

*"Somebody in the crowd fired a pistol and the people again started to scream hysterically, 'Kill the niggers! Kill the niggers! Pour gasoline on the niggers!' The mob started to throw stones on top of my car. So I opened the door of the car and I put one foot on the ground and stood up in the door holding an Italian carbine.*

*All this time three policeman had been standing about fifty feet away from us while we kept waiting in the car for them to come and rescue us. Then when they saw that we were armed and the mob couldn't take us, two of the policemen started running. One ran straight to me, grabbed me on the shoulder, and said, 'Surrender your weapon! Surrender your weapon!' I struck him in the face and knocked him back away from the car and put my carbine in his face, and told him that we didn't intend to be lynched. The other policeman who had run around the side of the car started to draw his revolver out of the holster. He was hoping to shoot me in the back. They didn't know that we had more than one gun. One of the students (who was seventeen years old) put a .45 in the policeman's face and told him that if he pulled out his pistol he would kill him. The policeman started putting his gun back into the holster and backing away from the car, and he fell into the ditch.*

*There was a very old man, an old white man out in the crowd, and he started screaming and crying like a baby, and he kept crying, and he said, 'God damn, God damn, what is this God damn country coming to that the niggers have got guns, the niggers are armed and the police can't even arrest them!' He kept crying and somebody led him away through the crowd."*

-from *Negroes with Guns*, documenting a 1961 NAACP campaign to integrate a public swimming pool.



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# I WILL NOT CRAWL

excerpts from Robert F. Williams on Black struggle and armed self-defense in Monroe, NC

Gospel, not so much by the fighting sects as by the Quakers, and not so much by Quaker men as by Quaker women?

This event advertises me that there is such a fact as death; the possibility of a man's dying. It seems as if no man had ever died in America before; for in order to die you must first have lived.

It is in the nature of the American Negro, the same as all other men, to fight and try to destroy those things that block his path to a greater happiness in life.

## **The Future Belongs to Today's Oppressed**

Whenever I speak on the English-language radio station in Havana (which broadcasts for an audience in the United States) I hope in some way to penetrate the mental barriers and introduce new disturbing elements into the consciousness of white America. I hope to make them aware of the monstrous evil that they are party to by, oppressing the Negro. Somehow, I must manage to clearly reflect the image of evil that is inherent in a racist society so that white America will be able to honestly and fully see themselves as they really are. To see themselves with the same clarity as foreigners see them and to recognize that they are not champions of democracy. To understand that today they do not really even believe in democracy. To understand that the world is changing regardless of whether they think they like it or not.

For I know that if they had a glimpse of their own reality the shock would be of great therapeutic value. There would be many decent Americans who would then understand that this society must mend its ways if it is to survive; that there is no place in the world now for a racist nation. As an individual, I'm not inclined toward "politics." The only thing I care about is justice and liberation. I don't belong to any political party. But I think that as long as the present politics prevails the Negro is not going to be integrated into American society. There will have to be great political changes before that can come about.

Those Americans who most deny the logic of the future are the ones who have driven me into exile. Those people have been cruel. Yet cruel as it may be, this exile was not the end those people had planned for me. But it is not in the hands of today's oppressors to determine my end. Their role in history denies to them an understanding of this, just as their role will not allow them to understand that every true nationalist leader in Africa has been imprisoned or exiled, and that the future leaders of Latin American and Asian national liberation today are experiencing imprisonment, exile, or worse.

The future belongs to today's oppressed and I shall be witness to that future in the liberation of the Afro-American.

*The following is a brief biographical sketch of an incredible man named Robert F. Williams, along with several chapters excerpted from his famous 1962 book Negroes with Guns. Though less well known than more urban groups like the Black Panthers, the words and actions of Monroe, NC's militant NAACP chapter were tremendously influential on later organizations that advocated self-determination, autonomy, equality, and self-defense.*

*This publication was made possible by public documents of the National Humanities Center and the Afro-American Studies Department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Though Robert F. Williams was not an anarchist perse, we hope that this publication can nevertheless further dialogue(s) around the themes of southern history, race, self-defense, and insurrection.*

*-in love and rage,  
the North Carolina Piece Corps*

groes are not pacifists just let them slap one. Pick any Negro on any street corner in the U.S.A. and they'll find out how much he believes in turning the other cheek.

All those who dare to attack are going to learn the hard way that the Afro-American is not a pacifist; that he cannot forever be counted on not to defend himself. Those who attack him brutally and ruthlessly can no longer expect to attack him with unity.

The Afro-American cannot forget that his enslavement in this country did not pass because of pacifist moral force or noble appeals to the Christian conscience of the slave-holders.

Henry David Thoreau is idealized as an apostle of non-violence, the writer who influenced Gandhi, and through Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. But Thoreau was not dogmatic; his eyes were open and he saw clearly. I keep with me a copy of Thoreau's *Plea For Captain John Brown*. There are truths that are just as evident in 1962 as they were in 1859 when he wrote:

... It was his [John Brown's] peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but such will be more shocked by his life than by his death. I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave.

I speak for the slave when I say, that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me.... I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable. We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day. Look at the policeman's billy and handcuffs! Look at the jail!... We are hoping only to live safely on the outskirts of this provisional army. So we defend ourselves and our henroosts, and maintain slavery. I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharpe's rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them or the like. I think that for once the Sharpe's rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.

The same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again. The question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it. No man has appeared in America, as yet, who loved his fellowman so well, and treated him so tenderly. He [John Brown] lived for him. He took up his life and he laid it down for him.

What sort of violence is that which is encouraged, not by soldiers, but by peaceable citizens, not so much by laymen as by ministers of the

# I WILL NOT CRAWL

**Excerpts from Robert F. Williams on Black struggle and armed self-defense in Monroe, NC**

# On Robert F. Williams

by Timothy B. Tyson

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Robert Williams, born in Monroe, North Carolina, became one of the most influential African American radicals of his time, primarily for his advocacy of what he called “armed self-reliance” during the late 1950s and the 1960s. He engaged in a widely published written debate with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1960 and, though his leadership abilities were no match for King’s, he wielded an enduring influence. His life in the freedom struggles revealed the deep influence of black nationalism and armed self-defense. His influence might have been even greater had he not been forced to flee the United States in 1961 with his wife and two small children, a machine gun slung over one shoulder, foiling a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dragnet. In Cuba and the People’s Republic of China, Williams shared podiums with Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Tse-tung. “Radio Free Dixie,” his regular program on Radio Havana from 1962 to 1965, blasted “rump-licking Uncle Toms” and “Ku Klux Klan savages” from Seattle to New York City. His 1962 book, *Negroes with Guns*, a decisive influence on the Black Panthers and a generation of young African American radicals, became a classic document of the Black Power movement. Just before his death on October 15, 1996, Williams completed a draft of his autobiography, *While God Lay Sleeping*. In its pages, in his life, we find a distillation of the bitter history that shaped not only one of the South’s most dynamic race rebels but thousands of other black insurgents whose militant resistance helped end the racial caste system in the United States.

Robert Williams was born in 1925 to Emma C. and John L. Williams. His father was a railroad boiler washer in Monroe, North Carolina, a town of six thousand in the North Carolina piedmont. His grandfather, Sikes Williams, born a slave in Union County, had attended Biddle Institute in nearby Charlotte after Emancipation and became a Republican Party activist during the late nineteenth century. Sikes Williams also published a small newspaper called “The People’s Voice” and denounced the white supremacy campaign, which took the vote from black citizens at the turn of the twentieth century.

Robert’s grandmother, Ellen Williams, also born a slave, was a daily presence in his childhood: Williams remembered her as “my greatest friend.” He recalled that “she read everything” and that she “specialized in history.” She would point to the old printing press in the shed and tell the young boy stories of the crusading editor’s political exploits. Before she died, Ellen Williams gave young Robert a gift that symbolized much that slavery and the struggle for liberty had taught her: the ancient rifle that his grandfather had wielded against white terrorists.

During World War II, Williams moved to Detroit, where he worked at the Ford Motor Company, joined a militant labor union, and battled white mobs

tion. Discrimination and race hatred are undesirable, and I’m just as much against racial discrimination, in all forms, every place in the world, as I am against it in the United States.

What do we mean by “nationalism”? When you consider the present white American society it can be classified as nothing but a nationalistic society based on race. Yet as soon as an Afro-American speaks out for his people, and is conscious and proud of his people’s historical roots and culture, he becomes a “nationalist.” I don’t mind these labels. I don’t care what they call me. I believe in justice for all people. And because the Afro-American is the most exploited, the most oppressed in our society, I believe in working foremost for his liberation.

## Non-Violence and Self-Defense

The tactics of non-violence will continue and should continue. We too believed in non-violent tactics in Monroe. We’ve used these tactics; we’ve used all tactics. But we also believe that any struggle for liberation should be a flexible struggle. We shouldn’t take the attitude that one method alone is the way to liberation. This is to become dogmatic. This is to fall into the same sort of dogmatism practiced by some of the religious fanatics. We can’t afford to develop this type of attitude.

We must use non-violence as a means as long as this is feasible, but the day will come when conditions become so pronounced that non-violence will be suicidal in itself. The day is surely coming when we will see more violence on the same American scene. The day is surely coming when some of the same Negroes who have denounced our using weapons for self-defense will be arming themselves. There are those who pretend to be horrified by the idea that a black veteran who shouldered arms for the United States would willingly take up weapons to defend his wife, his children, his home, and his life. These same people will one day be the loud advocates of self-defense. When violent racism and fascism strike at their families and their homes, not in a token way but in an all-out bloody campaign, then they will be the first to advocate self-defense. They will justify their position as a question of survival. When it is no longer some distant Negro who’s no more than a statistic, no more than an article in a news paper; when it is no longer their neighbors, but it means them and it becomes a matter of personal salvation, then will their attitude change.

As a tactic, we use and approve non-violent resistance. But we also believe that a man cannot have human dignity if he allows himself to be abused; to be kicked and beaten to the ground, to allow his wife and children to be attacked, refusing to defend them and himself on the basis that he’s so pious, so self-righteous, that it would demean his personality if he fought back.

We know that the average Afro-American is not a pacifist. He’s not a pacifist and he has never been a pacifist and he’s not made of the type of material that would make a good pacifist. Those who doubt that the great majority of Ne-

to the standard of Jim Crow life in a Jim Crow society. It is on this basis that they have struck out against the insanity of racial prejudice. We know that the Southern bigot, the Southern racist is mentally ill; that he is sick. The fact that Jim Crow discrimination and racial segregation may very well be based on economic exploitation is beside the point.

We are oppressed and no matter what the original cause or purpose of this oppression, the mind and personality of the racist doing the oppression have been warped for so long that he is a mental case. Even if the economic situation is changed it will take quite a while, and it will require quite a shock, to cure this mental disease. I've read that one of the best treatments for some forms of mental illness is the shock treatment. And the shock treatment must come primarily from the Afro-American people themselves in conjunction with their white allies; in conjunction with the white youth.

This movement that I led was not a political organization. It had no political affiliations whatsoever. It was a movement of people who resented oppression. But I would say one thing about our movement. What happened in North Carolina, had better become a lesson to the oppressors and the racists of America. Because it is symbolic of a new attitude, symbolic of a new era. It means that the Negro people are becoming restless. It means that there will be many more racial explosions in the days to come. Monroe was just the beginning. I dare predict that Monroe will become the symbol of the new Afro-American; a symbol of the Afro-American determined to rid himself of the stigma of race prejudice and the pain and torture of race hate and oppression at any cost.

## **Black Nationalism; Another Label**

The label Black Nationalist is as meaningless as the Communist label. The Afro-American resents being set aside and oppressed, resents not being allowed to enter the mainstream of American society. These people who form their own groups, because they have been rejected, and start trying to create favorable societies of their own are called "Black Nationalists." This is a misleading title. Because the first thing you must remember is that I am an Afro-American and I've been denied the right to enter the mainstream of society in the United States. As an Afro-American I am rejected and discriminated against. We are the most excluded, the most discriminated-against group in the United States; the most discriminated-against class. So it is only normal that I direct most of my energy toward the liberation of my people, who are the most oppressed class.

As for being a "Black Nationalist," this is a word that's hard to define. No, I'm not a "Black Nationalist" to the point that I would exclude whites or that I would discriminate against whites or that I would be prejudiced toward whites. I would prefer to think of myself as an Inter-Nationalist. That is, I'm interested in the problems of all mankind. I'm interested in the problems of Africa, of Asia, and of Latin America. I believe that we all have the same struggle; a struggle for libera-

in the Detroit race riot of 1943. Drafted in 1944, Williams endured the ironies of marching for freedom in a segregated army. Though the racial discrimination in the army angered Williams, military training gave him and a generation of African American veterans "some feeling of security and self-assurance," he recalled. "The Army indoctrination instilled in us what a virtue it was to fight for democracy and that we were fighting for democracy and upholding the Constitution. But most of all they taught us to use arms." Like thousands of other African American veterans, Williams came home unwilling to accept the South's racial caste system.

Another returning African American veteran, a friend of Williams's named Bennie Montgomery, killed his white landlord in a dispute over wages in 1946. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) wanted to lynch the black sharecropper, but instead state authorities whisked Montgomery out of town, tried and convicted him of murder, and ten months later executed him in the gas chamber at Central Prison in Raleigh. Robbed of their lynching, the local klavern of "the invisible empire" let it be known that Bennie Montgomery's body belonged to the Klan. "They was gonna come and take Bennie's body out and drag it up and down the streets," J. W. McDow, another African American veteran, recalled. "I rather die and go to hell before I see that happen." A group of former soldiers met at Booker T. Perry's barbershop and made a battle plan. When the Klan motorcade pulled up in front of Harris Funeral Home, forty black men leveled their rifles, taking aim at the line of cars. Not a shot was fired; the Klansmen simply weighed their chances and drove away. Former U.S. Army Private First Class Robert F. Williams cradled a carbine that night. So did three of the men who would become key lieutenants in the "black militia" that Williams organized ten years later. "That was one of the first incidents," Williams recalled, "that really started us to understanding that we had to resist, and that resistance could be effective if we resisted in groups, and if we resisted with guns."

Williams soon left the South for almost a decade, working briefly at Cadillac Motor Company in Detroit before using his G.I. Bill benefits to write poetry and study psychology at three different historically black colleges: West Virginia State College, Johnson C. Smith College, and North Carolina Central College for Negroes. "Someday," he vowed in a 1949 article for the Detroit edition of the *Daily Worker*, "I would return seasoned from the fight in the north and more efficient in the fight for the liberation of my people." In 1952, Williams wrote an essay for Paul Robeson's newspaper, *Freedom*, in which he predicted that African American college students would soon become "the most militant agitators for democracy in America today. They have nothing to lose and all to gain." In 1953, Williams ran out of money for college and reenlisted in the armed forces, this time in the United States Marine Corps.

"Wherever he has gone," an FBI observer noted during this period, "Williams has constantly complained, both in the Army and at previous places of employment, that he has been discriminated against." The Marine Corps was no different. Objecting bitterly to racial discrimination, Williams clashed with his officers, spent much of his sixteen months in the Marine Corps in the brig, and received an

undesirable discharge in 1955. His one bright moment as a marine came on May 17, 1954, when he heard that the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down school segregation. "At last I felt that I was a part of America and that I belonged," he wrote. "I was sure that this was the beginning of a new era of American democracy." Upon his return to Monroe in 1955, Williams joined both the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a mostly white Unitarian fellowship. In a Sunday sermon delivered to his fellow Unitarians in 1956, Williams hailed the Montgomery bus boycott and celebrated what he called "the patriots of passive revolution." His bitter collision with the Marine Corps had not dampened his commitment to equal rights for all under the U.S. Constitution and to those elements in the American political tradition that he believed undergirded black liberation. Invoking "the spirit of Concord, Lexington and Valley Forge," Williams declared from the pulpit that, as he put it, "the liberty bell peals once more and the Stars and Stripes shall wave forever."

The atmosphere at the Monroe NAACP was less exuberant. In the wake of the Brown decision and the triumph at Montgomery, KKK rallies near Monroe began to draw crowds as large as fifteen thousand. Dynamite attacks on black activists in the area were common and lesser acts of terror routine. "The echo of shots and dynamite blasts," the editors of *The Southern Patriot* wrote in 1957, "has been almost continuous throughout the South." The Monroe NAACP dwindled to six members who then contemplated disbanding. When the newest member objected to dissolution, the departing membership chose him to lead the chapter. "They elected me president," Williams recalled, "and then they all left."

Finding himself virtually a one-man NAACP chapter, Williams turned first to the African American veterans with whom he had stood against the Klan that night back in 1946. Another veteran, Albert E. Perry, M.D., became vice president. Finding it "necessary to visit homes and appeal directly to individuals," as Williams informed the national office, he painstakingly recruited from the beauty parlors, pool halls, and street corners, building a cadre of roughly two hundred members by 1959. The Monroe branch of the NAACP became "the only one of its kind in existence," Julian Mayfield wrote in *Commentary* in 1961. "Its members and supporters, who are mostly workers and displaced farmers, constitute a well-armed and disciplined fighting unit."

The branch became "unique in the whole NAACP because of a working class composition and a leadership that was not middle class," Williams wrote. "Most important, we had a strong representation of black veterans who didn't scare easily." In response to the drownings of several local African American children whom segregation had forced to swim in isolated farm ponds, the Monroe NAACP launched a campaign to desegregate the local tax-supported swimming pool in 1957. Not surprisingly, the KKK blamed the affluent Dr. Perry for the resurgent black activism, and a large, heavily armed Klan motorcade attacked Perry's house one night that summer. African American veterans greeted the night riders with sandbag fortifications and a hail of disciplined gunfire. The Monroe Board of Aldermen

Afro-American newspaper, which began publication in 1827. The truth of these words has not dimmed in the century and a half since they first appeared in *Freedom's Journal*. They are more appropriate than ever.

There *are* white people who are willing to give us aid without strings attached. They are willing to let us direct our own struggle; they are genuinely interested in the liberation of the Negroes. I wouldn't have been able to remain in the South as long as I did if it had not been for the support that I got from some white people in the North. And I might never have succeeded in escaping the legal-lynching manhunt fomented by the FBI nor have reached Cuban sanctuary but for the help of whites. They will be willing to continue helping us for the sake of justice, for the sake of human decency.

### **"Every Freedom Movement in the U.S.A. is Labeled 'Communist'"**

I'm not a member and I've never been a member of the Communist Party. But most decent-minded Americans should realize by now that every movement for freedom that is initiated in the United States; every movement for human dignity, for decency; every movement that seeks fairness and social justice; every movement for human rights, is branded as "Communitic." Whenever a white person participates in a movement for Black liberation, the movement is automatically branded as "under the domination of Moscow." I can't expect to be an exception.

This Communist-thing is becoming an old standard. An old standard accusation now. Anyone who uncompromisingly opposes the racists, anyone who scorns the religious fanatics and the super-duper American conservatives is considered a Communist.

This sort of thing gives the Communists a lot of credit, because certainly many people in my movement in the South don't know what a Communist is. Most of our people have never even heard of Marx. When you say Marx some of the people would think that maybe you were talking about a fountain pen or a New York City cab driver. Or the movie comedians.

But people aspire to be free. People want to be liberated when they are oppressed. No matter where the leadership comes from. The enslavement and suppression of Negroes in the American South were going on before Karl Marx was born, and Negroes have been rebelling against their oppression before Marxism came into existence. As far back as the 16th century, and the beginning of the 17th century, Negroes were even rebelling on the slave ships. The history of American Negro slavery was marked by very many conspiracies and revolts on the part of Negroes.

Certainly the Marxists have participated in the human rights struggle of Negroes, but Negroes need not be told by any philosophy or by any political party that racial oppression is wrong. Racial oppression itself inspires the Negro to rebellion. And it is on this ground that the people of Monroe refused to conform

better to bleed for a just cause than to bleed just for the thrill of the sight of blood. Rebellion ferments in modern youth. It is better that it expend itself against its true enemies than against teen-age schoolmates who can't even explain the reasons for their dangerous skirmishes.

The Montgomery bus boycott was perhaps the most successful example of completely pacifist action. But we must remember that in Montgomery, where Negroes are riding in the front of buses, there are also Negroes who are starving. The Montgomery bus boycott was a victory—but it was limited. It did not raise the Negro standard of living; it did not mean better education for Negro children, it did not mean economic advances.

Just what was the issue at hand for the white racists? What sacrifice? Remember that in Montgomery most of the white Americans have automobiles and are not dependent on the buses. It's just like our own experience in Monroe when we integrated the library. I just called the chairman of the board in my county. I told him that I represented the NAACP, that we wanted to integrate the library, and that our own library had burned down. And he said, "Well, I don't see any reason why you can't use the same library that our people use. It won't make any difference. And after all I don't read anyway." Now, this is the attitude of a lot of white Southerners about the Montgomery bus boycott. The white people who control the city didn't ride the buses anyway; they had their own private cars, so it didn't make any difference to them.

But when Afro-Americans get into the struggle for the right to live as human beings and the right to earn the same amount of money, then they'll meet the greatest amount of resistance, and out of it will come police-condoned or -inspired violence. When that happens, the racist must be made to realize that in attacking us he risks his own life. After all, his life is a white life, and he considers the white life to be superior; so why should he risk a superior life to take an inferior one?

Now I believe, and a lot of other Negroes do too, that we must create a black militancy of our own. We must direct our own struggle, achieve our own destiny. We must realize that many Afro-Americans have become skeptical and extremely suspicious of the so-called white liberals who have dominated "Negro" freedom movements. They just feel that no white person can understand what it's like to be a suppressed Negro. The traditional white liberal leadership in civil rights organizations, and even white radicals, generally cannot understand what our struggle is and how we feel about it. They have always made our struggle secondary and after all these years we really never got any place.

They have a patient sense for good public relations. But we're not interested in a good press. We're interested in becoming free. We want to be liberated. To me, oppression is harmful. It is painful. I would wake up in the morning as a Negro who was oppressed. At lunchtime, I would eat as a Negro who was oppressed. At night, I would go to bed as a Negro who was oppressed. And if I could have been free in thirty seconds, it would not have been too soon.

"Too long have others spoken for us," began the first editorial in the first

immediately passed an ordinance banning KKK motorcades, a measure they had refused to consider prior to the gun battle.

An even more remarkable local drama dragged Robert Williams onto the stage of international politics on October 28, 1958. Two African American boys, "Fuzzy" Simpson and Hanover Thompson, ages eight and ten, met some white children in a vacant lot. A kissing game ensued in which the ten-year-old Thompson and an eight-year-old white girl named Sissy Sutton kissed one another. The worldwide controversy that stemmed from the "kissing case" underlined the power of sexual questions in racial politics and demonstrated both the promise and the problems of cold war politics for the African American freedom struggle.

After the kissing incident, Sissy Sutton's mother reported that "I was furious. I would have killed Hanover myself if I had the chance." Sissy's father took a shotgun and went looking for the two boys. Neighbors reported that a white mob had roared up to the Thompson home and threatened not only to kill the boys but also to lynch their mothers. Later that afternoon, police officers spotted Hanover Thompson and Fuzzy Simpson pulling a red wagon loaded with soft drink bottles. "Both cops jumped out with their guns drawn," Thompson recalled. "They snatched us up and handcuffed us and threw us in the car. When we got to the jail, they drug us out of the car and started beating us." The local juvenile court judge reported to Governor Luther H. Hodges that the police had detained the boys "for their own good, due to local feeling in the case."

Authorities held the two boys for six days without permitting them to see parents, friends, or attorneys. Passing gunmen fired dozens of shots into the Thompson home. Klan terrorists torched crosses on the lawn. Hanover's sister found his dog shot dead in the yard. For many white citizens, the case seemed to resonate with the sexual fears that accompanied their vision of where school desegregation would lead. "If [black children] get into our rural schools and ride the buses with our white children," one local woman wrote, "the Monroe 'kissing' incident is only a start of what we will have." On November 4, Judge J. Hampton Price convened what he termed "separate but equal" hearings for the white parents and the black boys and sentenced the pair to Morrison Training School For Negroes. If they behaved well, Judge Price told the black boys, it might be that they could be released before they were twenty-one.

Robert Williams saw the "kissing case" as more than a local expression of the irrational sexual lynchpin of white supremacy; the bizarre clarity of the case and the strange politics of the cold war suggested a larger strategy. Like Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would do in Birmingham four years later, Williams and his friends in Monroe set out to use international politics of the cold war as a fulcrum to push the U.S. government to intervene. Determined to make the "kissing case" a global metaphor for the American racial dilemma, they fired off press releases, pestered reporters, hounded the wire services, and put in motion what Time magazine called "a rolling snowball" of worldwide publicity.

This publicity campaign quickly attracted the support of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), a Trotskyite group attempting to break with the American left's tendency to subordinate race to class. Efforts for socialism and black liberation must meet as equal partners, C. L. R. James and Claude DeBruce had persuaded their SWP comrades. DeBruce, an African American member, saw the need for an independent black political leadership, preferably with ties to the NAACP, that could "project a program in the interest of the mass of Negroes." Thus when Robert Williams emerged from the black South in 1958, the SWP stood poised to assist him on his own terms. Beginning in 1958, *The Militant*, the SWP's newspaper, carried dozens of articles about Williams and Monroe—twenty-five on the "kissing case" alone—coverage that overshadowed their reports on the Cuban revolution, the anticolonial uprising in the Belgian Congo, and all the other developments in the African American freedom struggle combined. "They knew I wasn't going to join any party," he recalled, "because I had made that plain. I wasn't interested in them." The reverse, however, was not true. Robert Williams "has some audacious plans which I think are feasible," SWP organizer George Weissman wrote. "Indeed, the more I see of him the more I think he has the possibility of becoming a real Negro leader." With logistical assistance from the SWP, Williams addressed audiences at labor halls, liberal churches, and college auditoriums across the country. Soon the "kissing case" emblazoned front pages around the globe. John Shure, head of the United States Information Agency at the Hague, reported that he himself had received over twelve thousand letters "even though the response does not appear to have been organized." While the White House and the State Department expressed alarm at the damage to U.S. foreign relations, Williams had a ready answer. "It is asinine for colored people to even think of sparing the U.S. State Department embarrassment abroad," he replied. "If the U.S. government is so concerned about its image abroad, then let it create a society that will stand up under world scrutiny." Three and a half months after Hanover and Sissy had kissed each other, Governor Hodges announced, under enormous political pressure, that the boys would be released.

"The kissing case," activist lawyer Conrad Lynn observed years later, "was the case that got [Williams] in national and international attention." The case furnished Williams not only with a network of seasoned activists in the American left but also with a growing number of supporters among black nationalists in Harlem. Audley "Queen Mother" Moore, an important figure in both communist and black nationalist circles in Harlem from the 1920s to the 1970s, organized support for Williams. He became a regular visitor to Louis Michaux's National Memorial African Bookstore on Seventh Avenue off 125th Street, where Michaux welcomed Williams to the podium the store provided for the legendary Harlem street speakers of the day. The most important of Williams's contacts among the Harlem nationalists was Malcolm X, minister at the Nation of Islam's Temple Number 7. "Every time I used to go to New York he would invite me to speak," Williams recalled. Malcolm would tell his congregation "that 'our brother is here from North Carolina, and he is the only fighting man that we have got, and we have got to help him so he can stay down there,'"

because he defends himself, his family, his home, and his dignity. He does not introduce violence into a racist social system—the violence is already there, and has always been there. It is precisely this unchallenged violence that allows a racist social system to perpetuate itself. When people say that they are opposed to Negroes "resorting to violence" what they really mean is that they are opposed to Negroes defending themselves and challenging the exclusive monopoly of violence practiced by white racists. We have shown in Monroe that with violence working both ways constituted law will be more inclined to keep the peace.

When Afro-Americans resist and struggle for their rights they also possess a power greater than that generated by their will and their hands. With the world situation as it is today, the most racist and fascist United States government conceivable could not succeed in exterminating 20,000,000 people. We know there is a great power struggle going on in the world today, and the colored peoples control the true balance of power. We also know, from the statistics of the Detroit race riots, that production in this country would fall in forty-eight hours. People everywhere in the world would be ready to support our struggle.

Nor should we forget that these same deceiving pacifist-preaching well-to-do southern blacks profit from the struggle, living lives of luxury while most Afro-Americans continue to suffer. Are they any better than the Negro Quisling in neighboring Charleston, North Carolina—a black man who rode around in a new pink Cadillac with anti-NAACP and anti-integration literature, a huge roll of money, and an expense account, all the blessings of the White Citizens' Council? It is an ironic sign that black Judases are becoming more expensive as the white racist becomes desperate—though it is a small consolation to those of us who suffer from his betrayals.

In Monroe, where we fought the Klan, we were being penalized. There are children there growing up without any education, children without shoes, children without food. Old people without medical attention. For the Monroe Negro, there is no work; there is no welfare. From all the money raised in the North by the official black leadership, no one would send a penny to Monroe, because white liberals who gave this money considered us to be outlaws and thugs. They preferred to let us suffer rather than to identify themselves with our position. They sent truck convoys into other places in the South, but penalized us because we took a militant stand.

But our children who are growing up without shoes are also growing up with a sense of direction they cannot obtain in the Jim Crow schools. There once was a threat, in Monroe, of Negro teen-age gang war. It abated as the teen-agers resolved their difficulties by coming to understand the problem. It is only natural to expect the black youth to be infected with a desire to do something. Frustrated by less active adults, this desire may be projected in the wrong direction. The vigor of the youth can be channeled into constructive militant actions. It is simply a matter of common sense to have these young Negroes constructively fight racial injustice rather than fight among themselves. Danger is not a respecter of color lines; it is



traitors.” In Atlanta, a university professor, energetic about the new spirit on the part of the Negroes, was very hopeful that new militant leadership would replace the old Uncle Toms, whose days, he was confident, were numbered.

There are exceptions among us. The Uncle Toms, the Judases, and the Quislings of the black “elite” would deny this rising consciousness. They do everything possible to make white Americans think that it is not true, while apologizing to us for the very people who oppress us. Some of these “responsible” Negroes are afraid that militant action damages “amiable race relations.” They complain that race relations may deteriorate to a point that many Negroes may lose jobs. What they mean is that they may lose their jobs. For the black workers, who are the first to be fired, and last, if ever, to be hired, the situation is so bad it can’t deteriorate.

We realize that there must be a struggle within our own ranks to take the leadership away from the black Quislings who betray us. Then the white liberals who are dumping hundreds of thousands of dollars into our struggle in the South to convert us to pacifism will have to accept our understanding of the situation or drop their liberal pretensions.

Why do the white liberals ask us to be non-violent? We are not the aggressors; we have been victimized for over 300 years! Yet nobody spends money to go into the South and ask the racists to be martyrs or pacifists. But they always come to the downtrodden Negroes, who are already oppressed and too submissive as a group, and they ask them not to fight back. There seems to be a pattern of some sort of strange coincidence of interest when whites preach a special doctrine to Negroes. Like the choice of theology when the plantation-owners saw to the Christianization of the slaves. Instead of the doctrines which produced the rugged aggressively independent and justice-seeking spirit that we associate with Colonial America as the New England Conscience, the slaves were indoctrinated in the most submissive “trust-your-master” pie-in-the-sky after-you-die form of Christianity.

It is because our militancy is growing that they spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to convert us into pacifists. Because our militancy is growing they come to us out of fear.

Of course, the respectable Negro leadership are the most outspoken exponents of non-violence. But if these people, especially the ministers, are such pure pacifists, why is it that so few, if any, criticize the war preparations of this country? Why is it that so few speak out against the Bomb? Isn’t that the sort of preaching one expects and hears from sincere pacifists? The responsible Negro leadership is pacifist in so far as its one interest is that we do not fight the white racists; that we do not “provoke” or enrage them. They constantly tell us that if we resort to violent self-defense we will be exterminated. They are not stopping violence—they are only stopping defensive violence against white racists out of a fear of extermination.

This fear of extermination is a myth which we’ve exposed in Monroe. We did this because we came to have an active understanding of the racist system and we grasped the relationship between violence and racism. The existence of violence is at the very heart of a racist system. The Afro-American militant is a “militant”

Williams recounted. Williams found ready support among Harlem intellectuals, including Julian Mayfield, John Henrik Clarke, John O. Killens, and other literary and political figures. “They all saw something in Monroe that did not actually exist—an immediately revolutionary situation,” Harold Cruse observed. Julian Mayfield later wrote an unpublished autobiography in which he disclosed that “a famous black writer made contact with gangsters in New Jersey and bought me two sub-machine guns which I took to Monroe.” Williams was not the best known black leader in the United States, but he may have been the best armed.

The “kissing case” recruited new allies for Williams, but it launched him on a collision course with the NAACP hierarchy. Since the Scottsboro trials of the 1930s, the NAACP had steadfastly shunned so-called “sex cases” and political alliances that might leave the organization open to red-baiting. Should the NAACP “ever get identified with communism,” Kelly Alexander, head of the North Carolina Conference of Branches, told a reporter, “the Ku Klux Klan and the White Councils will pick up the charge that we are ‘reds’ and use it as a club to beat us to death.” Differences over strategy became bitter: Alexander complained to the national office that Williams “has completely turned his back on the one organization that is responsible for him being in the spotlight today,” while Williams griped that Alexander “sounds more like a Tom than ever.” Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the national organization, began to refer to Williams in private as “Lancelot of Monroe.”

Just as the “kissing case” headlines faded in the spring of 1959, two news stories from other parts of the South gripped black America. One was the lynching of Mack Charles Parker, accused of raping a white woman in Mississippi. When Mississippi NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers heard that Parker had been dragged from his cell and murdered by a mob, he told his wife, “I’d like to get a gun and start shooting.” The other was the terrifying ordeal of four young black college students at Florida A&M. Their double date after a college dance was interrupted by four white men with guns and knives. The drunken assailants, who had vowed, as one of them testified in court later, “to go out and get some nigger pussy,” forced the two eighteen-year-old black men to kneel at gunpoint while they undressed the two women and decided aloud which one they would kidnap and then gang-rape. In the wake of these highly publicized outrages, Roy Wilkins conceded in a letter marked “NOT FOR PUBLICATION” that “I know the thought of violence has been much in the minds of Negroes.” By early May, Wilkins admitted that the NAACP found it “harder and harder to keep feelings from boiling over in some of our branches.”

Right on the heels of the Parker lynching and the terrors in Tallahassee, two pressing local matters brought Robert Williams and a crowd of black women to the Union County courthouse. B. F. Shaw, a white railroad engineer, was charged with attacking an African American maid at the Hotel Monroe. Slated for trial the same day, Lewis Medlin, a white mechanic, was accused of having beaten and sexually assaulted Mary Ruth Reid, a pregnant African American woman, in the presence of her five children. According to Williams, Reid’s brothers and several of the African American women of the Monroe NAACP had urged that the new machine guns be

tried out on Medlin before his trial. "I told them that this matter would be handled through the law and the NAACP would help," Williams recalled, "that we would be as bad as the white people if we resorted to violence."

The proceedings against the two white men compelled Williams to reconsider his assessment. The judge dropped the charges against Shaw in spite of the fact that he failed to appear for court. During the brief trial of Medlin, his attorney argued that he had been "drunk and having a little fun" at the time of the assault. Further, Medlin was married, his lawyer told the jury, "to a lovely white woman...the pure flower of life...do you think he would have left this pure flower for that?" He gestured toward Reid, who began to cry uncontrollably. Medlin was acquitted in minutes. Robert Williams recalled that "the [black] women in the courtroom made such an outcry, the judge had to send Medlin out the rear door." The women then turned on Williams and bitterly shamed him for failing to see to their protection.

At this burning moment of anger and humiliation, Williams turned to wire service reporters and declared that it was time to "meet violence with violence." African American citizens unable to enlist the support of the courts must defend themselves. "Since the federal government will not stop lynching, and since the so-called courts lynch our people legally," he declared, "if it's necessary to stop lynching with lynching, then we must resort to that method." The next day Williams disavowed the reference to lynching. "I do not mean that Negroes should go out and attempt to get revenge for mistreatments or injustice," he said, "but it is clear that there is no Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendment nor court protection of Negroes' rights here, and Negroes have to defend themselves on the spot when they are attacked by whites." Banner headlines flagged these words as symbols of "a new militancy among young Negroes of the South." Enemies of the NAACP blamed this "bloodthirsty remark" squarely on the national office. That very morning, when he read the words "meet violence with violence" in a United Press International dispatch, Roy Wilkins telephoned Robert Williams to inform him that he had been removed from his post as president of the Monroe NAACP.

The fiftieth anniversary convention of the NAACP that summer of 1959 became a highly public show trial whose central issue was whether or not the national organization would ratify Wilkins's suspension of Robert Williams. The national office printed up a pamphlet, "The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case," and distributed it to all delegates. As part of the coordinated effort to crush Williams, Thurgood Marshall visited the New York offices of the FBI on June 4, 1959, and urged agents to investigate Williams "in connection with [Marshall's] efforts to combat communist attempts to infiltrate the NAACP." Wilkins twisted every available arm. Daisy Bates, the pistol-packing heroine of Little Rock, agreed to denounce Williams for advocating self-defense—after the national office consented to buy \$600 a month in "advertising" from her newspaper. "The national office," Louis Lomax wrote, "subjected the Williams forces to a heavy bombardment from the NAACP's big guns." Forty speakers, including Bates, King, Jackie Robinson,

tions of the premises that make up the racist mentality. Look at the phenomena this way and they are the logical inventions of a thoroughly diseased mind. The racist is a man crazed by hysteria at the idea of coming into equal human contact with Negroes. And this mass mental illness called racism is very much a part of the "American Way of Life." When Afro-American liberation is finally achieved in the U.S.A., one of the many new developments in such a society will be some sort of institution that will correct those Americans whose minds are thoroughly warped by racism. Somehow a way will be found so that these insane people will be made whole, will be made well again.

### **"We Must Create A Black Militancy..."**

This is the time for the Afro-American to act. Our sense of national consciousness and militancy is growing. I speak of the masses of people, the masses of Afro-Americans that I know and have visited; in Jacksonville, Florida; in Atlanta, in Savannah, and in Macon, Georgia; in Columbia, in Charleston, and in Greenville, South Carolina. The oppressed and exploited black men that I've met on the streets of Harlem, on the streets of Detroit, and in Chicago. And I speak of the people in Monroe where five years ago, when I started talking about self-defense, I would walk through the streets and many of my black neighbors would walk away to avoid me. Today, despite the FBI manhunt and my exile, despite the frame-up arrests and the shootings since, despite the intimidation campaign like the one to drive Mrs. Johnson of The Crusader staff from Monroe, despite all of this, black Monroe continues its struggle.

As editor of *The Crusader*, I went south in the fall of 1960, deep in Jim Crowland, to observe the freedom struggle. I was confronted with this new wonderful spirit rising throughout Dixie—this determination to break the chains of bondage and the spirit of valor of a people who just a few years ago were submissive peons in civilization's no-man's-land. Daily, I saw the old myth about Afro-Americans being incapable of unity and action exploded.

In Savannah an NAACP leader had contributed \$30,000 to the local branch. The branch has a full-time worker and a suite of office space. Pickets and sit-ins have been beaten, and jobs have been lost, but the struggle goes on. The leader is not afraid of violence to himself because the people are with him. In that city an Afro-American union leader said that it had come to pass that the masses of Afro-Americans can see that "We must defend ourselves against violence with violence." That many of them now say that the American white racist needs a good "whipping" to bring him down to earth and to break his white supremacy mania.

I learned in Atlanta that Mr. Elijah Muhammad had made quite an impression and that many Afro-Americans are learning, to the consternation and embarrassment of the black respectable leadership, that he has more to offer than weak prayers of deliverance. A prominent minister in South Carolina said, "Our biggest stumbling block is the Uncle Tom minister—the people must stop paying these

saying that they were tied up, then she turned around and said that they were released by me unharmed and left an hour and a half later.

Meanwhile, she was claiming various reasons for being in the colored community in the first place. In one paper she said they were taking a short cut. For another paper she said that they were lost, that they didn't know where they were going. But no highway runs through our community. This was a dead-end street almost a mile from the highway that the Stegalls would use to get back to Marshville. Any person who knew the county could not possibly get lost there. The Stegall woman also told one reporter that the house I lived in, the house that I was born in, had been sold to my father by her father and that she had once lived there herself. In all these stories it was always Mrs. Stegall doing the talking and Mrs. Stegall's picture that you saw. They never had Mr. Stegall, who was a known Klansman, saying anything.

I also read a report where Mrs. Stegall was quoted by the Charlotte Observer as saying "that Williams only pretended that he was trying to help us." Well, how would she know? One of the best proofs that I was helping them is the fact that they were unharmed and still alive. And they know this.

## Chapter 7

### *Self Defense: An American Tradition*

The stranglehold of oppression cannot be loosened by a plea to the oppressor's conscience. Social change in something as fundamental as racist oppression involves violence. You cannot have progress here without violence and upheaval, because it's struggle for survival for one and a struggle for liberation for the other. Always the powers in command are ruthless and unmerciful in defending their position and their privileges. This is not an abstract rule to be meditated upon by Americans. This is a truth that was revealed at the birth of America, and has continued to be revealed many times in our history. The principle of self-defense is an American tradition that began at Lexington and Concord.

### **Minds Warped By Racism**

We have come to comprehend the nature of racism. It is a mass psychosis. When I've described racial conditions in the United States to audiences of foreign newsmen, Cubans and other Latin Americans, they have been shocked to learn of the depths of American race hatred. When I have cited as illustrations such extreme situations as the segregation of telephone party-lines in Union County, or the segregated pet-animal cemetery in Washington, D.C., where an Afro-American cannot bury his dog, they find such things comic as well as pathetic.

Such extreme examples of the racist mentality only appear comic when looked upon as isolated phenomena. In truth they are perfectly logical applica-

and dozens of distinguished lawyers, rose one after the other to denounce Williams. But when the burly ex-marine from Monroe finally strode down the aisle to speak, he was neither intimidated nor penitent.

"There is no Fourteenth Amendment in this social jungle called Dixie," Williams declared. "There is no equal protection under the law." He had been angry, they all knew, trials had beset him, but never had he intended to advocate acts of war. Surely no one believed that. But if the black men of Poplarville, Mississippi, had banded together to guard the jail the night that Mack Parker was lynched, he said, that would not have hurt the cause of justice. If the young black men who escorted the coed who was raped in Tallahassee had been able to defend her, Williams reminded them, such action would have been legal and justified "even if it meant that they themselves or the white rapists were killed." "Please," he beseeched the assembly, "I ask you not to come crawling to these whites on your hands and knees and make me a sacrificial lamb."

And there the pleading stopped. "We as men should stand up as men and protect our women and children," Williams declared. "I am a man and I will walk upright as a man should. I WILL NOT CRAWL." In a controversy that the Carolina Times called "the biggest civil rights story of the year," the NAACP convention voted to uphold the suspension of Robert Williams. The day after Daisy Bates had urged the assembly to censure Williams for his vow to defend his home and family, she wired the attorney general of the United States to complain about dynamite attacks on her home in Little Rock. "We have been compelled to employ private guards," she said. Williams wrote to Bates soon afterward, "I am sorry to hear that the white racists have decided to step up their campaign against you. It is obvious that if you are to remain in Little Rock you will have to resort to the method I was suspended for advocating."

Against this backdrop of white lawlessness and political stalemate in 1959 and early 1960, Robert Williams moved to strengthen the local movement in Monroe and to reach out to a national audience. Though Williams underlined the fact that "both sides in the freedom movement are bi-racial," his emerging philosophy reinvigorated many elements of the black nationalist tradition whose forceful reemergence in the mid-1960s would become known as "Black Power." His militant message was neither racially separatist nor rigidly ideological. Williams stressed black economic advancement, black pride, black culture, independent black political action, and what he referred to as "armed self-reliance." He connected the southern freedom struggle with the anticolonialism of the emerging third world, especially African nations. In the late 1950s, when other integrationists focused on lunch counters and voter registration, Williams insisted on addressing persistent black poverty: "We must consider that in Montgomery, where Negroes are riding in the front of buses," he said, "there are also Negroes who are starving." His approach was practical, eclectic, and improvisational. There must be "flexibility in the freedom struggle," he argued, and tactics must emerge from the confrontation itself. At the core of his appeal, however, stood his calls for absolute racial equality under a fully enforced

U.S. Constitution, backed by an unyielding resistance to white supremacy. In pursuit of this uncompromising vision of interracial democracy, Williams became an editor and publisher like his grandfather before him. Two weeks after the 1959 NAACP convention, FBI agents reported to J. Edgar Hoover that black children were “selling a newsletter known as *The Crusader* on the streets of Monroe.” Its title honored the late Cyril V. Briggs, Harlem organizer of the left-wing African Black Brotherhood in the early twentieth century. The *Crusader*’s self-proclaimed mission was “ADVANCING THE CAUSE OF RACE PRIDE AND FREEDOM.” Sample mailings yielded several thousand subscribers across the country. Williams’s newsletter fed a lively and important debate within the freedom movement about the meaning of nonviolence.

“The great debate in the integration movement in recent months,” Anne Braden of the Southern Conference Educational Fund wrote in late 1959, “has been the question of violence vs. nonviolence as instruments of change.” Harry Boyte, soon to be Martin Luther King Jr.’s first white aide, observed that “the idea of striking back...meets a steady response among the downtrodden, grass roots of the southern Negro population.” For several years, Boyte argued, Robert Williams “has succeeded in reaching these grass roots,” exercising “great influence in Union County and beyond because of his militant position and refusal to submit to intimidation.” Williams “poses a real threat to more peaceful and non-violent methods of solving our problems.” The FBI, too, remained uneasy about Williams’s expanding range of contacts. Hoover’s files, agents reported, “reflect numerous instances where groups in various sections of the country have proclaimed and demonstrated their sympathies with Williams and have sent him money.” Not merely the FBI but also the most influential advocates of nonviolence felt compelled to deal with Williams’s growing reputation. In a series of public debates in New York City, Williams faced A. J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, David Dellinger, and others. “Nonviolence is a powerful weapon in the struggle against social evil,” Williams conceded. “It represents the ultimate step in revolution against intolerable oppression, a type of struggle wherein man may make war without debasing himself.” The problem, according to Williams, was that the success of nonviolence depended somewhat upon the adversary; rattlesnakes, he noted, were immune to moral appeals, as were white terrorists in the South. “When Hitler’s tyranny threatened the world,” he argued, “we did not hear much about how immoral it is to meet violence with violence.” Williams “drew a large audience to his debate with the pacifists,” George Weissman of the SWP wrote to Carl Braden in Louisville, “and handled himself quite well.”

In a widely reprinted debate first published in *Liberation* magazine, Williams faced Martin Luther King Jr. Again careful to endorse King’s methods wherever they proved feasible, Williams advocated “armed self-reliance,” explaining that among well-armed white vigilantes, “there is open defiance to law and order throughout the South today.” Where law has broken down, he said, it was necessary and right to defend home and family. “Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist,” Wil-

because of the lack of law. We didn’t learn about the indictment until we were in New York and heard it flashed on radio and television. When we left North Carolina we headed directly for New York. In the beginning I thought that we would stay there; that we would stop over in Harlem and from there we would immediately start a campaign to tell the world about the ruthless racist oppression that was taking place in Monroe. It was for this reason that I had left North Carolina. Only from outside the state could I organize a publicity campaign that would bring help to the Negroes and Freedom Riders so hopelessly outnumbered in Monroe. I had left North Carolina only after the chief of police had called me and told me that the state troopers were coming and that in thirty minutes I would be hanging in the court house square. I remembered the words of Hugh B. Cannon when I had appealed to him for protection under law for the missing Freedom Rider. The Governor’s aide told me that he didn’t give a damn about anyone, that we had asked for violence and now we were going to get it. He wanted to know then “why I wasn’t dead yet!” I didn’t think then that anything legal was involved.

The first I knew of the indictment was in New York when I heard over the radio that there was an all-points alarm out for me and that I had been indicted for kidnapping the Stegalls by the Union County Grand Jury.

The FBI claims that it entered the case because I was an indicted fugitive from justice in interstate flight to avoid prosecution. But technically the FBI is wrong, because I left Monroe early that night about 9 o’clock. When the grand jury indicted me sometime late the next day, I was already in New York. I certainly didn’t cross the North Carolina state line as an indicted fugitive.

But this technical error in the Federal charge that was made against me so that I might be “legally” hounded throughout the whole United States is not at all surprising when one thinks of the complete falsity of the state kidnapping charge. It is very important to note what happened immediately after I left Monroe. I was indicted on the testimony of two policemen (there is no court record that the Stegalls ever appeared before the grand jury). Then, with the warrant issued, my house was raided by about a hundred officials of the state, the Federal government, and the local police armed with machine guns, rifles, riot-guns and tear gas. They didn’t know that I had already left. They couldn’t believe that I had got away.

When I read about the grand jury indictment in the New York papers, it was accompanied by interviews of reporters with Mrs. Stegall. I don’t know what Mrs. Stegall finally told the grand jury, if she ever did appear before them. But I do know she couldn’t keep her story straight for the reporters and she never told the same version twice.

I read stories in *The New York Post* and *The New York Times* the following day reporting that when they had questioned Mrs. Stegall she said—that I had chided the crowd for kidnapping her and her husband. Yet she turned around in the next paragraph and said that I was responsible because I was the ringleader of these people. Next I read that she claimed that they had been tied up in my house and held at gunpoint and that when I left the house they were still there. But after

coming from out of the county, they were coming from other towns or calling long-distance on the telephone offering to join in the defense group that was being formed. But all the people who had been regularly affiliated with me and in the guard were in the back of my house because that was where we were assembling and checking out our weapons and ammunition for the night. The street crowd consisted of Negroes who had become angry and involved. They didn't belong to any organization, to any one group. They were just armed private citizens who were fed up with oppression.

I went to the telephone and my wife gave the Stegalls a seat. When I came back the woman kept repeating, "If you'll take us out of here we'll be all right." And I told her again that I didn't have time to take her out. I told her that if I had been caught in her community under similar conditions I would already be dead. I said, "You see, we are not half as cruel as your people." And she admitted that I was right. She told me that she was a church-going Christian and that she wanted to help us and she wished there was something she could do. And I told her that her husband could help us. And he said he didn't know what he could do since he wasn't well known around Monroe, that they lived in Marshville. She kept saying, "You're Robert Williams!" and I told her, "Yes." She said, "Well, I never met you before, but I heard a lot of talk about you." And I said, "It was all bad." And she said, "Yes, I must admit that it was all bad, but you're not the type of fellow they say you are. You seem to be a good fellow. You're much better than I thought."

The telephone rang again. It was the chief of police, A. A. Mauney. He said, "Robert, you've caused a lot of race trouble in this town, but state troopers are coming. In thirty minutes you'll be hanging in the courthouse square."

He hung up. Someone else called and said there was a news flash on television that troops were being sent to surround the town. Another woman called and said that she saw troops moving in and that the highway patrol was parking its cars behind the jailhouse. This was confirmed by a radio flash. Then one of our fellows called me to the door. I went out into the street and looked around. Both ends were being blocked off by police cars. I realized they were trying to trap me into waiting until the state troopers got there. I told Mabel, my wife, that we had to leave. I said she didn't have time to take anything, just to get the children. I called Julian Mayfield who had left just after the Stegalls followed me in, and told him about the state troopers moving in around my area, advising him to leave Monroe immediately so that if something happened to me, someone would be free to tell the world the story. Then we left.

## **In Flight But Not a Fugitive**

Most people think that we left because we were fleeing an indictment. But the possibility of an indictment hadn't even occurred to me at that time. Remember, I left Monroe knowing I had saved the lives of the Stegalls. We were fleeing because of the attitude of the state, because of the attitude of the chief of police,

Williams noted. "Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone."

King conceded that white violence and white intransigence had brought the movement to "a stage of profound crisis." African Americans were frustrated, he said, and the "current calls for violence" reflected "a confused, anger-motivated drive to strike back violently." The Supreme Court's 1954 mandate and even the triumph at Montgomery had yielded small tokens, elaborate evasions, and widespread terror. Only three responses presented themselves. One could practice "pure nonviolence," King said, but this path "could not readily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage." A position that encompassed legitimate self-defense was more practical. King pointed out that "all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept [self-defense] as moral and legal. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi." Here was where King the politician sensed his constituency. "When the Negro uses force in self-defense," he continued, "he does not forfeit support—he may even win it, by the courage and self-respect it reflects." This widely accepted position was, of course, precisely Williams's view—which was King's problem.

The third and most unacceptable position, King argued, was "the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously." Here, then, was the pale beyond which King sought to cast his adversary. "Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no collective or practical alternative," King insisted. "He argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms." Essentially, King had invented his own Robert Williams, a kind of black Geronimo plotting military strikes against the white man, and then responded to that Robert Williams. Lacking theological training and combative in his manner, Williams made himself vulnerable to this caricature. But the philosophical position from which King centered his own argument—preferring nonviolence, but endorsing "the principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed"—was precisely the place where Williams had taken his stand. After the debate appeared in *Liberation* and began to resonate throughout the movement, W. E. B. Du Bois weighed in with a commentary, also entitled "Crusader Without Violence," in which he discouraged applause for King's critique of Williams. In Montgomery, he wrote, King had "stood firm without surrender," but Du Bois considered it "a very grave question as to whether or not the slavery and degradation of Negroes in America has not been unnecessarily prolonged by the submission to evil."

More than the persuasive skills of their elders, the bold actions of African American college students set these philosophical debates aside and gave the battalions of nonviolence their brief but compelling historical moment. On February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College walked into Woolworth's in Greensboro, sat down at a segregated lunch counter, and asked to be served. Within two months, the sit-ins had spread to fifty-four communities across nine states of the old Confederacy, infusing the freedom move-

ment with fresh troops and new tactics.

Soon after the sit-ins began, Robert Williams followed a dozen black youths into Gamble's Drug Store in downtown Monroe and was the only person arrested. Marched down the street in handcuffs, a shotgun-toting guard on either side of him, Williams spoofed himself as "the dangerous stool-sitter bandit" and vowed that he had "never felt prouder in my life." Young insurgents in Monroe mounted an aggressive campaign of sit-ins that displayed its own unique style. "The Negroes remained in each store only a short time," the Charlotte Observer reported, "usually until management closed the counters." Under court orders to abide by the law or face imprisonment, Williams defied the judge and marched with his young troops. "We're using hit-and-run tactics," Williams told reporters. "They never know when we're coming or when we're going to leave. That way we hope to wear them down," he said, managing to sound like a platoon leader even while participating in a passive resistance campaign. "They were always doing something," the manager of Jones Drug Store recalled. "It's a wonder somebody didn't kill him." It was no mystery to Williams; the main difference between the sit-ins in Monroe and elsewhere was that "not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins," Williams claimed.

The uneasy peace in Monroe would soon be broken, in large measure by followers of King. In 1961, Reverend Paul Brooks of SCLC and James Forman, soon to become president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), came to Monroe in the company of seventeen Freedom Riders fresh out of jail in Jackson, Mississippi. The young insurgents arrived in Monroe to launch a nonviolent campaign in Robert Williams's backyard, though Forman later denied any intention to undermine Williams. One of the Freedom Riders announced that he had come to Monroe because he considered "Mr. Robert F. Williams to be the most dangerous person in America." Another proclaimed: "If the fight for civil rights is to remain nonviolent, we must be successful in Monroe. What happens here will determine the course taken in many other communities throughout the South."

Williams welcomed the Freedom Riders warmly but had a similar understanding of the stakes. "I saw it first as a challenge," he recalled, "but I also saw it as an opportunity to show that what King and them were preaching was bullshit." Two weeks of picketing at the Union County Courthouse grew progressively more perilous for the Freedom Riders. Crowds of hostile white onlookers grew larger and larger. Finally, on Sunday afternoon, August 28, a mob of several thousand furious white people attacked the approximately thirty demonstrators, badly injuring many of them. Local police arrested the bleeding protestors. In his classic memoir, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Forman later called this riot his "moment of death" and "a nightmare I shall never forget." To the consternation of SCLC, the nonviolent crusade swiftly deteriorated into mob violence. Throughout the community, white vigilantes attacked black citizens and even fired fifteen shots into the home of former mayor J. Ray Shute, a white moderate who had befriended Williams.

At the height of this violent chaos, a white married couple entered the black

en in town. Some of their children were missing and some children were in jail. As soon as the Stegalls' car entered our street it was recognized and stopped at gunpoint less than a block away from my house. I was in the house at the time receiving telephone calls from all over town: calls from parents crying about their children who had participated in this demonstration; calls from Negroes reporting that they were beaten and asking what should be done, what action to take; calls from Negroes volunteering to fight, Negroes offering to join in armed groups so they defend the community. When I wasn't on the phone I was out in the back of my house setting up a defense line before nightfall.

When the Stegalls were stopped, they were taken out of their car and brought into my yard. Someone called me out of the house and I came out and saw all these people milling around the Stegalls. I realized how angry these people were and I saw the circle closing in around the Stegalls. I knew that if just one person lost control of himself the Stegalls would be killed. I started driving the crowd away from them, forcing the crowd out of reach.

Then Mrs. Stegall said, "We've been kidnapped!" She kept repeating this. I said, "Lady, you're not kidnapped. You can leave when you get ready but you got to go through this crowd and people are angry." She stood up and looked at the crowd and she said, "You should take us out of here. You could take us out. If you took us out of here they wouldn't bother us." I said, "Lady, I didn't bring you here and I'm not going to take you away. You knew that all these people would be here; you know how rioting has been going on in the town and you should have known better than to come into a place like this where the people are angry and upset like this. We are too busy now trying to defend our homes. I'm trying to set up a defense line and I don't have time to bother with you. That's your problem."

While we were standing there talking, an airplane flew over us. The airplane probably was either from the Klan or the Sheriff's Department. They use plenty of light planes and we were constantly getting calls threatening to bomb us from the air since my house was too well guarded to get us from the ground. So when this plane swooped over the house about fifteen men armed with high-powered .30-caliber rifles opened fire. Mrs. Stegall had been very indignant and arrogant, but as soon as she saw this she realized how serious the situation was, that these people were angry and really meant business. She started shaking all over and almost became hysterical. Then a car with white men drove by, firing, and about twenty fellows fired back and you could see flames where the bullets struck the car. Mrs. Stegall could see this.

I started into the house and the crowd began screaming that the Stegalls should be killed. When I started walking up the front steps Mrs. Stegall was right up against me, walking right up against my body and her husband was right up against her. They followed me on into the house while all these people were still screaming that they should be killed. One man was begging for somebody to give him a gun and let him, please, let him kill them.

Some of the people in this crowd I had never seen before. Negroes were

them.

The white mob was already armed. The police disarmed some of the men attempting to rescue the Freedom Riders and turned these additional weapons over to the mob. Firing broke out at the picket line when the police and the mob tried to prevent the English exchange student from getting into one of the rescue cars driven by three armed Negroes. The police held Negroes while white racists beat them up. At first the victims were all Freedom Riders and the local non-violent students, but soon Negroes were attacked indiscriminately as the mob fanned out all over town. They were massing for an attack against our community.

## **We Aim for Self-Defense**

So many Freedom Riders and Negroes were arrested that many prisoners with legitimate charges against them were released from jail to make room. Many of these people who came out of jail reported to me that students were bleeding to death there without any medical attention. I called the chief of police and told him that I had reports that the students were not getting medical attention and that their lives were in danger. I told him I would give him just thirty minutes to get medical attention for them and that if they didn't receive medical aid within thirty minutes, we would march on the jail. About fifteen minutes later James Forman called from the hospital to let me know that they were receiving medical care. Just after that, Julian Mayfield returned and reported that members of the white mob, which now included some uniformed police, were near the railroad tracks and firing down at Negroes who had fled town. At the approach of darkness, white people started driving through our community, shouting and screaming. Some fired out of their cars and threw objects at people on the streets. Many of the colored people started arming, exchanging guns, borrowing ammunition and forming guards for the night to defend the community from the mob massing in town. On the block where I live there were about 300 people milling around the street.

About 6 o'clock in the evening a white couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Stegall, came riding through our neighborhood. They were recognized as people who had driven through town the day before with a banner on their car announcing an "Open Season On Coons." It meant that this was killing time.

People have asked why a racist would take his wife into a riot-torn community like ours on that Sunday. But this is nothing new to those who know the nature of Klan raiding. Many Southern racists consider white women a form of insulation because of the old tradition that a Negro is supposed to be intimidated by a white woman and will not dare to offend her. White women are taken along on Klan raids so that if anything develops into a fight it will appear that the Negro attacked a woman and the Klansman will of course be her protector. Mrs. Stegall was brought along as insulation by her husband. They were trying to see what defenses we were preparing for that night.

The Negroes out on the street were raging. Some of them had been beat-

community for reasons that are unclear and drove straight into an angry black mob milling near Williams's house. "There was hundreds of niggers there," the white woman stated, "and they were armed, they were ready for war." Black residents, under the impression that the demonstrators downtown were being beaten and perhaps slaughtered, threatened to kill the white couple. Williams, though busy preparing to defend his home, rescued the two whites from the mob and led them into his house, where they remained for about two hours. White authorities later charged Williams and several other people with kidnapping, although the white couple met two police officers on their way home and did not report their alleged abduction. The woman later conceded that "at the time, I wasn't even thinking about being kidnapped.... [T]he papers, the publicity and all that stuff was what brought in that kidnapping mess." During a long night of racial terror, Williams slung a machine gun over his shoulder and walked several miles with his wife and two small sons to where Julian Mayfield waited with a car. The Williams family fled first to New York City, then to Canada, then on to Cuba to escape the hordes of FBI agents who combed the countryside in search of them. One of the agents assigned to search locally for Williams reported his frustrations to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover: "Subject has become something of a 'John Brown' to Negroes around Monroe and they will do anything for him."

The FBI dragnet never snared Williams, but it did not take Hoover long to hear from him. Every Friday night from 11:00 to midnight on Radio Havana, Williams hosted "Radio Free Dixie," a program that could be heard from 1961 to 1964 as far away as New York and Los Angeles. From Cuba, Williams continued to edit *The Crusader* for a circulation that eventually grew to forty thousand. In 1962, his book *Negroes With Guns*, published from Cuba, became the single most important intellectual influence on Huey P. Newton, soon to found the Black Panther Party in Oakland. Copies of *The Crusader* traveled down the Mississippi back roads with SNCC organizers: "this leaflet is being distributed by SNCC and COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] workers among U.S. Negroes," the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission complained in the spring of 1964. Later that year, when SNCC began to veer away from nonviolence, members cited Williams approvingly in the fierce internal debates.

As black activists began to reject even the tactical pretense of nonviolence, the influence of Robert Williams continued to spread. "Armed self-defense is a fact of life in black communities—north and south—despite the pronouncements of the 'leadership,'" a North Carolina activist wrote to Williams. Long before Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks led the chants of "Black Power" that riveted national media attention in the summer of 1966, most elements of that ambiguous slogan already were in place. "Your doctrine of self-defense set the stage for the acceptance of the Deacons For Defense and Justice," Lawrence Henry told Williams in the spring of 1966. "As quiet as it is being kept, the Black man is swinging away from King and adopting your tit-for-tat philosophy."

Williams's influence was not limited to the South. "As I am certain you realize,"

Richard Gibson, editor of *Now!* magazine in New York, wrote to Williams in 1965, “Malcolm’s removal from the scene makes you the senior spokesman for Afro-American militants.” *Life* magazine reported in 1966 that Williams’s “picture is prominently displayed in extremist haunts in the big city ghettos.” Clayborne Carson names Williams as one of two central influences—the other being Malcolm X—on the 1966 formation of the Black Panther Party For Self-Defense in Oakland, “the most widely known black militant political organization of the late 1960s.” The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) exaggerated considerably in 1969 when it reported that Williams “has long been the ideological leader of the Black Panther Party.” It is closer to say that the Panthers were “a logical development” from the philosophy of Williams, as Reginald Major asserted in his 1971 book, *A Panther Is a Black Cat*. According to Williams, he “talked to Bobby Seale and Mrs. [Kathleen] Cleaver by telephone when I was in Africa” in 1968 and the leadership “asked me to become Foreign Minister of the Panthers.” At that moment, Williams had already been named president-in-exile of two of the most influential revolutionary nationalist groups: the Revolutionary Action Movement, which the CIA believed to be “the most dangerous of all the Black Power organizations,” and the Detroit-based Republic of New Africa. “Despite his overseas activities,” the CIA reported in 1969, “Williams has managed to becoming an outstanding figure, possibly the outstanding figure, in the black extremist movement in the United States.”

Even though he became friends with Che Guevara and Fidel Castro himself, Williams grew uneasy in Cuba: he yearned to return home. As the Soviet strings on the Cuban revolution shortened, Williams resisted pressure to make his own politics conform to the Soviet line. “I am under constant attack by the [Communist Party of the United States],” Williams wrote to a friend in the mid-1960s. “They are trying to cut off my facilities here in Cuba. One would think I am Hitler and Wall Street combined.” An FBI informant as early as 1962 stated that Williams “has stubbed his toes” with Cuban Communists through his “criticism of [the] Communist Party for barring Negroes from leadership” and that he “may not be able to regain his footing.” The Stalinists were “getting worse than the crackers in Monroe,” Williams complained in 1964. “Things are about to the stage when I had to leave Monroe in a hurry.” Williams persuaded Castro to let him travel to North Vietnam in 1964, where he met Ho Chi Minh and wrote antiwar propaganda aimed at African American soldiers. In 1965, the Williams family relocated to Beijing, where Williams was “lionized and feted by top Peking leaders,” according to CIA intelligence reports. The Williams family dined with Mao Tse-tung and moved in the highest circles of the Chinese government for three years. Like the Black Power movement itself, as Williams got farther away from his roots in the South he sometimes drifted into apocalyptic nonsense. His 1967 essay, “The Potential of a Minority Revolution,” for example, depicted a scenario in which black saboteurs and guerrilla enclaves could bring down the U.S. government. Though Williams had been one of the best organizers in the black freedom movement, his isolation from any local constituency made him vulnerable to the same frustrations and delusions that plagued the rest of

who’s lost in the woods.” He said, “I don’t give a damn who he is. You asked for violence and now you’re getting it, see; you’re getting just what you deserved.” So I told him, “Do you know one thing . . . you are the biggest fool in the whole world!” [Ellipsis in original] He became infuriated and started raging on the telephone and told me to shut up. I told him that he may be the Governor’s assistant but he couldn’t tell me to shut up. He said, “If you don’t stop talking to me like that I’ll hang up.” And he finally hung up. No protection came.

Each time the Freedom Riders would get ready to go on the picket line they would call the FBI in Charlotte and ask for protection. The FBI would say, “We’re on our way.” But they would never be there when anything happened. On Saturday when the Freedom Riders were picketing in town and the taxicabs that had been transporting them to the line had started out to pick them up, the local white racists gathered together and blocked the road. This meant the Freedom Riders had to walk back to the colored community which was almost a mile away. The mob followed the Freedom Riders along the streets, throwing stones at them and threatening to kill them. When they came into the colored community, the colored people who were not participating in the picket line became very upset that our community had been invaded by a mob chasing Freedom Riders. Many of the colored people started stoning cars and beating back the white racists.

## Chapter 5

### *Self Defense Prevents a Pogrom: Racists Engineer a Kidnapping Frameup*

Sunday morning the chief of police and his men drove through the county urging whites to come to town to fight the Freedom Riders. In addition, people were coming in from other counties and from South Carolina. An organization called the Minute Men had brought people in.

By afternoon thousands of white racists had gathered in town, concentrating at the courthouse square. At 4 o’clock James Forman, one of the picket captains, called my home requesting four taxicabs within the hour. He said that the racists were threatening to assault the line and complained of police indifference. Forman was to end up in jail with a split head one hour later.

At 4:30 the Negro cab company called to report that they couldn’t get through to the picketers because every entrance into town was blocked off. Minutes later a couple of cars driven by our people came racing into the neighborhood. They had just made it in from town to report that the mob had started to attack the picket line, shots had been fired and the town was in the grip of a full-scale riot.

When the self-defense guard, which up to now had stayed away from the courthouse square, heard that the lives of the Freedom Riders and local non-violent youth were in danger, they jumped into their cars and rode into town, breaking through the mob’s blockade to rescue the picketers. Julian Mayfield went with



across the line and stopped at a restaurant. There they were recognized and attacked by white racists. In the scramble one of the Freedom Riders could escape only by running into the woods; the others had to flee in the car, leaving him behind. We notified the Monroe city police, our county police, the Charlotte police, and the Mecklenburg County police that a Freedom Rider was in the woods, missing, and the racists were trying to catch him. We were afraid he would be lynched. We asked them to intercede. The Monroe police refused. The Union County police refused. Rev. Brooks called the Governor's office. Governor Terry Sanford was out, they said. But Rev. Brooks got an opportunity to speak to the Governor's chief aide, Hugh B. Cannon, and complained to him about the lack of police protection for the Freedom Riders. The Governor's aide kept talking about Robert Williams. Rev. Brooks said he was not calling about Robert Williams; he was calling about a missing Freedom Rider. He said that they were pacifists, non-violent people, and wanted police protection. The Governor's aide, Hugh B. Cannon, replied, 'If you're a real pacifist you had better get the hell out of Monroe, man, because there's going to be plenty of violence there.'

Rev. Brooks kept trying to appeal to him for police protection but finally gave up. He said, "Since you're talking about Robert Williams so much, he's right here. Do you want to talk to him?" The Governor's aide said, Yes.

Cannon and I had talked about two weeks before when I had asked for state police protection. Instead the Governor had sent an Uncle Tom representative named Dr. Larkins, who is supposed to be the Governor's troubleshooter. He came and held a secret meeting with me to find out what it would take to quiet things down. I gave him the ten-point program and it shocked him. He said that it was too much, that the demands were too high, but he would take it up with the Governor anyway. And he said that, well, he understood I had been undergoing economic pressure and that this was wrong and that maybe I could get a job, that maybe the state could help me if we just didn't start any trouble around here.

When I called back the Governor's office and told Hugh B. Cannon about this bribe attempt, he replied, "You mean to tell me that you're not dead yet?" And I told him, "No, I'm not dead, not yet, but when I die a lot of people may die with me." So he said, "Well, you may not be dead, but you're going to get killed." I kept telling him that we wanted protection, trying to avoid bloodshed. He said, "If you're trying to avoid bloodshed you shouldn't be agitating."

## The Governor and the FBI

So this Friday night, when Rev. Paul Brooks finished talking to Hugh B. Cannon and he said he wanted to talk to me, I got on the phone and told him what had happened. He said, "Well, you're getting just what you deserve down there. You've been asking for violence, now you're getting it." I told him that I wasn't appealing to him for myself. I was appealing to him for a pacifist. And I told him, "Besides, I'm not appealing to you for a Negro; this happens to be a white boy

the movement in the last half of the 1960s.

In the late 1960s, when the Nixon administration moved toward opening diplomatic relations with China, Williams bartered his almost exclusive knowledge of the Chinese government for safe passage home and a Ford Foundation-sponsored post at the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan. Not that the entire federal apparatus was happy to welcome him home: the Internal Security Division of the Department of Justice observed that "Williams could be the person to fill the role of national leader of the black extremists. We should offset attempts by him to assume such a position." Williams, however, wrote to a friend that "a lot of people are going to be surprised after my arrival not to find me fighting for leadership the way many others are doing." Returning to family ties and local activism, Williams spent the last twenty-seven years of his life in the small, trout-fishing village of Baldwin in western Michigan and died on October 15, 1996.

A week after his death, Rosa Parks climbed slowly into a church pulpit in Monroe, North Carolina. Beneath her lay the body of Robert F. Williams, clad in a gray suit given to him by Mao Tse-tung and draped with a black, red, and green Pan-African flag. Parks told the congregation that she and those who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama had always admired Williams "for his courage and his commitment to freedom. The work that he did should go down in history and never be forgotten." Her presence in that pulpit, nearly inexplicable when viewed through the traditional narrative of "the civil rights movement," demonstrates in almost poetic fashion that historians should reexamine the relationship between "civil rights" and "Black Power." Our vision of the postwar African American freedom movement prior to 1965 as one characterized solely and inevitably by nonviolent "civil rights" protest obscures the full complexity of racial politics. It idealizes black history, downplays the oppression of jim crow society, and even understates the achievements of African American resistance. Worse still, our cinematic "civil rights movement" blurs the racial dilemmas that follow us into the twenty-first century.

The life of Robert Williams underlines many aspects of the ongoing black freedom struggle—the decisive racial significance of World War II, the impact of the cold war on the black freedom struggle, the centrality of questions of sexuality and gender in racial politics, and the historical presence of a revolutionary Caribbean. But foremost it testifies to the extent to which, throughout World War II and the postwar years, there existed among African Americans a current of militancy—a current that included the willingness to defend home and community by force. This facet of African American life lived in tension and in tandem with the compelling moral example of nonviolent direct action. No doubt those who began to chant "Black Power" in the mid-1960s felt that slogan with an urgency specific to their immediate circumstances. But then, as now, many aspects of its meaning endure as legacies from earlier African American struggles. Above the desk where Williams completed his memoirs just before his death, there still hangs an ancient rifle—a gift, he said, from his grandmother.

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# ***Negroes With Guns: excerpts***

## **Chapter 3**

### ***The Struggle for Militancy in the NAACP***

Until my statement hit the national newspapers the national office of the NAACP had paid little attention to us. We had received little help from them in our struggles and our hour of need. Now they lost no time. The very next morning I received a long distance telephone call from the national office wanting to know if I had been quoted correctly. I told them that I had. They said the NAACP was not an organization of violence. I explained that I knew that it was not an organization of violence. They said that I had made violent statements. I replied that I made these statements as Robert Williams, not as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They said that because I was an official of the organization anything that I said would be considered NAACP policy, that we were too close together. I asked them why if we were so close together they hadn't come to my rescue all this time when I had been the unemployed victim of the Klan's economic pressure and when I had had all of my insurance canceled as a poor insurance risk. I asked them why they didn't then consider our closeness.

### **Suspension, Distortion and Re-election**

In the next few hours Roy Wilkins of the NAACP suspended me from office. I didn't learn about it from the national office. I first heard of it when Southern radio stations announced and kept repeating every thirty minutes that the NAACP had suspended me for advocating violence because this was not a means for the solution of the race problem and that the NAACP was against Negroes using violence as a means of self-defense.

Our Union County NAACP was one of the few interracial branches in the South. We had some white pacifist members, and when I was suspended they sent a telegram to the national office stating that they were white Southerners and that they were pacifists, but they protested my suspension on the ground that they understood the problems in the community and that the national office did not. This telegram was never made public by the NAACP. And not a single paper ever printed the fact that ours was an interracial branch and that even Southern white pacifists supported my position.

Nevertheless, this all developed into a national debate. We found out that there was no provision in the NAACP constitution to justify or authorize this hypocritical action by Roy Wilkins. I demanded some sort of hearing. Wilkins turned the matter over to the NAACP's paternalistic Committee on Branches, and in New York City on June 3, 1959, they conducted what turned out to be a trial where I fought the suspension. The committee ruled that I was to be suspended for

isted in the United States especially in such a "progressive" Southern state as North Carolina was supposed to be. So we encouraged these visits. Julian Mayfield, the young Afro-American novelist and an old friend of Monroe, was there. A young exchange student, Constance Lever of Durham, England, was a guest at our house along with Mrs. Mae Mallory, who had been active in the movement for true integration in her own city, New York.

When the Monroe Non-Violent Action Committee set up its picket line on the first day, the Freedom Riders seemed convinced they were making real progress. One Freedom Rider even returned from the line overjoyed. He said, "You know, a policeman smiled at me in town today while I was on the line." I laughed and told him not to pay that any attention because the policeman was probably smiling at the thought of how best to kill him. Constance, the English exchange student, had joined the picket line. She said, "Oh, I don't think these people are so bad. I just think you don't know how to approach them. I noticed that they looked at me in a friendly way in town today. I tried to explain to her that these people were trying to win her and the others over in the hope that they would leave Monroe. The day that these people realized that they couldn't win the Freedom Riders over, they would show their true nature. A few days later, Constance Lever was arrested by the Monroe police and charged with "incitement to riot."

### **The Racists Act by Violence**

It was on the third day that the townspeople started insulting the pickets and their politeness turned to viciousness. A policeman knocked one picket to the ground and threatened to break his camera. Another was arrested and all the time the white crowd heckled. When one of the white Freedom Riders smiled back at the hecklers, two of Monroe's "pure white flowers" spit in his face. Tensions continued to mount.

On the fourth day a white Freedom Rider was attacked on the street in town and beaten by three whites. The police broke this up and promised to arrest the white people who had attacked this Freedom Rider. So the Freedom Riders kept on thinking there was a possibility that the law would be on their side because they had publicly proclaimed themselves to be non-violent. I told them it was all right for them to be pacifists but they shouldn't proclaim this to the world because they were just inviting full-scale violent attack. In the past we hadn't had any victims of the type of violence they were beginning to experience because we had shown a willingness to fight. We had had picket lines and sit-ins and nobody had successfully attacked our lines. But they said they were struggling from a moral point of view.

### **"Ain't You Dead Yet?"**

That night the Freedom Riders went for a ride into Mecklenburg County

crowded with colored youths just out of school. They have no means of gainful employment or wholesome recreation.

For reasons such as these we believe that the basic ill is an economic ill, our being denied the right to have a decent standard of living.

## **The Freedom Riders Come to Monroe**

We had planned to put picket lines around the county courthouse to draw attention to our program and to apply pressure for its achievement. At this time seventeen Freedom Riders came to our support, perhaps the first time that they engaged in a struggle over such fundamental demands as our program presented. Hitherto, as I've said, the goals were peripheral and while important, amenable to small compromises. For example, we had won integration in the public library. On these peripheral matters, leaders of the Sit-In Movements can meet with city and state officials and win concessions. I believe this is an important part of the overall Negro struggle. But when these concessions are used for propaganda by negro "leaders" as examples of the marvelous progress the Afro-American is supposedly making, thereby shifting attention from the basic evils, such victories cease to be even peripheral and become self-defeating. When we tackle basic evils, however, the racists won't give an inch. This, I think, is why the Freedom Riders who came to Monroe met with such naked violence and brutality. That and the pledge of non-violence.

The Freedom Riders reflected an attitude of certain Negro leaders who said that I had mishandled the situation and that they would show us how to get victory without violence. With them came the Reverend Paul Brooks, sent by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., to act as a "trouble-shooter" for the Freedom Riders, should the need arise, and to work with the community, helping it to develop non-violence techniques and tactics. I disagreed with their position but was more than willing to cooperate. The community rented a house for them which was christened "Freedom House" in their honor. They were joined by some of our militant youth who had participated in the picket lines around the swimming pool the previous month. Together they formed the Monroe Non-Violent Action Committee.

Although I myself would not take the non-violent oath, I asked the people of the community to support them and their non-violent campaign. Monroe students took the non-violent oath, promising to adhere to the non-violent discipline, which, along with other principles, prohibited self-defense. I also stated that if they could show me any gains won from the racists by non-violent methods, I too would become a pacifist.

At the same time, several observers were in Monroe to see for themselves what so-called democracy was like in Union County. We knew that people living in other sections of the country and other countries of the world would find it hard to believe that such vicious racist conditions, such brutality and ruthlessness, ex-

six months' time, after which I would automatically be reinstated.

I didn't think of doing anything more about the suspension; there was a more important matter at hand. As a result of the trial I was more convinced than ever that one of our greatest and most immediate needs was better communication within the race. The real Afro-American struggle was merely a disjointed network of pockets of resistance and the shameful thing about it was that Negroes were relying upon the white man's inaccurate reports as their sources of information about these isolated struggles. I went home and concentrated all of my efforts into developing a newsletter that would in accurate and no uncertain terms inform both Negroes and whites of Afro-American liberation struggles taking place in the United States and about the particular struggle we were constantly fighting in Monroe. The first Issue of *The Crusader* came off the mimeograph machine June 26, 1959.

Then at the last minute I decided to appeal the committee's decision to the NAACP's 50th National Convention which was meeting in New York that July. The national office found it necessary to issue a special convention pamphlet attacking me. This pamphlet tried to confuse my demand that Negroes meet violence with violence as a means of self-defense with the advocacy of lynch law. In its own way the national office contributed to the erroneous impression played up by the racist press that I was agitating for race war and the indiscriminate slaughter of white people.

My suspension was upheld by the convention delegates, many of whom either felt or were pressured into seeing the vote as a question of publicly supporting or disavowing the NAACP national leadership. But on the real issue at hand, delegate sentiment forced the national leadership to support the concept of self-defense. The preamble to the resolutions passed by that convention read, ". . . we do not deny but reaffirm the right of an individual and collective self-defense against unlawful assaults."

While I was suspended, the people in my branch voted to make my wife president to serve in my place. And at the end of the six months, instead of going back into office automatically, I held an election because I didn't want the NAACP national office to think that they were doing me any special favor. We had the election and I was re-elected unanimously.

The national office of the NAACP was determined to keep within the good graces of a lot of the influential Northern whites who were disturbed by our militancy. They maintained an indifferent attitude to our branch. We had a charter and that was all. We were unable to secure assistance from them in any of our school integration cases and our sit-in cases.

In 1960 we started a sit-in campaign. We became the thirteenth town in North Carolina to start sit-in demonstrations. Though the NAACP wasn't taking notice, our sit-ins proved that self-defense and non-violence could be successfully combined. There was less violence in the Monroe sit-ins than in any other sit-ins in the South. In other communities there were Negroes who had their skulls fractured, but not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins. We

had less violence because we had shown the willingness and readiness to fight and defend ourselves. We didn't appear on the streets of Monroe as beggars depending upon the charity and generosity of white supremacists. We appeared as people with strength, and it was to the mutual advantage of all parties concerned that peaceful relations be maintained.

While the demonstrations were taking place I was arrested and finally sentenced to serve thirty days on the chain gang. The NAACP was supposed to handle my case. They handled it up to the State Supreme Court, but then they dropped my case from appeal without telling me and with only a few days left in which to file an appeal. I discovered this through the newspapers because my case had been consolidated with that of seven students from Chapel Hill, N.C. The newspapers listed the names of the defendants whose NAACP lawyers had filed appeals and I was the only one in the group whose name did not appear. I appealed to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. They took my case up and filed an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

### **“A Letter from De Boss”**

All this did not mean that the NAACP national office was short on advice. While they did not feel responsible enough to take the appeal to higher courts, they did feel responsible enough to send me a letter upon my return from Cuba in the summer of 1960. I subsequently made two trips to Cuba.

My experiences in Monroe and with the NAACP which had resulted in launching *The Crusader* were also sharpening my awareness of the struggles of Negroes in every part of the world, how they were treated, their victories and their defeats. It was clear from the first days that Afro-Cubans were part of the Cuban revolution on a basis of complete equality and my trips confirmed this fact. A Negro, for example, was head of the Cuban armed forces and no one could hide that fact from us here in America. To me this revolution was a real thing, not one of those phony South American palace revolutions. There was a real drive to bring social justice to all the Cubans, including the black ones. Beginning late in 1959 I had begun to run factual articles about Cuba in *The Crusader*, pointing up the racial equality that existed there. The articles seem to have stirred up the national office for they sent me a letter which included statements such as these:

“. . . I wonder, however, whether you are fully aware of the dangers and disadvantages of the course of action you seem to favor. I have followed closely the events in Cuba in recent months and in particular, Dr. Castro's visit to the United Nations this fall. Regardless of the merits of the Cuban cause I was greatly disturbed by the frequent show of insincerity which, I believe, should give you food for thought before you find yourself used as just another pawn in the present unfortunate feud between Cuba and our country.

“. . . It is a callous interference in a native American problem and should be recognized as such by anyone in a responsible position of leadership in the

Aldermen to use its influence to endeavor to:

1. Induce factories in this county to hire without discrimination.
2. Induce the local employment agency to grant non-whites the same privileges given to whites.
3. Instruct the Welfare Agency that non-whites are entitled to the same privileges, courtesies and consideration given to whites.
4. Construct a swimming pool in the Winchester Avenue area of Monroe.
5. Remove all signs in the city of Monroe designating one area for colored and another for whites.
6. Instruct the Superintendent of Schools that he must prepare to desegregate the city school no later than 1962.
7. Provide adequate transportation for all school children.
8. Formally request the State Medical Board to permit Dr. Albert E. Perry, Jr., to practice medicine in Monroe and Union County.
9. Employ Negroes in skilled or supervisory capacities in the City Government.
10. ACT IMMEDIATELY on all of these proposals and inform the committee and the public of your actions.

(signed)

Robert F. Williams

Albert E. Perry, Jr., M.D.

John W. McDow

Our demands for equal employment rights were the most important of the ten points. Many plants were moving in from the North--runaway industry from the North moving to avoid labor unions, seeking low-priced workers in the South. They received considerable tax-supported concessions from the local Industrial Development Commission and they didn't hire any Negroes. In fact, local bigoted officials had done everything in their power to prevent Negroes from obtaining employment. They had even gone so far as to stipulate that the new industries could not hire Afro-Americans if they expected the special concessions made possible through the taxation of us all. This amounted to taxation without representation and it was one of our biggest complaints.

As a result of this racist policy, out of approximately 3,000 Afro-Americans in Monroe, there are 1,000 unemployed--persons unable to obtain jobs even as janitors, maids and porters. And maids and porters, when employed, earn at most \$15 for a six-day week. One of the few kinds of work available, cotton picking, pays all of \$2.50 for 100 pounds of picked cotton; at breakneck speed it takes a long day, much more than eight hours, to pick 150 pounds. Virtually every Negro high school and college graduate in Monroe has to leave to find employment. This is not true of the white graduates. Negroes are even laid off in the summer so white college youth can work at home. Meanwhile, each summer our street corners are

their refusal were: “because of the break in diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, the government of the United States cannot extend normal protective services to its citizens visiting Cuba.”

This false pretense of being interested in protecting me was a farce of the first magnitude and classic hypocrisy. Numerous threats and four attempts of murder had been made on my life in the preceding three weeks and the would-be assassins, aided and abetted by local officials, were offered immunity from law by the deliberate silence of Federal officials to whom I had continuously appealed for “normal protective services.” The Federal government couldn’t possibly have been interested in protection for me and my family, for they passed up many opportunities to protect us here at home.

This all happened a month before I was forced to leave Monroe.

## Chapter 4

### *Non-Violence Emboldens the Racists: A Week of Terror*

In our branch of the NAACP there was a general feeling that we were in a deep and bitter struggle against racists and that we needed to involve as many Negroes as possible and to make the struggle as meaningful as possible. We felt that the single issue of the swimming pool was too narrow for our needs, that what we needed was a broad program with special attention to jobs, welfare, and other economic needs.

I think this was an important step forward. The struggles of the Freedom Riders and the Sit-in Movements have concentrated on a single goal: the right to eat at a lunch counter, the right to sit anywhere on a bus. These are important rights because their denial is a direct personal assault on a Negro’s dignity. It is important for the racists to maintain these peripheral forms of segregation. They establish an atmosphere that supports a system. By debasing and demoralizing the black man in small personal matters, the system eats away the sense of dignity and pride which are necessary to challenge a racist system. But the fundamental core of racism is more than atmosphere—it can be measured in dollars and cents and unemployment percentages. We therefore decided to present a program that ranged from the swimming pool to jobs.

### **The Monroe Program**

On Aug. 15, 1961, on behalf of our Chapter I presented to the Monroe Board of Aldermen a ten point program that read as follows:

We, the undersigned citizens of Monroe, petition the City Board of

American Negro movement.

“ . . . the present Cuban attempts to endear themselves to American Negroes are obviously caused by ulterior motives. (Let me just ask you how the American Negro tourist would feel in Cuba at the constant chant of ‘Cuba si, Yanqui no!’)

“ . . . Are you willing to forsake the important support of that section of the people who are equally opposed to suppression of Negro rights in our country?

“ . . . Does not the unfortunate example of the great American Negro singer Paul Robeson<sup>1</sup> show you the dangers and mistakes of the road which you seem to be choosing? What has Paul Robeson with all his greatness done for the American Negro in his present struggle for equality: The answer, regrettable as it is, must be: Nothing.”

These excerpts were reprinted in *The Crusader* and replied to in this way:

“Only a fool or a mercenary hypocrite could muster the gall to call a nation and its great leader insincere in dealing with the captive blacks of North America when in the course of their daily lives they display the greatest measure of racial equality and social justice in the world today. It is certainly a first magnitude truism that social justice starts at home and spreads abroad. In past months I have twice been to Cuba and there is nothing insincere about my being made to feel that I was a member of the human race for the first time in my life. If this is America’s idea of insincerity, then heaven help this nation to become insincere like Fidel Castro and Free Cuba in granting persons of African descent entrance into the human race.

“As for my being ‘used as a pawn in the struggle of Cuba’ against imperialist and racist North America, I prefer to be on the side of right than on the side of Jim Crow and oppression. I prefer to be used as an instrument to convey the truth of a people who respect the rights of man, rather than to be used as an Uncle Tom whitewasher of black oppression and injustice and an apologist for America’s hypocrisy. Cuba’s aversion for America’s inhumanity to man is not an interference in a ‘native American problem.’ It is common knowledge that the master race of the ‘free world’ is out to export North American manufactured racism. Racism in the U.S.A. is as much a world problem as was Nazism. If the U.S.A. is to be the only nation exempt from the Human Rights Charter of the United Nations, then that august body is a party to the great transgressions against America’s captive people. I, for one, refuse to remain silent and cooperate with the very force that is seeking after my destruction.

“The racists in America are the most brutal people on earth. It is foolhardy for an oppressed Afro-American to take the attitude that we should keep this life-death struggle a family affair. We are the oppressed, it is only natural for us to air our grievances at home and abroad. This race fight in the U.S.A. is no more a fight to be fought just by Americans than is the fight for black liberation to be conducted by colored only. Any struggle for freedom in the world today affects the stability of the whole society of man. Why would you make our struggle an excep-

tion?

“I am not afraid of alienating white friends of our liberation movement. If they really believe in freedom they will not resent deviation from the old worn path that has led us in fruitless circles. If they are insincere they are no more than Trojan horses infiltrating our ranks to strike us a treacherous, nefarious blow on behalf of those and that which they pretend to detest. For if they resent our becoming truly liberated, they will detest us for not following their misguidance and skillful subterfuge designed to prevent our arrival to the promised land. They speak much of tolerance, but they display unlimited intolerance toward those Afro-Americans who refuse to become their puppets and yes-man Uncle Toms.

“It is strange that I am asked how a ‘Negro’ American tourist would feel in Cuba hearing the constant chant of ‘Cuba Si, Yanqui No!’ No one has bothered to ask how it feels to constantly face ‘White Only’ signs. These signs mean ‘White yes, Colored no!’ No one has asked me how it feels to be marched under guard with felons along a public street to jail for sitting on a ‘white only’ stool. On hearing, ‘Cuba Si, Yanqui No!’ and having lived all of my life under American oppression, I was emotionally moved to join the liberation chorus. I knew it didn’t apply to me because the white Christians of the ‘free world’ have excluded me from everything ‘yanqui.’

“You make a cardinal mistake when you fail to give the great Paul Robeson credit for making a great contribution to the American ‘Negro’ struggle. Paul Robeson is living proof that the Afro-American need not look upon the United States as ‘Nigger heaven’ and the last stop for us on this earth. Paul is living proof that other civilized societies honor and respect black people for the things that ‘Free America’ curses, oppresses and starves for. Paul has proven that all black men are not for sale for thirty pieces of silver. He has lit a candle that many of the new generation will follow.

“Yes, wherever there is oppression in the world today, it is the concern of the entire race. My cause is the same as the Asians against the imperialist. It is the same as the African against the white savage. It is the same as Cuba against the white supremacist imperialist. When I become a part of the mainstream of American life, based on universal justice, then and then only can I see a possible mutual cause for unity against outside interference.”

I don’t want to leave the impression that I am against the NAACP; on the contrary I think it’s an important weapon in the freedom struggle and I want to strengthen it. I don’t think they should be worrying about Cuba when there is plenty to worry about in our country. They know, as I know, the extent to which the state governments and the Federal government ignored our appeals for help and protection.

## Hypocrisy and Run-around

After we closed the pool, as I’ve already described, the racists in Monroe

went wild. On that same day, after we had gone home, a mob dragged a colored man from his car and took him out into the woods where they beat him, stood him up against a tree and threatened to shoot him. I had called the Associated Press and the UPI and reported that this man had been kidnapped and I also called the Justice Department. Apparently just when this man’s attackers were getting ready to shoot him, the chief of police came out and rescued him. How did the chief of police know where to find him in the woods? Later on this Negro was unable to indict anyone who had attacked him even though he recognized some of the members of the would-be lynch mob. The FBI refused to demand any indictments for kidnapping.

The racists would come through the colored community at night and fire guns and we had an exchange of gunfire on a number of occasions. One night an armed attack was led on my house by a sergeant of the State National Guard. He was recognized, but no action was taken against him. And the chief of police denied that an attack had taken place. We kept appealing to the Federal government. It was necessary to keep a guard of about twenty volunteers going every night men who volunteered to sleep at my house and to walk guard. This was the only way that we could ward off attacks by the racists. The telephone would ring around the clock, sometimes every fifteen minutes, with threatening calls.

Then through my newsletter, *The Crusader*, I started appealing to readers everywhere to protest to the U.S. government, to the U.S. Justice Department; to protest the fact that the 14th Amendment did not exist in Monroe and that the city officials, the local bureau of the FBI in Charlotte, and the Governor of the state of North Carolina were in a conspiracy to deny Monroe Negroes their Constitutional rights.

One of the readers of *The Crusader* wrote to Congressman Kowalski of Connecticut, who in turn wrote a letter to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy. He said that he had been appalled to learn about the lawlessness in Monroe, and how this was damaging to our country at a time when the United States was claiming to be a champion of democracy in the world. The Congressman asked for an investigation. But despite all those letters and telegrams to the U.S. Justice Department, no investigation was made. The only investigation they made was to ask our chief of police if these things were true. The chief of police assured them that they were not.

Finally I went to the Charlotte bureau of the FBI and filed a long report calling for a Federal indictment of the chief of police for denying citizens their rights guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. This report was filed, but I never heard from the FBI. Later a newspaperman told me that he had heard from the Justice Department and that they claimed they could find no evidence of any violation of the 14th Amendment in Monroe. They never did bother to answer me.

Yet it was at this time that I received a letter from the United States Department of State. In this letter they denied my family and me the right to travel to Cuba, where we had been invited for the 26th of July celebration. The grounds for