# Exploring Why the Role of Self-Defence is Omitted from the Dominant Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.

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# Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: The Role of Self-Defence in the Civil Rights Movement	7
Chapter 2: Leadership in the Dominant Narrative	16
Chapter 3: Mass Media and the Development of the Dominant Narrative	25
Conclusion	34
Bibliography: Primary Sources	38
Bibliography: Secondary Sources	43

# Introduction

One night in 1957 a group of Klansmen prepared to attack Dr Albert E. Perry at his ho	me in

nonviolence was extremely prominent in the movement, it was not ubiquitous	Thousands of

rights movement, few scholars have specifically asked why the role of self-defence is omitted from the dominant narrative. In this essay, I aim to contribute to civil rights historiography by answering this question.

Despite the vast amount of scholarship that has been published over the past three decades challenging the dominant narrative, it ultimately persists as the primary mode through which the public remembers the movement. At the core of this issue, I argue, is the separation between history and collective memory. Hasian and Frank write that while histories are 'punctuations of time that have been accepted by the majority of intellectual communities as an authentic record of past events,' collective memories 'are the public acceptances or ratifications of these histories on the part of broader audiences.' Therefore, trends in historical scholarship are not necessarily reflected in popular understandings of history. The dominant narrative, I argue, is a collective memory of the civil rights movement. Collective memories play an important role in civic life, particularly because politicians frequently evoke them for strategic purposes.<sup>5</sup> The dominant narrative, for example, has been used by neoconservative politicians for insidious goals such as dismantling reforms targeting racial discrimination. Furthermore, in recent years, Theoharis writes that the narrative has been used to demonise the Black Lives Matter movement, portraying it as a betrayal of the legacy of the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King.<sup>6</sup> By providing a narrow impression of how the movement provoked change, the narrative limits the lessons and conclusions that can

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Marouf Hasian Jr. and Robert E. Frank, "Rhetoric, History and Collective Memory: Decoding the Goldhagen Debates," *Western Journal of Communication* 63 (1999): 98. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319909374630">https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319909374630</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig w£ G rk, otll at ork, and ra

be gained from it. As such, attempts to dismantle the narrative and highlight the full scope of Black protest are incredibly valuable today.

In this essay I aim to show how and why the narrative obscures the role of self-defence in the movement. In the opening chapter I will establish the role that self-defence played in the civil rights movement, providing the necessary context required to understand the inaccuracy of the dominant narrative. The second chapter will examine the role of leadership in the dominant narrative. The narrative provides a top-down perspective of the movement, defining it by its leaders. I seek to

# Chapter 1: The Role of Self-Defence in the Civil Rights Movement

## Robert F. Williams and Self-Defence as a Black Tradition

To explore why it is left out of the dominant narrative it will first be necessary to examine the role that armed self-defence played within the civil rights movement. Throughout the course of the movement Black Southerners consistently showed

which he claimed faced the least violence of those anywhere in the South, 'proved that selfdefence and nonviolence could be successfully combined.'<sup>8</sup>

Much like in the rest of the South, the desegregation efforts in Monroe faced white backlash in the form of a terror campaign orchestrated by the local Ku Klux Klan. To protect Monroe's Black community, Williams formed the Black Armed Guard, a self-defence group comprised mostly of fellow working-class Black veterans.<sup>9</sup> The Guard was one of the many self-defence groups established by Black Southerners during the movement that varied from informal

crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Wells-Barnett's declaration that 'a Winchester rifle should have a place of honour in every Black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give' mirrors Williams' proclamation that self-defence was necessary due to the breakdown of law and order in the South. Williams' ties to the tradition were also personal. The rifle that his grandfather used to protect his family from white vigilantes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century served as a powerful symbol of the militant tr

work. More than just a defensive precaution however, the tradition of armed self-defence ran deep for Blacks living in rural communities in the Deep South. As Bob Moses attested, 'to the farmers in Mississippi, carrying a gun, protecting your home, was a way of life.' As a result, activists who came to work in these communities often found that their nonviolent rhetoric didn't resonate with locals.

The nature of the community organising work conducted in these areas left activists in a difficult position. Those from SNCC in particular, imbued with Ella Baker's philosophy of group-centred leadership, could hardly enter rural Southern communities and attempt to impose a nonviolent philosophy that was ultimately foreign to the locals. Moreover, activists working in the rural Deep South quickly found themselves in a dangerous environment with little help from law enforcement. Though the Kennedy administration established the Voter Education Project in 1962 to try and influence the direction of the civil rights movement, it refused to offer federal protection to activists who joined the project for fear of alienating its Southern white Democratic political allies. Much like Williams in Monroe in the late 1950s, activists working on voter registration drives were left to the mercy of often hostile local law enforcement. As a result of these conditions, many found themselves being protected by armed locals. In some areas, locals set up defence patrols to protect visiting activists. In other instances, those who took in civil rights workers sat up at night armed, guarding their homes. The grassroots movement is awash with figures like C.O. Chinn, who provided

the Wild West, 195; Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville; Tallahassee; Tampa; Boca Raton; Pensacola; Orlando; Miami; Jacksonville; Ft. Myers: University Press of Florida, 2007), 103-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Steven F. Lawson, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Nation," in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, 1945-1968 (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 24-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Payne, Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches, 122-3

shelter and armed protection to CORE activists in Canton, Mississippi. <sup>18</sup> In another fairly typical example, SNCC activist Fay Bellamy Powell recalls how a farmer in rural Greene County, Alabama showed up to guard the Freedom House one night, showing her and a fellow activist how to use his shotgun as a precaution. <sup>19</sup> These largely uncelebrated figures facilitated the movement in some of the most repressive areas of the rural Deep South.

Though historians debate the extent to which SNCC was an entirely philosophically nonviolent organisation from its inception, the experience of working in the rural South led a significant number of activists to accept nonviolence only as a useful strategy, not a way of life. By 1963, CORE's James Farmer suggested that the proponents of philosophical nonviolence constituted only a small proportion of the movement's participants. <sup>20</sup> Those who embraced nonviolence tactically but not philosophically often shared the view of Williams and many other rural Black Southerners that self-defence and nonviolence were complementary rather than contradictory. Nonviolent demonstrations could be an effective tool for producing concessions, but self-defence was a necessary measure to ensure the safety of activists working in a dangerous environment. <sup>21</sup> Discontent to rely solely on others for their safety, many activists working in the rural Deep South chose to take up arms themselves. The experience of Freedom Summer in 1964 in particular appears to have led many to this conclusion. James Forman later wrote that the campaign 'confirmed the absolute necessity for armed self-defence – a necessity that existed before the project but which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 109-10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Fay Bellamy Powell, "Playtime is Over," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, ed. Faith S. Holsaert et al. (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 479. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1hj9xfc.62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Payne, Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches, 116.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defence as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 176.

By far the most well-known self-defence organisation associated with the movement, however, are The Deacons for Defence and Justice. Founded in Jonesboro, Louisiana in 1964, the Deacons showcase several common characteristics of self-defence within the movement. Membership, for example, was comprised mostly of working-class Black veterans, and they were formed primarily to protect CORE activists working in the town. In Jonesboro and later in Bogalusa the Deacons maintained a public presence, guarding Freedom Houses and patrolling the streets with their weapons in a direct challenge to Klan harassment. More than just protecting locals and activists however, Charles Sims, president of the Bogalusa Deacons, claimed that their presence changed the way whites thought about Black people: 'we told [whites] a brand-new Negro was born. The one he'd been pushin' around, he didn't exist anymore.' In this sense, the organisation performed a psychological duty as well as a physical one, contradicting longstanding notions of Black people's passivity and the racial double standard of gun ownership in the South.

The Deacons represented a shift for self-defence in the movement. As Crosby writes, they 'took the already existing tradition... combined it with an assertive, confrontational attitude, and brought both into the public eye.'<sup>27</sup> Whereas Mallisham's group were unnamed in an attempt to remain unknown, the Deacons actively sought publicity and aimed to expand with chapters throughout the South. In this sense, Hill writes that they resembled a political organisation more so than a self-defence group.<sup>28</sup> With articles in the likes of the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*, the Deacons drew significant attention to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Charles Sims, "Armed Defence," in *Black Protest: History, Documents and Analyses, 1619 to the Present*, ed. Joanne Grant (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1968), 357-365.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Crosby, It Wasn't the Wild West, 229.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defence: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 46. ProQuest Ebook Central.

role of self-defence in the movement. In a 1965 *New York Times* article, CORE's Southern director Richard Haley admitted that 'the deacons had caused him to think anew about his own philosophy of nonviolence,' and that by protecting activists from immediate danger they provided a valuable function that CORE could not perform. <sup>29</sup> His comments highlight the organisation's transitioning stance in regards to self-defence as activists increasingly appreciated the aid of groups like the Deacons.

The Deacons were at their most visible during the Meredith March of 1966. The organisation provided protection with armed members walking alongside the marchers, guarding the

In conclusion, the civil rights movement was far more heterogenous than the dominant narrative portrays. Nonviolence and direct-action protests were undoubtedly essential elements of the movement, but by focusing solely on these elements the dominant narrative obscures others. Economic strategies were prominent throughout the movement, for example, but are not emphasised in the narrative. Armed self-defence is simply another aspect of the movement that is omitted from the narrative. Much like nonviolence, self-defence has leading advocates and standout figures such as Robert F. Williams and Charles Sims. It played a key part in major struggles, most notably in the grassroots movement, frequently alongside what are widely recognised to be nonviolent protests. Finally, self-defence not only played a prominent role in mainstream civil rights organisations but was the basis of several organisations that emerged from the grassroots movement, most notably the Deacons for Defence and Justice. By shunning the role of armed self-defence in the civil rights movement, the dominant narrative erases a rich and vital aspect of the movement's history.

## Chapter 2: Leadership in the Dominant Narrative

Throughout history leaders have been imbued with immense power to influence the public perception of events both in their time and retrospectively. Historians have often shown a propensity to emphasise such figures in their work, producing top-down narratives. As the focal point of much historiography, leaders are thus frequently used to define the course of history. This is certainly true of the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement. As a top-down narrative, it defines the movement by its leaders, or more accurately, by the leadership of one man: Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. To understand the version of the movement that the dominant narrative promotes then, specifically why it does not account for the role of self-defence, it is useful to examine the role of leaders in the narrative. #

#### Martin Luther King, Jr.

The dominant narrative focuses overwhelmingly on the leadership of King. As Fred Poweledge contends, '[i]n the minds of untold numbers of Americans,' King 'was the civil rights movement. Thought it up, led it, produced its victories, became its sole martyr.' The equation of the movement with King has resulted in the pervasive assumption that King's

'[n]o one will dispute... that Dr. King is the leading spokesman for the American Negro and the most prominent of his race since Booker T. Washington.'<sup>34</sup> From this position, King had

Coretta Scott King that he came to make King's job easier, claiming that '[i]f the white

Recognising their shared philosophy, Malcolm became a staunch supporter of Williams, holding fundraisers for the purchase of rifles in Monroe and selling copies of Williams' newsletter, *The Crusader*, in Harlem's Temple No. 7.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Malcolm, however, Robert F. Williams is absent from the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement. On a functional level this can be explained because, as Mohamud and Whitburn write, 'the traditional interpretation [of the movement] already has its threatening antagonist in Malcolm,' thus it has no need for a second leader of a similar ilk.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, though, I point out that Williams is omitted from the narrative because he makes it untenable. By aligning Black self-defence so heavily with Malcolm X, the narrative conveys it as something that occurred solely outside of the movement. In contrast, the civil rights movement is portrayed as entirely nonviolent, taking place primarily in the South between the major episodes of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956 and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

its own identity.<sup>50</sup> By confining the movement to the South, casting its enemies solely as working-class white Southerners, and erasing the opposition it faced in the North and West among the middle-classes, by freezing King in place proclaiming "I have a dream," the narrative portrays the movement as a time in which the nation came together to eliminate the evil of Jim Crow, fulfilling the inevitable promise of American democracy. Williams presents a very different picture of the civil rights movement. Like Malcolm, Williams was critical of nonviolence. Though he claimed to have great respect for pacifists, he complained that 'Nonviolent workshops are springing up throughout Black communities' while 'not a single one has been established in racist white communities to curb the violence of the Ku Klux Klan.'51 In the same year that the famous nonviolent demonstrations were taking place in Birmingham, Williams was proclaiming on his radio show from exile in Havana that nonviolence was an inefficient, foreign influence to the US. Self-defence was a true American tradition, he claimed, highlighting the American Revolution as an inspiring example. 52 While nonviolent demonstrators marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, Williams vehemently wrote that 'the power structure of the USA is a cruel force of brutal oppression, exploitation, dehumanisation, bloody imperialism and rabid racism.'53 His sentiment echoes that of Malcolm, but unlike Malcolm, Williams was a player in the civil rights movement. That the movement encompassed leaders like Williams as well as those like King shows it to be a far more challenging, less flattering period of American history than the dominant narrative portrays.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Theoharis, A More Beautiful and Terrible History, xiii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Strain, Pure Fire, 64-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Cristina Mislan, "In the Spirit of '76 Venceremos!': Nationalising and Transnationalising Self-Defence on *Radio Free Dixie*," *American Journalism* 32, no. 4 (2015): 441-443. https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2015.1099265.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Robert F. Williams, "USA: The Potential of a Minority Revolution," *The Crusader* 7, no. 1, August 1965. https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/1960-1970/crusader/7-1.pdf.

To conclude, by providing a top-down perspective of the civil rights movement, the dominant narrative is defined by the figures whose leadership it emphasises. It's depiction of those leaders obscures the role that self-defence played in the movement. By casting a filtered version of King as the defining figure of the movement, the narrative elevates nonviolence to its sole philosophy. King's centrality in the narrative takes root from the contemporary public perception of the movement; he was undoubtedly widely seen as the movement's primary leader as it was occurring, imbuing him with disproportionate power to influence how it was perceived by the public. As a result, the public perception of the movement consisted largely of the elements that King emphasised: nonviolence and the politics of respectability, resulting in a widespread public unawareness of the role of self-defence. King was a more challenging and nuanced character than the dominant narrative depicts, however. He understood the heterogeneity of the Black Freedom Struggle and wrote on several occasions about Black self-defence. In comparison, the dominant narrative defines King solely by nonviolence and the goal of integration. By casting this version of King in such an overarching role, the dominant narrative obscures all other aspects of the movement that deviate from this narrow scope, resulting in the omittance of the role of armed self-defence.

Just as it uses King to portray the movement as entirely nonviolent, the dominant narrative depicts Malcolm X as the defining figure of Black self-defence. While Malcolm was a public figure as the movement was taking place, he is not considered a part of it. By squarely identifying self-defence with him, then, the narrative conveys the notion that it occurred solely outside of the movement. This version of Malcolm is cast as the antithesis of the narrative's version of King, producing a dichotomy between nonviolence and self-defence. The dominant narrative's portrayal of the two leaders as ideological opposites thus promotes the perception of nonviolence and self-defence as opposing philosophies. This is misleading.

Self-defence was frequently utilised within the movement alongside nonviolent strategies. By portraying the two as opposites, the narrative obscures the role that self-defence played in the movement. Robert F. Williams invalidates the dominant narrative's nonviolence/self-defence dichotomy. As a figure ideologically similar to Malcolm but part of the same movement as King, Williams disrupts the binary that the narrative constructs with its portrayal of the two leaders. Williams ultimately reveals the true nature of self-defence during this period of the Black Freedom Struggle – it was utilised within the civil rights movement in aid of nonviolent tactics. Not only does Williams highlight the inadequacy of the narrative, his harsh, vitriolic critiques of the nation make him counterproductive to its very purpose, the celebration of national identity. As a result, he is erased from the narrative, alongside the role of self-defence. The dominant narrative's portrayal of leaders – it's depiction of King and Malcolm and lack of depiction of Williams – thus contributes to the omittance of the role of self-defence.

### Chapter 3: Mass Media and the Development of the Dominant Narrative

Mass media played a vital and well documented role in the civil rights movement. The contemporary importance of media is obvious; network news coverage provided millions of Americans with their primary account of the movement, greatly influencing its national perception. However, despite an abundance of scholarship since the 1980s attesting to its complexity and heterogeneity, public perception of the movement today remains heavily influenced by contemporary media accounts. This is because, as Edward Morgan explains, 'public memory draws heavily on the very stories, events, and personalities that prevailed in past media accounts.' Therefore, to understand why the role of self-defence is omitted from the dominant narrative, it is useful to examine the contemporary media portrayal of the civil rights movement.

#### The Media Portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement

Media coverage of the movement focused on the same big events that are emphasised in the dominant narrative. Major episodes like the March on Washington and Selma were media spectacles that defined the movement for the public. Charles Payne explains that while the media focused on big, dramatic events, the processes that led to such events were largely ignored. It was within such processes, the grassroots, everyday aspects of the movement, that self-defence played the most prominent role. By focusing primarily on big events, the media presented a narrow rendition of the movement that omitted the role of self-defence. The nonviolence of Black protestors, moreover, was a key aspect of media coverage. As Paul

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Edward P. Morgan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 139.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Charles M. Payne,

Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 289. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Good recalled, most journalists covering the Mississippi freedom summer project in 1964 sought stories of 'violence, police brutality, volunteer heroism, [and] Negro suffering.' Such themes defined movement coverage. Violence was a draw for the media, but primarily that enacted by aggressive whites against nonviolent Blacks. Carter writes that 'white violence directed against nonviolent African American demonstrators,' was 'the dominant interpretive frame... of how television' portrayed the movement to national audiences. The media additionally played a role in elevating King to the status of the movement's ultimate leader. 'By 1957,' Baker writes, 'King had displaced in the American press's imagination all

Cold War, exposed the hypocrisy of America's rhetoric of freedom and democracy on the global stage, putting pressure on the federal government to pass legislation.

Organisations attempted to portray the movement to the nation as favourably as possible. This was a difficult task. Despite being perceived today as a moral crusade that awoke the nation to the error of its ways, the movement's attempts to challenge the racial status quo drew opposition from large segments of the population who viewed it as a nuisance. Now remembered as an American hero, King was branded as un-American for his actions. One poll in 1966 revealed that only 28% of Americans had a favourable opinion of him. Example 27 This is significant because King tailored the image of the movement to be as unthreatening as possible and still faced widespread hostility. Considering this, had the public been aware of the true role of self-defence within the movement rather than perceiving it as nonviolent, it would likely have been oW duld li.

way of life.<sup>64</sup> As explained in chapter one, this was misleading. Beginning in the early-1960s, support for philosophical nonviolence was dwindling among activists conducting dangerous fieldwork in the Deep South, and a culture soon emerged in which activists frequently accepted armed protection from locals, and even decided to carry a weapon themselves. Yet, both organisations actively sought to hide radical developments associated with self-defence from the media, purposefully maintaining the inaccurate portrayal of the movement as uniformly nonviolent. Developments in the mid-1960s would prove this strategy to be wellfounded. When SNCC and CORE openly endorsed armed self-defence in 1966, the organisations lost considerable support from white liberals who perceived this development as a betrayal of King's teachings. In turn, financial contributions reduced to almost nothing. <sup>65</sup> That the organisations' shift to Black Power took the media by surprise shows the extent to which they were successful in hiding radical currents from the media. It also gives credit to Payne's argument that the media focused on big events while failing to grasp the processes that lead to them. 66 This shows that civil rights organisations' media strategies, alongside the tendencies of mainstream media coverage, led to the omittance of the role of self-defence from media portrayals of the movement, thus contributing to its omittance from the dominant narrative.

#### Self-Defence in the Media

While overarching trends resulted in its widespread omittance from media coverage, some khil(, som)rn0.0imt1.92 t( c)4(-3(s2o6anwe)6(lti)-3(---8(ibut)-3(ing t)-3(o it)-6000 463.9 372.29 Tm0 g0 G[(

of Robert F. Williams and the struggle in Monroe. The *Los Angeles Tribune* wrote that 'it is seldom that you find a president of an NAACP branch with the courage, the bluntness, the plain-spokenness, the intuitiveness, the sympathy, the righteous wrath of a Robert F. Williams.' The *New York Times* additionally published stories about Williams, though the coverage was much less sympathetic. One article proclaimed that 'Williams has publicly advocated violence as a means of ending racial restrictions.' The mischaracterisation of self-defence as violence was common among mainstream media coverage that delved into the issue. When discussed, self-defence was frequently associated with Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Malcolm was presented in the media as a menacing outsider, perpetually juxtaposed with King. As Bodroghkozy explains, 'in the white media, King and Malcolm functioned as binary opposites: nonviolent vs. violent; integrationist vs. separatist; potentially one of us vs. totally other.' The course of the structure of t

among SNCC fieldworkers.<sup>71</sup> The article proves that Herbers had some degree of knowledge about the diminution of nonviolent philosophy in the movement and the growing acceptance of self-defence among participants. It also highlights that journalists did not uniformly accept that the movement was unified and defined solely by nonviolence. Media coverage concerning self-defence increased significantly with the emergence of the Deacons for Defence and Justice in 1964. Over the following two years, major national newspapers provided steady coverage of the organisation and civil rights struggles in Jonesboro and Bogalusa. As Hill writes, this marked a turning point for the role of self-defence in the movement, with the Deacons publicly embracing what had previously been largely hidden.<sup>72</sup>

Coverage of the role of self-defence in the movement was generally confined to print journalism, however. Though major publications like the *New York Times* maintained significant readership, their influence on public perception of the movement pales in comparison to that of network news coverage. Television was by far the most prominent form of mass media at the time of the movement, with 92% of US households owning at least one television set by the early 1960s.<sup>73</sup> During this time, television news became an authoritative force in American life, and the movement was its first major ongoing domestic story.<sup>74</sup> This made network news coverage the primary framework through which the majority of the population experienced the civil rights movement, giving the networks immense power to frame how it was perceived in the nation. Thus, while there are examples of print journalists grappling with the role of self-defence, with some stories even appearing in one of the nation's foremost publications, the influence of such articles on national perception of the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 375.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Hill, *The Deacons for Defence*, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, 2-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Ibid., 44.

self-defence played the most prominent role. Hoping to gain sympathy and funding, civil rights organisations manipulated media coverage. King and the SCLC provoked clashes between nonviolent protestors and aggressive law enforcement, producing media spectacles that benefitted the movement's cause. In the process, the perception of Black demonstrators in the movement as passive victims became ingrained in the national psyche. SNCC and

## Conclusion

The dominant narrative is a regressive account of the civil rights movement. As Tyson explains, it 'idealises Black history, downplays the oppression of Jim Crow,' and 'blurs the racial dilemmas that follow us into the twenty-first century.' This has ultimately damaged the prospects of modern protests in the Black Freedom Struggle. Demonstrations that deviate

American citizens,' and that Blacks have to 'earn their rights.'

maintained this image to secure white liberal sympathy and funding, hiding more radical aspects of the movement, including the role of self-defence, from the media. As a result, self-defence was largely absent from the contemporary media portrayal of the civil rights movement. In the decades following the movement, the dominant narrative developed from media accounts. By presenting a narrow scope of acceptable protest, the dominant narrative has greatly limited modern understandings of the movement and inhibited modern protest movements. A revision of the narrative is becoming increasingly necessary to highlight the scope of resistance strategies in a world that, as Curry and Kelleher write, 'looks eerily similar to the 1950s and 1960s regarding the public executions of Black men, and condition of Blacks more generally.'<sup>79</sup>

Curry and Kelleher, Robert F. Williams and Militant Civil Rights, 68.

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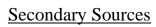
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