Fund Dinner of the Chicago Branch, Morrison Hotel, Chicago, 1959; Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington, KY, 2014), 81 n. 81.

11. Report of the Resolutions Committee in Gloucester B. Current, "Fiftieth Annual Convention," *Crisis*, August/September 1959, 400-410.

of slave property was the law of the land, enshrined in Article IV, Section 2 of the United States Constitution and then embellished by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and the Compromise of 1850.

Speaking to both fugitives and freemen in 1854, Frederick Douglass urged this response to the Fugitive Slave Laws: “A good revolver, a steady hand and a determination to shoot down any man attempting to kidnap [is the proper remedy to the fugitive slave law]. . . . Every slave hunter who meets a bloody death in his infernal business is an argument in favor of the manhood of our race.”<sup>12</sup> Douglass, like others in the early freedom movement, would come to view slavery and slave catching as acts of war.

Against modern intuitions, there is a rich story of slaves on the run and fugitives settled in the north, acting on Douglass’s advice. Thirty years before emancipation, Loveless and Pink Vandane stole supplies and their master’s shotgun and struck out for the north.<sup>13</sup> Henry Bibb stole his master’s gun, used it to escape, and later wrote a book about it.<sup>14</sup> On the Manigault plantation in coastal Georgia, overseers confirmed that slaves were stealing and hoarding ammunition after they discovered a cache of shot and powder hidden by a slave named Ishmael, who confessed his plans to run off.<sup>15</sup>

Various other cryptic reports of armed bands of escapees suggest multiple thefts or stockpiling of arms and ammunition in preparation for escape. In 1845, a free Black named Bill Wheeler led between seventy and eighty fugitives out of bondage. The unsupervised men sneaked off carrying pistols, blades, and farm tools improvised as weapons. With a semblance of military planning that defies intuitions of spontaneous escapes, the group separated into two companies and proceeded along alternate routes. Eventually, the larger group confronted and exchanged gunfire with pursuers outside Rockville, Maryland. Several Blacks were wounded, two of them stood trial, and one was executed.

A similar confrontation occurred that same year when ten slaves escaped from Hagerstown, Maryland. Before they could reach Pennsylvania, pursuers closed in. The fugitives “drew themselves up in battle order” and attacked with pistols and tomahawks. Eight of the fugitives managed to escape, leaving behind two of their own dead and several wounded Whites.<sup>16</sup>

12. Waldo E. Martin Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986), 188; Frederick Douglass, “Not Afraid to Die,” in *Violence in the Black Imagination: Essays and Documents*, by Ronald T. Takaki (New York, 1993), 17–35.

13. Clifton Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida, 1528–1865* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1989), 134; Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 129–30.

14. Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (Washington, DC, 2005), 84.

15. Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 104.

16. Harrold, *Border War*, 129–30.

In 1848, forty-seven Blacks armed with guns and knives fled from plantations in Kentucky bound for Ohio. Before reaching the Ohio River, they were surrounded by 300 armed Whites. The fugitives stood and fought in two separate skirmishes but ultimately surrendered. Armed fugitives had more success in 1855 when a group of six runaways from Virginia deployed pistols and knives to fight off bounty hunters who detained them in Maryland. Here, the full group managed to get away.<sup>17</sup>

The escape story of Rev. Elijah P. Marrs is particularly illuminating because it contains an explicit admission of gun theft. Marrs was born into slavery in Shelby County, Kentucky, in 1840. Eventually he would rise to become a revered clergyman, educator, and standout in Reconstruction-era politics. During the early stages of the Civil War, Marrs risked retribution at the hands of Shelby County rebels for reading and writing letters for local slaves. As the war progressed, the danger mounted for the “Shelby County Negro clerk,” and he soon decided to run off to the Union Army. In the late summer of 1864, Marrs organized a group of twenty-seven slaves who set out for Union lines. Confirming the surmise that theft was a source of guns for slaves, Marrs reports that his group was “armed with . . . war clubs and one old rusty pistol, the property of the captain.”<sup>18</sup>

Many of these early episodes are obscure and cryptically reported. But those are illuminated by accounts of other more widely known characters. Harriet Tubman is commonly depicted with a long gun or a revolver. Tubman’s actual use of firearms is surrounded by speculation. But the record is clearer for other armed conductors on the Underground Railroad. John P. Parker was a guide on the Underground Railroad in the mid-1850s. Operating out of Ripley, Ohio, Parker aided the escapes of countless fugitive slaves. He kept, carried, and fought with guns against slave catchers and recounted how he “never thought of going uptown without a pistol in my pocket.” Parker was credited by one observer with making Ripley “as important an escape route as any in the nation.” Parker evidently was not alone in his practice of arms. Fugitive slave Francis Fredric described escaping through Ripley, where he was “well-guarded by eight or ten young members with revolvers.”<sup>19</sup>

17. *Ibid.*, 131–77.

18. Elijah P. Marrs, *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs* (n.p., 1885), 17–20, 131, 177.

19. John P. Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, ed. Stuart Seely Sprague (New York, 1996), 118–21; William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (New York, 2005), 85; Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington, KY, 2004), 62; C. L. Innes, ed., *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky: A Narrative by Francis Fedric, Escaped Slave* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2010), 86; Harrold, *Border War*, 131, 179.

William Still, sometimes described as the “father of the Underground Railroad,” produced a voluminous record of slave escapes that includes three images of Blacks with guns successfully fighting off slave catchers. In the Barnaby Grigsby escape, a group of six fugitives had traveled from Virginia to the Cheat River Valley, Maryland, before they were stopped by a group of six White men hoping to capture them for reward money. Still writes that at least two members of the group brandished revolvers, repelled the startled Whites, and fled to freedom.<sup>20</sup>

The Grigsby escape is an example of fugitives simply brandishing guns to good effect. But another of Still’s accounts, rendered in the image titled “Conflict at the Barn,” involved actual gunfire and sword play that resulted in casualties on both sides. Fugitive Robert Jackson and a few of his cohorts had run off from Virginia. When they reached Maryland, slave catchers lured them to a barn with the lie that it was a safe resting place. When a group of armed men and a constable approached the barn, gunfire ensued. Jackson wounded the constable with a pistol shot and fired a second pistol, the effects of which he could not verify. Eventually, Jackson, wounded by gunfire, would make his way to Philadelphia, where he was nursed to health by members of the Anti-Slavery Society, who helped him escape to Canada.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most famous episodes recounted by Still is the 1851 Resistance at Christiana. Also called the Riot, Uprising, or Tragedy at Christiana—depending on who is telling the story—this episode is particularly evocative because of the detail provided in the written accounts by the central Black hero, William Parker, and by Fredrick Douglass, who facilitated the final leg of Parker’s escape. William Parker and Douglass had known one another when they were both slaves in Maryland. Parker eventually escaped and settled in Christiana, Pennsylvania, where he became an active conductor on the Underground Railroad. By the fall of 1851, Parker’s armed vigilance group already had rescued fugitive slaves from abduction and left southern slave catchers badly wounded. Parker also had suffered at least one gunshot wound in a failed rescue attempt.<sup>22</sup>

In September 1851, Parker was harboring fugitives who had escaped from a Maryland plantation. When their owner Edward Gorsuch arrived in Philadelphia to obtain a warrant to apprehend the fugitives, an agent of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society was stationed at the steps of the magistrate’s office. He sent the message to Parker that Gorsuch was headed to Christiana with

20. William Still, *Still’s Underground Railroad Records, with a Life of the Author* (Philadelphia, 1886), 124–26; Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick, eds., *Fleeing for Freedom: Stories of the Underground Railroad* (Chicago, 2004), 148–55.

21. Still, *Still’s Underground*, 48–51.

22. Ella Forbes, *But We Have No Country: The 1851 Christiana, Pennsylvania Resistance* (Cherry Hill, NJ, 1998), 296.

government papers and armed men, including a US marshal, to retrieve his human property.

By the time Gorsuch and his party arrived at Parker's farm, the word had gone out, and the surrounding Black community had responded to Parker's call for help. Differing accounts say that between fifty and 200 Black folk armed with guns and cutlery answered the call. Gorsuch's party was well armed but far outnumbered. When the gunfire started, Gorsuch's hired men quickly lost their resolve. Some fled and would later say they went for help. Gorsuch was killed, and two others in his group were wounded.<sup>23</sup>

In the aftermath, Parker and the fugitives fled north. They took refuge in Rochester, New York, with Fredrick Douglass, who hid them until they could pass into Canada. Douglass would write years later that at a boat dock on the banks of the Genesee River, Parker handed him "the revolver that fell from the hand of Gorsuch . . . presented as a memento of the battle for liberty at Christiana."<sup>24</sup>

\* \* \*

Roughly 200,000 nineteenth-century Black men participated in the ultimate act of political violence, taking up arms to fight in the US Civil War. When the war ended, many of them walked away carrying their service weapons and war prizes. Almost as soon as the shooting war stopped, Southern governments attempted to reinstitute slavery through a variety of state and local laws and private employment contracts restricting every aspect of Black life. Gun prohibition was a common theme of these Black Codes.<sup>25</sup>

There is rich evidence of the efforts of Freedman's Bureau and Union officials to uphold the freed slaves' right to keep and bear arms against government and private disarmament efforts. One Freedman's Bureau agent captured the scene with a report that the "negroes under his charge were widely armed and these guns they prize as their most valued possessions, next to their land."<sup>26</sup>

Other manifestations of the Black practice of arms appear in editorials from the early Black press. *The Loyal Georgian*, for example, reprinted the Freedman's Bureau order affirming Blacks' right to arms, along with this commentary:

23. Jonathan Katz, *Resistance at Christiana: The Fugitive Slave Rebellion, Christiana, Pennsylvania, September 11, 1851; a Documentary Account* (New York, 1974), 232; Forbes, *But We Have No Country*, 296; Harrold, *Border War*, 153, 154.

24. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Fredrick Douglass Written by Himself* (n.p., 1892), 281-82; Katz, *Resistance at Christiana*, 261.

25. Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 102, 114, 274, 428, 439; Stephen P. Halbrook, *Freedmen, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Right to Bear Arms, 1866-1876* (Westport, CT, 1998), 2, 12.

26. Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, 428.



Have colored citizens a right to own and carry firearms: Almost every day we are asked questions similar to the above. We answer certainly you have the same right to own and carry arms that other citizens have. We have several times alluded to the fact that the Constitution of the United States guarantees to every citizen the right to keep and bear arms. Gen. Tilson, Assistant Commissioner, for Georgia, has issued a circular in which he clearly defines the right. The Constitution of the United States is the law of the land, and we will be governed by that at present.<sup>27</sup>

The federal occupation army countermanded much of the racist state firearms legislation. Indeed, some of the strongest evidence supporting the individual nature of the constitutional right to keep and bear arms comes out of this period. Commissioners of the Freedmen's Bureau, all former Union Army generals, were instrumental in protecting the freedmen's right to arms for self-defense. Their reports to Congress about the blatant rights violations of southern state and local governments was one strong impulse for protective federal legislation. In 1866, former Freedman's Bureau commissioners-general Rufus Saxon and Wagner Sayne detailed to a congressional committee some of the snares that southern states were using to disarm the freedmen, including government-sanctioned "private contracts" designed to deprive them of firearms.<sup>28</sup> Blacks who sought to claim their constitutional right to arms sent petitions to Congress protesting racist state gun laws. One typical petition implored Congress to declare that "the late efforts of the legislature of the state to pass an act to deprive us of our arms be forbidden as a plain violation of the constitution."<sup>29</sup>

Guaranteeing to freedmen the constitutional right to arms was an important component of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Second Freedman's Bureau Act, and, ultimately, the Fourteenth Amendment. When Congress voted to override Andrew Johnson's veto of the Civil Rights Bill, one of the justifications was the need to guarantee the right to arms to freedmen across the South. When Congress began debating the Fourteenth Amendment, Senator Howard introduced it by explaining that its "great object" was to "restrain the power of the states and compel them in all times to respect these great fundamental guarantees . . . [s]ecured by the first eight amendments to the Constitution [including] the right to keep and bear arms." At the same time, Congress also abolished the southern state militias that had been deployed immediately after the war to disarm and oppress the freedmen. These acts are some of our strongest indicators

27. *Ibid.*, 2, 5, 27; "Right to Bear Arms," *Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), February 24, 1866.

28. Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, Rep. No. 39, 1st Sess., at 219 (1866); Cong. Globe, 39th Cong., 1st Sess. 371 (1866).

29. Philip Sheldon Foner and George Elizer Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865* (Philadelphia, 1980), 2:302.

that, by 1866, the right to keep and bear arms was decidedly an individual right and not about preserving militias.<sup>30</sup>

The Black tradition of arms unfolds in the Reconstruction era as a story in which guns were vital tools for self-defense and instruments of political violence. The story is populated by men like Elijah Marrs,<sup>31</sup> Emanuel Fortune,<sup>32</sup> and Abraham Galloway,<sup>33</sup> as well as entire Black communities who rose with arms to defend friends and neighbors against terrorism under names like the Camilla Riot<sup>34</sup> and the Darien Insurrection.<sup>35</sup>

\* \* \*

After Democrats stole the 1876 presidential election and Republicans stole it back, a compromise was struck that handed the presidency to Republicans and ended Reconstruction. It was the beginning of what some consider the low point of the Black American experience. This is the period during which Black political violence would seem increasingly fruitless and individual self-defense would become the driving theme of the Black tradition of arms.

This is the period, during the last part of the nineteenth century, that prompted storied antilynching activist Ida B. Wells to declare that “the Winchester Rifle deserves a place of honor in every Black home.” This was not empty rhetoric. Wells was advancing a considered personal security policy and was specifically referencing recent episodes, in Jacksonville, Florida, and Paducah, Kentucky, where well-armed Blacks had thwarted lynch mobs.<sup>36</sup>

30. Clayton Cramer, Nicholas Johnson, and George Mocsary, “This Right Is Not Allowed by Governments That Are Afraid of the People: The Public Meaning of the Second Amendment When the Fourteenth Amendment Was Ratified,” *George Mason Law Review* 17 (2010): 860–86; Cong. Globe, 39th Cong., 2d Sess. 1848 (1868).

31. Marrs, *Life and History*.

32. Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune, Militant Journalist* 14–15 (Chicago, 1972); Shawn Leigh Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle before the NAACP* (Philadelphia, 2012), 5.

33. David S. Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves' Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 202, 204.

34. Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 90, 289–92.

35. W. F. Brundage, “The Darien ‘Insurrection’ of 1899: Black Protest during the Nadir of Race Relations,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 74 (1990): 234–53.

36. Margaret Vandiver, *Letbal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005), 179; George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865–1942: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1996), 169–70; Daniel F. Littlefield Jr. and Lonnie E. Underhill, “Black Dreams and ‘Free’ Homes: The Oklahoma Territory, 1891–1894,” *Phylon* 34, no. 4 (1973): 348–49.

Similar episodes in Mississippi and Georgia confirmed for Wells the importance of armed self-defense in an environment where the idea of relying on the state for personal security was an increasingly absurd proposition. Wells's statement about the Winchester rifle reflected the sentiments of her peers. Her coeditor at the *Memphis Free Press*, Rev. Taylor Nightingale, urged his congregation to buy Winchesters as a practical response to the surrounding threats.<sup>37</sup>

The practice of arms ranged widely. Reports from the Black settlements in the West warned that "the colored men of Oklahoma Territory mean business. They have an exalted idea of their own rights and liberties and they dare to maintain them. In nearly every cabin visited was a modern Winchester oiled and ready for use."<sup>38</sup> This sort of preparedness was rewarded in 1891 when Edwin McCabe, an early advocate of Black migration to the American West, was attacked by a gang intent on discouraging Blacks from staking claims in the opening territory. Blacks had been run out of several staging towns. In Langston City, more than two thousand armed Blacks assembled in preparation for the land rush. After sporadic threats, McCabe was accosted and fired on. He was rescued by a superior force of Black men wielding Winchester rifles.<sup>39</sup>

\* \* \*

As the freedom movement became more formalized, Blacks in the leadership embraced armed self-defense and endeavored to articulate boundaries that reconciled it with the movement's political goals. W.E.B. Du Bois is an exemplar. He famously recounts pacing the floor following the 1906 Atlanta race riot with "a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and two dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot."<sup>40</sup> Du Bois was actually somewhat behind the curve. He did not follow the gun-carrying practices of his classmates when he was a student at Fisk University in the late 1880s. But he would recount later how his classmates carried guns whenever they went into Nashville.<sup>41</sup>

37. Linda McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York, 1999), 129, 155.

38. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York, 1999), 147.

39. William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York, 1986), 149-50; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 30; Littlefield and Underhill, "Black Dreams," 348-49.

40. Gerald Horne and Mary Young, eds., *W.E.B. Du Bois: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT, 2001); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998), 317; Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens, GA, 2005), 24; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York, 1994), 354.

41. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 67.

Du Bois's gun purchase in Atlanta and his aggressive statements following the riot were not passion of the moment things that he would regret. They were part of a continuing engagement of the practice and philosophy of armed self-defense. As editor of the NAACP's flagship magazine, *Crisis*, Du Bois continued to champion armed self-defense as a core private interest.

In some instances, Du Bois even presented self-defense as duty. After a lynching in Gainesville, Florida, he wrote, "No Colored man can read an account of the recent lynching in Gainesville without being ashamed of his people. Without resistance, they let a mob whom they outnumbered two to one, torture, harry and murder. In the last analysis, lynching of Negroes is going to stop, only when the cowardly mob is faced by effective guns, in the hands of people determined to sell their souls dearly."<sup>42</sup>

Du Bois also offered an important caution that prefigures Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonition decades later about respecting the line between self-defense and political violence. In commentary following the 1919 Chicago race riot, Du Bois urged robust self-defense with "bricks and clubs and guns." Then he cautioned that "we must never let justifiable self-defense against individuals become blind and lawless offense. . . . We must not seek reform by violence."<sup>43</sup>

Du Bois was no aberration within the early leadership of the NAACP. Walter White also would rise to pull heavy oars at the association. White was from Atlanta and was just a boy during 1906 Atlanta riot. Later, White recounted his father's grim instruction on the first night of the riot, as the two of them crouched in the dark with guns: "Son, don't shoot until the first man puts a foot on the lawn, and then . . . don't you miss."<sup>44</sup>

Louis Wright, the first Black chairman of the NAACP and a graduate of Harvard Medical School, was also in Atlanta during the 1906 riot. Roy Wilkins would write that, "Louis, like Walter, had been through the 1906 riot, and like Walter he had watched through the darkened windows of his home, gun in hand."<sup>45</sup>

The gun stories of Du Bois, White, and Wright make it easier to digest the fact that the NAACP cut its teeth as an organization supporting Black people who used guns in self-defense. The first major litigation that the NAACP supported was a case of armed self-defense by Black sharecropper Pink Franklin against a South Carolina planter who laid claim to him under a peonage contract.

42. *Crisis*, October 1916, 270-71.

43. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Let Us Reason Together," *Crisis*, September 1919, 231.

44. Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York, 1948), 5-12; Kenneth Robert Janken, *Walter White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 3-27.

45. Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York, 1984), 165.

The year was 1910, and Franklin was accused of murder. The “crime” that started it all was a basic breach of contract that would have given rise to a civil lawsuit for money damages between White people. But in South Carolina, Black sharecroppers were governed by a peculiar species of agricultural contract that was regulated under the South Carolina Criminal Code. It was a version of the peonage contracts that defeated Confederates deployed after the Civil War under the Black Codes. Sharecroppers who breached these agreements with planters could be punished by fines and imprisonment. Black contract breakers who could not pay their fines and mounting fees from incarceration might then be sold off through the convict labor system into a life that was just a step away from slavery.

Pink Franklin signed on as a tenant farmer with one planter and then left for a better deal at another farm. The first planter secured a warrant for Franklin’s arrest. One morning, around three o’clock, lawmen descended on Franklin’s cabin, warrant in hand. Stories conflict about the details. Franklin said that he was surprised in the middle of the night by strange men in his bedroom. When one of them shot him in the shoulder, Franklin dived to the floor, rolled to the gun he kept in the corner, and came up shooting.<sup>46</sup> A surviving constable claimed that both the front door to Franklin’s home and Franklin’s bedroom door were ajar; that they knocked, entered, and then were surprised by gunfire from Franklin, an axe attack by Franklin’s woman, and a flying tackle by Franklin’s young son.

It is unclear whether Franklin deployed the Winchester repeating rifle extolled by Ida B. Wells, but it is clear that he used something more advanced than the single-shot technology often employed by poor folk. Franklin fired with effect, killing one constable and wounding another.

Franklin was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. The NAACP supported the case through an appeal to the United States Supreme Court and then, with the aid of Booker T. Washington, lobbied the governor of South Carolina to commute Franklin’s death sentence to life imprisonment. In 1915, Franklin’s case was reopened, and he was paroled in 1919.<sup>47</sup>

As the NAACP matured, support for armed self-defense would continue at the highest levels of the organization. Following the July 1919 race riot in Washington, DC, James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP’s first Black executive secretary (who succeeded White pacifist John Shilliday), investigated the incident and offered this assessment of how and why peace was restored: “The Negroes saved themselves and saved Washington by their determination not to run but to fight, fight in the defense of their lives and their homes. If the White mob had

46. *Franklin v. State of South Carolina*, 218 U.S. 161 (1910).

47. Kenneth W. Goings, *The NAACP Comes of Age: The Defeat of Judge John J. Parker* (Bloomington, IN, 1990), 12.

gone unchecked—and it was only the determined effort of Black men that checked it—Washington would have been another and worse East St. Louis.”

The violence in Washington, DC, was sparked by a rumor that a Black man had raped a White soldier’s wife. White veterans rampaged through the city’s Black neighborhoods, spurred by an editorial from the *Washington Post* urging “every available serviceman to gather at Pennsylvania and Seventh Avenue at 9:00 p.m. for a cleanup that will cause the events of the last two evenings to pale into insignificance.” White service men stormed through Black neighborhoods in the southwest and Foggy Bottom. However, in northwest Washington, the forewarned community was barricaded in and well-armed. As the mob approached, Blacks answered with gunfire and scattered the mob.<sup>48</sup>

In 1919, the NAACP took on the armed self-defense case of Sergeant Edgar Caldwell, an active-duty soldier stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama. In December 1918, Caldwell was traveling into Anniston by streetcar and dared to sit in the White section of the car. The motorman and conductor teamed up to drag Caldwell from the forbidden zone. Caldwell launched one of them through the glass divider between the cars before they managed to throw him off the car.

As Caldwell lay in the mud, the two trolley men descended to give him a beating. The motorman, in heavy work boots, stomped and kicked Caldwell. Criminologists tracking mid-twentieth-century homicides would document that beating equaled—and sometimes surpassed—shooting and stabbing as a mode of criminal homicide.<sup>49</sup> Caldwell was a decorated veteran of World War I and understood that death could come from hands and feet as well as from knives and guns. Trapped on his back, writhing under blows from steel-toed boots, Caldwell drew his service revolver and fired two shots, killing one attacker and wounding the other.<sup>50</sup>

Due largely to the legal assistance and political maneuvering of the NAACP, including a failed appeal to the US Supreme Court, Caldwell survived for almost two years on death row before being executed. Over this period, Caldwell became a household name among Blacks. Writing for *Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois detailed efforts to save Caldwell and framed the issue as whether Blacks would be afforded the basic prerogatives of manhood. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund had yet to be formed, so the cash-strapped organization made direct appeals in the *Crisis* for donations to fund Caldwell’s defense.

48. Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York, 2005), 96.

49. Martin E. Wolfgang, *Patterns in Criminal Homicide* (Philadelphia, 1958), 84–88.

50. Vincent C. Mikkelsen, “Fighting for Sgt. Caldwell: The NAACP Campaign against Legal Lynching after World War I,” *Journal of African American History* 94, no. 4 (2009): 464–86; Shapiro, *White Violence*, 147–55.

In its March 1920 edition, *Crisis* published a full-length photograph of Caldwell along with an appeal: “We want 500 Negroes who believe in Negro manhood to send immediately one dollar . . . for Caldwell’s defense.” The plea resonated with donors, who responded with dollars and coins, notes and cards supporting the ideal of “Negro Manhood” exemplified by Caldwell’s armed stand.<sup>51</sup> After Caldwell’s execution, Du Bois eulogized him as a martyr for Black manhood.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most important cases supported by the NAACP was that of Dr. Ossian Sweet of Detroit in 1925. Sweet had the grand ambition to move his family into a nice house in a White neighborhood. He was familiar with the risks. In recent months, several Black families were run out of their new homes by mobs. Sweet’s colleague, Dr. Al Turner, did not even get to spend the night in his new home. Turner was reviled among Blacks, as the story spread of him fleeing the scene, cowering on the floor of his chauffeured car.

Sweet feared both mobbers and the shame of being called a coward when he walked into his new home carrying a sack filled with twelve guns and 400 rounds of ammunition. It was not long before the mob gathered. By the end of it, a White man in the mob was dead from gunshots fired by Blacks.

The NAACP hired Clarence Darrow to defend Sweet and his family. After Darrow wrestled the prosecution to a mistrial, the Sweets became national heroes among Black folk. Their tour of NAACP branches raised enough money to pay Darrow, with surplus left to fulfill James Weldon Johnson’s dream of a standing fund that could support important litigation without pushing the organization to the brink of insolvency. This was the beginning of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.<sup>53</sup>

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The modern Civil Rights Movement record is rich with oral histories, memoirs, and other accounts that illuminate the Black tradition of arms. Local lore in Columbia, Tennessee, says that in 1946, the armed Black community was a brake on plans to lynch Thurgood Marshall, who was assigned by the NAACP

51. Vincent C. Mikkelsen, “Coming from Battle to Face a War: The Lynching of Black Soldiers in the World War I Era” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2007), 171–73; *Crisis*, March 1920, 233.

52. Mikkelsen, “Fighting for Sgt. Caldwell,” 41; *Crisis*, October 1920, 282.

53. Boyle, *Arc of Justice*, 29–37, 99, 151–55, 163, 181, 187, 194, 203, 205–6, 219–21, 224, 228, 245–47, 257, 305, 307; “Negroes Shoot a White Youth in New Home Row,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 11, 1925; “What’s Wrong in Detroit?,” *Chicago Defender*, September 1925; “The Retention of Clarence Darrow,” *Daily American* (Washington, DC), October 1925; “We Must Fight If We Would Survive,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 18, 1925; “Law for Whites and Negroes,” *New York World*, October 31, 1925, reprinted in *Chicago Defender*, October 31, 1925.

to represent defendants who had used guns to fight off a mob in the Black neighborhood of Minkslide. The *Crisis* magazine championed the residents of Minkslide, who showed “that Negroes, even in small communities like Columbia where they were outnumbered almost three-to-one, do not intend to sit quietly and let a mob form, threaten and raid their neighborhood.”<sup>54</sup>

Another instance of armed community protection of Thurgood Marshall is better documented. In her 1998 autobiography, Constance Baker Motley describes how, in 1956, she and Marshall were guarded by armed Black men overnight and on the way to the courthouse when they were in Birmingham to press desegregation cases. Motley describes the scene this way:

When Autherine Lucy registered in February 1956 and was finally on campus, a riot broke out. . . . We then went to court with a motion to hold the dean of admissions and members of the board of trustees in contempt for failing to secure Miss Lucy’s peaceful attendance. While in Birmingham for this hearing, we stayed in Arthur Shores’ spacious new home on the city’s outskirts. This house had been bombed on several occasions, but because we could not stay in a hotel or motel in Birmingham, we had to take up Shores’ offer of his bomb-prone abode. . . .

When Thurgood and I arrived, the garage door was wide open. Inside were six or eight Black men with shotguns and machine guns who had been guarding the house since the last bombing. . . . When we went to court the next day, the driver of our car and one other man in the front passenger seat carried guns in their pockets.<sup>55</sup>

Long-time Mississippi Delta activist Dr. T. R. M. Howard is most celebrated for his efforts surrounding the Emmett Till murder trial. Howard helped search for witnesses, developed evidence, and opened his home as a safe haven for journalists, witnesses, and visitors. A variety of observers confirm that guns were everywhere. One reporter records “a long gun, a shotgun or rifle, in every corner of every room.” Howard typically carried a pistol openly in a belt holster. Every day of the trial, Howard and a caravan of armed men escorted Maime Bradley (Till’s mother) and others, including Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan, to the courthouse.

Journalist Cloyte Murdock, writing for the Black monthly magazine *Ebony*, described arriving at Howard’s home and having trouble getting her luggage through the front door. She finally wedged through and found the problem. A

54. Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, 187–88; “People’s Voice,” *Crisis*, March 9, 1946; editorial, *Crisis*, April 1946, 105.

55. Constance Baker Motley, *Equal Justice under Law: An Autobiography* (New York, 1999), 121–23.



cache of guns stacked behind the door had fallen over and blocked her entry. Another visitor identified a .357 Magnum revolver and a .45 automatic in holsters looped over the headboard in Howard's bedroom and a Thompson sub-machine gun at the foot of the bed.<sup>56</sup>

Throughout his activism, Howard confronted the reality of state failure and overt malice. It fueled his natural stance and political philosophy of self-sufficiency and self-help. The folly of relying on the state for protection was glaring in an episode where FBI agents were sitting in his office when a fresh threat came in. The agents were there investigating whether Howard had been the target of extortion. The interview was interrupted by a telephone caller who threatened to kill Howard if he continued to press for integration. Although they had just observed a threat to his life, the agents rebuffed Howard's request for protection and suggested that he contact local authorities. The governor of Mississippi already had refused the NAACP's plea to investigate the roadside shotgun murder of Rev. Henry Lee, with the retort that he did not answer letters from the NAACP. That was the environment that prompted Howard to keep "a small arsenal" in his home.<sup>57</sup>

Howard was not unusual. When news spread that Howard had received a particularly credible death threat, a neighbor quickly appeared with the assurance, "Don't worry about a thing, Doc. Me and a gang of fellows will surround your house tonight and we all have guns." Later, just on the rumor that Howard's wife had been accosted by bigots, fifteen cars full of armed Black men sped to Howard's home.<sup>58</sup>

Rosa Parks confirmed the Black tradition of arms dating from her earliest memories through the period of activism that made her famous:

By the time I was six, I was old enough to realize that we were actually not free. The Ku Klux Klan was riding through the Black community, burning churches, beating up people, killing people. At the time I didn't realize why there was so much activity, but later I learned that it was because African-American soldiers were returning from World War I and acting as if they deserved equal rights because they served our country. . . .

At one point the violence was so bad that my grandfather kept his gun—a double barreled shotgun—close by at all times. And I remember we talked about how just in case the Klansmen broke into our house, we should go to bed with our clothes on so we would be ready to run if we had to. I can

56. David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Champaign, IL, 2009), 67–68, 136.

57. Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, xiii, 108–9.

58. Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York, 2013), 36.

remember my grandfather saying, “I don’t know how long I would last if they came breaking in here, but I’m getting the first one who comes through the door.” . . . My grandfather wasn’t going outside looking for any trouble, but he was going to defend his home. I remember thinking that whatever happened, I wanted to see it. I wanted to see him shoot that gun. I wasn’t going to be caught asleep. I remember that at night he would sit by the fire in his rocking chair and I would sit on the floor right by his chair, and he would have his gun right by just in case.<sup>59</sup>

Early in their activism, Rosa and her husband Ray began hosting meetings at their home on Huffman Street. Ray had sheltered her from some of the initial late-night meetings of budding activists, where men came with guns and there were armed lookouts. This practice did not change when the couple started hosting groups in their home. Parks describes it this way: “It was the first meeting we ever had at our house, and it was in the front room. There was a little table about the size of the card table that they were sitting around. . . . The table was covered with guns. I didn’t even think to offer them anything—refreshments or something to drink. But with the table so covered with guns, I don’t know where I would’ve put any refreshments. No one was thinking of food anyway.”<sup>60</sup>

Threats and harassment would eventually drive Rosa Parks out of Alabama. But before she moved north, the gun was an important tool in the interim. “We did suffer some harassment,” Parks recalls: “The threatening telephone calls continued even after the Supreme Court decision. My husband slept with a gun nearby for a time.”<sup>61</sup>

In Birmingham, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth was protected by armed “Civil Rights Guards” after being attacked by terrorists.<sup>62</sup> But Shuttlesworth was not just a passive beneficiary of armed protection. After freedom riders from his congregation were assaulted in Anniston, Alabama, some of the injured were taken to a local hospital, where a hostile crowd formed outside. Freedom Rider Hank Thomas recalled that “the people at the hospital would not do anything for us . . . and told us to leave.” Shuttlesworth was already aware of the situation and was riding to the rescue with a fifteen-car caravan of armed men. Shuttlesworth’s reasoning reflected the long tradition of arms: “I’m going to get my people. I’m a nonviolent man, but I’m going to get my people.” Thomas recalled how Shuttlesworth’s show of force parted the crowd: “each one of

59. Rosa Parks and James Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York, 1992), 30–33, 67.

60. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

61. *Ibid.*, 161.

62. Andrew Michael Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1999), 110, 117–18, 169–70.

them got out with their guns and everything. . . . They had rifles and shotguns and that's how we got back to Birmingham."<sup>63</sup>

Shuttlesworth enjoys a higher historical profile than his compatriot, Rev. Ed Gardner. But Gardner faced similar threats and took a similar approach to the practice of arms. In 1956, multiple pressures forced the Birmingham NAACP office to close. Gardner and Shuttlesworth formed the Alabama Christian Movement to fill the gap. Although national attention focused on the Montgomery bus boycott, Gardner and Shuttlesworth led protests in Birmingham, where more than 500 marchers went to jail. Gardner and Shuttlesworth became open targets. Looking back, Gardner recalled that "they came by my place shooting and all like that, so I had two guards to guard my house. Reverend Shuttlesworth had guards guarding his house. We had a lot of laughs about that. I had a Winchester and I told 'em, this is a nonviolent Winchester."<sup>64</sup>

Gardner's quip about the nonviolent Winchester reflected the theme of private self-defense versus political violence. Grassroots activist Austry Kirklin elaborated the two themes in an oral-history account, describing how "we was nonviolent. Nobody never did fight back." Then, without missing a beat and with no worry about inconsistency, she revealed that "Mr. Sims, he used to always carry his gun on—him and Joe Smith"<sup>65</sup>

Daisy Bates, "the first Lady of Little Rock," president of the Arkansas Conference of NAACP Branches, and advisor to the "Little Rock Nine," pleaded for federal protection after a firebombing and cross burnings at her home. Federal officials declined to intervene and local law enforcement was overtly hostile.

Fortunately, the Bateses owned and were familiar with guns. The earliest record of their practice of arms is 1934, when Daisy and her husband L.C. were stopped by the police in Monroe, Louisiana, on a vague charge of "investigation." It came to nothing, except for the record of L.C.'s pistol in the glove compartment. L.C.'s gun carrying was in line with long family practice. A generation earlier, L.C.'s grandfather wielded a gun to stop an assault on two of his workers and ended up shooting a White man.<sup>66</sup>

Bates confirmed the surrounding culture of arms in a 1959 letter to Thurgood Marshall. She confided that that she and L.C. were under continuing threat and "keep 'Old Betsy' well oiled and the guards are always on alert."

63. Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York, 1977), 115, 141.

64. *Ibid.*, 141.

65. Youth of the Rural Organizing Cultural Center, "Ms. Austry Kirklin," 57, 71–77, and "Mr. T.C. Johnson," 153, both in *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South; An Oral History* (Boulder, CO, 1991).

66. Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (New York, 1962), 94–96, 111, 162; Grif Stockley, *Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas* (Jackson, MS, 2005), 24, 27, 186–88.

This would not have surprised Marshall, who found the Bateses' home "an armed camp" when he stayed there in September 1957 while litigating the Little Rock School Board's delay of court-ordered integration.<sup>67</sup>

In October 1957, Bates was awakened by something crashing through a side window. She bolted to the noise, gun in hand, and spied an angry little man standing in her driveway, poised to throw a flaming missile. She fired five quick shots that sent him running to a waiting car that sped off.<sup>68</sup> In the fall of 1958, a carload of toughs rammed into the rear of Bates's station wagon. When she stopped to survey the damage, they jumped out and threatened to drag her into the street. Recounting it later, she admitted, "I was so infuriated that I released the lock on the door and simultaneously released the safety catch of my pistol." Something about her demeanor stanchied the young bigots' enthusiasm and they retreated.<sup>69</sup>

Following the victory in Little Rock, Bates traveled around the country, speaking to various audiences, and sometimes recounted episodes of armed resistance by the Black folk of Little Rock. She told about the mother of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, who sent her husband to town to "buy me a gun with plenty of bullets." And depending on her audience, Bates also revealed that she carried her own pistol and knew how to use it.<sup>70</sup>

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There is a temptation to classify women like Daisy Bates as anomalies within a primarily male phenomenon. That would be a mistake. First, it ignores the fact of women living without men. Second, imminent threats to life and limb that mark the boundaries of self-defense do not respect gender boundaries. When threats arose, Black women answered, unencumbered by notions of "man's work."

Legendary voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer reflected this reality in her commentary on the essential tools of survival in an environment where any random night might bring terror. Hamer navigated the risks of activism through the storms of the 1960s, registering folk to vote, pressing the struggle as a leader in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, capturing the hearts of callous politicians at two national political conventions, and founding the National Women's Political Caucus.

Hamer's tactical stance was rooted partly in scripture. Speaking about the racists who terrorized her, Hamer was forgiving: "baby you just got to love

67. Stockley, *Daisy Bates*, 132.

68. Bates, *Long Shadow of Little Rock*, 96, 158–59, 174; Stockley, *Daisy Bates*, 186.

69. Bates, *Long Shadow of Little Rock*, 96, 158–59, 174; Stockley, *Daisy Bates*, 186.

70. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 159.

em.” But she was not naive. Long experience left her unwilling to leave other cheek exposed. Asked how she endured the multiple hazards of the time, Hamer responded, “I’ll tell you why. *I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom* and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch won’t write his mama again.”<sup>71</sup> Fannie Lou Hammer and Daisy Bates became civil rights legends. But most of the women who populate the tradition of arms are unheralded, their heroism consigned to footnotes in the broader narrative.

The notion of a shotgun in every corner of Hamer’s bedroom seems excessive until we consider that she was probably talking about single-shot shotguns. These cheap, simple, but versatile guns were the typical gun of poor folks. For those who know the culture, the image of a couple of single shots leaning behind the kitchen door is familiar. But many folk, even poor folk, would save and sacrifice to buy or trade for superior tools.

Annie Colton Reeves of Pike County, Mississippi, describes how her family saved and sacrificed to buy a heavy-caliber Winchester rifle, a light-caliber .22 rifle, a shotgun, and two handguns. Annie’s father said that “it’s better to have ammunition than to have food.” This was perhaps a calculation that with ammunition, one could get food. That calculation was evident in the training of the six Colton kids to be as familiar with guns as they were with the tools of the field. Still, the Colton kids understood the other possibilities. This was evident when Annie raised her gun to repel a group of menacing young men with the warning “whenever you get ready to go to hell, you come back.”<sup>72</sup>

In 1962, Rebecca Wilson of Dallas, Georgia, returned fire after hooded Klansmen blasted her front door with a shotgun. “It was the idea of the masks,” Wilson explained: “I was scared. I didn’t know what I was shooting at. I just had my hand out the door.” Her instincts were effective. She killed one man and wounded another. The others fled, surprised by the return fire. The shooting ultimately was acknowledged as an act of self-defense, and several of the Klansmen were charged with violating the state’s antimasking law. Wilson was placed in protective custody and moved out of state.<sup>73</sup>

71. Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville, FL, 2007), 121; Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), 233; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Champaign, IL, 2000), 9, 11.

72. Akinyele Omowale Umoja, “Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1996), 68–69.

73. Christopher B. Strain, “Civil Rights and Self Defense: The Fiction of Nonviolence, 1955–1968” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000); *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 15, 1962, 1.

Leola Blackmon recounted how Carroll County, Mississippi government officials created a bureaucratic maze that required Black voters to make multiple trips to the registration office. The scheduling of these trips was somehow made known to gangs of armed White men who would harass activists on the trip into town. According to Blackmon, “some Blacks just went home and . . . came back with their guns. . . . We had mens who guarded us. . . . They began to shoot back at this car and they hit it. . . . The laws didn’t try to find out who did it.” Later, when Klansmen set a cross afire in her yard, Blackmon deployed her own gun to chase them off: “I had a rifle. It would shoot sixteen times, and I just lit out up there and started shooting.” Blackmon explained that this was fully consistent with the principles of the nonviolence movement. Her rendition was not as scholarly as Martin Luther King’s. But the message that activists were to refrain from political violence was the same: “Well we said nonviolent when we was protesting the school buses; nobody not s’posed to fight. But that fight was brought on because we were looking for them to hit *us*.”<sup>74</sup>

In Jonesboro, Louisiana, Klansmen stood in the open, admiring their work after lighting a cross in the yard of Rev. Y. D. Jackson. They might have been better off if Jackson had been home. His wife was perhaps less willing than he to turn the other cheek. It just a moment before the arrogant Klansmen were ducking and running under gunfire from Mrs. Jackson, who emptied her rifle at them and was quickly reloading. For Black folks in Jonesboro, the incident reflected the new resolve that fueled the rise of groups like the Deacons for Defense.<sup>75</sup>

During the Freedom Summer Project, a student volunteer was shocked to find that her host, “Mrs. Fairly, was armed to the teeth.” In a letter home, the student wrote, “I met Mrs. Fairly coming down the hall from the front porch carrying a rifle in one hand and a pistol in the other.” In Ferriday, Mississippi, a rural farmer’s wife returned fire when a group of Klansmen shot into her home. After the brutal beating of her nephew by police in Tuscaloosa, activist Ruth Bolden admits, “I called my friends . . . to come over here and stay with me that night ’cause I was really scared to death. . . . I said ‘come and bring a lot of sandwiches’ and he knew what that meant: it was guns and a lot of bullets.” Afterward, Bolden started carrying a pistol concealed in her Bible.<sup>76</sup>

74. Youth of the Rural Organizing Cultural Center, “Ms. Leola Blackmon,” in *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 57, 71–77.

75. Lance E. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 40.

76. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1988), 21, 90; Simon Wendt, “Protection or Path toward Revolution? Black Power and Self-Defense,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 9, no. 4 (2007): 324; *Tuscaloosa (AL) News*, February 20, 2000.

After a series of midnight attacks in neighboring counties, northern activist Margaret Rose recorded that the family she stayed with in Holmes County, Mississippi, “were up all night. . . Mr. on the road patrolling with his new rifle and Mrs. walking from room to room in the house with a shotgun.”<sup>77</sup>

Another sort of defiance of gender roles is demonstrated by the evenhanded cooperation by Black couples who did what was necessary to fend off violent threats unencumbered by any notion that it was man’s work. In Forrest County, Mississippi, NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer had pressed the NAACP agenda since the early 1950s, when he sued the county sheriff for interfering with Black voting efforts. When northern students came to help with voter registration, some of them stayed with Dahmer and wrote home about the “guns, pistols and rifles . . . placed throughout his house.” As tensions escalated through the early 1960s, Dahmer and his bride Ellie would alternate sleeping and sitting up with guns. They continued this practice for several years, up through 1965.<sup>78</sup>

After the national leadership ousted him as president of the Monroe branch of the NAACP, fueling his storied debate with Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Williams actually stepped up his activism and formed connections with a variety of other groups. With the following he garnered in his fight with the NAACP, Williams expanded his newsletter, *The Crusader*. In the summer of 1961, Williams busied himself delivering the latest edition of *The Crusader*. Police followed him all over the county as he made deliveries. When he finally turned home, they pulled him over and said he was under arrest for a broken taillight. Since they had been following him all day, Williams feared that the stop was just a ruse to carry him off some place and beat him or worse. Williams followed them as instructed until he saw the chance to break away. Then, he raced home with two cruisers in pursuit. When the police pulled into Williams’s driveway, they faced his wife Mabel, who stood at the kitchen door with a 12-gauge shotgun, and Robert, emerging from around her with a rifle. Mabel warned the cops that they would not take her husband without a warrant. The officers withdrew, and nothing more was mentioned about taillights.<sup>79</sup>

In the all-Black town of Harmony, Mississippi, Winson Hudson and her husband Cleo forged a powerful partnership in pursuit of movement goals. Winson was president of the Leak County, Mississippi NAACP from 1962 to 2001. In 1961, a motorcade of local Whites, agitated by desegregation efforts, drove through Harmony, firing shots at houses along the road. They made it

77. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign, IL, 1995), 254.

78. Umoja, “Eye for an Eye,” 103–4.

79. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 259.

through once without resistance. Then, Hudson recalls, “they came through again and that time some of [her sister’s] boys and some more here were ready for ’em. They ran the Whites out of here. They followed ’em back to their homes and shot into them. This stirred things up so bad that even Governor Ross Barnett came out to Harmony and offered to build a junior college up here.”<sup>80</sup>

When Hudson and her family were specifically targeted, they responded twice with gunfire that thwarted the attackers. In one incident, midnight bombers were foiled at the Hudson home by the guard dog. So they attacked Winson’s sister’s home instead. Cleo Hudson, already alerted by the dog, ran to the scene with his gun. Winson Hudson would write later: “Cleo was shooting, emptying every gun.” The bombers sped away.

Later, midnight terrorists began leaving explosive devices in the roadside mailboxes of activists. By then, Hudson’s family was on the lookout for such attacks. As her two nephews were standing watch one night, “they drove up and put the bomb in the mailbox, my boys started shooting. They just lined that car with bullets up and down.” In another episode, the Black men of Harmony responded to an attack on the Black community center and “shot the Klan truck all up.”<sup>81</sup>

Jackie Hicks and her husband Robert of Bogalusa, Louisiana, faced threats both from local terrorists and local government when they began hosting interracial groups of northern student activists in their home. When they requested protection from the police chief, he told them “he wasn’t going to play no nursemaid to some niggers.”<sup>82</sup>

The Hickses and those around them survived multiple attacks. When northern activist Bill Yates was attacked and then chased by a car full of bigots, he sped to Jackie Hicks’s house. The attackers retreated when Jackie Hicks stepped out onto the porch with a pistol in her hand. Later that night, a car full of men returned and broke the windows of a van owned by one of the White students. Then, they started shooting. The return fire was more than they anticipated. Robert Hicks emerged from his house firing a Winchester rifle, not unlike the type Ida B. Wells had endorsed nearly a century earlier. Then, from cover around the house and from across the street, other men who had been guarding the Hicks home opened fire. The Hickses and their guests emerged unscathed. But Black hospital workers reported that two Klansmen were shot, and the story

80. Winson Hudson and Constance Curry, *Mississippi Harmony: Memoirs of a Freedom Fighter* (New York, 2002), 8–9, 58–59.

81. *Ibid.*, 2, 51–52, 58–59, 88; Dittmer, *Local People*, 257; Barbara Summers, ed., *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America* (New York, 1989), 160.

82. Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, 93–94, 109–10.



was suppressed to conceal police complicity in the attack. This episode was one of the early markers of the rise of the storied Deacons for Defense.<sup>83</sup>

The Deacons for Defense would become the most prominent, but other organized groups also took up arms in defense of their families, communities, and the movement. In Meridian, Mississippi, a defense group drawn from local Baptist church members guarded the home of NAACP leader Claude Bryant. In April 1964, an explosion rocked Bryant's house. He ran into the street and answered with rifle fire. After that incident, Bryant purchased a "high-powered" rifle better suited to the surrounding threats. The attack also prompted that the organization of an armed neighborhood watch.

Three months later, bombers attacked the home of Bryant's brother Charlie. With the front windows blown from her house, Charlie's wife, Ora, emerged from the smoke with a shotgun and fired on the fleeing terrorists. Ora Bryant was not the only person on watch that night. One neighbor recounts how "that car was fired on so many times coming out of there . . . by people straight up the street all through there. . . . And he was shot at when he turned the curve, coming back towards town. . . . And you could hear people hollering 'here he come.'" When the car passed his house, Claude Bryant ran out with his new rifle and fired a full magazine at the fleeing bombers. Afterward, the rumor spread that wounded terrorists were taken out of state for treatment in order to suppress the story of Black triumph.<sup>84</sup>

The Bryants and their neighbors understood that the fight was not over and followed up by organizing regular armed watches. Annie Reeves, whose husband also helped guard Claude Bryant, described sitting in her front room with the lights out, a rifle clutched in her lap. Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Nobles, active members in Claude Bryant's NAACP branch, also stood ready to protect their neighbors. Matthew Nobles camped on the roof of his house with a rifle while his wife slept fitfully, listening for trouble through an open window, her own rifle at the ready.<sup>85</sup>

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Organized defense groups pressured the boundary between permitted legitimate self-defense and forbidden political violence. The challenge is evident in the planning and controversy surrounding the Mississippi March Against Fear.

83. "Bogalusa Riflemen Fight Off KKK Attack," *Jet*, April 22, 1965, 5; Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, 118–19; *New York Post*, April 8, 1965.

84. Wendt, *Spirit and the Shotgun*, 119; Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 156–58; Dittmer, *Local People*, 266–68, 304.

85. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye," 159, 160.

The march started as essentially a solo effort by James Meredith who had broken down boundaries at the University of Mississippi in 1962 on a platform of nonviolence.<sup>86</sup>

Meredith's "march" had started as essentially a solo affair to urge Black voter registration. By 1966, the protest march was a well-worn tool. Some saw Meredith's march as an empty gesture, and his allies from the days of integrating Ole Miss basically ignored it. There were only four people with him when they crossed into Mississippi and an angry bigot stepped from the brush and laid Meredith flat with a shotgun blast.<sup>87</sup>

Movement leaders raced to the scene and vowed to continue the march. They were obviously concerned about safety. There was a corresponding worry that security measures would be considered provocative. It was a pointed example of the long-standing worry that security precautions could be construed as battle preparations and that self-defense might spill over into political violence. Those involved were acutely aware that they were walking a tightrope. The debate about security eventually fractured the coalition that had rallied in support of Meredith. All of the familiar organizations were there: Floyd McKissick, CORE's new director; Martin Luther King, for the SCLC; Stokely Carmichael of SNCC; Roy Wilkins for the NAACP; and Whitney Young of the National Urban League.

A primary bone of contention was whether the Deacons for Defense would be used to protect the marchers. The Deacons had become aggressive advocates of armed self-defense and had deployed firearms effectively against terrorists. The alignment here of King, McKissick, and Carmichael against Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young in the security strategy for the march offers a snapshot of King's thinking about the issues that framed the movements philosophy and practice of self-defense. Although there are different accounts of the episode, King's influence was decisive in favor of deploying the Deacons as security.<sup>88</sup>

As people were arriving for a strategy session at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, a van full of Deacons pulled up and unloaded, some of them carrying ammunition bandoliers and semiautomatic .30-06 caliber M-1 Garand rifles—the World War II infantry rifle that General George Patton called the "greatest battle

86. Simon Wendt, "Urge People Not to Carry Guns: Armed Self Defense in the Louisiana Civil Rights Movement and the Radicalization of the Congress of Racial Equality," *Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 45:281.

87. Roy Reed, "Meredith Regrets He Was Not Armed," *New York Times*, June 8, 1966; James H. Meredith, "Big Changes Are Coming," *Saturday Evening Post* (Indianapolis), August 13, 1966, 23-27; Wendt, *Spirit and the Shotgun*, 13; "He Shot Me Like . . . a God Damn Rabbit," *Newsweek*, June 20, 1966, 30.

88. Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London, 1995), 284-86.

implement ever devised.” The leader of the group, Earnest Thomas, was on cordial terms with King, who referred to Thomas as “Deac.” Hosea Williams, one of King’s aides, objected immediately to the Deacons and scolded Thomas, saying, “Well I’m going to tell you right now, there ain’t going to be no Deacons on the March.” Thomas countered that the national organizations risked losing the allegiance of grassroots folk “because you getting people hurt, and *then* you get back on them God-damn planes and forget about the people whose support you are about to lose.”<sup>89</sup>

Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young agreed with Hosea Williams. The NAACP had long supported compelling cases of private self-defense, but using the Deacons as security for the march posed real risks of political violence. That was a something that cautious leaders like Wilkins and Young had always worked hard to avoid.

While everyone argued, King sat listening. Finally, he interjected with a question to Thomas: “Deac, you mean you’re going to march?” It was a subtle and judicious intervention. Thomas responded, “I don’t have no intention of marching one block in Mississippi. But we’re going to be up and down the highways and byways. If somebody gets shot again, they’re going to have somebody to give account to for that.” King’s handling of the matter shows a deft political touch. There would be no photographs of Deacons marching with guns. The theme of nonviolence would be respected and projected across the airwaves. But in the background, armed Black men would be ready.

King was walking a fine line. It was too close to the edge for Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, who stormed out of the meeting and withdrew from the march. Two decades later, Andrew Young characterized King’s approach this way: “SCLC was aggressively nonviolent. But Martin made distinctions between defensive violence and retaliatory violence. He was far more understanding of defensive violence. Martin’s attitude was you can never fault a man for protecting his home and his wife. He saw the Deacons as defending their homes and their wives and children. Martin said he would never himself resort to violence even in self-defense, but he would not demand that of others. That was a religious commitment into which one had to grow.”<sup>90</sup>

There was a powerful element of pragmatism in King’s approach. This was evident in the days before the meeting when King stayed at Charles Evers’s Queens Road home in Jackson, Mississippi. The place was brimming with pistols and rifles. Evers would write later that King never “preached down” to him

89. Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, 246; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 477; Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1982), 397–98; Cleveland Sellers and Robert L. Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York, 1973), 162.

90. Hampton et al., *Voices of Freedom*, 287.

about the guns and teasingly complimented him: "Charles, I'm nonviolent, but I never feel safer anywhere, with anybody, than in your home."<sup>91</sup>

When the March Against Fear recommenced, armed Deacons were in the wings. At night, they guarded the campsites. In the mornings, while the marchers were assembling, the Deacons were in the vanguard, checking along the road and adjacent woodlots for threats and questioning Whites who lingered too long at the edges of the route. Deacon Charles Sims recalls: "I was carryin' two snub-nosed .38s and two boxes of shells and had three men ridin' down the highway with semiautomatic carbines with 30 rounds apiece."<sup>92</sup>

\* \* \*

Movement activists not only owned guns and fired them in self-defense; they also carried guns in defiance of discretionary permitting schemes, like the one that said that a bombing at Martin Luther King's home did not constitute good cause for granting him a license to carry a gun. Carrying concealed weapons in defiance of state "authority" was a minor art form. Legendary Delta activist Dr. T.R.M. Howard kept his gun in a secret compartment built into his car.<sup>93</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer's mother carried her gun concealed in a bucket.<sup>94</sup> Medgar Evers hid a pistol in a driver's seat pillow.<sup>95</sup> Others capitalized on the practice of church folk to carry around their Bibles in big leather covers and stuffed pistols in with the jumble of pens and papers.<sup>96</sup>

The prize for minimalist creativity goes to Sweets Turnbow, Hartman Turnbow's wife. At the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, Sweets Turnbow strolled the venues casually carrying a brown paper bag. It looked like she was toting her lunch. Years later, those who knew the truth would tell that inside the bag was a loaded pistol and how "Sweets never went anyplace without her brown paper bag and gun."<sup>97</sup> This actually was variation on the method employed by her husband Hartman, about whom Julian Bond reported this: "It's funny to see a man dressed like a farmer, with a briefcase. And he opens the briefcase and nothing's in it but an army automatic."<sup>98</sup>

91. Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York, 1998), 214.

92. Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, 246; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 477; Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, 397-98; Sellers and Terrell, *River of No Return*, 162, 166; Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 422; Hampton et al., *Voices of Freedom*, 281-95.

93. Beito and Beito, *Black Maverick*, 103.

94. Wendt, *Spirit and the Shotgun*, 121; Payne, *I've Got the Light*, 233; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 9, 11.

95. Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 251-52.

96. McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 21, 90; Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, 104.

97. Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York, 1998), 173; Dittmer, *Local People*, 286.

98. Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 267.

The narrative of nonviolence is ever-present here. And it is proper to acknowledge the unalloyed pacifism of people in the movement like Bob Moses, John Lewis, and countless others. They had strong influence on the dominant narrative of nonviolence. That theme is demonstrated in the warning of a White minister from New Jersey who cautioned that “the movement is no place for guns” after observing a big pistol on the car seat of one of the Deacons for Defense, who was providing security for the March Against Fear.

But other White activists embraced the lessons from their Black hosts about the importance of armed self-defense. Yale law student Don Kates battled southern segregation alongside William Kunstler and received enduring practical lessons about the importance of private firearms from his Black hosts. Kates translated those lessons into a lifetime of gigantically influential Second Amendment scholarship. Activist John Salter explained that his preparations also tracked those of the community, recounting that, “like a martyred friend of mine, Medgar Evers, I traveled armed with a .38 revolver and a Winchester rifle.” Medgar Evers’s brother Charles also considered the gun an indispensable tool.<sup>99</sup>

So how should one value the conviction of John Salter and Charles Evers that guns saved their lives, against the bloody fact that a man with a gun took the life of their beloved brother and friend Medgar? One lesson is that a gun is no guarantee of safety, and some will argue that it makes things worse. Still, Evers, Salter, and countless others chose the gun. This demonstrates the a powerful element of private autonomy at the root of the Black tradition of arms—where the strategy of nonviolence in pursuit of political goals operated alongside broad tolerance and even endorsement of private self-defense.

99. Quote from Jane Galt, “The Unseen in the Gun Debate,” United Liberty, last modified August 2012, <http://www.unitedliberty.org/articles/10758-the-unseen-in-the-gun-debate>. Salter subsequently collaborated with Don B. Kates on a scholarly article titled “The Necessity of Access to Firearms by Dissenters and Minorities Who Government Is Unwilling or Unable to Protect.” The collaboration was fueled by their common experience. Kates went south in 1963, the summer after his first year at Yale Law School, in the employ of the Law Student Civil Rights Research Council to work under William Kunstler, who was collaborating on cases with Black lawyers in Raleigh. Traveling into what he describes as “KKK country,” Kates carried a pistol in a holster, another pistol under the seat of his car, and a semiautomatic M1 carbine rifle in the trunk. Kates said that having more than one gun was important. In one instance, for example, his extra guns helped arm a group that stood watch at the rural homestead of a Black woman who had been threatened for joining as a plaintiff in several of the local cases that Kunstler was pressing. Interview with Don B. Kates, April 23, 2013. Don Kates would go on to produce an unparalleled body of Second Amendment scholarship and contribute centrally to the Supreme Court’s affirmation and elaboration of that right in seminal cases in 2008 and 2010.

## CONCLUSION

The right to keep and bear arms may be our most disparaged constitutional right. At a practical level, many people discount the utility of armed self-defense, and many argue it is counterproductive. A core assumption of that approach is the existence of a competent and benevolent state that supplants the need for self-help.

At the other end of the spectrum is a class of gun-owning skeptics who are unwilling to discount the utility of self-help against imminent threats. This often disparaged class is united in doubt about the competence and benevolence of the state. They invite snickers with arcane rhetoric about government tyranny and oppression. Popular culture tends to exclude Blacks from this group, perhaps on the unspoken assumption that the fear-the-government types are also racists.

But Black Americans have better reasons than most to be skeptical about the competence and benevolence of government. Blacks, more than most, have suffered from state failure and the overt hostility of government actors. Even today, many communities justly complain about the inability or unwillingness of state and local governments, and particularly their armed agents, to serve and protect Black people. Indeed, on the long view, tyranny in America is better exhibited in the experience of Black American citizenship than by British oppression of American colonists in the eighteenth century.