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Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960–1965

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The NAACP was a fully nonviolent organization, and they still stood for that [in 1965]. But they didn't stand in the way of no one else that decided that it took some violence to protect yourself. They didn't stand in the way of this, no way.¹

—James Young, *Secretary of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, Natchez, Mississippi*

Aaron Henry, the president of the Coahoma County Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), owned a gun and openly displayed it after his house in Clarksdale, Mississippi, was fire-bombed in the spring of 1963. He was so disturbed when Chief of Police Ben Collins confiscated his weapon that he complained about it in a letter to the policeman: “I discussed with you the activity of my placing an armed guard outside of my home,” he wrote. “To which we both agreed, as you did not have a policeman available to do private guard duty as you explained. I would like to know why, however; after your knowing that I had employed someone to guard my family and my property, . . . you went out to my home while I was not there, arrested my guard, fined him \$51.00 and took my gun?”²

That Henry was openly talking about employing armed guards to protect his family and house—to a policeman who was a known violator of civil rights, no less—is only one example of how normal it was to own and use weapons for armed self-defense in the Mississippi civil rights movement during the

1960s. NAACP activist E. W. Steptoe, who had organized the Amite County branch in Southwest Mississippi in 1954, also became the subject of police harassment and threats from white neighbors. A civil rights organizer who stayed with him in the early 1960s remembered that “as you went to bed he would open up the night table and there would be a large .45 automatic sitting next to you. Just guns all over the house, under pillows, under chairs. It was just marvelous.”³

Hartman Turnbow was another local civil rights activist who owned an arsenal of weapons. After Turnbow, a farmer in Holmes County, tried to register to vote in the spring of 1963 nightriders threw Molotov cocktails into his home. Turnbow recalled that his wife and daughter ran outside but he did not get out “till I got my rifle, and when I got my rifle, I pushed the safety off, got it into the shootin’ position, and then I run out. The first thing I met was . . . two white fellas. They start to shootin’ at me, and I start to shootin’ at them. So they run off, and then we come back and put the fire out.” The Black community believed that Turnbow had actually shot and killed one of the nightriders, but local authorities claimed that the cause of death was a heart attack.⁴

African American men were not the only people brandishing guns; so did women. Black residents in Holmes County set up nightly patrols to defend their community against nightriders in the summer of 1964. A white civil rights activist who lived with local people reported that the family was up all night. “Mr. on the road patrolling with his new rifle and Mrs. walking from room to room in the house with a shot gun, peering out of every window.” In the bedroom where one of the children was sleeping “was a large shot gun, waiting.” In the city of McComb, NAACP leader C. C. Bryant fired away at nightriders who bombed his house. McComb activist Ora Bryant, the sister-in-law of C. C. Bryant, and her husband, Charlie, were awakened in July 1964 by the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. “Mrs. Bryant grabbed a shotgun and fired at the car just as someone threw a package at the house.” Historian John Dittmer reports, “The subsequent explosion blew out all the front windows. . . . After this episode the Bryants took turns guarding over their house every night.” In the late summer of 1964, after more than a dozen bombings by a revived Ku Klux Klan, Black residents of McComb lighted up isolated neighborhoods with improvised streetlights and posted guards at their homes, businesses, and churches.⁵

Throughout the civil rights movement African Americans protected themselves and their communities against violent attacks of white segregationists. This was part of a long-standing tradition of revolts, armed resistance, and self-defense that developed during slavery and continued after emancipation when

Reconstruction failed to deliver political and social equality for Black Americans. Actual and rhetorical violence was sustained to resist the repression and violence of Jim Crow in the South and protest informal racism and segregation in the urban North in the twentieth century.⁶ While many scholars have successfully uncovered African Americans' use of self-defense and actual and rhetorical violence for earlier periods, armed self-defense within the modern civil rights movement remains something of a neglected subject in the movement's historiography. This might have its roots in the public image of the modern civil rights movement that is still dominated by the ideology of nonviolence.

While the civil rights movement of the 1960s was undeniably characterized by nonviolent protest as a tactic to gain political and social equality, the older tradition of armed self-defense and resistance within Black communities did not disappear. Even Martin Luther King Jr.—the icon of nonviolence—employed armed bodyguards and had guns in his house during the early stages of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956. Glenn Smiley, an organizer of the strictly nonviolent and pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), observed during a house visit that the police did not allow King a weapon permit, but that “the place is an arsenal.” “King sees the inconsistency, but not enough. He believes and yet he doesn't believe. The whole movement is armed in a sense, and this is what I must convince him to see as the greatest evil,” wrote Smiley to a colleague. King argued at the time that his concept of nonviolence allowed for armed self-defense as a last resort, but under the influence of Smiley and other pacifists he came to reject the use of all violence.⁷

Throughout the movement years many civil rights activists considered armed self-defense compatible with nonviolent tactics of protest, and some strictly nonviolent activists and organizations came to accept self-defense as a—necessary—strategy in the late 1960s.⁸ At the same time, civil rights leaders and activists also wanted to mitigate the fears of the white community and establish support from white Northern liberals by stressing—not without effort—the peaceful character of the African American movement and downplaying the willingness of the Black community to use violence.⁹ Sally Belfrage, a northern volunteer in the Mississippi movement, deliberately omitted reference to armed self-defense in her memoir, *Freedom Summer* (1965). According to historian Lance Hill, “One local black activist in Mississippi had bluntly warned her, ‘if you write about the guns, we'll kill you.’” Even though the daily reality of life in the South was far from nonviolent, national civil rights organizations managed to keep Black self-defense out of the national spotlight until the summer of 1965.¹⁰

Over the past decade a growing scholarly interest in armed self-defense during the modern civil rights movement has developed. Historians and researchers have become more aware that nonviolence in the civil rights movement was not normative and that Black violence in the 1960s was part of a tradition of armed resistance. Timothy B. Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (1999) and Lance Hill's *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (2004) have effectively highlighted the importance of armed self-defense within the movement. These books both describe specific examples of civil rights organizing around armed self-defense, but also give a broader framework for the emergence and use of armed self-defense.¹¹

In the article *The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement* (1999), Akinyele Umoja seeks to understand why members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) doubted their nonviolent approach and embraced armed self-defense after 1963, in contrast to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) adherence to nonviolent strategies.¹² It is unfortunate that Umoja leaves the NAACP out of his useful analysis because the NAACP was one of the key organizations in the civil rights struggle in the Deep South. African Americans in Mississippi had been fighting for social, political, and economic justice in covert and open ways since slavery and Reconstruction. The NAACP was virtually the only civil rights organization in the Magnolia state during the late 1940s and the 1950s. It was only with the start of the student sit-in movement in 1960 that outside organizations such as the SNCC and the CORE became involved in Mississippi, and they often relied on longer existing NAACP networks to find their footing in local communities.¹³

The NAACP faced a unique set of challenges in dealing with armed self-defense. Historian Peter F. Lau argues there was never a single NAACP. "Rather, as Charles Houston, the architect of the NAACP's legal strategy put it in 1933, there were many NAACPs. There was the NAACP of the national office that concerned itself 'with matters of national and state importance' and then there was the NAACP of the branches with 'as many local programs as there are local branches.'" These local branches were run by local people, people who dealt with widespread white opposition, from economic pressure to night-riders and lynchings. This world of violence, far removed from the national office in New York, influenced the activism and militancy of NAACP leaders like Aaron Henry, Medgar and Charles Evers, and many lesser known activists. The organizational structure of the NAACP caused conflicts over all kinds of issues, armed self-defense among them.¹⁴

Mississippi was the fiercest defender of white supremacy in the nation. Its violent reputation and the courage of both local people and outside organizers earned the civil rights struggle in the state a legendary status, but the role of the NAACP in this struggle is often defined as marginal. This characterization seems rooted in the dynamic of the movement itself. In the 1960s the big four organizations NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and SCLC were vying for local and national support and funding, and often played up their own role to the expense of other organizations. The commitment of the NAACP's national office to legal and political tactics came under increasing criticism from both members of the NAACP and the civil rights organizations that were committed to direct action. Nevertheless, NAACP leader Roy Wilkins was never averse to direct action—and many NAACP chapters and members were organizing and participating in direct protests—but Wilkins did see it as a useful tactic in combination with legal challenges. According to Gilbert Jonas, in his recent work on the NAACP, the white press seemed to repeat over and over again that the NAACP was bourgeois and moderate, an easy contrast to “revolutionary” SNCC, CORE, and SCLC. NAACP members were highly frustrated during the 1960s that the press seemed to ignore their role in local direct action campaigns like sit-ins and boycotts.¹⁵

Recently historians seem more interested in rehabilitating the role of the NAACP in the civil rights struggle. In *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (1995), Adam Fairclough argues that the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement has neglected the role of the NAACP by placing too much emphasis upon Martin Luther King Jr., the importance of the black church, and organizations focusing on direct action, like SNCC, CORE, and SCLC. According to Fairclough, “In Louisiana (and I suspect that the same was true in South Carolina and several other states) the NAACP provided the backbone of the civil rights struggle. It furnished continuity from the 1940s through the 1970s.” This essay aims to build on and contribute to existing research on the grassroots civil rights struggle in Mississippi, the reassessment of the role of the NAACP, and the role of self-defense in this struggle.¹⁶

In what follows, I focus on how local branches of the NAACP in Mississippi used a combination of nonviolent protest, economic pressure, radical speech, and armed self-defense to further their political goals and defend their communities during the height of the modern civil rights movement, between 1960 and 1965. Two different towns, Clarksdale in the Delta in the Northwest and Natchez in the Southwest, and two different NAACP branches receive detailed attention. I show that the emergence and usage of informal and formal forms

of armed self-defense in these towns was not just a question of violent or non-violent ideology within the civil rights movement, and that self-defense was not embraced only by organizations like SNCC or CORE. Ultimately the feasibility of armed self-defense was related to economic, political, social, and personal factors in local communities, and its use was also considered or employed by NAACP chapters. By demonstrating this, I hope to counter the portrayal of the NAACP as a moderate, middle-class, and nonviolent civil rights organization, as well as stress the complex and localized dynamics of the modern civil rights movement.¹⁷

Part 1: The Clarksdale Freedom Movement: “If this takes Forever and a Day”

1.1. Structures of repression and resistance

Famous blues musicians John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters both grew up on plantations in the Delta, outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi. The Delta makes up the northwestern quarter of the state, bordered on the west by the river that gives the state its name and the Delta its rich soil. The toil and sweat of Black sharecroppers and day laborers in the cotton fields shaped the life and the music of African Americans in the region, but over the course of the twentieth century the rule of “King Cotton” gradually weakened. The Great Depression, the collapse of the international cotton market, and mechanization formed the push factors that created migration to the North and to Southern urban areas. In the 1960s the cotton economy that had long dominated the Delta was so thoroughly mechanized that modernized plantations needed only a fifth of their former work force. This growing separation of African Americans from the land caused important shifts in the political, economic, and racial structures of the state. The Great Migration to the North and West of the country had started with World War I and intensified with the growing labor needs during World War II. During the 1940s about 1.6 million Blacks left the South, followed by almost 1.5 million during the 1950s.¹⁸

The collapse of the cotton economy caused some significant cracks in the system of debt bondage that made Blacks so vulnerable to economic and violent sanctions. Grinding poverty and time demanding agricultural work had long limited time and income available for Black organizing, and a scattered pattern of rural residence had made it difficult for people to communicate. While this situation remained in place in many locations, the virulence of white control efforts lessened slowly after 1930, and the number of lynchings in

Mississippi declined. Increased urbanization in the urban South also provided African Americans with a little more financial independence and made it somewhat easier to hide from violence. According to McAdam, the demographic transformation of the South set in motion by the collapse of the cotton economy created a growing class of urban Black residents possessed of personal resources traditionally associated with organizational activity in the mid 1950s.¹⁹ At the same time Black Mississippians became more determined to fight against white domination. Forces from outside Mississippi—World War II, migration networks to the North and West, and the GI Bill—shaped the African American experience in the 1940s and extended civil rights agitation. During the 1940s and 1950s, the NAACP managed to create a viable base in the state. Nevertheless, the old mechanisms of social control were still partly in place in Mississippi during the 1960s and would still be of great relevance during the modern civil rights struggle.

“Most of the economy of Clarksdale and Coahoma County is built around agriculture with many Negroes humbly abiding on plantations,” local NAACP officials wrote in a report about their branch in 1963. “Presently seventy-five to ninety per cent of the welfare cases, in Clarksdale, involve Negroes. Many rigidly deprived Negroes work on the plantations from eight to ten hours per day for a rate of thirty cents per hour. Most of the housing for Negroes is rental housing by White real estate companies and individuals. . . . If such were not the case eighty-five to ninety percent of the homes occupied by Negroes would be condemned for human habitation.” Clarksdale was one of the bigger towns in the Delta, with a population of between 21,000 and 22,000 in the 1960s. Sources differ on exactly how many of these residents were African American, but the more conservative reports state that Clarksdale was at least 50 percent Black and that Coahoma County was at least 68 percent Black.²⁰

Coahoma County’s economic and demographic structures shaped civil rights activity and armed self-defense in the region. Since the majority of African Americans in the Delta remained sharecroppers, field laborers, or domestic workers during the 1960s, their economic security often depended on just one white man or family. This dependency limited their personal freedom and personal choices severely, and it was this dependency that gave white supremacists the feeling that racial suppression would stay firmly in place. Employers frequently chased African Americans off the land or fired them when word got out that somebody was trying to register to vote or organizing others to do so. This is not to say that African Americans in other parts of Mississippi were not dependent on the white power structure, but the level of the dependency in the Delta was higher than in most parts of the state. Charles

Payne explains, “As oppressed as Blacks were in the hill counties, some of the jobs available to Black men there—woodcutting, lumber hauling, running small farms—offered a degree of independence, allowed for some personal initiative, and offered a better chance of bringing in some reward for one’s labor.”²¹

Akinyele Umoja describes how the economic structure of the community influenced patterns of armed self-defense in Black communities. “There were always Black people who defied the customs of segregation. . . . This is true particularly from those Blacks who could muster enough resources . . . to live a more autonomous existence than their brothers and sisters sharecropping on the plantations.” Umoja explains how these defiant community members were seen as “Bad Negroes” who often became folk heroes in their communities. “In rural areas ‘Bad Negroes’ could probably be found among those Blacks who owned enough land to survive and support their families . . . often weapons were needed to back up their defiant stance.”²²

Economic structures also influenced the patterns of repression within white communities, which in turn would influence Black activism. Historian Lance Hill argues that in places where African Americans could be sufficiently intimidated with economic threats white supremacists were less likely to use violence. In these areas the Citizens’ Council—formed in Mississippi in 1954 to fight the implementation of school desegregation and maintain white supremacy—projected a “respectable” middle-class image and did not publicly advocate violence. But in areas where African Americans were relatively free from economic coercion Klan activity seemed more frequent. As Hill explains, “In contrast to black sharecroppers, whites could not intimidate unionized black industrial workers by threatening to deprive them of income and shelter. White elites and competing white workers were forced to turn to terrorist violence to discipline the black working class.”²³

1.2. Aaron Henry and the origins of the Clarksdale Freedom Movement

Like so many postwar civil rights activists, Aaron Henry was a veteran of World War II. Using his GI Bill he studied pharmacy in New Orleans and managed to buy his own drugstore in Clarksdale in the early 1950s. Together with several high-school teachers, Henry organized a local chapter of the NAACP in 1952. Henry became one of the “young Turks” in the civil rights movement, challenging both the older and more cautious leaders in the NAACP and Mississippi segregationists. Even so, historian Charles Payne concludes he did not suffer

reprisals “as severe as one might have expected.” According to Henry the formation of the NAACP chapter in Clarksdale drew very little white reaction. He attributed this to the confidence of white residents that the system was so entrenched that nothing could change it. Payne gives a second explanation: “Henry was a particularly keen student of the Ways of White Folks. . . . He knew just how far he could push, when to back off, when to start pushing again.” Henry even opened his drugstore in partnership with a white man, a business relationship that seemed to work fine over the years. Characteristic of Henry’s mediating stance towards the white community was the thank-you letter he wrote to the registrar when he finally managed to register to vote—after trying four times.²⁴

Voter registration was one of the key issues that Henry and other civil rights activists pushed for in the 1950s, but progress was painstakingly slow. When Henry led 400 Black residents to request the desegregation of the local schools after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, he found he could no longer borrow money from white friends, and he started to receive threats on his life. As in the rest of the state, people who had signed the Clarksdale petition were quickly hit with a variety of reprisals and withdrew their names from the list. Nevertheless, the Coahoma County NAACP branch was slowly growing, and Henry became an increasingly important figure in the statewide NAACP. In 1954 he was elected state secretary, by 1955 he was state vice-president, and in 1960 he became president of the Mississippi state NAACP—to the delight of his friend Medgar Evers, who was the field secretary in the state. In his first speech after being elected state president Henry declared, “Our actions will probably result in many of us being guests in the jails of the state. We will make these jails Temples of Freedom.”²⁵

The Black community of Clarksdale began its most successful civil rights campaign in November 1961. “A decree, by the Mayor, issued through the Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce, cancelled invitation to Negro participation in the Nativity Parade for the year of 1961,” wrote the NAACP in its account of the Coahoma movement. “The Negro community was aroused and responded with a boycott against the downtown community holding the business men as well as the civic leaders responsible for this affront.” Withholding trade from local white merchants became a popular method to protest segregation, bad service, and discriminatory hiring practices. As John Dittmer explains, “Unlike signing school petitions, attempting to register to vote, or marching in picket lines, the boycott guaranteed a large degree of anonymity to the participants: the whole idea of the boycott was not to do something.” Best of all, with boycotts the Black community could hit white Mississippians where it hurt most—in the cash register.²⁶

The local NAACP was the center of the Clarksdale movement, holding weekly mass meetings, arranging transportation to other towns to do the necessary shopping, and printing a newsletter for the Black community that urged people to stay out of the stores and informed them about new developments. “The number of Negroes reported seen shopping downtown is getting progressively smaller. Thanks for your cooperation,” said the newsletter in June 1962, while at the same time urging people to stay away from the stores. “It is discouraging to see even a few teenage Negroes downtown. While some excuses can be made for the elderly Negro seen downtown, but for the teenager, your mind should not be conditioned so early to accept the doctrine of white supremacy.” Soon after the start of the boycott the aims of the Black movement became more radical: “Whether the School Bands of Higgins High School and Coahoma Junior College are invited and whether they accept or not to march in the Christmas Parade of 1962 is no presently involved issue. The issues are now *COURTESY AND EMPLOYMENT*,” explained the NAACP newsletter. “The boycott will go on until the downtown merchants treat us courteously, if this takes forever and a day.”²⁷

1.3. Patterns of repression and resistance in Clarksdale

The white community of Clarksdale did not appreciate the heightened civil rights activity of the NAACP branch and its members in the 1960s. The city government categorically refused to meet with an NAACP delegation to discuss the grievances of the Black community, even with the pressure of the boycott. The white community tried to muscle African Americans—who were predominantly dependent on white employers—into breaking ranks. Black boycotters were threatened with the loss of their jobs, welfare benefits, and loans. At the same time, the city stepped up its intimidation efforts and combined economic threats with legalized repression. The town had its own version of legendary Chief of Police “Bull” Connor from Birmingham, Alabama. According to the NAACP “much of the dirty work, in so far as the harassment of Negroes is concerned, hinges around the activity of Clarksdale’s Chief of Police Ben C. Collins—an avowed segregationist who uses his Police authority to suppress and humiliate Negroes.” The white community in Clarksdale had so much economic power over African American residents that it could choose to use a combination of economic threats and legalized repression and rely less on terrorist violence to subjugate the Black community.²⁸

Regardless of police repression—or maybe because of it—Aaron Henry managed to unite the Black community and almost all the local Black advancement groups in the county behind the boycott. According to Dittmer, the Clarksdale movement was unique “in that it combined widespread support from the Black middle class and a high degree of cooperation among competing civil rights organizations.” Aaron Henry’s personality and background played a major role in this. Henry was born and raised in Clarksdale, but his time in the Pacific during World War II and his college years in New Orleans made him worldly. He knew all about poverty from his family’s sharecropping years during his youth, but he had made it into the middle class as a successful local business man. Because he owned his own drugstore his income was relatively independent from the white community, and he knew how to navigate the color line in Clarksdale without getting killed by white folks, while at the same time being radical enough to earn the respect of Black folks. In addition to his work for the local and the state NAACP, Henry was a Mason and a member of the Elks. And, although the national NAACP was fearful of sharing the limelight with other civil rights groups, Henry was an active board member of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and was one of the activists who organized Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in Mississippi. All in all, Henry seems to have been a socially gifted organizer and politician, who managed to garner respect and support from a wide range of people and organizations. His mediating stance towards the white power structure and the strong involvement of the Black middle class in the Clarksdale movement were important in shaping the character of local protest.²⁹

After the start of the boycott in December 1961, one of the first goals of the white power structure in Clarksdale was to break Henry. He was threatened with arrest if he did not stop the boycott. “When I refused, he [County Attorney T. H. Pearson] called the Chief of Police, Mr. Ben Collins, whom he already had waiting and told him, ‘Carry this nigger to jail,’ Henry testified later. During that same day six other important NAACP members were charged with leading an illegal boycott. If the white leaders of Clarksdale thought they would break the movement by incarcerating its most important leaders they made a crucial mistake, because after the arrests and during the court cases the boycott became almost 90 percent effective.³⁰

The Coahoma County NAACP responded to the arrests with an appeal to the Black community to give nonviolent support to Henry and the freedom movement. “The appeals to violence and racial hatred by some of the lawyers

against us should not have the effect of causing us to hate all white people. We must really and truly develop the art of loving the man, yet hating the act of evil that he does," wrote the branch newsletter. Speaking out against the use of violent resistance, the NAACP newsletter said to "pray to God" that the NAACP would never become "A Black Nationalist group . . . engaging in a hate the white men campaign, and resorting to violence to obtain our goal."³¹

Next to the issues of equal employment and courtesy, the Clarksdale freedom movement increasingly focused on voter registration under the umbrella of the COFO.³² The voter registration campaign in Clarksdale managed to get four part-time local organizers on the payroll. With the help of SNCC field-worker Charles McLaurin they managed to motivate 1,234 persons to try to register to vote, with some 115 actually being registered in the summer of 1962. The changing tactics of the movement also led to a change in the focus and nature of harassment from the white power structure. For the time being Aaron Henry and the boycotters were left alone, and the Clarksdale police department focused on the voting rights campaign in the summer and fall of 1962; David Dennis, the leader of CORE in Mississippi, and seven other activists were arrested after attending a voter registration meeting in Clarksdale; SNCC registration worker Charles McLaurin was arrested when he stopped his car in front of the courthouse to drop off an elderly, crippled lady who wanted to register; Willie Griffin, a pregnant young Black woman from Clarksdale who was on the staff of the registration campaign, was arrested and jailed when she was downtown and tried to convince Black citizens to go to the courthouse and register. The tactic of economic intimidation was used on a grand scale during the fall of 1962. People not only lost their jobs or were harassed by the police, "We [also] began to hear many persons complain of threats being made against them that they would not qualify for relief during the winter because they had gone down to try to register and had otherwise participated in the Freedom Movement," reported the NAACP.³³

According to NAACP reports and newsletters, the white power structure had relied on economic repression and legalized harassment by the police department to suppress the freedom movement during its early years. The first months of 1963 seem to have meant a significant change in the attitude of—part of—the white community of Clarksdale. The Coahoma County NAACP recorded that, "From January 1963 through March 1963 several incidents of bombs being thrown in churches, houses bombed and set afire, homes shot into, and several other acts of violence, were directed towards some of the Negro leaders in the drive for freedom." Most likely, this shift to violent tactics was a response to the increasing Black protest in Clarksdale and growing

involvement of civil rights organizations and activists from other parts of the state and country.³⁴

The pressure on the white power structure in Mississippi as a whole was mounting, too, from both African American protesters and the federal government. The forces that caused more violent white tactics in Clarksdale were probably similar to the forces that led to the statewide revival of the Ku Klux Klan. “The Klan’s revival in late 1963 resulted from frustration,” argues John Dittmer, “A gut feeling that the battle for white supremacy was being lost. For nearly a decade the Citizens’ Council had led the forces of resistance, assuring the white masses that the state’s business and professional class would take care of any agitation on the race question. Although the Citizens’ Council had prevented the movement from making any major breakthrough . . . less affluent whites were now both impatient and angry, consumed by anxiety over the future.”³⁵

The Black community of Clarksdale did not respond to the terrorist attacks of white supremacists with active and organized armed self-defense—or if they did these incidents were not recorded—but the rhetoric of the freedom movement shifted significantly and Aaron Henry started to use the threat of armed self-defense to protect himself and his family. Henry’s house was firebombed in the early morning of Good Friday, April 5, 1963, while he, his wife, his daughter, and Congressman Charles C. Diggs from Detroit—who was visiting—were asleep. After getting his family out of the house, Henry and Diggs returned to fight the fire and managed to extinguish it. Since his old nemesis Ben Collins refused to provide police protection, Henry placed an armed guard outside his house. Fifteen days later a hole was blown through the roof of his drugstore.³⁶

That same month other activists experienced similar attacks. Most notable was the assault on Mrs. Vera Pige, who was beaten by a gas station attendant when she asked to use the—whites only—restroom. Mrs. Pige played a crucial role in the local NAACP branch as a secretary and youth branch organizer. She also organized youth branches in other parts of Mississippi and participated in statewide NAACP meetings. A professional woman, Vera Pige owned a beauty parlor and had an income that was relatively independent of the white community which gave her some freedom to be an activist without immediately losing her job, but did not protect her from white violence. In response to the abuse of Mrs. Pige, the NAACP newsletter shifted its rhetoric dramatically: “Where is the breaking point! . . . *The non-violence resistance movement*, being employed by Negroes even when they are attacked by whites, is coming under heavy disagreement by many Negroes locally and throughout the nation.” The newsletter stressed that the NAACP had always advocated a policy of self-defense but went on to threaten violent whites: “We will never strike

the *first* violent blow. We point out to our white attackers that in the future . . . you are *going to get your lick right back*. The rock throwing, shooting, bombings, and beatings, by whites against Negroes in this community, without retaliation, are *over*.³⁷

Although these threats did not become true in the following months, the Clarksdale activists did not give in to white pressure. Aaron Henry asked for more support from COFO partners SNCC, CORE, and SCLC to counter the violent attacks on the Clarksdale movement. After the murder of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers in Jackson on June 12, 1963, and another rejection from the Clarksdale mayor and commissioners to negotiate with the civil rights activists, a frenzy of sit-ins and demonstrations swept through the summer. The NAACP and COFO set up picket lines at the courthouse, the public library, city hall, and stores. More than 100 people were arrested, and many decided to stay in jail. The police abused male prisoners with beatings and female prisoners with intimidation. “I like to beat niggers’ asses,” said Ben Collins to SNCC activist Lafayette Surney. After that statement Surney was beaten unconscious by a group of officers. All cells were overcrowded and overheated, and prisoners received insufficient food and medical care.³⁸

“We will not forever be able to channel the activity of Negroes in non-violent channels if this violence against us continues to go on unabated,” wrote Aaron Henry to Burke Marshall of the Department of Justice in October 1963. However, using the rhetoric of violence was something different from actually engaging in organized armed self-defense. Coahoma County’s economic and demographic structure, the nature of repression of the white community, Aaron Henry’s personality, and the middle-class character of the Clarksdale movement all contributed to keeping the freedom movement nonviolent. The Clarksdale movement remained so throughout its whole campaign—during the violent Freedom Summer of 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party elections, and after the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, when the boycott quietly phased out.³⁹

Part 2: “The Old South Still Lives in Natchez”⁴⁰

2.1. Economics and the Klan

The revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi began in Adams County, in the Southwestern corner of the state, just on the other side of the river from Louisiana. White factory workers in the county seat of Natchez, a historic city

overlooking the Mississippi river, had formed an attractive recruiting ground for the Louisiana based Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. In December 1963 the Mississippi Klansmen broke away from the Louisiana group to form the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, which became the most dominant and violent Klan faction in the state. Among the forces that contributed to the growth of the Klan during 1964 were the positive national impact of the March on Washington, growing support of a strong federal civil rights bill, and the fear that the courts would soon force the desegregation of Mississippi schools. Especially less affluent whites who felt threatened in their economic security feared the future and formed the backbone of the new Klan.⁴¹

By the summer of 1964 nearly 5,000 Mississippians had joined the Ku Klux Klan and often worked together with local police to suppress the Black freedom struggle with terrorist violence. Adams County and the other counties of Southwest Mississippi—the center of the resurrection of the Klan—differed significantly from the Delta in both economic and demographic structures. A journalist described the area as not only having missed the civil rights movement but the Industrial Revolution as well. The Southwest was characterized by hills, poor soil, less cotton planting, and more subsistence farms, dairy farms, and lumbering than in the Delta. The Black population in these areas was much smaller than in the northwest part of the state, but African Americans were more independent and often found themselves in direct competition with whites for land and income. In the hill counties there was no veneer of an aristocratic tradition of race relations; the color line was drawn by violence—from both whites and Blacks.⁴²

Natchez was surrounded by the hill counties, but was strategically located at the river. In the 1950s the city emerged as one of the “New South” cities, with an industrial base built on factories like the Armstrong Tire and Rubber Company and International Paper Company. The emergence of new industries did not eradicate institutionalized racism, but rubber manufacturing and the wood products industry had given rise to a black working class that was unionized and more independent of the white power structure than in Clarksdale. Although some unions had a poor record on racial equality and integration of the workplace, they generally defended the rights of Black members to participate in civil rights activity without being fired by their employers. This was one of the reasons that the Black working class in Natchez had more freedom to participate in civil rights activity than in places like Clarksdale, where the working class was dependent on the white power structure and only professional men and women like Aaron Henry and Vera Pige had some space to maneuver without directly threatening their livelihood. According to Lance

Hill, working-class men formed the backbone of the Natchez branch of the NAACP, but their relative freedom from economic coercion probably contributed to Klan violence as a means of keeping the Black majority of Natchez under control.⁴³

Natchez had an NAACP branch and a local Business and Civic League, but even after the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 the city's facilities remained staunchly segregated—as they did in so many places in Mississippi. With the support of George Metcalfe and the local NAACP branch COFO had started a voter registration campaign in Adams County in 1963, but Ku Klux Klan violence made organizing difficult and dangerous. Archie Curtis, the longtime leader of the voter registration drive of the Natchez Business and Civic League, was abducted and whipped by four Klansmen on the night of February 15, 1964. Alfred Whitley, a janitor at the Armstrong Rubber Company, was also kidnapped and beaten. The home of an organizer of the Negro Pulp and Sulfite Workers local was bombed, and Clinton Walker, an employer of the International Paper Company, was found dead in his car on February 28, shot in the back with buckshot and rifle slugs. Nobody was arrested for these crimes. Chief of Police T. J. Robinson was a vocal advocate of white supremacy, and his force seemed to offer no protection. A house next to the residence where SNCC workers were staying was blown up in the late summer of 1964. Robinson told Dorie Ladner—the Black leader of the 15 Freedom Summer volunteers in Natchez—that the “bomb was meant for you. I’m surprised you haven’t been killed already.”⁴⁴

To counter the reign of terror, NAACP Field Director Charles Evers decided to go to Natchez—together with his visibly armed security team—in the spring of 1965. When he tried to desegregate local hotels, white hostility became so intense that Evers's group of armed guards positioned snipers at the Holiday Inn where he was staying. Charles Evers had become Field Director after his brother Medgar was murdered in June 1963, and he had maintained armed protection since. Four of his allies asked the national office of the NAACP for financial support in February 1965: “Because of a tremendous amount of harassment and increasing threats on the life of the Evers family, we’re asking for a financial appeal for guards to protect Mr. Evers and his family at night. For the past 18 months, he has had constant voluntary guards paid by himself. . . .” Evers was not the only armed African American in Natchez. Akinyele Umoja says, “Particularly driven by the reign of terror in Adams County and other parts of southwest Mississippi, several Natchez Blacks had been arming and preparing themselves for a violent confrontation with hostile whites.” It was this combination of Klan violence, the independent and heavily armed

Black population, the attitude of NAACP firebrand Charles Evers, and the influence from a Black armed self-defense group from Louisiana that led to the emergence of organized armed self-defense in Natchez.⁴⁵

2.2. The Natchez Movement and formal armed self-defense

In June 1965 civil rights activists in Natchez launched a boycott of white businesses, especially stores owned by Mayor John Nossier. As in Clarksdale, boycotting white stores was one of the few options the Black community had to exert pressure on the white power structure. Although Nossier's efforts to prevent racial violence during the Freedom Summer of 1964 had led to a Klan bombing of his house, he incurred the anger of the Black community by refusing to hire African Americans for the clerical staff of his stores. Unlike the boycott in Clarksdale, the protests in Natchez were little more than symbolic, with only women and children walking the picket lines while the men stood by. James Jackson, one of the local activists who later organized the armed self-defense group, complained that when he asked men to join the picket lines they suddenly had to go to a funeral or another formal occasion. "Nobody never dies until there is going to be a march or a picket. It started me thinking that the Negro was just fooling himself, that he was still ready to do nothing." Jackson's disappointment over the lack of activism was soon over, however, after yet another terrorist attack by the Klan transformed the attitude of the Black community.⁴⁶

On Friday, August 27, 1965, at 12:30 P.M., NAACP leader George Metcalfe finished an exhausting 12-hour shift as a shipping clerk at the Armstrong Tire and Rubber Company and walked up to his car. The atmosphere in the company was tense since the recent desegregation of the company cafeteria and Metcalfe's position as leader of the NAACP did not make him particularly popular with white employees. A couple of days earlier he had led a Black delegation to the local school board, demanding desegregation of the Natchez public schools. Metcalfe had also contacted the Adams County Chancery Clerk to protest the obstruction of Black voter registration and ask for compliance with Federal legislation. After Metcalfe turned the key to start his car, an enormous explosion rocked the windows of the factory. The bomb—hidden under the hood—was so strong that it completely demolished Metcalfe's vehicle and damaged several others nearby. Metcalfe's arms and legs were mangled by the explosion, and his eyes were severely injured; he was barely alive when his blood-soaked body was rushed to the hospital. Meant to bomb

the Black community into fear and passivity, the terrorist attack on George Metcalfe had exactly the opposite effect; it lighted the fuse in the racial powder keg of Natchez.⁴⁷

That same Friday a group of angry young Blacks gathered near Metcalfe's home, which also served as the NAACP headquarters. The group was armed with pistols and rifles and was in a vengeful mood. Charles Evers, who had rushed to Natchez to assist in the crisis, tried to calm down the group while at the same time empathizing with their lust for revenge. "If they do it anymore, we're going to get those responsible," said Evers, but at the same time he repeated, "We want no violence." He intimidated the white community and played into the mood of the Black community by stressing that Natchez's Black community was ready for full-scale war. "We had the guns and hand grenades, and everything it took to work—and we meant to use them if we had to." A local Black minister, holding a rifle, told a journalist, "The thing that's about to happen . . . is a war, or a race riot, or whatever it is, that's about to happen here." That night the city exploded into violence, as hundreds of infuriated Black youngsters armed themselves with pistols, rifles, rocks, and bottles and took to the streets of the business district. Evers and some local working-class NAACP members formed an impromptu security group to protect the protesters from the white police. "To make sure if they shoot somebody, we going to shoot them," explained one of them. At the same time the group tried to protect innocent whites who drove into the chaos by accident.⁴⁸

The next day the Black community drew up a list of demands for equal opportunity, including the hiring of four Black policemen, the desegregating of all public facilities, the naming of a Black representative to the school board, cooperating in a poverty program, public denouncing of the Klan, and the using of courtesy titles by city employees. A second night of rioting, a standoff between an angry armed crowd and four policemen, and chants of "We're going to kill for freedom" put force behind the demands. It was at this crucial point in the Natchez movement that several members of the Black community—most of them NAACP members—felt the need to establish a formal armed self-defense group that could protect the Black community and civil rights activists against the Klan and the police. Formal self-defense groups already existed on the other side of the river, in Louisiana, and just like the Ku Klux Klan their ideas spread into Natchez.⁴⁹

The Deacons for Defense and Justice was first organized in Jonesboro, Louisiana, in July 1964. Jonesboro was a violent industrial town, like Natchez, and after a reign of terror from the Klan the Black community felt the need to organize their own protection. Unlike informal self-defense groups in the

South, who tried to protect their homes, communities, and civil rights leaders like Aaron Henry in a more spontaneous fashion, the Deacons openly practiced and advocated armed self-defense. They also used a paramilitary structure of command and discipline, based on the military experience that many of their members had gained during World War II. The Deacons kept their membership secret to avoid terrorist attacks on their supporters, and they recruited mature and male members, contrasting with informal self-defense efforts in which women and teenagers also played a role. The Deacons for Defense and Justice tried to establish new chapters in other places, traveling throughout the South and even to Northern cities to recruit members and financial support. The chapter in Bogalusa, a mill town in Southeast Louisiana, received national publicity and notoriety when CORE activists in Bogalusa were repeatedly attacked by white terrorist vigilantes and a member of the Deacons shot and wounded a white man who attacked participants in a civil rights demonstration in the summer of 1965. In 1965 *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Times Magazine* both wrote feature stories on the Deacons.⁵⁰

The effectiveness of the paramilitary Deacons in Jonesboro and Bogalusa had gained the respect and admiration of movement activists in Natchez, and their ideas changed the pattern of armed self-defense in the movement. There was one problem, though; while local Blacks in Natchez were interested in organizing a paramilitary group, the leadership of the movement—dominated by SNCC and the national NAACP—was committed to nonviolence. The organization of a formal armed self-defense group created a political tightrope for Charles Evers. He did not want to alienate his local supporters in Natchez by repudiating armed self-defense, but he also faced staunch criticism from the NAACP national office for his public remarks in support of it. At the same time, the national office of the NAACP felt that it could not afford to fire Evers and lose the leadership of the movement in Natchez to competing organizations like SNCC and SCLC. This gave Evers some space to maneuver.

Charles Evers's personality and his position on armed self-defense played an important role in winning the hearts and minds of Black Natchez for the NAACP campaign. Evers and his slain brother Medgar had been early admirers of guerilla leader Jomo Kenyatta and the freedom struggle that was raging in Kenya in the 1950s. They even played with the idea of waging a Black guerilla war in Mississippi and started stockpiling weapons until their father ordered an end to it. The brothers channeled their rage into feverish civil-rights activity on behalf of the NAACP instead. While Medgar strived for equality in more respectable ways, Charles had always been the freewheeler, the black sheep of the family, and the hustler. His first successful business was a brothel that he

operated in the Philippines during World War II. Charles sought equality, too, but believed that “you can’t spend civil rights, and a man ain’t really free unless he has economic freedom as well as political and social freedom.”⁵¹

In the early 1950s Charles ran a hotel, a cab company, and a burial insurance business in Philadelphia, Mississippi. He was also the first Black disc jockey in the state. This success was too much for the white supremacists of the town, and they ran him out. He landed broke in Chicago and turned to hustling and pimping. He eventually managed to buy a few modest bars and a bootlegging operation and got into the jukebox business. Then his brother was murdered. According to journalist Adam Nossiter, Charles abandoned his own methods and adopted Medgar’s. The national NAACP was unhappy with Charles’s wish to continue his brother’s respectable work—Roy Wilkins never got along with him—but he was received in Mississippi as a returning dignitary, and NAACP officials felt they could not deny him the job.⁵²

Enraged by his brother’s death, Evers became an even firmer supporter of armed self-defense, and he did not go anywhere without his guards, who had voluntarily sworn to protect him after his return to Mississippi. “If anybody shot him, they would have to shoot us first, because we was gonna be with him. And we stuck to that,” remembered Milton Cooper 30 years later. Although Evers was always in conflict with other civil rights leaders, inside and outside of the NAACP, his “Bad Negro” attitude struck a chord with many ordinary African Americans, and he built a firm base of support in Mississippi. In February 1964 Evers made a statement at a fundraising dinner in Nashville, Tennessee, that summarized his attitude; “I have the greatest respect for Mr. Martin Luther King, but nonviolence 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 are going to use the same thing against them that they use against us.”⁵³

It was this attitude that made Evers and the NAACP branch the undisputed leaders of the Natchez movement, especially because SNCC activists tried to convince local people to stay nonviolent while local people were fed up with that form of protest. “If a man or a woman hits me [during a march], I’m going to hit back,” said a Black woman during a mass meeting in September 1965. “And so I don’t want to get in there since it’s nonviolent . . . I’m not afraid to march but if he hold my hand, if he stand in front of me, I’ll spit on him. I’m not afraid of them.” When SNCC leader Lawrence Guyot publicly rebuked the woman for her attitude, the church emptied out, and SNCC had lost its support from the community.⁵⁴

By early October 1965 the Natchez Deacons for Defense and Justice had organized themselves into a strongly armed group, and they were visibly working together with the NAACP to provide security for marches and protests. They also patrolled the Black neighborhoods, guarded homes of civil rights activists, and provided escorts for visiting supporters and officials. The Deacons stockpiled weapons and communicated through portable radios. The group was chartered by the state under the innocent name “Sportsmen Club” and could openly display weapons under the law of Mississippi. The Natchez Deacons never revealed their membership numbers to confuse the Klan and the police, but later research shows that the group consisted of a core of about 15 men and a support group of about 100 men who helped when needed. Most of the members were stable family men, in their thirties and forties, and had secure jobs that shielded them from economic pressure. The group had a surprisingly cordial relationship with the police department and Chief Robinson, who decided that the group actually helped to minimize conflict with the Klan.⁵⁵

The protection of the Deacons gave the civil rights campaign in Natchez a much needed boost because the Deacons also organized internal movement discipline. While the boycott in Clarksdale was enforced through calling out names of violators during mass meetings, the Deacons organized vigilante groups of Black women—and some men—who attacked shoppers and destroyed their groceries. These female vigilantes also beat up domestic workers who gave information to their white employers. This internal disciplining made the boycott almost completely effective. In December 1965, after just four months of boycotting and broad-scale community organizing, city government and local businessmen decided to give in and agreed to all of the demands of the Black community. Evers called it “the greatest concession” of the civil rights movement, and he was right as far as Mississippi was concerned. While the movement in Clarksdale quietly phased out and needed federal intervention to open voter registration to African Americans, Natchez had managed to exert enough—armed—pressure on the white power structure to create a total collapse of Jim Crow. “The Natchez campaign was the single greatest community victory for the civil rights movement in Mississippi, though historians have never given it the credit it deserves,” asserts Lance Hill. “The organizers united and inspired a community to courageous action . . . and secured dramatic legal and economic reforms. In comparison, the projects in McComb, Clarksdale and Jackson failed to win any significant demands and frequently left the black community demoralized and in disarray.”⁵⁶

This paper has tried to establish that the emergence and use of radical speech and organized Black armed self-defense during the height of the civil rights

movement in Mississippi was inexorably bound to specific local circumstances. While the active use of armed self-defense by the Black community was no more than a threat in Clarksdale during the early 1960s, Black paramilitary violence became a reality in Natchez in the summer of 1965.

Economic structures played a major role in creating structures of repression and resistance in the two towns. While the white elite in Clarksdale relied on economic repression and the Citizens' Council, working-class whites in Natchez turned to the terrorist methods of the Ku Klux Klan to intimidate the Black population. The Black community was in turn restricted in its actions by its economic position; the leadership of the Clarksdale movement was firmly in the hands of an independent Black middle class, and the Black working class was highly dependent on the white community for work, loans, and federal welfare. In Natchez the Black working class had a firm industrial base, independent from the white power structure, and competed directly with the white working class for jobs and privileges. It was this independent Black working class that dominated the Natchez NAACP and founded the paramilitary Natchez Deacons for Defense and Justice to protect their communities and civil rights activists.

But economic circumstances do not explain everything; the personalities of local leaders also played a significant role in the cases of Clarksdale and Natchez. It is almost irresistible to juxtapose the personalities of Aaron Henry and Charles Evers. They were both self-made businessmen, both fighters for justice and inequality, and both crucial for the NAACP in the state, but at the same time they were as different as day and night. Aaron Henry always stayed the respectable man, a perfect student of "the ways of white folk," a careful negotiator towards both the white and the Black communities. Henry had a gun and used guards to protect his house, but he never advocated organized armed self-defense; he used the threat of Black violence to intimidate the white community. Charles Evers was far from respectable; a former pimp and hustler, a bar owner, and a teacher, vengeful after the death of his brother, he openly advocated armed resistance and was always in trouble with the national NAACP. If Henry played "the trickster," Evers was the "Bad Negro."

The successful use of organized armed self-defense in the Natchez movement occurred at a time when the overall character of the civil rights movement was radicalizing too. SNCC and CORE workers wavered in their nonviolent commitment in the face of continuing violence and repression. The Deacons for Defense were successful in Louisiana and became nationally known, and ideas of Black self-determination and power were on the rise. It was in this context that the national office of the NAACP grudgingly accepted

Evers's radical stance, something that had not happened in the late 1950s when another NAACP leader in the South advocated armed resistance as well. At that time Robert F. Williams, NAACP leader in Monroe, South Carolina, was muscled out of his position by the national office for his open support of armed self-defense. In 1965 his ideas had become quietly acceptable, and organizations like the Deacons sprang up in towns all over Mississippi.

The differences between Clarksdale and Natchez and the different roles of the NAACP and armed self-defense in these communities are significant, as the NAACP is almost invariably portrayed as a moderate, middle-class, and non-violent civil rights organization, a characterization that does not do justice to the wide variety of local NAACP branches in Mississippi and other Southern states. The historiography of the civil rights movement is hampered by traditional portrayals of organizations that are considered "militant," "grassroots," and "radical"—like SNCC and CORE—and organizations that are typified as "middle-class," "conservative," and "top-down"—like the NAACP and SCLC. Another divide has been created between nonviolent tactics and armed self-defense and Black Power. The stories of Clarksdale and Natchez are just one indication that it is valuable for historians to step over these artificial divides and look at communities and their civil rights organizations with an open mind and fresh perspective.

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NOTES

1. Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 202. Hill interviewed several Louisiana and Mississippi civil rights activists in the 1990s; this quote is from an interview with Young in Natchez on April 14, 1994.

2. Aaron Henry to Ben Collins, Clarksdale, Mississippi, September 9, 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (hereafter referred to as NAACP Papers) [microform], ed. John H. Bracey Jr. and August Meier; project coordinator, Randolph H. Boehm (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1999). Although Henry asked for a reply, as far as I can see there seems to be no response from Ben Collins to Aaron Henry in the NAACP Papers.
3. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 106.
4. *Ibid.*, 191, 192, 267.
5. *Ibid.*, 254, 268, 306.
6. Steven Hahn provides a thorough analysis of early African American political organizing and active resistance in *A Nation under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998) is an excellent account of the complexity of slavery, oppression, culture, and resistance. Another classic is Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). Genovese also wrote extensively on the importance of slave resistance and rebellion in the developing New World in *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). For the period between Reconstruction and the end of World War I, Paul Ortiz shows in *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) how African Americans in Florida managed to organize in the face of severe repression to press for political rights, take care of their communities, and use armed self-defense in the face of lynchings and white violence. In *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: H. Holt, 2004), Kevin Boyle gives an intriguing and detailed account of a specific case of African American armed self-defense in relation to housing segregation in early twentieth century Detroit.
7. Stewart Burns, *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sacred Mission to Save America: 1955–1968* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 90–91. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 2.
8. See my later discussion of Akinyele O. Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (March 1999).
9. According to Doug McAdam in *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), the dependency of SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and NAACP on external support for the movement from labor groups, northern students, organized religion, and liberal groups like the American Civil Liberties Union could be problematic. According to McAdam, in the early movement years most external support organizations agreed with the goals of the movement, it was nonthreatening to them. But this started to change in the mid-1960s when the movement became more critical of economic structures and the War in Vietnam. Dependence on external funding and support led to instances in which some measure of control was exercised to constrain or tame movement activities. An example of this is the speech that SNCC leader John Lewis wanted to deliver during the march on Washington in 1963. His criticism of the role of the federal government and other “offensive” passages were omitted due to pressure of more moderate activists like Bayard Rustin and Roy Wilkins. McAdam also points out that the prevalence of external funding

might have been one of the reasons that SNCC and CORE did not manage to build a sustainable grassroots base for financial support, unlike the NAACP that had a long-standing grassroots funding base and also profited from external support in the 1960s. See pages 168–169 of *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. The forced revision of Lewis's speech is described in detail in John Lewis, with Michael D'Orso, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 221–228.

10. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 2, and 276 n4.
11. While Tyson analyzes armed self-defense in the 1950s from the ideological perspective of Black Power and the person of Robert F. Williams, Hill focuses on the reasons for the formation of a clandestine armed self-defense organization in Black communities in the Deep South as part of the civil rights struggle in the mid-1960s, and tries to establish the contribution of the Deacons for Defense and Justice to the movement.
12. Umoja shows how the differences between the organizations on the level of the relationships of organizers with local supporters, the class orientation its mass base, the tactics employed, and styles of decision making played a key role in this shift in strategies. Differences in organizational style and grassroots support led SNCC and CORE to question the effectiveness of nonviolence, and facilitate receptiveness to armed self-defense, while the more hierarchical approach and the class base of SCLC allowed it to distance itself from advocates of armed self-defense. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet," 573–776.
13. *The Ballot and the Bullet* leaves the impression that the NAACP was not relevant or that it did not deal with issues of armed self-defense, two misperceptions that this article seeks to counter.
14. Peter F. Lau, "Acid Test of Democracy: South Carolina and the Black Struggle for Civil Rights in America, 1865–1965" (unpublished manuscript), 13.
15. Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909–1969* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 171–76. Jonas is a former NAACP activist, and his book is part insider account, part historical study. In *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910–1966* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), Christopher Robert Reed gives a much needed detailed account of the functioning of a local NAACP chapter. But his study focuses on Chicago and does not reveal much about the NAACP chapters in the South. Reed ultimately concludes that for the Chicago NAACP "its role of prime mover, however, was limited to the period of foundation-building in that span of time before 1960," 201.
16. Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), xiv–xv. By describing grassroots civil rights organizing in Mississippi, this paper also hopes to contribute to historiography focusing on local civil rights movements. Earlier studies described a single national movement and saw its origins and outcomes as being closely related to Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). These studies tended to look at the civil rights movement from a "top down" perspective. Greta de Jong lays out different examples of this approach in *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Civil Rights in Louisiana, 1900–1970* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 219. Some of those are Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). In the past ten years there has been a

- shift towards acknowledging the importance of local activism and grassroots organizing, both before and during the 1960s. Two excellent books that deal with local leaders and participants of the civil rights movement in Mississippi are John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (1994) and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (1995).
17. In *The Deacons for Defense* Lance Hill argues that the Jim Crow system tolerated individual or spontaneous acts of Black armed self-defense—what I call “informal”—but that collective armed self-defense (“formal”) was not tolerated because it implied social and civil equality. Hill draws a strict line between the two, arguing that informal self-defense had no political meaning, but formal self-defense did.
 18. Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 16–19.
 19. McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970*, 87–88, 90, 96–98.
 20. The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]. The Black population in Coahoma County was a little smaller than in most Delta counties, where the Black population made up about three-quarters of the total population. I have used the more conservative numbers quoted by the local NAACP branch, since they use the local Chamber of Commerce as their source. John Dittmer estimates that “more than half” of Clarksdale’s residents were Black, but he fails to provide a source for this estimate. The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform] Dittmer, *Local People*, 121. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 16.
 21. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 282–83.
 22. Akinyele K. Umoja, “Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement” (Ph.D dissertation, Emory University, 1996), 67.
 23. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 188.
 24. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 56–68; Dittmer, *Local People*, 120.
 25. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 31–32, 59–60. Dittmer, *Local People*, 120–121.
 26. The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]; Dittmer, *Local People*, 121.
 27. Coahoma County Branch NAACP, newsletter, undated, most likely June 1962, Coahoma County Branch NAACP, newsletter, November 21, 1962, and The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microfilm edition], Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
 28. I use the term “legalized repression” or “legalized violence” to indicate that these forms of repression are primarily conducted by officials of the city or state, like the police force or the city government. The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform].
 29. Dittmer, *Local People*, 122–123. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 56–57, 61, 65.
 30. Testimony of Aaron E. Henry of Clarksdale, Mississippi, before Subcommittee No. 5 of the House Judiciary Committee, Thursday, June 13, 1963. The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]. With the boycott still in effect in March 1963 Aaron Henry was arrested again, this time on fake

charges of sexual assault. At Henry's trial, witnesses testified that he had been elsewhere during the time of the alleged attack. Moreover, Chief of Police Ben Collins had clearly placed false evidence in Henry's car after he was arrested, and in June the case was overruled by the Mississippi Supreme Court. When Henry complained to John Doar of the Justice Department that he had been framed by County Attorney T. H. Pearson and Chief of Police Ben Collins he was sued for \$40,000.

31. Testimony of Aaron E. Henry of Clarksdale, Mississippi, before Subcommittee No. 5 of the House Judiciary Committee, Thursday, June 13, 1963. Coahoma County Branch NAACP Newsletter, April 1962, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform].
32. COFO incorporated all national, state, and local protest groups in Mississippi. Although the national NAACP did not like the idea of a united civil rights movement—fearful of losing NAACP members and funds—the state conference of the organization joined COFO and Aaron Henry became its president.
33. Dittmer, *Local People*, 118–119; The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963. Testimony of Aaron E. Henry of Clarksdale, Mississippi, before Subcommittee No. 5 of the House Judiciary Committee, Thursday, June 13, 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]. The two primary sources sometimes differ on the dates of the arrests, but agree that they all took place during the summer and fall of 1962.
34. The Clarksdale Story—Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, fall 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform].
35. Dittmer, *Local People*, 217.
36. “Repair Bomb-Damaged Home of Aaron Henry,” NAACP press release, April 20, 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform].
37. “God has always had a Time,” by Mrs. Vera Mae Pigeo, May 1964, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]. Coahoma County Branch of the NAACP, newsletter, April 27, 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform].
38. Affidavit, State of Mississippi, County of Coahoma, Mr. Lafayette Surney, August 9, 1963, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]. Dittmer, *Local People*, 176–77.
39. Aaron Henry to Burke Marshall, October 6, 1963. Coahoma County Branch NAACP “Cryer,” July 11, 1964, and September 27, 1965, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform].
40. This was the slogan of an Adams County public relations brochure, meant to lure tourists to tour the elegant antebellum mansions of the former slaveholding elite. Dittmer, *Local People*, 353.
41. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 196; Dittmer, *Local People*, 216.
42. Dittmer, *Local People*, 216–17; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 112–14.
43. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 195–96; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 187–88.
44. Umoja writes “Metcalf” and Hill uses the spelling “Metcalf,” but NAACP documents use “Metcalf,” which is why I have chosen to use that as well. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 196–97; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 188; Dittmer, *Local People*, 216, 353.
45. Letter to Gloster B. Current, Director of Branches in NY, from Cullough, Mayberry, Cooper, and Chapman, January 28, 1965, reel 10, series A, part 27, NAACP Papers [microform]. The men who wrote the letter formed the core of Evers's self-appointed security team, according to Umoja on page 178. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 197–99.

46. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 189. Hill repeatedly argues that Black men were not interested in participating in the nonviolent movement because they felt they could not protect their honor and masculinity when they could not defend themselves against attacks from whites.
47. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 198; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 184–85.
48. Dittmer, *Local People*, 354–55; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 185–87; Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 199–200.
49. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 187; Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 199.
50. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 186–94. Hill argues in *The Deacons for Defense* that the group formed a political challenge to the nonviolent civil rights movement.
51. Dittmer, *Local People*, 50–51; Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 178.
52. Nossiter, *Of Long Memory*, 175–79.
53. Evers's security team eventually grew to over 70 men who took shifts in traveling all over the state with him. They managed to avoid all but one shooting incident by being extremely careful and openly displaying their weapons. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 177–82.
54. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 196–97.
55. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 201–202; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 198–99.
56. Umoja, *Eye for an Eye*, 201–202, 209–15; Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 203–206.