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# Robert F. Williams, “Black Power,” and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle

Timothy B. Tyson

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“The childhood of Southerners, white and colored,” Lillian Smith wrote in 1949, “has been lived on trembling earth.” For one black boy in Monroe, North Carolina, the earth first shook on a Saturday morning in 1936. Standing on the sidewalk on Main Street, Robert Franklin Williams witnessed the battering of an African American woman by a white policeman. The policeman, Jesse Alexander Helms, an admirer recalled, “had the sharpest shoe in town and he didn’t mind using it.” The police officer’s son, Sen. Jesse Helms, remembered “Big Jesse” as “a six-foot, two-hundred pound gorilla. When he said, ‘Smile,’ I smiled.” Eleven-year-old Robert Williams watched in terror as Big Jesse flattened the black woman with his fist and then arrested her. Years later, Williams described the scene: Helms “dragged her off to the nearby jailhouse, her dress up over her head, the same way that a cave man would club and drag his sexual prey.” He recalled “her tortured screams as her flesh was ground away from the friction of the concrete.” The memory of this violent spectacle and of the laughter of white bystanders haunted Williams. Perhaps the deferential way that African American men on the street responded was even more deeply troubling. “The emasculated black men hung their heads in shame and hurried silently from the cruelly bizarre sight,” Williams recalled.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (1949; New York, 1961), 22; Ernest B. Furguson, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms* (New York, 1986), 30, 40; Robert F. Williams interview by Robert Carl Cohen, 1968, transcript, pp. 4–5, box 1, Robert Carl Cohen Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison); *Crusader*, Dec. 1967, p. 3; Robert F. Williams interview by Timothy B. Tyson, March 10, 1993, audiotape (in Timothy B. Tyson’s possession). See also Robert F. Williams, “While God Lay Sleeping: The Autobiography of Robert F. Williams,” 1–4, 1996, *ibid.* I am grateful to the Williams family for sharing this manuscript and other family documents with me. With respect to the “emasculated black men,” the gender politics at work are glaring and important. On this heavily gendered and sexualized language, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, forthcoming).

Knowledge of such scenes was as commonplace as coffee cups in the South that had recently helped to elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. For the rest of his life, Robert Williams, destined to become one of the most influential African American radicals of his time, repeated this searing story to friends, readers, listeners, reporters, and historians. He preached it from street corner ladders to eager crowds on Seventh Avenue and 125th Street in Harlem and to congregants in Malcolm X’s Temple Number 7. He bore witness to its brutality in labor halls and college auditoriums across the United States. It contributed to the fervor of his widely published debate with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1960 and fueled his hesitant bids for leadership in the black freedom struggle. Its merciless truths must have tightened in his fingers on the night in 1961 when he fled a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dragnet with his wife and two small children, a machine gun slung over one shoulder. Williams revisited the bitter memory on platforms that he shared with Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao Zedong. He told it over *Radio Free Dixie*, his regular program on Radio Havana from 1962 to 1965, and retold it from Hanoi in broadcasts directed to African American soldiers in Vietnam. It echoed from transistor radios in Watts in 1965 and from gigantic speakers in Tiananmen Square in 1966. The childhood story opens the pages of his autobiography, “While God Lay Sleeping,” which Williams completed just before his death on October 15, 1996. In the anguish of that eleven-year-old, we can find distilled the bitter history that shaped one of the South’s most dynamic race rebels, and thousands of other black insurgents. That moment marked his life, and his life marked the African American freedom movement in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The life of Robert F. Williams illustrates that “the civil rights movement” and “the Black Power movement,” often portrayed in very different terms, grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom. In fact, virtually all of the elements that we associate with “Black Power” were already present in the small towns and rural communities of the South where “the civil rights movement” was born. The story of Robert F. Williams reveals that independent black political action, black cultural pride, and what Williams called “armed self-reliance” operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protest.

Despite his dramatic contributions, Williams has thus far had virtually no place in the unfolding narrative of the civil rights movement. Until recently, scholars of the movement focused on the pathbreaking legal march of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the powerful moral vision of Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King and the armies of nonviolent direct action have attracted the energies of able scholars—David J. Garrow, Adam Fairclough, and Taylor Branch among others. These works opened new worlds of history, but

<sup>2</sup> See Timothy B. Tyson, “Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1994); Marcellus C. Barksdale, “Robert F. Williams and the Indigenous Civil Rights Movement in Monroe, North Carolina, 1961,” *Journal of Negro History*, 69 (Spring 1984), 73–89; Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, ed. Marc Schlieffer (New York, 1962); and Williams, “While God Lay Sleeping.”



Unidentified African American man in front of a “white only” laundromat, Monroe, North Carolina, 1961. In the South where Robert F. Williams grew up, black maids washed the bodies of aged and infirm white people, but the uniforms that they wore could not be laundered in the same machines that white people used.

Photo, John Herman Williams, *Courtesy of John Herman Williams*.

their failures to examine sufficiently the roots of black struggles and the range of black self-assertion have created what Charles M. Payne calls “a history more theatrical than instructive.”<sup>3</sup>

In the last few years, a steadily growing stack of local and state studies sensitive to the dynamic relationship between local and national movements has begun to tell larger, more realistic, and more complex stories. John Dittmer’s *Local People* and Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* have taken us far beyond the television cameras and civil rights celebrities to the ordinary citizens who made the black freedom movement and to the roots of that movement in the culture of the rural black South. Both Payne and Dittmer also present extensive and persuasive evidence of the indispensable role that black self-defense played in sustaining local move-

<sup>3</sup> The best such works include Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York, 1976); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988); and Taylor Branch, *A Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York, 1998). Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995), 418.

ments. Adam Fairclough, in *Race and Democracy*, his study of the movement in Louisiana over the long period from 1915 to 1972, challenges his own earlier assumption that “the black activism of 1955 to 1965 displayed a unity and momentum that set it apart from what came before and what came after.” David S. Cecelski’s profound study of black schools in Hyde County, North Carolina, *Along Freedom Road*, points out the “notable continuity between older, more conservative African American voices, which had given the building of strong black schools priority over desegregation, and the newer ‘militant’ expressions of black separatism and community control.”<sup>4</sup>

The still-new historiography of Black Power touches on such issues, though its chronology tends to begin after 1965 and its geography remains largely urban and northern or western. Ephemeral early works echoed the vacuous mainstream journalism of the period, portraying Black Power as a “new black mood” or a “radical response to white America”—a black backlash to the betrayals of white liberals and the assaults of white reactionaries. The first major breakthrough in the literature, Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle*, recognized that Black Power “affirmed the legitimacy of a long-standing tradition of armed self-defense in the rural deep South” and that it reflected “dormant traditions of black radicalism” in Dixie. Carson recognizes that Black Power represented “a logical outgrowth” of the freedom movement’s efforts “to instill in the minds of black people the notion that they could create a better world for themselves.” In these frameworks, however, Black Power still represents a tragic departure from the civil rights dream—whether pointless, necessary, unfortunate, or inevitable.<sup>5</sup>

William L. Van Deburg’s landmark *New Day in Babylon* has pointed beyond despair and disillusionment toward Black Power’s important cultural and psychological affirmation. Van Deburg reveals Black Power as a fundamental stage in the development of African American political consciousness. More decisive for my pur-

<sup>4</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1994); Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*. For references to armed self-defense among black Mississippians, see Dittmer, *Local People*, 1, 47, 49, 86, 106, 166–67, 188–93, 215, 238, 254–86, 306–7, 310, 354, 358, 391–98. See also Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 44, 48–51, 54, 59, 61–62, 114, 138–39, 159, 168, 176, 202–6, 209, 279–80, 287, 308, 314. For a good local study that reveals the importance of armed self-defense in the freedom struggle, see David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877–1980* (New York, 1985), 35–36, 54–55, 109, 208–9. Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens, Ga., 1995), 1; David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 10. See also William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle For Freedom* (New York, 1979), 173, 237–39.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Zinn, *Postwar America: 1945–1971* (Indianapolis, 1973), 208; Thomas Wagstaff, *Black Power: The Radical Response to White America* (Beverly Hills, 1969); Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Garden City, 1969); Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, 1967); Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1969). Harold Cruse ignored the roots of Black Power, presenting it as “a strategic retreat” that “cover[ed] up a defeat without having to explain either the basic reasons for it or the flaws in the original strategy.” See Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967), 544–65, esp. 544, 548. A more recent analysis acknowledges that “the differences in the goals of the Southern civil rights movement and the (largely) Northern- and Western-based black pride and black consciousness movements . . . have been overemphasized” and suggests that Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X shared “the goal of constructing a new sense of self and of black culture.” See Richard King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens, Ga., 1996), 5. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 215, 299.

poses here is Van Deburg's important understanding that Black Power's "essential spirit was the product of *generations* of black people dealing with powerlessness—and surviving."<sup>6</sup>

The life of Robert F. Williams suggests that both Black Power and the civil rights movement have their roots in what Patricia Sullivan's important history of race and democracy in the New Deal-era South calls the "traditions of freedom and citizenship" that, "born in the crucible of Reconstruction, sustained communities of resistance." World War II afforded the black southerners who carried those traditions forward unprecedented political opportunities; many who seized them came from families with long traditions of resistance to white supremacy. And those traditions are only remotely related to nonviolence as it is conventionally depicted. In fact, it might be argued that nonviolent interracialism, rather than Black Power, is the anomaly. A careful sifting of historical evidence from across the South reveals the widely held distinction between the civil rights movement and Black Power as largely an intellectual architecture of political convenience.<sup>7</sup>

The very drama with which the life of Robert F. Williams illustrates these points has caused many scholars to dismiss him as minor and idiosyncratic or simply to ignore him altogether. "The Williams case is remembered by casual students of social change, if it is remembered at all," the journalist Fred Powledge writes, "as a transitory phenomenon, a mere glitch in the chronology of those years—the exception to the rule." Hugh Pearson, in his study of Huey Newton, incorrectly credits Williams with founding the Deacons For Defense and Justice and inaccurately argues that Williams "planted the first real seeds of militancy in the southern civil rights movement," though Pearson rightly notes the decisive influence Williams had on the Black Panthers. He also puts forth the fallacy that black southerners "first had to taste more atrocity at the hands of white racists" before they would summon the courage to defend their families. This notion that Williams took his stand "prematurely," as Malcolm X claimed, "just a couple of years ahead of his time," obscures the extent to which self-defense was rooted in southern black culture.<sup>8</sup>

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers knew better

<sup>6</sup> William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago, 1992), 34. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 14. On family traditions of resistance, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 207–35, esp. 233.

<sup>8</sup> Robert F. Williams is not mentioned in Branch's *Parting the Waters* and Garrow's *Bearing the Cross*, nor in Robert Weisbrod, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1990). There are several sentences on Williams in Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980* (New York, 1981), 66. For other portrayals of Williams as a harbinger of clashes to come, see David Levering Lewis, "The Origins and Causes of the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles Eagles (Jackson, 1986), 16; Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, 1988), 455–62; and Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 351–401. Fred Powledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (New York, 1992), 311; Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Cost of Black Power in America* (Reading, 1994), 25–28, 35–39. The Deacons For Defense and Justice were founded in Louisiana several years after Williams left the country. For Malcolm X's statement, see the 1964 radio interview, "His Best Credentials: On the Air with Joe Rainey," in *Malcolm X As They Knew Him*, ed. David Gallen (New York, 1992), 164–65.

than to push nonviolence on reluctant black southerners. In 1955 a black women’s newsletter published in Jackson, Mississippi, announced that since “no law enforcement body in ignorant Miss. will protect any Negro who has membership in the NAACP,” “the Negro must protect himself.” The editors warned “the white hoodlums who are now parading around the premises” that the editors were “protected by armed guard.” SNCC’s Charles Cobb observed, “In terms of the organizing . . . you didn’t go to the plantations, you didn’t go to these towns and somehow enter into a discussion of violence and nonviolence.” When white terrorists attacked the home of Hartman Turnbow, a local black farmer and SNCC stalwart in Holmes County, Mississippi, Cobb recalled, Turnbow “pushed his family out the back door and grabbed the rifle off the wall and started shooting. And his explanation was simply that, ‘I was not being,’ as he said, ‘non-nonviolent, I was protecting my wife and family.’” Even Bob Moses, who was as deeply identified with philosophical nonviolence as anyone in the freedom movement, acknowledged how much his convictions violated the mores among those SNCC sought to organize. “Self-defense is so deeply engrained in rural southern America,” Moses told SNCC volunteers in 1964, “that we as a small group can’t effect it.”<sup>9</sup>

The tradition, rooted in the unforgettable experiences of slave resistance and Reconstruction militancy, had survived what Rayford Whittingham Logan called “the nadir” of African American life. After an 1892 triple lynching in Memphis, for example, the black editor Ida B. Wells “determined to sell my life as dearly as possible,” she wrote; she urged other black southerners to do the same. “When the white man . . . knows he runs as great a risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does,” Wells insisted, “he would have a greater respect for Afro-American life.” When white mobs raged through the streets of Atlanta in 1906, W. E. B. Du Bois hastened home to defend his wife and family. “I bought a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and two dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot,” he wrote later. “If a white mob had stepped on the campus where I lived I would without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass.” Even Robert Moton, president of Tuskegee Institute, prepared to defend Booker T. Washington’s legacy with shotguns when Tuskegee was menaced by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1930s, rural blacks in Alabama armed themselves to organize the Share Croppers’ Union. Their own experience had taught them, one recalled, that “the only thing going to stop them from killing you, you got to go shooting.” Thirty years later, when SNCC organizers came to Lowndes County, Alabama, black farmers showed up for meetings armed; one black sharecropper told Stokely Car-

<sup>9</sup> *Eagle Eye: The Woman’s Voice*, Aug. 20, 1955, p. 1; *Fundhi: The Story of Ella Baker*, dir. Joanne Grant (Song-talk Publishing Co., 1980). For the statement by Bob Moses, see Mary King, *Freedom Song* (New York, 1987), 318.

<sup>10</sup> Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1997), originally published in 1954 as *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901*. For Ida B. Wells’s statement, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), 20. On W. E. B. Du Bois’s preparations for self-defense, see Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, 1998), 317. On Robert Moton’s preparation for self-defense, see Walter White, *A Man Called White* (New York, 1948), 70.

michael: "You turn the other cheek, and you'll get handed half what you're sitting on."<sup>11</sup>

This sensibility was not foreign to Martin Luther King Jr. nor to other members of his generation of black southerners. Glenn Smiley, who visited King's home on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1956, wrote back that "the place is an arsenal" and that King had armed guards. Probably the most crucial local ally of SNCC's campaigns in Mississippi, Amzie Moore, "like most politically active Blacks in Mississippi," Charles Payne writes, "often carried a gun. His home was well armed, and at night the area around his house may have been the best-lit spot in Cleveland." NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was "anything but non-violent," the NAACP official Ruby Hurley recalled. In 1953, Evers named his first child after the Kenyan guerrilla leader Jomo Kenyatta, Payne observes, and Evers "thought long and hard about the idea of Negroes engaging in guerilla warfare in the Delta." Daisy Bates in Little Rock wrote to Thurgood Marshall in 1959 that she and her husband "keep 'Old Betsy' well-oiled and the guards are always on the alert." Even in her public speeches, Bates bragged of the .32-caliber automatic she carried. She hailed the mother of Elizabeth Eckford, the black girl who had faced the mobs at Central High alone, for having "the courage of Harriet Tubman" because Mrs. Eckford kept her Bible and her pistol side by side. Despite the singular drama of his political career, Robert Williams's devotion to "armed self-reliance" remained more ordinary than idiosyncratic. Among the few historians who have explored his story, only John Dittmer summons the clarity to note that Williams's military service, his NAACP affiliation, and his willingness to defend home, family, and community by force if necessary made him "typical of the generation of southern blacks who launched the civil rights movement in the 1950s."<sup>12</sup>

Robert Williams was born in 1925 to Emma C. and John L. Williams. His father was a railroad boiler washer in Monroe, Union County, North Carolina, a town of six thousand in the North Carolina Piedmont. Women born in slavery still tended vegetable gardens along the street where young Rob Williams grew up. His grandfather, Sikes Williams, born a slave in Union County, had attended Biddle Institute in nearby Charlotte after emancipation and became one of Union County's first black schoolteachers. He enlisted as a Republican activist during the late nineteenth century and "traveled all over the county and the State making speeches

<sup>11</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Communists in Alabama during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 45, 229. See also Carson, *In Struggle*, 162–64. The roots of a distinctive Afro-Christianity were as deep as the bondage under which that faith was forged, but the roots of nonviolence in the black South were not deep. In a history of American nonviolence, not 1 of the 27 entries prior to the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr. reflects either African American or southern origins. See Staughton Lynd, *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1966).

<sup>12</sup> Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 22; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 44; Dittmer, *Local People*, 49–50; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 49–51; Daisy Bates to Thurgood Marshall, Aug. 3, 1959, box 2, Daisy Bates Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin); Daisy Bates, speech, 1959, box 3, *ibid.*; John Dittmer, "Robert Williams," in *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill, 1989), 231. Emphasis added.



and soliciting support for the Party.” Sikes Williams also published a small newspaper called the *People’s Voice*.<sup>13</sup> The “fusion” coalition of black Republicans and white Populists that he had labored to build won every statewide office in 1896. “THE CHAINS OF SERVITUDE ARE BROKEN,” Williams and his white Populist allies in Monroe proclaimed to their black constituents that year. “NOW NEVER LICK THE HAND THAT LASHED YOU.” Two years later, however, white conservatives overthrew the democratic process. “Go to the polls tomorrow,” the soon-to-be mayor, Alfred Waddell, told the white citizens of Wilmington, North Carolina, “and if you find the negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls, and if he refuses, kill him.” In a campaign of fraud and violence all across the state in 1898, Red Shirt terrorists helped the party of white supremacy install what the Democratic editor Josephus Daniels celebrated as “permanent good government by the party of the white man.”<sup>14</sup>

Robert’s grandmother, Ellen Isabel Williams, who had lived through these struggles, was a daily presence in his life as he grew to manhood; Williams remembered his grandmother as “my greatest friend.” He recalled that “she read *everything*” and that she “specialized in history.” Perhaps in part because Robert so strikingly resembled her handsome late husband, she would point to the iron printing press rusting in the shed and tell the young boy stories of the crusading editor’s political exploits. Herself born into slavery, she reminded her grandson that she had been conceived in the union of her mother with their owner, Daniel Tomblin. 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 at the turn of the century.<sup>15</sup>

It would not be long before Williams, gun in hand, found himself facing a new generation of white terrorists. In 1946 twenty-one-year-old Robert Williams

<sup>13</sup> Barksdale, “Robert F. Williams and the Indigenous Civil Rights Movement in Monroe, North Carolina,” 75; H. Nelson Walden, *History of Monroe and Union County* (Monroe, 1963), 15; S. E. Williams, “Application Blank No. 15” (in John Herman Williams’s possession, Detroit, Mich.). A photograph of the document is in my possession. I am grateful to Mr. Williams for sharing this and other family photographs and documents. *Crusader*, July 18, 1959, p. 2; “History of Our Family Reunion,” [1975], Williams Family Collection (in Mabel Williams’s possession, Baldwin, Mich.); Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, p. 53. There are no known copies of the *People’s Voice*, but its existence and politics are confirmed by Williams family sources and references to it in the local white newspaper. See “Monroe Historical Edition,” *Monroe Enquirer-Journal*, Sept. 1974, p. 4-B.

<sup>14</sup> “To the Colored Voters of Union County,” 1896, flier, Black History File (Heritage Room, Union County Courthouse, Monroe, N.C.); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 110–11. For the statement of Josephus Daniels, see J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South* (New Haven, 1974), 76. On the white supremacy campaigns of 1898 in North Carolina, see Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894–1901* (Chapel Hill, 1951); Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901: The Black Second* (Baton Rouge, 1981); H. Leon Prather, “*We Have Taken a City*”: *The Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Rutherford, 1984); and David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Williams, “Someday I’m Going Back South,” *Daily Worker* (Detroit edition), April 9, 1949, p. 7; *Crusader*, July 18, 1959, p. 2; “History of Our Family Reunion”; Robert F. Williams interview by Timothy B. Tyson, Sept. 2, 1996, audiotape (in Tyson’s possession). The crucial role of Ellen Williams in the ongoing political life of her family underscores the connection that Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore has drawn between African American women’s activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the emerging African American freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s. See Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 224.

stepped down from a segregated Greyhound in Monroe wearing the uniform of his country. Williams had moved to Detroit four years earlier to work at Ford Motor Company. Coming home from Belle Isle Amusement Park on the evening of June 11, 1943, he and his brother battled white mobs in one of the worst race riots in United States history. Williams was drafted in 1944 and endured the ironies of marching for freedom in a segregated army. When his government-issue shoe leather struck the same pavement where ten years earlier he had seen Big Jesse Helms drag the black woman off to jail, Williams was no longer a frightened eleven-year-old. Military training had given black 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 black veterans whom John Dittmer has characterized as "the shock troops of the modern civil rights movement," Robert Williams did not come home to pick cotton.<sup>16</sup>

Another returning black veteran, a friend of Williams's named Bennie Montgomery, did come home to raise cotton on the farm that his father operated as a sharecropper for W. W. Mangum, a white landowner near Monroe. Saturday, June 1, 1946, was a regular workday on the Mangum place, but Montgomery asked Mangum for his wages at noon, explaining that he needed to go to Monroe to have his father's car repaired. Mangum apparently kicked and slapped the young veteran, and Montgomery pulled out a pocketknife and cut his employer's throat. The Ku Klux Klan 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.<sup>17</sup>

State authorities shipped the sharecropper's remains back to Monroe. Robbed of their lynching, however, members of the local klavern of "the invisible empire" let it be known that Bennie Montgomery's body belonged, not to his family, but to the Ku Klux 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 devised a battle plan. When the Klan motorcade pulled up in front of the 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 United States Army Pfc. Robert F. Williams cradled a carbine that night. So did three men who would become key lieutenants in the "black militia" that Williams organized ten years

<sup>16</sup> Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, p. 44. On events at Belle Isle that evening, see Robert Shogun and Tom Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot: A Study in Violence* (New York, 1976), 34–35. See also Dominic Capeci and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson, 1991). Union County, North Carolina, Record of Military Discharges, vol. 7, p. 99 (Monroe Public Library, Monroe, N.C.); Dittmer, *Local People*, 1–9.

<sup>17</sup> *Monroe Enquirer*, June 31, 1946, p. 1; *ibid.*, March 31, 1947, p. 1. See also Marcellus C. Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement and Cultural Change in North Carolina, 1945–1965: Weldon, Chapel Hill, and Monroe" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1977), 42–43.

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.”<sup>18</sup>

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 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.” At Johnson C. Smith, Williams met one of his literary heroes, Langston Hughes, who considered Williams a promising poet and sent him handwritten poems as an encouragement. In 1953, however, Williams ran out of money for college and reenlisted in the armed forces, this time in the United States Marine Corps.<sup>19</sup>

“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. “Subject in a letter to the President of the United States expressed his desire to renounce his citizenship and live in a country ‘which would not let his family starve,’” United States Naval Intelligence reported. His one bright moment as a Marine came on May 17, 1954, when he heard that the United States 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.”<sup>20</sup>

Upon his return to Monroe in 1955, Williams joined both the local branch of the NAACP and a mostly white Unitarian fellowship. In a Sunday sermon delivered

<sup>18</sup> J. W. McDow interview by Tyson, Sept. 17, 1993, audiotape (in Tyson’s possession); Woodrow Wilson interview by Marcellus Chandler Barksdale, [1976–1977], audiotape, box 9, Duke Oral History Collection (Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.); B. J. Winfield interview by Barksdale, [1976–1977], audiotape, *ibid.*; Robert F. Williams interview by James Mosby, 1970, transcript, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.).

<sup>19</sup> Williams, “Someday I’m Going Back South,” *Daily Worker* (Detroit edition), April 9, 1949, p. 7; Robert F. Williams, “N. Carolina College Youth Calls for a Militant Generation,” *Freedom*, 11 (June 1952), 5; United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Testimony of Robert F. Williams: Hearings before the Committee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 91 Cong. 2 sess., part 1, March 25, 1970, exhibit no. 43, pp. 211–12; Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Naval Intelligence, San Diego, California, Investigation Report, “21 Jan–28 Apr 1955 Intermittently,” “Robert F. Williams” Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Subject File (in Tyson’s possession). I am grateful to the Williams family for sharing the complete file; parts of it are available in the Robert F. Williams Papers (Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). See also *Southern Patriot*, 18 (Jan. 1960), 3. The statement by Williams is in Vincent Harding, “Introduction,” in *The Eyes on the Prize Reader*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (New York, 1991), 36.

to his fellow Unitarians in 1956, Williams hailed the Montgomery, Alabama, 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 United States 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.”<sup>21</sup>

The atmosphere at the Monroe NAACP was less exuberant. In the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the triumph at Montgomery, Ku Klux Klan rallies near Monroe began to draw crowds as big 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 freedom movement journal 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,” Robert Williams recalled, “and then they all left.”<sup>22</sup>

Finding himself virtually a one-man NAACP chapter, Williams turned first to the black veterans with whom he had stood against the Klan that night back in 1946. Another veteran, the physician Dr. Albert E. Perry Jr., became vice-president. Finding it “necessary to visit homes and appeal directly to individuals,” Williams informed the national office, he painstakingly recruited from the beauty parlors, pool halls, and street corners, building a cadre of some two hundred members by 1959. The largest group of new recruits were African American women who worked as domestics. The Monroe branch of the NAACP became “the only one of its kind in existence,” the novelist Julian Mayfield, a key supporter of Williams in Harlem’s black Left, 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 later wrote. “Most important, we had a strong representation of black veterans who didn’t scare easily.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Robert F. Williams, “Colonel Jim Crow’s Last Stand: A Sermon Delivered at All Soul’s Chapel Unitarian Fellowship, Monroe, North Carolina,” March 25, 1956, pp. 1–2, box 3, Williams Papers.

<sup>22</sup> For attendance at a Union, South Carolina, rally, see *Charleston News and Courier*, Sept. 21, 1956, p. 1-B. For a report that in 1957 “cross-burnings and [Ku Klux Klan] meetings here attracted thousands,” see *Monroe Enquirer*, March 17, 1958, p. 1. *Southern Patriot*, 15 (Jan. 1957), 1; Williams interview by Mosby.

<sup>23</sup> Robert F. Williams to the NAACP, March 11, 1957, box A333, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, ed. Schlieffer, 50–51; McDow interview; Winfield interview; Wilson interview; Williams interview by Tyson, March 10, 1993; Williams interview by Mosby. Membership reports indicate that the branch grew from 92 to 121 members in 1959, but Williams claimed—and the records of the national office confirm—that the Monroe branch declined to record many memberships “for the purpose of protecting those who join the NAACP who do not want their names known.” See “Total Membership Received From Branches in North Carolina, January 1–October 1, 1959,” box C113, NAACP Papers. Julian Mayfield, “Challenge to Negro Leadership: The Case of Robert Williams,” *Commentary* (April 1961), 298; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 51.

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. Harry Golden, a prominent Jewish liberal from nearby Charlotte, observed that the specter of interracial sexuality “haunts every mention of the race question” and thought it “naive” of Williams to “experiment with the crude emotions of a small Southern agricultural community.” Not surprisingly, the Ku Klux Klan blamed the affluent Dr. Perry for the resurgent black activism and a large, heavily armed Klan motorcade attacked Dr. Perry’s house one night that summer. Black veterans greeted the night riders with sandbag fortifications and a hail of disciplined gunfire. The Monroe Board of Aldermen immediately passed an ordinance banning Ku Klux Klan motorcades, a measure they had refused to consider before the gun battle.<sup>24</sup>

When Williams and the other black veterans organized self-defense networks, black women insisted that the men teach them to shoot. But for black men as well as white men, the rhetoric of protecting women was fraught with the politics of controlling women. Williams recalled that the women “had volunteered, and they wanted to fight. But we kept them out of most of it.” Nevertheless, African American women who labored as domestics played crucial roles as gatherers of intelligence. They also worked the telephones and delivered the weekly newsletter, Williams acknowledged. But it was not easy to confine women to these roles. When police arrested Dr. Perry on trumped-up charges of “criminal abortion on a white woman,” dozens of black citizens, most of them women, armed themselves and crowded into the police station. *Jet* magazine reported that the women “surged against the doors, fingering their guns and knives until Perry was produced.” In short, black women both deployed and defied gender stereotypes—demanding of black men, in effect, “Why aren’t you protecting us?”—even though they overturned such stereotypes in their daily lives.<sup>25</sup>

An even more vivid local drama dragged Monroe onto the stage of international politics on October 28, 1958. Two African American boys, David E. “Fuzzy” Simpson and James 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. Rarely in history has an incident so small opened a window so large into the life of a place and a people. The worldwide controversy that stemmed from the “kissing case” underlined the power of sexual questions in racial politics and demonstrated both the

<sup>24</sup> *Carolina Israelite*, Jan. 1955, p. 9; *ibid.*, Jan.–Feb. 1959, p. 2; *Norfolk [Virginia] Journal and Guide*, Oct. 12, 1957, p. 1; “Is North Carolina NAACP Leader a Marked Man?,” *Jet*, Oct. 31, 1957, pp. 10–11; “Parades, Cavalcades, and Caravans” ordinance, *Code of the City of Monroe* (Monroe, 1957), 473–75, North Carolina Collection (Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

<sup>25</sup> Williams interview by Mosby; “Is North Carolina NAACP Leader a Marked Man?,” 10–11. An expanding literature on African American women’s activism in North Carolina helps place these self-assertions in an ongoing black women’s political tradition. See Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Politics of Reconstruction* (Urbana, 1997); and Christina Greene, “‘Our Separate Ways’: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina, 1940s to 1970s” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1997).

promise and the problems of Cold War politics for the African American freedom struggle.<sup>26</sup>

After the kissing incident, Sissy Sutton's mother reported, "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 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 Gov. Luther H. Hodges that the police had detained the boys "for their own good, due to local feeling in the case."<sup>27</sup>

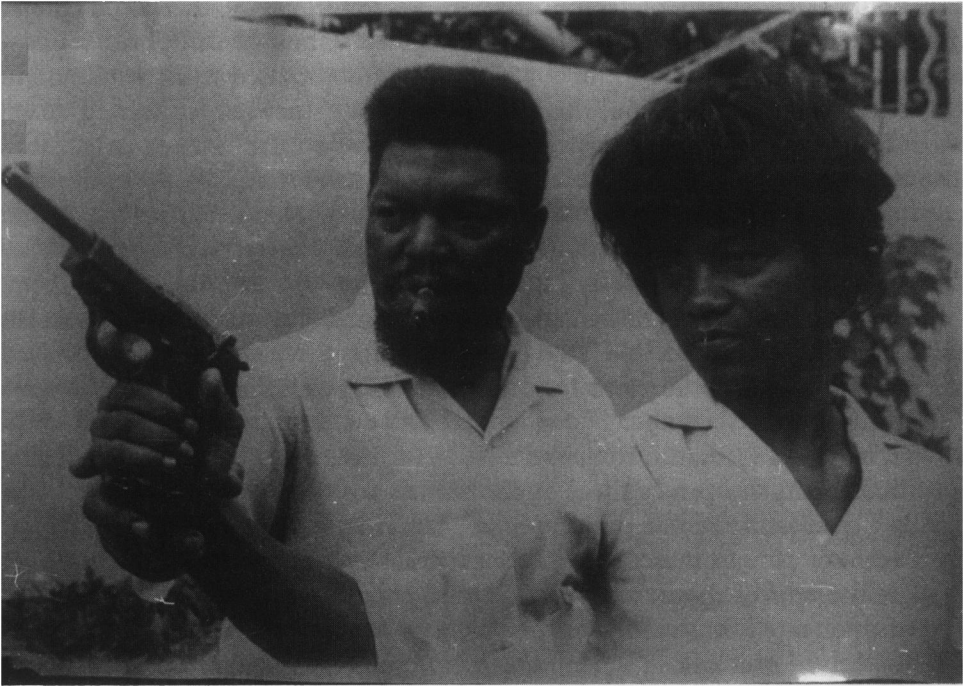
Authorities held the two boys for six days without permitting them to see parents, friends, or attorneys. Passing gunmen fired dozens of shots into the Thompson home. Klan terrorists torched crosses on the lawn. Hanover's sister found his dog shot dead in the yard. For many white citizens, the case seemed to resonate with the sexual fears awakened by the prospect of school desegregation. "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. Denied the right to engage counsel or to confront their accusers, Hanover Thompson and Fuzzy Simpson were sentenced to Morrison Training School for Negroes. If they behaved well, Judge Price told the boys, they might be released before they were twenty-one.<sup>28</sup>

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. As 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

<sup>26</sup> Kelly Alexander to Roy Wilkins, "A Report of Activities of the North Carolina State Conference of Branches in Reference to the Case of David Simpson and James H. Thompson of Monroe, North Carolina," Dec. 26, 1958, box 333A, NAACP Papers. See Patrick Jones, "'Communist Front Shouts Kissing Case to the World': The Committee to Combat Racial Injustice and the Politics of Race and Gender during the Cold War" (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> George Weissman, "The Kissing Case," *Nation*, Jan. 17, 1959, p. 47; Gloster B. Current to Wilkins, Dec. 23, 1958, box A92, NAACP Papers. See also *Charlotte Observer*, Jan. 12, 1959, p. 2-A; *Durham Carolina Times*, Jan. 10, 1959, p. 1; *Monroe Enquirer*, Nov. 20, 1958, p. 1. See also James Hanover Thompson interview by Tyson, May 13, 1993, audiotape (in Tyson's possession); and J. Hampton Price to Luther H. Hodges, Nov. 26, 1958, box 423, Governor Luther H. Hodges Papers (North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh).

<sup>28</sup> Thompson interview. See also *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 17, 1959, p. 3. Mrs. W. W. Rogers to editor, *Charlotte Observer*, Feb. 2, 1959, p. 2-B; *Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel*, Feb. 8, 1958, p. 1; Writ of Habeas Corpus and Petition, Superior Court, Mecklenburg County, N.C., Jan. 6, 1959, Laura Mola Papers (in Tyson's possession). See also "Transcript of Statements Made By Attorney Conrad Lynn During Interview on the 'Frank Ford Show,' Radio Station WPEN, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 20, 1959, from 12:40 until 1:35 AM," box A92, NAACP Papers.



Robert F. Williams teaches his wife Mabel Williams to use a pistol given to him by Fidel Castro. Four months earlier, she held off Monroe police officers with a .12-gauge shotgun when they tried to arrest her husband.  
*Courtesy of John Herman Williams.*

the international politics of the Cold War as a fulcrum to move the United States 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.<sup>29</sup>

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, saw the need for an independent

<sup>29</sup> This strategy appeared the moment that the Cold War did. “It is not Russia that threatens the United States so much as Mississippi,” the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) declared in a 1947 petition to the United Nations, “not Stalin and Molotov but Bilbo and Rankin.” See Mary Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” *Stanford Law Review*, 41 (Nov. 1988), 95 and n201. In Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. explained his strategic vision: “The United States is . . . battling for the minds and the hearts of men in Asia and in Africa, and they aren’t gonna respect the United States of America if she deprives men and women of the basic rights of life because of the color of their skin.” See Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 791. The *Time* story (from the international edition of the magazine) was reprinted in *Monroe Enquirer*, Feb. 9, 1959, p. 1.

black political leadership, preferably one 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. That coverage 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,” the 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.”<sup>30</sup>

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, forcing Governor Hodges to hire a team of professors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to translate the tens of thousands of letters that poured into his office. John Shure, head of the United States Information Agency (USIA) at the Hague, reported that he 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 United States 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.”<sup>31</sup>

Governor Hodges soon launched a public relations campaign of his own, aiming, as an aide urged the governor, to “give the NAACP a taste of its own medicine . . . [and] place the whole Confederacy in your debt.” The aide suggested to the governor that “by hitting directly at the communist connection, we might be able to convince people of the insincerity of these protests.” The Federal Bureau of Investigation informed Governor Hodges that “Robert Williams has been under investigation for a considerable period of time” and that “you would have access to this information if you desire.” The ensuing smear campaign asserted that the entire affair had been “a Communist-directed front,” that the families of the boys were “shiftless and irresponsible,” and that Hanover Thompson’s mother had “a reputation for using her daughters in prostitution.” The USIA and the State Department broadcast these charges around the world, winning few minds and fewer

<sup>30</sup> Claude DeBruce, “On the Negro Question,” *SWP Discussion Bulletin* (July 1956), 1–5, box 1, Socialist Workers Party Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin); Jones, “‘Communist Front Shouts Kissing Case to the World,’” 44; Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, pp. 562–63; George Weissman to Carl Braden, Feb. 19, 1959, box 1, Committee to Combat Racial Injustice Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

<sup>31</sup> Robert E. Giles to William C. Friday, Feb. 6, 1959, box 423, Hodges Papers. John Shure’s comments are excerpted in Basil L. Whitener to Hodges, March 2, 1959, *ibid.* For Williams’s remarks, see *Crusader*, Aug. 1962, p. 4.



hearts. Three and a half months after Hanover and Sissy had kissed each other, Governor Hodges, under enormous political pressure, announced that “the home conditions have improved to the extent that the boys can be given conditional release.”<sup>32</sup>

“The kissing case,” the activist lawyer Conrad Lynn observed years later, “was the case that got [Williams] in national and international attention.” The case not only furnished Williams with a network of seasoned activists in the American Left but 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.<sup>33</sup> The most important of Williams’s contacts among the Harlem nationalists was Malcolm X, minister at the Nation of Islam’s Temple no. 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,’” Williams recounted. Williams found ready support among Harlem intellectuals, including Julian Mayfield, John Henrik Clarke, John Oliver 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. Later, in an unpublished autobiography, Julian Mayfield 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.<sup>34</sup>

The “kissing case” recruited new allies for Williams, but it launched him on a

<sup>32</sup> John Briggs to Bill Sharpe, Feb. 23, 1959, box 423, Hodges Papers; Sharpe to Hodges, Feb. 12, 1959, *ibid.*; Hodges to Sharpe, Feb. 19, 1959, *ibid.*; O. L. Richardson to Hodges, n.d., *ibid.*; Chester Davis, “Communist Front Shouts ‘Kissing Case’ to the World,” *Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel*, Feb. 8, 1959, p. 1; *Monroe Enquirer*, Feb. 16, 1959, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Conrad Lynn interview, [1975], transcript, pp. 4–5, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection; Muhammed Ahmed, “Queen Mother Moore,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana, 1992), 486–87. Other speakers who used the bookstore’s streetfront podium included Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Carlos Cooks, James Rupert Lawson, and Edward “Porkchop” Davis. See Kleytus Smith and Abiola Sinclair, *The Harlem Cultural / Political Movements, 1960–1970* (New York, 1975), 46. See also Rosemari Meali, *Fidel and Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting* (Melbourne, 1993), 29.

<sup>34</sup> Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, pp. 382–83. The Federal Bureau of Investigation found the alliance alarming; J. Edgar Hoover warned his Charlotte, North Carolina, office about Williams’s “recent activities in connection with the Nation of Islam at New York” and ordered that a file be opened on that connection. See Director to Special Agent in Charge, Charlotte, June 18, 1959, “Robert F. Williams” FBI Subject File. Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 358–59; Julian Mayfield, “Tales From The Lido,” [1975?], draft autobiography, Julian Mayfield Papers (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.). I am grateful to Kevin Gaines for sharing these materials. Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) is a “famous black writer” who admired Williams greatly and in 1959–1960 not only had “rejected Martin Luther King’s philosophy” but also had concluded a poem with the line, “Will the machinegunners step forward?” See Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago, 1997), 237. In an interview Baraka neither confirmed nor denied having supplied the machine guns. Amiri Baraka interview by Tyson, April 9, 1998, notes (in Tyson’s possession). An anonymous but reliable source interview confirms that he did.

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."<sup>35</sup>

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 Agricultural and Mechanical University. 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, 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, the NAACP found it "harder and harder to keep feelings from boiling over in some of our branches."<sup>36</sup>

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. Another inflammatory case was slated for trial the same day. Lewis Medlin, a white mechanic, was accused of having beaten and sexually assaulted Mary Ruth Reid, a pregnant black woman, in the presence of her five children. According to Williams, Reid's brothers and

<sup>35</sup> Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge, 1969). See also James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994). Davis, "Communist Front Shouts 'Kissing Case' to the World," 1; Alexander to Wilkins, "Report of Activities of the North Carolina State Conference of Branches in Reference to the Case of David Simpson and James H. Thompson of Monroe, North Carolina"; Williams to Weissman, Dec. 17, 1958, box 1, Committee to Combat Racial Injustice Papers; Wilkins to P. L. Pratts, "Personal, Not For Publication," May 28, 1959, p. 1, box A333, NAACP Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York, 1986); Mrs. Medgar Evers with William Peters, *For Us, the Living* (New York, 1970), 194; Roy Wilkins, "Report of the Secretary to the Board of Directors for the Month of April 1959," box A333, NAACP Papers. See also *Washington Post*, May 3, 1959, p. 4; *Durham Carolina Times*, May 23, 1959, p. 1; *New York Times*, May 7, 1959, p. 22; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959, p. 3; and *Charlotte Observer*, May 3, 1959, p. 1. Wilkins to Pratts, "Personal, Not For Publication"; Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York, 1982), 265.

several of the black 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.”<sup>37</sup>

The proceedings against the two white men compelled Williams to reconsider his assessment. The judge dropped the charges against Shaw although he had failed even to appear in 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 Mary Ruth Reid, who began to cry uncontrollably. Lewis 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.” Black 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, however, 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.”<sup>39</sup>

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. “High officials of the organization may speak in cultivated accents and dress like Wall Street lawyers,” Thomas Waring of the *Charleston News and Courier* charged, “but they are engaged in a revolutionary enterprise.” That very morning, when he read the words “meet violence with violence” in a United Press International (UPI) dispatch, Roy Wilkins telephoned Robert Williams to inform him that he had been removed from his post as president of the Monroe NAACP.<sup>40</sup>

That summer of 1959, the fiftieth anniversary convention of the NAACP pre-

<sup>37</sup> *Monroe Enquirer*, Jan. 26, 1959, p. 1; *ibid.*, March 9, 1959, p. 1; *New York Post*, Jan. 27, 1959, p. 4; *ibid.*, May 7, 1959, p. 1; *ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1959, p. 1; *Crusader*, April 1963, p. 4; *Durham Carolina Times*, Feb. 7, 1959, p. 2; *ibid.*, Jan. 31, 1959, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Williams interview by Mosby; *Southern Patriot*, 18 (Jan. 1960), 3; *Monroe Enquirer*, May 7, 1959, p. 1; Jones, “Communist Front Shouts Kissing Case to the World,” 127; Williams interview by Mosby.

<sup>39</sup> “Rec’d via phone from UPI—May 6, 1959,” box A333, NAACP Papers. See also *New York Times*, May 7, 1959, p. 22. “Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary, Complainant, Against Robert F. Williams, Respondent, Brief For Respondent,” 1–2, box A333, NAACP Papers.

<sup>40</sup> *New York Times*, May 7, 1959, p. 22; *Jackson [Mississippi] State-Times*, p. 1; *Charleston [South Carolina] News and Courier*, May 7, 1959, p. 1; Wilkins to Williams, telegram, May 6, 1959, box A333, NAACP Papers.

sented a highly public show trial whose central issue was whether the national organization would ratify Wilkins's suspension of Robert Williams. The national office printed 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," an FBI memorandum stated. Wilkins twisted every available arm. Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, in an unmistakable reference to the whisper campaign to discredit Williams, took the podium to congratulate the NAACP for "rejecting retaliation against terror" and "repulsing the threat of communism to invade your ranks." Daisy Bates, the pistol-packing heroine of Little Rock, agreed to denounce Williams for advocating self-defense—after the national office consented to buy six hundred dollars a month in "advertising" from her newspaper. "The national office not only controlled the platform," Louis Lomax wrote, but "they subjected the Williams forces to a heavy bombardment from the NAACP's big guns." Forty speakers, including Bates, King, Jackie Robinson, 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.<sup>41</sup>

"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 co-ed 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 besought the assembly, "I ask you not to come crawling to these whites on your hands and knees and make me a sacrificial lamb."<sup>42</sup>

And there the pleading stopped. Perhaps the spirit of his grandfather, Sikes Williams, the former slave who had fought for interracial democracy and wielded a rifle against white terrorists, rose up within him. Perhaps he heard within himself the voice of his grandmother, who had entrusted that rifle to young Robert. "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 *Durham Carolina Times* called "the biggest civil rights story of the year," the NAACP convention voted to uphold the suspension of

<sup>41</sup> *The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case*, pamphlet, box 2, Committee to Combat Racial Injustice Papers. Special Agent in Charge, New York, to Director, telegram, June 5, 1959, "Thurgood Marshall" FBI Subject File (J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, Washington, D.C.). My thanks to Alex Charns for sharing these documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. *New York Times*, July 14, 1959, p. 1; Bates to Wilkins, July 23, 1959, box 1, Bates Papers; Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York, 1962), 112–14.

<sup>42</sup> *Crusader*, July 25, 1959, p. 1.

Robert Williams. The day after Daisy Bates had urged the assembly to censure Robert 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.”<sup>43</sup>

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 emerging Third World nations, especially in Africa. 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 United States Constitution, backed by an unyielding resistance to white supremacy.<sup>44</sup>

In pursuit of this uncompromising vision of interracial democracy, Robert 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, whose newspaper of the same name had issued a “Declaration of War on the Ku Klux Klan” in 1921. The *Crusader’s* self-proclaimed mission was “ADVANCING THE CAUSE OF RACE PRIDE AND FREEDOM.” Soon sample

<sup>43</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 25, 1959, p. 1; *Crusader*, July 25, 1959, p. 1; *Durham Carolina Times*, Jan. 5, 1960, p. 1. With respect to the obvious gender politics at work here, see note 1 above. Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (New York, 1962), 162; Williams to Bates, Aug. 19, 1959, box 2, Bates Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Myers, “When Violence Met Violence: Facts and Images of Robert F. Williams and the Black Freedom Struggle in Monroe, North Carolina” (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1993), 44–45; Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, ed. Schlieffer, 40. For an attack on Williams as insufficiently ideological, see Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 358–59, 382–401. It is time to reconsider the provisional and eclectic homegrown radicalism that black southerners developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. See, for example, Clayborne Carson, “Rethinking African-American Political Thought in the Post-Revolutionary Era,” in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (New York, 1997), 115–27; and, for a historical account, Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*.

mailings yielded several thousand subscribers across the country. Shortly after Williams began to spread his confrontational appeals in the *Crusader*, the first published biography of Martin Luther King Jr. appeared, written by a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's board of directors. The book was entitled *Crusader without Violence*. Whether the title was intended as a direct rejoinder to Williams or not, it situated the book within a lively and important discussion.<sup>45</sup>

"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."<sup>46</sup>

Not merely the FBI but also the most influential advocates of nonviolence felt compelled to deal with Robert 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 on 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."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> "From Charlotte SAC To Director," July 31, 1959, "Robert F. Williams" FBI Subject File. For Cyril V. Briggs's 1921 "Declaration of War on the Ku Klux Klan," see Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 208–9, 495n. Williams told Robert A. Hill that "many years ago [he had] heard of Cyril V. Briggs and his *Crusader*" and that he had adopted the name in honor of Briggs. See Cyril Briggs, *The Crusader*, Cyril V. Briggs, *Editor*, ed. Robert A. Hill (New York, 1987), xlvi. L. D. Reddick, *Crusader without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1959).

<sup>46</sup> *Southern Patriot*, 18 (Jan. 1960), 3; Harry Boyte, "Education and the Unfinished Business of Democracy," draft, n.d., box 26, Boyte Family Papers (Perkins Library). Groups cited include chapters of the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality, the Nation of Islam, and the Fair Play For Cuba Committee. See "Director to Charlotte SAC," Sept. 18, 1961, "Robert F. Williams" FBI Subject File.

<sup>47</sup> Weissman to Braden, Oct. 20, 1959, box 49, Carl and Anne Braden Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin). See also *Crusader*, Oct. 3, 1959, p. 6. There are reports of debates at New York's Community Church, Oct. 1, 1959, and the Libertarian Center, Oct. 23, 1959, in memo, Oct. 17, 1961, "Robert F. Williams" FBI Subject File.

A widely reprinted debate in the pages of *Liberation* magazine pitted Williams against Dr. 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 had 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,” Williams noted. “Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone.”<sup>48</sup>

Dr. 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,” King 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.<sup>49</sup>

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, Dr. King had invented his own Robert Williams, a black Geronimo plotting military strikes against the white man, and he 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.<sup>50</sup>

The King-Williams debate resonated throughout the movement as Williams be-

<sup>48</sup> Robert F. Williams, “Can Negroes Afford to Be Pacifists?,” *Liberation*, 4 (Sept. 1959), 4–7; Martin Luther King Jr., “The Social Organization of Nonviolence,” *ibid.* (Oct. 1959), 5–6. Williams and King appear side by side, with an excellent commentary by Anne Braden, in *Southern Patriot*, 18 (Jan. 1960), 3. Abbreviated versions may be found in Carson et al., eds., *The Eyes on the Prize Reader* (New York, 1991), 110–13.

<sup>49</sup> King, “Social Organization of Nonviolence,” 5–6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

gan "to symbolize the alternative to both tactical nonviolence and nonviolence as a way of life," as James Forman of SNCC wrote in his memoir, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. King and Williams "were supposed to present two opposed views," according to Forman, but "in my analysis, they did not seem to be at cross-purposes." Julian Bond, then a student activist in Atlanta (in 1998 he became the head of the NAACP), recalls reading the debate and "believing that Williams got the better of it" and "that Williams was not the figure King and others depicted." Bond, Forman, and most SNCC activists considered nonviolence purely a tactical stance. Nonviolence as tactics offered a way to avoid "being wiped out," SNCC's Timothy Jenkins reflected, but "if you had the capacity at any given time to defend yourself successfully with violence, there were a number of people who were prepared to use it at all times." 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 Robert 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."<sup>51</sup>

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 movement with fresh troops and new tactics. "Only in 1960, when black students entered the fray in large numbers, did a broad assault on segregation become possible," Adam Fairclough points out. "Young people made up the initial phalanx, the entering wedge." King flew to Durham, North Carolina, on February 16 to encourage the students with a speech, telling them that their protest was "destined to be one of the glowing epics of our time." He returned to Atlanta the following day. "While others were pioneering innovative methods of nonviolent direct action," Fairclough observes, "King seemed strangely ambivalent about embracing the new tactics by personal example. Although fulsome in his praise of the lunch counter protests, for example, he showed little interest to lead a sit-in himself."<sup>52</sup>

On March 1, by contrast, 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

<sup>51</sup> James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; Seattle, 1997), 158–59; Julian Bond to Timothy B. Tyson, Sept. 5, 1997 (in Tyson's possession); *Fundhi*; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Crusader without Violence," *National Guardian*, Nov. 9, 1959.

<sup>52</sup> Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 71–72; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 54–55; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 128; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 276; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 57–58.



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 sit-ins in Monroe and elsewhere was that “not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins,” Williams claimed.<sup>53</sup>

The uneasy peace in Monroe would soon be broken, in large measure by followers of Dr. King. In 1961, Rev. Paul Brooks, an activist in the Nashville student movement investigating for SCLC, and James Forman, soon to become president of 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 rather incoherent nonviolent campaign in Robert Williams’s backyard; some participants, including Forman, sought to support Williams, who was under enormous pressure from the Ku Klux Klan; others wanted to prove Williams wrong. 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.”<sup>54</sup>

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 protesters. In his classic memoir, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, James Forman later called this riot his “moment of death,” “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

<sup>53</sup> Criminal Record 75CR9796, March 11, 1960 (Union County Courthouse, Monroe, N.C.); *Charlotte Observer*, March 9, 1960, p. 1; *ibid.*, March 22, 1960, p. 7-A; *Crusader*, May 14, 1960, pp. 1–2; W. R. May telephone interview by Tyson, May 26, 1994, notes (in Tyson’s possession); Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, ed. Schlieffer, 68.

<sup>54</sup> *Crusader*, Aug. 21, 1961, p. 3; James Forman telephone interview by Tyson, Jan. 17, 1997, audiotape (in Tyson’s possession). “We have been friends with Mr. Williams,” Joseph McDonald, a Freedom Rider from New York, told reporters, “but we have no real connection with him, because he believes in the defensive violence technique. That is to say, he would defend his home.” See *Raleigh News and Observer*, Aug. 29, 1961, p. 1.

the home of the former mayor J. Ray Shute, a white moderate who had befriended Williams.<sup>55</sup>

At the height of this violent chaos, a white married couple, for reasons that are unclear, entered the black community and drove straight into an angry black mob milling near Robert 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 . . . the 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. "I didn't want those racist dogs to have the satisfaction of legally lynching me," he explained to Dr. Perry.<sup>56</sup>

The Williams family fled first to New York City, then Canada, then on to Cuba to escape the hordes of FBI agents who combed the countryside in search of them. Supporters of Williams gloried in the escape. Some black residents of Monroe still maintain that Fidel Castro sent helicopters for Williams. Others tell of how he got away in a hearse owned by a black funeral director from Charlotte. An agent assigned to search for Williams locally reported his frustrations to FBI director Hoover: "Subject has become something of a 'John Brown' to Negroes around Monroe and they will do anything for him."<sup>57</sup>

The FBI dragnet never snared Williams, but it did not take Hoover long to hear from him. Every Friday night from eleven to midnight on Radio Havana, Williams hosted *Radio Free Dixie*, a program that from 1961 to 1964 could be heard as far away as New York and Los Angeles. KPFA Radio in Berkeley and WBAI in New York

<sup>55</sup> Williams interview by Mosby; Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 193–98; Harry G. Boyte to Truman Nelson, Aug. 23, 1962, box 26, Boyte Family Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Mabel Stegall interview by Algernon Watt, c. 1962, audiotape (in Tyson's possession). In interviews in 1961, Stegall confirmed that Williams had tried to prevent harm to her and her husband and that he had not detained them. See *Monroe Enquirer*, Aug. 31, 1961, p. 1; *Raleigh News and Observer*, Aug. 29, 1961, p. 1. Investigative records generally confirm Williams's accounts of these events. See Walter Anderson, State Bureau of Investigation, to Hugh Cannon, Office of the Governor, Sept. 14, 1961, box 111, Governor Terry Sanford Papers (North Carolina Division of Archives and History). An investigator for the national office of the NAACP, no admirer of Williams, wrote that "the charges of kidnapping against the so-called Monroe defendants are probably without genuine substance." John Morsell to Clore Warne, March 15, 1963, box A279, NAACP Papers. See also Boyte to Nelson, Aug. 23, 1962, box 26, Boyte Family Papers. The charges were later dropped. Robert F. Williams to "Doc," n.d., box 1, Williams Papers.

<sup>57</sup> The escape from Monroe has been shrouded in mystery. Williams was reluctant to speak on this point, explaining that he had pledged to protect the many people who had helped his family. But he confirmed the outlines of this story for me in an untaped interview, Sept. 2, 1996. Julian Mayfield, whom Williams had protected by his secrecy, tells the story in Mayfield, "Tales From The Lido," Mayfield Papers. Special Agent in Charge, Charlotte, to Director, teletype, Aug. 30, 1961, "Robert F. Williams" FBI Subject File.

City occasionally rebroadcast the show, and bootleg tapes of the program circulated in Watts and Harlem. An activist in Watts wrote to Williams in 1962, “I am letting my other nationalist friends make copies [of the tapes] and telling each of them to let someone make a copy of theirs.” During the early 1960s folk revival, Pete Seeger performed the “Ballad of Monroe” all over the country—“Robert Williams was a leader, a giant of a man,” the leftist troubadour sang. From Cuba, Williams continued to edit the *Crusader*, which was distributed via Canada and sometimes Mexico, for a circulation that eventually grew to forty thousand.<sup>58</sup> 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, California. A play based on *Negroes with Guns*, Frank Greenwood’s *If We Must Live*, ran in Watts from July to December of 1965 to eager crowds and enthusiastic reviews. Copies of the *Crusader* traveled down the Mississippi back roads with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organizers: “this leaflet is being distributed by SNCC and COFO 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.<sup>59</sup>

As black activists began to reject even the tactical pretense of nonviolence, the influence of Robert Williams continued to spread. By spring 1962 “the example of the North Carolina militant,” August Meier and Elliott Rudwick observe, had “had a profound effect” within the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). “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 invoked by that ambiguous slogan were already in place. “Your doctrine of self-defense set the stage for the acceptance of the Deacons For Defense and Justice,” Lawrence

<sup>58</sup> Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, pp. 622–23; Special Agent in Charge, Charlotte, to Director, June 6, 1963, p. 7, “Robert F. Williams” FBI Subject File; Robert Perkins to Williams, Dec. 15, 1962, box 1, Williams Papers; Kay Greaves, KPFA Radio, to Williams, Aug. 19, 1963, *ibid.* The Williams Papers hold hundreds of letters from listeners, many of them in Los Angeles and some as far away as the state of Washington, and taped copies of the broadcasts. On Pete Seeger’s “Ballad of Monroe,” see “Bill” to Williams, April 29, 1962, *ibid.*; and Gary Green to Williams, n.d., *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Committee on the Judiciary, *Testimony of Robert F. Williams*, part 1, Feb. 16, 1970, p. 39. On distribution of the *Crusader*, see Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, pp. 623–24; and Williams Papers. Authors who range from bitter critics to uncritical admirers of Huey P. Newton nonetheless agree that Williams influenced him. See David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties* (New York, 1989), 146; Pearson, *Shadow of the Panther*, 28; and Gilbert Moore, *A Special Rage* (New York, 1971), 4. On the play *If We Must Live*, see *Los Angeles People’s World*, July 3, 1965, p. 3; and Frank Greenwood to Williams, Dec. 1, 1965, box 1, Williams Papers. The *Crusader* was popular in Watts, though it is absurd to blame Williams for the Watts riot as many right-wing observers did. Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, 1995), 265, 268. For the complaint by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, see observation attached to copy of *Crusader*, box 135, Johnson Family Papers (Manuscript Collections, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg). My thanks to Elizabeth A. Cotris for locating these materials for me. On use of the *Crusader* by members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, see “Supplemental Correlation Summary,” April 19, 1969, “Robert F. Williams” FBI Subject File; and Danny Lyons, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 147.



A gleeful Robert F. Williams smokes a cigar in celebration of his safe passage to Havana, Cuba, after escaping from a massive Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dragnet in 1961.

*Courtesy of John Herman Williams.*

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."<sup>60</sup>

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."

<sup>60</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (Urbana, 1975), 202-4; Clyde Appleton to Williams, Sept. 20, 1965, box 1, Williams Papers; Slater King to Williams, Nov. 10, 1963, *ibid.*; Lawrence Henry to Williams, March 31, 1966, *ibid.*

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) exaggerated considerably in 1969 by reporting 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 [he] 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, an influential group with hundreds of members that sought to establish an independent black republic in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. “Despite his overseas activities,” the CIA reported in 1969, “Williams has managed to becom[e] an outstanding figure, possibly *the* outstanding figure, in the black extremist movement in the United States.”<sup>61</sup>

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. As early as 1962, when Williams had been in Cuba for less than a year, an FBI informant stated that Williams had “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.” “I am under constant attack by the [United States Communist Party],” 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.” 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 swapped Harlem stories with Ho Chi Minh and wrote antiwar propaganda aimed at African American soldiers. In 1965 the Williams family relocated to Beijing,

<sup>61</sup> Richard Gibson to Williams, March 5, 1965, box 1, Williams Papers; Russell Sackett, “Plotting a War on Whitey,” *Life*, June 10, 1966, p. 100; Clayborne Carson, “The Black Panther Party,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas, 96; Central Intelligence Agency Report, “Robert Franklin Williams,” Aug. 28, 1969, “Robert F. Williams” FBI Subject File; Reginald Major, *A Panther Is a Black Cat* (New York, 1971), 63–64. Realizing the influence Williams wielded and that he would soon arrive in the United States, Masai Hewitt and other Panther leaders contacted Williams and asked him not to attack “white racism per se” but instead to “denounce [Maulana Ron] Karenga and the other Cultural Nationalists as reactionaries and racists.” “Only middle-class people who can afford to buy expensive air tickets,” they suggested, “have been able to visit you.” Upon his return, the Panthers informed him, he would see that “the enemy is the capitalist system which uses racism to perpetuate itself” by dividing black and white workers. Williams must not “divide the working class.” “I don’t know what white proletariat they have found to unite with,” Williams told Robert Cohen skeptically. “If they can produce one, I will be glad to join them in uniting with it.” See Robert Carl Cohen to Williams, April 13, 1969, box 1, Cohen Papers; Williams to Cohen, April 26, 1969, *ibid.* Central Intelligence Agency Report, “Revolutionary Action Movement,” Aug. 8, 1968, “Robert F. Williams” FBI Subject File; Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 144–49. The Central Intelligence Agency claim is probably an exaggeration. See Central Intelligence Agency Report, “Robert Franklin Williams.”



Mao Zedong autographs Robert F. Williams's copy of the red book (*Quotations from Chairman Mao*). Beijing, China, 1966. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports indicated that Williams was "lionized and feted by top Peking leaders." Williams enjoyed long talks with Mao, Zhou Enlai, and other Chinese leaders.  
*Courtesy of John Herman Williams.*

where Williams was "lionized and feted by top Peking leaders," according to CIA intelligence reports. The Williams family dined with Mao Zedong 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 fantasies; his 1967 essay, "The Potential of a Minority Revolution," for example, depicted black saboteurs and guerrilla enclaves bringing down the United States 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 the movement in the last half of the 1960s.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> A. B. Eddy to Mr. Evans, memo, May 14, 1962, "Robert F. Williams" FBI Subject File; Williams to "Harry," n.d., box 1, Williams Papers; Williams to Julian Mayfield, c. 1964, *ibid.*; Sidney Rittenberg, "Recollections of Robert Williams," May 4, 1997, typescript (in Tyson's possession). See also Williams interview by Cohen, transcript, p. 312. A printed and illustrated version of Williams's broadcasts to African American soldiers, "Listen, Brother," may be found in the Williams Papers. I have no evidence on the veracity of Ho Chi Minh's stories of his connection to Harlem and the Garvey movement, but the North Vietnamese leader did tell those stories to Williams. Rittenberg, "Recollections of Robert Williams," 3; *Crusader*, Sept.-Oct. 1967, p. 1.



Robert and Mabel Williams, Baldwin, Michigan, September 2, 1996. Williams completed his memoirs, “While God Lay Sleeping—The Autobiography of Robert F. Williams,” a few days before this picture was taken. He died a few weeks later, surrounded by his family.  
Photo, John Herman Williams, *Courtesy of John Herman Williams.*

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 activ-

ism, Robert 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.<sup>63</sup>

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 Zedong 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 Robert Williams "for his courage and his commitment to freedom. The work that he did should go down in history and never be forgotten."<sup>64</sup> Her presence in that pulpit, nearly inexplicable when placed in 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 African American freedom movement between 1945 and 1965 as 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.

<sup>63</sup> Rittenberg, "Recollections of Robert Williams," 3. See also Williams, "While God Lay Sleeping," 237–319. J. Walter Yeagley, assistant attorney general, internal security division, to Will R. Wilson, assistant attorney general, Criminal Division, Aug. 8, 1969, Department of Justice Memorandum, "Robert F. Williams" FBI Subject File. See also Myers, "When Violence Met Violence," 73–74; Williams to Cohen, April 26, 1969, box 1, Cohen Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Rosa Parks, eulogy for Robert Williams, Nov. 22, 1996, Central Methodist Church, Monroe, N.C., written notes of Timothy B. Tyson (in Tyson's possession); videotape, Williams Family Collection.