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.

Royce 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 "weren'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 street fights. 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 reflexive response, one of the Deacons drew his revolver and began firing. In an instant a dozen pistol shots were ringing 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 racist 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 violent 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. This was the 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 Jr.’s home was amazed 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 Bell, 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.

Visible 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 visible, 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 seaside 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 1960s 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 nonviolence once again had ulterior motives: that the exotic philosophical import from the East was merely a method of decency-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 critical 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, legislative, 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 tension 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 showdown 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 stricture of nonviolence—Robert F. Williams had pioneered the strategy several years earlier in Monroe, North Carolina, where 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 end his organizing days inside the United States. The Deacons took a different tack; 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 dedicated 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 apalling failure to enforce the Civil Rights Act and uphold basic
constitutional rights and liberties in the South. The Klan’s resurgence in 1964 was
due to the rise 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
ten 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—indeed 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
virtually “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 strategy 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 inchoate 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