

Civil Rights and armed struggle in the sixties

Interview with a Southern militant

Much has been written about the Southern civil rights struggles of the sixties, but very few analysts and historians have discussed and evaluated the armed wing of that movement, though a few episodes of armed struggle are well known. Robert F. Williams described the war against the Ku Klux Klan in Monroe, North Carolina, in his book *Negroes With Guns*.

Two episodes in 1963 called attention to the movement's armed potential. One was the episode when Martin Luther King arrived in Birmingham at the height of the mass confrontations between police and the Black community and called upon the people to lay down their weapons. The other was in the Mississippi Delta when Hartman Turnbow returned fire when his home was attacked by white terrorists, successfully routing them and making his name a legend in the movement. A few years later, Hattiesburg NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer died while defending his home against a Ku Klux Klan assault, but held off the attackers with his shotgun long enough for his family to escape to safety.

Eventually the movement's armed defense potential was formally organized into the Deacons for Defense and Justice, which did receive considerable attention in the media — especially when armed Deacons appeared at marches, rallies, and demonstrations to provide protection. An interview with Charles R. Sims, President of the Deacons' Bogalusa chapter, was originally published in the *National Guardian* and can be found in Joanne Grant's book, *Black Protest*.

It is the offensive military side of the movement that has received no coverage at all. Recently *Urgent Tasks* interviewed an activist in Georgia who served both as a movement organizer and guerrilla fighter in the sixties.

Q. What I'm basically interested in is the armed struggle of the sixties. I know from my own experience that it took a lot of different forms. I remember a meeting in Georgia in 1961 when people were saying, "We've got to get our shit together to be able to deal with this stuff." I don't remember myself when the Deacons for Defense and Justice was formed, but it must have been fairly early.

A. 1963 or 1964.

Q. Was that formed first in Bogalusa or someplace else?

A. That was formed in Bogalusa, Louisiana. In terms of paramilitary movements during the sixties,

there were several. There's some minor successes, and maybe some of the successes could be considered major. I remember white people in Philadelphia, Mississippi, coming down to the SNCC office and houses where movement people lived, shooting in houses. And one night all that stopped, because when they shot, they were shot back and they were hit. So that stopped that.

Q. What year was that?

A. This had to be around 1966, or maybe latter 1965. It stopped that. And for those people it was a big victory. People were terrorized to be in their own homes because of threats of white people coming and shooting.

Q. We're talking about Ralph Featherstone, who was one of the well-loved people in SNCC.

A. Yes. One of the things that I remember about Feather is that he was the kind of guy that dealt with the situation, whatever the situation was. Basically he was a planner in economics, that kind of thing. But he was not afraid to deal with whatever came up, and one of the early signs that he was not afraid was there in Philadelphia in the summer of 1966 when the Klan and other conspirators were shooting into the SNCC office and shooting into people's houses. Feather organized a group of fellas to shoot back, and they stopped it. And then later on, in 1969 or 1970, you hear about Feather getting blown away in a car.

Q. That was with Che Payne in Maryland. The assumption then is that he fell as a soldier in that situation?

A. Yes, he did. Tragically, but a brave soldier. And there were people throughout the movement who understood that. Without mentioning names we can go on talking about other soldiers who were just as brave as Feather and contributed just as much as Feather. It might never have made the paper, but if people in paramilitary groups can make life at least tolerable for poor people in those communities where they were afraid. . . . You know, we can't now get a sense of the fear that was in people's hearts in communities, especially in the South. In many of those communities people didn't even look up at white people when they spoke to them; they looked down. It had been going on for generations and generations. For those people not to fear white people, and say, "We want a part of this political process," even, that's a big step forward.

So maybe guys who helped bring people to that

level, I'd have to classify them all as soldiers, whether they were willing to take a gun and make a stand, or sometimes one who could get it done without doing that — I think he's just as valuable. But there was some armed struggle in Black communities throughout the country that coincided, you might say it was a product of the movement. There's been struggle in the Black community since the beginning of time, it just hasn't been documented — that's the problem.

Q. Reprisals are obvious things. One example we know of is when the man who lynched Emmett Till was shot in West Point, Mississippi, in 1969. Are there other cases?

A. Well, you know, a lot of things happened, and you read about them in the paper, and you don't realize what's really going down. For instance, if a service station owner would slap a Black lady or spit on a Black lady, and two or three weeks later his service station mysteriously burns down, I would call that a reprisal. That kind of thing happened all the time.

In various places throughout the South there were movements. I spent a lot of time in 1968, 1967, and the latter part of 1966 in Arkansas, and there was a movement there. A lot of brothers got together and they did a lot of things that proved beneficial to the poor people living in those areas — community patrols. That kind of thing was going on in Atlanta also. It was going on in Cairo, Illinois, where Charles Koen was.

But the problem with most of those movements was that the people who had to do the guerrilla activities were also visible people. And they had to make a life-or-death stand. Like Koen had to stand up and say, "We're here. Come and get us." And that kind of operation is going to fail.

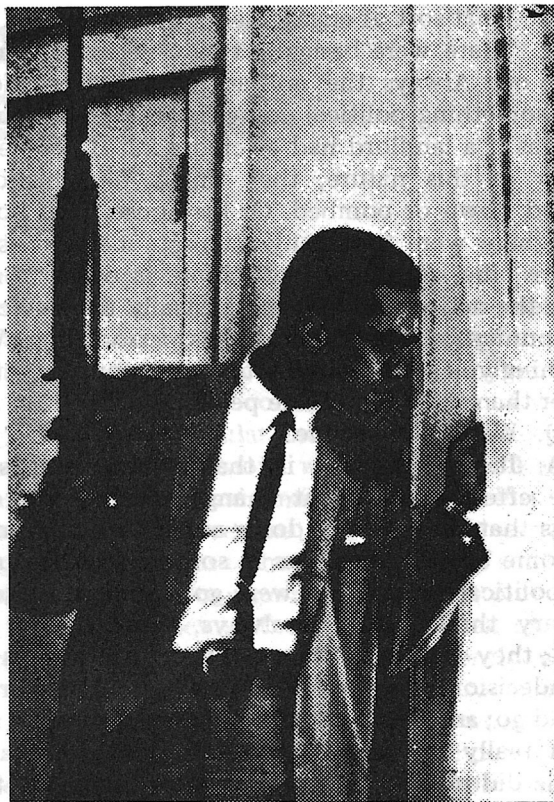
And a lot of times the paramilitary operation was born out of frustration, when everything else you tried to do failed. Then you realized that, hey, we've got to take it a step further. And one of the most disheartening things about all of that is that Black people are basically a Christian people, and do not really believe in those kinds of military operations. Part of the job that people who were involved in those operations, part of what they had to do, is explain the need for protection to the community in which they were living and operating.

Q. You said that there were several different organized paramilitary groups. About how many people were in each unit?

A. I would say less than 20.

Q. Did one unit know of the existence of others? Did they have organizational contact?

A. Let's put it like this. Most of the units that I knew grew out of a larger political organization. I'm not going to say that they were all part of some political organization and this was the military part of this political organization. It wasn't that way. But it grew



out of — when I say grew out of, people who were part of political organizations who got frustrated, fed up with the fact that they were getting their asses kicked every day, who may have just dropped out of the organization altogether, decided to form a paramilitary group, who identified with the political aspirations of that larger organization, but who felt that they needed to work outside of that organization maybe to achieve some things, and maybe just to protect what that organization was trying to do.

Q. What sort of people were normally the ones who would form those sorts of groups? Were they young people? Were they people who had military experience? What were their backgrounds?

A. I would basically say young middle class. Some had been leading political people in organizations. Maybe one or two had some service experience, but most did not. They just learned, they did what they did, by trial and error. That's why many of them failed.

Q. Tell me about Georgia.

A. Well, there were some brothers here in Georgia, some were affiliated with the Panthers, some were affiliated with SNCC. A lot of these brothers had left the organization but had returned to those places and began to organize around things like rent strikes or poor housing conditions, food, things of that nature, but also with a willingness to protect the community.

Q. Let's take that as an example. What period are we talking about?

A. The period we're talking about now is late 1968, 1969, early 1970.

Q. What sort of engagements took place?

A. There were basically two types of operations going on. Always the military actions were tied in with something political going on in the community. Such as if a landlord had evicted a lot of people, and things of this nature, they might find his office burned down or bombed. Or his house. I do not believe there were too many attempts made at assassinations, the second type of thing. In other words, I think the actions taken were basically to protect the community, maybe to show this person that "We're watching you, and you'd better cease your activities," rather than to eliminate the person.

Q. Was that effective?

A. It was effective in that it had some short-range effect. You might change some of the overt things that this person's doing at the time. You might get some better conditions in some places because of the political things that were going on, and also the military threat. But, as always, these groups were small; they were not financed; there was always a lot of indecision within the groups as to how far you should go; and this kind of thing.

It really gets back to two things. One is that the people did not have any training, or very little training. And secondly, they were reluctant to deal with military-type situations. They did it because they felt it had to be done, not because it was something they really wanted to do.

I don't know where you begin. Black people have been revolting in this country ever since they've been here. There were people long before the sit-ins who were dealing with white society on a one-to-one basis and winning. That has always happened. The only reason you had it on such a wide scale in the sixties was because of the movement itself, and the kind of awareness that had grown in those Black communities, where it might not be a guy and his brother doing it now; it might be a guy and his friend, somebody he didn't even know two years before.

That was one of the reasons that Black paramilitary groups were so easily infiltrated. People were doing things because they believed this is what had to be done. They were hooking up with other people who they thought believed the same way, and a lot of times it was cops they were hooking up with.

Q. Is it reasonable to believe that generally these developments began defensively and only later became offensive?

A. Yes. You know, like the first larger unit of the type we're talking about was the Deacons. And it was basically to protect and defend the Black people of that community.

Q. I remember that the Deacons sent their entire military contingent to the Black Power march, the Meredith march, I guess all the way from Greenwood to Jackson.

A. Yes, they did.

Q. So it was clear that by a certain point they no longer viewed themselves as protectors of that one community — actually by that time they had spread to a number of cities and towns in Louisiana and Mississippi — but protectors of the movement.

A. No, I think they still viewed themselves as protectors of the community, but I think they also realized Meredith, a Black man, had gotten shot because he dared to walk the highways of Mississippi to protest what was and still is a legitimate grievance. And the fact was that he was shot down. And Black people had to rally to that no matter where they were. And the Deacons were not the only group who came to march for those purposes.

Q. Can you tell me who else?

A. The Deacons is the only group I know by name and reputation, but there was also another group out of Chicago. At that time a certain brother was in Chicago, and there were some people who came down with him.

Q. That particular group actually goes back to the middle sixties. I remember they had some people in Selma, and in Mississippi, in 1964 and 1965, and for some years after that. And they were organized even earlier.

A. Later on, after the movement began to die out, you began to find out what people were doing in terms of paramilitary operations throughout the country. And I don't know too many cities where some things did not go on. When you hear about people throwing rocks and burning a few buildings on the news, you might as well believe that a whole lot more than that happened.

Q. You've talked about a group that was colloquially called the Cowboys. How far back did that go?

A. That was a group that really lived a very short time. It didn't start until about late 1967 after some things happened in a couple of places, like New Orleans — some people going to jail. Some people were presented with some long prison terms if they ever had trials. It grew out of a frustration, a need to do something. Some people hooked up with other people, some of those groups we talked about, and began doing things that were really daring, to say the least. I talked to some of the guys, and I know they were all dedicated. They all felt that what they were doing had to be done. They all wanted to be successful, but I think a lot of them doubted very seriously whether they would be, for a lot of different reasons. They didn't have the kind of weaponry to do what they wanted to do. And the few things that they did do successfully resulted in them having to go underground for long periods of time, and finally many of them wound up in jail.

Q. What were their successes?

A. Well, I'm not going to say, but there was one success in Mississippi. I'll just put it that way.