

Violence and/or Nonviolence in the Success of the Civil Rights Movement: The Malcolm X–Martin Luther King, Jr. Nexus

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ABSTRACT

Nonviolent mass protests are often considered as having been mainly responsible for the two major legislative gains of the Civil Rights Movement half a century ago—the 1964 Civil Rights Act (CRA) and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA). In this article, I argue that it was the combination of that course *and* the threat of violence on the part of African Americans that fully explain those two victories. A close reading of the texts and actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X is indispensable for my claim. The archival evidence, as well, makes a convincing case for the CRA, its proposal by the John F. Kennedy (JFK) administration and enactment by Congress. For the VRA, its proposal by the Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) administration and enactment by Congress, the evidence is more circumstantial but still compelling. The evidence reveals that for the threat of violence to have been credible, actual violence was required, as events in Birmingham, Alabama, demonstrate. Such violence, the “long hot summers” of the 1960s that began with Birmingham, probably aided and abetted subsequent civil rights gains—a story that has potential lessons for today’s struggles for social equality.

The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.

John F. Kennedy, “Address on Civil Rights,” June 11, 1963

Introduction

In Cairo, June 2009, the newly inaugurated first African American president of the US broached an issue before an audience of mainly young people that only he, with any credibility could—violence versus nonviolence in progressive social change. Barack Obama had a particular audience in mind. “Palestinians,” he admonished, “must abandon violence. Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and it does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation.

But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the center of America's founding ... It's a story with a simple truth: that violence is a dead end.¹

It is indisputable that nonviolence or, more accurately, tactical nonviolence (a distinction to be explained) played a central role in the victory of the Civil Rights Movement [hereafter CRM]. The moral high ground it seized garnered mass support both domestically and internationally, decisive in its success. Working people throughout the US and elsewhere were not only won to the movement's cause but were inspired by it as well.

Yet, violence did figure into the victory of the CRM—the violence of its enemies. Indeed, at critical moments, CRM organizers employed nonviolent direct action to provoke its enemies into blatant, public brutality.² The protesters won the moral high ground precisely because of their disciplined nonviolent response to that brutality. “Hands up, don't shoot!” made famous by the nonviolent protests against police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, is an echo of that tactic.³

But there is another way violence was consequential that has been insufficiently investigated. If respect and empathy were the reaction of most people to the CRM, that of US rulers can be summed up in one word: fear. Despite southern Blacks' initial scrupulous and heroic adherence to nonviolence, their mass movement for equality—along with the often less polite risings of millions across the colonial world—rang on US rulers' ears with the same hair-raising, ever-feared words: *the natives are restless*. This is exactly what drove their incessant daily reading of developments. African American violence and/or the threat thereof, I contend, go a long way toward explaining the government's response.⁴ I also claim that the government's fears were not provoked solely by the domestic situation. The international arena weighed heavily in its calculus. From both vantage points, American leaders felt compelled to make concessions that they had not originally intended to make.⁵ Decisive, in other words, in the CRM's success were the mass peaceful protests *and* the potential threat of violence inherent in them.

No two individuals epitomized more the violence/nonviolence dichotomy *and* connection than Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. James Cone may have first suggested how the two played off one another in the realization of the goals of the CRM: “Martin and other civil rights leaders,” he wrote in 1992, “took advantage of the Black Muslim threat in many of their speeches and writings in order to strengthen their own case for equality.”⁶ Cone,

¹Remarks by the president at Cairo University, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” Cairo University Cairo, Egypt. The White House Office of the Press Secretary, available online at: <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>>.

²David J. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Dennis Chong, *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sally Avery Bermanzohn, “Violence, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” *New Political Science* 22: 1 (2000), pp. 31–48; Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); and Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

³I revisit the Black Lives Matter movement in the Conclusion.

⁴Charles Payne makes a similar claim but provides no supporting evidence in his essay in Steve F. Larson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 134.

⁵Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), also argue that both factors were determinant in explaining their response. More determinant, I argue, unlike them, was the movement itself.

⁶James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 264.

however, did not supply details about how that was done and, more importantly, how US rulers read what they said and did; perhaps this is why his claim was never treated seriously by the mainstream academic literature on the CRM. This inquiry takes up this claim and offers evidence to make at least a circumstantial case in its support—the first to do so. A close reading of the MLK–Malcolm X texts *and* actions is required, as well as any evidence about how they were read by US rulers. To do so is to bring agency and consciousness back into an understanding of the CRM.⁷

To make my case, I focus on the key period in the CRM after its birth almost a decade earlier: from Spring 1963 to Spring 1965, from Birmingham to Selma. More protests took place then, with greater participation rates and national scope, than at any other time in the more than century-old struggle to achieve political equality for African Americans. The two historic legislative conquests that came in the wake of those protests, the 1964 Civil Rights Act (CRA) and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA), attest to the power unleashed in that moment—exactly fifty years ago. To make my argument about the perceived relationship between violence and nonviolence in the movement, I engage in an interrogation of two key texts of the CRM and how they interact: MLK's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech. The actions of the authors of both texts, I argue, are equally important. I connect for the first time the proverbial dots between the utterances and actions of the two leading protagonists of the "Freedom Now" movement, as it called itself, and the reactions and responses of US rulers. To fully appreciate what transpired, some background is necessary.

Toward the Second Reconstruction

Historians and activists generally agree that the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 launched what came to be called the CRM. What made the fight there consequential was its successful outcome, the desegregation of public transportation. The nascent movement now had a victory, winning national attention and a potential model for confronting the system of Jim Crow elsewhere. As well, it produced a potential national leader, the young Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr (hereafter, MLK).

Montgomery had roots in other developments, not the least being the outcome of World War II.⁸ It is no accident that Blacks, who served in World War II (WWII) ostensibly waged for democracy against a blatantly racist regime, were often in the forefront of the fight against Jim Crow in the communities they returned to—just like their Third World counterparts who helped lead the anti-colonial struggle upon returning after the War. The imperial power's subjects—its "wogs" and "niggers"—seized the promise of democracy (along with their training in the use of deadly force) and almost as one around the world decided that they were not going back to the plantation.

Charles Cobb, Jr.'s new and long over-due book, *This Nonviolence Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*,⁹ confirms what many of us who grew up

⁷Klinkner and Smith's analysis, I will argue at the end, is a notable example of their absence. While Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), recognize their importance in the CRM, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, don't, unfortunately, warrant even a mention in their account.

⁸For an explanation of the emergence of the CRM in broader historical perspective, see Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

⁹Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). Bermanzohn (2000) anticipates Cobb.

in the South during that period knew first hand—the endorsement of the right of armed self-defense by our parents and relatives (including, especially and of course those who served in WWII and Korea). Furthermore, Cobb confirms for the first time what has long been rumored: MLK's (unsuccessful) application for a concealed weapons carry permit. "But this did not stop him from having firearms in his house."¹⁰ One activist "described his home as 'an arsenal.'"¹¹ The weapons, MLK explained, were "Just for self-defense."¹² He was acting in a long tradition going back to newly freed slaves enthusiastically embracing the Second Amendment (what President Andrew Johnson energetically sought to deny to them).¹³

Another outcome of WWII was a new global confrontation—the Cold War. One consequence was Washington and Moscow's battle to win the hearts and minds of the newly independent governments in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa to their sides. Not only were Black Americans' spines strengthened by Africans and Asians taking rulership of their own countries, but also they quickly grasped the opportunity to weaken Washington internationally by shaming it for its own internal Southern apartheid regime, knowing that Washington's success in this campaign hung on how it was seen treating its own dark citizens.

The historic 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, *Brown vs Board of Education*, revealed Washington's sensitivity to how racial realities in the US affected its image abroad. The *amicus curiae* brief submitted by the Justice Department in the case was instructive. Racial segregation had "an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries. Racial discrimination furnished grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith."¹⁴ However encouraged Blacks were by the court's decision, the sobering fact is that virtually all southern school districts were able to resist its implementation. Little Rock, Arkansas, showed in 1957 that it could only be done, grudgingly, with federal troops, that is, arms.

The horrific murder of the twelve-year-old Black youth Emmett Till in Mississippi by white racists in 1955 was a seminal event.¹⁵ The hundreds of thousands of Black workers—many of them union members—who turned out to view his mutilated corpse in the second-largest US city of Chicago put iron in the self-confidence and resolve of what was then called American Negroes. The picture was clear: they had had enough. That Montgomery came a half year later is no coincidence. But if Montgomery showed, apparently, that Jim Crow and the violence it entailed could be successfully challenged with nonviolence, racist violence did not end with the Montgomery victory. Thus was posed, again, whether a nonviolent course was the only road toward, as it increasingly began to be called, "freedom now."

Developments in Monroe, North Carolina, between 1957 and 1960 were particularly telling. Robert Williams, the head of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter and a US Marine veteran, began to argue, due to Ku Klux Klan violence against the emergent movement, for the right of armed self-defense. He provoked what came close to being the only organized national debate within and beyond

¹⁰Ibid., 7.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Akhil Reed Amar, *America's Constitution: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp. 390–391. On Johnson's actions and Black reaction, see Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (Bloomsbury Press, 2014), pp. 112, 165, 205, 240.

¹⁴Erin Miller, "The Global Impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*," available online at: <<http://www.scotusblog.com/2010/02/the-global-impact-of-brown-v-board-of-education/>>.

¹⁵See Devery Anderson's Emmett Till, *The Murder that Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

the CRM on the issue. The pacifist publication, *Liberator*, published his defense in 1959 and invited a response from the now widely seen hero of Montgomery. MLK agreed that the nascent movement for equal rights for Blacks would be greeted increasingly with violence and that there could be three responses. One could be “pure nonviolence” but that “could not readily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage.”¹⁶ The second and “only practical stance” entailed “self-defense.”¹⁷ That principle, he argued, “even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi.”¹⁸ The third response, what he accused Williams of promoting, “is the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously”—the position to be rejected.¹⁹ Aside from MLK’s tendentious spin on Williams’s actual position—essentially the same as his own preferred second option—his retort is revealing. Clearly, he was not wedded as is usually assumed to nonviolence in principle or as a strategy to be practiced at all places and times, but rather nonviolence as a tactic, given the circumstances in which the movement operated. MLK was, at least then, a practitioner of tactical rather than strategic or, what he termed, “pure nonviolence.”

If moderate forces such as MLK distanced themselves from Williams, radicals embraced him. Not surprisingly, the charismatic spokesperson for the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm X, helped raise funds and supplied him, openly, with arms for his National Rifle Association club in Monroe, chartered since 1957. That Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) Director J. Edgar Hoover opened a file on him in 1959 is too no surprise, especially after Williams made the first of two trips to revolutionary Cuba that year. FBI surveillance of Williams was endorsed by the national leadership of the NAACP. The latter, no doubt, had been looking for a pretext to remove him from the Monroe chapter presidency and conveniently found it with remarks Williams made in frustrated response to the most recent judicial exoneration of racist violence against Blacks in Monroe. “Violence,” he bitterly concluded, “would have to be met by violence.”²⁰

Roy Wilkins, NAACP national head, offered delegates to its 1959 convention in July the opportunity to have the final word on Williams’s removal but only after it mobilized its “big guns,” including MLK, to sustain the leadership’s decision. Though Wilkins was victorious, the delegates also voted for a resolution that Williams and his supporters authored in support of the right of armed self-defense: “We do not deny, but affirm the right of individual and collective self-defense against unlawful assaults.”²¹ That the oldest and most staid of the civil rights organizations could take such a stance registered the degree to which tactical nonviolence resonated favorably amongst Blacks.

Due to highly dubious charges filed against him by local and federal authorities, Williams fled the US in 1960. He eventually settled in Cuba from where he emitted shortwave broadcasts to promote Black revolutionary action. Ninety miles off its shores, “Castro’s Cuba” was seen increasingly by US rulers as an existential threat. That some Black youth—including myself I must confess—found Williams’s perspective more attractive than that of MLK gave them reason for that concern. And that these same youth had access to a voice with a similar

¹⁶Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. xxvii.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., xxiv.

²¹Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 164.

message not in exile but present and actively organizing in the US, Malcolm X, was even more threatening.

Four years after the victorious Montgomery Bus Boycott from 1955 to 1956, Black college students took the lead. Sit-in demonstrations in 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee, that challenged Jim Crow in public accommodations, won national attention and became examples to be emulated elsewhere. The sit-ins took a new form in 1961 with the Freedom Rides, a challenge to Jim Crow on interstate transportation. Despite the often brutal response they encountered, freedom riders remained loyal to the doctrine of nonviolence. By 1963, however, that campaign had little to show in the way of success. That was also true for the fight to integrate public transportation at the local level. The system of Jim Crow in the Old Confederacy was largely unchanged since the defeat of Reconstruction at the end of the nineteenth century. How, leaders and followers of the almost decade-old movement increasingly asked, can we carry out a Second Reconstruction?

“But For Birmingham”

From the end of 1961 to about the middle of 1962, the CRM launched an intense campaign in Albany, Georgia, to challenge its racist order. But it ended without having won any concrete concessions; the nonviolent direct-action tactic of MLK’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was widely seen as having suffered a defeat.²² Long-time Birmingham civil rights activist Fred Shuttlesworth, a minister like MLK, but unlike the SCLC leader of proletarian origin and combative temperament, urged him to come to his city and promised him a sorely needed victory if he did so. Shuttlesworth also subscribed to tactical nonviolence, but in a more confrontational style, as his actions in Birmingham had demonstrated for more than eight years.

Unlike the Albany campaign, Birmingham was to be a planned action under SCLC direction in alliance with Shuttlesworth and his forces. Launched on April 3, 1963, the campaign demanded the end of Jim Crow practices in downtown stores, increased employment opportunities for Blacks in those stores, and the establishment of a biracial committee to plan for the desegregation of schools and other public facilities. By this stage of the CRM, the planners recognized that their actions had to force the federal government, the Kennedy administration, to intervene on its behalf, what it had at best been reluctant to do. Project X, as it was called, employed nonviolent direct action, sit-ins, picket lines, and marches with the hope that violent reaction on the part of the Birmingham police (for which its chief, Eugene “Bull” Connor, had long been notorious) would attract needed national attention. But after three weeks of arrests of about three hundred protesters, the campaign appeared to be floundering. Connor, unexpectedly and wisely, had so far refused to take the bait.

Making matters worse was the old-guard Black leadership’s counter campaign to discredit the actions of the MLK–Shuttlesworth alliance.²³ MLK and his SCLC lieutenant Ralph Abernathy decided that their own arrests would get the needed media attention to turn things around. In response to their critics, the “moderates” in Birmingham and elsewhere, MLK, during his eight-day detention, wrote what would come to be the CRM’s most lasting

²²Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 42–52.

²³For a look at Birmingham’s Black middle class that MLK’s ire was directed at, see Condoleezza Rice’s autobiography, *A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Family and Me* (New York: Crown, 2010).

literary contribution. *Letter from Birmingham Jail* is basically a defense of the right of the oppressed to protest by nonviolent means. About half-way into the seven-thousand word essay, MLK asked his critics to consider the alternative to what he was advocating—passages that have received insufficient attention.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of 'somebodiness' that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle.

If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as 'rabble-rousers' and 'outside agitators' those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.²⁴

A week before he penned these lines, MLK appeared at a mass meeting in Birmingham with the leading representative of the NOI in the South, Jeremiah X. With one arm draped around his shoulders and the other around those of a White cleric, he said, "we don't love what Brother X advocates, black supremacy ... we love our white brother and we love integration."²⁵ MLK was, in other words, sincere about seeking to be an alternative to the NOI and, as he saw it, its potentially violent line. At the same time, MLK employed in these passages, I contend, the threat of violence on the part of the Black plebian "masses" to advance Project X. It was as if he was saying, in other words: "It's either me and my nonviolent course or them, the NOI and other potentially violent extremists." I also claim that this threat, as subsequent events demonstrated, fell on receptive ruling-class ears.

Though given to the press on April 18, 1963, MLK's letter did not become fully public until a month later, just in time for the most critical moment in the Birmingham crisis.²⁶ Released from jail on bond along with Abernathy on April 20, MLK, the rest of the SCLC leadership and Shuttlesworth made plans to escalate the confrontation—to fill up Connor's jails with school children. Project C (for confrontation)—or the "children's crusade" as it came to be called—proved to be decisive in the outcome of the battle of Birmingham. The decision to recruit children, some as young as six, to go to jail was understandably controversial. When

²⁴"Letter from a Birmingham Jail," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, available online at: <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/liberation_curriculum/pdfs/letterfrombirmingham_wwcw.pdf>.

²⁵McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, p. 335.

²⁶On the timing, see Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 384; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, p. 245; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, p. 355.

MLK questioned its appropriateness, Shuttlesworth, in his usual working-class wisdom, responded, “We got to use what we got.”²⁷

After a week of demonstrations, the SCLC accomplished what it never had before: “This marked the first time that Gandhi’s ‘fill the jails’ axiom of nonviolent strategy had been executed in America.”²⁸ The “children’s crusade” resulted in a ten-fold increase in arrests. And most importantly, it came with unforgettable images—arguably the most memorable in the entire history of the CRM—Connor’s hoses and attack dogs victimizing peaceful demonstrators, exactly what the confrontation’s planners had hoped for. The outcome, with the prodding of the Kennedy administration, was a settlement between Birmingham’s downtown business establishment and the SCLC–Shuttlesworth leadership that achieved almost all of its demands.

Shuttlesworth’s intransigence at key moments in the negotiations was determinant in the victory. During the almost week-long confrontations between the police and the activists, it became increasingly clear to both sides that not all Blacks were willing to abide by the discipline of nonviolence. On the second day of the actions, in fact, participants and onlookers responded violently to the police in various ways: “Those who had ringside seats on a corner rooftop rained bricks, stones, and Coke bottles on the men in uniform.”²⁹ From afar, Malcolm X offered advice: “We believe that if a four-legged or two-legged dog attacks a Negro he should be killed.”³⁰ President John F. Kennedy’s (JFK) man on the scene, Burke Marshall, gave the president details about the escalating danger of violence. This led to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy’s (RFK) decision to speak directly with Shuttlesworth by phone to convince him to agree to a settlement. The longer the protests continued, in RFK’s view, the greater the chance of a violent response to Connor’s brutality. Exactly for that reason, “to avoid a dangerous and imminent explosion,” the downtown business leaders, as their spokesperson explained, decided to accept his demands. In his report to the mass meeting about the settlement, MLK exclaimed, “I’m thankful to God for Fred Shuttlesworth.”³¹

Up to this point in the Birmingham crisis, the JFK administration resisted taking any formal federal action to end Jim Crow on the grounds that it lacked the constitutional authority to do so. That posture quickly ended the day after the settlement. When the local Ku Klux Klan heard about the settlement, some of its members responded violently with bomb attacks against the home and motel where MLK had been staying—an unsuccessful but unmistakable assassination attempt. The Black masses that JFK and the local ruling elites had come to fear poured into the streets on Saturday night May 10, 1963—the first of the urban “riots” or rebellions of the 1960s. “For the next five hours, blacks rampaged through a twenty-eight-block area, wrecking scores of police cars and private vehicles, razing six stores to the ground, and setting fire to a two-story apartment house. ‘Let the whole fucking city burn,’ one rioter shouted.”³² The White House went into military battle mode in a crisis meeting that included the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Army.

²⁷McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, p. 363.

²⁸Ibid., 398.

²⁹Ibid., 371.

³⁰Ibid., 419.

³¹Ibid., 371, 419, 423, 424.

³²Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 392.

But it was not Klan violence and its opposition to the settlement that was uppermost in their minds. “The Negroes,” reported RFK, “are mean and tough ... and have guns and have been worked up about this ... If you have another incident ... another bombing, for instance, or fire, or something like that and it attracted a large number of Negroes, then the situation might well get out of hand ... The feelings of the Negroes generally and reports that we get from other cities—not just the South—is that this could trigger off a great deal of violence around the country now with Negroes saying they’ve been abused for all these years and they’re going to start following the ideas of the Black Muslims.”³³ His brother agreed and emphasized the need to defend the settlement as the only solution. “We can’t,” JFK said, “just have the Negroes running around the city and then have this agreement blow up.”³⁴ Thus, the decision to deploy eighteen thousand federal troops outside Birmingham to stop, apparently, “Negroes running around the city.”³⁵ Operation Oak Tree, as it was called, “was the first time in modern memory that federal troops had been called out to calm civil insurrection rather than to enforce a court order, as at Little Rock [Arkansas, 1957] and Oxford [Mississippi, 1962].”³⁶

RFK’s reference to the “Black Muslims” or NOI recalls the point that MLK made in *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Whether that informed his comment is not known. What it does show, along with subsequent statements, is that RFK and JFK subscribed to MLK’s either-me-or-the-NOI argument. For example, in an effort to get them to support the Birmingham settlement, RFK told a group of Alabama newspaper editors on May 14: “Remember it was King who went around the pool halls and door to door collecting knives, telling people to go home and to stay off the streets and to be nonviolent ... If King loses, worse leaders are going to take his place.”³⁷ The night of May 10–11, 1963 concentrated US ruling-class minds like never before.

It was during the heady days of Operation C, before May 10, that the JFK administration first entertained the idea of federal legislation to outlaw Jim Crow. The images of Connor’s dogs attacking the civil rights protestors and especially their international repercussions forced the president to consider whether he had done enough to resolve the crisis. “I quite agree,” he told a group of liberal lobbyists the day after their publication on May 4, “if I was a Negro I’d be sore.”³⁸ But despite his professed empathy for the protestors, the brutality that they experienced at the hands of Connor’s dogs was not what finally convinced him to propose such legislation, as Nick Bryant convincingly shows in *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*:

It was the black-on-white violence of May 11—not the publication of the startling photograph a week earlier—that represented the real watershed moment in Kennedy’s thinking, and the turning point in the administration’s policy. Kennedy had grown used to segregationist attacks against civil rights protesters. But he—along with his brother and other administration officials—was far more troubled by black mobs running amok. Based on his fraught exchanges with his brother and [Burke] Marshall that afternoon [May 13], it is clear that it was this fear that prompted him to reconsider his civil rights proposals, and to push soon afterwards for far stronger measures.³⁹

³³Ibid., 393.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 392–93.

³⁶McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, p. 443.

³⁷Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 395.

³⁸Ibid., 387.

³⁹Ibid., 393.

Probably, no encounter affected RFK as strongly as the meeting that he had on May 22, 1963 with a group of distinguished Black figures at his family's apartment in New York City. Included in the gathering was Jerome Smith, a rank-and-file civil rights field worker fresh from the trenches in Mississippi. An eyewitness to and victim of the racist terror in Mississippi, Smith vented his anger at the administration's reluctance to take on Jim Crow. To the attorney general's complaint about the difficulties they faced in doing so, Smith retorted: "You don't have no idea what the trouble is ... I'm close to the moment where I'm ready to take up a gun ... I want to vomit being in the same room as you."⁴⁰ RFK was clearly taken aback by this and other comments Smith made and left the meeting not only piqued but shaken. Coupled, however, with his recent apprehensiveness about Black protests spreading rapidly to other cities both in and outside the South, he realized that Smith's venting was symptomatic of a larger reality. "Government statisticians counted 758 racial demonstrations and 14,733 arrests in 186 American municipalities over the ten weeks following the May 10 Birmingham settlement."⁴¹ "President Kennedy," Taylor Branch reports, "said there were even demonstrations on U.S. military bases, overseas!"⁴² Decisive action by his administration was urgently needed.

Vice President Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) counseled the same in a speech on May 18, 1963: "otherwise the tragic headlines which speak of the breakdown of law and order will increase rather than diminish."⁴³ Two days later, in an Oval Office meeting, RFK relayed his latest fears: "If you look around the country right now ... there must be a dozen places that are having major problems today ... You're going to have an eruption ... It's because the Negroes are now just antagonistic and mad and they're going to be mad at everything ... My friends all say the Negro maids and servants are getting antagonistic. She said you don't know how they're sassing me back in my house."⁴⁴ Jerome Smith's outburst in New York City (NYC) two days later confirmed his worst fears.

After a meeting with Marshall and other staff members on June 1, 1963, JFK resolved to propose major legislation to end Jim Crow. On that same day, FBI wiretaps heard MLK propose a new round of protests. The "threat itself," said MLK, "may so frighten the President that he would have to do something."⁴⁵ It is doubtful that JFK's proposal was motivated by what the FBI heard MLK say. The events of the prior month were probably more determinant. But either way, JFK responded, telling a group of businessmen on June 4: "Our concern is that we do not have a battle in the streets of America in the coming months."⁴⁶ To the US Conference of Mayors on June 9, he warned of the spread of civil rights protests throughout the nation. "Students will be out of college and out of high school ... Large numbers of Negroes will be out of work ... and rising summer temperatures are often accompanied by rising human emotions ... inviting pressure and increasing tension, and inviting possible violence ..."⁴⁷

On the occasion of a June 11 victory against Alabama Governor George Wallace in a civil rights confrontation (the integration of the University of Alabama), JFK decided to announce

⁴⁰Ibid., 402–403. For more details on the meeting, see Charles Euchner, *Nobody Turn Me Around: A People's History of the 1963 March on Washington* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), pp. 119–121.

⁴¹Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York: Simon & Schuster), p. 84.

⁴²"President Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr." C-SPAN, April 9, 2014, available online at: <www.c-span.org/video/?318483-1/president-johnson-martin-luther-king-jr>.

⁴³Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 405.

⁴⁴Ibid., 400.

⁴⁵Ibid., 404.

⁴⁶Ibid., 416.

⁴⁷Ibid., 411.

on national television the historic legislation he would be submitting to Congress. He asked Congress to do three things: end Jim Crow in public accommodations; authorize the federal government to be more active in school desegregation; and enact “greater protection” of the right to vote. The desegregation of public accommodations was clearly the heart of the proposal, the right thing to do, “a moral issue”—what the speech is most remembered for. But JFK’s real aim, I contend, was to end the protests.⁴⁸ Seven times in the thirteen-minute speech, “streets” and/or “demonstrations in the streets” appear. No other theme appears as often. And it was “the events in Birmingham” that caused the protests to spread elsewhere. The protests, he claimed, “threaten violence,” the second most repeated theme in the speech—mentioned three times. The second invocation of violence left no doubt: “The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.”⁴⁹ Diane McWhorter argues that the “address was in many respects a reply to Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ which had been privately sent to the administration.”⁵⁰ I agree if the earlier discussed section of the *Letter* in which MLK employs the threat of violence to make a case for Operation X is what McWhorter is alluding to. JFK’s “frustration and discord” is, I contend, MLK’s “frustration and despair.”

Eight days later, JFK formally submitted his proposal to Congress, with the same rationale: “Last week I addressed to the American people an appeal to conscience ... In the days that have followed, the predictions of increased violence have been tragically borne out. The ‘fires of frustration and discord’ have been hotter than ever.”⁵¹ JFK met with civil rights leaders, including Shuttlesworth, on June 22 to discuss the bill’s prospects and joked: “I don’t think you should be totally harsh on Bull Connor. After all he has done more for civil rights than almost anybody else.”⁵² His humor spoke volumes about his understanding of the bill’s origins. “Shuttlesworth heard the president say something different: ‘But for Birmingham, we would not be here today.’”⁵³

Between Birmingham and Selma

On July 26, the tenth anniversary of the Cuban revolution’s commencement, Fidel Castro, before an audience of hundreds of thousands in Havana, spoke of:

solidarity and fraternity [with] the US Negro population (applause) which has our sympathy (applause), a population which is a victim of fierce repression there. We have seen photographs of how they use ferocious dogs against Negro citizens as a symbol of what representative democracy stands for. What causes this? This hate against the Negro population is generated by slavery. Who has kept this hate alive? Capitalism. Discrimination will remain while there is exploitation of man in the US.⁵⁴

⁴⁸At the Oval Office meeting on May 20, he actually proposed legislation to ban the demonstrations but quickly pulled back upon the advice of Marshall Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 400.

⁴⁹Only two loci acknowledge White racist violence, at best obliquely.

⁵⁰McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, p. 464.

⁵¹Bryant, p. 427.

⁵²Eskew, p. 312.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Castro Speech Data Base, Latin American Network Information Center, available online at: <<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html>>.

Castro's solution:

Let the U.S. Negro leaders come here, let them come to Cuba to see a society without discrimination (applause). Let the Negro leaders see how discrimination is eliminated. Discrimination is eliminated by eliminating exploitation of man by man. Of course, they do not want to let them come. They do not want them to see the revolution.⁵⁵

Still smarting from its confrontation with Castro over Soviet missiles, the last thing the JFK administration needed in that moment was the Cuban Revolution, ninety miles from its shores, advertising itself as an attractive model for Black America. How seriously it treated Castro's appeals is uncertain. But it had every reason to be concerned, as RFK learned from his aforementioned encounter with Jerome Smith two months earlier. In addition to being open to "take up the gun," "Smith said that he didn't really feel like a citizen of the US. If he was drafted to go to war in Cuba ... he wouldn't go. How can you expect me to fight for democracy down there ... when the administration doesn't fight for democracy in the South? ... Robert Kennedy was shocked."⁵⁶ Again, this was only eight months after the threat of a US invasion of the island over the missiles—a threat that was still on the table.⁵⁷ Smith's barb suggested that an invasion could be compromised by racial division at home.

When JFK learned that civil rights leaders planned a massive nonviolent March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, he tried to dissuade them. Of uppermost concern, it could provoke violence. Unsuccessful in the entreaty, his administration, as it had during Operation Oak Tree, went into military battle mode, "the biggest peacetime military buildup in American history. By midmorning on August 28, five military bases on the outskirts of the capital were bursting with activity—a heavily armed, 4,000-strong task force ... At Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 15,000 Special Forces ... were placed on standby to be airlifted at the first stage of trouble."⁵⁸ The Pentagon "set up a 'war room,' with an open telephone line to the White House."⁵⁹ Every violent or potentially violent contingency was planned for. If a speaker appeared to be stoking the crowd to violence, a Justice Department official on the platform was to rush to the podium, cut off the microphone and "put on a record of Mahalia Jackson singing 'He's Got the Whole World in His Hands.'"⁶⁰

The best-known of these behind-the-scenes preventative actions had to do with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader John Lewis's speech. His organization was often viewed as the CRM's shock troops and underwent some of the worst violence the racists meted out. When the White House learned that Lewis would not only excoriate its less than stellar record in stifling that brutality but advocate a more radical posture for the CRM, it immediately sought to censor his speech—demanding that two sentences be removed: (1) "Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the street and put it in the courts. Listen Mr. Kennedy, Listen Mr. Congressmen, Listen fellow citizens, the black masses are on the March for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won't be a "cooling-off" period," and (2) "We will March through the South, through the Heart of Dixie, the way [General William Tecumseh] Sherman did. We shall pursue our own 'scorched earth'

⁵⁵Ibid. African Americans did travel to Cuba to see for themselves what Castro touted. See Ruth Reitan, *The Rise and Decline of an Alliance: Cuba and African-Americans in the 1960s* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999).

⁵⁶Euchner, *Nobody Turn Me Around*, p. 121.

⁵⁷See Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 23–25.

⁵⁸Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 8, and afterward. See also "After Words With Nick Bryant," C-SPAN, June 17, 2006, available online at: <www.c-span.org/video/?193086-1/words-nick-bryant>, for more details.

⁵⁹Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 8.

⁶⁰Euchner, *Nobody Turn Me Around*, p. 162.

policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — non-violently.”⁶¹ Under tremendous pressure from the March’s key organizers, Lewis agreed to the cuts. But just in case he failed to do so, Plan B, the Mahalia Jackson recording, would be implemented. As it turned out, the day went off virtually violence-free. The March’s self-policing proved effective.

The CRM’s nonviolent orientation was challenged, once again, a week later, with the bombing of the headquarters of Operation C in Birmingham, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the resulting death of four Black children attending Sunday school. The crime was so heinous that even staid voices such as the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins now questioned the wisdom of nonviolence: “Unless the federal government offers more than ‘picayune and piece-meal aid against this type of bestiality’ Negroes will ‘employ such methods as our desperation may dictate in defense of the lives of our people.’”⁶² Two leading Black clergy were more direct: The crime, said Rev. Gardner C. Taylor, “forces a reexamination by serious Christians of the entire doctrine of non-violence except as a tactical approach in selected situations.”⁶³ Bishop C. E. Tucker, head of the African Methodist Episcopal church, elaborated: “The Ghandi [*sic*] philosophy of non-violence in situations of this kind seems impotent and ineffective. As one of the presiding bishops of a church with a constituency of one million—70,000 of whom reside in Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi—I call upon our membership in these states here and now to arm themselves to repel any illegal intrusions upon their persons, the privacy of their homes, or the sacredness of their institutions. The same admonition applies to our constituency in Kentucky [where he issued the statement].”⁶⁴ Their outrage stood in contrast to the JFK administration’s generally tone-deaf response.

It was one thing to introduce the CRA of 1964, but another to get it passed by Congress. Not until JFK’s assassination on November, 22, 1963 did the proposal begin to make real headway through the legislative maze. His successor, LBJ, adroitly used the national sorrow in its wake toward that end. Yet, there is no reason to assume that African American violence or the threat of violence played any lesser role in the bill’s eventual enactment than it did in JFK’s decision to send it to Congress. Both factors motivated the new president as much as they had his predecessor in making the proposal the previous spring.⁶⁵ From this moment onward, the archival research is thinner on the topic for the LBJ administration and Congress.⁶⁶ We must therefore rely on circumstantial evidence.

Except for a few figures (including the writer James Baldwin, one of the organizers of the NYC meeting with RFK), the trauma of JFK’s assassination moved the CRM’s key leaders to declare a moratorium on protests. Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the NOI and, thus, Malcolm X’s superior decreed a similar moratorium until the end of the year. Not until the middle of December did the CRM carry out a major protest, in Atlanta, Georgia. That action continued into the New Year and was accompanied by an upsurge in NYC and Cleveland, Ohio, in the form of rent strikes and demands for school desegregation. By March 1964, Malcolm X had severed his ties with the NOI, owing in part to a controversial comment

⁶¹Ibid., 150–54, 164–66.

⁶²*The Militant*, 27, September 23, 1963, p. 5.

⁶³Ibid., October 7, 1963, p. 2.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Bryant, *The Bystander*, pp. 404–411 on LBJ’s involvement in the CRA’s origins.

⁶⁶Clay Risen’s, *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014) and Todd S. Purdum’s, *An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties, and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014) are the most recent accounts about how the proposal became law. But their read of that process, just as for the origins of the proposal itself, largely ignores the evidence I employ to make my case regarding the role that violence and/or the threat of violence may have played.

that he made about the assassination in December. At the Socialist Workers Party's (SWP) Militant Labor Forum on March 16, 1964, he announced that he wanted to be more politically engaged with the Black struggle, which the NOI would not permit—news that neither the FBI nor the White House could have welcomed. It is no accident that the FBI proceeded to step up its recently instituted and infamous Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), designed to disrupt the activities of the SWP and other organizations it deemed subversive. That the SWP was active in defending the Cuban Revolution was even more ominous.

As efforts in the Senate to pass the civil rights bill were grinding to a halt due to a Southern Democratic filibuster, Malcolm X gave a major speech in Cleveland on April 3, 1964 in which he detailed his new orientation. A week earlier, he had witnessed the filibuster in progress from the Senate gallery, an experience that figured significantly in his remarks.⁶⁷ To the mainly African American audience of two to three hundred at the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE, one of the four leading civil rights organizations) sponsored event, he began with the question that advertised the event, "The Negro Revolt, and Where Do We Go From Here?" or "What Next?" "In my little humble way of understanding it," Malcolm said, "it points toward either the ballot or the bullet."⁶⁸ By that he meant that if Blacks could not win freedom through the electoral process, they had the right to resort to armed struggle. Given what was happening in Congress at that moment, it is understandable that "the bullet" was the focus of his conclusions:

If a Negro in 1964 has to sit around and wait for some cracker senator to filibuster when it comes to the rights of black people, why, you and I should hang our heads in shame. You talk about a March on Washington in 1963, you haven't seen anything. There's some more going down in '64.

And this time they're not going like they went last year. They're not going singing "We Shall Overcome." They're not going with white friends. They're not going with placards already painted for them. They're not going with round-trip tickets. They're going with one-way tickets. And if they don't want that non-violent army going down there, tell them to bring the filibuster to a halt. The black nationalists aren't going to wait. Lyndon B. Johnson is the head of the Democratic Party. If he's for civil rights, let him go into the Senate next week and declare himself. Let him go in there right now and declare himself. Let him go in there and denounce the Southern branch of his party. Let him go in there right now and take a moral stand – right now, not later. Tell him, don't wait until election time. If he waits too long, brothers and sisters, he will be responsible for letting a condition develop in this country which will create a climate that will bring seeds up out of the ground with vegetation on the end of them looking like something these people never dreamed of. In 1964, it's the ballot or the bullet.⁶⁹

Whether conscious or not (probably not), Malcolm X's "The Ballot or Bullet" speech was a necessary complement to MLK's either-me-or-them threat in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*—necessary to make the threat credible. The FBI's report "focused on two of his central arguments: that the civil rights bill being filibustered before the Senate either would not be passed or, if signed by President Johnson, would not be implemented; and that African Americans should initiate gun clubs."⁷⁰ In fact, he urged his audience to look for inspiration to the experience of "guerrilla warfare" in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Even Senator Hubert Humphrey, frustratingly trying to shepherd the bill through the Senate, "mused darkly on the

⁶⁷The only time Malcolm X and MLK ever met was when, by chance, both were at the Congress to witness the filibuster—captured in an oft-produced photograph.

⁶⁸Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Cleveland, Ohio, April 3, 1964, *Social Justice Speeches: EdChange Multicultural Pavilion*, available online at: <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html>.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), p. 304.

prospects for widespread racial violence in the coming summer: "There is a sense of bitterness and open rioting which is going to kick back and could very well precipitate small Algerias [i.e. revolutions] all around the country."⁷¹ Regarding Latin America, Malcolm X clearly had Cuba in mind. Long before the speech, as a member of the NOI, he embraced the Cuban Revolution, once meeting with Fidel Castro. His admiration for the revolution only deepened after he left the NOI, along with his efforts to have US racist practices condemned at the international level, especially in Africa. All of that was well known and documented by the FBI.

The filibuster was eventually broken and LBJ signed the CRA into law by LBJ on July 2, 1964. Despite that historic gain, the discontent within Black America that Malcolm X accurately sensed soon manifested itself. Two weeks later, a three-day rebellion broke out in Harlem, New York and then spread to Brooklyn, Rochester, Jersey City, St. Louis, and a Chicago suburb. Police brutality or allegations of police brutality were the spark in almost every instance. The hope of US ruling elites that passage of the CRA would buy it domestic peace was seriously challenged. Yet, organized discontent in the form of nonviolent civil rights protests largely subsided for the second half of the year, even in the face of the continued violence that activists faced, such as the kidnapping and murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi that summer. This was mainly due to the decision of the CRM leadership to call for a moratorium on protests as the presidential and other November elections approached. The lesser evil, anybody-but-(Republican candidate Barry)-Goldwater perspective, became hegemonic amongst progressive forces. The moratorium also meant that the LBJ administration could carry out its new interventionist project in Southeast Asia relatively free from opposition. Once the elections were over, however, the peace it enjoyed soon evaporated, having domestic and international implications.

I have seen no published evidence that the threat of violence in Malcolm X's "Ballot or Bullet" speech played any role in ending the Senate filibuster of the CRA. But it is striking that, first, a leading African American spokesperson very much on the US rulers' radar issued such a threat that the FBI reported and, second, the leading Congressional figure responsible for the bill's passage apparently feared that failure to do so would lead to civil unrest. Detailed archival research of Congressional, White House, and FBI files might determine the extent of the speech's influence.

"Out of Saigon, into Selma!"

The CRA's failure to effectively address the denial of voting rights for most Blacks in the Old Confederacy meant that the CRM had unfinished business on its agenda. "By the end of [SNCC's] Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964," for example, "after lynchings, shootings, beatings, jailings, evictions, and firings, only 1600 new voters have been registered in that state—barely .004 of the unregistered Blacks."⁷² Particularly egregious were a group of counties in Alabama where Blacks were (or nearly) a majority of the population. In Dallas County, whose seat was Selma, less than two percent of eligible Blacks were registered to vote.⁷³ In next door Lowndes County, none were.⁷⁴ Suits by the Department of Justice to change the situation had proven ineffective. The CRM's leadership decided to focus on Selma and

⁷¹Risen, *The Bill of the Century*, p. 190.

⁷²Civil Rights Movement Veterans, ed. Bruce Hartford, "History and Timeline: 1965: Selma & the March to Montgomery: The Situation": available online at: <<http://www.crmvet.org/tim/timhis65.htm#1965Selma>>

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Dallas County and then grow the movement outward from there. A fight in Selma, where an especially vicious police force existed, could force the federal government to do for voting rights, what Birmingham and Bull Connor did for the fight to end Jim Crow in public accommodations.

First, a legal obstacle had to be confronted. An injunction issued months earlier effectively banned freedom of assembly. It “stipulated that if three or more of the named people or other members of the named organizations,” that is, Black leaders and their organizations, “gathered together, they could be arrested and jailed.”⁷⁵ No successful voting rights campaign could be mounted unless the injunction was challenged. That happened on January 2, 1965, when seven hundred Blacks gathered in and outside Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church that Sunday evening to hear MLK announce the launching of the campaign. There were too many for the police to arrest and jail.⁷⁶

With that victory under its belt, the movement then organized to challenge the voting registration process itself, an obstacle course designed to prevent Blacks from voting. January 18, 1965, the next time that the Dallas County registration office opened to take applications—only twice a month—offered the obvious opportunity. From then on, for approximately six weeks, over four thousand protesters were arrested for simply trying to exercise the right to register to vote.⁷⁷ That campaign supplied some of the most indelible images of the CRM, precisely because of the brutal reaction of Sheriff James Clark and his Ku Klux Klan-infused posse of two hundred. On January 25, for example, Clark’s abusive behavior provoked the fifty-four-year-old Annie Cooper to swing back with a hit that took the larger Clark to his knees. As she later described it, “Jim Clark could not take me down alone ... (he) and I were going at it blow for blow, punch for punch, and lick for lick, with our fists ... Suddenly he cried out to his deputies: ‘Don’y’an see this nigger woman beatin’ me? Do some’um.’ At the urging of the sheriff the others came to his aid. All four of them closed in on me.”⁷⁸ Though subdued and severely brutalized, Annie became an instant hero for the movement, despite having broken its discipline to “turn the other cheek” when provoked. No doubt the FBI agents present noted what she had done, how it was received, and what it potentially represented—a possible replay of that fateful Saturday night/Sunday morning in Birmingham in May 1963.

Because the campaign, after a couple of weeks, made little headway in actually registering people, the organizers decided, as in Birmingham two years earlier, to escalate direct action by having MLK and his lieutenant Ralph Abernathy get arrested on February 1. The hope was, as then, that it would attract needed national attention, including that of the White House. A few days later, more arrests took place that filled the jails of Selma with protesters.

This was the context in which Malcolm X came to the city. After speaking to an overflow crowd of three thousand at Tuskegee Institute, a historic Black college about a hundred miles to the east, SNCC organizers Faye Bellamy and Silas Norman insisted that he speak to youth activists in Selma.⁷⁹ At Brown Chapel the next day on February 4, he gave, first, an

⁷⁵Gary May, *Bending Toward Justice: The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), p. 39.

⁷⁶Civil Rights Movement Veterans, “Breaking the Selma Injunction.”

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, “Marching to the Courthouse” and “The Teachers March.”

⁷⁸Civil Rights Movement Veterans, “Annie Cooper and Sherriff Clark, and May”, *Bending*, pp. 64–65.

⁷⁹SNCC veteran Martha Prescod Norman Noonan confirmed their initiative at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the VRA Conference at the University of Minnesota, April 10, 2015.

impromptu press conference and then spoke to three hundred youth involved in the voter registration drive.⁸⁰ To a reporter's question about the campaign, Malcolm X responded:

I might point out that I am 100 percent for any effort put forth by Black people in this country to have access to the ballot. And I frankly believe that since the ballot is our right that we are within our right to use whatever means is necessary to secure those rights. And I think that the people in this part of the world would do well to listen to Dr. Martin Luther King and give him what he's asking for, and give it to him fast, before some other factions come along and try to do it another way. What he's asking for is right. That's the ballot. And if he can't get it the way he's trying to get it, then it's going to be gotten, one way or the other ... Dr. King and his followers are very intelligently trying to impress the people of this area that they should give the Black man the right to vote. Now, if the people of this area are not intelligent enough themselves to recognize what they consider an intelligent approach, then I think the intelligence of the Black people in this area will compel them to devise another method that will get results.⁸¹

For the young activists, he employed a metaphor and humor, the house slave/field slave distinction to analyze the Selma struggle. While the former, he asserted, identified with the slave master, the latter wished harm upon him, including the burning of his house and his death. That distinction, he insisted, still existed within the Black community. As for himself, "I'm a field Negro," with all of the implications that came with that identification. The analogy was not lost on the audience. As the New York *Herald Tribune* reported: "His speech was long and eloquent and it clearly disturbed the people running the registration drive. Malcolm X did not explicitly challenge Dr. King's non-violence doctrine but he did say, 'The white people should thank God that Dr. King is telling these people to be loving and non-violent, that he is holding these people in check.' The young crowd cheered repeatedly, and for hours afterward other speakers tried to simmer off the steam that Malcolm had generated."⁸²

After his speech, Malcolm X spoke briefly with the wives of MLK and Abernathy who came to see their jailed husbands. To Coretta Scott King, he is reported to have said: "Mrs. King, will you tell Dr. King that I had planned to visit with him in jail? I won't get a chance now ... I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking that I could make it easier. If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King."⁸³ If it is doubtful that the "Ballot or the Bullet" speech was a conscious attempt by Malcolm X to aid and abet MLK's "either-me-or-them" threat in *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, his Selma intervention was unambiguous. It consciously sought to enable MLK's nonviolent praxis whether he had read the Birmingham letter or not. It could not be clearer.

"Malcolm X's brief appearance in Selma," speculates Gary May, "may have had the effect he intended, for two days later [LBJ] reversed himself."⁸⁴ On February 6, George Reedy, his press secretary, "announced that the president planned to urge Congress to enact a voting rights bill during that session and that Vice President Humphrey and Acting Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach would meet with King on Tuesday, February 9."⁸⁵ Until then, LBJ claimed that trying to get a voting rights bill through Congress would be futile and that he had other legislative priorities.

⁸⁰Malcolm X, *February 1965: The Final Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2005), p. 26.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁸²*The Militant*, February 15, 1965.

⁸³Civil Rights Movement Veterans, "Malcolm X Speaks in Selma."

⁸⁴May, *Bending*, p. 69.

⁸⁵*Ibid.* Malcolm X's intervention merits only a sentence in Garrow's *Protest at Selma*, p. 51, clearly inconvenient for his thesis that SCLC's tactical nonviolence was determinative in the outcome.

On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated as he spoke in NYC. Speculation about federal government complicity can only be just that until all relevant documents are made public.⁸⁶ Certainly no tears were shed in the White House, Department of Justice, or FBI when news of his death arrived. A collective sigh of relief was the more likely response. For John Lewis, on the other hand, who attended the funeral, his reaction is instructive: “I had my differences with him, of course, but there was no question that he had come to articulate better than anyone else on the scene—including Dr. King—the bitterness and frustration of Black Americans.”⁸⁷ Lewis probably recognized that the absence of that voice allowed US rulers to sleep a little more comfortably and, thus, under less pressure to make concessions to his nonviolent course.

In the month after Malcolm X’s visit, Selma supplied two other indelible images of the CRM. One was on February 10, 1965 with Clark’s posse charging protesters with clubs and whips and then applying cattle prods to disperse them. Days later, police shot point-blank in the stomach of one protester who eventually died: Jimmie Lee Jackson, the campaign’s first martyr. The other searing image was when marchers tried on March 7, 1965 to cross Edmund Pettus Bridge from Selma on their way to Montgomery about fifty miles away. The action became known as “Bloody Sunday” for good reason. On horseback, in car, and on foot, Clark’s posse brutally clubbed and whipped not only the marchers as they drove them back to Brown Chapel, but any Blacks along the way. A hundred of the six hundred marchers sustained serious injuries, not the least of whom was John Lewis who had been at the head of the peaceful procession. At the church and still bleeding from the blows he took, he cried out to the fellow wounded and supporters, “I don’t know how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam . . . and he can’t send troops to Selma, Alabama”—words reported in *The New York Times*.⁸⁸

Some of the terror of March 7 was captured on camera and soon seen around the world. At almost the same moment, US combat troops made their first major landing in Vietnam, to “bring democracy” there and, with accompanying photographs, images that clashed profoundly with those coming out of Selma—a major public relations problem for the LBJ administration. It pressured, unsurprisingly, MLK not to mount another March in response to “Bloody Sunday.” But the national call had already gone out and supporters and sympathizers with the Selma campaign began to arrive in the city to March again. One of them, James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister from Boston, became the campaign’s second martyr, at the hands of a group of racist thugs. Though MLK effectively canceled the March—staging only a symbolic one to the disappointment and anger of many—outrage around the country and abroad to the Pettus Bridge brutality resulted in mass actions elsewhere, especially on Saturday, March 13: “In the largest single demonstration in Harlem’s history, some 25,000 persons marched today in support of the freedom fighters of Selma, Alabama. The virtually unanimous mood of the demonstration was criticism of [LBJ] for not sending federal marshals or troops to Alabama. The most common theme of the slogans on the marchers’ signs was to withdraw US troops from Vietnam and send them to Alabama . . . ‘Out of Saigon, into Selma.’”⁸⁹ Though the first “official” mass anti-Vietnam War demonstration would take place a month later in Washington, DC, the Harlem March was in hindsight the de facto first such action.

⁸⁶For the most detailed discussion of his death and the speculation about it, see Marable, *Malcolm X*, chapters 15 and 16.

⁸⁷Civil Rights Movement Veterans, “Tension Escalates.”

⁸⁸Civil Rights Movement Veterans, “The March to Montgomery.”

⁸⁹*The Militant*, March 22, p. 8.

Two days later, on March 15, 1965, LBJ went to Congress to propose what everyone knew he had to do under the circumstances, for both domestic and international reasons. The third sentence of his nationally televised address made clear why he was there: “At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.”⁹⁰ He would now submit to Congress a bill to enforce a constitutional right of Blacks—what the 1964 CRA had failed to do—the right to vote. The reason, as he pedagogically explained and detailed—what the protesters in Selma knew all so well—was due to the obstacle course that prevented Blacks from becoming voters. The bill would be crafted to overcome those hurdles. To leave no doubt about his real agenda, he warned the protesters that, despite the fact that their actions “have been designed to call attention to injustice, designed to provoke change, designed to stir reform,” their right to “free speech does not carry with it the right to holler fire in a crowded theater [or] ... the right to block public thoroughfares to traffic . . . [or] infringe the constitutional rights of our neighbors.”⁹¹ And should the protesters be even more confrontational, they should know that “we will guard against violence, knowing it strikes from our hands the very weapons which we seek—progress, obedience to law, and belief in American values.”⁹² Since the only real violence had been that of the police and their racist thugs, what all the world had seen, LBJ had to appear to be evenhanded in his admonitions. He warned that “we will not accept the peace of stifled rights, or the order imposed by fear, or the unity that stifles protest. For peace cannot be purchased at the cost of liberty.”⁹³ And along the way, LBJ boldly and strategically, if not always convincingly (at least for some of us), evoked the anthem of the CRM, “We Shall Overcome”—what is most remembered about the speech.

The drama of the moment notwithstanding, the real protagonists had been the mass protests in Selma and the brutal response by the police that they provoked, and, thus, the possibility that Malcolm X’s “by-any-means-necessary” alternative would become increasingly attractive to the protesters, especially the youth—that’s what motivated LBJ’s proposal. Like his predecessor, on June 11, 1963, LBJ saw the light because he felt the movement’s heat in the streets. International considerations, again, as with JFK, figured significantly in his calculations.

If LBJ thought that his historic address convinced the CRM that it could take off its marching shoes, he miscalculated. A week later, on March 21, 1965, one of the most memorable moments in the CRM took place. Three hundred marchers set off from Selma to complete the trek they were denied on “Bloody Sunday,” the Selma to Montgomery March. The organizers knew that for Johnson’s proposal to be enacted, the White House and Congress would have to be pressured. The fifty-mile March was more than symbolic—another reminder to US rulers that Blacks and their supporters were prepared to take to the streets if necessary. Though the action produced another martyr, Viola Liuzzo—again, at the hands of racist thugs—it accomplished its goal when it reached Montgomery five days later, against the wishes of Alabama’s Governor George Wallace and LBJ. Thus, the fight for freedom of assembly launched on January 2, one necessary in the fight to win the right to vote, was finally

⁹⁰“President Johnson Speech at Voting Rights Act Passage,” *The Leadership Conference*, available online at: <<http://www.civilrights.org/voting-rights/vra/johnson-speech.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>>.

⁹¹ibid.

⁹²ibid.

⁹³ibid.

won on March 25, less than three months later, in the only place where it could be: on the highways and streets of Alabama. Along the way, Black Americans, in Alabama and elsewhere, gained a new sense of confidence and self-respect—crucial for the fights that lie ahead.

A development that began to spread at that moment and quite relevant for this discussion was the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Founded in Louisiana in 1964, the organization's purpose was to provide armed defense for civil rights workers. Chapters were established elsewhere as violent racist reaction escalated against Blacks and their supporters who sought to test the effectiveness of the 1964 CRA.⁹⁴ Many of its leaders had been, like Robert Williams, Black WWII veterans. The Deacons worked most closely with CORE. By January 1965, that relationship had deepened: "For the first time anywhere in the South, representatives of a national civil rights organization had played a role in creating a group for the express purpose of providing armed self-defense ... By the time of CORE's July 1965 convention ... the organization's Resolution and Constitution Committee seemed prepared to rescind its commitment to nonviolence."⁹⁵ For FBI undercover operatives, the Deacons probably seemed like Malcolm X's ghost.

Whether the Deacons' movement was determinant in any way is not known, but on August 6, 1965, Congress passed LBJ's proposal, in half the time it took to pass the CRA. He signed the VRA into law on that date. Nothing is more telling about ruling-class intentions in enacting the VRA than what LBJ told MLK at the bill's signing: "Handing one [of the signing pens] to Dr. King, Johnson ... told him his work was now done, that the time for protest was over."⁹⁶

Conclusion

If the LBJ administration thought that Malcolm X's absence and the VRA would ensure domestic tranquility, it quickly learned otherwise. Less than a week after the signing of the VRA, Watts, the Black neighborhood in Los Angeles, exploded. It proved to be the greatest civil disturbance in US history since the Draft Riots in NYC during the Civil War in 1863, resulting in fifty-five deaths, mainly of Blacks at the hands of the police and US military, and a billion dollars in property destruction. Prophetically, Malcolm X, two weeks before his assassination in February, declared that "1965 will probably be the longest, hottest, bloodiest summer that has yet been seen in the US since the beginning of the Black revolution."⁹⁷ Watts was the beginning of the second (or third if Birmingham is included) of what came to be called the "long hot summers," ending in 1968 after MLK's assassination. They constituted the most pressing domestic problem for US rulers in the second half of the 1960s. Accompanying these rebellions was another ominous development—they were beginning to echo in Vietnam. African American soldiers there began to ask themselves who was their real enemy—the Vietnamese or "the man"? The increasingly popular anti-war protest slogan, "No Vietnamese ever called me Nigger," registered the resonance of this sentiment on the home front.

Though difficult to prove, I am convinced that the continuing threat of further such rebellions and their echo in Vietnam go a long way in explaining the actions of a Republican

⁹⁴"Negro Defense Units Spreading in South" was a headline on the front page of *The Militant* on June 14, 1965. See Cobb, *This Nonviolence Stuff'll Get You Killed*, Chapter six, for details. Bermanzohn "Violence, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement" also argues that armed self-defense was consequential but doesn't mention the Deacons.

⁹⁵Cobb., pp. 202–203.

⁹⁶May, *Bending*, p. xix.

⁹⁷Malcolm X, *February 1965*, p. 39.

president who never distinguished himself in advancing the CRM agenda. Even more committed to the war in Vietnam than LBJ, Richard Nixon did more to implement that agenda than, arguably, any president since, including the current occupant of the White House. As Doug McAdam argues convincingly in his authoritative analysis of this period, “the evidence reviewed here provides consistent support for the view that the urban riots of the mid to late 1960s did help to stimulate a reactive pattern of favorable federal action across a wide range of policy areas of interest to blacks.”⁹⁸ US rulers could not afford to fight a war abroad if “the streets” at home continued to be violent.

This study is not the first examination of the CRM that points to the role of violence or the threat of violence in its success.⁹⁹ Philip Klinkner and Rogers Smith did the same almost two decades ago. Similar to this analysis, they argued that the international arena of the Cold War figured significantly in explaining the concessions US rulers were willing to make. However, the agency of the movement itself, what actually concentrated ruling-class minds, and its consciousness about violence, especially how MLK’s “either-me-or-them” tactic played effectively off of Malcolm X’s “by any means necessary” rhetoric—backed up by the urban rebellions that began in Birmingham on May 10–11, 1963—gets, at best, second place in their account. At the end of an otherwise informative volume, they list “measures that might revive the nation’s flagging March toward racial justice.”¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately and tellingly, they miss what was decisive for the gains made “toward racial justice” between 1963 and 1969—the mass nonviolent protests in the streets and the threat of violence that came with such mobilizations. As for the unorganized violence, the riots/rebellions, how and to what extent it was determinant—other than the obvious that the threat of violence can only be credible if it manifests itself on occasion—is beyond this article’s limited intent. At least for the passage of the CRA and VRA, this investigation’s focus, a case can be made that the fateful night of Saturday May 10–11, 1963 in Birmingham, and the protests that unfolded elsewhere in its wake—JFK’s “fires of frustration and discord ... burning in every city”—weighed heavily in the calculus of ruling elite response.

In arguing for a MLK–Malcolm X connection in explaining the CRM’s success, I make no claim that the two were on a convergence course in the last years of their lives.¹⁰¹ There is no evidence that MLK welcomed Malcolm X’s intervention in Selma. In fact, he seems to have opposed it.¹⁰² What is certain is that if it was MLK who first raised the idea of the threat of violence aiding and abetting the CRM in his Birmingham Jail letter, Malcolm X, in united front-like fashion, consciously acted on it—all to the attention and, no doubt, consternation of US rulers.

When President Obama addressed the gathering celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington on August 28, 2013, he acknowledged the importance of protest, what enabled him to be the latest occupant of the White House. But he suggested that it is no

⁹⁸Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 222. For more quantitative support for McAdam’s claim, see Richard Fording, “The Political Response to Black Insurgency: A Critical Test of Competing Theories of the State,” *American Political Science Review* 95: 1 (2001), pp. 115–130.

⁹⁹Herbert Haines’s notion of “radical flank effects” asserts that “radical” forces can enable the agenda of “moderates” in social movements. His own research on the CRM, specifically, 1954–1970, purports to measure such effects by examining “white reactions” as measured by “the funding of civil rights organizations” during this period. Such a measure fails to capture what I attempt to do: to understand how ruling elites responded to radical actions or threats. See Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954–1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁰Klinkner and Smith, pp. 242–287, 347–351.

¹⁰¹Chris Hedges claims there was, *Death of the Liberal Class* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), p. 184.

¹⁰²See Jack Barnes, *Malcolm X, Black Liberation & the Road to Workers Power* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2010), pp. 127–29.

longer possible or necessary to mobilize on the scale done in 1963: “We may never duplicate the swelling crowds and dazzling procession of that day so long ago.”¹⁰³ More important, he applauded, were those “marching” individually every day as parents, teachers, “businessm[en].”¹⁰⁴ Contrary to President Obama’s discouragement of mass protest and LBJ’s similar admonition to MLK at the signing of the VRA, youth today, fortunately, not only in Ferguson but elsewhere in the world, some of whom are inspired by the CRM, are not—as recent actions show—pessimistic about mass political mobilizations. Many know somehow—perhaps that period’s unconscious legacy—and correctly that not only real change (what they might understand as the installation of a new operating system and not just a new app) but basic democratic rights come only when the masses take to the streets, actions that come with the potential threat of violence—what Birmingham and Selma taught. Can there be any doubt that the quick arrest of a police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina, caught on camera summarily executing Walter Scott on April 4, 2015, and, the later indictment of six others in Baltimore, Maryland for the murder of Freddie Gray there on April 19, 2015 were due to the mini-rebellions, respectively, in Ferguson in August, 2014, and Baltimore, April 25, 2015? Lest it be construed that this conclusion gives a free pass to gratuitous violence, it does not. Those who seek to turn every peacefully organized protest into a violent action commit the same sin of pacifism, the conversion of a tactic—in this case, violence—into a strategy.

To assist rebellious youth in their quest not just for civil and human rights but, more importantly, social equality, it is incumbent on those of us who had the privilege to live in and learn from that, the commencement of the Second Reconstruction, moment to ensure that its story be accurately remembered and not as some, like President Obama, would like it to be remembered.

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¹⁰³President Obama Marks the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington, available online at: <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/08/28/president-obama-marks-50th-anniversary-march-washington#transcript>>.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

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