

1964: The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence in the Mississippi Freedom Movement

1964 will be America's hottest year. . . . A year of racial violence and much racial bloodshed. . . . if there is to be bleeding it must be reciprocal.
—Malcolm X

Akinyele O. Umoja

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the American South is often characterized as a nonviolent revolution. Scholarly and popular literature and media re-creations of the movement rarely emphasize the significance of armed resistance in the struggle of black people for desegregation, political and economic rights, and basic human dignity. In dozens of Southern communities, black people picked up arms to defend their lives, property, and battle for human rights. Black people relied on armed self-defense, particularly in communities where federal government officials failed to protect movement activists and supporters from the violence of racists and segregationists, who were often supported by local law enforcement. Armed resistance played a significant role in allowing black communities and the movement to survive and continue. The Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign and the drive for political and human rights in McComb, Mississippi, in 1964 illustrate well the dynamic role played by armed resistance in the Southern freedom movement.

The year 1964 was also pivotal for the influence of the philosophy and strat-

Radical History Review

Issue 85 (winter 2003): 201–26

Copyright 2003 by MARHO: The Radical Historians' Organization, Inc.

egy of nonviolence in the civil rights movement. Yet the experience of organizing in Mississippi presented challenges to two organizations philosophically and strategically committed to nonviolence, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). CORE and SNCC organized voter registration campaigns in the rural communities of the Deep South, where white supremacist violence had played a critical role in black disenfranchisement since Reconstruction. The national leadership of both associations wanted the federal government to provide protection against racist terror. In the context of voter registration, CORE and SNCC leaders believed that movement organizers needed to maintain the moral standard of nonviolence in order to win support from liberal sentiments in government and the American public. Yet for a nonviolent strategy to work in the Deep South, federal protective intervention was a necessity.

While nonviolent organizations relied on the possibility of federal assistance, local Mississippi blacks organized to protect their communities and civil rights activists with arms. The possession of guns and other weapons was common for most Southerners, white and black. Since emancipation, Southern blacks had historically demonstrated a willingness to defend their lives, property, and dignity with arms, particularly in communities where a large percentage of them lived in contiguous areas and owned land. With the acceleration of the civil and human rights struggle in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the armed resistance of local blacks became more intense and organized.

SNCC began to organize in rural Mississippi in 1961.¹ CORE sent its first full-time organizer to Mississippi in 1962, and it initiated work in the state's rural communities the following year.² In 1962, SNCC, CORE, and the state National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) coordinated their voter registration efforts in Mississippi under the umbrella of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO).³ After 1964, armed self-defense would become an integral part of each organization's Southern planning strategy.⁴ I argue that the ideological shift on the question of nonviolence within CORE and SNCC occurred primarily because of the impact of events in Mississippi in 1964. This shift signaled the beginning of the end of nonviolence as the Southern freedom movement's philosophy and method. While the shape and extent of armed resistance varied in different communities, this form of struggle spread ever more widely throughout the state.

The Origins of the Mississippi Freedom Summer

By 1964, the dilemma of how to continue their voter registration efforts in the face of increasing attacks confronted CORE and SNCC organizers in Mississippi. White supremacists had already demonstrated their readiness to respond violently to any challenge to the system of segregation. The Kennedy administration, particularly the

Justice Department, had meanwhile proven unwilling to protect COFO activists from such violence. COFO activists, some of whom had come to Mississippi with the expectation of federal protection, expressed dismay at their inability to guarantee security for local blacks. Bob Moses, SNCC's first organizer in Mississippi, arrived in the state in 1961. In the following years, he and others saw a reign of terror, including the assassination of Medgar Evers in 1963.⁵ In spite of the efforts of local blacks to protect themselves and their communities, nightriders continued their bombings, drive-by shootings, and other acts of harassment and intimidation.

By the fall of 1963, a debate developed within COFO and the SNCC concerning how to proceed with the movement in Mississippi. Bob Moses proposed COFO bring a massive contingent of white volunteers from Northern colleges and universities.⁶ The involvement of nearly a hundred white volunteers from Yale and Stanford during the successful Freedom Vote campaign earlier that fall had impressed him. The Freedom Vote was an alternative election to demonstrate that disenfranchised Mississippi blacks would participate in the electoral arena if they had the opportunity. Black people cast over 70,000 ballots during this mock electoral process, held at the same time as the "white only" elections. A statewide campaign, the Freedom Vote enabled COFO for the first time to connect local projects in one consolidated effort.⁷

Prior to the Freedom Vote, SNCC had not encouraged white volunteers to come to Mississippi. Moses himself had felt the involvement of large numbers of whites in rural Mississippi might endanger the security of the local projects and their organizers. In the spring of 1964, a SNCC field report from Mississippi stated it was "too dangerous for whites to participate in the project in Mississippi—too dangerous for them and too dangerous for the Negroes who would be working with them."⁸ Moses had also believed that the employ of local blacks as primary recruits and workers in the projects would ensure the development of indigenous leadership.⁹

More than from the good impressions of white participation in the Freedom Vote, Moses's change of position came from his concern over the security of local people and the movement. Moses believed that only federal intervention could prevent racist violence by nightriders and state and local law enforcement. In spite of his appeals and those by other SNCC leaders, most COFO workers active in Mississippi believed the Kennedy administration provided an inadequate response to the assassination of activists like Medgar Evers and the shootings, bombings, and attacks on other activists and local Mississippians. Since the federal government seemed unconcerned about black lives, Moses proposed bringing a large number of whites from privileged Northern families to force the Justice Department and the FBI to play an assertive role in protecting voter registration personnel.¹⁰

The majority of the SNCC field staff, particularly those recruited from Mississippi, opposed Moses's proposal. Mississippi field organizers, including Hollis

Watkins, MacArthur Cotton, Willie Peacock, and Sam Block, believed the involvement of massive numbers of white college students would interrupt the process of developing indigenous leadership and organization in black Mississippi communities.¹¹ They believed it necessary to continue organizing new forces, particularly young people, and to unite with already existing indigenous networks, such as the local NAACP chapters and informal intelligence systems and defense groups.¹² In many Mississippi communities, COFO had not yet initiated any organizing. Some argued that to have Northern whites as these communities' first contact with the movement might discourage black initiative and self-reliance. Northern whites with a college education might intimidate Mississippi blacks with little formal education. Charles Cobb, an SNCC activist and Howard University student from Massachusetts, feared that privileged white students empowered by their experiences, contacts, and administrative skills would "take over" the local COFO projects from indigenous blacks.¹³

On November 14, 1963, in a COFO staff meeting in Greenville, Mississippi, Moses proposed the Mississippi Summer Project. The project would include a massive, statewide voter registration of disenfranchised black voters, the organization of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and the establishment of freedom schools to enhance the academic skills and political and social consciousness of Mississippi black youth. The MFDP was projected as a multiracial political party, which would challenge the legitimacy of the Mississippi Democratic Party at the National Democratic Convention. Moses's proposal, supported by Dave Dennis and SNCC activist Lawrence Guyot (from Hancock County, Mississippi), included the mobilization of large numbers of white students. Primarily indigenous black Mississippians involved in COFO and SNCC—like Watkins, Cotton, Block, and Peacock—opposed Moses's proposal. After a heated debate and three votes, the COFO staff agreed to a compromise, which allowed the participation of a hundred white volunteers.¹⁴ On December 30, 1963, Moses presented the idea to SNCC's national executive committee, which enthusiastically supported his proposal. In this meeting, SNCC veterans like John Lewis, Marion Barry, and James Forman agreed that involving large numbers of white students would compel the federal government to protect movement workers in Mississippi. The SNCC executive committee enlarged the number of white volunteers to be recruited and decided to send representatives to a COFO meeting in January 1964 to help Moses convince COFO staff to accept the revised proposal.¹⁵

Armed Self-Defense versus Nonviolence:

An Internal Debate within the SNCC and CORE

On June 10, 1964, six months after Moses and the SNCC national leadership convinced COFO staff to agree to bring large numbers of white volunteers into the Summer Project, another issue created debate within SNCC. At a national staff

meeting in Atlanta during the preparation for Freedom Summer, the question of armed self-defense was put on the table. This was the first time that SNCC activists discussed carrying or using weapons at the national level.

The same group of individuals who opposed the inclusion of massive numbers of whites in the Summer Project vehemently argued that SNCC activists should be allowed to arm themselves. The debate began after SNCC staff working out of the organization's Greenwood office, the Freedom House, informed participants in the meeting that they had made a decision to "protect the people around the office" and prevent "people from breaking in and bombing the office." Since January 1964, guns had been kept in the Freedom House. Charles Cobb told the meeting that Amzie Moore had received information from the "grapevine" (the informal intelligence network) that Moore, Bob Moses, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dave Dennis, and Aaron Henry were targeted for assassination. Staff members in Greenwood also believed their lives were in jeopardy, having learned that whites in the delta were arming themselves to terrorize COFO. Some organization staff had also received information about a truckload of arms and ammunition, intercepted in Illinois before reaching white supremacists in Mississippi. Besides fearing for their personal security, staff members expressed concern about burglaries that had occurred at the office. The potential for violence had persuaded the staff of the Greenwood office to obtain guns for their protection. They and other delta organizers also reported that local blacks were arming themselves and advising SNCC activists to do likewise. Willie Peacock pointed out that since the "FBI was unwilling to track down" the perpetrators of white supremacist violence, rural blacks were establishing a "self-defense structure." Awareness of the presence of armed blacks had deterred white attacks on the black community.¹⁶

The seriousness of the situation, and the response of SNCC organizers in Greenwood to it, sparked a lively discussion on the question of armed self-defense versus nonviolence. Should SNCC workers in the Deep South carry arms? Should armed sentries surround SNCC and COFO Freedom Houses in the South? What relationship should SNCC have with indigenous black Southerners who practiced armed self-defense? What would likely be the consequences of black communities defending themselves through armed resistance? SNCC staff passionately debated these questions.

Many offered arguments that supported a strategy of nonviolence and questioned the practicality of armed resistance. Frank Smith, an indigenous Mississippian who organized in Greenwood and Holly Springs, encouraged his comrades to maintain a nonviolent posture. He supported the view that only the federal government could provide adequate protection for local blacks and movement people in Mississippi. Courtland Cox, active in the Non-violent Action Group (an SNCC affiliate group at Howard University in Washington, DC), believed that the advocacy and practice of armed resistance would isolate SNCC from the majority of the black

population. Ruby Doris Smith, an SNCC veteran of the 1961 sit-in movement and a Spelman student, wondered if SNCC should allow local blacks to provide ostensibly nonviolent organizers with protection. Prathia Hall, an activist and theology student from Philadelphia, made one of the most passionate arguments in opposition to armed self-defense. Wounded in Dawson, Georgia, in 1962, she was no stranger to the violence of Southern segregationists. Remembering the four girls murdered in a Birmingham church bombing in 1963, Hall argued that by “destroying life [through violence] we don’t preserve” the lives of the victims in Birmingham. From a pragmatic point of view, she argued that talk of black self-defense was suicidal. Hall believed that “if you kill an attacker . . . you will lose your home anyway because the [white] townsmen will come to the aid of the attacker and take everything [life and property] away from you.” On the question of arming SNCC workers, Bob Moses argued that while SNCC could not expect local blacks to commit themselves to nonviolence, its own workers were obligated to remain unarmed. He recognized that arms represented a way of life in black Southern culture and that nonviolence was a foreign concept to most local blacks. Nevertheless, he insisted that SNCC as an organization was committed to nonviolence and required its organizers to practice Christian pacifism.¹⁷

The advocates of armed self-defense were equally passionate and persuasive. Sam Block testified that armed blacks had deterred whites intending to do harm to the SNCC office. He also invoked the example of Laura McGhee, a local leader in Greenwood, Mississippi, who had prevented attacks on her home by openly carrying arms. In response to Hall’s assertion that armed self-defense would prove suicidal for black Southern communities, Mike Sayer, a white activist from New York, reminded his colleagues of Robert Williams and the armed black community in Monroe, North Carolina. To Sayer, the success of armed patrols in Monroe in repelling Klan violence suggested armed black resistance would not necessarily lead to the massacres forecast by Hall.

At a critical moment in the debate, Charles Cobb asked a fundamental question: “Where does SNCC stand when Mr. [E. W.] Steptoe is killed while defending his home, with his two daughters there and his rifle laying on the floor?” He continued, “Where does SNCC stand when I pick up his gun . . . as I will . . . and, then, when the police arrest me?”¹⁸ After a long silence, SNCC’s elder advisor Ella Baker offered her perspective to break the impasse. Baker rarely intervened in the internal debates of her junior comrades in SNCC. In response to Cobb, she declared, “I can’t conceive of the SNCC I thought I was associated with not defending Charlie Cobb. . . . In my book, Charlie would not be operating out of SNCC if he did what he said.” All factions within SNCC respected Ella Baker. While not affirmatively advocating armed self-defense, Baker’s support for Cobb was a crucial opening for SNCC staff desiring more flexibility around the organization’s position on the use of

force. After Baker's affirmation and several other comments, Cobb asserted, "I won't carry a gun . . . but what's different here is the presence of Mr. Steptoe's daughters. If I were there alone, I'd head out the back door. The question to me is purely one of protection of the daughters."¹⁹

After the lengthy debate, a consensus was reached that no guns were to be kept in any "Freedom House or office in any SNCC project" and that "no one on staff is to carry guns or weapons." It was also resolved that SNCC as an organization would not take any public position on armed self-defense. It was also decided that "volunteers recruited for the Mississippi Summer Project who carry weapons will be asked to leave."²² Although the SNCC field staff managed to reach a consensus on this issue on the eve of Freedom Summer, support for armed self-defense and the practice of carrying weapons would grow within the organization. The Freedom Summer experience would play a significant role in diminishing nonviolence as the guiding philosophy and strategy of the organization.

Members of CORE also engaged in debates concerning the organization's position on armed self-defense. As early as 1962, CORE national leadership became concerned about its field staff's commitment to nonviolence and the difficulties of getting Southern blacks to not utilize weapons in response to segregationist violence. At the 1963 CORE National Convention, members organized a special workshop on mass violence and the philosophy of nonviolence. The impetus for this workshop came from reports of CORE field organizers that spoke of being armed as a common practice among Southern blacks. In the Deep South, movement centers like Canton, Mississippi, and Plaquemines and West Feliciana parishes in Louisiana, CORE workers and the meetings they organized received protection from armed black civilians. In a report from West Feliciana, a CORE worker stated, "We cannot tell someone not to defend his property and the lives of his family, and let me assure you, those 15–20 shotguns guarding our meetings are very assuring."²³ James Farmer, the national director of CORE, feared that it would prove difficult to restrain CORE members from participating in acts of armed resistance as the Southern movement intensified. In one instance, Farmer reported that after a police raid, CORE members armed themselves "to shoot it out with the police the next time they came to the office." At the 1963 convention, many delegates reported they had to disarm Southern blacks "who had come to mass meetings and demonstrations with revolvers and knives."²⁴ Farmer spoke directly to the perceived dangers of CORE members and movement activists and supporters embracing armed resistance. Fearing the effects the movement's association with armed resistance would have on white support, Farmer warned that "widespread violence by the freedom fighters would sever from the struggle all but a few of our allies. . . it would also provoke and, to many, justify such repressive measures as would stymie the movement."²⁵

Farmer's fears of CORE members abandoning nonviolence as a way of life and primary strategy were not imagined or exaggerated. In the South, many key CORE activists had begun to recognize the utility of armed resistance as either a compliment or an alternative to nonviolent direct action. In 1961, young CORE leaders from the New Orleans group showed so much commitment to Gandhian principles that they spoke of "preparing to die if necessary."²⁴ But by 1963 and 1964 they recognized armed resistance as legitimate, and in some cases they used its potential as a bargaining measure. For example, during a heated exchange between CORE activist Jerome Smith and Attorney General Robert Kennedy in May 1963, Smith asserted that if the federal government could not protect movement activists, he could not promise a continued commitment to nonviolence. Not mincing words, Smith told Kennedy, "When I pull the trigger, kiss it [nonviolence] good-by [sic]."²⁷ A COFO leader and CORE representative in Mississippi, Dave Dennis, also began to change his total commitment to nonviolence in reaction to federal indifference. In January 1964, Dennis cautioned Robert Kennedy that blacks "shall not watch their families starve, be jailed, beaten, and killed without responding to protect them. You have proven by your refusal to act that we have no other recourse but to defend ourselves with whatever means we have at our disposal."²⁶

On the eve of Freedom Summer, an incident occurred that would move Dennis to break emotionally and politically with the philosophy of nonviolence. On June 21, 1964, two CORE workers, James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner, and one Freedom Summer volunteer, Andrew Goodman, were reported missing after being released by Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price. Chaney was a black Mississippian from Meridian, Schwerner a white New Yorker who had come to Meridian in 1963 to run the CORE office there, and Goodman was a white college student from New York. The three workers were attempting to find housing for Freedom Summer volunteers in Neshoba County. Dennis should have traveled with them but did not go due to a bout with bronchitis. For security purposes, COFO workers were required to call in to their local headquarters every two hours to communicate their location and status. When no one received a call from the three, an alert was sent out and SNCC, CORE, and COFO workers and supporters in Mississippi and across the United States mobilized to Neshoba County to locate them.²⁷

Pressure was directed at federal authorities, particularly the FBI, to join in the search for Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. Many COFO workers had much criticism for the federal authorities' response; they had contacted the FBI the same evening the three activists went missing, but twenty-four hours passed before the agency responded. President Lyndon Johnson also inquired into the whereabouts of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, expressing his concern to U.S. Senator James Eastland and Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson and sending former Central Intelligence Agency director Allen Dulles to meet with Mississippi officials. The COFO activists were dismayed that Dulles did not make time on his schedule to meet with

Rita Schwerner, Mickey's wife. On July 10, 1964, when the FBI opened a field office in Jackson, Mississippi, J. Edgar Hoover made statements that confirmed the growing sense of insecurity among COFO workers. In what must have come as reassurance to Mississippi segregationists, Hoover declared, "we most certainly do not and will not give protection to civil rights workers . . . protection is in the hands of local authorities."²⁸ Nevertheless, the fate of two white Northerners from prominent families did create the type of public outcry that forced the FBI and federal authorities to investigate the case and provide some security for the hundreds of white volunteers and other COFO workers involved in the Summer Project. By the end of the summer, over 150 agents had been assigned to the Jackson FBI office.²⁹

It was not until the early days of August that the bodies of the three activists were found under two feet of dirt in a bulldozed trench at the base of a dam. Dennis, CORE's state director, took personal responsibility for the disappearance and subsequent lynching of the three men. He later expressed remorse that his illness had kept him from coming to Meridian to provide leadership and experience in the crucial first hours of the search for the three, when they might still have been found alive and saved from their killers. During the federal search for Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, officials found the bodies of several people in remote areas of Mississippi, a fact that profoundly affected Dennis. One of these black victims was a fourteen-year-old boy, found in the Big Black River clad in a CORE T-shirt. The fact that no serious effort had been made to investigate these probable murders and pursue the crimes' perpetrators disturbed Dennis even more.³⁰

As one result of this searing experience, the CORE and COFO leader began to disassociate himself from an adherence to nonviolence. When asked to speak at the memorial service for James Chaney, Dennis either consciously or unconsciously disregarded an order from CORE national leadership to preach reconciliation and nonviolence. He gave an emotional address: "I'm sick and tired of going to the funerals of Black men who have been murdered by white men. . . . I've got vengeance in my heart tonight." He challenged the audience, "If you go back home and take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us . . . if you take it and don't do something about it . . . then God damn your souls."³¹ Years later, reflecting on his emotional comments that day, Dennis explained his intent:

I felt then that there was only one solution. If we're gonna have a war, let's have it. And that people ought not to say, "Let's leave it up to the government to take care of this. . . . Let's go in there ourselves, let's go on and get it over with, one way or another." That's the emotion I felt. I was just tired of going to funerals. . . . I never did . . . try to deal with anyone on non-violence again.³⁴

Even after abandoning nonviolence, Dennis never went about armed in his work in Mississippi. The fundamental change in his practice concerned what he counseled other activists to do or not to do. After the tragedy of Neshoba County, Dennis and

other CORE workers in Mississippi did not discourage people from defending themselves. In fact, Dennis wondered whether, if his three deceased comrades and other victims of racist violence whom he had encouraged to remain nonviolent had perhaps carried arms, the results might have differed.³³

The events leading up to Freedom Summer reveal serious differences in the movement around the role of nonviolence and the use of weapons. SNCC and CORE members in Mississippi were becoming more receptive to and in some cases participants in armed self-defense. Nonviolence dwindled in popularity within the ranks of the Southern movement. These trends would be strengthened over the course of the summer of 1964.

The murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, and the threatened violence by Mississippi segregationists, did not stop the Mississippi Summer Project. Over 3000 college students were recruited to volunteer in local COFO projects, especially voter registration efforts, in thirty-eight communities. Almost two-dozen community centers opened, and activists organized thirty freedom schools teaching black history, movement politics, literacy, and math skills to children and young people.³⁴

As predicted by Moses and Dennis, the massive involvement of white students in COFO projects did put Mississippi in the national media spotlight and, particularly after the abduction of the three COFO activists in Neshoba County, brought about an increased federal presence. White supremacists continued their campaign of terror. Between June and October 1964, over 1000 movement activists and supporters were arrested by Mississippi police, thirty-seven churches were bombed or burned to the ground, and fifteen people were murdered.³⁵ In response to this unabated terrorism, black communities across the state of Mississippi activated defense networks for the protection of their lives and property and the protection of the movement.

The Movement's Havens:

Black Farming Communities and Armed Resistance

Throughout Mississippi, movement workers knew of localities that provided them a safe haven. These haven communities—generally contiguous black landowning communities, in which an organized, armed presence served to discourage nightriders from conducting raids—proved essential for the statewide campaign. Movement workers, particularly field organizers, could enjoy a relative sense of security if they made it to one of these communities before dark.

One such haven was Harmony, a small farming community in Leake County, about fourteen miles from the county seat of Carthage. Leake County was located in Mississippi's fourth congressional district (CORE's domain in the state), east of Madison County and west of Neshoba County. Harmony's location in the heart of the

fourth district made it a natural safe haven for activists going from one center to another. Harmony was composed of “several hundred [black] families who [owned] their own farms.”³⁶ Freedom Summer did not constitute the first episode for Harmony in the freedom struggle. After emancipation, the community had organized around a school, built by local resident blacks with assistance from the philanthropic Rosenwald Fund. The school marked a central institution and a source of pride for Harmony residents.³⁷

Armed resistance constituted an essential element of the struggle in Harmony. Leake County, like Neshoba to the east, was central Klan territory. Consequently, Harmony residents “would look out for one another.”³⁸ Harmony’s men were particularly concerned about the possibility of white men sexually violating the women of Harmony, and they were prepared to retaliate against white rapists. Harmony formally linked up with the civil rights movement when Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, visited the small hamlet in the late 1950s to assist local residents in organizing the Leake County NAACP. They organized protection for Evers anytime he came to Leake County. In 1962, residents filed a desegregation suit against the Leake County school system after county officials closed the Harmony school and bused Harmony’s youth to a segregated school in Carthage. Following the suit filing, nightriders attacked Harmony residents, who in turn organized and carried out retaliatory violence. In an interview with movement historian Tom Dent, Harmony resident Winson Hudson remembered groups of black men attacking the homes of Leake County white residents in response to violence from white supremacist marauders. After a couple of forays by vigilantes from both “sides of the tracks,” Leake County officials thought it better to negotiate a truce between the groups. Yet even with the truce in effect, blacks realized “you better not get caught out of the community.”³⁹ In 1964, federal courts forced the Leake County schools to desegregate.

As a haven community, Harmony’s tradition of armed resistance was probably more important than its strategic location in the fourth congressional district. CORE activist Jerome Smith called Harmony “a together community” of “powerful people who would defend themselves.”⁴⁰ Adult men and women and the youth all participated in a community defense system. In the evening, young men took turns in an armed watch of the Harmony community center, which housed the local freedom school and COFO headquarters and was located along the main roads entering Harmony. They used car horns and blinking headlights to signal intruders approaching the general community or individual farms. Signal codes were changed periodically to ensure secrecy and security. Volunteer Von Hoffman commented, “It is dangerous to drive off the paved highway into the Harmony area after sundown if your car is unfamiliar there.”⁴¹ Husbands and wives took turns during the evening staying awake and participating in an armed watch of their individual property.⁴²

Remembering an incident that exemplified Harmony's tradition of armed resistance, local NAACP activist Dovie Hudson recalled hearing that white vigilantes traveled down the road placing bombs in the mailboxes of Harmony residents. After Hudson called her sons, "one got one gun and one got the other one." As the bombers drove up to Hudson's mailbox, "my boys started shooting. . . . They just lined that car with bullets up and down."⁴³ This incident illustrates why Harmony residents called their community "the lion's mouth." According to Dovie Hudson's sister Winson, the nightriders who came into Harmony "wouldn't get out."⁴⁴ Harmony's cooperation in supporting and protecting its friends and neighbors and its determination in combating its enemies meant that civil rights workers felt very secure in this hamlet. Harmony epitomized collective armed resistance animated by a community spirit of defiance and militancy. As Winson Hudson stated, "The more they [white terrorists] did to us . . . the meaner we got."⁴⁵ Once white supremacists understood the risks of marauding Harmony, COFO activists were relatively safe in this small community.

The Mileston farming district in Holmes County constituted one of the most important haven communities in Mississippi. Mileston was located in the western delta cotton-growing region of Holmes. Unlike other portions of the delta, the black farmers of Mileston were able to purchase land through New Deal programs to form a contiguous landowning community, and, like Harmony, Mileston constituted a black landowning enclave. Its residents had a strong sense of community, solidarity, and cooperation. Mileston farmers shared tools and helped their neighbors with planting and harvest. A cooperatively owned cotton gin also served to make the Mileston farmers more self-reliant.⁴⁶

As in Harmony, the cooperative spirit of Mileston farmers extended from the economic arena to self-defense and community protection. In the summer of 1964, the Mileston community formed an armed community patrol, building on the informal networks it had established in agricultural production. The self-reliance and cooperative spirit of the Mileston community gave COFO and SNCC activists and summer volunteers a sense of security in that section of Holmes County.⁴⁷ Concerning Mileston's preparedness for dealing with segregationist violence, SNCC activist Ed Brown recalled, "When there were instances of confrontation there was sufficient organizational strength behind us to make whites think twice before doing anything."⁴⁸

Hollis Watkins, a COFO/SNCC organizer assigned to Holmes County for the Summer Project, actually participated in the Mileston armed patrol in direct violation of SNCC policy on activists and arms. For his part, Watkins felt obligated to participate in the defense of the community because he relied on its families, particularly the household of farmer Dave Howard. He described in great detail the system set up to "make sure strangers didn't venture" into Mileston:

If a vehicle came across the tracks down into the community and didn't give the proper signals, after a certain hour, you know after dark, then the telephone messages would be relayed and ultimately that vehicle would be approached from the front and the rear and checked to see who it was. In most cases it would be met head-on with headlights . . . with two people in a car. And generally being approached by four people in a pickup truck from behind . . . two of the people would generally be in the cab. And two would generally be in the back with the guns raised over the cab.⁴⁹

As in Harmony, the system included signals for incoming friendly vehicles, including blinking headlights or honking the car horn a certain number of times. In case intruders had observed the system and figured out its purpose, the signals periodically changed. According to Watkins, the evening hours were divided, and community residents volunteered for different shifts. Only adult men participated in the armed watch of the community.⁵⁰

The homes of Mileston residents considered local movement leaders, people housing summer volunteers, and churches and other institutions identified with the movement received special protection. Describing the safeguarding of particular people and places, a Mileston resident, Shadrach Davis, remembered: "We would have to watch different ones' houses here at night. . . . Two or three 'f us would set in the trucks wit' guns at this driveway. Then we'd leave an' ride over to the other areas of the community . . . one, and two o'clock at night. . . . n' see how was everythang goin."⁵¹ As a result of this kind of protection, COFO organizers believed Mileston a safe area. Just like Harmony, COFO activists came to rely on, in Brown's words, the "organizational strength" of the Mileston farmers for protection. In fact, when it was determined in early summer that it was too dangerous for the white volunteers to go directly to southwestern Mississippi, they were instead sent to Holmes County. There they could adjust to Mississippi life and receive some of the best protection anywhere in the state.

Survival and Resistance:

Armed Defense and Organizing throughout Mississippi

While probably not achieving the same level of organization as haven communities like Mileston and Harmony, general armed defense became an essential practice of the movement in projects throughout the state. One feature that distinguished haven communities from other rural areas was the high level of collective solidarity. In other communities, small numbers of isolated but committed activists bonded together to support one another. Unlike the rural haven communities, these communities often lacked the high concentration of black landowners in a contiguous area.

In Holmes County, local Freedom Summer activity took place in communities other than Mileston. Old Pilgrim's Rest, a small rural community in the northwestern portion of Holmes, mounted a voter registration campaign and organized a freedom school. Only a few of the residents, the families of Vanderbilt and Cora Roby, Jodie and Virgie Saffold, and "Link" Williams, decided to house summer project volunteers. Significantly, marriage and blood related these three households. Their role in the local movement and their decision to house volunteers made the Robys, Saffolds, and Williams the primary targets of white supremacists in Holmes County. Lacking the high level of solidarity seen in Harmony and Mileston, these three families had to support each other. Commenting on how his neighbors ostracized him, Jodie Saffold remembered often overhearing people say about him, "that nigger ain't got no sense." In their own home, Mr. and Mrs. Saffold took turns sleeping at night, armed with rifles to watch for nightriders. Vanderbilt Roby often spent evenings "layin' in the bushes" outside his home, "lookin' for them [the nightriders] to come and shoot." Vanderbilt, Jodie, and Link would also periodically drive by each other's home to check on the security of their comrades.⁵²

As SNCC organizers recognized in the June 1964 debate, delta blacks were armed and prepared for white supremacist violence during Freedom Summer. After SNCC began activity in Greenwood during 1962, segregationists initiated a wave of terror to intimidate activists and the black community. While not exhibiting the same degree of organization as Harmony and Mileston, some local blacks demonstrated a willingness to defend their lives and property with guns. A small group of black Greenwood residents also gave armed protection to the SNCC Freedom House and mass meetings. During ostensibly nonviolent marches in Greenwood, armed black observers would protect peaceful demonstrators. Throughout Freedom Summer, elements of the Greenwood black community maintained an armed presence.⁵³ While other places may not have organized as well as Greenwood, guns were certainly part of the culture of survival and resistance. Unita Blackwell, community leader of the delta town of Mayersville, took turns sleeping in the evenings with her husband so someone would be awake, armed, and on alert for nightriders.⁵⁴ A host making weapons available to volunteers was not an unusual occurrence. SNCC organizer Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) remembered being handed a revolver by MFDP leader Fannie Lou Hamer when staying at her home in Ruleville, Mississippi. Sundiata Acoli (formerly known as Clark Squire), a young black activist living in New York, volunteered to come to Mississippi to participate in Freedom Summer after hearing of the murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. He was assigned to Batesville, a small town in the delta county of Panola. "An older sister" who was one of the movement leaders in Batesville housed Acoli. When entering his bedroom in the rear of the house, he noticed "a loaded 12 gauge [shotgun] leaned against the corner and a box of shells on the bureau."⁵⁵

In Meridian and other urban centers, black communities possessed a critical mass to protect movement leaders and black institutions and businesses. Meridian constituted a railway hub and retail center for Mississippi. The town exhibited an ethnic character more diverse than most Mississippi locations since its population, besides African descendants and white Protestants, included Jewish and Irish Catholic communities. In spite of segregation and the constant threat of white supremacist violence, many in the black community perceived life in Meridian as better than in other parts of the state. Local black businesses were not segregated from the main business district and two high schools served black students (prior to the late 1940s, no black community in east Mississippi had a secondary school). Although residents took pride in the community's achievements, restrictions on political participation and economic opportunity for blacks ensured discontent in black Meridian.⁵⁶

While Meridian gained national attention from the investigation of the abduction and murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, it already possessed a well-organized, generations-old movement. The local NAACP chapter had been established in the 1930s, and the local chapter of the Holbrook Benevolent Association, which served not only the healthcare and burial needs of the community, but also as a vehicle for public advocacy and organization, had been formed by businessman E. F. Young in the 1940s. The *Weekly Echo*, a local black-owned newspaper, challenged Meridian's segregationist policies. In the early 1960s, Meridian saw demonstrations against segregated lunch counters and was the first Mississippi stop on the Freedom Ride against segregated bus terminals. According to local businessman, community leader, and activist Charles Young (the son of E. F. Young), "the Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner activity was the water that went on the plant that caused the plant to mushroom."⁵⁷ Perhaps less visible, the practice of armed defense of movement leaders and institutions was nothing new in Meridian. In the 1940s, a local black, George Haynes, helped to protect black community leaders with his double-headed axe, and in the 1950s members of the black community helped guard the homes of NAACP leaders C. L. Darden, Albert Jones, and Charles Young.⁵⁸

The First Union Baptist Church, led by Reverend R. S. Porter, formed the primary base of the Meridian movement. Even though nearly half of the parishioners opposed the church's involvement in the movement, Union Baptist, under Porter's leadership, hosted most of Meridian's movement meetings, and its members formed the core of the armed sentry for the Meridian black community in 1964. Porter, known as a "man who liked his rifle," participated in the self-defense group. It declared as its mission the protection of key movement leaders and institutions, particularly churches targeted by white supremacist terrorists. Meridian was located in Lauderdale County, which saw more church bombings than any other county. Since Union Baptist formed the center of local movement activity and received its

share of threats, the security force placed great attention on the church. Members of Union Baptist generally took turns participating in an armed guard from the church loft. No doubt because of the guard, Union Baptist Church escaped attack. The Meridian group also took responsibility for protecting high-profile activists who visited Meridian, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Roy Wilkins.⁵⁹

The Meridian defense group was unique insofar as it protected and included a white Mississippian in its activities. Attorney William Ready, a local movement supporter of Irish Catholic descent, was targeted for assassination by local Klan terrorists. Remembering the role of Porter and Union Baptist members in protecting his family and home after receiving Klan death threats, Ready commented, “My preacher friends guarded my house for five years. . . . We used to sit up many a night, waiting. Our wives had learned to make us all night meals.”⁶⁰ One time, after receiving word that the Klan planned to make an attack on his home, Ready positioned himself across the street from his house in a ditch. While he was waiting for his attackers, a car approached the house. According to Charles Young, “One of them [the nightriders] got out [of the car] and started towards the house . . . he [Ready] cut loose,” firing his weapon at them.⁶¹

“Some People’s Fixin’ to Be Killed”:

The McComb Movement Responds to Racial Terror

While the level of violence was intense in Meridian, the black community and the movement faced even greater challenges in McComb, located in Pike County. SNCC began a voter registration and desegregation campaign there in 1961, but even prior to SNCC activity, McComb registered an increase in terrorist violence by the Klan and harassment by local police. This violence constituted a brutal form of social control in response to a rapid influx of black people into the city from rural Mississippi, particularly neighboring Amite County. Freedom Summer only accelerated the campaign of terror. By 1964, McComb was popularly known as the “bombing capital of the world.”⁶² Between June 22 and August 12, twelve bombings of homes, churches, and businesses—perpetrated by the local klavern of the United Klans of America—shook the city’s black community. With access to guns, ammunition, and dynamite, the Klan was determined to instill enough fear into McComb’s black community that it would not support COFO’s voter registration program.⁶³ Indeed, one year earlier, a black domestic worker in the household of members of the white power structure had discovered that the local segregationist forces had already developed a “hit list” of local NAACP and COFO leaders, possibly for assassination.⁶⁴

Many COFO activists and others in the black community believed that the local and state police actively conspired with the bombers. The police investigated COFO members for the bombings and on occasion publicly blamed movement

activists for the terrorism. In response, individual households and movement participants prepared to defend themselves. While they did not possess their enemies' firepower, local black activists did what they could. Armed black patrols could not prevent many of the bombings, but they ably responded to other Klan attacks. On June 22, 1964, white supremacist terrorists attempted to bomb the home of McComb NAACP leader Claude Bryant, while also bombing two other homes that evening. A resident of the politically active Beartown community of McComb, Bryant was considered by many as the principal leader of the McComb movement. He, like many other local NAACP members, worked for the Illinois Central Railroad and owned a local barbershop. Segregationists had already bombed his barbershop in April. They returned in June to bomb his house. The dynamite was thrown from a moving car; however, it did not reach Bryant's house, exploding twenty-five yards from the property. After the impact of the explosion jarred his home, Bryant grabbed his rifle and fired at the perpetrators' car. From this day on, until the terrorist campaign ceased, an armed patrol composed of local NAACP men guarded Bryant's home in the evenings. Bryant also purchased a high-powered rifle to more adequately protect himself.⁶⁵

On July 26, Bryant's brother Charlie and his wife Ora "Miss Dago" Bryant were awakened by the sound of a car pulling into the driveway of their home. Miss Dago, considered a significant local movement leader, grabbed her shotgun and fired at the vehicle the moment a bomber threw a bundle of explosives at the house. The explosion broke the front windows and tore the asbestos siding off the house. Responding to the attack on his brother's home, Claude Bryant, armed with his new high-powered rifle, and other neighbors traded gunfire with the perpetrators. McComb resident and movement supporter Johnnie Nobles later gave his account of that eventful night:

It was a white man . . . that night . . . that got shot. . . She [Ora Bryant] shot somebody. . . That car was fired on so many times coming out of there . . . by people straight up the street all through there. . . And he was shot at when he turned the curb, coming back towards town. . . And you could hear people hollering "here he come."⁶⁶

Some local blacks believe that the perpetrator possibly hit by Mrs. Bryant's bullets was taken across the border to Louisiana or Tennessee for treatment in order to escape suspicion. For the rest of the summer, Charles and Ora Bryant took turns guarding their home with their shotgun.⁶⁷

Like the Bryants, families throughout the black neighborhoods of McComb, particularly those involved in the movement, began to conduct a nightly armed watch of their homes. In the Algiers community of McComb, the Reeves family had a history and reputation as outspoken "Bad Negroes."⁶⁸ Mr. and Mrs. Reeves partic-

ipated in the NAACP and housed COFO workers and volunteers during the Summer Project. For three months after the attempted bombing, Carl Reeves took part in the patrol of Claude Bryant's home. Not surprisingly, the Reeves received threats from white supremacists. They contacted the local police about the threats and proclaimed, "Y'all won't catch 'em, but we'll catch 'em." Fearful the Reeves meant business, the police instructed the family, "don't shoot the man, shoot the tires [of the nightriders' vehicle]."⁶⁹ When her husband went away in the evening, Annie Reeves, armed with a rifle, watched with the lights out from her living room. Her teenage son William stood guard on the porch, while a teenage neighbor, Eddie Williams, and other young people patrolled the perimeter of the house with rifles.⁷⁰

The Reeveses make just one example of families working together to protect their lives and property in the face of rampant terror. NAACP member Matthew Nobles slept on the roof of his house with a rifle to fend off nightriders. While Nobles crouched on the roof, his wife slept with a rifle at her side. She left her window open so the sound of any vehicle in their neighborhood would wake her up.⁷¹ The Reeveses, the Nobleses, and the Bryants became virtual militia units defending the black communities of McComb.

An armed community watch was also organized to protect black businesses in McComb, particularly those owned by local movement activists. Aylene Quin's café and Ernest Nobles's cleaning business required special attention. Quin and Nobles constituted the backbone of the group of black entrepreneurs who provided housing, food, and transportation for COFO activists and volunteers in Pike County. Quin's café served COFO workers and Nobles's truck often clandestinely transported them around the city. Nobles's shop also marked a place of refuge for activists pursued by police in the Burgland section of McComb. In the evenings, Nobles, his brothers, and friends took turns participating in an armed watch of the business.⁷² From a loft across the street above a black-owned cab stand, armed black men watched Nobles's place all night long during Freedom Summer. Despite the patrol, someone set a fire in the back of the business one evening, but it fortunately caused only minor damage. On another occasion, one of Nobles's brothers almost shot a man tossing the newspaper in front of the cleaner's, thinking the "paper man" was throwing dynamite. Johnnie Nobles remembered, "when he threw that paper, we throw the door open and had guns on him." Luckily, the paper man was recognized before there were fatal consequences.⁷³

After the official end of the Summer Project, SNCC activists continued the COFO project in McComb. Jesse Harris, a SNCC activist from Jackson, remained in his post as McComb COFO project director, determined to complete the tasks of the movement. The forces of segregation and white supremacist terrorism also continued their efforts to intimidate, harass, and neutralize black communities and movement activists.

By this time, residents had little confidence that the federal government was

seriously trying to prevent local terrorism and repression in McComb. The FBI had not brought to justice any of those responsible for the proliferation of bombings since June 1964. In fact, the FBI reduced the number of its agents in McComb from sixteen to four in August. In a letter dated September 9, 1964, COFO activist Jesse Harris appealed to Justice Department official Burke Marshall “to take action before it was too late. . . . unless responsible forces are brought to bear in McComb, what happened in Neshoba County will happen here.”⁷⁴ When federal authorities declined to act, the black community of McComb had little choice but to become an armed camp. Armed and on alert, the black neighborhoods of McComb were angry and tense in the late summer and early fall of 1964. Although the Klan’s use of violence and intimidation had failed to drive a wedge between the movement and the black community, the potential for militant, retaliatory action from large numbers of McComb blacks, particularly among the working class, poor, and youth, had grown considerably. SNCC activist Joe Martin remembered the climate in McComb’s black neighborhoods in September 1964 as determined, no matter the consequences:

The thing that was threatening white folks was thinking they was putting fear in blacks. The fear turned into anger, but it was turning the wrong way [from where white supremacists intended]. They [many McComb blacks] was ready to start shooting people who was white. . . . Deacon [Claude] Bryant and the other older guys went to them [the white power structure and the FBI] and told them “some people’s fixin’ to be killed. And ain’t all of them going to be black.”⁷⁵

On September 20, 1964, the fuse was lit and the explosive element within the McComb black community ignited. That evening, white supremacists bombed the residence of Aylene Quin, injuring her two children, a nine-year-old girl, Jacqueline, and a five-year-old boy, Anthony. Later the same night, white vigilantes attacked and almost completely destroyed the politically active Society Hill Baptist Church of the Beartown community. These two bombings, particularly the assault on the home of the well-loved and respected Quin, brought an immediate reaction from outraged black residents. Hundreds of them poured into the streets armed with guns, Molotov cocktails, bricks, and any weapon available to them. Roving mobs of youth marched down McComb’s streets looking for white people or white-owned property and establishments to attack. Johnnie Nobles remembered the effect the Quin bombing had on him: “I was hateful and mean and I wanted to do something.”⁷⁶ Leaving his shift guarding his brother’s cleaners from nightriders, Nobles was arrested with his .32 handgun on his way to Quin’s neighborhood. In order to avoid the charge of carrying a concealed weapon, Nobles passed his gun to a friend by pretending to pass a wallet. Black retaliation in response to the bombing was serious: “If a white [-owned] vehicle come into that section, Miss Aylene Quin’s neighborhood, they [black protesters] tearin’ it up. . . . You could hear them bustin’ windows out of cars.”⁷⁷ Joe Martin remembered that black snipers also shot at passing cars driven by

whites, including police vehicles: "People start[ed] taking 'pot shots' at white peoples' cars and stuff."⁷⁸ Facing the fury of a spontaneous black uprising, McComb's police and the legion of whites deputized for the occasion stayed on the perimeter of the black community. The persistent persuasion of COFO workers, who walked the streets talking to the roving mobs, ultimately calmed the rebellion.⁷⁹

After this violent response by the black community, the federal government finally turned its attention to the volatile situation in McComb. On September 21, 1964, Aylene Quin, Ora Bryant, and another activist whose property terrorist bombers targeted, Matti Dillion, went to Washington, DC. These three formidable women from McComb met not only with Justice Department officials, but also with president Lyndon Johnson. After this meeting, Johnson personally contacted Mississippi governor Paul Johnson and threatened to send federal troops to McComb. Governor Johnson in turn contacted Pike County district attorney Joseph Pigott, who had already been warned about the possibility of federal intervention by justice officials. In the meantime, the *New York Times* and other major news media had reported the violence in McComb. With the specter of an armed black uprising looming, McComb had suddenly become a national issue.⁸⁰

On September 29, 1964, Governor Johnson convened McComb and Pike County officials to warn them he was on the verge of mobilizing the Mississippi National Guard to McComb. Within twenty-four hours, Klansmen were being arrested for the bombings, and one week later a total of eleven Klansmen had been taken into custody for participating in arson and the bombing of homes and institutions in the black community. Nine men were tried on October 23, 1964. After pleading guilty and being sentenced to five years' incarceration, Judge W. H. Watkins, who claimed they had been "unduly provoked," put the bombers on probation.⁸¹

The black community felt betrayed again by the virtual release of the white terrorists. However, the commercial element of the white power structure began to champion toleration and compromise, having realized that a reputation as "the bombing capital of the world" did not profit McComb business. The racist violence had not terrorized the black community into submission, but had provoked a racial uprising. The outrage and retaliatory violence of September 29, 1964, had played a significant role in forcing the federal and state governments to intervene and making the power structure "blink."⁸²

Armed self-defense and armed resistance appeared in virtually every community in which COFO organized projects during Freedom Summer. The extent of this phenomenon depended on various factors, particularly the social cohesiveness of each community. In communities with a strong tradition of solidarity and self-reliance, like Harmony and Mileston, collective armed organization reached its peak, but armed self-defense formed a component of the overall struggle for civil and human rights virtually everywhere.

The Beginning of the End of Nonviolence

In June 1964, SNCC had its first national debate on the issue of armed self-defense. Beginning a year earlier, this same issue challenged CORE's national leadership. While both organizations maintained a public posture of nonviolence, many grassroots members and volunteers began to arm themselves during 1964. I would argue that in Mississippi and other parts of the South these organizations could not have functioned effectively without the armed protection of local people.

Despite the SNCC ban on arms, several SNCC and COFO organizers carried arms during Freedom Summer. Hollis Watkins participated in armed patrols in Mileston. Armed COFO activists escorted Sundiata Acoli when he was transported from Jackson to his Summer Project assignment at Batesville.⁸³ After receiving an unsatisfactory response from federal authorities when white supremacists bombed their Freedom House and violently harassed them on several occasions, Jesse Harris and other SNCC staff set up an armed patrol in McComb.⁸⁴ McComb SNCC organizer Joe Martin, who also participated in an armed watch of the home of Ora and Charles Bryant, recalled, "It was against SNCC's policy, but we had weapons."⁸⁵

Historians of 1960s activism have underestimated the role of black Southerners in transforming SNCC's posture and practice on armed self-defense. Some seem to assume that young activists, often college educated and many from the North, were not significantly influenced by black farmers and working people from the South.⁸⁶ But many SNCC and COFO staffers came from communities in Mississippi and other Southern states where armed self-defense had a longer tradition than nonviolence. Many others were influenced by local movement leaders like E. W. Steptoe, Hartman Turnbow, Laura McGhee, Ora Bryant, and R. S. Porter, whose practice no one could confuse with the philosophy of nonviolence. To many black Southerners, nonviolence sounded alien and even foolhardy. Given the context of a Southern black tradition, it was difficult for nonviolence to compete with armed self-defense. Bob Moses spoke of the importance of local people in transforming SNCC's policy and practice of nonviolence: "Local people carried the day. They defined how they and the culture was going to relate to the issue of using guns, having them available and nonviolence. . . . They defined that and people fell into it. Then the question was, 'well, can we apply that to us as organizers?'"⁸⁷ For historian Todd Gitlin, the embrace of armed resistance by the SNCC and other formerly nonviolent movement activists represents disillusion and a loss of hope. This view disregards the armed resistance of local black people as a vehicle for maintaining the freedom struggle. While the betrayal of the federal government and liberals certainly disillusioned activists, the persistent sacrifices and struggles of black farmers and workers gave the SNCC and other activists confidence that they could rely on the organized masses to gain the political power necessary to achieve human rights and social justice.

Movement historians have also underemphasized the role played by landown-

ing black haven communities in the survival of the freedom movement. Black farming communities, like Harmony and Mileston, served as autonomous bases of resistance and support in the heart of hostile territory. Reminiscent of outlier (so-called maroon) communities during slavery, Mississippi's haven communities, with their tradition of self-reliance, were able to manifest a high level of solidarity and resistance compared to other black communities in the state. Communities that possessed a critical mass of black landowners were able to develop a sense of autonomy from white supremacy, unlike communities of primarily tenant farmers. The ownership of land not only gave black farmers something tangible to defend, but it also gave them resources with which to engage in cooperative efforts and to support voter registration and other COFO activities in their counties.

As evidenced by Ora Bryant, Unita Blackwell, and Annie Reeves, Mississippi women were actively involved in armed resistance, particularly in defending their homes and families. As in the case of the Reeveses, some families made sure their female children were proficient in the use of weapons to protect themselves from white rapists. One should note, however, that men conducted patrols of the community, its meetings, leadership, and institutions. After 1964, in Mississippi and other places in the South, armed resistance would take on a more institutionalized and paramilitary character compared to the informal household and community self-defense of Freedom Summer. As armed resistance became more institutionalized, it also became more patriarchal, excluding the participation of women.

For the strategy of nonviolence to work in Mississippi, the federal government would have had to intervene with force to provide security against the forces of white supremacist terrorism. The experience of Freedom Summer left movement activists and black Mississippians deeply dissatisfied with the federal government and led to the unsuccessful attempt by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to challenge the credentials of the segregationist Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 National Democratic Convention. After all the murders, bombings, and other forms of terrorism endured by Mississippi blacks and the movement, the failure to unseat the segregationist democrats finally persuaded many activists that they could not rely on white liberals, the Democratic Party, and the federal government to help advance the goals of the freedom struggle.⁸⁸ These activists now understood that the movement and black people in general would have to fall back on themselves for their own liberation.

A staff retreat to evaluate SNCC's direction and program at Waveland, Mississippi, in November 1964 illustrated the change in the practice of SNCC membership on the question of armed self-defense. The retreat was held near the beach on the Mississippi Gulf. Retreat participants became alert when they heard a low-flying plane soaring near their facilities. Later that evening, a vehicle drove near their meeting place and threw a Molotov cocktail on a nearby pier. Suddenly several male

members of SNCC ran from the meeting with arms, caught the nightriders, and only released them after a warning from the young freedom fighters. Lorne Cress, a Chicago native and SNCC staffer in McComb, was surprised by the armed response from her comrades. Up until that day she had believed to belong to a nonviolent organization. She turned to Howard Zinn, a college professor, historian, and advisor to SNCC, and stated, “You have just witnessed the end of the nonviolent movement.”⁹¹

Notes

1. Eric Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 33–70; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 46–50.
2. Dave Dennis, interview by Tom Dent, Lafayette, LA, October 8, 1983, Dent Collection, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 178–79; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 186–88.
3. Dennis, interview by Dent; Dittmer, *Local People*, 118–19.
4. Akinyele Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29.4 (1999): 559–78.
5. Charles Cobb, interview by Tom Dent, Washington, DC, February 11, 1983, Dent Collection, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi.
6. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 38.
7. James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 354–71; Carson, *In Struggle*, 96–98; Burner, *He Shall Lead*, 112–13, 114–24.
8. Carson, *In Struggle*, 77.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 98; Dennis, interview by Dent.
11. Hollis Watkins, interview, in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950's through the 1980's*, ed. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (New York: Bantam, 1990), 182–83; MacArthur Cotton, interview by author, Jackson, MS, July 23, 1994; Hollis Watkins, interview by author, Jackson, MS, July 13, 1994; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 297–98.
12. Black workers, particularly domestics, who had close proximity to the white power structure, often supplied information about what segregationists were planning to do against the movement. This informal network was essential to the security apparatus of local community activists.
13. Cobb, interview by Dent.
14. Cotton, interview by author; Watkins, interview by author.
15. Carson, *In Struggle*, 99–100; Forman, *Black Revolutionaries*, 372–73.
16. “Staff Meeting Minutes,” June 10, 1964, SNCC Papers, box 7, folder 7, archives of Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, GA.
17. Ibid.

224 *Radical History Review*

18. Ibid. E. W. Steptoe was a farmer and local movement leader in Amite County in southwestern Mississippi, known by COFO activists to always carry arms.
19. Ibid.; Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Quill, 1987), 323; Cobb, interview by author.
20. King, *Freedom Song*, 324; Forman, *Black Revolutionaries*, 374–75; Cobb, interview by author.
21. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 263–64.
22. M. S. Handler, "Militancy Grows, CORE Aides Warn: Convention Delegates Fear Negro Will Strike Back," *New York Times*, June 28, 1963.
23. Ibid.; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 296.
24. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 116.
25. Ibid., 298.
26. Ibid.
27. Dennis, interview by Dent; Jack Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs Who Gave Their Lives for Racial Justice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 112–28.
28. "FBI Director Tells Plans for Our State: No Protection Planned for Civil Rights Workers Here," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 11, 1964.
29. Dittmer, *Local People*, 248–51.
30. Ibid., 248–49; Dennis, interview, in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 194; Dave Dennis, interview, in *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South*, ed. Howell Raines (New York: Penguin, 1983), 278.
31. Dennis, interview, in Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 278.
32. Ibid.
33. Dennis, interview by Dent; Dennis, interview, in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 195; Dennis, interview, in Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 277–78; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 298. After Freedom Summer, Dennis returned to Louisiana where he worked closely with the Deacons for Defense and Justice. The association of Dennis with the deacons, considered by many after 1964 to be the armed wing of the Southern movement, further demonstrates the break with nonviolence and embrace of self-defense.
34. McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 255–56.
35. Len Holt, *The Summer That Didn't End: The Story of the Mississippi Civil Rights Project of 1964* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 12.
36. John Herbers, "School Test Nears in Harmony, Miss.," *New York Times*, August 16, 1964.
37. Winson Hudson, interview by Tom Dent, Harmony, MS, August 1, 1979, Dent Collection, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi; Herbers, "School Test Nears in Harmony," 58; Dittmer, *Local People*, 256–57.
38. Hudson, interview by Dent.
39. Ibid.
40. Jerome Smith, interview by Tom Dent, New Orleans, LA, September 23, 1983, Dent Collection, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi.
41. Nicholas Von Hoffman, *Mississippi Notebook* (New York: David White, 1964), 94–95. *Mississippi Notebook* includes photographs by Henry Herr Gill of Harmony blacks defending their community with guns, including Harmony youth participating in an armed watch of the Harmony community center.
42. Ibid.; Smith, interview by Dent.

43. Dovie Hudson, interview, in *I Dream A World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*, ed. Brian Lanker (New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1989), 161.
44. Hudson, interview by Dent.
45. Hudson, interview, in Lanker, *I Dream A World*, 161.
46. Payne, *Light of Freedom*, 279–82.
47. *Ibid.*, 280.
48. Ed Brown, interview by Tom Dent, Atlanta, GA, July 2, 1979, Dent Collection, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi.
49. Watkins, interview by author.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Shadrach Davis, interview by Thomas Frazier and Nathaniel Spurlock, in *Minds Stayed On Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South: an Oral History*, ed. Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center (ROCC) (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), 124.
52. Jodie and Virgie Saffold, interview by author, Old Pilgrims Rest, MS, July 1994; Jodie Saffold, interview by Marques Saffold, Jefferey Blackmon, and Marvin Noel, in ROCC, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 64–65; Vanderbilt and Cora Roby, interview by Marques Saffold, in ROCC, *Mind Stayed on Freedom*, 48, 52–55.
53. Cotton, interview by author; Watkins, interview by author; Payne, *Light of Freedom*, 208–9.
54. Uanita Blackwell, interview by author, Jackson, MS, June 1994.
55. Kwame Ture, interview by author, Decatur, GA, February 1994; Sundiata Acoli, letter to Akinyele Umoja, October 8, 1994, author's personal archives.
56. Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign against the Jews* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 104–7; Charles Young, interview by author, Meridian, MS, October 3, 1994.
57. Young, interview by author.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*; Nelson, *Terror in the Night*, 108–9.
60. Bill Ready, quoted in Nelson, *Terror in Night*, 109.
61. Young, interview by author.
62. Dittmer, *Local People*, 268.
63. *Ibid.*, 266–68, 304.
64. Matthew Nobles, interview by author, McComb, MS, July 18, 1994.
65. “Police Probing Blasts,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 24, 1964; Claude Bryant, interview by author, McComb, MS, July 1994; Dittmer, *Local People*, 267, 306.
66. J. F. Nobles, interview by author, McComb, MS, July 20, 1994.
67. *Ibid.*; Dittmer, *Local People*, 268, 306.
68. The Reeves family name was changed at their request. A “Bad Negro” was a black person who lived in the Jim Crow South and defied the customs of segregation or was allowed the space to coexist with white supremacy without being subject to the humiliation imposed on the majority of blacks in the South. Bad Negroes were often found among those blacks who could muster enough resources within the context of segregation to live an autonomous existence compared to the majority of their brothers and sisters engaged in sharecropping for survival. The majority of the black community often admired and raised these openly defiant blacks to the status of folk heroes. See Allison Davis, Burleigh Gardner, and Mary Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), 2, 249, 534.

226 *Radical History Review*

69. Annie Reeves, interview by author, McComb, MS, July 1994.
70. Ibid.; William Reeves, interview by author, McComb, MS, July 1994; Eddie Williams, interview by author, McComb, MS, July 1994.
71. M. Nobles, interview by author.
72. Watkins, interview by author; J. F. Nobles, interview by author; M. Nobles, interview by author.
73. M. Nobles, interview by author; J. F. Nobles, interview by author.
74. "Federal Inaction Challenged," *Student Voice*, September 23, 1964, 3.
75. Martin, interview by author.
76. J. F. Nobles, interview by author.
77. Ibid.
78. Martin, interview by author.
79. Ibid.; J. F. Nobles, interview by author; Dittmer, *Local People*, 307.
80. Dittmer, *Local People*, 308–10.
81. Ibid., 310–11; "McComb Shaken by Over 20 Bombings," *Student Voice*, November 25, 1964, 1, 4.
82. Dittmer, *Local People*, 310–13; Payne, *Light of Freedom*, 316.
83. Acoli, letter to Umoja.
84. Cobb, interview by author.
85. Martin, interview by author.
86. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 146, 216; Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixties Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 71–72, 74–75. Both Gitlin and Morgan acknowledge the existence of armed resistance in Southern black communities, but in discussing the transformation of SNCC, they offer Northern black spokesman Malcolm X, progressive Third World leaders, or reactions to the violence of white Southerners as significant factors influencing the organization's shift toward armed resistance.
87. Moses, interview by author.
88. Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), 111; Forman, *Black Revolutionaries*, 386–96.
89. Lorne Cress, interview by author, Jackson, MS, June 18, 1994; James Garret, interview by author, Jackson, MS, June 18, 1994; Cobb, interview by author.

