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Protection or Path Toward Revolution? Black Power and Self-Defense

Simon Wendt

This article examines the evolution of the ideology and practice of armed self-defense in the Black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Comparing self-defense tactics in the southern civil rights movement with armed militancy in the Black Power movement, the article argues that there were both continuities and discontinuities between these two phases of the Black freedom struggle. The fact that African-American activists relied on armed protection long before the advent of Black Power clearly contradicts the long-held notion that 1966 marks a sudden renunciation of Martin Luther King's nonviolent philosophy. Compared with the pragmatic necessity to protect Black communities against racist terrorists in the South, however, the self-defense efforts of Black Power groups such as the Black Panther Party tended to play a more symbolic role and served primarily as a means of affirming black manhood, gaining publicity, and recruiting new members.

Keywords: Armed Self-Defense, Black Power, Civil Rights Movement

Although the current wave of historical scholarship on Black Power has only begun to explore the richness and diversity of this movement, it has already fundamentally altered our understanding of the African-American freedom struggle. In popular memory, Black Power continues to be reduced to angry cries for self-defense that fostered violent race riots, betrayed the integrationist and nonviolent vision of earlier activism, and ultimately failed to achieve its seemingly unrealistic goals. In reality, as recent studies have shown, what came to be known as Black Power was a multidimensional movement with multi-layered ideologies and agendas that accomplished much more than has been acknowledged. Black activists engaged in a wide range of political, cultural, and intellectual activism, which helped reinterpret African-American identity and left a significant legacy that continues to shape American society to this day.¹

While this new scholarship has introduced fresh perspectives and provided important new insights, few scholars have attempted to probe the evolution of self-defense tactics in the civil rights–Black Power era. If we seek to understand the complexities of Black Power, however, we need to explore the roots and the development of armed resistance. Gaining a deeper understanding of these complexities will help us to answer some of the very same questions that students of Black Power are beginning to formulate. First, researching this aspect of Black militancy sheds light on continuities and discontinuities between the post–World War II civil rights struggle and the Black Power movement. Second, focusing on armed resistance helps us to understand the evolution of protest strategies and radical ideologies within the Black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

A number of historians have provided tentative answers to these questions. Timothy Tyson, in his pioneering study of Black militant Robert F. Williams, has suggested new ways of conceptualizing the links between the pre-1965 southern freedom struggle and the Black Power movement. According to Tyson, Williams’s life exemplifies how these seemingly distinct movements “emerged from the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African-American freedom.”² In a similar fashion, the scholarship of Emilye Crosby, Lance Hill, Christopher Strain, Akinyele Umoja, and myself has shown that southern activists, the nonviolent rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr., and other civil rights leaders notwithstanding, used armed self-defense against racist terrorism on a widespread basis.³ These findings cast doubt on traditional interpretations of Black Power—which regarded it as an abrupt rupture with the nonviolent idealism of Martin Luther King—and hint at neglected continuities between these two eras.

Yet a closer look at armed resistance in the 1960s also reveals conspicuous discontinuities. In the southern freedom movement, self-defense became a pragmatic necessity, which complemented nonviolent protest and voter registration drives in numerous civil rights campaigns. Consequently, such protective efforts were utilized mainly to help local movements survive in the face of white supremacist terrorism, although they also bolstered the morale of many activists and instilled pride in those who protected the movement by arms. In contrast, armed resistance efforts in the Black Power movement tended to play a more symbolic role. During the Black Power era, African–Americans faced legalized state violence, not attacks by individual white terrorists that used extra-legal attacks to stop southern civil rights activists. This made it much more difficult to define and combat the enemy. Thus, although radical groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) conceptualized self-defense as a revolutionary alternative to nonviolence, it ultimately served primarily as a gendered symbol of defiance and male psychological empowerment. In the case of the BPP, this affirmation of Black manhood through self-defense played an important role in gaining publicity and in recruiting new members, but it also put strains on gender relations within the party, impeded their organizing efforts, provoked a wave of government repression, and obscured the party’s political message. While some of the roots of Black militants’ self-defense strategies are to be found in the Deep South, then, the dynamic reinterpretation of the meaning of armed resistance and revolutionary violence in the Black Power era marks a significant turning point in the struggle for Black liberation.⁴

Throughout the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, the most important benefit of self-defense was that it helped local movements in the Deep South survive when confronted with violent attacks from white supremacist terrorists. As early as 1957, Black activists defended themselves against white aggression in Little Rock, Arkansas; Birmingham, Alabama; and Monroe, North Carolina. In the dangerous aftermath of the desegregation crisis at Little Rock’s Central High School, Daisy Bates, the local leader of school integration efforts and president of the chapter of the Arkansas National Association for the



“Remnants of tear gas canisters litter the indigenous villages of La Maria, Columbia, weeks after a police siege laid waste to their community” July 2006, Photographer: Megan Adam

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), relied on a “volunteer guard committee” for protection. Since neither federal nor state authorities cared about the safety of Bates, some of her friends and neighbors began to guard her home with shotguns and pistols. On one occasion in 1958, the NAACP activist herself repelled an invader with a volley of gunshots.⁵

In Birmingham, charismatic minister Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, who was constantly threatened and attacked by white racists for leading the city’s freedom movement, accepted similar protection efforts from what came to be known as the Civil Rights Guards. Led by Colonel Stone “Buck” Johnson, one of Shuttlesworth’s most loyal followers, the members of this defense group protected the pastor’s church and the parsonage. On several occasions, the Civil Rights Guards successfully prevented bomb attacks against the two buildings.⁶ The same year that the Birmingham defense group formed, ex-marine and NAACP activist Robert F. Williams organized a protective agency in Monroe, North Carolina. After Klansmen terrorized the Black community for demanding the racial integration of the town’s swimming pool, Williams and other military veterans established a sophisticated rifle club that guarded the homes of civil rights leaders with pistols, machine guns, and dynamite, and, on one occasion, fended off an attack by the Ku Klux Klan.⁷

In the first half of the 1960s, as another wave of racist terrorism swept over the Deep South, more formal and informal Black defense groups formed in the region. Most of these organizations were established in 1964, a year when hundreds of nonviolent protests and voter registration campaigns challenged the racial status quo in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and other southern states. In Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Black activists formed a defense organization after police brutally dispersed nonviolent protestors with tear gas. Trying to channel the anger of a number of men who intended to retaliate against the white

community into constructive organizing, Black war veterans instead proposed the formation of a defense organization that would protect the movement against white aggression and intimidation from the United Klans of America, which was headquartered in Tuscaloosa. Led by Korean War veteran Joseph Mallisham, the group that they organized operated like a military combat unit. A small executive board planned the unit's operations, while ordinary members executed them. Tuscaloosa's defense squad concentrated on protecting the homes of movement leaders, but it also was on call if nonviolent demonstrators were in trouble. One night in July 1964, Mallisham and his comrades rescued several teenage demonstrators from an angry mob at the local movie theater and repelled a Klan attack while chauffeuring the teenagers back to the Black neighborhood. Although the nonviolent Tuscaloosa movement won stunning victories in 1964, forcing white authorities to desegregate the city's schools and public accommodations by the end of 1965, the defense group continued to patrol the city's Black section for several years.⁸

During the Freedom Summer project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which brought hundreds of white volunteers to Mississippi to call attention to the discrimination and racist violence suffered by African-Americans in the Magnolia State, a number of local activists used their guns to defend themselves, their communities, and the volunteers they housed in their homes. Assisting voter registration efforts in the all-Black community of Milestone, perplexed white student Eugene Nelson wrote home: "The Movement may be non-violent but the people here are by no means so when it comes to protecting their families and property."⁹ Indeed, a majority of African-Americans who lived in the Milestone area protected their property with guns. Volunteers were required to honk a prearranged signal before approaching Black farms. If they failed to do so, Black guards were likely to fire at their car.¹⁰ In some towns and cities, informal defense groups protected Black churches and the homes of local civil rights leaders and sometimes became enforcers of boycotts against white merchants. In Leake County, for example, Black men guarded the newly built community center of the all-Black town of Harmony. After a Klan attack on the Black community, one volunteer explained in a letter that local Blacks had armed themselves because they did "not intend to have all their hard work go up in flames right away."¹¹ Across Mississippi, similar defense efforts operated in tandem with nonviolent voter registration drives and other civil rights campaigns until 1968.¹²

One of the most famous defense organizations of the southern freedom movement were the Deacons for Defense and Justice, which formed in 1964 in the small mill town of Jonesboro, Louisiana. Armed with rifles and pistols, the Deacons patrolled Jonesboro's Black neighborhood day and night to prevent racist attacks. In 1965, Black activists formed a Deacons chapter in Bogalusa, Louisiana. The Bogalusa group gained national fame after several shoot-outs with the Ku Klux Klan. When several carloads of Klansmen shot into the residence of a local civil rights leader at the beginning of April 1965, for example, fifteen armed Deacons welcomed them with volleys of disciplined gunfire. Like the Tuscaloosa group, the Deacons patrolled the Black neighborhood, protected the door-to-door canvassing of civil rights volunteers, and provided armed escorts for activists of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which assisted many local movements in Louisiana.¹³ Racist attackers who ventured into the Black section of town quickly learned that the Deacons took their protection duties seriously. On occasion, white invaders confronted a small army of Black men, who suddenly emerged from bushes and dark driveways. Local activist A.Z. Young reminisced about one of those encounters: "They was all smiles. It was 'yes sir' and no sir,' and so we let 'em go, and they ain't been back."¹⁴ Most whites stayed away from the Black neighborhood once news of the Black defense group's patrols had spread. The Deacons, which established several chapters and affiliates in the state, remained an integral part of the civil rights movement in Louisiana at least until 1967.

Although armed protection was primarily a men's job, which many Black defenders considered an affirmation of their manhood, women knew how to use guns as well. Southern protective groups consisted primarily of military veterans with a working-class background and did not admit female members, but there were occasions when Black women armed themselves to protect civil rights activities. During SNCC's Freedom Summer project, for instance, one volunteer was shocked to find that her host Mrs. Fairly was armed to the teeth. "I met Mrs. Fairly coming down the hall from the front porch carrying a rifle in one hand [and] a pistol in the other," he wrote home in July 1964. "I don't now know what is going on . . . [All she said was] 'You go to sleep; let me fight for you.'"¹⁵ SNCC worker Jo Anne Ooiman Robinson was similarly bewildered when the woman that she stayed with told her about the ax that she hid under her bed. Robinson became even more alarmed when learning that the local activist had slept with a gun under her pillow, which she removed only after nearly shooting a neighbor's son. In April 1965, the wife of Bogalusa activist Robert Hicks, armed with a pistol, saved a CORE worker from a group of Klansmen that had followed him to the Hicks residence. Three months later, a Black woman in Ferriday, Louisiana returned fire when a group of Klansmen shot into her home.¹⁶ While men might have viewed self-defense as a male prerogative, women could and did contribute to the safety of southern Black communities during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

The protection efforts of these Black men and women predated the calls of Black Power militants for self-defense and frequently helped local activists to hang on in an extremely hostile and dangerous environment. As John Salter, a white leader of nonviolent protests in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s, later reflected, "No one knows what kind of massive racist retaliation would have been directed against grass-roots black people had the black community not had a healthy measure of firearms within it."¹⁷ The fact that the number of white attacks against civil rights activists sharply declined in Monroe, Tuscaloosa, Jonesboro, Bogalusa, and other southern locales once African-Americans began to fight back suggests that Klansmen hesitated to attack the Black community if their own lives were at risk.

For the Black Power movement, such examples of armed resistance were important insofar as they inspired militant organizations such as the Black Panther Party and contributed to the radicalization of the southern freedom struggle. Robert F. Williams and the Deacons for Defense and Justice in particular became minor celebrities among Black nationalist circles. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the founders of the BPP, later said that the example of Williams and the Deacons had had a great influence on the paramilitary character of their organization.¹⁸ More important, the fact that armed resistance frequently proved very effective in thwarting racist violence triggered numerous disputes among civil rights activists. In growing debates on self-defense within CORE and SNCC between 1963 and 1966, an increasing number of activists came to view armed resistance as a pragmatic necessity. By 1966, the year that Stokely Carmichael introduced the term Black Power to the vocabulary of the Black freedom movement, some accepted self-defense as an integral part of the Black freedom struggle in the South.

Yet by the time that SNCC and CORE embraced Black Power and self-defense, armed protection became less important in the southern freedom movement. Some pockets of violent white opposition survived, but by 1967 federal and state authorities finally began to take seriously their responsibility to protect civil rights protest. By the late 1960s, groups such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice and the Tuscaloosa protective agency were no longer active. Since the primary reason for their founding had been the security of Black communities, their work was simply no longer necessary.¹⁹ Many proponents of Black Power thought otherwise, however, making self-defense a central pillar of a multi-layered agenda that included Black political and economic power, self-determination,

antiracism, and radical internationalism. In many ways, self-defense in the Black Power era represented a revival as well as the continuation of traditions of Black militancy that predated the iconographic imagery of the BPP and others.

But any analysis of this revival would be incomplete without taking into account the Black nationalist critique of nonviolence and advocacy of self-defense, a strain of Black Power that grew outside the South but might have been even more powerful in shaping the ideas of the new militants. As early as 1961, the New York-based Black nationalist journal *Liberator* hailed the “heroic sacrifices” of the nonviolent Freedom Riders but questioned the efficacy of their tactics. “Unlike them,” the editors wrote, “we can feel no love or compassion for either the white hoodlums who attacked them or the white officials who failed to protect them.” From the perspective of the *Liberator*, the Freedom Ride only proved the futility of nonviolence.²⁰ Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of Black militants shared such skepticism, primarily because they tended to regard nonviolence as a threat to their manhood. In June 1963, for example, one reader of the *Baltimore Afro-American* insisted: “To those who offer the line that ‘nothing is accomplished through violence’, they are simply misguided hypocrites attempting to justify cowardice.”²¹ A Black New Yorker similarly concluded in a letter to the same newspaper: “Moses’ law was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That is the only kind of law real men can respect. Only cowards will hide behind a ‘love everybody’ teaching.”²² Disputing King and other civil rights activists, these skeptics suggested that nonviolence would only compound the social and political impotence of Black men.

In contrast to these condemnations, which received little attention outside the Black community, the tirades of Malcolm X against Martin Luther King were publicized across America, making the Black Muslim the most well-known critic of the movement’s nonviolent orthodoxy. As the spokesman of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, Malcolm X preached the sect’s gospel of Black pride, moral uplift, and economic self-reliance. In addition, he lambasted King’s philosophy of nonviolence and insisted on Blacks’ right to self-defense. “Any Negro who teaches other Negroes to turn the other cheek in the face of attack,” he argued in a 1963 television interview, “is disarming the Negro of his God-given right, of his moral right, of his natural right, of his intelligent right to defend himself.”²³ From the Muslim minister’s perspective, there was no “turn-the-other-cheek revolution.” Revolutions, he explained in his famous “Message to the Grass Roots,” could not be based on loving one’s enemy but involved bloodshed, and “modern Uncle Toms” like Martin Luther King served only as pawns in the white man’s scheme to keep African-Americans passive and powerless. “Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone,” he told his followers, “but if someone puts his hands on you, send him to the cemetery.”²⁴

After his split with the Nation of Islam in March 1964, Malcolm X continued to call upon Blacks to defend themselves with arms if attacked by white racists. Through his secular Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), whose program encouraged Blacks to control their own educational, cultural, economic, and political institutions, he sought to convince African-Americans of the need for active armed resistance against white violence.²⁵ Even before founding the OAAU, Malcolm reiterated his appeal to abandon nonviolence and predicted that the masses of African-Americans would soon pick up the gun. The time was ripe, he said, “for the American Negro to fight back in self-defense whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked.”²⁶ In particular “in areas where the Government seems unable or unwilling to protect our people,” Blacks ought to organize rifle clubs to safeguard their communities.²⁷

Malcolm’s militant message—which focused not only on armed resistance but also stressed Black pride and Pan-Africanism—had an immense impact on Black militants across the United States. In April 1964, the *Liberator* praised Malcolm for “saying out

loud what many Americans of African descent have been thinking for years.”²⁸ Echoing this militant gospel a few months later, Black nationalist Richard Henry of the Detroit-based Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL) called for “a quick and widespread formation of rifle clubs by Negroes all across the North” to assist southern Blacks in an imminent guerilla war against white terrorists.²⁹ A reader of *Ebony* seconded such proposals, arguing in November 1964 that it was “time we stopped turning the other cheek,” as Malcolm X had urged Blacks to do.³⁰ The assassination of the militant Muslim only reinforced the power of his message, which became one of the founding documents of the Black Power movement. As William Van Deburg has pointed out, Malcolm X “became a Black Power paradigm—the archetype, reference point, and spiritual adviser in absentia for a generation of Afro–American activists.”³¹

The Black freedom movement in Cleveland, Ohio illustrates how Malcolm’s tenets translated into militant action even before his violent death. In 1963, a few Black Clevelanders began to organize nonviolent demonstrations to protest against de facto school segregation and racial discrimination.³² The growing disenchantment with nonviolence and the decision of local civil rights leader Lewis Robinson to form a self-defense organization to be prepared for white violence the following year was in large part a consequence of Malcolm’s teachings. “[B]eing practical,” Robinson later said about the influence of Malcolm on his thinking, “it’s impossible for a Black man with his eyes open in America, not to think like Brother Malcolm.”³³ In February and March 1964, Robinson and fellow activists repeatedly discussed the Black Muslim’s teachings, in particular his call to form rifle clubs to protect the Black community against racist attacks. In early April 1964, after hearing Malcolm X speak about “The Ballot or the Bullet” in Cleveland, Robinson announced to startled news reporters that he would soon form the Medgar Evers Rifle Club, the name being a tribute to the NAACP leader from Mississippi who was assassinated in 1963.³⁴

Unlike southern protective squads, however, the Medgar Evers Rifle Club was primarily a symbol of psychological empowerment, not a physical necessity. Since there were no overt racist threats against civil rights activists (Robinson began to receive threatening phone calls only after he had announced the formation of the defense group), Robinson’s rifle club served no protective purpose. Rather it contributed to a new sense of male pride among the group’s members. After several weeks of target practice on a farm east of Cleveland the wives of the Black defenders, as Robinson remembered in his autobiography, “showed a new respect for their men and the men, in turn, felt like men, masters of their destinies, protectors of their women and families.”³⁵ In a 1967 interview, the group’s leader readily admitted that his organization represented “a psychological way of our educating the Blacks and conditioning them that we’re going to have to fight for ourselves.”³⁶ In the end, this affirmation of manhood, coupled with the inspiring teachings of Malcolm X, resolved Robinson and other activists to form a Black nationalist cultural center in downtown Cleveland that was intended to promote civic, political, and economic responsibility among underprivileged Black youth. Opened in November 1964, the Jomo Freedom Kenyatta House became an important community center and helped reduce juvenile delinquency by offering recreation and cultural events for Cleveland’s Black teenagers.³⁷

The history of the Cleveland movement is instructive because it illustrates some of the differences between self-defense in the southern civil rights struggle and the Black Power movement. The Black Panther Party, for example, similar to the Medgar Evers Rifle Club, utilized self-defense mostly as an effective symbol of defiance. Of course, as Nikhil Pal Singh has pointed out, the Panthers’ self-defense efforts were “strategic choices and carefully posed challenges to the so-called legitimate forms of state violence that had become all too regularly used within Black communities,” and subsequent shootouts had serious

consequences for the organization, including numerous incarcerations and deaths of party members.³⁸ But the BPP's attempts to challenge this tradition of state violence functioned mostly on a symbolic level, namely as a means of gaining publicity, as an affirmation of Black manhood, and as tool to recruit new members.

The BPP's well-known armed demonstration at the California State Legislature in Sacramento on May 2, 1967 is perhaps the best example of how such strategic symbolism could gain publicity. Newton and Seale were confident that their widely publicized protest would help them achieve their long-term goal: to establish the BPP as the "vanguard group" of the Black revolution. Indeed, within days of the Sacramento protest, Blacks from across the nation inundated the organization's Oakland office with requests for permission to start additional chapters.³⁹

Within the organization, self-defense also became an important means to affirm Black manhood. "The Black woman found it difficult to respect the Black man because he didn't even define himself as a man!" Newton explained in an interview. He was certain that his organization, together with other Black militants, had "regained our mind and our manhood."⁴⁰ Eldridge Cleaver, the organization's minister of information, similarly pointed out in a 1968 interview that the BPP was "a natural organization" for the young, since it was organized by their peers and provided "very badly needed standards of masculinity."⁴¹ In the early years of the organization, this standard appeared to be defined primarily by guns and the willingness to use them. While similar links between self-defense and Black manhood could also be observed in southern defense organizations, such affirmations of manliness remained largely a by-product of the necessity to defend Black communities against racist attacks.

Finally, the early fixation on self-defense in the Black Panther Party not only gained the organization publicity and instilled pride in its members but also became one of the reasons why many people joined the group in the first place. Newton and Seale knew that recruiting the unemployed or underemployed "brother off the block" was facilitated by their organization's martial imagery. This seems to have been true not only for the Oakland organization. In the Philadelphia BPP, for example, as Matthew Countryman has pointed out in his study of the city's Black freedom struggle, "it was the party's emphasis on 'the gun' that attracted the vast majority of party members."⁴²

As beneficial as this focus on self-defense might have been in creating powerful images of fearless Black men, it was fraught with problems. For one thing, the oft-cited sexism and misogyny that permeated Black Power organizations such as the Black Panther Party was closely linked to notions of masculine self-defense. Of course, gender relations within the party were subject to change, and many female members actively influenced the organization's views on the role of women in the struggle for Black liberation. In the 1970s, for example, the number of women in leadership positions increased considerably, although this was primarily due to the leadership vacuum that the imprisonment or exile of male party leaders had created. Still, at least until the late 1960s, the BPP remained a largely male-centered organization that regarded women as readily available sexual objects rather than equal and respected party members. Recent research suggests that this dynamic was not confined to the original Panthers but was replicated in other chapters as well (e.g., Baltimore and Philadelphia).⁴³ In Ron Karenga's US organization, male members were even more explicit in their adamant opposition to women's equality. Like the Nation of Islam, US required its female members to submit to male leadership and male authority without question, clearly impeding Black women's ability to influence the program of US and other Black nationalist groups.⁴⁴ As Stephen Ward has noted, the Black Power movement's frequent use of the metaphor of manhood "and the male-centered political framework that it represented could be, and too often was, used to silence and discipline the activism of Black women."⁴⁵

It is important to point out, however, that women were far from passive supporters in the Black Power era. Recent studies have demonstrated that Black women were often the backbone of community organizing efforts in the urban freedom movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁴⁶ More importantly, Black feminist organizations such as the Third World Women's Alliance did not simply challenge male-centered interpretations of the Black freedom struggle but actively interpreted and shaped Black Power politics and ideology.⁴⁷ Some female activists, contesting male Black Power activists' proclaimed protective prerogative, defended themselves against white aggression. In 1967, for example, Baltimore activist Marion Johnson, after moving into one of the city's last white-only public housing complexes, armed herself to protect her children from white supremacists who had burned crosses in the area. The Black Women's United Front, another Black feminist organization that was founded in the early 1970s, established defense committees for female Black prisoners who had protected themselves against sexual attacks by male prison guards.⁴⁸

In the case of the Panthers, another problem that was closely related to masculine self-defense strategies was the tendency of some activists to overlook the importance of political organizing and social activism. According to Newton's analysis of the early years of the organization, many party members seemed to believe that Mao Zedong's tenet that political power grew out of the barrel of a gun meant that political power *was* the gun. As he told his followers in 1971, they seemed to ignore that the "culmination of political power" was "the ownership and control of land and the institutions thereon so that we can get rid of the gun."⁴⁹ Such misunderstandings impeded the effectiveness of the Oakland BPP's organizing efforts within the Black community. Focusing on the history of the Panthers in Philadelphia, Matthew Countryman similarly concluded that "the gun as a symbol of resurgent manhood" hampered the party's "ability to develop a sustainable long-term strategy for achieving its goals."⁵⁰

The most harmful consequence of self-defense tactics in the Black Power era was the wave of government repression that Black militants' martial posture provoked in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To confront the alleged threat of the BPP and other militant organizations, the Federal Bureau of Investigation used the sophisticated domestic counter-intelligence program COINTELPRO.⁵¹ Huey Newton was one among very few militants who admitted that the BPP's self-defense stance became counter-productive once white authorities declared war on the Panthers. In his memoirs, Newton pointed out that the efforts of white authorities to disrupt the activities of his organization had not started until the BPP staged its armed demonstration in Sacramento. Other chapters faced similar problems. Numerous incarcerations and infiltration by police informers weakened the Baltimore chapter considerably. In Philadelphia, police raided the homes of party members and indicted Black Panthers on fabricated charges.⁵² By 1969, having become aware of these problems, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale deliberately toned down the militant rhetoric of the Party. As early as 1968, they had dropped the term self-defense from the group's original name (Black Panther Party for Self-Defense). But their hope that these measures and a less provocative language would bring an end to police harassment and government repression were ultimately illusory.⁵³

The public image of the Panthers, too, changed little, Newton's attempts to use less militant language notwithstanding. In the mind of most Americans, the BPP—and, in fact, the Black Power movement in general—remained inextricably linked to guns and violence. The news media continued to focus on the organization's paramilitary character, ignoring the discrimination and abject poverty that Newton and Seale wanted to call attention to. It was no accident that the BPP's ten-point platform discussed self-defense *after* the demand for self-determination, full employment, decent housing, and education for the Black community. Yet the American public paid no attention to the efforts of the party to alleviate

these dismal conditions, including its free breakfast programs for school children, legal and medical assistance for the poor, and other community services. Self-defense thus obscured some of the most important messages of Black Power and contributed to the resentment and subsequent misconceptions that burdened the movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

One problem that exacerbated white America's hostility was Black Power militants' tendency to blur the distinctions between self-defense and revolutionary violence. Interestingly, Robert F. Williams was among the first activists to reinterpret the meaning of self-defense for the Black freedom struggle. Williams came out of a tradition of homegrown southern militancy that stressed Blacks' right to defend themselves against racist terrorism. Later, however, while living in Cuban and Chinese exile, he became an ardent advocate of revolutionary violence against the white oppressor. According to Williams, urban guerrilla warfare constituted a form of self-defense. In September 1964, he explained this logic to a journalist of the *National Guardian*. "[Y]our first step, if you're abused, is to ask people not to abuse you," he said. "Then you defend yourself against that abuse: and then, if necessary, you must be prepared to destroy in order to defend."⁵⁴ From this perspective, it was difficult to see any distinction between self-defense and aggressive violence.

Many Black Power organizations, including the BPP, echoed Williams and cited the theories of Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, and Che Guevara as additional evidence for their claims that aggressive violence against white authorities was a justified form of armed resistance. For African-Americans, as Huey Newton wrote in his memoirs, "the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. At bottom, this is a form of self-defense. Although that defense might at times take on characteristics of aggression, in the final analysis the people do not initiate; they simply respond to what has been inflicted upon them."⁵⁵ Other revolutionary nationalists, including the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Africa, and the Black Liberation Army, followed a similar logic. In contrast to the rationale of southern defense groups such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice, the ultimate goal of the Black Power movement's "self-defense" strategy was not simply the safety of the Black community but the creation of a new and just social order that would have to be brought about by revolutionary violence if necessary. Although many activists had abandoned previous plans for armed revolution by 1972, focusing on political organizing instead, this reinterpretation of defensive violence as part of a protracted struggle for Black liberation remains one of the lasting legacies of Black Power.⁵⁶

Notes

1. The most important works include Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (St. James, N.Y.: Brandywine Press, 2000); Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998). An earlier study that continues to provide a good overview but focuses on the cultural dimensions of the

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2. Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 3.

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