

THE EYES ON THE PRIZE

CIVIL RIGHTS READER

DOCUMENTS, SPEECHES, AND
FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS FROM
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE,
1954-1990

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1. "Is Violence Necessary to Combat Injustice? For the Positive: Williams Says 'We Must Fight Back' "

Robert F. Williams

Robert F. Williams of Monroe, North Carolina, was one of the few civil rights activists who openly challenged the idea that blacks should rely on nonviolent tactics. In 1959 Williams's position had prompted the national office of the NAACP to suspend him as head of its Monroe chapter. This selection originally appeared in Liberation magazine (September 1959).

In 1954, I was an enlisted man in the United States Marine Corps. I shall never forget the evening we (heard) the historic Supreme Court decision that segregation in the public schools is unconstitutional.

At last I felt that I was a part of America and that I belonged. That was what I had always wanted, even as a child.

I returned to civilian life in 1955 and the hope I had for Negro liberation faltered. Acts of violence and words and deeds of hate and spite rose from every quarter. There is open defiance to law and order throughout the South today. I have become disillusioned.

Laws serve to deter crime and protect the weak from the strong in civilized society. Where there is a breakdown of law, where is the force of deterrent? Only highly civilized and moral individuals respect the rights of others. The Southern brute respects only force. Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist.

I have great respect for the pacifist, that is for the pure pacifist. I am not a pacifist and I am sure I may safely say most of my people are not. Passive resistance is a powerful weapon in gaining concessions from oppressors, but I venture to say that if Mack Parker [a black man lynched in 1959] had had an automatic shotgun at his disposal, he could have served as a great deterrent against lynching.

In 1957 the Klan moved into Monroe and Union County (N.C.). Their numbers steadily increased to the point wherein the local press reported 7500 at one rally. They became so brazen that mile-long motorcades started invading the Negro community.

These hooded thugs fired pistols from car windows. On one occasion they caught a Negro woman on the street and tried to force her to dance for them at gun point. Drivers of cars tried to run Negroes down. Lawlessness was rampant. Instead of cowering, we organized an armed guard. On one occasion, we had to exchange gunfire with the Klan.

Each time the Klan came on a raid they were led by police cars. We appealed to the President of the United States to have the Justice Department investigate the police. We appealed to Governor Luther Hodges. All our appeals to constituted law were in vain.

A group of nonviolent ministers met the City Board of Aldermen and pleaded with them to restrict the Klan from the colored community. The city fathers advised these cringing, begging Negro ministers that the Klan had constitutional rights to meet and organize the same way as the NAACP.

Not having been infected by turn-the-other-cheekism, a group of Negroes who showed a willingness to fight caused the city officials to deprive the Klan of its constitutional rights after local papers told of dangerous incidents between Klansmen and armed Negroes. Klan motorcades have been legally banned from the City of Monroe.

On May 5, 1959, while president of the Union County branch of the NAACP, I made a statement to the United Press International after a trial wherein a white man was supposed to have been tried for kicking a Negro maid down a flight of stairs in a local white hotel. In spite of the fact that there was an eyewitness, the defendant failed to show up for his trial, and was completely exonerated.

Another case in the same court involved a white man who had come to a pregnant Negro mother's home and attempted to rape her. In recorder's court the only defense offered for the defendant was that "he's not guilty. He was just drunk and having a little fun." A white woman neighbor testified that the woman had come

to her house excited, her clothes torn, her feet bare and begging her for assistance; the court was unmoved.

This great miscarriage of justice left me sick inside, and I said then what I say now. I believe Negroes must be willing to defend themselves, their women, their children and their homes. They must be willing to die and to kill in repelling their assailants. Negroes *must* protect themselves, it is obvious that the federal government will not put an end to lynching; therefore it becomes necessary for us to stop lynching with violence.

Some Negroes leaders have cautioned me that if Negroes fight back, the racist will have cause to exterminate the race.

This government is in no position to allow mass violence to erupt, let alone allow twenty million Negroes to be exterminated.

It is instilled at an early age that men who violently and swiftly rise to oppose tyranny are virtuous examples to emulate. I have been taught by my government to fight. Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone.

2. "The Social Organization of Non-Violence"

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The article from which this selection is excerpted originally appeared in the issue of Liberation magazine (October 1959), following the one in which Robert F. Williams's article was published. King was by now a national figure and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization he and other activist ministers had formed early in 1957 in the wake of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Here one must be clear that there are three different views on the subject of violence. One is the approach of pure nonviolence, which cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage. The second is violence exercised in self-defense, which all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal.