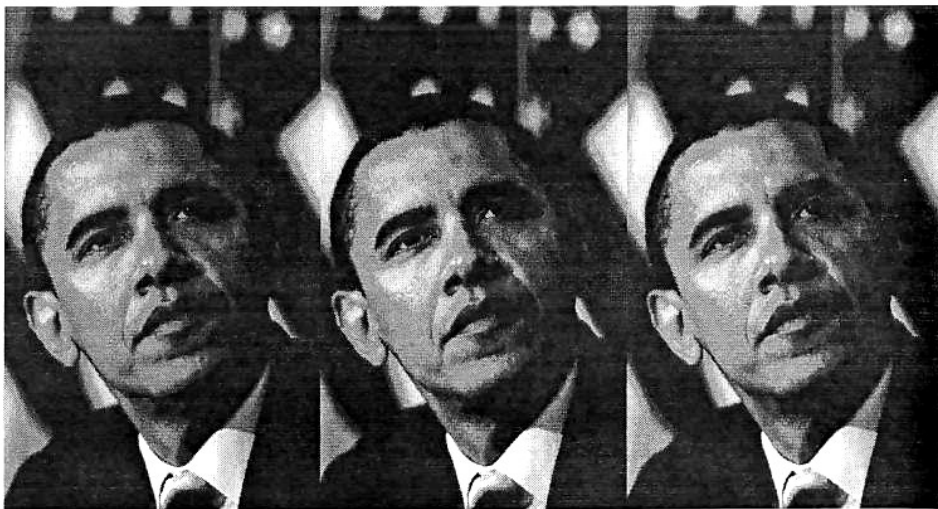


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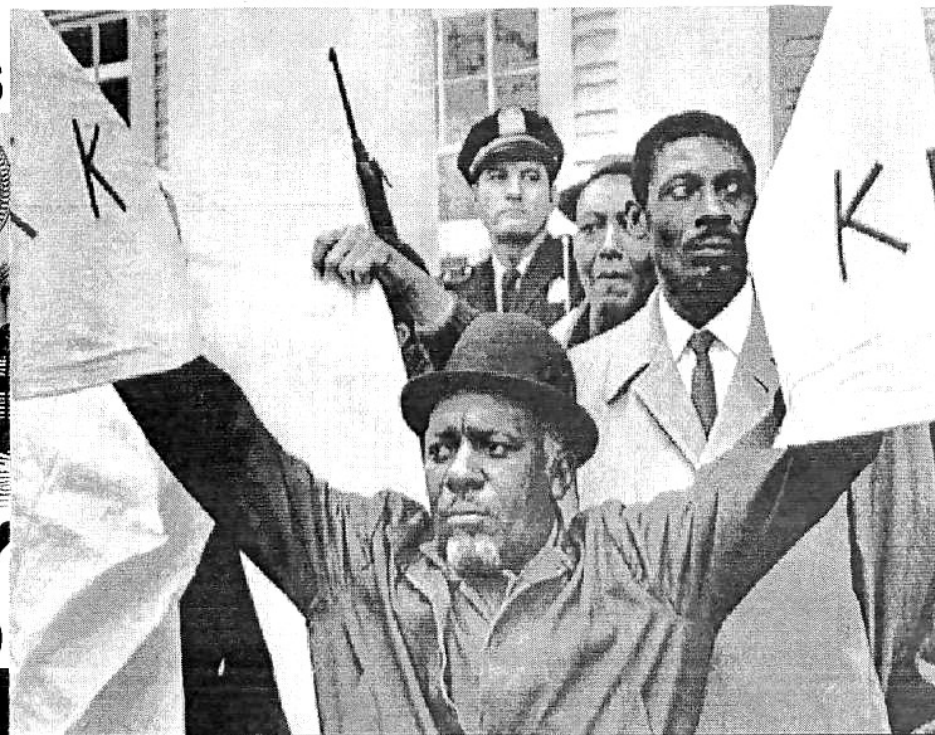
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## The Deacons for Defense

Armed Resistance and the  
Civil Rights Movement



Lance Hill



Bennett was among the skeptics. The dilemma for blacks, according to Bennett, was to oppose power but not appear to be rebelling against the status quo. "The history of the Negro in America," wrote Bennett in 1964, "... has been a quest for a revolt that was not a revolt—a revolt, in other words, that did not seem to the white power structure as a revolt." Martin Luther King had solved the dilemma, Bennett said, by "clothing a resistance movement in the comforting garb of love and forgiveness."

Nonviolence was ultimately a coalition-based legislative strategy cloaked as religion. In their attempt to assuage white fears of black violence, the national organizations took a stand against self-defense that placed them at odds with local movements besieged by police and Klan violence and hobbled by passive stereotypes. By giving the luster of religious precept to a pragmatic stratagem to attract white liberals—white accommodating liberal fears of black violence—the national civil rights leadership took the high moral ground and made their critics look like nihilistic advocates of violence. In truth, defense groups like the Deacons used weapons to avoid violence. And they raised important and legitimate questions about a strategy that pinned its hopes on liberals, organized labor and the federal government. CORE activist Lincoln Lynch summed up the doubts of the dissenters from nonviolence: "History has shown that if you're really depending on the vast majority of whites to help, you're leaning on a very broken reed."

The Deacons came to see nonviolence as a "broken reed" strategy that offered little support or protection. The nonviolent strategy had its strengths and made enormous accomplishments, but they came at a high price for many African American men in the South. This is not to second-guess the choices made by national civil rights organizations, but to understand the limitations of nonviolence and how it shaped the ultimate outcome of the movement—and continues to affect American racial politics to this day.

The escalating attacks by the Ku Klux Klan in 1964 thrust the Deacons for Defense and Justice into the middle of a national debate on nonviolence. More than a defense group, the Deacons grew into a symbolic political organization that played a key role in the battle against nonviolent movement orthodoxy. They represented the black working class's fledgling attempt to create a new black consciousness. They preached self-reliance rather than dependence on the government for rights and freedom; they sought reform by force and coercion rather than by pacifism and moral suasion; and they repudiated the strategy of winning white approbation through suffering. Freedom was to be won through fear and respect, rather than guilt and pity. In short, they believed that to be free blacks had to act free.

Paul Farmer had brought his pistol. The president of the Washington Parish White Citizens Council was standing in the middle of the street along with several other members of the council and the local Ku Klux Klan. It was the autumn of 1966 in the small paper mill town of Bogalusa, Louisiana.

Royan Burris, a black barber and civil rights leader, knew why the Klansmen were there. They were waiting for the doors to open at Bogalusa Junior High. The school had recently been integrated, and white students had been harassing and brutalizing black students with impunity. "They were just stepping on them, and spitting on them and hitting them," recalled Burris, and the black students "wasn't doing anything back." In the past Burris had counseled the black students to remain nonviolent. Now he advised a new approach. "I said anybody hit you, hit back. Anybody step on your feet, step back. Anybody spit on you, spit back."

The young black students heeded Burris's advice. Fights between black and white students erupted at the school throughout the day. Now Paul Farmer and his band of Klansmen had arrived with guns, prepared to intervene. Their presence was no idle threat; whites had murdered two black men in the mill town in the past two years, including a sheriff's deputy.

But Farmer had a problem. Standing in the street, only a few feet from the Klan, was a line of grim, unyielding black men. They were members of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a black self-defense organization that had already engaged the Klan in several shooting skirmishes. The two groups faced off: the Klansmen on one side, the Deacons on the other.

After a few tense moments the police arrived and attempted to defuse the volatile situation. They asked the Deacons to leave first, but the black men refused. Burris recalled the Deacons' terse response to the police request. "We been leaving first all of our lives," said Burris. "This time we not going in peace." Infuriated by the Deacons' defiance, Farmer suddenly pulled his pistol. In a reflex response, one of the Deacons drew his revolver, and in an instant half a dozen pistols were waving menacingly in the air. Surveying the weapons arrayed against them, the Klansmen grudgingly pocketed their own guns and departed. The Deacons for Defense and Justice had faced death and never flinched. "From that day forward," said Burris, "we didn't have too many more problems."

In 1964 a clandestine armed self-defense organization formed in the black community in Jonesboro, Louisiana, with the goal of protecting civil rights activists from the Ku Klux Klan and other racist vigilantes. After several months of relatively secret operations, the group publicly surfaced in February 1965 under the name "Deacons for Defense and Justice." By the end of 1966, the Deacons had grown to twenty-one chapters with several hundred members

concentrated in Louisiana and Mississippi. The Deacons guarded marches, patrolled the black community to ward off night riders, engaged in shoot-outs with Klansmen, and even defied local police in armed confrontations. When the U.S. Justice Department faltered in enforcing the Civil Rights Act, the Deacons' militant politics and armed actions forced a pivotal showdown in Bogalusa between the government and southern segregationists.

Although the Deacons began as a simple self-defense guard to compensate for the lack of police protection, they soon developed into a highly visible political organization with a clear and compelling alternative to the pacifist strategies promoted by national civil rights organizations. They were not the first blacks to practice or advocate armed self-defense. Throughout the civil rights movement, African Americans frequently guarded themselves and their communities against vigilante assaults. But until the Deacons emerged, these armed self-defense efforts were almost always conducted by informal and disconnected covert groups that avoided open confrontations with authority and purposefully eschewed publicity—in part because they feared retaliation and in part because they wanted to maintain the illusion of non-violence in the movement. It was this public image of a nonviolent movement that ensured white liberal support in the North. Civil rights leaders and activists also concealed armed self-defense for the same reasons. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one visitor to Martin Luther King's home was alarmed to find an "arsenal" of weapons and discovered that King himself had requested gun permits for his bodyguards. Yet publicly King adamantly opposed any open, organized armed self-defense activity. Similarly, Sally Befrage, a northern volunteer in the Mississippi movement, deliberately omitted reference to armed self-defense in her memoir *Freedom Summer* (1965). One local black activist in Mississippi had bluntly warned her, "If you write about the guns, we'll kill you." She took his advice.

Invisible to the broader public, clandestine self-defense groups had little effect on the Ku Klux Klan or federal policy in the South. The Deacons, in contrast, consciously built a highly public, regional organization that openly defied local authorities and challenged the Klan—something that neither the Klan nor Washington could ignore. The Deacons boldly flouted the age-old southern code that denied blacks the right of open and collective self-defense, and by doing so they made an implicit claim to social and civil equality. By the summer of 1965 the Deacons for Defense had developed chapters throughout the South and generated considerable national publicity through major news stories in *Life* magazine, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Stories in *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Nation*, and *Business Week* followed in 1966. Influential black publications like *Ebony* carried the Deacons' story into thousands of black households, along with a widely read series of articles that

ever attain power, he would act without restraint or pity to revenge the injustices and brutality. . . . Many white men fear retaliation. The job of the Negro is to show them that they have nothing to fear, that the Negro understands and forgives and is ready to forget the past." To underscore his point, King counseled blacks not to defend themselves against Klan assaults and bombings, but to wear down whites through redemptive suffering: "Bomb our homes and threaten our children; send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities and drag us out on some wayside road, beating us half dead, and we will still love you. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer." If the Klan bombed one home, King urged blacks to submit themselves by the hundreds to more bombings until the terrorists, "forced to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood of his brother . . . will call an end to his self-defeating massacre."

Sadly, that day of penitence never came for the inveterate racists. But King's early pronouncements on the importance of nonviolence in maintaining the black/liberal coalition set the course for the national movement in the years that followed. King continued to rely on a strategy that required blacks to suffer white violence to win liberal sympathy. During the 1965 Selma campaign King said that the movement was forcing its "oppressor to commit brutality openly—in the light of day—with the rest of the world looking on" and that white violence in Selma would lead "Americans of conscience in the name of decency [to] demand federal intervention and legislation." The movement could not afford to alienate whites. "We can't win our struggle with nonviolence and . . . cloak it under the name of defensive violence," King said in criticizing the Deacons. "The Negro must have allies to win his struggle for equality, and our allies will not surround a violent movement." Using force against the Klan "would only alienate our allies and lose sympathy for our cause."

The position of a civil rights organization on armed self-defense became the litmus test for white liberal support. For an organization to embrace collective self-defense—a right that was taken for granted by whites—was to risk losing critically needed liberal funds and jeopardize the tenuous coalition with northern whites. Not surprisingly, the task of moral suasion ultimately determined the overarching strategy of the national civil rights movement. Major strategic initiatives were measured against the ability to win or retain white northern allies. It was a strategy that had its detractors in the African American community from the beginning. In the 1930s black moderates and conservatives first trumpeted Gandhian nonviolence in an effort to undermine the considerable appeal of Marxism among young blacks. In the 1960s many critics suspected that the partisans of non-violence once again had ulterior motives: that the exotic philosophical import from the East was merely a method of candy-coating the black revolution to make it palatable to white liberals. Noted black writer Lerone



exclusively to the North for his moral appeals. This strategic course placed white liberals and armed self-defense at the center of a conflict that would deeply affect the evolution of the Deacons for Defense.

From the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, opposition to black armed self-defense was an article of faith for national organizations, including King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the NAACP, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—though SNCC and CORE moderated their official positions near the end of the movement. By opposing armed self-defense, the national civil rights organizations often placed themselves on a collision course with local movements. There were significant differences between the goals and strategies of national and local organizations and campaigns. Locally controlled movements frequently focused on immediate efforts to gain power over segregation, economic needs, and government services. And unrelenting police and vigilante terror compelled local movements to give substantial time and resources to counter violence and intimidation.

In contrast, the national organizations were guided by the thinking that racial inequality—social, economic, and political—could be remedied only by national legislation that removed the civil barriers of segregation and discrimination. This civil rights legislation would be won by coalescing with northern liberals and applying pressure on Congress and the president. White liberals became an indispensable ally for the national civil rights organizations—for legislative reform as well as movement funding. King held to his belief that northern white liberals (and, to some degree, trade union leaders) could be morally persuaded to support the civil rights movement. Toward this end, he sought to gain their sympathy by employing tactics that provoked and exposed the raw white violence that lay under the surface of southern life. The strategy wielded both coercion and moral suasion: coercion against southern whites to create the circumstances for moral suasion in the North.

But winning the sympathy of whites unavoidably meant appeasing white fears of black violence. In the 1950s many northern whites retained old stereotypes of blacks as violent, vengeful, and impulsive. They believed that blacks lacked internal psychological constraints and self-discipline, and that they were incapable of forgiveness and generosity. King was acutely aware of these white fears of violence, and in his first and most important book, *Stride toward Freedom*, published in 1958, he adamantly argued that the civil rights movement had to adopt nonviolence if it wanted to win over northern whites. "Only through a nonviolent approach can the fears of the white community be mitigated," argued King. "A guilt-ridden white minority lives in fear that if the Negro should

appeared in *Jet* magazine—the premier weekly for the African American working class. Within a few months of their birth, the Deacons had become the talk of the movement and folk heroes to legions of African Americans in the Deep South. The publicity propelled the Deacons into the center of a national debate on the effectiveness of nonviolent direct action, and very soon they were at loggerheads with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the mainstream nonviolent civil rights organizations.

Not alone in their disenchantment with passive resistance, the Deacons reflected a growing disillusionment of working-class blacks with the pacifistic, legalistic, and legislative strategies proffered by national organizations. Many African Americans, men in particular, refused to participate in nonviolent protests because they believed that passive resistance to white violence simply reproduced the same degrading rituals of domination and submission that suffused the master/slave relationship. Moreover, many African Americans regarded passive resistance and love for one's oppressor as dubious antidotes for immobilizing fear and resignation. The fissure between civil rights leaders and their rank and file loomed large: by the summer of 1963 a Louis Harris poll showed that 22 percent of black respondents said that they thought they would have to resort to violence to win their rights—five times the percentage of black leaders polled. Moreover, a majority of those surveyed believed that blacks would win in this violent show-down with whites.

The Deacons were a unique phenomenon among civil rights groups—the only independent working-class-controlled organization with national aspirations to emerge during the civil rights movement in the Deep South and the only indigenous African American organization in the South to pose a visible challenge to Martin Luther King and the nonviolent movement orthodoxy. The Deacons were not the first organization to publicly defy the strictures of nonviolence—Robert F. Williams had pioneered the strategy several years earlier in Monroe, North Carolina, when he converted a local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter into a redoubt for armed self-defense. But when the national NAACP drummed Williams out of the organization—with the help of Martin Luther King—he was left without an organizing framework. A riot in Monroe in 1961 caused Williams to flee to Cuba and ended his organizing days inside the United States. The Deacons took a different tact: they formed their own organization outside the mainstream nonviolent groups and mounted a vigorous campaign to expand it throughout the South.

Reflecting class tensions within the African American community, the Deacons spearheaded a working-class revolt against the entrenched black middle-

class leadership and its nonviolent reform ideology. In small towns throughout Louisiana, the Deacons assailed the traditional NAACP leaders, a social stratum forged in the old economic order of agricultural dependency and habituated to the politics of accommodation and tactical legalism. They were emblematic of the newly industrialized southern economy that had called into existence a black working class that was no longer the captive of sharecropper servitude. Their political strategy was confrontational, disdainful of nonviolence, and independent of white liberal control.

The Deacons were born in response to two significant developments in 1964: the emergence of a well-organized racist militia—the Ku Klux Klan—and the federal government's appalling failure to enforce the Civil Rights Act and uphold basic constitutional rights and liberties in the South. The Klan's resurgence in 1964 was a direct result of the failure of the Citizens Councils of America. Beginning with the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation decision, the Citizens Councils, dominated by respectable white civic and business leaders, led the opposition to integration efforts across the South. The Councils preferred legal and legislative strategies to violence and terror. But by the 1960s many ardent segregationists regarded the Councils' law-abiding and electoral strategy as an ignominious defeat; the Councils had failed to hold the line against the Yankee invaders.

By 1964 the deteriorating position of the Councils and other old-line segregationists, coupled with the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, sparked a spectacular growth of Klan organizations that advocated terrorist violence and direct action to thwart enforcement of the new law. In towns with large black working-class communities—independent of the old agricultural elite—terrorist violence replaced economic threats as the principal means of social control over blacks. Throughout slavery and Jim Crow, violence had been a major coercive instrument for maintaining white supremacy, and there was little reason to expect that African Americans could successfully avail themselves of the new civil rights laws as long as white violence went unchecked.

The rise of white supremacist violence in response to desegregation made armed self-defense a paramount goal for many local black organizing efforts. Beginning in 1960, the Deep South states blatantly ignored federal authority and openly flouted the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Civil rights activists were routinely beaten and illegally imprisoned with impunity. The First Amendment right of free expression disappeared into the smoke of burning crosses. By 1965 the Ku Klux Klan had, through a well-organized terrorist war, carved out a virtual "Klan nation" in southwestern Mississippi and neighboring southeastern Louisiana—often with the complicity of state and local law enforcement agencies. Within this territory a highly organized and well-disciplined Klan

organization fought a successful guerrilla war to defend white caste privilege. The Klan governed the territory on all matters of race. They mobilized thousands of supporters, conducted scores of successful boycotts, published their own newspapers, and staged coups against recalcitrant local governments. It was manifest that there would be no racial progress in this region unless African Americans could devise a stratagem to break the back of white terror.

A full year after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Klan's terror campaign had succeeded in preventing enforcement of the law in the Deep South, and most small communities remained rigidly segregated in all public accommodations. President Lyndon Johnson, fearing a political backlash in the South, had avoided a showdown with southern law enforcement and the Klan. "Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words," said Thomas Hobbes, "and of no strength to compel a man at all." The Sword of the Covenant was nowhere to be found in the Deep South. And so the final act of the civil rights movement had been written, complete with a cast of menacing night riders, derelict sheriffs, dawdling federal authorities, and vulnerable African Americans. The fatal limits of nonviolence would soon become clear.

Nonviolence is at the center of the Deacons' story. Much of the popular history of the civil rights era rests on the myth of nonviolence: the perception that the movement achieved its goals through nonviolent direct action. The myth posits that racial inequality was dismantled by a nonviolent movement that awakened the moral conscience of white America. In this narrative Martin Luther King Jr. serves as the "moral metaphor" of the age while black militants—advocates of racial pride and coercive force—are dismissed as ineffective rebels who alienated whites with Black Power rhetoric and violence.

Recent accounts take issue with the idea that the movement relied on moral suasion, instead arguing that King and other civil rights leaders never placed much stock in Mohandas Gandhi's theory of redemptive suffering—the idea that if one suffered racist violence through nonviolent resistance, one could eventually change the hearts and minds of racists. These narratives argue that, even if King began his career believing that black suffering would awaken a sense of "moral shame" in white southern racists, he quickly came to terms with the political limitations of nonviolence and abandoned the strategy. The idealistic pacifist became a hard-nosed pragmatist and turned to a strategy that combined nonviolent tactics with direct action protest—winning reforms through coercion rather than persuasion.

The truth is that King never abandoned his overriding strategy of moral suasion; he did, however, change his target audience. By 1963 King had given up any hope of appealing to the conscience of the white South and instead turned