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## “THIS NONVIOLENT STUFF AIN’T NO GOOD. IT’LL GET YA KILLED.”<sup>1</sup>: TEACHING ABOUT SELF-DEFENSE IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Many students only know the Civil Rights Movement through a distorted mythology dominated by selected rhetoric from Martin Luther King Jr., and images of nonviolent protesters often being attacked by white hoodlums. Journalist and author Fred Powledge acknowledges this phenomenon, writing, “In the minds of untold numbers of Americans, . . . [King] *was* the Civil Rights Movement. Thought it up, led it, produced its victories, became its sole martyr.”<sup>2</sup> According to scholar Charles Payne, “In most popular discourse about the movement, King serves a normative role—the apostle of nonviolence, advocate of interracial brotherhood and Christian patience.” Payne has also argued that these images and interpretations dominate many movement studies that “are strongly predisposed toward the normative . . . downplaying the role of pressure, economic or otherwise, reducing the movement to a ‘protest’ movement, treating nonviolence as if it were somehow natural while treating militance as inevitably doomed to failure.”<sup>3</sup>

I find that many of my students, already steeped in the popular images of King as the movement, expect a normative, top-down view of the movement that reinforces their sense that long-suffering, loving, well-behaved, forgiving African Americans petitioned, peacefully and patiently, for citizenship rights which were then granted by a well-intentioned (if slow) federal government. Much like the perverted picture of the movement portrayed in the popular movie *Mississippi Burning*, in their minds the bad guys were stereotypical redneck whites who were defeated by the heroic federal government, personified by the FBI and the martyred Kennedy brothers. As in *Mississippi*

*Burning*, blacks played a relatively passive role—victims more than actors—in a drama where equality was bestowed upon them.

Teaching students about the strong tradition and pervasive presence of self-defense among southern African Americans and the ways it was crucial to the movement is one way of breaking that mythology apart. In teaching about self-defense, I try to emphasize several points, most of which run counter to either the standard mythology or assumptions that my students bring to class. First, nonviolent direct action and self-defense were not mutually exclusive, but were often used by the same people in different situations. Related to that, self-defense is not the opposite of nonviolence nor the equivalent of violence.

Second, black self-defense was intricately related to violent white resistance and the failures of the legal system to work for African Americans, something difficult for my students to grasp. To understand the movement, they must know that, as legal scholar Steven Barkan writes, “The entire legal machinery of the South became a tool for social control of civil rights efforts.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, self-defense and African-American threats of violence (both explicit and perceived) were crucial for preventing violence and providing a measure of safety for local blacks and their movement allies. At times, black self-defense forced concessions, changes in policy, or action from resistant local (white) public officials and even the federal government.

Third, students are often comfortable with African Americans requesting citizenship rights and angry or disbelieving about denials of those rights. However, many also seem to think that any black rhetoric or expression of violence (even of self-defense) somehow negates African-American citizenship rights. This is part of a historic and contemporary sense that African Americans do not have the same inherent rights as other American citizens and that blacks are held to a different, higher standard of behavior as they “earn” their rights. Study of black self-defense can also force students to confront African Americans claiming or insisting on (not asking for) full citizenship.

Finally, self-defense in the movement is closely tied to rural communities, grassroots activism, and the organizing tradition—the day in, day out work with local activists around local issues—and is particularly visible in local studies and primary sources. Thus, studying self-defense requires taking detours outside the most familiar narratives and the normative histories of the movement that typically overemphasize major events, the ideology of nonviolence, the efficacy of moral suasion, the role of whites, and the activism of the federal government, while minimizing or obscuring local people and bottom-up perspectives. The same sources that provide insight into self-defense can also be used to explore other important issues including the pervasiveness of white repression; the roles of black landownership, black churches, gender, and class in movement activism; relationships between local people, national organizations, and outside organizers; and the interplay between federal law and local activism.<sup>5</sup>

Self-defense was pervasive in the movement, especially in rural areas. Bob Moses, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary, says, “certainly we didn’t meet any people in Mississippi who were practicing nonviolence—I mean none of the people we were working with.”<sup>6</sup> In their histories of the Mississippi movement, John Dittmer and Charles Payne describe instance after instance where blacks carried guns and used them to defend themselves, their families, their property, and their communities. According to Payne, “In rural areas particularly, self-defense was just not an issue among blacks. If attacked, people were going to shoot back.”<sup>7</sup> One of those people was Hartman Turnbow, the first black person to try to register in Holmes County, Mississippi. When whites retaliated by throwing bombs and shooting into his house, Turnbow returned fire. He later warned Martin Luther King Jr. that “This nonviolent stuff ain’t no good. It’ll get ya killed.” Turnbow explained his philosophy to King. “I said, ‘Every what the Mississippi white man pose with, he got to be met with.’ I said, ‘Meet him with ever what he pose with. If he pose with a smile, meet him with a smile, and if he pose with a gun, meet him with a gun.’”<sup>8</sup>

Turnbow’s attitude was widespread. Writing about Louisiana, historian Adam Fairclough notes that workers from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), “soon discovered, moreover, 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.”<sup>9</sup> In his biography of Robert F. Williams, the Monroe, North Carolina, resident who became infamous for his advocacy of “armed self-reliance,” historian Timothy Tyson argues that Williams’s views made him “more ordinary than idiosyncratic.” Tyson’s biography makes it clear that Williams’s attitudes and actions were part of an extensive and long tradition among rural African Americans.<sup>10</sup> In 1962, while living in exile in Cuba, Williams characterized self-defense as an explicitly American response to the failures of the legal system:

American Negroes have armed themselves as a group . . . where the authorities could not, or rather would not, enforce their duty to protect Americans from a lawless mob. . . . It has always been an accepted right of Americans, as the history of our Western states proves, that where the law is unable, or unwilling, to enforce order, the citizens can, and must, act in self-defense against lawless violence. I believe this right holds for black Americans as well as whites.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the South, few blacks saw any contradiction between their involvement in a movement commonly considered nonviolent and their pervasive reliance on arms. Even Robert Williams, widely (and inaccurately) portrayed as an advocate of violent warfare, actively participated in sit-ins and

other forms of nonviolent direct action and protest.<sup>12</sup> Mary King, who worked in SNCC's Atlanta office, noted that "There was not necessarily any contradiction or conflict felt by a black southerner who professed nonviolence but also believed in self-defense."<sup>13</sup> Bob Moses, speaking about SNCC organizers and the local people they worked with, made the same point:

Self-defense is so deeply ingrained in rural southern America that we as a small group can't effect it. It's not contradictory for a farmer to say he's nonviolent and also to pledge to shoot a marauder's head off. The difference is that we on staff have committed ourselves to not carry guns.<sup>14</sup>

The comments of several of Hartman Turnbow's coworkers in Holmes County illustrate the same point. Mr. Jodie "Preacher" Saffold stressed, "It was nonviolent, but I was gon' hit back. I was gon' hit back."<sup>15</sup> Another coworker, Mrs. Bee Jenkins, offered her understanding of the meaning and limits of strict nonviolence in the movement:

Dr. Martin Luther King said it was nonviolent. It was nonviolent until they brought in the law enforcements. After they came in with their guns, our menfolk thought we had to be protected, too. They didn't bother them unless they tried to start shooting at us or got violent with us.<sup>16</sup>

A Port Gibson, Mississippi, NAACP leader, James Dorsey, explained, "If you are fired upon then naturally you, if you couldn't call the law, well naturally you would have to act in self defense."<sup>17</sup>

Charles Evers, who succeeded his brother Medgar Evers as Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP after Medgar was assassinated in 1963, had little use for strict nonviolence. Charles Evers remained bitter for years that the national NAACP had not provided protection for his brother (who traveled Mississippi roads with a loaded gun on the front seat of his car). The NAACP tried not to make the same mistake with Charles Evers. Early in 1966 after Vernon Dahmer, another NAACP activist in Mississippi, was killed by a firebomb attack, the national NAACP provided a revolving fund to pay for bodyguards to protect Charles Evers. Evers once said, "I don't know what the Lord told Martin Luther King, but the Lord's never once told me to turn the other cheek." He explained his views. "I don't consider when you defend yourself, violent. You got a right to defend yourself."<sup>18</sup>

As these examples suggest, there were, in fact, many types of movement activism that did not require nonviolence. As a tactic, nonviolence was particularly tied to the sit-ins, freedom rides, and other forms of direct action. Bob Moses observes that advocates of this approach failed in their efforts to initiate a "nonviolent movement" in Jackson, Mississippi, after the 1961 freedom rides. Explaining that most of those working in Mississippi were involved with "this more practical program of voter registration," he points

out that “There was nothing in the work that we were doing which required [that] any of the people that we were working with practice nonviolence.” He stresses, “There is nothing in the federal government that says you have to be nonviolent to go register.”<sup>19</sup> In this context, many rural activists who described themselves as nonviolent were not basing that on a moral philosophy or a disciplined tactical approach to achieving change. Rather, they were referring to their commitment not to initiate violence as a strategy for achieving full citizenship rights.

Self-defense was critical for helping to create space for protest and activism, keeping people alive to participate in demonstrations, desegregate facilities, and register to vote. In addition to providing protection when the law failed, in some situations organized self-defense helped force action by (white) government officials. In Monroe, North Carolina, in the late 1950s for example, when armed black men, including veterans, fired back at night riders, Klansmen retreated. Moreover, the town board of aldermen subsequently passed a new law banning Klan motorcades, something they had refused to do before blacks fought back.<sup>20</sup> Robert Williams, the best known of these men, explained,

The lawful authorities of Monroe and North Carolina acted to enforce order *only after, and as a direct result of, our being armed*. Previously they had connived with the Ku Klux Klan in the racist violence against our people. Self-defense prevented bloodshed and forced the law to establish order.<sup>21</sup>

Williams, the Monroe NAACP branch president, was suspended by the national organization in 1959 for telling the press that blacks should “meet violence with violence.” Speaking out in anger and frustration after two white men were acquitted in two separate cases of violence against black women, Williams implied that because the courts and federal government failed to protect blacks, blacks should use lynching themselves. The next day he clarified his views, repudiating his reference to lynching and reiterating his belief in self-defense not retaliatory violence. Ironically, though the NAACP maintained Williams’s suspension at its 1959 convention, the organization simultaneously reaffirmed its commitment to “the right of individual and collective self-defense against unlawful assaults.” In addition, whether NAACP members or not, many of the same people who publicly condemned Williams as violent relied on self-defense for their own protection.<sup>22</sup>

The Louisiana Deacons for Defense and Justice provide an important example of well-organized, collective black self-defense. Founded in 1964 in Jonesboro, Louisiana, when local lawmen provided a Klan escort and failed to protect movement workers, the Deacons spread to other communities where they typically worked closely with movement activists, including those whose national organizations were pledged to nonviolence. Adam Fairclough notes that the Jonesboro group “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.<sup>23</sup>

✕ The best-known Deacons chapter was organized in 1965 in Bogalusa, Louisiana, a factory town on the Mississippi border dominated by an active, eight-hundred-member Klan. Facing Klan terrorism and inadequate law enforcement, the Deacons protected movement workers and the black community, carrying guns and returning fire when they were attacked. Fairclough explains that the Deacons “emphatically” rejected “the self-sacrificing ethic, but not the assertive tactics of nonviolent protest” and “practiced armed self-defense in a visible and highly effective manner.”<sup>24</sup> As one member explained, “It takes violent blacks to combat these violent whites. It takes nonviolent whites and nonviolent Negroes to sit down and bargain whenever the thing is over.”<sup>25</sup>

The Deacons, especially those in Bogalusa, were explicitly responding to the failures of the legal system and, through their actions, generated pressure on local and federal officials to provide adequate protection. Christopher Strain observes 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.”<sup>26</sup> Implying that the Deacons acted like lawmen, James Farmer, national director of CORE, insisted that “the Deacons don’t replace legal law enforcement—there is no such thing as legal law enforcement in much of the South that will protect a Negro citizen.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Bogalusa Deacons’ president, Charles Sims, explained how the Deacons’ protective actions influenced whites’ response:

The law here, it was on the books, but it was against the black man and nothin’ against the white man. We had to equalize that thing. So we organized and let the man know that we meant to protect ourself, and then he started tryin’ to do somethin’, a little bit of somethin’ about it. But not much, until we forced their hand.<sup>28</sup>

George Lipsitz writes that by 1965, Bogalusa was “the most violent city in the South” with “sharply polarized” and “heavily armed” “combatants.” According to Adam Fairclough, it was “an armed camp” and the clash between the Klan and civil rights forces in Bogalusa had created “a crisis of such magnitude” that both the state and the federal government were forced ✕ to respond. In fact, the Deacons’ willingness to fight back encouraged relatively aggressive state and federal intervention that ultimately helped disarm the Klan and enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>29</sup>

The idea of organized, armed black men scared many whites. Fairclough writes that “The emergence of the gun-toting Deacons for Defense and Justice [was] regarded by many at the time as a harbinger of deadly armed conflict throughout the South.” He also described the Deacons as “an object of

worried fascination to whites,” some of whom viewed the organization as “a terrorist group or guerrilla army.” Similarly, Christopher Strain observes that “the popular, media-generated image of the Deacons [was] as gun-slinging vigilantes.”<sup>30</sup> Despite these perceptions, the Deacons were an explicitly defensive organization and members supported and participated in nonviolent protest. Charles Sims, of the Bogalusa Deacons, stressed that their purpose was “to prevent violence, not to start it.”<sup>31</sup> He explained his own support for the use of nonviolent tactics and his understanding of how, in the context of white lawlessness, they were inadequate:

The non-violent act is a good act—providing the policemen do their job. But in the Southern states, not just Louisiana, but in the Southern states, the police have never done their job when the white and the Negro are involved—unless the Negro’s getting the best of the white man.<sup>32</sup>

Insisting that he believed “non-violence is the only way,” Sims stressed that “We never attacked anyone, but we would defend ourselves against *anybody* at any time, anywhere, regardless of the price” (italics in original).<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, whites’ fears served the movement well. Participants and historians almost universally assert that black armed resistance prevented violence. Calling it “part of the calculus of change,” Charles Payne observes that “Continuing the old tradition of racist violence was coming to mean that you really could lose your life or your liberty.” Because “The objective evidence still said that a white man couldn’t be brought to justice for killing a Black person,” Payne argues that it was self-defense, not fear of prosecution, that helped limit the deadliness of white vigilante violence in Mississippi in the early 1960s.<sup>34</sup>

Bogalusa Deacon Charles Sims says, “The showing of a weapon stops many things. Everybody want to live and nobody want to die.”<sup>35</sup> One of Hartman Turnbow’s Holmes County coworkers remembers that when whites attacked Turnbow, Turnbow “opened fire on them, and this is what dispersed them, ’cause they can’t stand when a black man go to throwing fire at a white man.”<sup>36</sup> In the 1940s, Robert Williams was part of a group of black men who gathered to protect the body of a black man executed for killing his white boss. Timothy Tyson writes that “When the Klan motorcade pulled up in front of the Harris Funeral Home, forty black men leveled their rifles, taking aim at the line of cars. Not a shot was fired; the Klansmen simply weighed their chances and drove away.”<sup>37</sup> According to Robert Williams that success “really started us to understand that we had to resist, and that resistance could be effective if we resisted in groups, and if we resisted with guns.”<sup>38</sup>

Christopher Strain writes of a similar incident in Bogalusa in July 1965. Klansmen randomly firing bullets in a black neighborhood quickly retreated when “a fusillade of bullets met them in return.”<sup>39</sup> Akinyele Umoja argues that the Deacons’ presence in Jonesboro and southwest Mississippi forced

whites to consider the consequences of violent attacks. Moreover, he notes, harassment “seemed to decrease in the face of disciplined, armed Black resistance.”<sup>40</sup> When James Forman, a longtime SNCC activist, visited Robert Williams in 1961, he asked Williams if he could publicize his vast arsenal of guns. Williams agreed, explaining that, like John Foster Dulles, his “policy [was] to carry a big stick to avoid incidents.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Deacon Charles Sims observed that “When the white power structure found out that they had mens, Negro mens, that had made up their minds to stand up for their people and to give no ground . . . it had a tendency to keep the night-riders out of the neighborhood.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite the importance and pervasiveness of self-defense, it remains largely invisible in traditional movement narratives. To address this with my students, I incorporate the topic into a wide range of classes, including a U.S. history survey (post-1945), a topical class on the Civil Rights Movement, an African-American history survey, and sophomore seminars on research and interpretation in history. The sources on self-defense are diverse—including short documents, oral history interviews, articles, and monographs—and can be adapted for all of these classes. In addition to introducing students to self-defense as an important aspect of the African-American freedom struggle, I often use self-defense as the basis for exercises intended to develop research and analytical skills. In fact, I find that one of the keys to teaching students about new interpretations that challenge their assumptions is to engage them actively in analysis so they can develop parts of the argument themselves. In particular, students often seem more receptive to the theory and reality of African-American armed self-defense when it is grounded in individual black experiences of lawlessness. Thus, through analysis of case studies and primary sources, students more readily grasp the complexity of self-defense (and other issues) in the Civil Rights Movement. The following are a few brief suggestions for sources, approaches, and document-based assignments that can be adapted to teach self-defense in a variety of courses.

Perhaps the easiest approach to incorporating the study of self-defense into existing classes is to assign applicable monographs. Several local studies do a particularly good job of addressing the role of self-defense in the overall context of the freedom struggle. These include Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; John Dittmer, *Local People*; and Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*. Timothy Tyson's biographical work on Robert Williams provides a brief history of self-defense throughout African-American history and explicitly grounds Williams in the larger freedom struggle. Depending on the type of class and the available time, choose between his monograph, *Radio Free Dixie*, or his article published in the *Journal of American History*.<sup>43</sup>

Another approach is to use case studies oriented for teaching content or for emphasizing research or analytical skills. Among the most obvious topics for case studies are some of the ones I have mentioned above: Robert Williams and Monroe, North Carolina; Bogalusa and the Deacons for



Defense; and the Mississippi Movement. In each of these, self-defense is grounded in the freedom struggle and each topic has an accessible range of primary and secondary sources for class use.

For Monroe, North Carolina, these sources include Tyson's work; Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*; and James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. Joanne Grant's collection, *Black Protest*, provides a useful excerpt from *Negroes with Guns* and the *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* has a debate between Williams and Martin Luther King Jr., that was published in 1959.<sup>44</sup> For Bogalusa and the Deacons for Defense, the sources include Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*; George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle*; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*; and Christopher B. Strain, " 'We Walked Like Men' " in *Louisiana History*. Fred Powledge published an early article on the Jonesboro Deacons in the *New York Times* and there are published interviews with Charles Sims of the Bogalusa Deacons in Raines's *My Soul Is Rested* and Grant's *Black Protest*. For those who want to dig deeper, there are also two relevant dissertations, Lance E. Hill, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement" and Akinyele K. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom movement."<sup>45</sup>

The sources for exploring self-defense in the Mississippi Movement are extensive, starting with the monographs by Payne and Dittmer. Interviews and documents are widely available in published collections and online at the University of Southern Mississippi. In *My Soul Is Rested*, Howell Raines has an interview with Hartman Turnbow, the Holmes County activist. This interview works particularly well in combination with *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South*, a collection of oral histories done by Holmes County school children. In the process of describing their experiences in the Holmes County Movement, participants portray a range of self-defense activities that include carrying guns to register to vote, protecting participants in marches, and most pervasively, the use of guns to protect self, family, and community.<sup>46</sup> I particularly like using these interviews to provide my students a view of the movement outside the spotlight and from the perspective of people who never became famous. As an appendix I include brief excerpts from one of the Holmes County interviews and some possible questions about self-defense for students to consider as they read the collection.

The *Minds Stayed on Freedom* interviews are also a good starting point for developing a historiographical exercise. Used with other oral histories, Tyson's article on Robert Williams and Payne's "Bibliographic Essay" in *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, the interviews provide an important contrast to movement history as it is portrayed in overviews and high school and college texts. Using this range of materials and perspectives with students can give them an important opportunity to evaluate divergent interpretations and to use primary sources and specific scholarly analysis to critique narrative overviews. These

materials work well for addressing nonviolence and self-defense, but also for a wide range of other important topics. Following the Holmes County interview excerpt, there are two other sample assignments I use for exploring self-defense through document analysis (see section on Sample Assignments).

I believe it is important to address self-defense in the history of the black freedom struggle because it was pervasive and often necessary for the movement's survival. It also forces my (mostly white) students to be more aware of how some of their assumptions and prejudices influence their views of history. Like many white liberals and federal officials before them, at an abstract level, many of my students believe in equality, while continuing to harbor an unspoken sense that blacks must "earn" rights through certain behaviors; that disorder is more of a problem than lack of equality; and that potential black violence is more of a problem than actual white violence. Finally, self-defense gives students some concrete examples of the danger involved in pursuing freedom, of the dangers involved in not pursuing freedom, and of the ways that blacks used, not just moral suasion, but pressure and power, to achieve changes in the racial status quo. This last is an important lesson for all of us and one that the African-American students in my classes typically embrace. The courage, determination, and persistence of people like Hartman Turnbow offer a compelling model for struggle in the face of oppressive opposition.<sup>47</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Hartman Turnbow to Martin Luther King Jr., *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin, 1977, 1983), 266.
2. Fred Powlledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1991), xiv.
3. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 420–421.
4. Steven E. Barkan, *Protesters on Trial: Criminal Justice in the Southern Civil Rights and Vietnam Antiwar Movements* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 31.
5. Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South, an Oral History* (Boulder: Westview, 1991), xi; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 439.
6. Robert Parris Moses, interview by Joseph Andrew Sinsheimer, November 19, 1983, Cambridge, Mass., Joseph Andrew Sinsheimer Papers, Duke University, 20.
7. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, esp. 204; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
8. Hartman Turnbow in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 263–266, esp. 266.
9. Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 342.
10. Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 540–570, esp. 546.
11. Robert Franklin Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), 39.
12. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 562.
13. Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 91.
14. Bob Moses, quoted in King, *Freedom Song*, 318.
15. Mr. Jodie "Preacher" Saffold, in *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 64.
16. Mrs. Bee Jenkins, in *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 139.
17. James Dorsey, interview by Emily Crosby, Port Gibson, Miss., May 5, 1992, in author's possession, 33.

18. Moses, interview, 20; Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1997), 36; Henry E. Briggs to Roy Wilkins, January 17, 1966, John Morsell to Briggs, March 16, 1966, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress; Charles Evers, interview by Emilye Crosby, Fayette, Miss., August 5, 1982, in author's possession, 5.
19. Moses, interview, 20–21.
20. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 551.
21. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 41.
22. NAACP resolution, July 1959, quoted in Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 164; Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 557–559.
23. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 342–343; Lance Hill argues that the Deacons were not actually formed until November 1964 when they adopted the name. Lance E. Hill, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1997), 44.
24. George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 94–95; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 345; Sims in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 417–421; Charles R. Sims, in Joanne Grant, ed., *Black Protest: 350 Years of History, Documents, and Analyses* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1998), 336–343.
25. Ernest Thomas quoted in Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 357–358.
26. Christopher B. Strain, "We Walked Like Men: The Deacons for Defense and Justice," in *Louisiana History* 38, no. 1 (1997): 61.
27. James Farmer, quoted in Strain, "We Walked Like Men," 62.
28. Sims, in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 417.
29. George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle*, 93; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 371–376, esp. 360, 342.
30. Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 345, 358; Strain, "We Walked Like Men," 45.
31. *Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal*, September 20, 1965, Folder 227, Box 6, Ed King Papers, Tougaloo College Archives.
32. Sims, in Grant, *Black Protest*, 343.
33. Sims, in Grant, *Black Protest*, 343; Sims in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 417.
34. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 205, 206.
35. Sims, in Grant, *Black Protest*, 340.
36. Mr. T. C. Johnson, in *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 152.
37. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 548.
38. Robert Williams, quoted in Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 549.
39. Strain, "We Walked Like Men," 43.
40. Akinyele K. Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1997), 189, 207, esp. 189.
41. James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: Open Hand, 1972, 1985), 163.
42. Sims, in Grant, *Black Protest*, 336.
43. Robert F. Williams, "Is Violence Necessary to Combat Injustice? For the Positive: Williams Says 'We Must Fight Back,'" and Martin Luther King Jr., "The Social Organization of Non-Violence," 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: Penguin, 1991), 110–114.
44. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 540–570.
45. James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart* (New York: Arbor House, 1985); Fred Powladge, "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro an Unusual Town," February 21, 1965, *New York Times*; Sims, in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 416–423; Sims, in Grant, *Black Protest*, 336–344.
46. For online interviews, see the Civil Rights Digital Archive at the University of Southern Mississippi, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/index.html>; Hartman Turnbow in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 260–266; *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 39, 43, 55, 62–63, 87, 93–94, 55, 62–63, 87, 93–94, 121, 138–139, 152, 153, 166.
47. This essay was completed with support from a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship for college teachers.

## SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS: SELF-DEFENSE AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

**Sample Assignment 1:** Excerpts of interview with Mr. Robert Cooper Howard, from *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, pp. 91–100.

Mr. Robert Cooper Howard, one of the Holmes County activists, offers a good example of self-defense. When whites burned a cross in his yard, he told the sheriff, "The very next one come up and do something in front of my house, I will be calling the undertaker." Despite that warning, whites returned, throwing bombs and firing into his house. He recalls:

They fired into the house. Shot in. You can see the holes in the window and in the siding of the house there. I got a bed in there where the bullets went all in that bed. My wife was shot in the knee; the bullet's still in there now. All my children was back in that room. I had eleven children in that same room that my wife was shot in. Then they came right on by me, and just as they got to me, I started to firin' on 'em. Some of them shots hit 'em.

He describes his response when the sheriff threatened him with jail:

I say, 'Yeah, but I was at home tending to my business when they come shootin' into my house. I wadn't out there meddlin'; they come there meddlin' me. I think I had a right to shoot back at them done shot int' my house.' So finally they up and let me out. That next mornin' the sheriff sent his deputies here and take all the guns we had. I told 'em we was tryin' to protect ourselves, just as everybody else protect theirs. They take my gun. I told 'em I was gonna buy me some more guns. 'You can take ever' one I buy, but I'm gonna protect my family. I live here, I'm paying taxes here, I'm not botherin' nobody.' Simply 'cause those two little boys was going to the white school over there.

Mr. Howard's experience with violence and white lawmen, his military service, his concern for his family, and his attitude toward self-defense were quite common among rural African Americans:

I don't figure that I was violent. All I was doin' was protectin' myself. You see, if you gonna fight me, why 'ontcha come face to face? Why slip around at night sneakin' around and do it? See, the onliest way to break the sneakin' around at night is you gonna have to get ready for it. They would sneak around and then laugh about it. But it happen they caught that time, and that absolutely stopped it. Haven't been any more nightriders and bombin' peoples at night, goin' down their houses, burnin' crosses, doin' things. That broke all that up. I figure like this: Somewhere down the line somebody had to do something' to stop it. If they hadn'a did it, they wouldn've been doin' it yet. I didn't bother nobody, pick at nobody—only thang I was wantin' was *equal justice*, just like everybody else. An' why is it that I go to the army, served in Uncle Sam's army three years and four months, then come back and be treated as if I hadn't went?

I just didn't want to go out and shoot 'em up, but I figure like this: If they try to attack me, then I was goin' to protect myself. And that's in me today. I'm not gon' meddle, but I want you to treat me like you want to be treated.

Questions about self-defense for interviews in *Minds Stayed on Freedom*.

1. What do the people interviewed say about using weapons?
2. In what situations did people in Holmes County use weapons? How do they use weapons? Why do they use weapons?
3. How do they understand their use of weapons? That is, do they see themselves as violent? Why or why not? How do they connect their attitudes to the best-known advocate of nonviolent tactics, Martin Luther King Jr.?
4. According to the men and women in Holmes County, what happened as a result of their willingness to use weapons? How did it affect or influence the local Civil Rights Movement?

**Sample Assignment 2:** Debate between Robert F. Williams and Martin Luther King Jr., 1959. Robert F. Williams, "Is Violence Necessary to Combat Injustice? For the Positive: Williams Says 'We Must Fight Back,'" and Martin Luther King Jr., "The Social Organization of Non-Violence," in *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, pp. 110–114. I sometimes supplement this with the excerpt from Robert Williams's *Negroes with Guns* in Grant's, *Black Protest*, pp. 320–324.

The format and titles of the pieces by Williams and King set them up as if they were opposites, though both Williams and King basically argue in favor of self-defense. Timothy Tyson points out that because King was supposed to debate Williams, but essentially agreed with him, King "invented his own Robert Williams, a black Geronimo plotting military strikes against the white man, and he then responded to *that* Robert Williams" (Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 562). I use this assignment to encourage my students to examine when, why, and how blacks used "violence," in the freedom struggle; to force them to reconsider their assumption that self-defense and nonviolence are mutually exclusive; and to encourage them to read carefully and critically.

When I first began using this assignment, I worried about giving too much away and simply warned my students to read carefully and not too be overly influenced by the titles. However, I have found that warning insufficient and that the exercise works better when I give my students questions with the reading (instead of later) and tell them directly that the two men do not disagree as much as the title would suggest. In class, with the document projected so we can look at it together, I ask the class to answer the assigned questions and offer specific supportive evidence from the documents.

In addition to self-defense, this assignment introduces them to a number of important themes: the significance of military service (especially

World War II) in the freedom struggle, the tacit cooperation between southern (white) lawmakers and the Klan, the failures of the legal system for African Americans, the role of black militance and pressure in forcing action from white officials, and the presence of competing ideologies and tactics among black activists. Finally, I find it very important to remind my students that this was written before the sit-in movement began and that, as Timothy Tyson points out, Williams more quickly embraced that use of nonviolent direct action than did King.

Questions:

1. What things does Williams consider important to mention about himself and his community? That is, what context does he provide for his argument?
2. When Williams advocates “violence” what does he mean? Can you offer a specific example?
3. How did Williams and other blacks in Monroe, North Carolina, try to deal with the threat posed by the Klan before they began using self-defense? Were they effective? Why or why not?
4. What happened after Williams and other blacks used self-defense? What does Williams conclude from this?
5. What three views on violence does King identify? Which of the three does King advocate as most feasible? On which does he focus his opposition?
6. What does King say about “pure nonviolence?” Does he consider it viable for most people?
7. What is the difference between King’s view on nonviolence and Williams’s view on nonviolence?

**Sample Assignment 3:** John Hulett and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), 1965. John Hulett, “How the Black Panther Party Was Organized,” in *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, pp. 273–278 or in Grant, *Black Protest*, pp. 379–384. Sometimes I supplement this with oral histories about the LCFO in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, pp. 267–282.

This speech by John Hulett describes the 1965 founding of the LCFO, an independent black political party. Best known for its emblem, the Black Panther, the LCFO is most often connected to Black Power (popularized by one of the group’s SNCC organizers, known then as Stokely Carmichael) and the Black Panther Party (which adopted the name and emblem). It can be useful for illustrating the connections between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, and the ways that both southern repression and movement activism continued after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I also like to ask my students to use this document to identify specific sources of

white power and black power in Lowndes County, Alabama, to provide a basis for discussing the Black Power Movement. However, I think this assignment works particularly well for illustrating how neither local lawmen nor the federal government were able or willing to protect blacks' right to meet (and use ostensibly public space for legal political activity) until these officials learned that blacks were going to meet (without their permission) and protect themselves, even if it meant bloodshed and death. Here, black self-defense was critical for gaining access to political rights and a more equitable application of existing laws.

Questions:

1. Based on your reading of John Hulett's piece, "How the Black Panther Party Was Organized," identify types of white power in Lowndes County. Give specific examples.
2. Based on your reading of Hulett, identify types of black power in Lowndes County. Give specific examples.
3. How does Lowndes County, Alabama, reflect the continuing presence of white supremacy and white power in the rural South after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
4. What role do the federal government and new civil rights laws play in the Lowndes County Civil Rights Movement?
5. How do African Americans in Lowndes County begin to break the hold of white power and exert power of their own? Consider carefully the interaction between the LCFO, the sheriff, and the justice department over the organization's state-required public meeting.