

Introduction

My father was born in 1915 to a sharecropping family in the Bolivar County village of Alligator in the Mississippi Delta. Dad told me stories about Mississippi when I was growing up in Compton, California. These stories were full of examples of White terrorism and intimidation. One story I heard invoked mixed feelings of fear and pride. My father remembered seeing a Black man hanging from a Delta water tower, apparently after being lynched by White supremacists. Angered by this visible assault on Black humanity, my grandfather grabbed a rifle and intended to shoot the first White man he saw. My father, his siblings, and his stepmother tackled my grandfather and disarmed him. After hearing this story, I was proud that my grandfather wanted to fight back against the terrorists who lynched one of our people. On the other hand, I understood the fear in the hearts and minds of my father, uncles, and grandmother as they visualized the retaliation that would have been inflicted on the family if my grandfather had carried out his plans.

Fear and intimidation were essential elements of the system of subordination of Black people and the maintenance of White power in Mississippi and the South during the times of racial slavery and segregation. White supremacist violence was the primary cause of fear and intimidation. The primary social function of this violence was to maintain White political and economic power and the color line during segregation. My grandfather would have most likely been a lone warrior on the day he was disarmed by his loved ones. His anger overcame his fear and motivated him to fight back to confront the perpetrators of this lynching. This book is about Black people in Mississippi who picked up guns or other weapons and decided to use force to fight back against those who would deny their human rights and dignity. Ultimately, the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi and the South was a fight to overcome fear. Blacks overcame fear and asserted their humanity through a variety of tactics. This story documents the role that

armed resistance played in overcoming fear and intimidation and engendering Black political, economic, and social liberation.

The central argument in *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* is that armed resistance was critical to the efficacy of the southern freedom struggle and the dismantling of segregation and Black disenfranchisement. Intimidation by White supremacists was intended to bring fear to the Black population and its allies and sympathizers in the White community. To overcome the legal system of apartheid, Black people had to overcome fear to present a significant challenge to White domination. Armed self-defense had been a major tool of survival in allowing some Black southern communities to maintain their integrity and existence in the face of White supremacist terror. By 1965, armed resistance, particularly self-defense, was a significant factor in the effort made by the sons and daughters of enslaved Africans to overturn fear and intimidation and develop different political and social relationships between Black and White Mississippians.

We Will Shoot Back argues that without armed resistance, primarily organized by local people, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists would not have been able to organize in Mississippi. After organizing by SNCC and CORE, armed resistance served as a complement to self-proclaimed nonviolent organizers and organizations from 1961 through 1964. By 1965, armed self-defense and militant rhetoric was chosen by a growing number of Mississippi human rights activists as the alternative to the nonviolent tactics and posture of the early 1960s. This study argues that a tradition of armed resistance existed in the culture of southern Blacks that produced a variety of organizational forms to respond to the necessity of protecting Black communities, their leaders, allies, and institutions. The way armed resistance was organized varied in different stages of the freedom struggle in Mississippi. Armed self-defense tended to be informal and loosely organized by community activists and supporters from the 1950s through 1964 in Mississippi. After 1964, paramilitary groups with a specific chain of command and discipline emerged in some Mississippi communities and Movement centers. The open advocacy of armed resistance and the abandonment of the rhetoric of nonviolence also became the common practice of Movement spokespersons after 1964.

Historiography and Armed Resistance in the Southern Black Freedom Struggle

I completed my dissertation, entitled “‘Eye for an Eye’: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement,” in 1996. The question of armed resistance in the southern Black Freedom Struggle was underdeveloped in previous literature. “Eye for an Eye” and other works have turned the tide on the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement with respect to the question of armed resistance in the southern Black Freedom Struggle. Historian Emilye Crosby has pointed out the importance of local studies of the Civil Rights Movement revealing the role of armed self-defense in a way that was ignored by previous literature that emphasized a national “top-down” narrative.¹ The two seminal books on the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, John Dittmer’s *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*² and Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*,³ acknowledged the role of armed self-defense in the Civil Rights Movement. Books like Adam Fairclough’s *Race and Democracy*,⁴ David Beito and Linda Royster Beito’s *Black Maverick*,⁵ Emilye Crosby’s *Common Courtesy*,⁶ Hasan Kwame Jeffries’ *Bloody Lowndes*,⁷ and Wesley Hogan’s *Many Hearts, One Mind*⁸ seriously represent the role of armed self-defense in their accounts of the southern Black Freedom Struggle. Recent publications, particularly Timothy Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie*⁹ and Lance Hill’s *Deacons for Defense*,¹⁰ illuminate the role of armed self-defense in the southern freedom struggles of the 1950s and ‘60s. Christopher Strain’s *Pure Fire*¹¹ and Simon Wendt’s *Spirit and the Shotgun*¹² connect the southern tradition of self-defense to the general Black Freedom Struggle, including the Black Power Movement.

We Will Shoot Back continues the study of the armed self-defense and armed resistance tradition in the southern Black Freedom Struggle. Prior to the intervention of the trend represented by the abovementioned authors, Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defense were seen as exceptions in the Civil Rights Movement. My work demonstrates that armed resistance was persistent and pervasive in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi and played a critical role in the survival and success of the Movement. Tyson’s award-winning work on Robert Williams is a much-needed biography on the most popular advocate of armed resistance in the southern Black Freedom Struggle. My work is different from *Radio Free Dixie* in that it is not a biography of one individual but primarily focuses on virtually unknown activists from local movements who played critical

roles in the southern struggle in campaigns that had local, regional, and national significance. *We Will Shoot Back* also distinguishes the overt practice of Williams from that of his contemporaries in the late 1950s and early 1960s, who tended to play a more covert and conciliatory role in their advocacy and use of weapons. Medgar Evers was the most well-known of Williams's contemporaries who engaged in armed self-defense. This book also places the Deacons in the context of the tradition of armed Black resistance. I will also demonstrate how the Deacons played a part in changing political culture and efficacy in the Mississippi Black Freedom Struggle.

Another contribution *We Will Shoot Back* makes to the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement is that it offers another layer to the story of Freedom Summer. During the summer of 1964, in the face of intensified racial terror and limited federal protection, local community residents organized themselves to protect their communities and hundreds of volunteers who came to support voter and human rights efforts in the state. Armed resistance by local people was a common feature and practice during Freedom Summer.

Strain's and Wendt's contributions to this dialogue discuss the continuity of the armed resistance tradition in northern urban centers during the Black Power Movement. Their accounts are consistent with the general trend in the proliferation of recent literature on the Black Power Movement. Most accounts acknowledge the role of the southern Black Freedom Struggle in ushering in the term "Black Power" in association with the growing militancy and radicalization of activism in the 1960s. The dominant narrative of Black Power shifts away from the South to the northern and western regions of the United States after the popularization of the term "Black Power" in the 1966 Meredith March in Mississippi. *We Will Shoot Back* demonstrates the continuity of the armed resistance tradition during and beyond this period of the Black Power Movement in the Freedom Struggle in Mississippi. Wendt argues that federal intervention made it unnecessary for Blacks to utilize armed self-defense in the post-Civil Rights Era. He argues after 1967, "defense squads that emerged in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi outlived their usefulness."¹³ While some paramilitary groups and defense networks demobilized after 1967, campaigns for human rights persisted in rural communities in Mississippi and the South, as did the need for local communities and activists to protect themselves from White terror and intimidation. Some Black activists and communities continued to see the need for armed resistance in spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. This work documents the continuity of collective self-defense activities

until the late 1970s, particularly in the campaigns organized by the United League in northern Mississippi. Elements of the Mississippi Black Power Movement would even engage in retaliatory violence and guerilla warfare.

Strain frames the political content of armed self-defense in the context of the “fight for full citizenship and full American-ness.” He also discusses the philosophical context of the right and practice of self-defense in European philosophy and mainstream U.S. political culture.¹⁴ Black resistance in the United States cannot be solely interpreted through the lens of Western philosophical constructs. I argued in my dissertation that the Black armed resistance legacy was rooted in retention of African military tradition.¹⁵ Colin Palmer asserted that the first enslaved Africans (born in West and West-Central Africa) established the “cultural underpinnings” of African descendant life in the United States.¹⁶ Michael Gomez offered that enslaved Africans created a polycultural matrix in which they enacted one culture when visible by slaveholding society and another when in their own social space. Gomez’s interpretation postulates enslaved Africans negotiating within the slave quarters, forests, and swamps to design their own New African cultural matrix borrowing on West and West-Central African institutions.¹⁷ I argue that this New African matrix in the United States must be considered as a significant and foundational factor in the identity, social life, and political culture, including insurgent resistance, of Black people in the United States. The work of Black Atlantic World historians John Thornton and Walter Rucker establishes African influences on enslaved African rebels in colonial British North America and pre-emancipation United States.¹⁸ Mississippi-born activists like Hollis Watkins and MacArthur Cotton told me that they were protected in Mississippi during the early 1960s by Black men who were connected through secret societies. Former Black Panther and political prisoner Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt) often shared that his elders in Morgan City, Louisiana, had a clandestine network for armed self-defense of the Black community that originated with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s and continued through the Deacons for Defense of the 1960s.¹⁹ The UNIA and the Deacons in Louisiana and Mississippi relied on the secret society tradition to provide themselves with organizational cohesiveness and a chain of command. Gomez also informs us that the proclivity to organize social and political activities through fraternal organizations was a tradition our enslaved ancestors remembered from their African heritage.²⁰

The work of Gomez and Cedric Robinson establishes the heterogeneous character of African descendant political culture in the United

States. Gomez asserts that by 1830 “two distinct and divergent visions of the African presence in America” surfaced. Some African Americans’ vision was to achieve inclusion within the United States as “full participants in the American political experiment.” Others were less hopeful of inclusion as equal partners within the U.S. power structure and held as “close to the bosom of Africa as they could get.”²¹ Robinson also argued that “two alternate Black political cultures” emerged by the 1850s, one assimilationist and elitist, another separatist (or nationalistic) and communitarian. Robinson argues that the two Black political cultures reached “their closet accommodation” during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. He argues that political repression of civil rights militants and Black nationalists contributed to a divide between the two historic Black political orientations in the culmination of the 1960s political insurgency. The African political experience in the United States has diverse ideological currents, ranging from assimilation to pluralism to autonomy to radical transformation to nationalism. The desire for “first-class” U.S. citizenship was one political objective of the Black Freedom Struggle, but aspirations for self-determination and autonomy also compete and coexist with liberal pluralist expressions. This study focuses on the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The orientation of the Civil Rights Movement was a fight for first-class citizenship and basic human rights. The Black Power Movement included activist fighting for pluralism and citizenship rights, but also the desire for an independent Republic of New Africa, the socialist transformation of U.S. society, and pan-African revolution. The emphasis on self-determination is what primarily distinguishes the Black Power Movement from the Civil Rights Movement. In this sense, the Black Freedom Struggle and armed resistance cannot be confined to the fight for “full citizenship and full American-ness.”

We Will Shoot Back also treats the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements as two related but distinct periods of social movement in the historic Black Freedom Struggle for human rights and against racial oppression. This study does not view the Black Freedom Struggle as one long social movement.²² I utilize the term “Black Freedom Struggle” to identify the historic fight of African descendants for liberation and human rights. The Black Freedom Struggle includes both the fight for emancipation from racial slavery that was waged from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and the fight for human rights, social and economic justice, and political power that was waged from the late nineteenth century through contemporary times. Several social movements rose and declined through

the Black Freedom Struggle, including the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

New social forces emerge in different periods but often rely on traditions and resources of previous movements. The strategic objective of the Civil Rights Movement was the inclusion of African Americans in citizenship rights and the dismantling of U.S. apartheid barriers to Black humanity and dignity. The Black Power Movement had several ideological expressions, including revolutionary nationalism, cultural nationalism, political pluralism, Black capitalism, and Pan-Africanism. All of these ideological expressions emphasized Black identity and consciousness, self-determination, and self-reliance. Some of the activists of the Civil Rights Movement became Black Power militants. Other civil rights advocates became critics and opponents of the new, often more radical ideological direction of their former comrades who embraced Black Power and the emerging social forces it represented in the late 1960s and early '70s. While armed self-defense was debated in the Civil Rights Movement, it was virtually accepted in the Black Power Movement, and the rhetoric of nonviolence was virtually unused by its activists. Challenges to segregation continued to occur during the Black Power Movement in Mississippi. Unlike in the civil rights period of the struggle, demands for Black self-determination, community control, and Black pride emerged in the desegregation struggle. For example, many Mississippi Black communities demanded Black representation in decision making in school desegregation plans and that African American history be required in school curricula in the 1970s.

Terminology

How do I define “armed resistance”? Emilye Crosby points out “a lack of consistency” in the use of the term “armed resistance” in recent scholarship.³³ I define “armed resistance” as individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or other goals of insurgent political action and in defense of human rights. Armed resistance includes armed self-defense, retaliatory violence, spontaneous rebellion, guerilla warfare, armed vigilance/enforcement, and armed struggle. “Armed self-defense” is the protection of life, persons, and property from aggressive assault through the application of force necessary to thwart or neutralize attack. “Retaliatory violence” is physical reprisal for attacks on people or institutions associated with the Movement. “Spontaneous rebellion” is unplanned, unorganized, politically

motivated collective violence intended to redress injustice. “Guerilla warfare” refers to irregular military-tactic efforts utilized by small groups to harass, attack, and strike a larger, better-resourced opponent. “Armed vigilance/ enforcement” is the use of coercive force by a social movement to assert its authority among its constituency and community and to counter the loyalty its population may have for the dominant power structure. Finally, “armed struggle” is a strategy utilized by an insurgent movement to gain state power through military means.

All of the forms of armed resistance defined above were employed in Mississippi during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, with the exception of armed struggle. The use of guns is not necessary in my definition, only the use of force. Guns are merely technology utilized during a particular moment in history. Fists, feet, stones, bricks, blades, and gasoline firebombs may all be employed to defend, protect, or protest. “Armed resistance” is utilized in this study as a broad term that includes different forms of insurgent force.

We Will Shoot Back: Chapters

This study focuses on the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi from the post–World War II era through the late 1970s. Chapter 1 provides a historical and cultural background to the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. This chapter reconstructs the political and social climate in the state, describing the nature of segregation, the character of White terrorist violence, and the collective and individual acts of armed resistance to racial oppression prior to the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the state. The social function of White supremacist violence during the Reconstruction and Nadir period was to suppress Black political aspirations and maintain Black workers as a servile labor force. Post–Civil War Black insurgency, particularly armed resistance, is placed in a cultural construct of the “Bad Negro,” public defiance of White supremacy, and “Bruh Rabbit” (covert resistance).

Chapter 2, “‘I’m Here, Not Backing Up’: Emergence of Grassroots Militancy and Armed Self-Defense in the 1950s,” focuses on the role of self-defense in the Mississippi Black Freedom Struggle in the 1950s. This period provided the network and infrastructure for the dismantling of apartheid in the 1960s and ‘70s. The development and role of the Regional Council for Negro Leadership (RCNL) and its primary spokesperson, Dr. T. R. M.

Howard, is highlighted, as well as Howard's assertive self-defense posture. Finally, the chapter highlights the prevalence of armed self-defense utilized by grassroots activists as reflected in Medgar Evers's attitudes and practices concerning armed resistance.

"Can't Give Up My Stuff': Nonviolent Organizations and Armed Resistance," chapter 3, examines the initial organizing efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Mississippi and the interaction with organizers from these groups with local leaders and people who engaged in armed resistance. SNCC's and CORE's origins were rooted in the strategy, methods, and philosophy of nonviolence. When their organizers initiated and ignited voter registration campaigns, they encountered a host of local leaders who utilized guns as a means of survival in political and everyday life. This chapter highlights the tension and cooperation between the nonviolent organizations and the indigenous armed resistance tradition in Mississippi.

Chapter 4, "Local People Carry the Day': Freedom Summer and Challenges to Nonviolence in Mississippi," focuses on the events leading up to, during, and after the historic Freedom Summer voter registration campaign of 1964 and the impact of armed resistance on that period. The chapter describes the informal organization of armed self-defense in a variety of communities across the state during Freedom Summer. I also draw attention to how spontaneous rebellion in McComb put pressure on federal and state government to intervene to suppress racial terrorism by the Klan. A particular focus is the first national debate within SNCC on self-defense, as well as the impact of armed resistance by local people on SNCC's and CORE's ideology and practice, which eventually led to both organizations embracing the concept of armed self-defense.

Chapter 5, "Ready to Die and Defend: Natchez and the Advocacy and Emergence of Armed Resistance in Mississippi," explores the transition from informal self-defense groups to formal paramilitary organizations, particularly the Deacons for Defense and the open advocacy of armed resistance. In Mississippi, the development of paramilitary organization was parallel to the emphasis on consumer boycotts as a method to coerce local White power structures to concede to demands of the Movement. The campaign led by the state and local NAACP in Natchez, Mississippi, provides the model for this collaboration of consumer boycott and paramilitary organization. Consistent with this model is the development of enforcer squads to gain accountability from local Blacks during the boycott. The open advocacy of armed resistance by activists signified a shift

in rhetoric that would be modeled until the late 1970s in the state. Chapter 6, entitled “‘We Didn’t Turn No Jaws’: Black Power, Boycotts, and the Growing Debate on Armed Resistance,” explains how the “March against Fear” from Memphis to Jackson was significant in igniting local initiatives in many communities. SNCC’s promotion of the slogan “Black Power” signaled a shift in attitude and emphasis of the freedom struggle. This chapter examines how the Black consciousness/Black Power emphasis interacted with the Natchez paramilitary model in Mississippi in two towns impacted by the march, Belzoni and Yazoo City. These boycotts were organized by Rudy Shields in Humphries and Yazoo counties and emphasized armed resistance.

Chapter 7, “‘Black Revolution Has Come’: Armed Insurgency, Black Power, and Revolutionary Nationalism in the Mississippi Freedom Struggle,” continues the story of the Black Power Movement in Mississippi and the role of armed resistance in it. One focus is the boycott organizer, Rudy Shields, and his transition to Black Nationalism in campaigns in Aberdeen and West Point in northeast Mississippi. West Point experienced retaliatory violence organized by an armed clandestine unit of the Black Power Movement months prior to Shields’s involvement there. Shields was also active in organizing college students in the aftermath of the campus shootings and deaths at Jackson State College in 1970. Finally, this chapter examines the ordeal of the Republic of New Africa in Mississippi and the involvement of Mississippi Black Power militants with the nationalist formation. Finally, in chapter 8, “‘No Longer Afraid’: The United League, Activist Litigation, Armed Self-Defense, and Insurgent Resilience in Northern Mississippi,” I look at the United League of Mississippi, self-described as a “priestly, human rights organization” that organized boycotts in the state from 1974 through 1979. In a period generally considered a low point of Black insurgency, the United League organized successful boycotts utilizing self-defense and bold rhetoric embracing armed resistance. The United League represents a continuity of the Natchez model and its last expression in Mississippi politics in the twentieth century.