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***"Urge People Not
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By SIMON WENDT*

Steve Miller and Bill Yates, two white Civil Rights workers from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), had been organizing in rural Louisiana for several days in early February 1965 when a violent incident severely tested their beliefs. For Miller and Yates, CORE's nonviolent approach was more than a tactic; it was a philosophy of life. Their work in Louisiana, however, would compel them to reconsider this commitment. Shortly after their arrival in Bogalusa, a small paper-mill town in the Florida Parishes, local whites chased the CORE workers' car across town and eventually forced them to stop. Pulling the activists out of the vehicle, the white mob beat them severely, breaking Yates' hand in the scuffle. Finally, the two activists escaped into a black-owned café across the street where they were shocked to encounter a small brigade of armed black men who promptly

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barred the door to their assailants. Most of these men would later join the legendary Deacons for Defense and Justice, a highly organized African American defense group founded in 1964. Fearing for their lives, Miller and Yates experienced immense relief at the sight of these local blacks and their guns. Later, Steve Miller admitted that his commitment to nonviolence ended on that day.¹

In the 1960s, Civil Rights activists who were organizing in the Deep South were all too familiar with this kind of violence. The experience of the two CORE workers in Louisiana illustrates certain complexities of the Southern black freedom struggle that challenge the conventional wisdom regarding Civil Rights. In the minds of many, the inspirational activities of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the audacious nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham and Selma still epitomize the modern Civil Rights movement. The ascendancy of the Black Power slogan and black militants' calls for self-defense in 1966, on the other hand, seemingly signifies a sudden and radical break with the "nonviolent" movement.

The history of the Congress of Racial Equality in Louisiana suggests that, far from being the exception to the rule, Southern black militancy and armed self-defense were integral parts of the African American freedom movement long before 1966. In fact, founded as a primarily white Northern organization, CORE's willingness to embrace armed self-defense seems to have grown in direct proportion to its relationship with the black South. Local African Americans' determination to defend themselves against white terror seriously challenged CORE's traditional commitment to nonviolence and contributed to the organization's gradual radicalization in the 1960s. By the end of the decade, the now virtually all-black organization abandoned the nonviolent approach and openly called for armed resistance and Black Power.

¹"CORE Worker's Hand Broken in Beating by White Gang," *Louisiana Weekly*, February 13, 1965; "Bogalusa, Louisiana, Incident Summary: January 25-February 21, 1965," CORE—Southern Regional Office Files (hereafter cited as CORE—SRO), box 7, folder 5, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison (hereafter cited as SHSW); and Lance Hill, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1997), 141.

Civil Rights scholarship has only recently begun to pay attention to the phenomenon of armed self-defense. Not too long ago, historians still conceptualized the African American freedom movement in terms of the efforts of major Civil Rights organizations and their respective leaders to press for new Civil Rights legislation. Martin Luther King, Jr., figured most prominently in these studies.² In the mid-1980s, the focus of the literature began to shift toward the study of local movements and the contribution of ordinary black citizens. This shift towards local history greatly enhanced our understanding of the modern Civil Rights movement.³ More important, some of the most recent studies suggest that the concept of the "nonviolent" movement was far from pure pacifism. John Dittmer and Charles M. Payne's pioneering studies of the Mississippi freedom movement already implied that armed self-defense was more than a mere footnote to the history of the black freedom struggle. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Payne points out: "Very little attention has been paid to the possibility that the success of the movement in the rural South owes something to the attitude of local people toward self-defense."⁴

In his 1999 article on the Deacons for Defense and Justice, Christopher B. Strain begins to bridge this historiographical gap by briefly sketching the early history of the Louisiana defense organization. However, Strain fails to examine the Deacons' volatile relationship to CORE and ignores the defense organization's impact on its radicalization.⁵ In another article on armed resis-

²See, for example, Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986).

³Some early local studies are William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York, 1981); David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York, 1985); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984).

⁴John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1994); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995), 205. For an excellent state study of the Louisiana Civil Rights movement, see Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, Ga., 1995).

⁵Christopher B. Strain, "'We Walked Like Men': The Deacons for Defense and Justice," *Louisiana History*, 38 (1999): 43-62.

tance, Akinyele O. Umoja stresses the significance of black defense efforts in the Southern movement and rightly contends that nonviolent organizers' focus on indigenous activism made it "difficult to condemn militant armed resistance by local Blacks."⁶ However, Umoja does not thoroughly explore the role that these complexities played in activists' increasing militancy.

Up to now, only Timothy B. Tyson's biography of Civil Rights activist Robert F. Williams has argued convincingly for historians to acknowledge the Southern roots of the black freedom struggle's radicalization. In his landmark study *Radio Free Dixie*, Tyson argues that "[t]he story of Robert F. Williams illustrates that the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement, often portrayed in very different terms, grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicament, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom."⁷ Similarly, the story of CORE suggests that armed self-defense—while not to be equated with Black Power—played a crucial role in the radicalization of that traditionally nonviolent organization.

When an interracial group of young college students gathered in Chicago to found CORE in 1942, few believed that it was a potential mass organization. The early membership consisted of a small number of young idealists who embraced the teachings and philosophy of the Indian human rights activist Mohandas Gandhi, embodied in his concept of *Satyagraha*—committed nonviolence and redemptive love for one's opponent.⁸ Long-time activist and CORE member Bayard Rustin recalled that Gandhi disciple Krishnalal Shridharani's *War Without Violence*, a detailed account of Gandhi's teachings, "became our gospel, our bible."⁹

⁶Akinyele O. Umoja, "The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies*, 29 (1999): 558-78.

⁷Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 307-08.

⁸George Houser, "CORE: A Brief History," July 1949, Meier-Rudwick Collection of CORE Records (hereafter cited as Meier-Rudwick Collection), box 3, folder 3, SHSW; "N.A.C. Meeting, December 31, 1965-January 2, 1966," Meier-Rudwick Collection, box 2, folder 5; James Farmer, *Freedom When?* (New York, 1965), 57. On Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence see John Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley, 1969).

⁹Quoted in Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (Berkeley, 1998), 69.

Buoyed by their early successes in desegregating public accommodations in Northern cities during the 1940s through nonviolent "sit-down" campaigns, some members hoped for organizational expansion.¹⁰

One obstacle to expansion, however, was that nonviolence proved to be an alien concept to both white and black Americans. Activists' attempts to explain the rationale of nonviolent protest to potential recruits fell on deaf ears. A common response was: "You mean that if someone hits you, you're not going to hit back? What are you, some kind of a nut or something?"¹¹ Even within some of the early CORE chapters, members vigorously debated the efficacy of pure nonviolence. Faced with numerous bomb attacks against black neighborhoods in 1946, members of the organization's Chicago chapter openly called for "the formation of defence [*sic*] squads to guard Negroes living in 'tension' areas who are in danger of attacks."¹² Chicago CORE's chairman Gerald Bullock reported to the national office with resignation that "Satyagraha is at this point beyond the comprehension of these people."¹³ CORE's abstract philosophy and the anticommunist hysteria that gripped the United States in the early 1950s confined the organization's growth to small chapters in a handful of Northern and Western cities. Thus, for the first two decades of its existence, CORE remained a small, predominantly white organization, comprised of Northern middle-class pacifists.¹⁴

After the Montgomery bus boycott sparked the modern Civil Rights movement in 1955, the sit-in movement of 1960 rejuvenated CORE and the entire black freedom struggle. Thousands of young college students in the South craved for workshops that would teach them nonviolent direct action. As a result of its vig-

¹⁰Especially James Farmer, who became CORE's National Director in 1961, believed that only a nonviolent mass movement could successfully challenge segregation and discrimination. See James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1985), 111.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 109.

¹²Berry Bessler, "Defend Negro Homes," *Chi-CORE News*, September 15, 1946, Congress of Racial Equality Papers (hereafter cited as CORE Papers), series 3, box 6, folder 9, SHSW.

¹³Gerald Bullock to George Houser, January 13, 1946, CORE Papers, series 3, box 6, folder 9.

¹⁴Farmer, *Freedom When?*, 65.

orous support of the student movement, the organization's membership surged, and CORE and other Civil Rights organizations became determined to attack the stronghold of white supremacy—the Deep South.¹⁵ The legendary Freedom Ride of 1961, designed to integrate public accommodations in interstate travel, foreshadowed the travails that Civil Rights workers would endure in Dixie. White Southerners reacted with an unprecedented level of violence to the attempts of CORE and the newly established Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to challenge Jim Crow.

Unlike the Freedom Ride, which became a media spectacle around the world, CORE's early voter registration work in rural Louisiana in 1962 remained virtually invisible to the public. Daily threats against activists as well as white supremacist bomb attacks went unreported. The national government felt no responsibility to protect Civil Rights workers from white assaults.¹⁶ While the United States Code actually authorized the president to use armed forces to curb racist attacks, Atty. Gen. Robert F. Kennedy asserted as late as 1964 that the administration had no right to interfere with such violence in Southern states.¹⁷ CORE increased its voter registration efforts in Louisiana in 1963, but because of the administration's apathy, local whites continued to thwart Civil Rights activity with economic reprisals and violence.¹⁸

When CORE first entered the state, many local African Americans feared a violent white reaction and hesitated to respond to voter registration drives.¹⁹ However, once Civil Rights workers demonstrated their resolve despite white terror, an increasing number of local blacks became involved in the movement. Organizers quickly learned that those African Americans willing to

¹⁵August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (Urbana, 1975), 98, 113, 126.

¹⁶Marvin Rich, "Chronology of Some Events at Shreveport, La., May 25, 1962," CORE Papers, microfilm, reel 16, frame 00046.

¹⁷"Laws give U.S. Right to Curb Terror in South," *National Guardian*, July 11, 1964.

¹⁸"Registration Drive in Rural Louisiana," *CORE—Lator* 102 (1963), CORE Papers, microfilm, reel 49, frame 00164.

¹⁹Miriam Feingold, "Field Report: St. Helena, East Feliciana, & West Feliciana Parishes, June 28 to July 5, 1964," CORE Papers, series 5, box 64, folder 3.

challenge white supremacy refused to adhere to CORE's nonviolent discipline. One bewildered CORE worker noted: "Most take self-defense at night for granted (protecting the home, and all that). So this talk of guns and accepting an armed guard, is not 'against' CORE rules."²⁰ In fact, prior to the Civil Rights movement, the concept of nonviolence had been virtually unheard of in Southern black communities. One of Martin Luther King's aides conceded in an interview: "Nonviolence as a way of life was just as foreign to blacks as flying a space capsule would be to a roach."²¹ Guns and armed self-defense had a long tradition in the African American community, and few Louisiana blacks were willing to yield the right to protect their home and their family.²²

As early as January 1963, after becoming the first registered black voter in West Feliciana Parish since Reconstruction, the Rev. Joseph Carter armed himself to fend off Ku Klux Klan attacks.²³ Later that year, when local police threatened to lynch CORE's national director James Farmer in the aftermath of a violent demonstration in Plaquemine, local African Americans smuggled Farmer out of town in a hearse. Two heavily armed ex-Marines accompanied Farmer to safety.²⁴ The Plaquemine experience—where mounted state troopers had mercilessly battered black demonstrators with nightsticks after using teargas to disperse the protestors—left deep scars on Farmer's commitment to pacifism. "For CORE," he wrote in 1968, "nonviolence . . . ended on a balmy night, September 1, 1963, in a sleepy town on the Mississippi, when a uniformed mob screamed for my blood."²⁵ Not surprisingly, CORE's leader did not object when several

²⁰Meldon Acheson to Hi, y'all!, July 30, 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers, SHSW.

²¹Quoted in Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 158.

²²On armed self-defense among African Americans in their response to white violence, see Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, 1988). On the peculiar character of American armed self-defense, see Richard Maxwell Brown, *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society* (New York, 1991).

²³Bob Adelman, "Birth of a Voter," *Ebony*, (February, 1964): 88-94, 96.

²⁴James Farmer, "Louisiana Story 1963," Anna Holden Papers, box 1, folder 7, SHSW; "Horse Troopers Scatter Negroes," *New York Times*, September 1, 1963; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 251-52.

²⁵Farmer, foreword to Inge Powell Bell, *CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence* (New York, 1968).

Plaquemine blacks began to bring their guns to rallies in the parish, vowing to protect him from future attacks.²⁶

In West Feliciana Parish, the black community organized to protect the local movement soon after CORE field workers began to organize in the state. Activist Mike Lesser wrote to the regional CORE office in November 1963: "[I]f any hostile white folks should ever try to approach the place without warning they would find themselves faced by 15-20 high powered, long-range shotguns before they got within 50 yards of the building." According to Lesser, local African Americans' announcement to "shoot any strange face on their property" had reduced white harassment considerably.²⁷ In 1964, a perplexed CORE summer volunteer reported that the first thing that her host family taught her was how to shoot the shotgun which the family kept for protection.²⁸

That same year, some African Americans elevated these mostly spontaneous protection efforts to one of the first organized self-defense units of the modern Civil Rights movement. The black community in the small northern Louisiana town of Jonesboro endured constant Klan threats after CORE activists arrived. Local white café and restaurant owners vowed to kill every African American who attempted to enter their businesses, and local authorities informed CORE that they would provide no protection for Civil Rights workers. Thus, local African Americans were left to defend themselves. Shortly after CORE members launched their campaign to desegregate public facilities in early July, several armed black men served as guards. Two weeks later, after the Ku Klux Klan had staged a night procession through the black neighborhood, local blacks decided to organize themselves to protect the black community. White CORE worker Charles Fenton assisted in establishing a highly organized self-defense group, which later came to be known as the Deacons for Defense and Justice.²⁹

²⁶Farmer, *Freedom When?*, 19.

²⁷Mike Lesser to Terry Perlman, November 4, 1963, CORE Papers, microfilm, reel 5, frame 00185.

²⁸Jim Peck, ed., "Louisiana—Summer 1964: The Students Report to their Home Towns," CORE Papers, unprocessed accessions, box 1, folder 2.

²⁹Daniel Mitchell, "A Special Report on Jonesboro, Louisiana with Reference to Voter Registration Activities involving the Congress of Racial Equality," July

Equipped with rifles, pistols, and walkie-talkies, the defense organization patrolled the black section of town around the clock. Following every white driver who entered the black neighborhood, the Deacons quickly put an end to white violent harassment.³⁰ The Deacons also protected Civil Rights workers and volunteers, assigning Charles Fenton a personal bodyguard. Although most members owned several guns—the membership consisted mostly of African American army veterans—the group bought additional rifles and pistols and provided members with ammunition.³¹ Harassment by local police continued, but white attacks against black homes and Civil Rights workers ceased almost completely.³² For several months, the Jonesboro Deacons operated in obscurity. Indeed, few members of CORE's executive National Action Council were aware of the Deacons' existence. That changed in February 1965 when CORE activists and a *New York Times* article first reported the Deacons' activities.³³

The emerging freedom movement in Bogalusa, Louisiana, finally thrust the Deacons for Defense and Justice upon the national stage. As in Jonesboro, segregation and discrimination in this little paper-mill town had survived the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Dubbed "Klantown USA" by journalist Paul Good, Bogalusa was a hostile environment. Soon after some local white liberals had proposed to discuss the implications of the recently passed Civil Rights legislation, the Ku Klux Klan launched a

1964, CORE—Jackson Parish Files, box 1, folder 10, SHSW; "Reports on Desegregation of Public Facilities 1964-1965 in Jonesboro," CORE—Jackson Parish Files, box 1, folder 5; Daniel Mitchell, "Jackson Parish and Jonesboro, Louisiana: A White Paper," CORE—Monroe, Louisiana Chapter Files, box 4, folder 4, SHSW; Hill, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice," 19.

³⁰Hamilton Bims, "Deacons for Defense and Justice," *Ebony*, (September, 1965): 25-30.

³¹Fred Powledge, "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro an Unusual Town," *New York Times*, February 21, 1965.

³²"Louisiana—October 1964 through April 1965—Summary Field Reports," CORE—SRO, box 4, folder 2; "Summary of Events in Jonesboro, Louisiana, March 8 through March 16," press release, March 16, 1965, CORE Papers, microfilm, reel 17, frame 00258.

³³National Action Council Minutes, National CORE Office, February 6-7, 1965," CORE Papers, series 4, box 2, folder 1; Powledge, "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro an Unusual Town."

campaign of terror and intimidation.³⁴ But determined to resist, Bogalusa's African American activists asked CORE representatives to assist them in their challenge to Jim Crow. In February, after a large white mob had gathered and vowed to kill CORE field workers Bill Yates and Steve Miller, their local host Robert Hicks quickly mobilized a group of armed men to guard his house. The determination of African Americans to defend themselves, together with numerous telephone calls to local authorities, prevented a violent clash.³⁵ Two days later, Yates and Miller were rescued from the white mob at the aforementioned black-owned café. Shortly thereafter, local police and two carloads of armed African Americans escorted the two activists out of town.³⁶ As in Jonesboro, CORE's repeated pleas for federal protection had been ignored.³⁷

Faced with constant harassment and violent intimidation, local blacks and CORE workers contacted the Jonesboro Deacons to establish a Bogalusa branch of the defense organization. Local leader A. Z. Young later reflected: "We felt as though that we must protect ourselves and if any blood flows any direction in this city that it'll be both black and white together."³⁸ At the beginning of March 1965, the Jonesboro Deacons obtained an official state charter thus affording the defense organization a semi-official status. Not surprisingly, the organization's "Articles of Incorporation" did not mention armed self-defense, but portrayed

³⁴Steve Miller to Shirley Mesher, February 12, 1965, CORE—Louisiana Sixth Congressional District Files (hereafter cited as Sixth Congressional District Files), box 1, folder 8, SHSW; John Herbers, "Klan Haunts Louisiana City That Canceled Hay's Rights Talk," *New York Times*, January 9, 1965; Paul Good, "Klantown USA," *The Nation*, February 1, 1965, 110-14.

³⁵Nancy Gilmore, "Louisiana Field Report, January through June 1965," CORE—SRO, box 7, folder 5; "Bogalusa, Louisiana, Incident Summary: January 25-February 21, 1965," CORE—SRO, box 7, folder 5.

³⁶Frank Hunt, "Bogalusa: Town Ruled by Fear," *Afro-American* (Baltimore), July 31, 1965, 20; "CORE Worker's Hand Broken in Beating by White Gang;" "Bogalusa, Louisiana, Incident Summary: January 23-February 21, 1965."

³⁷Miriam Feingold, "Field Report: St. Helena, East Feliciana, & West Feliciana Parishes, June 28 to July 5, 1964;" Ronnie Moore to Robert Kennedy, July 25, 1964, Sixth Congressional District Files, box 1, folder 12.

³⁸A. Z. Young, interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording, Miriam Feingold Papers (hereafter cited as Feingold Papers), SHSW.

its purpose as educating United States citizens and especially minority groups in the principles of democracy. Somewhat veiling the underlying principles of the group's aims, the document stated that the Deacons would defend American citizens' Civil Rights and property rights "by any and all honorable and legal means."³⁹ It is likely that the common knowledge of white Southerners' traditional fear of armed African Americans influenced the group's decision to de-emphasize its actual motivation in organizing the Deacons.⁴⁰

To be sure, organized self-protection as practiced by the Deacons was far from a unique phenomenon in the modern Civil Rights movement. In Monroe, North Carolina, Civil Rights activist Robert F. Williams had organized a group of army veterans into a self-defense unit as early as 1957. In 1959, Williams' statement to "meet violence with violence" triggered a vigorous debate on violence and nonviolence within the leadership of the black freedom struggle, leading to his ouster as the president of the Monroe chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁴¹ In the aftermath of the 1957 Little Rock School Crisis in Arkansas, friends of local leader Daisy Bates, armed with automatic pistols and shotguns, stood guard at her home. Between 1957 and 1959, bright floodlights blinded white assailants, while steel screens covering the front windows protected Bates and her guards from gunfire.⁴² The Deacons' high level of organization as well as their attempts to expand the defense organization into other Southern as well as Northern states, however, clearly set them apart from similar defense efforts in the past. While reports that inflated the Deacons' strength to several thousand members in fifty branches across the South were vastly exaggerated, the defense group did

³⁹"Articles of Incorporation of Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc.," March 5, 1965, CORE—SRO, box 5, folder 4.

⁴⁰For examples of white Americans' fear of African American armed insurrection during World War II, see Howard W. Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race: Challenge to American Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1943).

⁴¹Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 86-89, 137-65.

⁴²Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (New York, 1962), 94-96, 111, 162.

expand into Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama, and a few Northern cities.⁴³

The Bogalusa Deacons in particular raised organized black self-defense to a new level of sophistication and notoriety. The new branch's first president, Charles Sims, a former army weapons and judo instructor, expanded the organization's arsenal. A young white Civil Rights activist recalled in his memoirs that the trunk of Sims's car usually contained "a semiautomatic carbine that looked like a submachine gun, two shotguns, several boxes of shells, and a handful of grenades."⁴⁴ Remembering one organizer's advice to "[k]eep plenty of ammo at your house, in your car, wherever you are," the Deacons began to standardize their weapons, which allowed them to buy ammunition by the case.⁴⁵ Since local authorities often helped in thwarting Civil Rights activities, the Bogalusa Deacons also began to monitor police radio communications.⁴⁶

White supremacists soon learned that the Deacons meant business. When several carloads of Klansmen shot into the Hicks residence at the beginning of April, they were met by several volleys of disciplined gunfire by fifteen armed Deacons.⁴⁷ Sometimes white hooligans who entered the black section of town suddenly found themselves surrounded by a dozen armed Deacons, quietly emerging from bushes and dark driveways. Local activist A. Z. Young recalled that whites who encountered the Deacons' recep-

⁴³Fred L. Zimmerman, "Race and Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate against White Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 1965; "Deacons Defy Whites, Stay Armed Thruout [sic]," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 24, 1965; "Northern Members, Plea Begun," *Afro-American*, November 27, 1965. According to historian Lance Hill, there were local Deacon affiliates in seventeen Southern and four Northern cities. Hill, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice," 263.

⁴⁴Peter Jan Honigsberg, *Crossing Border Street: A Civil Rights Memoir* (Berkeley, 2000), 33, 52.

⁴⁵"Negro 'Deacons' Claim They Have Machine Guns, Grenades for 'War'," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1965.

⁴⁶Fred L. Zimmerman, "Race and Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against White Attacks," 18.

⁴⁷"Shots Are Fired at a Negro Home," *New York Times*, April 8, 1965; Robert Hicks, interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording; Gayle Jenkins, interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, Bogalusa, tape recording, Feingold Papers.

tion "got mighty polite. They was all smiles. It was 'yes sir' and 'no sir,' and so we let 'em go, and they ain't been back."⁴⁸ Few whites dared to enter the black neighborhood after news of the black defense group's existence had spread.

The Deacons also provided protection for CORE field workers and volunteers. On one occasion Jonesboro Deacon Elmo Jacobs, who was driving white student volunteers to town, traded several shots with a carload of local white youths. When the young men started firing at the car, Jacobs pulled out his .38 caliber pistol and returned the fire, fending off their assailants.⁴⁹ In Bogalusa, members of the defense squad guarded CORE volunteers day and night. One Berkeley student reported about his stay:

We never crossed the streets without a Deacon. We never drove our car without a Deacon present. Most of our cars were escorted by two carloads of Deacons, one in front and one in back. The homes where we stayed were guarded day and night by Deacons, and our canvassing was protected by Deacons. Our lives were literally in their hands.⁵⁰

In addition, the Deacons guarded most of the nonviolent demonstrations that took place during the summers of 1965 and 1966.⁵¹ During a protest march at the beginning of July 1965, a scuffle between white bystanders and two African Americans turned violent when one of the black men pulled out a pistol and shot his assailant. Although it is unclear whether the black men involved in the shooting were members of the Deacons, the incident testifies to the widespread determination of Louisiana blacks to defend themselves against white violence.⁵²

⁴⁸Quoted in "The Deacons," *Newsweek*, August 2, 1965, 28.

⁴⁹Elmo Jacobs, interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, Jonesboro, Louisiana, tape recording, Feingold Papers; "Statement made by Loretta Estelle on Shooting on April 10, 1965," CORE—Monroe, Louisiana Chapter Files, box 3, folder 4; "Klansmen Shocked by 2 Blasts," *Afro-American*, April 17, 1965.

⁵⁰"The Problem in Focus," *Campus CORE—Lator* (Berkeley) 3 (1965): 26, Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, Addendum (hereafter cited as CORE Papers, Addendum), microfilm, reel 17, frame 0293.

⁵¹Royan Burris, interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. 1966, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording, Feingold Papers.

⁵²Roy Reed, "White Man Is Shot by Negro in Clash in Bogalusa, La.," *New York Times*, July 9, 1965; "Attack 'Triggers' Shooting at Bogalusa," *Louisiana Weekly*,

Local African Americans as well as Civil Rights workers agreed that the Deacons' presence had done more than just diminish white harassment; they were convinced that the defense squad had saved many lives. Local leader Robert Hicks told an interviewer: "If it hadn't been for these people, a setup, the idea of people willing to protect themselves—Negroes—I'd say we wouldn't be here today."⁵³ One student volunteer was convinced that "ten more would have been beaten or shot in Bogalusa if we had relied on these [federal] protection agencies."⁵⁴ CORE field secretary Richard Haley also acknowledged the Deacons' important role. "The Deacons have the effect of lowering the minimum potential for danger now," he conveyed to a reporter. "That is a valuable function, and one that CORE can't perform."⁵⁵

Ultimately, the crisis that CORE's nonviolent demonstrations and the Deacons' presence generated compelled the federal government to intervene. Confronted with almost daily violent clashes between blacks and whites, Louisiana Gov. John McKeithen and Bogalusa activists appealed for help to Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson. In reaction to this plea, the White House dispatched a mediator and a representative of the Justice Department to settle the conflict. In spite of the Justice Department's decisive steps in curtailing harassment by Ku Klux Klan and local police, however, the black defense unit remained an essential part of the Bogalusa movement.⁵⁶

July 17, 1965; Hattie Mae Hill, interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. 1966, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording, Feingold Papers; Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 285-91; "Tensions Rise in Bogalusa," *New York Times*, July 11, 1965; Honigsberg, *Crossing Border Street*, 84-86.

⁵³Robert Hicks, interview by Feingold.

⁵⁴Carl Hufbauer, "Bogalusa: Negro Community vs. Crown Colony," *Campus CORE—Lator* (Berkeley), 3 (1965): 21.

⁵⁵Quoted in "Armed Negro Unit Spreads in South," *New York Times*, June 6, 1965.

⁵⁶Roy Reed, "2 Bogalusa Pleas Given to Johnson," *New York Times*, July 15, 1965; Gene Roberts, "Bogalusa Pickets Attacked 7 Times," *New York Times*, July 17, 1965; "Man in the Middle," *Time*, July 23, 1965, 19; Roy Reed, "Klan Brought to Trial," *New York Times*, September 8, 1965; "U.S. Court Enjoins Klan in Bogalusa," *New York Times*, December 23, 1965; Roy Reed, "Bogalusa Police on Trial Again Over a Night of Violence Against Negroes," *New York Times*, December 29, 1965. For a more thorough account of the Johnson administration's response to the Bogalusa crisis, see Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 370-78.

For the local African American community, the Deacons signified more than mere protection. The defense group also was an enormous source of pride. One observer noted: "Watching the Deacons in Louisiana, one is struck repeatedly by the pride they inspire among Negroes. . . . the Deacons have proved to be a natural instrument for building community feeling and nourishing the Negro identity."⁵⁷ Historian George Lipsitz has similarly pointed out that the Deacons' "discipline and dedication inspired the community, their very existence made black people in Bogalusa think more of themselves as people who could not be pushed around."⁵⁸

For black men, moreover, the formation of the self-defense unit symbolized an affirmation of their manhood. In a letter to the editor of *Ebony*, a man from Chicago wrote in admiration: "This organization in effect explodes the myth of the moral weakness and petticoat and pulpit subordination of the Negro male."⁵⁹ Although some of Bogalusa's African American women took regular target practice and sometimes helped defend Civil Rights workers, they did not participate in the Deacons' regular patrol duties.⁶⁰ In a society permeated by symbols of masculine violence, African American men regarded the right to defend the black community as their exclusive prerogative.⁶¹

Some shocked observers likened the defense squad to dangerous "protection racketeers" or "Mao-inspired nationalists."⁶² A

⁵⁷Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," *New York Times Magazine*, August 15, 1965, 22.

⁵⁸George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia, 1988), 96.

⁵⁹L. Y. Lemon, letter to the editor, *Ebony* (November, 1965): 13.

⁶⁰"The Deacons," *Newsweek*, 29; "Summary of Incidents in Bogalusa, Louisiana, April 7-9, 1965," CORE—SRO, box 1, folder 6; Rita Dandridge, "Meriwether, Louise (1923-)," in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Brooklyn, 1993), 2:783-84.

⁶¹On the connection between violence and manhood in Southern society, see John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 18, 24, 38; Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 352-53, 368; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 43, 73.

⁶²Shana Alexander "Visit Bogalusa and You Will Look for Me," *Life*, July 2, 1965, 28.

local police officer called the Deacons "a threat to society."⁶³ Their strict focus on self-defense, however, clearly distinguished them from the revolutionary nationalists of the late 1960s. Charles Sims emphasized in a speech that "as a Deacon, you cannot fire on a man unless you've been attacked."⁶⁴ Reiterating the group's defensive character in an interview, Sims told a reporter: "I believe nonviolence is the only way. Negotiations are going to be the main point in this fight." But, according to Sims, the Deacons were necessary to protect the nonviolent movement.⁶⁵

The Deacons did accept nonviolence as a tactic, but the majority of the organization's membership considered the concept of redemptive love degrading to their manhood and few men participated in nonviolent demonstrations.⁶⁶ Deacon organizer Earnest Thomas declared in a speech: "It's not natural to let someone destroy your wife, your kids and your property and not prevent it. If this means battle, then that's the way it has to be."⁶⁷ According to Deacon Royan Burris, the defense group's militant stance also won them respect from white Southerners. "They finally found out that we really are men," he declared in an interview. It was clear "that we would do what we said, and that we meant what we said."⁶⁸ Rather than loving their enemy, Charles Sims pointed out in an interview that the Deacons had always "walked like men."⁶⁹ Defying the Southern myth of the submissive and contented Negro, the Deacons powerfully asserted African Americans' dignity and manhood.⁷⁰

⁶³Zimmerman, "Race and Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against Attacks," 18.

⁶⁴Speech by Charles Sims, Pres. of Bogalusa Chapter at Meeting of New York Militant Labor Forum on Dec. 17, " *The Militant*, December 27, 1965.

⁶⁵"The Deacons—and Their Impact," *National Guardian*, September 4, 1965.

⁶⁶"Northern Members, Plea Begun," *Afro-American*, November 27, 1965.

⁶⁷Quoted in "Deacons Take Aim at Klan in North; Locate in Chicago," *Afro-American*, October 23, 1965.

⁶⁸Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," 11.

⁶⁹Interview with Charles R. Sims, in Howell Raines, ed., *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York, 1977), 421.

⁷⁰A. Z. Young, interview by Feingold.

While armed self-defense became a vital part of local Civil Rights projects in Louisiana, it posed a serious predicament for CORE. The question as to how to react to the breach of the non-violent discipline plunged many pacifist activists into moral conflict. Field worker Miriam Feingold spoke for many when she asked during a staff meeting in early 1964: "Is a violent person [a] 'traitor to our cause?'"⁷¹ Organizing in a small black community not far from Bogalusa in 1965, pacifist CORE worker Meldon Acheson found himself the last representative of an insignificant minority. "Nearly everyone in the community is armed to the teeth," he wrote in a letter to his parents. With considerable resignation, he noted that "all but one are committed to nonviolence only as a tactic." His attempts to convert the local black population to philosophical nonviolence soon fizzled.⁷² Only long-time pacifist and CORE member Bayard Rustin remained unequivocally opposed to defense groups such as the Deacons. Condemning any kind of violence in the movement, he emphasized in an interview: "I'm against the Klan doing it. I'm against the Minutemen doing it. I'm against the Negroes doing it—for any reason."⁷³

Armed self-defense triggered many vigorous philosophical discussions among the Louisiana task force, but most CORE field workers came to accept black protection as a simple necessity. In a letter to the regional CORE office, Mike Lesser discussed his work in West Feliciana Parish: "Incidentally, so you don't get the wrong idea, we are preaching non-violence, but [we] can only *preach* non-violence. We cannot tell someone not to defend his property and the lives of his family, and let me tell you, these 15-20 shotguns guarding our meetings are very reassuring."⁷⁴

The national office of CORE, on the other hand, was in danger of tarnishing its nonviolent image by endorsing armed resistance. National CORE repeatedly admonished its staff to advocate non-

⁷¹Miriam Feingold, "Staff Meeting, New Orleans, La., February 14, 1964," notebook no. 10, microfilm, reel 2, frame 422, Feingold Papers.

⁷²Meldon Acheson to Dear Mother and Dad, July 10, 1965; Meldon Acheson to Hi, y'all!, August 6, 1965; Meldon Acheson to Hi, y'all!, July 30, 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers.

⁷³Quoted in Jack Nelson, "Arming of Negroes in Right Fight Assailed," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1965.

⁷⁴Mike Lesser to Terry Perlman, November 4, 1963.

violence and to urge local African Americans to leave their guns at home. "Be very careful in advocating self-defense in [the] community," activists were exhorted at a staff meeting in July 1964. "Urge people *not* to carry guns"⁷⁵ However, few activists followed this directive. Despite their commitment to nonviolence, CORE workers Charles Fenton and Bill Yates actually assisted in organizing the Deacons chapters in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, while CORE's national image played only a minor role in their considerations. Most field staff focused on the interests of the local black communities upon whom they depended. In a staff meeting at the end of 1963, two activists angrily responded to the admonition that CORE could not afford to advocate retaliation, "to hell w[ith] CORE, we're w[ith] the people!"⁷⁶

By 1965, most activists and volunteers had pragmatically agreed that adhering to pure nonviolence would be counterproductive in rural Louisiana. Asked if she approved of the Deacons, one California student bluntly responded, "[n]ot really, but when you're down there, it's an irrelevant question."⁷⁷ CORE field secretary Richard Haley spoke for many when he later explained, "CORE was in a peculiar position . . . the truth is that most of us were grateful that there was a Deacons for Defense around. CORE couldn't walk around with guns, but the Deacons could." Some CORE workers, however, did start carrying guns and assisted the Deacons in guarding black homes. CORE organizer Isaac Reynolds regularly carried a pistol and a revolver when driving on lonely country roads in the state, while a young college student from California joined the Deacons in patrolling the black neighborhood.⁷⁸

National Director James Farmer had to be more cautious in dealing with the issue of armed resistance. In his apparent attempts to preserve CORE's nonviolent image, he conspicuously blurred the distinction between philosophical and tactical nonvio-

⁷⁵"Louisiana Summer Task Force Staff Meeting, July 15, 1964," CORE—SRO, box 9, folder 12.

⁷⁶Miriam Feingold, "Notes on Staff Meeting," November 24, 1963, microfilm, reel 1, frame 789, Feingold Papers.

⁷⁷Quoted in Alexander, "Visit Bogalusa and You Will Look for Me," 28.

⁷⁸Fred Powledge, *Free At Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston, 1991), 573; Carl Hufbauer, "Bogalusa: Negro Community vs. Crown Colony," 21.

lence. The organization's legitimacy as an acceptable Civil Rights organization as well as its financial well being depended almost exclusively on white Northern liberals, who easily confused the acknowledged right of self-defense with the specter of "black violence."⁷⁹ Aware of the complex dynamics of sympathy and fear that determined the response of many white Americans to the Civil Rights movement, elder statesman of pacifism and early CORE mentor A. J. Muste criticized that "[m]any act as if they thought Negroes have a peculiar obligation to be nonviolent."⁸⁰ Letters by white CORE sympathizers to James Farmer served as an additional reminder about the fragility of Northern support. "Although only a small percentage of whites will help actively," a white man from New Jersey wrote in 1963, "the majority feel guilty and will not oppose the Negro's advance as long as it is nonviolent," and only if CORE maintained its nonviolent image, would "sympathetic bystanders" continue to support the organization.⁸¹

Hence, James Farmer was at pains to reassure the public about CORE's nonviolent philosophy. Undoubtedly aware of these complexities, field worker Bill Yates advised in 1965 that "[t]he Deacons should definitely be kept in the background."⁸² Similarly, activists attempted to disavow any close association between CORE and the defense group. When the *New York Post* published an article in April 1965 that suggested a direct link between the Deacons and CORE, Farmer's secretary immediately dispatched a letter to the editor, emphatically noting that "CORE does not advocate self-defense through the use of violence." He emphasized that the organization unequivocally believed that nonviolence remained "the most effective approach to social

⁷⁹Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 135-36; Lillian Smith to James Robinson, July 20, 1959, CORE Papers, series 5, box 35, folder 4; B. Ruth Powell to all concerned, July 9, 1963, CORE Papers, microfilm reel 7, frame 00158; Jerome Wyckoff to James Farmer, July 15, 1963, CORE Papers, microfilm, reel 29, frame 00069.

⁸⁰A. J. Muste, "Rifle Squads or the Beloved Community," *Liberation* (May, 1964): 8-9.

⁸¹Jerome Wyckoff to James Farmer, July 15, 1963, CORE Papers, microfilm, reel 29, frame 00069.

⁸²Bill Yates, "Staff Meeting—April 12, 1965," CORE—SRO, box 4, folder 2.

change."⁸³ The same month on the CBS broadcast "Face the Nation," James Farmer reiterated CORE's unconditional adherence to nonviolence. The Deacons, he stressed, used their weapons only in self-defense and accepted the nonviolent discipline during demonstrations.⁸⁴

In a *New York Amsterdam News* editorial, Farmer continued to reject the ostensible danger that the Deacons posed to CORE's nonviolent stance. According to Farmer, the Deacons were a "strict and disciplined defense organization" that would "not seek violence." Resisting any dogmatic interpretation of nonviolence, however, he wrote: "We believe non-violence still has much tactical validity in the Civil Rights Revolution and many of us are philosophically committed to non-violence as a way of life."⁸⁵ In reality, though, by 1965, most CORE activists had abandoned philosophical nonviolence.

Attempting to downplay the militancy of the Deacons, Farmer frequently made a distinction between armed self-defense "outside" the movement and CORE's nonviolent demonstrations. In one TV interview, he remarked about the Deacons: "You must understand, when a man's home is attacked that's not the movement, that's his home." Despite the interviewer's insistence that CORE's demonstrations took place in the streets, not in people's homes, Farmer voiced his conviction that guns and peaceful demonstrations could be separated.⁸⁶ However, Louisiana had convincingly demonstrated that armed self-defense and nonviolent direct action frequently worked hand in hand, playing an indispensable role in the survival and success of local Civil Rights projects.

Activists' experience with the necessity of armed resistance against white terror in the South, combined with the influence of black nationalism in Northern CORE chapters, led to the gradual

⁸³"KKK, CORE in Gun Battle," *New York Post*, April 8, 1965; Robert Brookins Gore to Mr. Wechsler, April 8, 1965, CORE Papers, Addendum, microfilm, reel 16, frame 1327.

⁸⁴"Face the Nation," CBS Television Broadcast, transcript, April 25, 1965, CORE Papers, Addendum, microfilm, reel 1, frame 0048.

⁸⁵James Farmer, "The CORE of It!," editorial, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 10, 1965.

⁸⁶James Farmer, "Interview, WABC-TV, July 18, 1965, New York," CORE Papers, Addendum, microfilm, reel 4, frame 0984.

radicalization of CORE. As early as 1965, Northern delegates openly contested the organization's commitment to pacifism and nonviolence during CORE's annual convention. The Brooklyn chapter—though committed to tactical nonviolence—requested "that the National CORE Convention endorse the right and need of people to organize and defend themselves against terrorist attacks."⁸⁷

The convention clearly reflected the disparate currents swirling in the black freedom struggle. For the first time, a representative of the Nation of Islam had been invited to speak, and concerns about African Americans in Northern ghettos were featured more prominently in the debates. In stark contrast to Northern black militants, who were disenchanted with CORE's nonviolent philosophy, the representative of the Deacons, Earnest Thomas, exhorted the delegates to continue the nonviolent tactic. Although Thomas proposed to establish Deacon chapters across the country to protect Civil Rights workers, he emphasized that nonviolence should remain an essential component of the movement.⁸⁸ In the end, a majority of delegates barely averted a vote on the issue of self-defense. Immediately thereafter, an official press release proudly announced: "In effect this means that the present stand that CORE is a non-violent organization with no exception stands."⁸⁹ Though wavering dangerously, CORE's non-violent image had been preserved one more time.

The James Meredith March in June 1966 forced these festering debates into the open. Longtime activist Meredith had been a true believer in nonviolence. In spite of harassment and intimidation experienced during his attempt to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962, he adhered to nonresistance. After a white gunman ambushed him on the first day of his Mississippi March Against Fear, however, he reconsidered his commitment. Recovering from the attack in a hospital, an angry Meredith told reporters: "I'm sorry I didn't have something to take care of that

⁸⁷"Brooklyn CORE: National Convention Resolutions," CORE Papers, series 4, box 1, folder 4.

⁸⁸"Minutes of 23rd Annual Convention, July 1 through 5, 1965, Durham, North Carolina," Meier-Rudwick Collection, box 2, folder 1; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 402.

⁸⁹CORE News Staff, "Convention Decisions, Morning Session, 5 July 1965," press release, CORE Papers, series 4, box 1, folder 4.

man." On future visits to Mississippi, he informed a *New York Times* reporter, he would be armed.⁹⁰

The Congress of Racial Equality immediately announced the continuation of the demonstration, asking other Civil Rights organizations to join. During the organizational meetings, national Civil Rights leaders engaged in a vigorous debate about armed self-defense. This question, along with the debates about the role of whites and the hesitancy of the federal government to support the movement, eventually split the frail coalition. When Floyd McKissick, CORE's new director, Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC signed a manifesto highly critical of the Johnson administration and agreed to have the Deacons for Defense and Justice protect the march, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins and the Urban League's Whitney Young, Jr., angrily withdrew their support.⁹¹

Invited to protect the demonstrators, the Deacons for Defense and Justice patrolled the campgrounds, escorted activists to the airport, and searched for bombs in areas adjacent to the march route.⁹² SNCC worker Cleveland Sellers recalled the Deacons' assistance: "They would tell us certain things we needed to know along the way. They would go into the wooded areas. They would check cars out. They would keep their eyes on all of those things, but the spirit was around self-defense."⁹³ It is likely that the Deacons' presence alone prevented violent attacks by whites, though police harassment remained a frustrating reality during most of the march.

⁹⁰Quoted in Roy Reed, "Meredith Regrets He Was Not Armed," *New York Times*, June 8, 1966; James H. Meredith, "Big Changes Are Coming," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 13, 1966, 23-27.

⁹¹Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York, 1990), 286; Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (1973; reprint ed., Jackson, Miss., 1990), 162; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York, 1967), 25-29; Roy Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (1982; reprint ed., New York, 1994), 316-17.

⁹²Roy Reed, "Civil Rights March Presses Deeper into Mississippi on Meredith's Route," *New York Times*, June 10, 1966; Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 165.

⁹³Sellers quoted in *Voices of Freedom*, 286.

During a hot and humid night on June 17, 1966, Stokely Carmichael of SNCC planted a new slogan that would become the catch phrase of future black militants. "We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'," Carmichael shouted into the sultry night at the rally in Greenwood. "What we gonna start saying now," he angrily declared, "is Black Power!" The crowd of several thousand African Americans responded with an enthusiastic roar and kept chanting "Black Power!"⁹⁴ In the minds of many white observers, the ambiguous new slogan symbolized the end of nonviolence although Carmichael tried to convey that Black Power referred mainly to the political power of African Americans. But he knew that "whites get nervous when we don't keep talking about brotherly love."⁹⁵ Despite regular attempts by representatives of CORE and other Civil Rights groups to convince white America that Black Power did not mean black violence, most whites already associated the term with armed rebellions and guerilla warfare.⁹⁶

CORE's annual convention shortly after the march clearly reflected the changing mood. Southern activists, influenced by the experience of constant white terror and homegrown Southern black militancy, joined militant Northern CORE members, deeply affected by the black nationalist rhetoric of Malcolm X, in modifying the organization's traditional stance.⁹⁷ During a conference in February 1966, Southern CORE staff had already discussed alternatives to philosophical nonviolence. In a report, Richard Haley noted that "[a] committee also got together to draw up a statement on Nonviolence. The paper stated that non-violence has been unsuccessful in solving any of the problems which confront the Negro population; that the CORE policy on non-violence

⁹⁴Quoted in Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 166-67.

⁹⁵"Civil Rights: Black Power," *Newsweek*, June 27, 1966, 36; Paul Good, "A White Look at Black Power," *The Nation*, August 8, 1966, 112-17.

⁹⁶Robert E. Dallos, "CORE Chief Assails Humphrey for 'Racist' Views," *New York Times*, July 8, 1966; "Black Power Defined," CORE Papers, Addendum, microfilm, reel 5, frame 0956; William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago, 1992), 18.

⁹⁷Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 399.

should be either m[o]dified or removed in keeping with the current situation."⁹⁸

In some Northern chapters, commitment to nonviolence had begun to dwindle as early as 1962. As one field secretary explained, "[i]n meetings with Northern CORE groups we don't talk about nonviolence anymore."⁹⁹ Confronted with daily news reports about white terror in the South, Northern members' confidence in pacifism continued to erode. At the Western regional conference in early 1964, one CORE member observed "a disturbing atmosphere of lightly-suppressed violence, particularly among the leadership."¹⁰⁰ Shortly after the shooting of Meredith, Harlem CORE publicly vowed that "in any future action wherein we want to behave in a nonviolent manner we will seek the protection of our brothers to guarantee this right."¹⁰¹ During the annual convention in 1966, this development translated into an almost unanimous call for armed protection and Black Power.

In contrast to the cautious James Farmer, who had attempted to guard CORE's nonviolent image in the media, new national director Floyd McKissick now openly endorsed armed self-defense. "The right of self-defense is a constitutional right," he told the delegates, "and you can't expect black people to surrender this right while whites maintain it."¹⁰² While not rejecting nonviolence outright, McKissick stressed its merely tactical character and declared that "the philosophy of nonviolence is a dying philosophy." Virtually calling for open retaliation, CORE's national director announced: "Let the Ku Klux Klan come down the street and start bombing churches and homes, they are gonna get some bombing back."¹⁰³ The resolution on armed self-defense passed by the national convention echoed McKissick's angry

⁹⁸Richard Haley, "CORE Southern Staff Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 6 and 7, 1966," Robert Curvin Papers, SHSW.

⁹⁹Quoted in Bell, *CORE and the Strategy of Nonviolence*, 57.

¹⁰⁰Thomas J. Cummins to James Farmer, April 20, 1964, CORE Papers, Addendum, microfilm, reel 9, frame 0085.

¹⁰¹Douglas E. Kneeland, "Meredith to Resume March June 16 in Mississippi," *New York Times*, June 10, 1966.

¹⁰²Quoted in Lester A. Sobel, ed., *Civil Rights 1960-66* (New York, 1967), 376.

¹⁰³"Director of CORE Criticizes Nonviolence as a Dying Principle," *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1966.

rhetoric. "CORE accepts the concept of self-defense by the Deacons," the resolution stated, "and believes that the use of guns by CORE workers on a Southern project is a personal decision, with the approval of that project's and the Regional directors."¹⁰⁴ Founded as a small primarily white cadre organization on the basis of Gandhi's teachings, CORE had been transformed into a virtually all-black mass organization that seemed to doubt even the tactical efficacy of nonviolence.¹⁰⁵

By the end of 1967, after dozens of urban riots had erupted in black ghettos all across the United States, the appeal of nonviolence had clearly dwindled. Martin Luther King's assertion on "Meet the Press" that "the vast majority of Negroes feel that nonviolence is the best strategy, the best tactic to use in this moment of social transition," represented a statement of hope rather than a description of reality.¹⁰⁶ Revolutionary black nationalists such as the Black Panthers and their call for armed self-defense and black pride were far more popular among black ghetto youth than the philosophy of redemptive love.

After King's assassination on April 4, 1968, even the most naïve idealist had to concede that the age of nonviolence was over. Calling King the "last prince of nonviolence" at the slain leader's funeral, Floyd McKissick remarked with resignation: "Nonviolence is a dead philosophy and it was not the black people that killed it."¹⁰⁷ A 1969 CORE pamphlet echoed the movement's ideological shift. "The idea of remaining non-violent when confronted with violence is contrary to human nature and human psychology," the pamphlet stated. According to the author of the leaflet, Gandhi's nonviolent technique would promote only "racism and acts of violence against Blacks."¹⁰⁸ By the end of the 1960s, black activists considered Gandhi's teachings obsolete.

¹⁰⁴"Resolutions for the Resolution Committee of the National Convention of CORE, July 1 to July 4 from the Northeast Region," CORE Papers, series 4, box 2, folder 1.

¹⁰⁵Bill Bradley, "Our Southern Projects: 'A Review'," 1965, Robert Curvin Papers.

¹⁰⁶"Meet the Press," August 13, 1967, Vol. 11, No. 33 (Washington, 1967): 1-9.

¹⁰⁷Quoted in "'King Is the Man, Oh Lord'," *Newsweek*, April 13, 1968, 38.

¹⁰⁸"A Brief History of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1942-1969," February 1969, Meier-Rudwick Collection, box 3, folder 3.

The history of the Congress of Racial Equality in Louisiana strongly suggests that the traditional narrative of the black freedom struggle needs revision. The story of the Louisiana freedom movement demonstrates that armed self-defense and nonviolent direct action frequently worked in tandem in local Civil Rights projects long before militant Black Power advocates voiced their call for armed resistance in 1966. Local African Americans' determination to protect their homes, their families, and the movement added to CORE activists' disenchantment with philosophical nonviolence, ultimately leading to its demise. The available evidence implies, then, that the modern Civil Rights movement's gradual radicalization had deep roots in the Southern black freedom struggle. To be sure, the year 1966 signifies an important ideological shift in the movement—particularly its emphasis on black pride and Pan-Africanism.¹⁰⁹ Neither should armed self-defense be simply equated with Black Power. To ignore the significant role of homegrown Southern black militancy, however, clearly diminishes the complexity of the black freedom struggle and disregards the crucial contribution of so-called ordinary people to social change.

¹⁰⁹On the ideological strands of Black Power, see John T. McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African-American Political Thought* (Philadelphia, 1992); and Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*.