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A Question of Survival: Robert F. Williams and Black Armed Self-Defense in the American South

Devin McAllister
devin.mcallister@students.cau.edu

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES, AND HISTORY

MCALLISTER, DEVIN

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A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL: ROBERT F. WILLIAMS AND BLACK ARMED SELF-DEFENSE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Committee Chair: Daniel Black, Ph.D.

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Many academic and popular accounts of the Civil Rights era emphasize nonviolent activists and activism at the expense of those who embraced armed self-defense and resistance. Nevertheless, the latter played a significant role within these struggles. One of the most significant was Robert F. Williams, a black militant activist—and president of the local NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina—who embraced armed self-defense as a necessary and instrumental component for the liberation of black people in America. After publicly declaring that blacks should defend themselves and hold racist whites accountable through armed self-defense, he was met with immeasurable backlash from other civil rights leaders and organizations, including the national NAACP. The purpose of this study is to examine his beliefs in the necessity of armed self-defense, as well as his impact on the civil rights movement.

A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL: ROBERT F. WILLIAMS AND BLACK ARMED
SELF-DEFENSE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

DEVIN MCALLISTER

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, AFRICANA WOMEN'S
STUDIES, AND HISTORY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	
I.	INTRODUCTION 1
	Purpose of the Study 9
	Statement of the Problem..... 10
	Method 11
	Methodology 12
	Research Questions13
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW 14
III.	HISTORICAL CONTEXT 27
IV.	FINDINGS 43
V.	CONCLUSION..... 68
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....72

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Few people within the general public have heard of the civil rights activist Robert F. Williams. He was born in Monroe, North Carolina, a small town about 20 miles south of Charlotte, on February 26, 1925. While not nearly as well-known as neighboring cities that participated in the civil rights movement, Monroe is where Williams developed his ideas of black liberation. In Monroe, he saw that black people had no protection under the law, equality through the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, or justice in the court system. Police brutality and the assault on black bodies was a common occurrence in Southern states. White supremacy in Monroe was also enforced through violence. In this atmosphere, Robert Williams came to embrace armed self-defense and resistance as an instrumental and unavoidable component of black liberation in America. When blacks in Monroe decided to arm themselves, they noticed an outcome far different from the injustice regularly plaguing their community. By defending themselves, black citizens limited and challenged further humiliation and degradation from perpetrators of racist violence.

With World War II's coming to a close in the 1940s, Williams returned home from the Marines and eventually revitalized the Monroe chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during the 1950s.

Alongside vice-president and veteran Dr. Albert Perry, Williams joined a wave of activism from veterans who had just made their way back home. Medgar Evers, notable civil rights activist, recalls veterans returning home saying, “while fighting a war against forces proclaiming a doctrine of racial superiority, it became increasingly difficult to justify racial discrimination at home” (Evers 2005, 161).

Williams argued that black citizens of Monroe should arm themselves. In this sense, Williams was part of a long tradition of African Americans who believed in defending themselves with guns. In the 1950s, non-violence became the primary civil rights strategy. As a veteran, Williams had further discovered, on an international level, the power of bearing arms. His experience in America’s military allowed him to witness how people combat violent assailants. Williams, as well as other veterans, had also become an observer of America's hypocrisy surrounding black citizens bearing arms.

Self-empowerment adopted after World War II made its way back to black communities. Men and women began joining organizations such as the NAACP, National Urban League, and numerous local organizations that were committed to the progress of black people in America. Many of these groups adopted nonviolent tactics including increased voter registration, sit-ins, and other protests to address the oppression of African Americans that was continuing across the country. Organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the NAACP utilized non-violent strategies. Many organizers thought that non-violence was an effective strategy in the fight for equality. While effective in various instances, some towns were unable to use any form of protest without eliciting white violence that led to death. While the Jim Crow South was a

place of racist terrorism, organizers believed their non-violent strategies could appeal to the moral compass of most whites if broadcasted to the mainstream. If America's white majority could empathize with the lives of southern blacks, many black organizers seemed to be optimistic about change. Robert Williams was not too sure. Williams, alongside veterans, and community members, believed that non-violent tactics were useful but simply too limiting.

Monroe's black community understood and despised the history of race relations. Black people were murdered with impunity. He particularly saw the assault of black women in the community and the lack of protection for them (Tyson 1999, 1). White police officers assaulted black women in broad daylight in Monroe and were never held accountable. Common occurrences such as these would lead Williams to take action against this abuse in the future. Many people in Monroe who were police officers, judges, attorneys, and city officials were close associates with and members of the Ku Klux Klan. Black people in Monroe understood that racism played a major role in their disenfranchisement, segregation, and lack of justice. For years Monroe's black community witnessed destruction due to a white supremacist system. Robert Williams recognized the injustice and terror black people faced. Witnessing these different assaults would eventually lead him to believe that armed self-defense was their only recourse. After traveling the country while in the military, Williams began to see discrimination against and humiliation of black people everywhere. This solidified his belief that something had to be done. Living under a white supremacist social order would mean violence would be used to reinforce that order. Violence has always been one of the many

ways white supremacy has been reinforced in America. For Williams, the bearing of arms meant that he believed black life was precious and worthy of protecting.

Many black families in the South owned rifles, and some used them to protect themselves against racist violence. Racism would often be the basis that led to blacks being punished for disobeying the law. Oftentimes, blacks never committed a crime at all. While the 14th Amendment made African Americans U.S. citizens, a system was setup unfairly criminalizing black communities. The court system was never a place where black people were consistently shown justice. Black organizations tried to use the court system to fight for justice, but often to no avail. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, along with other federal actions in previous years, further angered the white South which was determined to maintain their white supremacist system.

In many communities, whites were hostile to the ruling. Monroe, North Carolina—where Robert Williams had been elected president of the NAACP chapter—was no exception. The NAACP was opposed to militancy and the use of violence to combat violence. Williams, however never promised to be non-violent. An article published in the *Racine Journal-Times* reflected the rejection of Williams's stance by stating, "The wiser leaders of the NAACP have realized this, and long ago rejected the force of arms to advance their cause"(Guns Won't Right a Wrong 1959, 16). He and new members, mostly comprised of Monroe's working class and other veterans, believed in defending themselves. In addition to the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLS) and the Student Non-Violent

Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were also using non-violent strategies to fight for justice.

Robert F. Williams advocated armed self-defense and called for more militant leadership, which was willing to use armed self-defense. He influenced the Black Panther Party, The Republic of New Afrika, and the Revolutionary Action Movement (Tyson 1999, 297). Williams's leadership became known internationally, especially during burgeoning Cold War politics. His militant leadership—openly declaring armed self-defense—is only one reason that caused his rise in popularity. He showed other black people in America how to end the destruction that whites were wreaking in black communities. His stance on arming himself was shown to be effective. Members of the Ku Klux Klan and other violent whites realized that members of the black community were armed. The abuse of black bodies was reduced when black people defended themselves.

Robert Williams knew one of the many things standing between him and white injustice was the gun. Guns helped to keep African people collectively in submission in America. His stance on black people defending themselves was similar to that of Malcolm X and numerous others who are gaining recognition for their stance on armed resistance. In fact, Robert Williams and his wife, Mable Williams, would travel to visit Malcolm in New York and while at the mosque, a collection would be taken up in support of Williams. Williams would use the funds to purchase more weapons for the people in Monroe (Tyson 1998, 145).

Williams's belief in bearing arms was part of the American belief that people have a right to defend themselves. The right to defend one's self is a central component in a people's freedom. Across the world, freedom fighters could identify with Robert Williams and his philosophy of self-defense. Because of his international presence, resulting in part from his radio show, *Radio Free Dixie*, he would eventually influence different groups of people in different countries. His radio program set the stage for his international presence (Tyson 1999, 285). While in exile in Cuba—due to alleged kidnapping charges—he created a radio station that spread an uncensored message about blacks suffering in America around the world. He would go on to live in China in 1965 for a brief period as well. Williams's influence largely goes unrecognized in civil rights history. His absence from the United States at the height of the civil rights movement—along with his stance on armed self-defense—may be the foremost reasons for his erasure from history books. Although he is an obscure figure, his life was dedicated to the global liberation of black people.

Robert F. Williams's pragmatism led to ideals that would forever change the civil rights movement. Gaining popularity in America and abroad during the same time as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. caused many civil rights leaders to oppose his ideas, as "Martin Luther King Jr. had no difficulty with adversaries, black or white, so long as he was preaching non-violence" (Clarke 1995, 41). His position on armed self-defense and eventually calling for revolution made him an immediate threat to white supremacy. While being watched by the U.S government, like many activists in America at the time, Williams eventually fled the country after being informed that there was a warrant for his

arrest. His life in Monroe and travels across America led to his adamant stance on bearing arms in defense of freedom. Because white supremacy was the law in Monroe, black people had no recourse. Thus, “for the nonwhites, then, this is something like the intellectual equivalent of physical process of seasoning, slave breaking, the aim being to produce an entity who accepts sub personhood” (Mills 1997, 88). By the time Robert Williams began to gain popularity as the NAACP chapter president in Monroe in the late 50’s, sit-ins and boycotts were becoming popular. Williams also joined protests with members of his community when advocating for use of the city’s swimming pool; thus, believing that acts such as these and sit-ins would be beneficial (Williams 1998, 38). When Freedom Riders reached Monroe, North Carolina in 1961 to prove a point about non-violence they were quickly met with violence. If Freedom Rides could be successful—forcing city officials to enforce integration—in a known racist town like Monroe, then non-violence would have proven its value in the fight against social injustice. Freedom Riders were foreigners in Monroe. Robert Williams was extremely familiar with white supremacist and did not in any way underestimate the probability that whites would kill blacks at will.

This thesis explores and analyzes Robert Williams’s idea that armed self-defense and resistance was an instrumental and unavoidable component for black liberation in America. His stance on countering white supremacy will also be examined. Historical documents show his faithful dedication to the movement towards the freedom of African people globally. Although categorized as a militant activist by some, his militancy was born out of the defense of his people. He never believed that black people were the

aggressors in a country that perpetuated racism and allowed whites to reinforce white supremacy through racism. Robert F. Williams was a freedom fighter. A believer in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Williams's constant refusal to tolerate abuse on his community reveals his commitment to self-determination. He also shows how once a nation has profited from the abuse of black bodies, then protection is imperative to secure freedom. If the nation is unwilling to protect its people, then the people have to protect themselves—by any means necessary.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it examines the forgotten measures that blacks in America had to take in order to survive. Robert F. Williams advocated armed self-defense and resistance because he believed that the liberation for black people in America would not occur without it. This study also analyzes America's seemingly dedication to the destruction and debilitation of black people. Studying Williams's beliefs helps scholars and laypersons further understand the effects of black socio-political unrest and how it has shaped America's tradition of civil disobedience. Williams understood that the oppression and assault on black bodies was the perpetuation of white supremacy. As an idea, white supremacy is elevated through the physical debasement of black bodies. This thesis examines the philosophy of one who sought to protect black people through armed self-defense. As humanistic inquiry, this offers a unique perspective on the American belief that all citizens have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, while also revealing what revolutionary steps black people have taken to reach liberation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study of Robert F. Williams and his ideas on armed self-defense is necessary because many scholars and citizens alike have lauded the notion of non-violent social change without exploring the geographical places and cultural ways in which that philosophy proved inept. Armed resistance was necessary in many places if black life was to be preserved. Yet, the general populace has not examined the efficacy and social utility of armed self-defense as a legitimate and morally sound means of perpetuating the civil rights movement. Robert F. Williams's ambition to teach such a philosophy deserves critical attention in order to elucidate the ways in which the notion contributed unto the success of social change in the 1950s and 1960s.

METHOD

I explored critical secondary sources of Robert Williams's social ideology, which lent insight into the context of William's ideas and their social/cultural importance. For primary source material, I investigated Williams's personal papers, housed at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. Newspaper articles, journal articles, books, interviews, and radio narratives combined to form a manifold of source material that when examined and explicated, proved holistic insight both into Williams and the evolution of his ideas.

METHODOLOGY

I approach this work as an Afrocentrist, meaning that I am specifically concerned about how knowledge and the production of knowledge affects, shapes, and reflects truth in the African world. More specifically here, this means that, in this study, I make three governing assumptions: (1) African American's moral compass remained intact, even as oppressive structures worked to demean, degrade, and ultimately destroy them. (2) Williams's actions reflected his commitment to love and protect black people—not his desire to harm whites. That he believed in bearing arms reflects his unwillingness to surrender to the machinations of white supremacy and his hope in the perpetuation of righteousness without black life as the cost. This must be understood, ultimately, as Williams's attempt to teach black people self-love and self-worth via self-protection rather than his hope to inspire race war. (3) Williams's intent was to create a space for freedom and liberation for all Americans. This is important to note because although history may characterize him as a nationalist, Williams was not a separatist. Expressed differently, he wanted to change the social reality of what it meant to be American. He did not advocate racial division or black secession from the nation. All three assumptions were taken into account when analyzing the ideas and approaches Robert Williams initiated as a leader within his community and ultimately the world. The Afrocentric lens allows me to analyze Williams without assigning unto him assumptions about his behavior that do not reflect his true ideology.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How did Robert F. Williams alter the course of American history?

Why should Robert F. Williams be highlighted in the tradition of Black armed self-defense America?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

African American history is a history that includes many forms of resistance. Scholars have researched African people's resistance in America and found those dedicated to the liberation of their people. Through research, one militant activist's name consistently appears: Robert F. Williams. Although historians have mentioned him in passing, and some have written books and articles and have made documentaries regarding him, he has yet to receive the level of attention deserved. Numerous books, such as *Pure Fire*, *Spirit and the Shotgun*, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, and *Negroes and the Gun*, refer to Williams—reflecting his contributions to the freedom struggle.

Yet, Williams is not a popular figure within general conversation about heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. His beliefs surrounding armed self-defense for black people seem to be the underlying reason for his exemption from popular conversation. Williams valued his community and believed that everyone had the right to freedom and the protection of their freedom. He also understood that there was no such thing as autonomy without freedom; freedom is non-existent when unprotected by the law that governs the land. Williams believed that Black Americans fighting to attain freedom in the United States needed to arm themselves (Tyson 1999, 50).

The aim of this chapter is to chronologically examine literature on the work and cultural significance of Robert Williams and to determine the gaps in scholarly production on this historical revolutionary figure. In Williams's only published work, *Negroes with Guns*, published in 1962, he discusses the circumstances that would lead to his exile from the United States. In this brief work, Williams explains why he advocated "flexibility in the freedom struggle" (Williams 1998, 4). Elaborating upon his ideas about flexibility, he asserts that he never advocated "violence for violence sake" (Williams 1998, 4). Although autobiographical, the brevity of the book leaves many questions unanswered.

Negroes with Guns is more a counter response against those who were trying to assassinate his character. The book is an overview of his life before his exile. It took more than 30 years for a biographical sketch to be produced. The work summarizes his personal experiences along with his beliefs in relation to his hometown Monroe, North Carolina and the United States. Since he was wanted and charged with kidnapping—by the U.S. government, this work tells his side of the story. Williams explains his pragmatic belief that black people needed guns to protect themselves from white assailants. He provides ample evidence of his attempts to be non-violent while working for social equality in Monroe. While not the best source on Williams' historical background and upbringing, *Negroes with Guns* does explain the reasons for his belief in armed resistance and the circumstances of his exile.

Timothy B. Tyson's biography on Robert F. Williams, *Radio Free Dixie* (1999), published in 1999, is a more comprehensive work. Tyson explains how Robert F.

Williams' life led to his ideas about nonviolence and the use of armed self defense. He describes how Williams assisted in the uplifting of his community, and particularly how he would "inspire African-American domestic workers and military veterans of Monroe, North Carolina to build the most militant chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the United States" (Tyson 1999, 2). Tyson states that Williams thought that "emasculated black men hung their heads in shame" when black women were violently abused by white assailants (Tyson 1999, 2). Tyson's emphasis on Williams's reaction to the abuse of black female bodies, the African-American oral tradition, and religion separates *Radio Free Dixie* from many texts that reference him.

Williams recalled first seeing the abuse of black women when he was eleven years old (Tyson 1999, 1). According to Tyson, "Robert Williams looked on in terror as Big Jesse [Helms] flattened the black woman with his huge fists, then dragged her off to the nearby jailhouse, her dress up over her head, the same way that a cave man would club and drag his sexual prey" (Tyson 1999, 1). Williams would not only remember this assault for years, but saw it as further cause for black people to believe in armed resistance to prevent it. As a teenager, Williams organized others to end late night predatory lifestyles that whites in the Monroe community indulged in:

As a teenager, Williams organized several friends into a secret organization called X-32 "to make war on white philanderers who fancied Black women after dark." The boys of X-32 sewed white hoods to conceal their identities and "night after night we vainly patrolled the alleys and dark sectors of the streets hoping to catch him." One evening, as Clarkston's distinctive car rolled slowly into the Neck, Williams and his cohorts swopped down on the vehicle and unleashed a broadside

of bricks and stones, smashing all of the car's windows and sending their enemy screeching off into the night. (Tyson 1999, 20)

Williams's childhood memories of black women's abuse and humiliation at the hands of white men helped to shape his ideology. Tyson's reiteration of Williams's stories also reflects Williams's zeal for storytelling.

Tyson presents a black story telling tradition that reflects a different world (Tyson 1999, 11). Williams used his narrative skills in conjunction with his radio station, *Radio Free Dixie*, and to publish his newsletter, *The Crusader*, both reaching black people all over the United States. Tyson describes *The Crusader* as "an expression of homegrown black Southern radicalism that emerged from local black traditions and communities of resistance but took on international political implications" (Tyson 1999, 193). While Robert Williams was the editor of the newsletter, his wife, Mable Williams, was the circulation manager and would also write pieces for the newsletter.

Williams would later say, "through the *Crusader*, we became the first civil rights group to advocate a policy stressing Afro-American unity with the struggling liberation forces of Latin America, Asia and Africa" (Tyson 1999, 196). William's focus on an international unity differentiates him from many of his counterparts in the 1950s. He could convey information in a way that engaged his readers. The *Crusader* would bring his message of armed self-defense to the masses. Williams penned messages in his newsletter that seemed to shock many, such as "the Klan is offering a bill of goods that it cannot deliver, namely, a frightened and cringing Negro who will passively surrender his rights" (Williams 1959, 1). Messages like those implied rights such as the second

amendment would be used. Many religious organizations did not openly advocate the use of weapons.

Robert Williams grew up in the Baptist church. It was here where he also groomed his speaking abilities. While Williams's experience within his own church is positive, Tyson addresses Williams's critique of the black church in *Radio Free Dixie*:

He never forgot the power of this religious experience and the importance of this spiritual community in his early life. But for Williams the black church rarely confronted the harsh realities of the Jim Crow South in a way that transcended the politics of accommodation. "This preacher would preach and start very emotional sermons, but didn't say anything about racial problems," he reflected. Oversimplifying matters somewhat, he claimed that most black preachers "didn't dare speak against the white people because some of the white people contributed money to the churches. (Tyson 1999, 8)

Williams criticized his religious counterparts—mainly pastors and ministers—involved in the civil rights movement. Through his dialogue, as well as criticism of religious spaces, it was obvious that he respected the religious beliefs of others. Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* is the most complete work on Robert F. Williams. By examining Robert Williams's personal life to origins of his belief in bearing arms, he reflects Williams's activism. Due to the various topics covered in Tyson's work, it seems to be the best biographical account on Williams, as well as the most intriguing. Tyson also mentions Williams's correspondence and relationships with others in the Freedom Movement and as well as influencing other southern organizations.

The Deacons for Defense, originating in Louisiana, are often omitted from historical texts and popular accounts. Lance Hill, author of *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*, does an excellent job reminding

readers of the black southern-armed tradition. Naturally, most of the book covers the Deacons for Defense's relationship with the Civil Rights Movement. In some instances the Deacons were "viewed as the political heirs of Robert F. Williams and the vanguard of a growing self-defense movement" (Hill 2004, 221). Williams influenced the organization and would form close relationships with its leaders. There was a belief that "the mere presence of black men in the movement deterred Klan and police terrorism" (Hill 2004, 51). Williams's program "Radio Free Dixie" was played throughout the south, and convinced many black people that his tactics were feasible. Williams's doctrine of self-defense, according to Lawrence Henry, "set the stage for the acceptance of the Deacons for Defense and Justice" (Tyson 1999, 291). There are obvious limitations researching Robert Williams and using this book as a source. The book focuses on Deacons for Defense and Justice, thus only referencing Robert F. Williams but not providing detailed information on him.

Nevertheless, Williams and the Deacons were on the same ideological page with regards to armed self-defense. Rural families in the South were accustomed to having weapons in their homes. Rural towns in Louisiana were similar to Monroe, North Carolina. While civil rights protestors in Louisiana tried to be non-violent, there were times when Deacons would actually shoot white assailants in self-defense. Hill tells the story of a young man who defended himself and his fellow marchers. Henry Austin was 21 years old, younger than most members in Deacons for Defense.

Now the mob turned on Johnson, pinning him against the driver's side door and preventing his escape. Austin grabbed his .38 caliber pistol, shoved open the driver's door and stepped in front of Johnson to face the angry mob, "I have a

gun!” he shouted, but his voice could barely be heard over the din of the crowd. When he fired a warning shot into the air, the mob continued to advance. Austin took aim and fired three shots into the chest of one of the white attackers, Alton Crowe. The tormentors recoiled in shock. They stared speechless at the black man holding the pistol. (Hill 2004, 142)

The shock that the white mob felt is symbolic of their arrogance and confidence in white supremacy. Although they were the attackers, they were surprised that their intended victim would defend himself. Austin gave more than one warning before firing into the crowd—displaying his hope in humanity. Ironically, but not surprisingly, whites in the area wanted Austin lynched or electrocuted. This is the contradictory view that blacks in the rural south understood when marching or picketing for equality. It reflects the need for an organization like Deacons for Defense. It also shows whether in Louisiana or North Carolina, the need for self-defense saved the lives of black people in the South.

Charles E. Cobb Jr. boldly argues that guns have always been a major component for African people’s liberation struggle in America. The need for self-defense is a direct result of the capture and enslavement of Africans. Although focusing on the 1950s, he claims that, “any discussion of guns and black self-defense therefore must begin with the country’s origins”(Cobb 2014, 28). Throughout *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed* (2011), Cobb examines multiple instances where African-Americans’ advocated armed self-defense. In examining the Civil Rights Movement, Cobb discusses the relationship between the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the NAACP. When organizers began to travel in the Deep

South, they realized that relying on non-violence would be quite difficult.

Cobb describes a time when CORE and SNCC members came to this harsh realization:

Everywhere in the rural south, CORE organizers were finding that black people were not going to abandon the practice of armed self-defense, and thus the same transformations were occurring among CORE members as in SNCC. Unlike the people they were when they were students and leading sit-ins and Freedom Rides, the older people in rural counties and parishes (as they are called in Louisiana) made it clear that they were not going to commit to the non-violent way of life advocated in the philosophies of Martin Luther King Jr. or Mohandas Gandhi. (Cobb 2014, 191)

Cobb reminds readers that not every leader in the black community agreed with nonviolence. He explains W.E.B. Du Bois' weariness towards non-violence stating, "writing in 1957 about the Montgomery bus boycott, W.E.B. Du Bois expressed great skepticism about nonviolence: No normal human being of trained intelligence is going to fight the man who will not fight back. . . but suppose they are wild beasts or wild men? To yield to the rush of the tiger is death, nothing less" (Cobb 2014, 4). Malcolm X, as a minister in the Nation of Islam, denounced Martin Luther King Jr. as "a modern Uncle Tom subsidized by whites to teach the Negroes to be defenseless" (Cobb 2014, 4). The question of armed self-defense consistently found itself at the center of conversation. Since guns were prevalent in the South, the thought of using one for defensive measures was customary.

In rural southern areas, it was common to own a shotgun or pistol. Already aware of the dangers associated with living in the Deep South and aware of present day lynching, black people struggled with the idea of non-violence. Non-violence is a difficult concept. Given the prevalence of white hatred, being unarmed seemed like

suicide. In many instances, Civil Rights protesters who used non-violent strategies were not from areas like rural Louisiana. Some had never dealt with the consequences of defying white supremacy in Dixieland. Because of this, groups of armed men across the South assisted protestors in ways that have been unrecognized in civil rights history. Cobb further reiterates, “although nonviolence was crucial to the gains made by the freedom struggle of the 1950s and 60s, those gains could not have been achieved without the complementary and still underappreciated practice of armed self-defense” (Cobb 2014, 1). Cobb’s explanation for armed self-defense notes that there are very few details about women’s perspectives. Like many books on the civil rights movement voices of men eclipse—especially armed self-defense movements—women’s voices. While women were vital actors in the civil rights movement, men were still expected to be providers and protectors.

The Deacons for Defense and Justice was founded in Louisiana during the 1960’s. Since many members of the Jonesboro community rejected non-violence, they would assist in other ways. According to Cobb, “at first, they simply sat unarmed on the porch watching the street, shadowed CORE workers as they canvassed for voter registration, or placed themselves near picket line protest” (Cobb 2014, 196). It wasn’t until later when under the official name “Deacons for Defense and Justice” that they would become armed to remove the fear that the Klan would attack workers. Over time the Deacons would become widely known throughout the South. While most of the members were men, women were permitted to join. As of January 5, 1965, Cobb observes, “for the first time anywhere in the south, representatives of a national civil rights organization had

played a role in creating a group for the express purpose of providing armed self-defense” (Cobb 2014, 201). While Robert F. Williams brought about the same act almost a decade prior to the Deacons, it was on a local level, like the Deacons, and never received national assistance from the NAACP.

In *We Will Shoot Back*, Akinyele Umoja illustrates how some black Mississippians were no different from other areas of the South in their belief in armed self-defense. Although black citizens in Mississippi advocated armed self-defense, they did so in the privacy of their own homes. Robert Williams’s appeal for public self-defense would forever change southern leadership, specifically in national organizations. Umoja explains Williams’s impact on the Mississippi movement:

Prior to 1965, Black activists in Mississippi practiced armed self-defense but did not openly advocate its exercise. Monroe, North Carolina’s Robert Williams was the exceptional Black southerner who openly declared that African-Americans should meet “violence with violence.” The conciliatory approach of practitioners of armed resistance allowed SNCC and CORE organizers to depend upon the protection of armed Blacks while maintaining a public stance of nonviolence. After 1964, Mississippi Movement leaders openly embraced armed resistance. (Umoja 2013, 122)

After his statement about meeting violence with violence, Williams became “the primary advocate for armed self-defense by Movement activists and observers” (Umoja 2013, 53). While Williams may have been the principal figure for armed self-defense, armed blacks were going unnoticed while protecting many members of the movement. Charles Evers, a prominent figure in Civil Rights history agreed with Robert Williams. At one point in 1964, Evers made a speech that reflected the anxiety that blacks in Mississippi felt:

I have the greatest respect for Mr. Martin Luther King, but non-violence won't work in Mississippi . . . We made up our minds . . . that if a white man shoots at a Negro in Mississippi, we will shoot back. If they bomb a Negro Church and kill our children we are going to bomb a white church and kill some of their children. We have served notice in Mississippi . . . that before we be slaves anymore, we'll die and go to our graves. (Umoja 2013, 127)

Evers later rephrased his remarks but his frustrations were noticed. Only a few years prior to Evers's speech, Robert F. Williams was suspended for making remarks that were interpreted as violent. Both men were leaders of their NAACP chapters. Evers also held similar views to Williams when it came to non-violence. Williams did not think that non-violence could be the only tactic used in the South. These men understood that entrenched racism caused whites to want to murder, lynch, and disenfranchise blacks. The belief that white supremacy would ultimately use violence to enforce itself would seem to be the rationale for Williams's belief in flexibility within the freedom movement. Mississippians understood Williams's call. They understood that if they only practiced non-violence as a tactic then it would result in the same violence that killed blacks.

If researchers need an overview of armed black resistance, Nicholas Johnson's *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (2014), is a suitable place to begin. While explaining the tradition of armed resistance in America, he provides detailed experiences and shows how armed self-defense saved the lives of many African Americans. Johnson analyzes the rationale behind African-American's use of weapons to protect themselves and deconstructs myths about black political violence. At moments, Johnson insinuates that black people participated in avoidable conflict. These instances are subjective and do not take into account black people's historical oppression and the

resisting response to it. Although Johnson's comments can cause argument, he does highlight the life of Robert F. Williams throughout the text.

Johnson begins the first chapter with a description of Robert F. Williams and the struggle he faced. Highlighting the story of Robert F. Williams allows readers to understand the tradition of bearing arms as well as community support in this effort. Williams believed that families had the right to defend themselves. He was also a president of the Monroe, North Carolina branch of the NAACP. For this reason there was a tremendous amount of backlash against his announcement that he would be defending himself. Roy Wilkins, national director of the NAACP condemned Williams and his comments. Williams was later suspended from his position. The dispute between Williams and the National officials of the NAACP would recur.

Self-defense was at the core of the argument. Johnson describes how just some years later other prominent civil rights organizations would raise the same argument. By 1966, Both CORE and SNCC flirted armed self-defense a sociopolitical tactic in the struggle to achieve civil and human rights. CORE, a formally interracial organization founded on Gandhian principles of nonviolence, whose members and leadership were predominantly white well into the 1960s, transformed into an almost entirely black organization that threw off its pacifist constraints. SNCC became exclusively black during the 1966 Atlanta Project. SNCC leaders Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown became more widely known as part of the Black Power Movement (Johnson 2014 287).

Constant disputes over self-defense caused a split among civil rights organizations. The National Urban League, NAACP, and SCLC stood firm on the

position of non-violence. CORE and SNCC members began to openly carry guns for protection at many protests to protect organizers. Other organizations began to mobilize and were denounced as extremist by other civil rights groups. The Black Liberation Army and Revolutionary Action Movement advocated the use of self-defense. Johnson makes sure to highlight other differences that caused organizations like CORE to begin their transformation. Prior to the call for self-defense, CORE's membership was integrated and funded largely by white patrons. Then there was a call for black consciousness in the 1960's. John Henrik Clarke describes this time period by stating, "after the Second World War, African consciousness was reflected in the literature and activities of the Civil Rights Movement" (Clarke 1993, 76). The call for self-defense led to organizations also calling for autonomy. White financial support led to any form of self-defense to be seen as support for violence.

The inclusion of Robert F. Williams in numerous texts reflects his powerful impact on the civil rights movement. While he did not originate the idea that blacks should arm themselves against racial terror, his idea of flexibility within the freedom struggle led to a distinctive viewpoint that affected the civil rights and black power movements. Williams's beliefs impelled fellow activists to take a more pragmatic approach to liberation. A stance that would not only liberate African-Americans in ways that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. saw fit, but also securing it in a way that Malcolm X knew was necessary. Robert F. Williams was able to interwoven what seemed to be incompatible beliefs. He demonstrated that militant activist could be both practically and amicably grounded.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Countless in the general populace equate the Black Power movement with the beginning of armed black resistance in the United States. That is unequivocally false. Black armed resistance—as well using them for self-defense—has an extensive history that goes back to the beginning of African enslavement in the Americas. Self-defense has been a constant theme throughout history for Africans in America. While the debasement of African bodies rest upon the belief that Africans are inferior, Africans defending themselves enforces the idea of equality and humanity. In past times, the black community has seen how black men and women’s self-defense can be morphed into a story that labels them as the aggressors of situations.

Through historical analysis scholars will view the long tradition of armed black resistance in the United States, as well as the need for blacks to bear arms for liberation. The enslavement of Africans initiated a struggle that continues today. While the notion of docile Africans being captured and transported is still maintained by white supremacist thinkers, history shows readers the contrary. There are numerous accounts of every day and large-scale resistance which are routinely left out of popular conversation pertaining to racism and oppression. This chapter will focus on armed black resistance in the U.S. and North American Colonies and its affect on the way of life in these territories.

Insurrections occurred frequently on ships making their way to the Americas and Caribbean Islands. Facing the atrocities of the middle passage, enslaved Africans understood the importance of resistance. In *The Slave Ship*, Marcus Rediker expounds on insurrection efforts:

Yet insurrection aboard a slave ship did not happen as a spontaneous natural process. It was, rather, the result of calculated human effort—careful communication, detailed planning, precise execution. Every insurrection, regardless of its success, was a remarkable achievement, as the slave ship itself was organized in almost all respects to prevent it. Merchants, captains, officers, and crew thought about it, worried about it, took practical action against it. Each and all assumed that the enslaved would rise up in a fury and destroy them if given half a chance. For those who ran the slave ship, and insurrection was without a doubt their greatest nightmare. It could extinguish profits and lives in an explosive flash. (Rediker 2004, 292)

The suspicion of revolt and rebellion would constantly take place in the minds of captors throughout the period of enslavement. This was the case especially since, “rebellion began at the initial point of capture within Africa itself, continuing down to the barracoons, and it often erupted into mutiny aboard the slavers” (Gomez 2005, 110).

Slave traders and slave holders enacted extensive measures to prevent any form of uprising, including psychological tactics enacted to dissuade resistance. Physically, men were restricted because of their chains aboard ships. Women were shackled as well but had more access to mobility on the ships. Due to the mobility of women, many insurrections were more efficient. African women commonly played a role in African resistance in America. There were women on board who had been warriors in their homeland. Being trained in combat, tactics learned by Africans were often used on slave ships. Europeans were often surprised at how quickly Africans were able to learn how to

use the weapons. On one ship, *Thomas*, it was said “the slaves making use of Swivel guns, and trading Small Arms, seemingly in an experienced Manner against them” (Rediker 2007, 294). Europeans bearing of arms were to subdue Africans if there were any attempt of rebellion. Africans on board knew that if they were to free themselves from their new bondage, they must bear the arms of their captors. Africans combative skills and physical features made them than adept to take on their captors, but the use of the gun made the chances of winning a battle minimal. Nevertheless, mutinies on ships continued to occur out of desperation. The desperation to be free was far greater than living in the conditions that the middle passage warranted.

Unfortunately, many of these mutinies ended in defeat. The anger that European captors conjured resulted in heinous acts of defilement on black bodies. The rage of Europeans often left a devastating psychological impact, “sometimes the body parts of the defeated would be distributed among the remaining captives, throughout the ship, as a reminder of what happened to those who dared to rise up” (Rediker 2007, 299). This reflected the morally void lifestyle that Europeans normalized in the America’s. Crew shipmates worked tirelessly to understand what caused minimal rebellious activity on ships—although they always knew there would be a possibility. Since it was already assumed African people, like any human, wanted to rebel, this shows slave traders understood the act as inhumane. The ultimate goal— whether tacitly or overtly—was to subdue and overwhelm the African. Thus, Africans recognized the need for inconspicuous forms of planning rebellions.

Life on North American plantations continued a life of subjugation and inhumane treatment for African people. Because of the horrific circumstances that Africans were placed in, multiple forms of resistance continued. There are numerous events where enslaved Africans resisted. Resistance came in many forms but there was one weapon the enslaved knew would be helpful—the gun. The gun is what continued to separate the enslaved from plantation owners and overseers. Thus, many resistance efforts became even more strategic and covert. Planning rebellions demanded secrecy. If there was suspicion that there would soon be an uprising, the enslaved were likely to be shown why they should not rebel. Throughout the history of African enslavement in the Americas there are instances where those who are enslaved give details to white owners and overseers about planned revolts. Performing hard labor, planning a rebellion, and anticipating the consequences would be a task.

In 1739, near the Stono River, in South Carolina, enslaved Africans wanted freedom and were willing to do anything to gain it. Their understanding of needing arms to be successful led them to their first step towards liberation. Vincent Harding explains the Stono Rebellion in his work *There is a River*:

Having first successfully raided a store for arms and ammunition and executed the two storekeepers, they elected a captain and set out boldly in search of freedom. Moving “at a slow pace,” they marched toward the southwest, heading for the relative safety of Saint Augustine. “With colors flying and two drums beating,” the black men advanced “like a disciplined company,” and it is said that on their way “they called out liberty.” Also they killed every white person who came within their reach, burned and sacked houses and barns, and eventually built up a company of some seventy to eighty marching Africans. (Harding 1981, 34)

Prior to the Stono Rebellion, “local slave patrols were merged with the colony’s militia, reflecting a shift from concern with an outer enemy to increased surveillance of the enslaved, resisting blacks” (Harding 1981, 33).

Not even a year after the Stono Rebellion, a group of Africans banded together in Goose Creek, South Carolina to initiate another insurrection. Harding suggests one of the priorities were to secure weapons, “like the Stono forces, they had no arms and were reportedly planning to break into a Charleston arsenal and then take over the city” (Harding 1981, 35). Like many other planned insurrections, their plan was disclosed and resulted in the lynching of dozens of Africans. It would seem difficult to imagine freedom for enslaved Africans with no use of bearing arms. Guns were a component to freedom, not because the enslaved wanted to be violent murderers, but it was a major component towards securing their freedom. The Americas was created with no vision of all African people being free. Thus, the very function of American society operated off of the premise that African people were to be used for economic gain. Africans had no choice but to rebel. The response to revolt—even if only insinuated—was to take the lives of the enslaved to intimidate others within proximity. Similar to the journey of the middle passage, dismembered body parts would be displayed to discourage any form of rebellion. This was the continuation of attempting to create a subhuman class of people in the Americas.

Gabriel Prosser, an enslaved African living in Henrico County, Virginia knew he was not born to live oppressed. In 1800, he planned an attack in which he, as well as others, would “make a surprise midnight attack on Richmond to capture arms, burn

warehouses, and perhaps take the governor as hostage, thereby inspiring a general uprising among thousands of Africans” (Harding 1981, 55). Committed to the fight for freedom, Africans continuously sought ways to liberate themselves. Although their commitment was to freedom, America’s commitment was deeply rooted in black disenfranchisement. While Africans in North America fought for freedom, those in the Caribbean also continued their struggle for liberation.

Armed resistance continued well into the 19th century. Daniel Rasmussen’s work *American Uprising* gives a thorough account of what he considers blacks largest act of armed resistance—The German Coast Uprising:

In 1811, a group of between 200 and 500 enslaved men dressed in military uniforms and armed with guns, cane knives and axes rose up from the slave plantations around New Orleans and set out to conquer the city. They decided that they would die before they would work another day of backbreaking labor in the hot Louisiana sun. Ethnically diverse, politically astute, and highly organized, this slave army challenged not only the economic system of plantation agriculture but also the expansion of American authority in the Southwest. Their January march represented the largest act of armed resistance against slavery in the history of the United States—and of the defining moments in the history of New Orleans and, indeed, the nation. (Rasmussen 2011, 1)

Rasmussen relates this 19th century struggle to Robert F. Williams and his involvement in the civil rights movement. He says, “coming to terms with American history means addressing the 1811 uprising and the story of Robert F. Williams—not brushing these events under the rug because they upset safe understandings about who we are as a nation” (Rasmussen 2011, 217).

The result of armed resistance by enslaved Africans in Louisiana would be deadly, similar to other rebellions that had come prior. The men captured after the

rebellion were tortured and killed in an extremely gruesome fashion. Their heads were chopped off and “by the end of January, around 100 dismembered bodies decorated the levee from the Place d’Armes in the center of New Orleans forty miles along the River Road into the heart of the plantation district” (Rasmussen 148).

The Haitian revolution played a major role in the perception of rebellion in the 19th century. From the years 1795 to 1799 Great Britain had lost 100,000 men to battle (James 2012, 43). Not only did Africans in Haiti free themselves from bondage, they also took the lives of many who were their former oppressors. This seemed to have numerous impacts as European nations were still continuing colonization efforts around the world. The revolution in Haiti disrupted economic prosperity for multiple nations in Europe, as well as instilled fear in many Europeans. The Haitian revolution had taken place less than a decade prior to the rebellion in Louisiana. Rasmussen highlights the effects of the Haitian revolution by stating, “public destruction of the rebels was, in slaveholders’ minds, a necessary precondition for the safety of the plantation regime and the prevention of a ferocious revolt along the lines of Haiti” (Rasmussen 2011, 149). Rasmussen also details the psychological impact of both the enslaved and those involved in the enslavement of Africans:

Psychologically, killing another human being is difficult—unless some circumstance makes it possible to dismiss the humanity of the murdered. In this case, a powerful racist ideology that characterized black slaves as little better than cattle, coupled with a rage inspired by a violation of the racial order, provided ample justification. The planters considered the slaves brutal savages hell-bent on wreaking unspeakable atrocities on them and their families. In an area full of planters with strong ties to Haiti, such atrocities were not difficult to imagine. (Rasmussen 2011, 149)

Constant fear that Africans would eventually rebel and kill their enslavers was a recurring thought in the minds of white Americans. As a result, enslavers and white community members took drastic measures to ensure that if there were a revolt it would be limited. It also became a practice to exhibit dead black bodies to persuade the enslaved to rethink any thoughts of freedom that they may have. Rasmussen explains that this method of retaliation was not foreign to Europeans, as “in the previous fifty years, beheadings had become the prime method for putting down slave revolts” (Rasmussen 2011, 150). Examples such as this reflect white supremacist’s perception of the African in Americas. Although originally seen as an economic commodity, the enslavement of Africans in the Americas further burgeoned into one of the most devastating periods in world history.

There was an increase in revolts as the Civil War approached. In 1829, *David Walker’s Appeal* articulated and “delivered a furious indictment of American racism and slavery, coupled with a call to Southern black to rise up and overthrow their masters” (Walker and Wilentz 1995, xxiii). Enslaved men and women were well aware of revolts and resistance taking place in the Americas and the Caribbean. For example, there was an instance in 1826 when black captives overtook a ship, Harding explains how they killed two members of the crew, then ordered another crew member to take them to Haiti because they knew of the black struggle there (Harding 1981, 81). Black men in the South began circulating Walker’s pamphlet, which is evident in the four black men arrested in New Orleans on charges of circulating the Appeal (Harding 1981, 93).

Not long after Walker's *Appeal* Nat Turner and his comrades in Virginia initiated their own plot to liberate themselves. Harding writes that Turner, "hoped to move so quickly and kill so thoroughly that no alarm would be given before his marchers reached Jerusalem, and had captured the cache of arms stored there" (Harding 1981, 95). Turner maintained, like the freedom fighters before him, bearing arms was the only way him and his comrades would have a fighting chance. Turner's death was similar to many of the insurrectionist that preceded him. Not only was he murdered, but killed in the most dehumanizing way that whites in Southampton could think. Vincent Woodard, In *The Delectable Negro*, details the response to Nat Turner and the thoughts that followed his death:

Many whites feared that Turner would literally rise from the grave and rebone himself. This is how some have explained the gruesome cannibalization of Turner after his death. Williams Sydney Drewry, a member of the Southampton community, documented *The Southampton Insurrection* (1900) the exact methods of punishment and postmortem abuse of Turner's body. According to Drewry, after Turner was executed, his body was delivered to doctors, who skinned it and made grease of the flesh. Mr. R. S. Barham's father owned a money purse made of his hide. (Woodard 2014, 172)

The fear of a Nat Turner resurrection alludes to something far greater than Nat Turner himself. Whites in the South were well aware revolt and rebellion was on the minds of the enslaved. This is why so much effort was put into imposing fear in them. The process of creating a docile slave was the most important objective to make the slave trade profitable. Thus, America's objective was a continual process in making the African docile. The making of an African slave had now been in practice over 200 years. Any form of resistance was always met with some sort of violence. Not only was the

enslavement of African people brutally violent and dehumanizing, it also disrupted African's cultural continuity. Familial structures, initiation processes, and societal norms were all altered once considered chattel. The extreme inhumane circumstances led the enslaved to have to find the most extreme ways to escape plantation life. Emancipation, in whichever way they could get it, became the goal.

During the Civil War, with many "free blacks" migrating north, whites feared their presence. Some felt, as McPherson highlights, "setting black men free to be the equals of white men in the slave states is something more dreadful than rebellion or secessions, or even a dismembered union" (McPherson 1982, 69). While simply an assumption, this ultimately led to racially motivated riots for the next half-century. With many whites indecisive about the abolishment of slavery, it left black people in a peculiar position. Violence still existed in the North, and blacks were still enslaved in the South. A war between the north and south gave many of the enslaved and those who were free hope. Immediately black men wanted to enlist and help their brothers in bondage as much as possible. Blacks would write to government officials across the North exemplifying their willingness to help fight the south. Many blacks—understanding that white northerners were racist—tried to empathize with them while trying to gain citizenship as well as free other enslaved African Americans. Many of the letters were written in a "trickster" fashion that was masked in patriotism. McPherson details in his work *The Negro's Civil War*, how one black organization in Pittsburgh, the "Hannibal Guards", would send a letter to a northern general:

Sir: As we sympathize with our white fellow-citizens at the present crisis, and to show that we and do feel interested in the present state of affairs; and as we

consider ourselves American citizens and interested in the Commonwealth of all our white fellow citizens, although deprived of all our political rights, we yet wish the government of the United States to be sustained against the tyranny of slavery, and are willing to assist in any honorable way or manner to sustain the present Administration. We therefore tender to the state the services of the Hannibal Guards. (McPherson 1982, 19)

Many white men didn't want black men involved in the war. Black men constantly were told, "this is a white man's war" (McPherson 1982, 22). Contrary to popular belief now, it was a white man's war. Lincoln's administration, as well as anti-slavery newspapers as McPherson acknowledges, "declared emphatically that the purpose of the war was the restoration of the Union, and that issues of slavery and the Negro had nothing to do with the conflict (McPherson 1982, 22). There were also black troops in the confederate army. Many of them fought not because they wanted to retain the enslavement of African people, but because they thought it would eventually lead to white men honoring them and letting them go free. McPherson highlights a group of free blacks in New Orleans who volunteered to aid the confederacy:

In New Orleans the prosperous free community declared that they were ready to take arms at a moment's notice to fight shoulder to shoulder with other citizens. Black men in New Orleans formed a military organization known as the "Native Guards," which was enrolled as part of the state militia. But the "Native Guards" were never used by the Confederate government. When the Union forces captured New Orleans in the spring of 1862, the regiment of black men refused to leave the city with the rest of the confederate army. Instead they welcomed the conquering army and declared their allegiance. (McPherson 1982, 23)

After the Civil War, many blacks were hopeful for freedom. It was a time to begin a new life for themselves and their families. For southern blacks, their knowledge of General Sherman's "Special Order No.15" gave them more hope for equality. This is

what is mostly known today as “forty acres and a mule”. As McPherson shows in *The Negro’s Civil War*:

Sherman issued his “Special Field Order No.15,” which designated the coastline and riverbanks thirty miles inland from Charleston to Jacksonville as an area for exclusive Negro settlement. Freedmen settling in this area could take up not more than forty acres of land per family, to which they would be given “possessory titles” until Congress “shall regulate the title.” General Rufus Saxton was authorized to supervise the settlement of the Negroes on the land, and by the end of June 1865, more than forty thousand freedmen had moved onto their new farms. (McPherson 1982, 303)

Unfortunately for blacks who had recently moved onto this new property, McPherson explains, Andrew Johnson “issued a pardon and restoration of property to the former Confederate owners of these lands” (McPherson 1982, 304). This was a devastating blow to those who hoped for a new life. Due to southern whites hostility towards blacks after the war, many came to rid blacks off of “their property”. Although blacks on plantations, during and after slavery, knew they would need to bear arms for their liberation, arms were never attained to secure and defend their new homes. Many were forcefully driven out and began journeying aimlessly throughout the South. Another overwhelming blow to southern blacks was the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. According to McPherson, Jack Flowers who was formerly enslaved, went on to say “I ‘spect it’s no use to be here. I might as wells stayed where I was. It ‘pears we cant be free, nohow. The rebs won’t let us alone. If they can’t kill us, they’ll kill our frien’s, sure” (McPherson 1982, 311).

The ending of Reconstruction by the white southern “Redeemers” and the violence that came along with it also shaped views on Black armed self-defense. While

blacks began to possess more weapons, whites contemplated ways they could disarm blacks. In Louisiana for example, “a mob of whites who had broken up a freedmen’s political meeting, disarmed them, prevented them from voting in a state election, and murdered fifty-nine of them in what became known as the Colfax Massacre” (Strain 2005, 20). Reconstruction’s demise deflated many blacks’ dreams and aspirations. For many, their only way to live was returning to former plantation owners and work as sharecroppers. The militancy that often returns with the men from war had now begun to wear off. Southern blacks noticed that “after the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South and the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s, the white people of the South proceeded to segregate, subordinate, disfranchise, and frequently to lynch Negroes” (McPherson 1982, 317). Formerly enslaved blacks were left in the South to fend for themselves with no one there to protect them. Their former slave masters, overseers, and slave patrolmen were continuing to create anguish in black family’s lives. Former slaves were not completely defeated. Many began to organize the best that they could to create small communities and stable economic situations.

On the brink of post-emancipation, the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and continual lynching proved America’s racism and oppressive tactics were still heavily engrained. By the 20th century, a new popular attitude towards racism also began to develop. Many figures such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Dubois vocally expressed more militant views towards racist acts of violence. Garvey, a prominent black nationalist argued “ they can pull off their hot stuff in the south, but let them come north and touch Philadelphia, New York or Chicago and there will be little left of the Ku Klux Klan”

(Johnson 180). Dubois on the other hand, who lived in Atlanta, was at higher risk for comments such as these.. Dubois is known to have been in Atlanta during the 1906 race riots and “paced with a shotgun, ready to defend his own family against the mob” (Johnson 181). Once again, this exemplifies the pride that black people had in their communities, as well as their will to defend them. Red Summer, 1919, a time known as one of the most violent moments in the 20th century, reflected “the greatest period of interracial strife the nation has ever witnessed” (McWhirter 2011, 13). While lynchings spread across the country, numerous accounts reiterate the resistance from blacks throughout America.

There was also mob violence in Tulsa, where “Black Wall Street” was a prominent black business district. While smaller events initiated the riot, it was black men’s carrying of guns that proliferated the white mob into a riot. The black veteran who first began carrying his weapon announced “I’m going to use it if I need to” in response to a white man asking him “Nigger where you going with that pistol” (Johnson 2014, 188)? John Hope Franklin argues that many more whites died than is portrayed through media. Franklin, who lived in Tulsa, remembers joining his father at his law practice and being “attentive to cases involving the estate of some white person who died on or about June 1, 1921” (Johnson 2014, 189). This reveals Franklin’s reluctance towards the idea that blacks did not use arms to protect themselves

A similar situation occurred in Rosewood, Florida. Black men taking up arms to defend themselves appalled whites in this instance too. Johnson recounts blacks’ admiration of one of the men, Sylvester Carrier, in the work *Negroes and the Gun*:

Sylvester Carrier was elevated as an exemplar of black manhood by the *Pittsburgh American*, which declared that Rosewood should “make Negroes everywhere feel proud and take renewed hope. For our people have fought back again! They have met the mob with its own deadly weapons, they’ve acquitted themselves like freemen and were not content to be burned like bales of hay. This was not just a general endorsement of self-defense, of the type that virtually might make when pressed. The *Pittsburgh American* was talking pointedly about self-defense with guns. (Johnson 2014, 192)

Both instances display black’s will to defend their families by any means necessary. More importantly, it shows the need for black people to arm themselves to prevent violence against them by their oppressors. Once black people were able to own guns, they went and bought rifles and pistols and kept them in their homes for both self-defense and as a component of rural life. It became a norm to own guns. Black armed self-defense and resistance remained common through the 1930’s and 1940’s and into the modern Civil Rights era of the 1950’s and 1960’s. Many black men began to even gain reputations for keeping their firearm on them while they ventured throughout their cities. One of these men was named Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard, also known as T.R.M. Howard. He was known to own an arsenal of weapons and wasn’t afraid to use any of them. After the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, Howard traveled to Mississippi with “a caravan of armed men escorted Mamie Till and others, including Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan, to the courthouse” (Johnson 2014, 218). He and others had been known to watch southern black’s homes at times for security reasons. The widely publicized murder of Emmett Till ignited a fire in the black community and seems to have demanded a new form of accountability. According to Michael Eric Dyson, Till’s murder was “on the hands of every person who watched in malignant silence as black

men were lynched, black women were raped, and black children were intimidated and even murdered” (Dyson 1993, 195). Till’s murder was the reflection of the abuse, hatred, and white supremacy that either directly or indirectly put black people’s lives constantly at risk.

In 1955—the same year of Till’s murder—Robert F. Williams returned home from the Marines and joined his local NAACP Chapter. Not long after, he would follow the long tradition of black men and women bearing arms to protect members of their community. While not the first to bear arms and publicly advocate for black people defending themselves with arms, he was one of the few to do so and find ways to reach the masses. He became a spokesman for a large group of black people in America who believed they have the right to deal with racial hatred and oppression on their own terms. He knew that black people were not criminal nor did they deserve the abuse that was endured. Amos Wilson further details this idea explaining, “that the white American must see virtually every black male as criminal or as a potential criminal regardless of facts to the contrary, bespeaks an intense psychic need of white America to perceive him as such” (Wilson 1990, 37). Williams was unwilling to be white America’s caricature of a black man. He was fully aware of his political context in this country and was never oblivious to the oppression that blacks historically endured. African’s cultural continuity has always been in jeopardy. Robert F. Williams made sure that as the sons and daughters of captives, the struggle for liberation would continue.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

As prominent as Robert F. Williams was throughout the civil rights movement, his erasure from mainstream civil rights history perpetuates the constant narrative that African-Americans—besides Malcolm X—were steadfast believers in non-violence as the pathway to liberation. Not only did Robert F. Williams conclude that passive resistance was an undesirable approach to freedom, but he also called for the restoration of black manhood. He believed in a manhood that required black men to hold other men accountable for their actions, especially in regards to the abuse black women suffered from white assailants. His belief in armed self-defense and non-violent demonstrations led to a balanced approach to attaining and securing civil rights in the United States for black people.

Unwilling to compromise his belief of armed self-defense, Williams found himself in constant danger and heavily criticized by his civil rights counterparts. While extremely straightforward in his approach to liberation, he became a complex figure in a society that refused to believe armed resistance, coupled with blackness, was a natural fit. Africans have always resisted in the Americas. They had no choice, unless subordination was acceptable. Chancellor Williams understood this by emphasizing in *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, “there is no peace and harmony, of course when the blacks humbly stay in their place—their subordinate place” (C. Williams 1971, 312).

The tradition of black people fighting back is woven into America's fabric. While there are always overt attempts to disrupt African's cultural continuity, African people refused to willingly be degraded. Robert F. Williams's fight was a fight for human rights, which has been in jeopardy since professed that Africans were not fully human. He was not the sole figure during the civil rights movement to call for armed self-defense but he deserves to be highlighted as a warrior within this fight for liberation. Not only did Williams effectively strategize, he helped to align his community's thinking toward complete freedom. As the late 1950's began Williams had a spotlight on himself and his NAACP chapter.

In 1957, Robert F. Williams and other black citizens of Monroe requested the use of the city pool for one day a week for black children (Williams 1998, 6). This was not a plea to integrate the pool, but only a request to use it, as it was a public facility. Their request was denied. Four years after their original request they were still denied use of the pool. This resulted to a picket line led by Williams and other community members. While participating in a demonstration, members of Monroe's white community fired rounds at the crowd of black people protesting the denial of black children's ability to swim in the city pool (Williams 1998, 6). This ultimately led to the pool being closed down until further notice.

While the pool could have possibly been closed down for safety concerns, it doesn't seem plausible to assume that it was for the safety of Monroe's black citizens. The police department allowed black picketers to be fired upon, while putting forth minimal, if any, effort in stopping shooters from attempting to frighten or kill black

protestors. This is an example of what members in the Monroe community witnessed during Robert Williams's local NAACP presidency.

Reflecting on the amount of tolerance for racist behavior plaguing the South, Monroe revealed itself as a city with no intentions of protecting its black citizens. The right to receive protection from law enforcement was largely ignored. In fact, law enforcement was often the perpetrator of violent crimes against blacks in the South with no one to systemically hold them accountable. This would not be the first instance where Robert Williams would experience the lack of protection from city law enforcement while exercising his right as an American citizen.

With the pool picketing in 1961 continuing Williams was reminded of how much he was not protected by law enforcement. While driving back to the picket lines where he and others were picketing, he was rear-ended by a white man. The car behind him pushed his vehicle to 70 miles per hour as they approached a patrol station. Williams recognized the patrol station. While trying to seek the attention of the patrolmen by blowing his horn the patrolmen "threw up their hands, laughed, and turned their backs to the highway" (Williams 1998, 8). The nonchalant attitude of the patrolmen was not an uncommon reaction to black lives in danger in Williams's hometown. Black people did not regularly receive justice in Monroe, North Carolina. The town, like many other Southern towns, was a reflection of America's lack of empathy for its colored citizenry. There was an absence of concern for the safety of African-Americans; in fact, many of the white officers across America were perpetrators of terrorism against blacks. This caused many blacks, especially in rural southern towns, to question where their protection would come

from. The same men who vowed to protect and serve were responsible for the maltreatment of blacks and never held accountable.

Once Williams drove his car to his destination he showed the chief of police the damage done to his vehicle. After laughing in Williams's face, the chief told him "I don't see anything. I don't see anything at all" (Williams 1998, 8). At this point not only did patrolmen not intervene into what could have become a murder, but the chief of police who supposedly holds his officers responsible showed no regard for the well-being of a black man. After Williams went to the Court Solicitor to demand a warrant for the assailant's arrest, the solicitor showed no real attempt in apprehending a white man being accused by a black one. In fact, the solicitor told Williams "if you insist, I'll tell you what you do. You go to his house and take a look at him and if you recognize him, you bring him up here and I'll make out a warrant for him"(Williams 9). Law enforcement in Monroe clearly had no intentions of producing justice for Williams. The instructions given to Williams could have easily led him to another man's property where he would be gunned down and accused of violating another man's property. Williams already understood law enforcement's tactics but continuously made sure he followed proper procedure when it came to the justice system. Williams understood that once they were forced to take matters into their own hands, they could always say they tried to call on the police department, revealing the discrimination of law enforcement.

A couple of days after Williams was rear-ended; he continued to join the others in the picket line at the swimming pool. A couple of men had been following Williams from his home to the protest. One day, another car struck Williams and both cars went into a

ditch. There was a large crowd of whites standing adjacent to the picketers and once they saw the cars veer into the ditch they began to scream, “kill the niggers! Kill the niggers! Pour gasoline on the niggers! Burn the niggers!” (Williams 1998, 10) Supposing Williams had “killed” a white man the crowd figured that this was a green light for a lynching. While the men from the other vehicle began to draw nearer to Williams—one of the white men carrying a baseball bat—they didn’t realize that Williams and his passenger was armed. It did not take long for the men to realize Williams was willing to use his weapon. There were a few police officers that watched the whole ordeal. According to Williams, “when they saw that we were armed and the mob couldn’t take us, two of the policemen started running”(Williams 1998, 10). The fleeing of the police and other whites illustrated how whites in Monroe respected black people when they were armed, even if it was out of fear. Although beneficial for Williams in that instance, this one moment did not overshadow law enforcement’s moral abandonment of the black community.

Once again, the lack of police involvement questions the lack of integrity officers held when dealing with America’s black citizens. The officers saw fit that the hostile mob of whites could determine the consequences for Williams. This was not a new phenomenon. Large crowds of whites have historically terrorized blacks and decided their fate. This crowd mob surrounded Williams assuming they would bring Williams a similar fate, but an individual was apparently met with a blow. Williams then put a gun to his face and told the mob he “didn’t intend on being lynched” (Williams 1998, 10). Through all the commotion there was an older white man in the crowd who frantically

yelled “God damn, God damn, what is this God damn country coming to that the niggers have got guns, the niggers are armed and the police can’t even arrest them” (Williams 1998, 10). Williams reiterated what the Harlem radical, Hubert Harrison, hypothesized nearly fifty years prior when stating, “lynchings and pogroms were indulged in because they cost the aggressors nothing” (Perry 2009, 266). The views of the older white man reflected the long-held white supremacist idea that a black man—in Monroe or elsewhere in the U.S.—should not be allowed to defend himself in the face of white violence. This logic—which has been supported by law enforcement—left black people in America often fending for themselves when in danger. Williams witnessed the hostility of whites and had now seen the hypocrisy of a citizen defending him or herself.

Monroe was a microcosm of America. Institutional racism stifled the progression of black members of the town. Overt racism and intimidation instilled fear among the black community. The lack of protection from law enforcement left many blacks feeling helpless in dangerous situations. The culminations of these instances created lives of constant fear. Black people in southern communities lived in constant worry for their lives, never knowing if an assault was coming their way. Reporting assault or unfair treatment was usually not an option, as it came with a cost. The cost was usually one’s life. Whether that meant physically, socially, or economically, black people had to be cautious when it came to reporting misfortunes to the same people who oppressed them. Understanding that this was their circumstance, black people had to find alternative means to protect themselves, which often resulted in a community of silence.

Robert Williams was attacked in front of authorities and they refused to budge until they realized that he could harm the mob of whites, clearly reflecting America's constant hypocrisy. Being American psychologically persuades members of society to ignore brutality committed against blacks, because it is assumed that they deserved it. This is what makes blacks fighting for liberties and American rights in the United States of America complex. The country was founded on the brutalization of black bodies. America has always thrived on the backs of unprotected blacks. For blacks to be American, all citizens, especially whites, must redefine and reimagine a world where everyone's basic rights are protected. Williams and others in the black community of bearing realized that bearing arms assisted America in reimagining a just and equal country. If it was the irresponsible use of guns against blacks that helped keep blacks subjugated, then it was the gun that had the power to equalize an obvious unequal nation.

Williams's open carrying of firearms caused hysteria in Monroe. During the 1961 swimming pool picket, the tensions surrounding racial relations and bearing arms had already been ignited. After the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling many whites began to retaliate against blacks as a fear tactic. There were especially attacks against black women by white men, while the myth of the scary black male rapists was being purported. Like many black men in the South, Williams had witnessed the abuse of black women by white men throughout his life. Since childhood, he watched as black women were treated with cruelty while black men hung their heads in shame (Tyson 1999, 1). Their shame has roots on the plantation. The reason these men held their heads in shame

is because they feared their retaliation. They understood the limitations of their power.

For so long, and too often, black men held their tongues as black women were degraded.

White men wanted black men to understand that as white men, they had access to black women. Previously being owned by white men, black men and women were continuously involved in situations where their bodies were forced to abide by the law. Sexually, with neither black men nor women owning their bodies, sexual advances were forced and became normal. This created a misguided conception concerning black bodies and sexuality. White men constructed ideas centered on black people and sexuality during American plantation life. Even after slavery, white men continued to sexually prey on black women and men. White men—who were free— were legally given access to black bodies, which constructed sex as a forcible action. This inevitably led to the belief that if black men were freed and regarded as equal citizens then they would in turn rape white women. The sadistic origins from which this logic once came would continue to plague America and cause more arbitrary laws to monitor black behavior, especially involving black women.

Robert Williams realized that the only reliable protection black women would ever receive is from black men. In many communities, since racist whites already terrorized black men, women, and children, patriarchs of black families understood their responsibility to attempt to protect their families and communities. Mary Ruth Reid, pregnant and a mother of a six-year-old boy, was almost raped one night in Monroe. The man responsible for this had also beaten Reid and would have continued the abuse if it wasn't for her son who tried his best to defend his mother. The man was also a married

man. The incident eventually led to a trial in which the assailant was being charged with attempted rape. While in court, the prosecutor told the jury to look at the man's wife: "this white woman is the pure flower of life"(Williams 1998, 25). Indicating that white women exemplify womanhood, the prosecutor hoped the jury would believe that the assailant was incapable of raping a black woman. Not only is this absurdly false, but it reinforces the idea that black sexual behavior is constructed by those other than black people. The defense attorney continued to spew irrational statements to persuade the jury. One of those statements included, "do you think this man would have left his pure flow for that?"(Williams 1998, 25) Once more the defense attorney was insinuating that the black woman is subhuman and does not reflect true womanhood. He also is insisting that black women cannot be desired in a respectable way. Already blatantly disrespecting the victim, the attorney finished his comments to the jury by saying "it's just a matter of whether or not you're going to believe this woman or this white man", and that "he was just drinking and having a little fun" (Williams 1998, 25). He was acquitted.

Oftentimes, white men assaulted black women to assert their manhood. In Winston Salem, NC, a white man stabbed a black man to death after the black man asked a white woman for a cigarette light. This murder took place in 1959 as Williams understanding of racial violence towards black women was propelled into his newsletter, *The Crusader*. As the push for integration became more apparent to whites, there was more racial violence. Manhood—or what was defined as manhood— could be found at the root of many of violent occurrences. Throughout the first volume of the *Crusader*, Williams delivers jarring statements to many non-violent activists. From this point

forward, he constantly rejected “the emasculated men who preached non-violence while white mobs beat their wives and daughters”(Tyson 1999, 141). He pressed for black men to resist violent racism. While white men also abused white women, they boldly announced it was their natural duty to protect white women from other races of men. While this is extremely toxic, it led to a construction of manhood that America adopted and was left as the blueprint for other men. While white men committed racial terror upon black bodies, white men’s behavior was a reflection of rejecting black manhood. It reveals—based on white construction of manhood—how the emasculation of black men perpetuates white supremacy. It also reflected the paradox that black families had to deal with. There is a history of white men abusing black men’s wives and children, and the continuance of non-violence was not an acceptable resolution. Manhood in America reflected only white men, while depending on the emasculation of black men for white manhood to be legitimate.

While black men felt the need to protect black women, there has always been resistance from black women against white assailants. Timothy Tyson tells how “when Williams and other black veterans organized self-defense networks, he said, black women insisted that the men teach them to shoot”(Tyson 1999, 141). Black women demanded black men allow them to arm themselves as well as expecting black men to protect their families. The many women who played a role in resisting not only learned how to use firearms but were also vital in other roles as well. In addition to learning armed self-defense, they “played crucial roles as gatherers of intelligence, spying on employers who assumed their loyalty or unimportance”(Tyson 1999, 141). Black women

were more than ready to exude their militancy. This propelled even more black men to want to do the same. One of the supporters of armed self-defense was Malcolm X, who “had begun to raise money to buy military carbines, machine guns, and dynamite for the Monroe NAACP” (Tyson 1999, 145). After a series of trials in which white men stood charged of assault and rape but were found not guilty, black women were eager to handle the abuse of black women their own way. Ironically, while Williams asserted self-defense, he also tried to convince many of the men and women to allow the courts to do their jobs. It shows that he had hope in the judicial system, even if it were minimal. As white men were repeatedly acquitted, Williams remembers women saying he “was responsible for this man not being punished” (Tyson 1999, 149). This would reinforce his belief in armed self-defense and the outspoken declaration of it.

Williams garnered support from blacks, especially in the South. As previously discussed, the idea of armed self-defense and resistance existed among African Americans for generations. A black woman wrote to the *Amsterdam News* her support of Robert Williams as well as noting, “If the NAACP men are afraid to do the job, why don’t they move over and let the Negro women do the job”(Tyson 1999, 159). Williams was aware of some criticism he was receiving and his experience in the courtroom prompted him to make comments that would lead to confrontation from numerous groups and individuals. Williams’s statement—after the Mary Ruth Reid trial led to an acquittal—was, “the negro cannot expect justice in the courts. He must convict his attackers on the spot. He must meet violence with violence, lynching with lynching.”(Williams 1998, 26) Following widespread coverage of his comments across

America, Williams clarified that he meant his comments as a self-defensive strategy. Although he and his community's support for armed self-defense was not new, the media reported his comments as black people in Monroe seeking to kill random whites. Not only did the white majority take offence to his comments, but the national NAACP became extremely concerned with how they would be perceived while a chapter president made such a claim. Nicholas Johnson, author of *Negroes and the Gun* explains how Williams's statements were seen as dangerous:

Williams's statement triggered the perennial worry. An organized program of violence risked an overwhelming violent response and promised to alienate essential white allies. It also highlighted the paradox that despite the worry about political violence hurting the broader freedom movement, armed self-defense was a crucial private resource for blacks. Through rhetoric, policy, and practice, emerging leaders and ordinary black folk tried to accommodate these two concerns by maintaining a clear boundary between foolish political violence and righteous self-defense. In the view of some people, Robert Williams crossed the line. (Johnson 2014, 26)

There had been growing discontent from the black community with how black men reacted to racially charged violence. In fact, in the 14th issue of *The Crusader*, Williams stated "*The Crusader* sympathizes with those spineless Negroes who are afraid to be in the same town with a voice that speaks unequivocally for the rights of men" (Williams 1959, 1). Many black women were dissatisfied with non-violence, as well as black men holding various contrasting views on a non-violent movement. In the South, it was understood that there was a history of arming one's self. Black people in the South, largely from rural or working class areas, were gun owners. They also were members of various organizations. In the North, many members associated with the NAACP were of

a different class and many southern blacks saw them as elitist—although many blacks in the south carried the same elitist attitudes. Williams’s poignant response to violence enacted upon blacks made both liberals and conservatives in the movement uncomfortable. Racism, as well as violent acts fueled by racism had become so pervasive that any stance of self-defense from black people appeared too radical. The seemingly natural response for a human who is being attacked is to defend themselves from the attacker. For black people in America, they are not expected to act within the confines of this natural response. They have been expected, especially from white people, to reflect a higher righteousness. Ironically, that same moral compass has been historically absent from the minds of whites.

Robert Williams’s comments were revolutionary for multiple reasons: his public support for armed self-defense was considered taboo by many, moreover, his comments were a stark contrast to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s burgeoning idea of non-violence. While many activists and ordinary people supported Williams and his comments, just as many rejected his views and saw them as counterproductive for black people’s social advancement. Some of his strongest opposition came from within the National NAACP, where he had developed a respectable reputation through the local Monroe chapter.

Following Williams’s comments on armed self-defense, the NAACP quickly responded by reprimanding him. Roy Wilkins, the NAACP national president, called Williams. Wilkins sought confirmation that what reporters said was true. He thought that if Williams truly meant that blacks should “meet violence with violence”, then the NAACP would have to work swiftly to disassociate the organization from Robert

Williams. While Wilkins realized Williams had no intentions on retracting his statement, Williams was preparing to reiterate exactly what he meant by his comments. At a press conference, Williams explained “it is clear there is no Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendment, no court protection of Negroes’ rights here, and Negroes have to defend themselves on the spot when they are attacked by whites” (Tyson 1999, 151). Williams and other local NAACP officials were aware of black people’s anger and frustrations. It was understood that even if Williams was advocating lynching, there were many people who would support it. Williams’s public outcry for self-defense affected the perception of black civil rights activists, which made many blacks cautious of their image.

The civil rights movement was perceived as being founded on non-violent principles. Anything that deviated from that purview was regarded as being counter-productive and ineffective the mainstream. Many blacks adopted this belief as well. Most blacks understood—especially in rural southern areas—that non-violence was only useful when the people who are being pled to are reasonable. That wasn’t the case where many blacks were still being raped, murdered, and abused on a daily basis. Williams’s comments removed him from the status quo within the civil rights movement. He was now seen as an outlier within the NAACP and a deviation in its leadership. Williams would ultimately be suspended for six months from his position (Tyson 1999, 151). While members in the Monroe community did not agree with his suspension, it was understood that “politics” was at the center of the suspension.

Williams did not worry much about the suspension, and felt “ Afro-American struggle was merely a disjointed network of pockets of resistance and the shameful thing

about it was that Negroes were relying upon the white man's inaccurate reports as their sources of information about these isolated struggles"(Williams 1998, 29). He also argued that during an attack on a young black woman in Tallahassee that the young people "would have been justified in defending the girl had they had weapons" (McGuire 2010, 174). Truthfully, many blacks operated within the confines of white liberal perspective because that is where they found "allies" and financial backing. While non-violence is morally sound, using it as a singular approach while bombarded by violent attacks will lead to one's own destruction.

Throughout the first issue of *The Crusader*, Williams reiterated his points on self-defense as well as addressed black people who have touted snobbish and "big shot" ways (Williams 1959, 1). While addressing white supremacy and elitism—both which continue today—he penned the newsletter in a way where its fierce tone captured its readers. Williams seems to have had some resentment towards the national office of the NAACP, and rightfully so. One of his biggest complaints with the national NAACP was Williams and the Monroe Chapter "were unable to secure assistance from them in any of our school integration cases and our sit-in cases"(Williams 1998, 30). The national office largely ignored the Monroe chapter of the NAACP until they felt pressured to reprimand Robert Williams. The relationship between the local Monroe chapter and the national office continued to worsen, but Williams's vision engulfed more than just organizational ideology.

The conflict surrounding Williams and the national office seems to have stemmed from a much larger issue. Many blacks in southern rural areas and northern cities had

differing views on race relations and dealing with them. While the NAACP has historically been helpful, it can be assumed that blacks in rural areas were helpless when it came to their towns receiving assistance from national organizations. Williams's comments on securing assistance reminds us of how rural blacks have been ignored when it comes to them combatting oppression. The NAACP's chapters in rural areas differed from many of those in more urban concentrations. In smaller towns such as Monroe, many NAACP members were of the working class.

Working class black communities seem to have had different relationships with white supremacy than their middle-class counterparts. The middle-class community seemingly had more to lose when dismantling white supremacy because many of the community members have found a way to work within that system. The working-class community—especially in rural areas—has less of an attachment to white communities and more likely to see armed self-defense as a rational component towards liberation. One could speculate that Williams found most of his support within the latter group of individuals. Especially since, according to Cobb, its members comprised of “a working class composition and a leadership that was not middle class” (Cobb 2014, 110).

With this same group of community members, Williams helped create a rifle club through the National Rifle Association (Williams 1998, 60). Multiple white rifle clubs existed in Monroe. Armed training in an organizational structure was foreign to most black communities. Robert Williams's establishment of a structure for armed resistance laid a new front for militant liberation. Black people defending themselves were already a form of radical resistance in America. Black people defending themselves with guns—the

weapon that kept them in bondage—embodies a major form of liberation. Newspapers and other media sources began to discredit black armed self-defense. The reports reflect white communities' inability to understand why blacks should defend themselves with arms. Williams emphasized this point by saying, "when the Negroes of Monroe, outnumbered and out armed, gallantly rose to defend their homes, their families and their persons, their efforts at self-defense were scorned by the press and they were smeared with the insinuation that their weapons were furnished by some insidious Communist conspiracy" (Williams 1998, 62). Williams alluded to something far more complex than the United States relationship with communism. Whites in America couldn't comprehend blacks wanting to arm themselves in an organized fashion on their own. When blacks organized to defend themselves, it was assumed that there was another group's involvement. Insinuating that blacks cannot organize on their own reveals the naiveté surrounding blacks suffering at the hands of whites in 20th century America.

A prime example of America's disregard and minimization of black discontent is when white community members of Monroe responded to Williams's organizing by saying his father "never gave us any trouble" (Tyson 1999, 270). Since whites perceived blacks fighting for justice as "starting trouble", then murder or abuse against blacks was warranted in the minds of white racists. The idea of blacks "starting trouble" led to a reactionary form of protection, even if it only was a reaction to an idea that was constructed in their minds. It also expounds on the belief that blacks have to be degraded for whites to be successful and feel safe. White Americans distrust of blacks are rooted in the racially charged tragedies that have been committed by whites against blacks for

centuries. Whites continued to see resistance or the thought of resistance as “trouble”.

This is why Robert Williams caused so much commotion throughout the South. Williams not only showed he and others advocated armed self-defense; he also verbally declared the use of them for protection, which removed any assumptions about his intentions.

In 1961, the Freedom Rides were beginning to expand across the South. A interracial group of young college-aged students—eager to make a change in the civil rights movement—rode buses into segregated areas to confront Jim Crow of the destinations was Monroe, North Carolina. Robert Williams felt like the Freedom Riders “reflected an attitude of certain Negro leaders who said that I had mishandled the situation and that they would show us how to get victory without violence” (Williams 1998, 41). While Williams did not necessarily agree with their approach, he was cooperative as well as supportive. He even told the freedom riders, “if they could show me any gains won from the racists by non-violent methods, I too would become a pacifist” (Williams 1998, 41).

Williams understood white racists in Monroe better than the out-of-town protesters. He had grown up there and witnessed the numerous times black people were assaulted by their white counterparts. There had been an attempt to take his life and he was not willing to erase his memory in hopes for racial equality. The students were not oblivious to racial hatred but also were not residents of the area; therefore, lacked an understanding of the local situation. The Freedom Riders in Monroe took the non-violent oath. Robert Williams held on to his pragmatic beliefs and did not take the oath. He did stay true to his word and assisted in any way that he could, and even allowed a student to

stay at his home (Tyson 1999, 266). As the students began to get involved with the picket line that already started in Monroe, they assumed the police officers would be more receptive to them than activists advocating armed resistance.

On the third day students began to get spat on and beaten. As the days progressed the attacks had gotten worse and Williams began to notice police officers reactions to protest. He recognized the white community and police officers were more susceptible to assaulting protesters when they knew there was no consequence for their actions. Prior to the freedom riders joining they “hadn’t had any victims of the type of violence they were beginning to experience because we had shown a willingness to fight” (Williams 1998, 43). Williams’s belief in self-defense became more and more practical as protestors were attacked and no arrests were made. Students traveling to Monroe knew they were practicing a method Williams had already initiated, but they wanted to show the results of their commitment to non-violence.

Williams, although perceived as a staunch militant, had already tried the methods of his civil rights counterparts. He did not believe there was one way to progression for black people. He believed there should be flexibility. When a black man or woman is being attacked and no one is held accountable for it then there should be a different approach taken. Blacks being pacifist made whites and some of black leadership comfortable. Some black people who lived in southern areas and understood the extent of violence carried out by whites on an every day basis knew there was only one thing that they respected. While most were worried the use of a gun would lead to a battle resulting

in one's own mortality, some understood the threat of its use kept harm at a distance. This is the point Williams tried to stress to the Freedom Riders.

The Freedom Riders were in Monroe to push for racial equality to Monroe, but also “to affect a reconciliation between supporters and opponents of NAACP leader Robert Williams” (Tyson 1999, 265). The Freedom Riders involvement seems to have been strategically used by the NAACP's leadership to undermine Williams. The actions of the Freedom Riders also minimalized the idea of self-defense. Self-defense is a branch on the tree of self-determination. To regard self-defense as violent, while finding the use of a mixed racial group of students as more efficient, it declares that black people cannot achieve liberation on their own. This was Williams's issue with many prominent civil rights leaders. He felt they were detached from the masses of blacks in the South.

Williams was not alone in his beliefs and found support from many of his peers whether it was publically or privately. Williams's felt like he was more acquainted with the racist in Monroe and “also saw it as an opportunity to show that what King and them were preaching was bullshit” (Tyson 1999, 266). The freedom riders quickly saw that Williams was warm and welcoming. They also saw how he would not be persuaded to follow any other teachings that would relieve him of his armed self-defense approach. Although Williams would not adhere to the nonviolent oath, he was closely tied to the Monroe Nonviolent Action Committee—an organization in Monroe that aligned philosophically with the Freedom Riders.

While there were racial clashes throughout the protest, the Freedom Riders began to be victims of rising hostility from whites. According to Tyson, at one point a black

man “stepped out onto the porch of a nearby house with a rifle and fired several shots into the air, sending the whites fleeing back toward downtown” (Tyson 1999, 271). The violence directed towards the protesters calmed down. It was a testament to Williams’s statements about armed self-defense. The racist whites wanted to harm the students and simply did not respect them and their nonviolent tactics. They did respect the gun. It was evident in their abandonment from the scene of the protest. They did not value lives of blacks but valued their own lives enough to no longer want to feel threatened.

Unfortunately, a young black boy was beaten not far from the protest. It was said that the white men who attacked him thought he was the son of Robert Williams. Aiming for this never to occur to him or his family, Williams believed in arming himself for self-defense. Armed self-defense had to be taken seriously by blacks, especially as an oppressed group of people in America

During the Freedom Riders protest, a white mob gathered and tried to attack some of the protesters. James Forman, known for his involvement with SNCC, was one of the students to be badly beaten the day of the protest (Tyson 1999, 273). Protesters began to run to escape what sounded like gunfire. They noticed “dozens of other small fights in progress at the time the shooting occurred, involving both white and colored people” (Tyson 1999, 274). Those small fights eventually turned into shootouts involving blacks, whites, and law enforcement. The plan to come to Monroe and instill non-violent practices as progressive quickly crumbled before the protester’s eyes. They were now witnessing violence that many blacks in the community had witnessed for numerous years. It was no coincidence blacks targeted during the protest were non-violent

protesters. Williams and his peers had never endured such violence while they were picketing and protesting. Whites in the Monroe community understand that Williams and others in the Monroe NAACP branch were willing to protect themselves. If Dr. King and others in leadership sought to prove a point to Williams and his followers, then it was being countered. The idea of being a pacifist had seemed too limiting as the sole tactic in the Freedom Struggle. When they were armed, they were not harmed. When they were unarmed, they were beaten.

Many of the protesters were arrested. The police knew they were innocent. While some received medical care Williams was contacted and notified about the situation surrounding the student's arrest (Williams 1998, 47). Simultaneously, whites in town were infuriated. Williams saw a car passing through the neighborhood he had noticed the day before. He remembered a banner flying on the car with a disturbing message: "open season on the coons" (Williams 1998, 48). He recognized the man in the vehicle, as well as his wife—unclear why a man would bring a woman into that type of situation. Blacks were furious when they saw the car and immediately blocked the car off, wanting to take their frustrations out on the driver and passenger. The passengers of the vehicle were near by white residents Charles Bruce Stegall and his wife Mabel Stegall (Tyson 1999, 278).

After Williams had walked out to the car, the driver and passenger followed him into his house while "all these people were still screaming that they should be killed" (Williams 1998, 49). In fact, the only reason the two walked into Williams's home is because "when someone called Williams back into the house, the anxious Stegalls followed him" (Tyson 1999, 279). Due to police being notified about the Stegalls,

“Williams received telephone reports from black residents of Union County who had seen highway patrol, Ku Klux Klan, or National Guard caravans pouring into Monroe” (Tyson 1999, 281). Not long afterwards Williams would flee Monroe, NC, understanding the dangers surrounding his involvement there. Consequently, the FBI had determined Williams was wanted: charged with kidnapping for the couple he had just saved (Tyson 1999, 283).

Williams’s act of concern for the white couple he felt was in danger exemplifies his character. It also reveals his assumption there could have been a level of innocence with the couple. Williams came to aid them in their time of need and they in turn accused him of kidnapping them. From false accusations to convicting someone black was not unheard of throughout America’s court system. Williams’s understood that if he were tried, he would indeed be convicted. This ultimately led to his exile. He also knew that law enforcement wouldn’t mind killing him: “If I had not been able to escape from the United States I would have never have gotten to a trail, let alone a fair trial”(Williams 1998, 56).

Williams’s departure did not diminish his role within the civil rights movement. In fact, he was still admired by many blacks who believed they should arm themselves for their own protection. His belief in flexibility within the freedom struggle is what made him dangerous. He was not a reflection of a docile black man seeking to make whites comfortable. In fact, he understood that making them uncomfortable was America’s way towards progression.

Williams was a representation of how America portrays black men who they feel they cannot control. Once he became wanted he was labeled as extremely dangerous and schizophrenic. This reinforced the idea that if anyone saw him, shooting him on sight would be understandable. The irony of his capture is that he never physically harmed anyone, yet the authorities made his detainment top priority. The effort that was put into advertising him as a wanted man cannot be overlooked. There were 250,000 wanted circulars with his face covering the front of them (Williams 1998, 55). The focus on his capture once again reveals America's hypocrisy and non-acceptance of black's humanity. There were not thousands of wanted posters when protesters were beaten and bludgeoned. There were no posters when black men and women were raped and killed. Not only does this reflect a psychological issue, it also reflects a systemic issue. The American system allows white men to assault blacks because it is assumed that blacks deserved it. In fact, *The Robinsonian* in 1957 published an article where Williams voiced concerns about receiving threats of his home eventually being bombed. Because of continuous life threatening situations, Williams and others advocated armed self-defense. Armed self-defense doesn't allow white men to determine whether or not who has the right to live. When black people allowed themselves to be seen as non-violent and unwilling to defend themselves, whites continued to control a narrative that favored black's oppression.

Williams's determination stemmed from the desperation that many of his black peers also felt. There was not only a need for immediate progress, but also protection of human life. The protection of black people was the first step in liberation. While many

white liberals and black civil rights leadership may have misunderstood Williams, he was a reflection of black self-determination and followed within the footsteps of those before him. His belief in resistance resonated with thousands and eventually influenced many who would later form their own organizations. He was admired while in exile. His involvement while away from the United States was a testament to his dedication to being a freedom fighter he was. He was a man dedicated to the freedom of his people, as well as one who had a vision much larger than what many could see in the moment. In a country where media persuaded their audiences to believe in a one-sided approach to civil rights being attained, Williams believed in both non-violence and armed self-defense. Believing that the average black person in America was not docile, he understood the possibility of self-empowerment. Never selfish nor a self-proclaimed leader, Williams place in history is solidified whether he is a popularly noted figure or not. His statements surrounding black people revealed his true intentions: “because the Afro-American is the most exploited, the most oppressed in our society, I believe in working foremost for his liberation” (Williams 1998, 82). He will forever be one of our great heroes fighting for the liberation of our people.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

There is an extensive history of African people resisting oppression and racism in America. The yearning for freedom has led to uprisings on ships, rebellions, protests, and sit-ins. The civil rights movement was part of the centuries-long struggle that black people in America have waged. Robert F. Williams's efforts were a part of resistance to the United States' tradition of white supremacy. He, like his predecessors, envisioned an America in which black people could live in peace. Refusing to live under intimidation and fear, Williams sought to minimize the pain and suffering for black people in America.

Williams was committed to the liberation of black people. His empathy for African people shaped that commitment. He loved all mankind. Since childhood, Williams witnessed the antithesis of what he was reared to understand as the love for humanity. His ideas led to his election as president of the Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the NAACP. In that capacity, Williams organized and strengthened his community. His belief that there should be flexibility in the freedom struggle—including a variety of tactics and strategies—helped create both friends and enemies.

Williams's thoughts on armed self-defense caused controversy in the civil rights movement. He believed that sit-ins, protests, and pickets had their place. He also believed that black men and women should be able to defend themselves. He understood the

possession of firearms would provide an efficient self-defense strategy. Not only did members in.

Monroe's African American communities agree with him, so did many black people across the country. In the South where many blacks already owned guns, Williams's ideas seemed logical. Williams never called for black people to incite violence. He understood that self-defense was a right of all Americans.

The constant assault on blacks, and lack of assailant convictions, led Williams to decide to publically endorse black-armed self-defense. Not only did Williams feel that his peers should let the courts do their jobs, on multiple occasions he trusted that law enforcement and the court systems would be fair in seeking justice for the victims. However, the people whom Williams trusted to carry out justice—individuals in the judicial system and local authorities—were the same people who perpetuated white supremacy. Although Williams initially had a naïve confidence in Monroe's court system, black women persuaded Williams to declare that bearing arms was necessary to attack white supremacy. Williams is included in the African American tradition of resisting by any means necessary.

Williams was well versed in the African American tradition of resistance. His colleagues in the Monroe NAACP were also knowledgeable of the history of black resistance. This allowed Williams's ideas to come to fruition. Opposition he eventually faced came from the national NAACP office. The Monroe chapter was demographically different from many chapters reflecting the national office in New York City. As an organization comprised of working class blacks, many of them were interested in

strengthening their own communities. Many of them also worked amongst each other and had similar sentiments on how racism plagued their existence. Whites had animosity towards black's stance on armed self-defense. Their animosity didn't seem to weigh heavily on their conclusion that armed self-defense was still needed. This is a contrast between northern NAACP chapters that may have been strictly built on integrationist ideology and elitism. In Cobb's words, Williams "accused Wilkins of not being interested in ordinary people" (Cobb 2014, 153). Since white America was beginning to see civil rights activists as believers in non-violence—which racist whites felt was their only option—when Williams declared his support for armed self-defense, its alarm was inevitable.

Williams's ideas on self-determination and integration make him a complex figure within the civil rights movement. Popular perceptions regard most members of the civil rights movement as either integrationists or black separatists. This dichotomy excludes black people in the movement from being seen as possessing a variety of ideologies. Williams wanted to live in a society in which black people could build their own communities and demand respect from white citizens in America. His pragmatic stance on black liberation was neither contradictory nor irrational. He simply wanted black people in America to live in peace and to be treated as equal citizens. Many had sentiments that clashed with Williams. According to a 1969 article published in *The Gastonia Gazette*, Williams was referred to as "a sworn enemy of America—an enemy of the Negro race—an enemy of free men everywhere" (Red Traitor Returns 1969, 4). Understanding that white supremacists in America could not see African Americans as

full citizens, Williams fought for the survival and freedom of his people. Unlike white racists who saw Williams and other blacks as the true threat, there was no history of black community members of Monroe, North Carolina assaulting whites with impunity. The same cannot be said about members of Monroe's white community.

Robert Williams's public outcry of holding white assailants accountable by any means necessary was the most far-reaching tactic heard in the Jim Crow South. His thoughts were based on necessity and morality. For him to believe in a system that he knew was prejudiced reflects his hope in the country that would consider him a wanted man for a crime he did not commit. While he eventually returned to the United States, he also remembered what led to his exile. Thus, he continued to be a freedom fighter. Many organizations such as The Republic of New Afrika and Black Panther Party sought his leadership and wisdom, while also regarding him as one of the fathers of the burgeoning Black Power movement (Tyson 1999, 298). While Williams is honored as part of the long tradition of African resistance in the Americas, he should also be revered as a man who fought for the humanity of all people. Williams's love for his people will forever be admirable. As a man who seems to have only been satisfied by the thought of his people being liberated, his fight will always be remembered as a testament and reflection of the crusade continued.

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