LEIDEN UNIVERSITY
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Master Thesis in History: Political Culture and National Identities

The Deacons for Defense and Justice:
Revolutionary Force or Defensive Necessity?

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22 April 2018
Academic Year 2017/2018

Cover Picture from: Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense and Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), Courtesy Ronnie Moore Collection, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans.

"Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals."

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Nobel Lecture*, 11 December 1964

"Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone, but if someone puts his hands on you, send him to the cemetery."

Malcolm X, *Message to the Grass Roots*, 10 November 1963

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List of Abbreviations

BCVL	Bogalusa Civic and Voters League
BPP	Black Panther Party
CCBP	Coordinating Council for Black Power
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
DDJ	Deacons for Defense and Justice
FDDJ	Friends of the Deacons for Defense and Justice
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NUL	National Urban League
OBP	Organization for Black Power
RAM	Revolutionary Action Movement
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Introduction

In June 1965, US House Representative Jimmy Morrison of Louisiana's 6th district received a letter from a concerned citizen who urgently requested the Justice Department to look into the matter of the "Deacons for Defense" in Bogalusa, Louisiana. The letter was written by a Louisianan woman who insisted this newly organized "bunch of idiotic Negros" to be thoroughly investigated, since they were supposedly in the possession of machine guns and hand grenades.[1] Little did the woman who wrote the letter know that the FBI had already been investigating this so-called defense group since their establishment. In November 1964, a group of black men met at a local church in the small paper-mill town of Jonesboro, Louisiana, to discuss how to approach attacks from the local Ku Klux Klan. In the wake of several threatening events, the men concluded that the only way to protect the black community against vicious attacks was to return fire. In order to defend the black community, the men decided to form an organization for protection, especially for those advocating civil rights. The most important aspect of their organization was the carrying of weapons for self-defense. No member would be allowed to use violence as an instigator or for retaliation, but in case of an attack, the Deacons would not hesitate to use their guns. Self-defense instantly became the pillar of "The Deacons for Defense and Justice." In the era of the African American struggle for civil rights, news of a group of united black men carrying guns spread fear among many, and affected the already stirring debate on nonviolence versus self-defense.

In 1964, the national civil right movement was experiencing its apex. Highly publicized protests such as the march on Birmingham demonstrated the continuing racial injustice in the Deep South. Even after Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the process of integration was left up to state legislators, who often refused to enforce the act on a local scale. The nonviolent initiatives such as in Birmingham were aimed at confronting such injustices. These initiatives are often illustrated as crucial turning points in American history, and display the indisputable importance of the nonviolent movement, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. most beautifully characterized it. The nonviolent tactics that dominated the movement between 1955 and 1965 proved to be quite innovative for the black community. Large groups of nonviolent black protesters caused a lot of stirring between 1955 and 1965. Unsurprisingly, the entry of the slogan "Black Power" into the civil rights movement and the increase in popularity of ideologies of black self-defense in 1965 produced even more commotion. Many scholars have depicted 1965 and the (re)invention of "Black Power" in the movement as a considerable shift between nonviolent activism and self-defensive activism. The creation of the Deacons for Defense and Justice is often aligned with the increase in black militancy and black self-defense. Most black activist organizations that were formed in alliance with the ideas of black self-determination were portrayed as threatening and violent by the media in the 60s and 70s. Still today, activists and organizations affiliated with the ideology of Black Power are portrayed as the violent counterparts of the nonviolent movement, the instigators of the beginning of the end of the civil rights movement. Although most scholars still adhere to this narrative, some are

[1] "Urgent Letter, Congressional Liaison Office, Louisiana," 23 June 1965. In *Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts. Subject: Deacons for Defense and Justice*, File number HQ 157-2466, Federal Bureau of Investigation (hereinafter referred to as the FBI Files).

expanding their research and rediscovering narratives, and the idea of a sharp shift between a "nonviolent" era before 1965 and a "violent" era after 1965 is more often contested. Furthermore, the exact roles that organizations such as the Deacons played in the civil rights movement's change from nonviolence to self-defense are disputable.[2]

The purpose of this study is to determine what role the paramilitary Deacons played in the nation-wide repositioning of black self-defense as opposed to nonviolent activism in the late 1960s. Scholars who investigated the emergence of Black Power and the increase in black militancy during the 1960s sometimes mention the Deacons as an essential factor, whereas others simply describe the group as a hoax. These differing stances on the topic show that more research of the Deacons is of great importance. Therefore, the question this research will answer is what role the Deacons for Defense and Justice played in the development of nonviolent disobedience and self-defensive activism between 1964 and 1968. In order to determine the significance of the Deacons in the late 1960s' civil rights movement, especially in respect to the emergence of black self-defense and Black Power, it is essential to analyze a variety of aspects that were substantial for the creation, the existence, and the eventual fading of the group.

The first aspect this research will cover is the establishment of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Created in Jonesboro and certified by the State of Louisiana, the Deacons were an official Louisiana corporation. However, the organization did not leave many documented recordings to indicate the organizational structure and ideological intentions. The only initial document, written by the men who established the Deacons in November 1964, is the official charter of the group. Accounts from other historians and news-stories will be used alongside the official charter to answer how the creation of the Deacons fitted into the development from black submission to black self-determination in the South. After the Deacons were created, the organization got involved in several events of considerable importance for the civil rights struggle in the Deep South. Despite their involvement with nonviolent organizations such as the Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Deacons sparked a nation-wide response by vocally expressing their commitment to self-defense and their use of guns. The group's local approach and the leaders' public appearances determined the reputation of the group, which is of great importance for a coherent analyses of the Deacons' role within the southern civil rights movement. Therefore, the second chapter will cover how Deacon members and leaders influenced a changing sentiment in black activist thought. The third and final substantial aspect of this research is the eventual decline of the group. An official discontinuation of the Deacons for Defense was never initiated, but several sources indicate that the Deacons were discontinued before the 1970s commenced. It is crucial to look into the remarkably rapid fading of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Especially because theories of black self-defense and black self-determination rapidly increased in popularity and the number of black militant organizations grew substantially during the late 1960s. Therefore, the final question to answer in order to determine the role of the Deacons is

[2] "Deacons for Defense and Justice, also known as "The Deacons", Charles Sims, Spokesman, Racial Matters." Unknown Date, FBI Files; Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988).

why the self-defensive organization faded away, despite the increasingly important role for black self-defense within the civil rights movement.[3]

By shedding new light on the establishment and the activities of the Deacons, motivations and tactics for the southern struggle for African American equality will be reassessed. The official FBI files on the Deacons for Defense and Justice will serve as the primary source and the backbone for these insights. These recently published files covering the activity of the Deacons for Defense confirm a spread of fear among the American federal government. The Bureau increased investigation into black activists who were possibly influenced by black nationalist-sentiments and who were likely to pose a problem for the US government. The most notorious and sometimes illegal FBI program targeting "black extremists" was the Counterintelligence Program, or COINTELPRO, in which the Deacons shortly appear. Although the COINTELPRO files do not serve the greater potential of answering the research question, they will be used as an indicator of federal concern.[4] The files on the Deacons, dated between 1964 and 1970, contain several insightful attachments, such as letters from concerned white citizens and interviews with former Deacon-members. However, the flaws of this primary source should be taken into consideration. The files are incomplete, they are not chronologically arranged, they are often unreadable due to erased ink, and most importantly; they consist of biased accounts written by FBI agents. Yet although it cannot be said that they paint a complete picture of the Deacons, they do offer a crucial inside view. Besides the FBI files, several articles from regional and national newspapers will serve as indicators for the media attention the Deacons received in the late 1960s. These articles display the distribution of information and the accuracy of the portrayed information through the eyes of local and national media platforms. Finally, the personal accounts achieved by historian Lance Hill in his descriptive and elaborate work on the Deacons will serve as an important source of information where other sources are lacking. An important example of these accounts is an interview with a former member of the Deacons, which Hill conducted in person. A variety of secondary literature will help to structure the thesis into a historically structured research.

Historiography

The first books on the civil rights movement, written in the 1960s and early 1970s, reflect analyses of how the civil rights movement was perceived at the time of its peak. Historians from the 1960s and 70s have written about the civil rights movement at a time when a *grand narrative* of the movement had taken hold in popular discourse, which divides the movement into two streams, the nonviolent era and the Black Power era. The grand narrative revolves around the themes of American idealism, racial struggle and equality, and positions the Black Power era as a disruption of the nonviolent movement. Most historians agree that the civil rights movement began in the mid-1950s. Originating from the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling against racial segregation in 1964's *Brown v. Board of Education* and by the Montgomery Bus

[3] Roy Reed, "Armed Dixie Negro League is Spreading. 50 Chapters now in 3 States," *Des Moines Sunday Register*, 6 June 1965, General Section; "Negro 'Deacons' Claim They Have Machine Guns, Grenades for 'War." *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 1965, in FBI Files.

[4] "Freedom of Information and Privacy Act," Unknown Date, Subject: *Counterintelligence Program, Internal Security, Disruption of Hate Group*, File number HQ 157-9-33, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Boycott of 1955-1956, when fifty thousand black citizens eventually ended segregated transport. The events in Montgomery kicked off a decade of collective action, inspired by the charismatic leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. The movement consisted of a powerful moral vision of nonviolent direct action and the goal of an interracial democracy. From Montgomery the grand narrative moves forward by a series of events, among which the segregation of Central High School in Little Rock, the lunch counter sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington and King's "I have a dream" speech, and the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery. The wave of protests from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s secured several key legislative victories, most importantly the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In conclusion, the civil rights movement and the governmental response succeeded in abolishing legal segregation and granting citizenship rights to African Americans.[5]

However, the grand narrative indicates that 1965 marked the year when the civil rights movement started to unravel with the emergence of militant black nationalist thought, which many scholars have defined as the legacy of the in 1965 assassinated Malcolm X. The Black Power era brought an end to the nonviolent civil disobedient actions and paved the way for a period of social instability and violence. This grand narrative of the civil rights movement is common among historians since the late 1960s. Historian Anna Kosof ended her 1989 leading study on the civil rights movement with Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, concluding that after these events the "moderate wing of the civil rights movement," represented by Martin Luther King, gave way to young militants and their violent ways. According to her "the late sixties saw a different kind of civil rights movement."[6] Scholars Brian Ward and Tony Badger particularly define the "classic southern civil rights era" as 1955-1965 in their elaborate study on King from 1996. The era that followed was a violent and badly organized one.[7] In his classic study of the civil rights movement (2008), Harvard Sitkoff argues that the year 1965, and the Watts riots in particular, was the turning point during which the era of nonviolence ended and "the age of Malcolm X's angry heirs began," and Kathryn Nastrom explains that the Black Power era serves as a "tragic epilogue" to the grand narrative, lacking the moral clarity of the

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[5] Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-14; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10-11; Brian Ward, "Forgotten Wails and Master Narratives: Media, Culture, and Memories of the Modern African American Freedom Struggle", in Ward, ed., *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 8-10; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 3, 391, 413; and Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *The Journal of American His*tory 75 (December 1988), 786-811; Joyce M. Bell, *The Black Power Movement and American Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, June 2014).

[6] Anna Kosof, *The Civil Rights Movement and its Legacy* (London: Franklin Watts, 1989), 66.

[7] William T. Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 86; Brian Ward and Tony Badger, *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 4.

earlier movement and without its efficacy.[8] The grand narrative has maintained that nonviolence shaped and directed the movement until roughly 1965, when the civil rights struggle was thrown off course by frustration, impatience, disillusionment, combativeness and turned violent. Under this paradigm, a clear duality exists between the pre-1965 nonviolent movement and the post-1965 violent movement.

Recently, scholars have recovered a tradition of Black Nationalism and armed self-defense that began in the late 1960s.[9] According to historian Christopher B. Strain, many accounts of the civil rights movement have tended to dichotomize any discussion of the struggle for black equality in terms of violence and nonviolence. Questions about the role of armed resistance in the civil rights movement are often at the center of movement studies. Scholarly interests have shifted over time, raising new questions regarding the need for self-defense, the role of white supremacy, and the black identity. Strain explains that it is important to examine the mindset of black Americans employing self-defense during the late 1950s and 1960s – before the right to armed protection became an assumption by those encouraged by the rhetoric of Black Power.[10] Furthermore, in his detailed study on the Mississippi Freedom Struggle, historian Charles Payne concludes that "very little attention has been paid to the possibility that the success of the movement in the rural South owes something to the attitude of local people toward self-defense."[11] The importance of local black communities and their attitudes towards a strategy of self-defense has often been underestimated, especially in the rural South. Former field secretary for the SNCC and journalist Charles E. Cobb, Jr. concluded in his 2014 book on the vital link between armed resistance and the survival and liberation of black communities that the principled practice of self-defense merged with the civil rights movements' tactics and strategies of nonviolence in the South. He argues that this confluence between armed self-defense and nonviolent civil disobedience "has often been oversimplified as a clash between violent and nonviolent ideas and approaches to civil rights struggle." But the former SNCC field secretary stresses how this oversimplification ignores the more complex tensions between

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[8] Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2008), 185; Kathryn Nastrom, "Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement and Writing of Civil Rights History", *The Journal of Southern History* 74, No. 2 (May, 2008), 333.

[9] William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Akinyele Umoja, "Eye for an Eye: The Role of Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement." (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1996); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

[10] Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire. Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 93, 97, 153, 214; Benjamin Muse, *The American Negro Revolution: From Nonviolence to Black Power, 1963-1967* (Fort Lee: Lyle Stuart, 1968), 242.

[11] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom,* 205.

the priorities of local black communities and the priorities of national civil rights organizations and activists.[12]

An example of complex tensions between local black communities and national organizations is displayed throughout the story of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. A rather small and often forgotten self-defensive organization, the Deacons present a story of rural black communities and their attitudes toward the local civil rights struggle. The emergence of the Deacons in 1964-65, was soon overshadowed by Black Power nationalists such as the Black Panther Party, which is still noticeable in Deacon historiography. The historiographical debate on the Deacons for Defense and Justice lacks the extensive scope into the complexity of self-defense versus nonviolence, especially in comparison to other self-defensive organizations that erupted in the late 1960's. Nevertheless, several recent studies have provided us with extensive research on the Louisiana-originated Deacons. Historian Lance Hill's principal research on the creation and the impact of the Deacons for Defense contains an impressive amount of insights and places the organization into the wider scope of the national civil rights movement. Especially the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons played an important role, according to Hill. The African American author, who has been active in civil rights activism himself, has interviewed several of the former members of the Deacons and speaks of the organization with great adoration. He argues that the Deacons inspired pride in the community and had "proved to be a natural instrument for building community feeling and nourishing the Negro identity."

Historians who wrote on the Deacons in an earlier stage, for example Benjamin Muse in his 1968 book on *The American Negro Revolution*, do not include the Deacons as a positive aspect of the civil rights movement. Muse emphasizes that although Deacons patrolled the headquarters of CORE in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, CORE officials and other civil-rights leaders avoided identification with the group, their methods were not endorsed.[13] Muse argues that the Deacons' philosophy was a harbinger of "a large element of impatient, sullen Negroes […] who were united only by a common infection with the thing called Black Power." Such "sullen negroes" met here and there with extremist groups or simply on the ghetto street and were mostly unorganized.[14] Muse's book from 1968 was written in the heyday of the Black Power era, and reflects the author's personal feelings of aversion at the time. His work functions as a valuable source for learning about the perception of the Deacons and the Black Power era at the time. In other earlier works on self-defense in black activism, the Deacons are barely mentioned. Clayborne Carson's book on the SNCC *In Struggle*, originated from 1981, only quickly mentions the Deacons once as "a Louisiana based defense group."[15] The same is true for historian Adam Fairclough's 1987 book on the SNCC and Martin Luther King, Jr.[16]

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[12] Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed. How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Duke University Press, June 2014), 122-123.

[13] Muse, *The American Negro Revolution,* 166.

[14] Idem, 233, 277.

[15] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 164.

[16] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.* (University of Georgia Press, 1987).

Over time however, historians tended to pay more attention to the Deacons while writing on self-defense. Even those who previously inclined to do so. For example, in Fairclough's more recent study on the civil rights movement in Louisiana, he extensively covers the Deacons' role in the Louisianan struggle. He concludes his coverage of the Deacons by stating that the Bogalusa movement represented a new level of black militancy. However, Fairclough argues the Deacons turned out to be a "gigantic hoax", far less important than seemed at first. Contrary to exaggerated press reports, the Deacons never grew into a large, statewide organization, Fairclough emphasizes.[17] Historian Simon Wendt is also more critical of the importance of the Deacons in his 2007 book on armed resistance in the civil rights struggle. He argues that the Deacons did *not* assume organizational breadth and political influence, like Lance Hill claims in his work. "But", recalls Wendt, "neither was the defense organization what Adam Fairclough has called a 'gigantic hoax'," because potentially exaggerated numbers and the failure to establish a nation-wide organization do not diminish the significance of the Deacons.[18] Historians Charles Payne and Christopher Strain have both separately argued that it is crucial to examine African American self-defense in the 1960s while paying great attention to the role and attitude of local people toward armed resistance. Perhaps most important for this study will be to research the determination of the rural southern black communities in Louisiana to obtain their autonomy over their own lives, and in what way the Deacons represented this determination by self-defensive organizing. [19]

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[17] Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (University of Georgia Press, 1999), 3.

[18] Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun. Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights (*University Press of Florida, 2007), 93-94.

[19] Payne, *I've Got The Light,* 205; Strain, *Pure Fire,* 1-7.

1 'By any and all honorable and legal means'

1964 was a year of great importance for the African American civil rights movement in the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was celebrated as a great success of the nonviolent strategy, led by the reverent Martin Luther King, Jr. However, as the year proceeded, the results of the Civil Rights Act proved to be disappointing throughout the South. National media attention for dramatic events such as the bloody protests in Selma, displayed to the nation how southern segregation was kept in place through intimidation and violence. In many other rural southern areas segregation remained unchanged as well. Until local black communities decided to take matters into their own hands. The events leading up to the creation of the Deacons in 1964 are crucial for understanding how the organization fitted into the national changes of nonviolent activism and self-defense.

The Freedom Summer

In June of 1964, CORE launched a new civil rights campaign in the Deep South. CORE dubbed the new campaign the *Freedom Summer,* named after the famous 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders who rode interstate buses to challenge segregation. After the success of nonviolent disobedient actions, such as the Montgomery bus-boycott, CORE was determined to challenge southern segregation head on, starting with voter disenfranchisement. In an attempt to register as many African American voters as possible, over a thousand out-of-state volunteers participated in the Freedom Summer alongside thousands of black Mississippians and Louisianans. When the Freedom Summer was launched in 1964, the national consensus of the five most influential civil rights organizations; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), The National Urban League (NUL), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), CORE, and SNCC, was that voter registration was the primary need in the South and should be the primary focus of civil rights campaigns. All five organizations agreed on the importance of nonviolent civil disobedience as a means to challenge segregation, and all the organizations nationally voiced their support of the non-violent approach.[20]

The strategy of nonviolent direct action in the South was relatively new and widely adopted by the national civil rights movement. Nonviolent actions brought young people into an older tradition of community organizing. As the organizations grew, the nonviolent direct actions rapidly moved SNCC and CORE into grassroots efforts to expand black voter registration throughout the South. However, grassroots organizations mostly consisted of northern young people who were willing to adapt the ideology of nonviolence as a way of life. For older generations of black southerners, this ideology was more difficult to adapt. As the Kennedy administration continued to press student activists to abandon direct-action protests and work on voter registration instead, segregation in the Deep South barely changed in the first years of the 1960s. Furthermore, white southerners responded with anger to the expanding of civil rights organizations throughout the South. [21]

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[20] Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff*, 100-105.

[21] Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff,* 89-95, 98, 102, 145-149; Hill, *The Deacons*, 212-219, 261-263; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 64-66; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 32-37; Laura Visser-Maessen, "A Lot of Leaders? Robert

White vigilante violence showed itself through kidnappings, assassinations and bombings of Freedom Summer activists and local blacks associated with the movement. The region's Ku Klux Klan membership rose as civil rights activism increased. Hooded white men burned crosses throughout the states to intimidate those who dared to challenge the white-power structure. [22] Throughout the South, Klan members openly advocated to keep segregation in place. Klan rallies were organized more often, during which Klan leaders declared that "the nigger is not a human being", and should not be treated as such.[23] Hidden under white ropes, local racists terrorized the black neighborhoods. Most of the southern white response to the Freedom Summer consisted of fear, hypocrisy and anger, which was characterized by blaming Northern volunteers as outside agitators for increasing public discontent and escalating protests.[24] That sentiment among white southerners did not only exist in rural communities. Many high-ranking state –and federal officials publicly voiced their discontent with black activists, most vocally being FBI director Edgar J. Hoover, who mistrusted the civil rights movement for being too communist. As the civil rights movement progressed in the 1960s, Hoover targeted activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party *and* the Deacons for Defense and Justice for investigation through COINTELPRO. [25] The federal government did not provide any protection for the Freedom Summer activists in Mississippi and Louisiana in 1964.

A few days after the Freedom Summer was launched, the crucial consequences of white vigilante violence were revealed when Klansmen in Philadelphia, Mississippi murdered three CORE activists. The case, known as the *Mississippi Burning murders*, caused national outrage and media coverage. Although the effect the Klan's terror had on the daily lives of black southerners was nationally known, the murders stood out because of the national attention for the Freedom Summer. Especially when official released that two of the murdered men were white volunteers from the North. Promoting civil rights in the South was not only dangerous to blacks; white volunteers were not spared by the Klan's terror-tactics either. The media attention forced Hoover into an extensive investigation, and pressured the federal government into sending the National Guard for a search-operation. The bodies of the three men were found, buried in an old dam. Over twenty white local Mississippians were initially suspected of murder, one of whom was the County Sheriff. But local officials hindered the prosecution and

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Parris Moses, SNCC, and Leadership in the Production of Social Change during the American Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1965." (Ph.D. dissertation, Leiden University, 2013), 4-15.

[22] Roy Reed, "Moderates Fail to Aid Bogalusa," *New York Times*, 11 July 1965, 46; Strain, *Pure Fire,* 108; "Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 28 Feb. 2011, Web. 10 January 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/20110228/ku-klux-klan-history-racism#murdered-by-the-klan>.

[23] Roy Reed, "Moderates Fail to Aid Bogalusa," *New York Times*, 11 July 1965, 46.

[24] Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff*, 112.

[25] The so-called "big five" consisted of: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), The National Urban League, The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), from: M.S. Handler, "The Big Five in Civil Rights", *The New York Times*, 24 July 1966; Wendt*, The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 66; Strain*, Pure Fire*, 97; *Counterintelligence Program, Internal Security, Disruption of Hate Group* Files, File number HQ 157-9-33, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

refused to prosecute any of the men for murder. During the search for the three men, the bodies of eight other black Mississippians were found, including the body of a fourteen-year-old boy.[26]

The murdered activists, the discovery of several other bodies, and the involvement of local authorities represented a common, distressing phenomenon throughout the Deep South. White southerners killing black southerners was common, without consequences and often even involved state officials. In most cases no one was arrested, let alone convicted, and the daily threat of discrimination and violent oppression proceeded. In the development of the Mississippi Burning murders, justice never came. However, the outrage over the murders caused a lot of pressure on the Johnson administration to act on civil rights. The media pressure eventually played a motivating role for the Johnson administration to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act, which was signed in presence of Martin Luther King, Jr., was seen as a great win for black civil rights, and illegalized segregation and discrimination throughout the country.[27] At the same time, the outrage over the murders and the unwillingness of the federal government to provide protection increased a new regional sentiment among the black population in the South. Black southern men and women were fed up with injustice and fear. The murders fueled the need for protection and self-defense.

The Jonesboro Deacons

CORE's Freedom Summer project targeted small rural towns in Mississippi and Louisiana, in an effort to win over the minds of local black communities for the cause of integration. Jonesboro was one of those towns. A small paper mill town, Jonesboro was located in the Northern area of Jackson Parish, Louisiana. The town had a population of approximately four thousand, one third of which was black. The black neighborhood in Jonesboro; "The Quarters", covered a substantial part of the town. In Jonesboro, African Americans were used to struggling with white supremacy and racism, and the local Klan chapter was substantial. When CORE arrived, the increase in threatening attacks by the local Ku Klux Klan was no different from any other southern town. While CORE was organizing more anti-segregation protests, tensions between the white and black neighborhood enlarged. It was not unusual for local Klansmen to form a caravan of cars and drive through town in white hoods and ropes to taunt and scare the black population. Anti-segregation picket-lines and sit-ins were violently disrupted by groups of white aggressors who relentlessly targeted the protesters, even women and children.[28] And consequently, none of the white assaulters were ever punished for their deeds by local law enforcement. With CORE coming to Jonesboro, white harassment accumulated and the activists soon realized that their objectives of reducing voter disenfranchisement might not be achieved. In this town, like in many others, the black population was not able to register to vote, simply because that would be a life-threatening activity. CORE's nonviolent voter registration project

[26] Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 60-68; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 90-97.

[27] Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Ray Price was one among the three men actually convicted of contributing to the murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, from: Hill, *The Deacons,* 31-36; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun,* 45-48.

[28] Roy Reed, "White Man is Shot by Negro in Clash in Bogalusa, La.," *New York Times*, July 11, 1965, 46.

only seemed to target a small aspect of the discrimination in southern towns such as Jonesboro, where the black population faced harassment and feared life threatening attacks every day.[29]

Many southern blacks, especially in rural communities, felt alone and isolated. There really was no substantive white support for the black freedom struggle. Although the white-supremacist system of the old South was weakening because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was still in place. However, black southerners were increasingly unwilling to submit to white supremacy, socially or politically. The risk of white violence was already in the lives of many, and rural black communities had learned how to minimize the risk of white terror long before the existence of organizations such as CORE. Therefore, in the rural South, nonviolent direct-action was not popular among the rural black community. When CORE got involved in the Deep South, the organization encountered the reality of white vigilante violence. The violent encounters with vigilante groups such as the Klan, and the unwillingness of the local law enforcement to provide protection for black activists displayed a crucial limitation of the nonviolent approach in practice and in idea. A nonviolent approach would not have the same results in rural Klan-dominated areas as it had in the southern cities.[30]

The increase in violent attacks after CORE's arrival initiated several prominent black citizens of Jonesboro to collectively discuss ways of protection. One of the men was local high school teacher Frederick Douglas Fitzpatrick, who proposed the idea of a black auxiliary police unit that would be officially sanctioned, providing legitimacy and respect in Jonesboro. This unit would help the regular police forces to monitor Klan-activity in the Quarters. Another man, most vocal, was father of three and war veteran Earnest Thomas. Thomas argued a police unit would not have enough autonomy and legitimacy to make a difference for the black community and proposed to organize an unofficial defense group instead. However, everyone ultimately supported the idea of a black police unit and the black community was pleasantly surprised when the local authorities permitted the formation of the police squad. Several local citizens were appointed to join the unit by the summer of 1964, including Fitzpatrick. The police officers patrolled the Quarters and the residents of Freedom Summer activists, and observed the movements of the KKK.[31]

As the summer of 1964 was proceeding, the community observed in frustration how the black police unit was used as a tool for the town's white power structure to neutralize civil rights protests. On July 29, 1964, a group of young CORE protesters and local citizens entered a segregated cafeteria in downtown Jonesboro. Encouraged by the Civil Rights Act, the group of black protesters demanded to be served, but the restaurant owner refused. After a short standoff, several black officers were sent to the scene and ordered the black protesters to leave. The police department made convenient use of the black unit to break up civil rights protest in an effort to control the movement. Thomas would later recall; "They were looking for some

[29] Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun,* 74; Hill, *The Deacons,* 36.

[30] Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff,* 89, 122; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 74-76.

[31] Hill, *The Deacons*, 36-37; Strain, *Pure Fire*, 90-97.

black policemen to do their dirty work".[32] Police actions such as in the café happened again at multiple other occasions that week. Black protesters who imposed an inconvenience for the local white authorities were of inconsequential meaning to those white authorities, and when such an inconvenience occurred, the equally unimportant black police unit was sent in to shut down the commotion. Local officials did not provide any protection to civil rights activists, but instead were engaging in the oppression of those who advocated black civil rights. Even by using the black police unit to dismantle local activists who tried to enforce the Civil Rights Act.[33]

As July came to an end, one event changed the future of Jonesboro. On a hot summer evening, the electricity to the Quarters of town was suddenly shut off and dozens of men dressed in white hoods and cloaks drove through the black neighborhood. In front of the Klan-convoy was the police car of the local deputy sheriff, who personally escorted the caravan through the Quarters. While yelling racist taunts, the hooded men tossed pamphlets onto the streets, warning blacks to stay away from CORE and the civil rights movement.[34] The intention of this night of terror was to intimidate the black community into submission to the white power structure of segregation. The Klansmen intended to scare locals from engaging in any form of civil rights activism. Instead, this moment of Klan-terror became a crucial turning-point, by which Klansmen provoked the black community and instigated a response they never expected.[35]

It had only been one month since CORE launched the Freedom Summer, and white terror soared throughout Mississippi and Louisiana. But the black community of Jonesboro was tired of being subjected to vigilante Klan-violence and police injustice. Within several days of the Klan's night of terror, a group of approximately twenty black men, many of whom were members of the black police unit, gathered again. This time to discuss forming a group *besides* the black police squad, to defend the Quarters from white attacks. The most pressing item on the minds of the men was to arrange armed patrols around the neighborhood. Fitzgerald and Thomas now both called for an armed self-defensive squad besides the police unit. Thomas raised the issue that black men did not just want to protect their families, but that they were sick and tired of the white myths of black male powerlessness. The relationship between non-violence, violence, and black manhood in the civil rights struggle has often been examined. According to Christopher B. Strain, the definition of what it meant to be a man implied an obligation to defend black women and children against racist attacks. This definition challenged the movement's non-violent strategy of submission, and is part of the reason why the non-violent protests failed to attract large numbers of black men. Often African American men did

[32]Earnest Thomas. Interview by Lance Hill, San Mateo, Calif., by telephone, tape recording and notes, 6, 20 February 1993, from: Hill, *The Deacons*, 33;

[33] Hill, *The Deacons*, 33; 36-37; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 74-77.

[34] Hill*, The Deacons*, 36-37.

[35] Ibidem; "Deacons for Defense and Justice," 24 February 1965, FBI Files.

not participate, because they worried they would not be able to restrain from defending women or children being attacked.[36]

In Jonesboro, a group of black men decided to contradict the national civil rights movement's strategy of strict nonviolence. An armed defensive squad was formed that sharpened security measures and escorted CORE workers while registering voters. At the same time, the black police unit continued to patrol the Quarters. When white harassers drove into the black neighborhood, the armed men drove them out. Although single volunteers had carried out these activities before, the security was now better organized. When the Jonesboro Deputy Chief decided to dismantle the black police unit in October 1965, the black community was startled at first, but soon turned to the newly created group of armed men for protection. During another meeting on a cold Tuesday night in November, members of the black community discussed the extension of the self-defense group, now that the black police unit was discontinued. Before the dismantling of the black police unit, the defensive group had simply been an extra patrolling security measure. However, on that evening, the group of men decided to become its own movement, not a secret auxiliary to protect the nonviolent movement. The defense group and the veterans of the black police unit coalesced into one organization committed to armed self-defense; the Deacons for Defense and Justice. An informant would later tell the FBI that the primary catalyst for the creation of the Deacons was the town government's decision to disband the black police unit.[37]

By the end of November 1964, the Deacons for Defense and Justice were patrolling through Jonesboro on a regular basis. Chosen as the Deacons' president was local resident Percy Lee Bradford, whereas Earnest Thomas filled the position of vice president. Kirkpatrick remained an important member and spokesperson. Equipped with walkie-talkies and citizen band radios, armed men guarded the Quarters. The equipment served to monitor Klan action, and gave the Deacons the advantage of preparing for potential assaults. The group was ready to defend the black community and would return fire if necessary. The black southern men who were forced to defend activists by means of armed resistance, were proud of their ability to protect themselves and the community. They regarded armed resistance as an assertion of black manhood.

More Than a Protective Squad

The Deacons started off as quite a clandestine organization. Jonesboro locals, state CORE members, and law officials were aware of their existence, but the group remained relatively anonymous. According to Lance Hill, they regarded themselves as merely the defensive arm of public civil rights organizations such as CORE. The best way to protect their membership was to adhere to secrecy.[38] However, it did not take long for the FBI to notice the organization in

[36] Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff,* 108; Hill, *The Deacons,* 39; Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun,* 67; Simon Wendt, "'They Finally Found Out that We Really Are Men': Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era," *Gender & History* 19, No. 3. (November 2007), 543-564.

[37] "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc. Jonesboro, Louisiana," Date Unknown, FBI Files; Hill*, The Deacons,* 40-41, 45.

[38] "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc. Jonesboro, Louisiana," 25 March 1965, FBI Files; Hill*, The Deacons,* 55-56.

early January of 1965. On January 6, the first message concerning the Deacons for Defense and Justice was sent to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover from the New Orleans office. New Orleans agents informed the director about the creation of an organization that "has for its purposes much the same as those of CORE […], but that captioned organization is more militant than CORE and that it would be more inclined to use violence in dealing with any violent opposition encountered in Civil Rights Matters." The day before the first message was sent to the FBI, Percy Lee Bradford, president of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, cooperated with FBI officials and agreed to an interview about the intentions of the armed squad. It appears he was willing to provide important information to the FBI, as he brought up names of individuals who were leading the Deacons, gave an estimation on the number of members, and informed the officials about the equipment that was being used. During the interview, Bradford emphasized the DDJ's purpose to be much the same as those of CORE, "except its members would, if attacked, defend themselves by use of force". [39] Furthermore, he expressed the hope that the Deacons would not be necessary for long. He even believed that if things would change and the black community would be safe, the Deacons would be able to disband within a couple of years.

Bradford's interview on January 5 was the first time the Deacons' self-defensive philosophy was explained by a member. Significantly, the Deacons did not have any written statement of purpose expressing their goals and strategy yet. At this point, the organization was simply created through oral agreement between local black men, called into existence through the necessity of protection against threat. As Hill puts it: "The KKK had left little time to contemplate organizational philosophy."[40] During the interview, Bradford was clearly cautious with his explanation of the Deacons' strategy. He emphasized the similarities between CORE's strategy of nonviolence and the Deacons' loyalty towards the nonviolent approach. He repeatedly assured the officials the organization was "a *non-violent* Negro movement." But despite the continuing emphasis on the similarities between the approaches of CORE and the Deacons, the differences were more striking and clearly of more interest to the federal agents who reported the interview. Behind every sentence that described Bradford emphasizing the Deacons' similarities to CORE and the inherited belief in nonviolence, the possible use of armed self-defense was highlighted. Bradford was clearly struggling as he tried to distinguish the Deacons from vigilante organizations, while he also attempted to emphasize the importance of self-defensive action. The president of the brand-new Deacons tried to merge the philosophy of self-defense with the strategy of nonviolence. A difficult reconciliation, which turned out to be difficult throughout the national civil rights movement after 1964. Bradford was trying to reassure the agents of a non-threatening inheritance, but the Bureau was not convinced after his explanation. Upon reading the interview, the FBI headquarters ordered more intensive research into the Deacons' members, ideology and most importantly, the organization's activities.[41]

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[39] Hill, *The Deacons,* 53; "SAC New Orleans to Director", 6 January 1965, FBI Files; "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Percy Lee Bradford, President," 6 January 1964, FBI Files.

[40] Hill, *The Deacons,* 54

[41] Ibidem; "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Percy Lee Bradford, President," 6 January 1964, FBI Files.

An official charter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice was created on March 5, 1965. The charter was written by the Deacons' Board of Members, which consisted of Bradford as the president and Thomas as vice-president, besides secretary Charlie White, treasurer Cosetta Jackson, and agent Elmo Jacobs.[42] On March 9, the charter was officially certified by the Secretary of State of the state of Louisiana. The charter declared that all future chapters would have to be channeled into the headquarters in Jonesboro. The main purposes of the new organization were described as educating local citizens of the United States and especially minority groups in (1) the principals of the republican form of government and the democratic way of life, (2) the provisions of the constitutional laws of the United States and the State of Louisiana, (3) the use, value and purpose of the ballot, and (4) the value of economic security.[43] But more importantly, the charter of the Deacons read that:

> This corporation has for its further purpose, and is dedicated to, the defense of the civil rights, property rights and personal rights […] and will **defend** said rights **by any and all** honorable and legal **means** to the end that justice may be obtained.[44]

In the official charter, the objective of the Deacons for Defense and Justice is described as the dedication to the proposition of protecting the rights granted by appropriate law to all Citizens of the United States of America, implicitly appealing to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Board of Members avoided the term self-defense while writing the official charter, just like it deliberately never mentioned the use of weapons as a means of defense. It is, however, implied that the civil, -property and –personal rights of the local community should be defended through any means necessary, including the use of arms. The charter fits into the narrative of the mainstream civil rights movement and Bradford's efforts to reconcile armed resistance with nonviolence. The Board of Members decided to describe this reconciliation of two opposite strategies in an implicit manner, by not explicitly using the words armed self-defense. The explanation for the implicit language is self-evident. Many civil rights leaders criticized armed self-defense, while most of the national organizations supported nonviolent direct action. King and the nonviolent leaders feared that defensive action would be too close to aggressive violence. Anyhow, African Americans arming themselves had to be cautious, especially in relation to the national civil rights movement. Any form of aggression against white citizens or government officials posed the risk of alienating (white) allies of the movement, which was the biggest fear of organizations such as King's SCLC and the NAACP. Black display of force could also cause a violent response by white vigilantes and law enforcement.[45] The Jonesboro Deacons tried their best to reconcile self-defense and nonviolence in the official charter and left

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[42] "Articles of Incorporation of the Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC. United States of America, State of Louisiana, Parish of Ouachita," 5 March 1965, FBI Files.

[43] Ibidem.

[44] "Articles of Incorporation of the Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC.," Unknown Date, FBI Files.

[45] Fairclough*, Race & Democracy*; Hill, *The Deacons,* 47; Strain, *Pure Fire,* 90-97; Wendt*, The Spirit and the Shotgun,* 70-74; Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff,* 122.

out any language that indicated violence. Consequently, the charter does not reflect the *actual* purposes of the organized men who called themselves the Deacons for Defense and Justice.

The organization's name reflects a desire to identify with respected symbols of the black community, but also affirms a paradox. The Christian term "Deacon" was associated with respected authority, peace and morality, whereas "Defense" was often interpreted as a symbol of militancy. In its name, the Deacons combined Christian pacifism with self-defensive violence. The organization was merging the black community with CORE nonviolent civil rights efforts in the Deep South. They were not the first black men to advocate armed self-defense, but they were the first southern civil rights organization to advocate it. More importantly, the Deacons were unique in holding the autonomy over their organization through local establishment and all-black control. Roughly all major civil rights organizations consisted of a mixed membership of blacks and whites, whereas the Jonesboro organization was made up of only African American men. Furthermore, most organizations depended on white financial support. The Deacons' financial revenue consisted solely of the membership-payments, which meant the organization had no substantial monetary supply. It did mean, however, that the Deacons would not have to rely on white support in fear of losing financial assistance. This form of self-sustainment was an important first step toward improving black autonomy in the rural south. [46]

Jackson High

The Deacons' strategy of secrecy changed on February 21, 1965. In the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, reporter Fred Powledge published an article headlined "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro Unusual Town." The article painted a sympathetic picture of the Deacons in Jonesboro. Powledge wrote about Jonesboro as a regular southern town, untouched by civil rights legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Public places remained segregated, the KKK was spreading fear and terror, and African Americans were still expected to step off a side-walk when whites passed by. *But*, Powledge emphasized, in this town the black community initiated to form a protective association. The article focused mainly on the defensive philosophy of the Deacons, characterizing them as a protecting force against white terror.[47] Powledge's article gave the Deacons some regional attention, but the new self-defense organization was still relatively unknown, especially when the media's attention turned to the unfolding drama in Selma in March 1965, where nonviolent protesters led by King were attacked by southern law enforcement. Regionally however, the Deacons were establishing a name, and that name was causing trouble for some of the members. In Jonesboro, Deacon Kirkpatrick was working as a sports coach at the black Jackson High School, when rumors started to circle about his supposed dismissal. The rumors implied that the all-white Jackson High School Board was firing him from his position, due to his associations with the Deacons and his activity in civil rights activism. Once the rumors of Kirkpatrick's possible dismissal spread, black students walked out of class in anger and joined for protests and demonstrations

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[46] Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun,* 71-77; Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff,* 122-128.

[47] Hill, *The Deacons,* 77.

in front of the school. The walkout quickly grew beyond the issue of Kirkpatrick's rumored discharge. Within days, the protest developed into a comprehensive school boycott.[48]

A report from the Deacons FBI file, dated March 19, 1965, reads that, "[the Jackson High school boycott] involves Negroes protesting and demonstrating as result of rumor that high school coach Kirkpatrick reported action in recent civil rights activity was to be dismissed from position. Some indication that Deacons for Defense and Justice might be involved- in violence in connection with this action".[49] The rumors of Kirkpatrick's dismissal accelerated the Jonesboro civil rights struggle, which had already intensified with the establishment of the Deacons. The black community was aggravated with the School Board, who supposedly wanted to punish a teacher for participating in the civil rights struggle. At first sight, the boycott seemed one of many demands for equality in the South, but there was a striking difference. While protesters elsewhere were seeking equality through integration, like during the Chicago school boycott of 1963, the Jackson High School demonstrators demanded equality through other means. Not integration, but the control of black institutions and the demand of equal resources within a segregated system were the proposed means to an end at Jackson High. The demand for control of black institutions *by* the black community was a demand for black autonomy, which correlated closely to the all-black control the Deacons had over their organization. It certainly was no coincidence that the protesting students at Jackson High were demanding black autonomy in the same town where the all-black self-defensive civil rights organizations was established, and it did not take long for the Deacons to get involved.[50]

With assistance from local activists and other adults, the Jackson High students made a list of demands to present to the School Board. Most of those demands concerned the unequal distribution of resources. As a response to the demands, the Board promised to meet with the protestors on March 22, but only if the students were to discontinue their demonstrations and return to class. At this point, the president and vice president of the Deacons, Bradford and Thomas, openly spoke out against the proposal of the Board and urged the students to continue demonstrating. They argued that the boycott was the only leverage the black community had to enforce their demands.[51] When the protests did not end, despite a strategy of harassment by the local sheriff's department, the School Board decided to close the school and use more desperate measures to break up the students. In a CORE summary of events, a description of March 11 portrays how the students returned to the school to demonstrate, when local police officers blocked the passage between the school and the Quarters. The students were completely closed off from the black community. Within minutes, several fire trucks arrived and firemen began

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[48] Hill*, The Deacons* 85; "Memorandum, Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana," 15 March 1965, FBI Files. "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc. Jonesboro Louisiana," 25 March 1965, FBI Files.

[49] "Teletype to SAC, New Orleans (157-3290) from Director, FBI, Jackson High School Paren Negro end Paren, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Racial Matter," 19 March 1965, FBI Files.

[50] On October 22, 1963, more than 200,000 students in Chicago stayed out of class and marched in the streets with tens of thousands of others to protest segregation and inequality in the public schools; Hill, *The Deacons* 87-88.

[51] Idem 89; "Teletype to SAC, New Orleans (157-3290) from Director, FBI, Jackson High School Paren Negro end Paren, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Racial Matter," 19 March 1965, FBI Files.

unloading the hoses, which suggested the Jonesboro law enforcement was willing to take violent measures comparable to those taken by authorities in Selma. The Jonesboro Deacons, who learned about the unfolding danger, were restrained by the blockade and desperately began to search for entry points to reach the students. When the Deacons tried to pass the blockade they were hindered by groups of deputized white locals and policemen. Several members were arrested for a variety of reasons, but the armed Deacons remained persistent and refused to leave until the blockade was lifted. The blockade lasted from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. Luckily, the police actions against the students did not turn violent. [52]

What would have happened if the police *had* assaulted the students can only be guessed. It would have been imaginable for the Deacons to respond with violence to any police assault against the students. Presumably, the prospect of being attacked by an organized group of black men influenced the police decision to act without violence. The boycott came to national attention during an ABC news program, when CORE Director James Farmer announced that the Freedom Summer campaigns in Jonesboro and other small Louisianan towns would be the primary focus of CORE's Freedom Summer.[53] In the meantime, federal officials grew more concerned that the campaign of harassment by the local police force in Jonesboro would instigate an uncontrollable situation, or even a race-war. On March 24, 1965, a teletype was sent from the New Orleans office to inform the bureau of "a volatile racial situation and indication that the Deacons may be involved".[54] The Jackson high boycott eventually dissolved without any crucial solutions, and the matter soon faded away.

However, the school boycott had displayed a decisive shift in black southern thought. A broad consensus of growing disappointment and aggravation stimulated the need for self-determination among the black southern population. According to Hill, this development made the creation of a black militant organization such as the Deacons inevitable.[55] Within this new consensus, a group of black men decided to become its own movement. Strengthened by an all-black control over their own movement and stimulated by the black community's support, the newly established Deacons demanded the autonomy over their own community by providing protection. The Deacons' display of autonomy encouraged others from the black community to demand the same. The Jackson High boycott demonstrated how the broader consensus of black self-determination initiated by the Deacons spread throughout the community.

[52] Hill, *The Deacons*, 90-92; "Summary of Events in Jonesboro, Louisiana, March 8 through March 16", 16 March 1965, in: *CORE Southern Regional Office Summary*.

[53] "Teletype to SAC, New Orleans (157-3290) from Director, FBI, Jackson High School Paren Negro end Paren, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Racial Matter," 19 March 1965, FBI Files.

[54] Ibidem.

[55] Hill, *The Deacons,* 231.

2 'Rather be caught with a weapon than without one'

The Deacons were becoming an integral part of the black community in Jonesboro. In the *Times* article of February 1964, Powledge described how the presence of the organization "kept Jonesboro from developing into a civil rights battleground", and how the organization discouraged local police from brutalizing activists. On several occasions, the Deacons showed up when local black citizens were threatened by Klan-members, and prevented the situation from escalating. Deacon members and leaders were positioning the organization within the realm of southern civil rights activism, and started to actively look for ways to expand. Within weeks, another chapter was established in Bogalusa, Louisiana, and plans for Northern extensions were enunciated. Black activists from throughout the nation learned of the existence of the Deacons. During an already existing shift in black activist thought, the entrance of the Deacons on a national platform was sure to cause an effect.

The Bogalusa Chapter

On February 21, 1965, besides the appearance of Powledge's article had appeared in the *New York Times*, another crucial event took place. On the evening of the twenty-first, several Deacons traveled to the small town of Bogalusa, Louisiana, about 200 miles from Jonesboro. They were asked to join in a meeting with Bogalusa leaders, held at the black neighborhoods' labor hall. Organizer of the meeting was Robert Hicks, a vocal African American civil rights activist who led the Bogalusa Voters and Civil League (BVCL) in town. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the development of a Bogalusa chapter of "an organization now being put together in Louisiana known as the Deacons for Defense and Justice." Bogalusa was another typical Louisianan town, where integration was far from enacted. Police harassment and Klan-terror were part of every-day life in the black community, and unsurprisingly, the Deacons' philosophy of self-defense was well received there. The main speaker of the evening was Earnest Thomas. He discussed the importance of black men defending themselves against white violence. Thomas explained how the Deacons "intended to combat violence with violence; that they had no intention of starting anything themselves but wanted to be ready." His confident remarks were praised with an applause from the audience. [56]

He proposed to create a chapter in Bogalusa and explained how a Deacon chapter would improve the current situation of Klan-violence and discrimination. Thomas firmly stressed that all future local chapters would be channeled into the headquarters in Jonesboro, and he described how membership-payments would facilitate the purchase of radio equipment, ammunition, literature and more. The Deacons intended to establish a code system through which state wide communication could be created, which would help in case African Americans in one community were having difficulties and were in need for assistance. Thomas criticized the tendency of the black community to buy cheap weapons and pointed out that the purchase of substantial weapons was important, and everyone had to keep plenty of ammunition in cars

[56] "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Percy Lee Bradford; RM." 23 February 1965, FBI Files.

and homes. The Jonesboro vice president quickly mentioned he was in contact with groups in Chicago and Houston for the purchase of automatic weapons and explained at great length the advantages of having roving patrols in the various communities. According to Thomas, once police officers noticed that black men were armed, they were more likely to back away.[57]

The meeting was a great success for the Deacons, and the procedures for establishing a Bogalusa chapter started that night. The Deacons were expanding. Bogalusa resident Charles Sims was chosen as president of the Bogalusa chapter and Royan Burris as vice president. Sims was a veteran of World War II and was known as a though man. His opinions on armed self-defense were very much in line with those of Jonesboro vice president Thomas. The man who had arranged the meeting on the twenty-first, Robert Hicks, did not serve as a member or officer in the Bogalusa chapter. However, Hicks and A.Z. Young, another BVCL leader, were heavily involved with the activities of the Deacons and often acted as spokespersons for them. Even some of the expenses of the Bogalusa chapter were reimbursed by the BVCL. As a result, Charles Sims was made financial secretary for the BVCL.[58]

In Bogalusa, the Deacons' chapter started off in roughly the same pattern as the Jonesboro chapter had. Bogalusa was part of Washington Parish, and in 1965 the Parish's Sheriff's department employed its first black deputy sheriffs, among other black police officers. When CORE came to Bogalusa, activists were terrorized by Klansmen, and the black community was not able to protect them. Local African Americans who got involved with civil rights activism received death threats by phone and were chased by carloads of hooded men. But the newly established Deacon chapter started to patrol the black community, in addition to the black officers. Robert Hicks soon announced that white citizens would no longer be allowed to enter the black community at night. In response, the Klan intensified its exertion of terror over the next few months, which reached a climax on June 2, 1965. Black deputy sheriffs O'Neal Moore and Creed Rogers had just finished their shift and were driving home, when their car was attacked by a Klansman in a pickup truck. The man shot at the black officers, instantly killing Moore and severely injuring Rogers. Rogers was able to give a description of the truck and the driver, and several arrests were made at first. But unsurprisingly, no one was ever charged for the murder.[59] The murder worsened the already tense situation in Washington Parish. Several local black leaders spoke out against the situation and expressed their support for the Deacons, who guarded the homes of activists and the Moore widow. CORE leader James Farmer promised to speak at Moore's funeral on June 9, and openly applauded the Deacons for the offered protection.

Meanwhile, several FBI agents who reported the events pointed out a crucial question for national civil rights organizations as advocates of nonviolence. "Should a civil rights organization committed to nonviolence align itself with the Deacons and accept its services, as one organization (CORE) has done?"[60] In the wake of the O'Neal murder, Earnest Thomas

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[57] Ibidem.

[58] "Bogalusa Chapter Deacons of Defense and Justice", 17 August 1965, FBI Files.

[59] Hill, *The Deacons*, 96-98; Strain, *Pure Fire,* 103-104.

[60] "Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)," 10 June 1965, FBI Files; Strain, *Pure Fire,* 102.

visited Bogalusa too, and was interviewed by an unknown FBI agent. He explained that the connection between CORE and the Deacons began accidentally in Jonesboro when CORE discovered that its workers were safer with the Deacons around.[61] He explained how one of their many jobs was to protect civil rights workers and volunteers participating in civil rights activities. "A person who walks a picket line knowingly exposes himself to white violence, but when at night he is entitled to rest without worry and that's where the Deacons come in."[62] But the collaboration between CORE and the Deacons in Jonesboro and Bogalusa was a remarkable one, especially while looking at the CORE founding principles.

CORE philosophy was centered around nonviolent disobedience. The 'CORE rules for ACTION' were published by the National Advisory Committee of the national civil rights movement in 1963.[63] The published set of CORE rules consisted of several main principles of nonviolent action by which the organization explained its strategy and position within the movement. "All groups affiliated with national CORE agree to follow the nonviolent procedure in all action which they sponsor." A set of thirteen rules for action provided a guide for the individuals participating in CORE projects. Throughout these thirteen written rules, the importance of nonviolence and submission to aggression was central. Rule number six of the 'CORE rules for ACTION' read that:

> He [the CORE activist] will meet the anger of any individual or group in the spirit of good will and creative reconciliation: he will submit to assault and will not retaliate in kind either by act or word.[64]

Obviously opponents of the collaboration between the Deacons and CORE referred to these rules for action. The Congress of Racial Equality, which was founded on the grounds of radical nonviolence and even called upon its members to submit to any form of assault, was cooperating with a self-defensive organization, ready to fire back at racist assaulters. The question posed by FBI agents as to whether or not a nonviolent organization should align itself with the Deacons became increasingly important for CORE and consequently played a part in CORE's repositioning, which would soon commence.

The murder on O'Neal Moore proved to be only the beginning of a violent summer in Bogalusa. On July 8, 1965, during a civil rights march in downtown Bogalusa, a flying bottle, thrown by white assaulters, struck a seventeen-year-old girl in the face. Two Deacons on the scene, Henry Austin and Milton Johnson, quickly drove their car towards the girl and a local white nurse, who tried her best to get the injured girl into the car. But the white attackers rushed to the car too. While the Deacon members were trying to help the girl and the nurse, an assaulter

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[61] "Airtel, Revolutionary Action Movement, IS-RAM (OO: Chicago), Detroit, 10 June 1965, FBI Files; "Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)," 10 June 1965, FBI Files.

[62] "Airtel, Revolutionary Action Movement, IS-RAM (OO: Chicago), 10 June 1965, FBI Files.

[63] The National Advisory Committee of the National Civil Rights Movement consisted of prominent movement leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr., and several of his key mentors; from: National Advisory Committee, "CORE rules for ACTION," *Congress Of Racial Equality*, April 15, 1963, Web. 12 December 2017. <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/corerules.pdf>.

[64] National Advisory Committee, "CORE rules for ACTION," *Congress Of Racial Equality*, April 15, 1963.

hit both men repeatedly in the face. In response, Austin took out his gun and shot the white attacker in his chest and his neck. Austin and Johnson were immediately arrested by police officers, while the startled white assaulters were shouting at policemen, throwing rocks at the protesters, and attacked several news photographers.[65] That same evening, a rally was organized by the all-white National States Rights Party in Bogalusa, where several prominent white supremacist leaders responded to the events at the march. Outspoken racist J.B. Stoner was outraged over Austin's defensive action and urged white citizens to fire their black domestic help to speed black emigration from the South, while stating that "the nigger […] is somewhere between the white man and the ape."[66] Stoner intensified the electrically-fueled atmosphere in Bogalusa as he warned his audience that "what the nigger really wants is our white women."[67]

The Klan's response to the Bogalusa chapter and the Austin shootout predictably consisted of more violence against the black community. In July 1965, the Bogalusa Klan displayed a familiar performance. On a summer night, a large caravan of cars drove through the black neighborhood. Dozens of cloaked men were shouting, taunting, and randomly shooting into black homes. The parade was a frightening sight; as all Klan actions of terror were. Yet none of the Klansmen expected the evening to end the way it did. As the caravan moved through the Quarters, it was suddenly startled by a shower of bullets. The unexpected return of fire forced the Klan caravan out of the neighborhood, in what turned out to be the first head-to-head violent encounter between the Bogalusa Klan and the Bogalusa Deacons.[68] Austin's defensive action during the protest was not a once only reaction; the Klan learned that these black men were dedicated to defend their community and would not hesitate to fire back. The Deacons for Defense and Justice displayed their policy of self-defense twice in one month; by protecting nonviolent marchers and by defending the black neighborhood.

A National Platform

A couple of days after Moore's death, Charles Sims appeared on national television on the Louis Lomax show in Los Angeles, to comment on the events in Bogalusa and further describe the intentions of the Deacons. Sims described himself as "The Man" in the Deacons in Bogalusa, and explained during the show that the organization was established for the purpose of protecting civil rights workers who could not obtain protection from law enforcement authorities. Sims took a rather radical approach during the show, and publicly defined the Deacons' intentions far more explicitly than Bradford and the Deacons had done in the official charter. He admitted he was aware of the illegality of anyone carrying concealed weapons, but he "would rather be caught with a weapon than without one in Bogalusa." He voiced the opinion that in the event of "trouble," "blood would be flowing down the streets like water." Sims claimed he could rally one hundred armed men within fifteen minutes notice and had done so

[65] Roy Reed, "White Man is Shot by Negro in Clash in Bogalusa, La.," *New York Times*, July 11, 1965, 46, in Strain, *Pure Fire*, 108.

[66] Roy Reed, "Moderates Fail to Aid Bogalusa," *New York Times*, July 11, 1965, 46, in Strain, *Pure Fire* 108.

[67] Strain, *Pure Fire,* 108-109.

[68] Strain, *Pure Fire,* 97-98

previously. An FBI report on Sims' appearance on the Louis Lomax show was concluded by a statement that any suggestions made to Sims which favored "nonviolence" were unacceptable to him and to the audience, who applauded Sims wildly."[69]

Sims clarified that the Deacons intended to expand throughout the north, which sparked more fear for the gun-carrying Deacons. The FBI office in Los Angeles received several anonymous telephone protests and letters, complaining about the aims and arms of Sims and 'the Deacons.' To those worried citizens, the Deacons indicated the formation of a black Ku Klux Klan;

> "Urgently request you ask Justice Dept. to look into Matter of "Deacons for Defense" in Bogalusa, one Charles Sims, reported to be president. They are supposed to have Machine guns, and hand grenades. I live seven miles from that arsenal!"[70]

The Deacons were conceived as a threat, and the Bureau intensified its research. During another interview with federal agents in the summer of 1965, Earnest Thomas claimed that the Deacons consisted of 50 to 55 chapters in various areas in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. He declined to enclose the number of members, but mentioned guesses from 5000 to 15000. According to Christopher Strain, part of the Deacons' strategy was to limit public knowledge of membership for tactical purposes. He quotes Thomas as stating that "it would not make sense to tell you we got four hundred men here, and let 'the men' (police) bring eight hundred."

In the FBI files, Thomas is quoted while repeating several important statements on the Deacons' intentions, "Thomas […] states a concern that the Deacons may be painted as aggressive and trigger happy. They were organized strictly for defense and they are highly disciplined."[71] The efforts of Thomas were contradicting. On the one hand he was boasting about the expansion of the Deacons while he adhered to some secrecy by declining to give more information. Bragging about the size of an armed organization in combination with mysterious claims subsequently triggered the interest of the FBI. On the other hand, Thomas was trying to persuade the bureau that the Deacons were not just a bunch of violent militants, but a disciplined organization. Which indicates he was trying to assure the bureau that any concern about the Deacons' intentions was unnecessary. Nevertheless, Thomas' contradictory remarks resulted in a warning for the FBI headquarters, indicating that the Deacons were violent avengers with connections to radical Black Nationalists. On June 10, the documented interview was sent to the FBI headquarters, including a thorough research into the Deacons' actions and their connections to several black nationalist organizations.[72]

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[69] "Airtel, Deacons for Defense and Justice, aka "The Deacons;" Charles Sims, Spokesman, Racial Matters, OO: New Orleans," 15 June 1965, FBI Files.

[70]"Urgent Letter, Congressional Liaison Office, Louisiana," 23 June 1965, FBI Files.

[71] Strain, *Pure Fire*, 104; "Teletype to SAC, New Orleans (157-3290) from Director, FBI, Jackson High School Paren Negro end Paren, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Racial Matter," 19 March 1965, FBI Files; "Airtel, Revolutionary Action Movement, IS-RAM (OO: Chicago), 10 June 1965, FBI Files; "Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)," 10 June 1965, FBI Files.

[72] "Airtel, Revolutionary Action Movement, IS-RAM (OO: Chicago), 10 June 1965, FBI Files; "Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)." 10 June 1965, FBI Files.

The FBI's suspicion was not unjust. The Deacons were expanding their connections. The assassination of Malcolm X, the foremost critic of nonviolence, in February 1965, had troubled the Deacons and led to the first contact between the Louisianan organization and the revolutionary black nationalist wing of the civil rights movement. Earnest Thomas persuaded his Jonesboro chapter to initiate a trip to New York. When he arrived in New York he met with several former friends and colleagues of Malcolm X, among other black nationalists. The revolutionary black activists in New York were heavily influenced by nationalist ideologies and Marxist doctrine; in contrast to most black activists in the Deep South. The Deacons were admired by most of the black nationalists for their willingness to take up arms and defend their rights. Thomas was quickly exposed to an assortment of critics of nonviolence.[73] When Thomas decided to travel to New York, it sparked his determination to expand the Deacons and establish chapters throughout the nation. In New York, he established a support organization called the "Friends of the Deacons for Defense and Justice (FDDJ)." However, the organization never collected any significant amount, and the FDDJ was discontinued within eight months.[74] Before he returned to Jonesboro, Thomas also made contact with members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). RAM was a small national network of Marxist-Leninist black revolutionaries who adhered to the support of Robert F. Williams, a former NAACP leader from Monroe, who had fled to Cuba after controversy over his self-defensive chapter.[75] The connection between the Deacons and RAM sparked considerable attention from the FBI, as the FBI files show.[76] The idea of black nationalist groups meeting and the possibility of the formation of a coalition of black revolutionaries was the FBI's largest fear. In FBI files from the Counterintelligence Program, this fear of coalition was prominent:

> "In unity there is strength; a truism that is no less valid for all its triteness. An effective coalition of black nationalist groups might be the first step toward a real "Mau Mau" in America, the beginning of a true black revolution." [77]

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[73] Hill, *The Deacons*, 78-79; "Earnest Thomas, Vice President of the Jonesboro DDJ," 14 June 1965, FBI Files.

[74] Hill, *The Deacons*, 348.

[75] Robert Williams was a top priority for Hoover and the FBI, because the Bureau feared Williams was pushing for violence to achieve the liberation of the African American people in the United States, and was pursuing a political revolution by organizing a communist political party, in "Deacons of Defense and Justice also known as "The Deacons"; Charles Sims, President-Bogalusa, Louisiana, Racial Matters," 29 September 1965; "Organization for Black Power (OBP)," 9 September 1965, FBI Files;

[76] "Deacons for Defense and Justice Jonesboro, Louisiana," 15 March 1965, FBI Files; "Airtel to Director, FBI, From SAC, New Orleans, Subject Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, No. File: 105-1057," Unknown Date, FBI Files.

[77] "Counterintelligence Program, Black Nationalist-Hate Groups, Racial Intelligence" 4 March 1968, in: *Counterintelligence Program* file 157-9-33, FBI Files; "A real Mau Mau in America" refers to the Mau Mau uprisings in Kenya between 1954 and 1960 in which a guerilla-organization named Mau Mau was rising up against the British colonial domination. An important part of the organizations' strategy was to spread fear among the large population of white colonialists by committing violent raids against them.

In another FBI memorandum, local agents informed the headquarters that several Louisiana political officials had expressed a great deal of concern with reference to the Deacons for Defense. Most importantly they feared the group's connections with black nationalists and their potential influence on the southern civil rights movement, especially now that they were expanding.[78]

In the small town of Homer, Louisiana, an official Deacon chapter was created on June 10, 1965, with the objective to "meet force with force" in cases of white terror against the black community.[79] In August of 1965, another chapter of the Deacons was formed in Natchez, Mississippi. A prominent member from the Natchez black community asked Robert Hicks to come to the town and help establish a chapter there. Instead, Charles Sims travelled to Natchez to discuss the formation. After much deliberation, the Natchez group decided not to affiliate with the Louisiana Deacons, because the group felt they had little to gain from a formal affiliation with the Deacons. Sims was agitated and initially requested a membership payment to be made if the Natchez group wished to use the Deacons' name, but the Natchez group refused and Sims refrained. The Mississippi group was known throughout the movement as the Natchez Deacons, but they were never an official chapter of the Louisiana Deacons.[80] In the meantime Thomas and Sims started to organize Deacons chapter in northern cities, by using existing connections with black nationalist groups. The Deacon leaders' efforts and statements were often contradicting, and it seemed that the Jonesboro vice president and the Bogalusa president were competing for Deacon-expansion in the big cities. Neither one of the Deacon leaders were very successful. Designed chapters in Boston, Cleveland and Philadelphia never really took off. Eventually, only Thomas would partially succeed in Chicago.

Exaggeration

After FBI director Hoover directed several agents by the end of 1965 to investigate the accuracy of the claims made by Thomas, concerning the amount of Deacon members and chapters, the Director received dozens of reports from southern, southeastern, and even some eastern states. Most of the agents reported the same; no information had been found to indicate a formation of a chapter of the Deacons for Defense in Justice in the area.[81] The only responding bureaus who

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[78] "Deacons for Defense and Justice Jonesboro, Louisiana," 15 March 1965, FBI Files; "Airtel to Director, FBI, From SAC, New Orleans, Subject Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, No. File: 105-1057," Unknown Dates, FBI Files.

[79] "Homer Chapter Deacons of Defense and Justice", 17 August 1965, FBI Files.

[80] Akinyele Umoja, "We Will Shoot Back", The Natchez Model and Paramilitary Organization in the Mississippi Freedom Movement," in: *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, January 2002, 271-294.

[81] "Airtel to SACs, New Orleans, Birmingham, Charlotte, Jackson, Jacksonville, Mobile, Savannah, Deacons of Defense and Justice, Racial Matters, OO: New Orleans," 19 July 1965, FBI Files; "Airtel, Deacons for Defense and Justice, RM, New Orleans," 12 July 1965, FBI Files; "Memorandum to Mr. Sullivan, Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matters," 15 July 1965, FBI Files; "Airtel, Deacons for Defense and Justice, Racial Matters, Jackson," 15 July 1965, FBI Files; "Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice-Racial Matters, Savannah," 1 July 1965, FBI Files; "Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice, RM. OO: New Orleans, Birmingham," 14 July 1965, FBI Files; "Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice. RM., Jackson," 14 July 1965, FBI Files; "Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice, Racial Matter, Charlotte," 14 July 1965, FBI Files; "Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice, Racial Matters, Jacksonville," 14 July 1965, FBI Files; "Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice. RM., Mobile," 14 July 1965, FBI Files;

reported Deacon-activity were New Orleans and San Antonio, Texas. New Orleans was obvious, as their office was responsible for monitoring activity in Jonesboro, Bogalusa, and Homer. The San Antonio office was more surprising. The office reported statements made in a local newspaper by a Cornell University student named Mark Klein, who claimed to be responsible for the formation of *The Committee to Aid the Deacons* in Austin, Texas.[82] Klein, who called himself a "revolutionary socialist," organized events during which he spoke of the importance of self-defense. He claimed that African Americans organizing in armed self-defensive groups was the next stage in "the negro struggle."[83] The Texan committee did not spark a lot of fear among federal officials, but in the FBI it was mentioned that "Klein voiced Communistic propaganda." Although the law student continued his efforts for the Deacons for a while, but never raised significant funds. [84]

After Hoover sent out the command for investigation, a memorandum consisting of an extensive analysis of the Deacons was sent to the headquarters. The file explained that although the statements made by Deacon leaders were generally accurate in respect to the purposes of the group; the motivation for its' establishment; its relationship to CORE; and the possession of firearms, there were a number of repeated inaccuracies and exaggerations. First of all, Deacon leaders Thomas and Sims claimed to have over 50 chapters throughout the United States. FBI investigation revealed that the only existing *official* chapters were located in Jonesboro, Bogalusa, and Homer, and therefore only in the state of Louisiana. As Thomas explained during the first meeting in Bogalusa, the original Deacons agreed that all future chapters would have to be channeled into the headquarters in Jonesboro. Although the Bogalusa chapter allegedly received several requests for possible set-ups across the South, actual requests were never officially accepted nor enacted by the headquarters in Jonesboro. Furthermore, the headquarters in Jonesboro only had the authority to establish chapters within the state.[85] In Natchez however, the group of armed men who named themselves the Deacons supported economic boycotts in southwest Mississippi. This Deacon chapter may not have been officially chartered through the Jonesboro Deacons, but their impact on the Natchez black community and the national image of the Deacons was of substantial importance.[86]

However, the Deacons' total membership estimates were dubbed "highly exaggerated" in the FBI report. "Membership probably no more than a few hundred."[87] An unidentified Deacon member contacted federal agents and charged that the Deacons were not as big as

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"Memorandum, Deacons of Defense and Justice, Racial Matters, (OO: New Orleans), Jacksonville," 19 July 1965, FBI Files.

[82] "Airmail, "Changed" Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC., aka Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc. RM., New Orleans," 4 August 1965, FBI Files; "Airmail, The Committee to Aid the Deacons, Racial Matters, San Antonio," 9 August 1965, FBI Files.

[83] "Teletype, The Committee to Aid the Deacons, San Antonio, Texas," 19 August 1965, FBI Files.

[84] Ibidem; Hill, *The Deacons*, 346.

[85] "Activities of known or alleged Chapters of the DDJ," July 1966, FBI Files

[86] Umoja, "We Will Shoot Back," 290-294.

[87] "Memorandum, Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matters," 15 July 1965, FBI Files.

claimed. “This surely illustrates the uncertainty as to the actual facts notwithstanding newspaper accounts.” While covering the aspect of weapons, the FBI memorandum confirmed that the Deacons possessed firearms. Nevertheless, the memorandum downplayed the issue of carrying weapons by stating that most rural southerners possess firearms. The carrying of rifles and pistols in rural areas was commonplace by white and black citizens, and the Louisiana state law allowed for anyone to carry firearms, as long as the weapon was not concealed on the person. Such firearms could easily be bought at local stores. The claim of Deacon members and leaders that they were in possession of machineguns and hand grenades was invalidated, as the Bureau found no indication that the Deacons were in possession of such heavy arms.[88]

As the memorandum was drawn to an end, the agent concluded that if the Deacons claimed to be organized for defensive purposes and as a retaliation to Klan violence against the black community, “it is not surprising that Deacons leaders would exaggerate its strength for the purpose of discouraging violence against Negroes and to help encourage increased membership”.[89] Although the memorandum gave the impression that the Deacons were no longer of any interest to the FBI, the Bureau continued to monitor them. Especially when the national civil rights movement was shifting towards a more radical ideology.

Violence on the Horizon

In July 1965, a teletype from the Charlotte FBI office informed the headquarters of statements made by CORE’s James Farmer after O’Neale Moore’s death, in which he refused to denounce or criticize the Deacons for their self-defensive approach. The national director of CORE stated that “Negroes in this nation are down to about their last ounce of patience. For all the hoopla and the speechmaking and legislation, very little has changed in the reality of Negro life in this country.” Farmer was voicing an attitude of aggravation which was brewing among the black population. Many civil rights activists started to perceive armed self-defense as a necessary tool for the civil rights struggle in the South, since the nonviolent strategy did not bring about enough change. During a CORE convention that month, Jonesboro Deacon Thomas was present and declared that the period of African American nonviolence was over. He accused white men of having given the black community new laws and apparent privileges under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but when black men and women tried to use those laws and privileges, they were beaten. He encouraged the idea of black self-protection by stating that “we must have the Deacons to let the Klan know that negroes as a whole are not nonviolent”, indicating that the Deacons would take it upon themselves to defend the Act of 1964 and those who tried to enforce equality.[90] He argued that the black community should not have to wait for white northern strategies or permission to enforce the new laws of integration. In another interview that month, Thomas again pressed on the uselessness of nonviolence: “They can come down and play non-violence with those rednecks all they want, we who live down there have our own way of

[88] “Memorandum, Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matters,” 15 July 1965, FBI Files.

[89] Ibidem.

[90] “Teletype, Deacons for Defense and Justice, Racial Matter,” 14 July 1965, FBI Files.

handling things."[91] James Farmer described the use of self-defense by the Deacons in a way that best reflects how many activists in the South viewed the emergence of armed protection:

> "It's clear that violence maybe on the horizon. And if violence is on the horizon, I would certainly prefer to see it channeled into a defense discipline than the random homicide and suicide of rioting."[92]

Farmer's fear of the "suicide of rioting" became reality in California by the end of the summer of 1965. From August 11 to 16, riots quelled the neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles. After a local African American man was arrested, a minor argument with police officers escalated into a fight. Anger among the black community over rumors of police brutality, combined with a long-time feeling of despair over socio-economic racism and living conditions motivated thousands of black citizens to take to the streets. Six days of looting followed. The national guard was sent in and eventually ended the riots. Thirty-four people, mostly black citizens, were killed over the time-span of six days, twenty-three of whom were shot by law enforcement.[93] The riots and the federal response became a central topic among civil rights organizations, especially in respect to the increasing popularity of armed resistance. By the end of August, Robert Hicks of Bogalusa traveled to Detroit, Michigan, as a spokesperson for the Deacons. In Detroit he attended a so-called freedom dinner in honor of the Deacons, during which the utmost topics resolved around the Watts riots. Several spokesmen at the dinner referred to the riots as a class war and predicted more of such outbreaks if the black population would not be treated differently by the federal government. One speaker noted that violence at times was the only way of letting the white establishment know that the black people were tired of being pushed around. A Michigan Congressman argued that although he did not believe in violence, he felt a man was less a man if he would not defend himself, his property and his family. "Hear me, Mr. President, you had better take the money you are spending in Vietnam to fight an uncalled for war and spend it here on the big city slums or else you will have more class wars."[94] Another congressman at the dinner acknowledged that various situations in the civil rights movement concerning nonviolent action called for new techniques and approaches, and confirmed the Deacons were perhaps displaying such a new approach through self-defensive organizing.

When Hicks took the stand himself, he tried to avoid the topic of the riots, and instead focused on the discipline of strict self-defense. The Deacons only used defensive violence when they were under attack and according to Hicks, these defensive actions were paying off. The

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[91] "Group Formed to Help Arm Negroes," 8 August 1965, FBI Files.

[92] Strain, *Pure Fire*, 108-109; James Farmer, "Deacons for Defense," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 10, 1965, 15.

[93] Watts Riots

[94] "Airtel. Appearance of Robert Hicks, Vice-President, Bogalusa (LA.) Deacons for Defense and Justice, sponsored by Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL), 22-8-1965, Detroit, Mich. Racial Matters," 24 August 1965, FBI Files.

black communities of Jonesboro and Bogalusa saw the number of white attacks decline.[95] Slowly but certainly, the situation in the Louisianan towns was changing for the better. The decline suggested that Klan-members were hesitant to terrorize black citizens if it meant their own lives were at risk.[96] The approach of organized self-defensive was working for the black communities in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, so why could it not work for other black communities throughout the United States?[97] More Deacon leaders voiced their contentment with the effect the organization had on white assaults in the South. On September 29, 1965, Charles Sims appeared on the Lomax Show again, this time accompanied by A.Z. Young of the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League. Both men argued that the efforts of the Klan to terrorize the civil rights workers in Bogalusa was no longer successful, thanks to the Deacons' presence. Young claimed that the Klan was on the way out; "they still ride, but now they are careful when and where they ride."[98] In another interview, Earnest Thomas claimed approximately the same about the Klan in Jonesboro. The Klan was quieter there too because of the Deacons' armed self-defense.[99]

The effect the Deacons had on white vigilante assault in Louisiana was demonstrated on May 13, 1966, when a shooting occurred outside the Acme Café in Bogalusa around midnight. Three black men picketed the café, which was under Federal Court order to integrate. The men were denied service and after a short standoff they decided to leave. But as they walked outside, one of the men was attacked by a white local. The three men got away and ran to their car to grab their guns. Several shots were fired at the café as the men drove away from the scene. Approximately an hour later, a group of armed Deacons arrived at the Acme. The scene of about twenty armed men intimidated the white locals and refrained them from more provocation. No violence occurred, but the police arrived to the scene within minutes upon the Deacons' appearance and arrested about ten of the black men. The next day, as a response to the events of the previous night, civil rights activists decided to enter various cafés in Bogalusa to challenge the ongoing segregation. During these actions, white assaulters did not strike again. The idea of provoking the activists into summoning twenty armed Deacons must have seemed dispensable. As Hicks, Sims, Young and Thomas had all claimed before, white assaulters were increasingly hesitant when their lives were at risk, causing the number of white attacks to decline.

However, the local law enforcement had once again shown to be unwilling to enforce the law as instructed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The police arrested the Deacons who arrived at the scene, and took no further action against the white attacker who initially assaulted

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[95] Elizabeth Kai Hinton*, The New Black History: Revisiting the Second Reconstruction* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 15 September 2011), 199; Strain, *Pure Fire,* 109-110.

[96] Hinton, *The New Black History*, 199.

[97] "Airtel. Appearance of Robert Hicks, Vice-President, Bogalusa (LA.) Deacons for Defense and Justice, sponsored by Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL), 22-8-1965, Detroit, Mich. Racial Matters," 24 August 1965, FBI Files.

[98] "Deacons of Defense and Justice also known as "The Deacons"; Charles Sims, President-Bogalusa, Louisiana, Racial Matters." 29 September 1965, FBI Files.

[99] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matter," 26 October 1965, FBI Files.

the black activist, nor the white bar-owner who had violated federal orders by refusing service to the three black men. The police actions infuriated the Deacons and the black community of Jonesboro. Local FBI agents who intended to interview Deacon members about the events in May, reported that some of them made derogatory remarks regarding the FBI and the Department of Justice in connection to Civil Rights Activists. One Deacon said he thought the Department of Justice was not worth "shit", and that if any more black citizens would be arrested for entering the Acme Café, "we will come to the Acme and tear that place up."[100]

In a way the Bogalusa chapter overshadowed the Jonesboro headquarters, because of the media attention it received after violent events such as the Austin-shooting and the Acmé café events. Nevertheless, the Bogalusa and the Jonesboro chapter both expressed their contentment with the effect the organization had on Klan-violence. Throughout the United States, African Americans were exploring different strategies in the struggle for civil rights. In many of those new approaches patience and white collaboration were of minor importance. A growing number of black Americans felt that nonviolence had brought no change. For them, King's famous and undoubtedly courageous approach was no longer effective enough. The increasing demand for black strength and cohesion placed a fresh emphasis on "black consciousness" – the demand for racial pride, strength, and solidarity, and cleared the way for a new ideology in African American activism. The ideology of Black Power.[101]

[100] "Racial Situation, Bogalusa, Louisiana," 13 May 1965, FBI Files; "Racial Situation, Bogalusa, Louisiana," 14 May 1965, FBI Files.

[101] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 311.

3 ‘Don’t you know the Negro can kill too?’

The self-defensive approach became increasingly appealing to African American activists, causing a deeper rift between supporters and opponents of nonviolence. Examples of self-defensive organizations in the South, such as the Deacons, inspired other activists to explore the effectiveness of armed resistance. In growing debates on self-defense, activists started to accept armed resistance as a necessity in the struggle for black equality in the South. The involvement of the Deacons with organizations such as CORE and SNCC marked a shift in the civil rights movement. The movement would change even more when the ideology of Black Power entered the realm of African American activism in 1965.

Black Power

Former NAACP leader Robert F. Williams had occasionally mentioned the term “Black Power” in a political context during his leadership in Monroe, Mississippi, in the 1950s and 60s. Several black activists incorporated the term in organizational texts, and in June of 1966 chairman of SNCC Stokely Carmichael gave his first speech on Black Power. Carmichael’s speech stuck. He explained the term by emphasizing black self-defense and black self-reliance, as he stressed the importance of black autonomy. Carmichael believed that if the black community would establish a self-sufficient economy, including black-owned stores, cooperatives, and medias, the white power-structure would be weakened, and African Americans would not be retained in the grip of white economic dependency. Carmichael used the phrase “Black Power” to urge black pride and socio-economical independence, and argued that “all black Americans should begin building independent political, economic, and cultural institutions.”[102] He also urged the black community to elect black candidates during elections, thereby obtaining a degree of black power through the ballot process.[103] This increasing awareness of the effect of black independency was an important change in civil rights movement-thought, and displayed a sentiment that was spreading among many of the nation’s black activists. Civil rights organizations such as CORE and SNCC were shifting towards an ideology of black self – reliance. As James Farmer had voiced accurately a year earlier; the African American population was done being patient and obedient.

Preceding Carmichael’s very first speech on Black Power was a southern Civil Rights demonstration that included interference of the Deacons; the Meredith March Against Fear. On June 6, 1966, activist leader and writer James Meredith decided to walk a solitary march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi in an effort to address the continuing racism in the rural Deep South, despite the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Unique about his initiative was his decision to invite only individual black men to join him on his walk. He did not want the national civil rights organizations to be involved, and certainly wanted no media circus. However, on the second day of his march, Meredith was shot by a white supremacist

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[102] Carson, *In Struggle*, 191-206; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 311; Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (*New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

[103] “Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matter (Organization)”, 31 January 1965, FBI Files.

who waited for him along the road. The one thing Meredith did not want, happened. Major civil rights organizations rallied to the cause, vowing to carry on the march in Meredith's name, and the event became highly publicized in the national media. Fortunately, as a result of the media attention, the Mississippi state officials were pressured into promising to protect the marchers from white terror, making sure they would finish what Meredith had started.[104]

A broad range of civil rights organizations took part in the March Against Fear. Martin Luther King and his SCLC, Stokely Carmichael and the SNCC, Floyd McKissick of CORE and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). But most striking was the participation of a group of armed men, dedicated to protect the protesters in case the state officials would decline to do so; the Deacons. FBI agents observed Thomas as participator in the March Against Fear. He acted as head of the Deacons, supervising the armed protection for members of the march.[105] But not everyone was content with their involvement. While discussing the course of the march, the leaders of the large organizations were joined by members of the Deacons. Thomas and his group intended to carry their guns while marching, and their intentions were supported by SNCC's Carmichael and CORE's McKissick. King however, who believed indisputably in the effect of nonviolence, insisted no one would openly carry guns during the march. Thomas eventually agreed to King's wishes, but the discussion concerning armed self-defense rapidly expanded throughout the time-span of the march, and the gap between those in favor of King's nonviolence and those in favor of Thomas' defensive approach increased, with Carmichael being the most vocal advocate for the Deacons.[106]

During the march, Carmichael was briefly arrested for questionable reasons. His anger over the mistreatment caused him to address the rhetoric of self-defensive action at an evening rally on June 16. Historian Adam Fairclough quotes him as stating; "This is the 27th time I've been arrested. I ain't gonna be arrested no more.. […]Every court house in Mississippi should be burned down tomorrow so we can get rid of the dirt."[107] The next evening, he held a similar rally at which he cheered the famous words; "What do want?", to which the audience responded: "Black Power!" During a conference for the so-called Coordinating Counsel for Black Power, later that year, Carmichael again defined black power in terms of the attainment of political and economic goals by African Americans. He compared the black man to a dog, stating that a barking dog never bites. He suggested that the black leaders who threw in with the power structure by using nonviolence and by depending on white support, such as Martin Luther King, could be compared to this barking dog; the power structure did not fear them, because they knew they would not do anything. Carmichael said that the other black leaders could be compared to the other dogs who, if pushed hard enough, would eventually bite. If the system were to continue to push the black community, sooner or later the black community

[104] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul* 310; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (University of Washington Press, June 1997) 448-456.

[105] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC.," 22 November 1966, FBI Files.

[106] Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul, 311-313.

[107] Idem, 316; Paul Good, "The Meredith March," in: *New South*, Summer 1966 (reprinted *in Reporting Civil Rights: American Journalism* 1963-1973) 11-13.

would react. Carmichael then provocatively asked the group, "don't you know the Negro can kill, too?"[108]

As a response to Carmichael's statements and the national media attention his statements attracted, King tried to redefine Black Power in terms of conventional political power and urged the marchers to drop the talk of black power. His urges were not convincing, especially when the march entered its third week. A few days after Carmichael's speech, federal and state authorities decided to reduce protection during the March from twenty guards to only four. Several days later, King asked Thomas to travel to Jonesboro and retrieve radio equipment for the march. Thomas agreed and the Deacons left. While the Deacons were on their mission, the marchers arrived in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three CORE volunteers had been murdered by Klansmen in the summer of 1964. Over two hundred marchers entered Neshoba County where the Deputy Sheriff, complicit in the Mississippi Burning murders, awaited them. He was accompanied by a group of angry-looking white men, who followed up on an arranged signal by throwing bottles, firecrackers and rocks at the marchers. The four guards who were still present were unable to protect the protesters, while some of the black marchers attempted to fight back. According to Lance Hill, Earnest Thomas was furious when he heard King had taken the marchers to Philadelphia while the Deacons were absent. He suspected King had sent him away on purpose, to prevent him from engaging in retaliatory violence in case of an attack by white assaulters.[109]

When one hundred state troopers attacked the activists by firing tear gas canisters and kicking those who failed to clear the site, it became even more difficult to argue against self-defense. The federal government left the marchers to the mercy of the state authorities, which intensified the increasing sentiment among activists that the black community should protect itself by any means. The terrifying events during the last days of the march raised the debate between nonviolence and self-defense beyond the level of theory. Thomas and the Deacons refused to agree to King's requests of not carrying guns any longer and finished the march fully armed. When the March Against Fear came to an end in Jackson on June 26, 1966, it seemed to have caused more polarization between the civil rights organizations than it had brought unity. And the popularity of "Black Power" kept growing. [110]

On July 24, a little over a month after Carmichael first used the term, the *New York Times* published a flyer in cooperation with the NAACP. The flyer contained brief explanations of "the Big Five" and their stances on the issue of Black Power. The NAACP and its executive director Roy Wilkins were praised as the most important organization and the most influential political figure in civil rights. "To Mr. Wilkins, Black Power means black racism and "black death"." The National Urban League and its executive director Whitney Young were admired

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[108] "Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Racial Matter, Stokely Carmichael, Racial Matter," Chicago, Illinois, 13 January 1967, FBI Files.

[109] Andrew Kopkind, "The Birth of Black Power," in: *Ramparts*, October 1966, 6; Hill, *The Deacons,* 389-390; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 317

[110] Fairclough*, To Redeem the Soul* 318; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, June 23, 1966), 477; "Report of Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission", in: *Southern Exposure*, Fall 1981, 116; Paul Good, "The Meredith March," in: *New South*, Summer 1966 (reprinted *in Reporting Civil Rights: American Journalism* 1963-1973), 11-13.

in the flyer for speaking the language of big businesses and the government, and for winning white support. "[Mr. Young] believes Black Power is self-defeating and dangerous".[111] The two most outspoken black critics of Black Power were positively portrayed by the New York Times flyer, along with the SCLC and the role of Martin Luther King. "An exponent of nonviolence, [King] condemns Black Power, but does not go as far as some who brand it black racism." CORE and the SNCC however, were wearily criticized for their adherence to the idea of Black Power and CORE's recent membership decline was "possibly as a result of growing Black Power philosophy". The SNCC was portrayed the worst. An organization made up of "kids, depending upon the prevailing mood and state of tension", whose members live in "the shacks of Negro communities".[112] CORE's McKissick and SNCC's Carmichael were mentioned as the principal advocates of Black Power.

The Times' flyer was not incorrect while reporting the stances of the 'Big Five'. NAACP, NUL and SNCC did indeed oppose the Black Power-rhetoric which was unfolding throughout the nation. Roy Wilkins even claimed that "the term "Black Power" means anti-white power […] it is a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan."[113] Wilkins was voicing the concerns of white citizens and many prominent middle-class black leaders, which was unsurprising. Wilkins and the NAACP had always consisted of high-ranking, middle class blacks who relied on white support. Losing white support would be crucial for the NAACP's monetary supplies. Furthermore, NAACP, NUL and SNCC all had in common the belief that full integration and equality would be accomplished by involving the white community in the struggle for civil rights.

CORE and SNCC were shifting towards a strategy of excluding the white community and focusing on black autonomy. CORE openly supported Black Power, and SNCC's Carmichael basically invented it. During a conference in November, 1966, the president of the Coordinating Council for Black Power argued that Black Power could well be the turning point of the black revolution. He stated that when the black community would start channelizing resources back into the community, money, jobs, and ultimately real black power would follow. Which, in return, would provide political and social gains.[114] Organizations such as the Revolutionary Action Movement and the radicalizing SNCC gained in popularity, while King and moderate organizations such as SNCC tried their best to calm down the intensification of the Black Power movement.

The Deacons and Black Power

At a first glance, the Deacons and the Black Power movement seemed to have a lot in common and several Deacon members got more involved with the radical ideas of the black power movement. An FBI report from November, 1966, warned the Bureau of a particular member of

[111] M.S. Handler, "The Big Five in Civil Rights", *The New York Times*, 24 July 1966.

[112] Ibidem.

[113] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul* 320; Roy Wilkins, "Steady As She Goes," reprinted in *Black Viewpoints*, ed. A.C. Littleton and M.W. Burger (New York, 1971) 295-296.

[114] "Co-ordinating Council for Black Power (CCBP), Racial Matters," 21 November 1966, FBI Files.

the Deacons in Bogalusa, who spoke during a conference for Black Power. The conference, which was organized by the CCBP, included appearances from members and leaders of CORE, SNCC, and the Deacons. The Deacon member who spoke at this conference was Henry Austin, the man who shot a white assaulter during a march in Bogalusa in the summer of 1965. According to the report, Austin "advocates the revolution and follows philosophy of Red China, distributing cardboard posters with pictures of Uncle Sam, opposing Vietnam."[115] Austin was known to be a firm vocalist for black self-determination. During an open forum before the Socialist Workers Party in Cleveland, Ohio in January 1967, Henry Austin said that the Deacons were blazing a trail for justice. "When the police send in the KKK to settle an incident, and when the Deacons show up, it is so quiet you can hear two cotton balls being rubbed together," he said, "We have been under white power for 400 years, and we are tired of it. One of these days we will be under black power. When the Negro does come out of the ghetto's, America will need the National Guard for protection. We don't want civil rights or voting rights now. It is out of the question at this time."[116] During his speech before the Socials Workers Party, Austin implied retaliatory violence. These implications were very much in conflict with the original charter of the Deacons as it was formulated in Jonesboro. It started to become apparent that the Deacons were not acting as a coherent organization, rather several members were speaking as if they were spokespersons of the Deacons. When in fact, they simply voiced their own opinions.

On the 4th and 5th of September, 1966, the Deacons were invited to a meeting in Detroit, Michigan. The Organization for Black Power (OBP) organized a "steering committee", which was supposed to be a small group, but the national director of the OBP invited many leaders from militant black organizations such as RAM. The FBI file covering this meeting presents an accurate image of the increasing popularity of black self-determination and black nationalism among civil rights organizations. Several of the attendees were associated with the Black Nationalist movement, and some blamed the Organization for Black Power for being too mild in dealing with problems. Most of these vocal attendees were RAM members, who called for severe measures such as the refusal of military service among blacks. Outside the meeting, flyers were handed out to passing African Americans that read;

> "The white racist decision workers (Johnson and the other thugs), must take us for stone fools if they think black people will serve as cannon fodder for the Hitler type war machine designed to mercilessly slaughter Asians in Vietnam. Especially in the light of the atrocities committed by the racist beasts in Los Angeles."

During the meeting, Thomas spoke as a representative for the Deacons. Compared to other attendees, his opinions were mild. He explained the Deacons' strategy of self-defense as a means to protect oneself and others of the black community from attacks by white people in the South, and he urgently pressed those present to refrain from becoming involved in any acts of

[115] "Coordinating Council for Black Power Racial Matters; Conference on Black Power, October 15-16, 1966, Washington D.C., Racial Matters," 30 September 1966, FBI Files.

[116] "Deacons of Defense and Justice Inc. Aka Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc.," 18 January 1967, FBI Files.

violence such as riots. Thomas and the Deacons did not intent to be part of any national revolution, their main issue remained to deter Klan violence and expand to the North to establish chapters that would do the same. His presentation did not impress the urban activists at the meeting. RAM members concluded the meeting by calling for the black community to "join 50,000 angry blacks" in a protest demonstration at Fort Wayne, Detroit; "We are serving notice to the white racist that we will fight a nitty gritty, toe to toe, head wupping struggle in raceland U.S.A. to liberate our people rather than play an incognito slave role on this earth again."[117]

The strategy of black control over black institutions became the primary pinnacle of Black Power and the Deacons had been the first southern civil rights self-defense organization in the South to have full black-control over the organization. However, as the Deacons got more involved with the Black Power movement, the contrast between the Louisianan organization and the new black nationalist ideology became more apparent. The most important factor of this contrast was the rural versus urban divide. The organizational approach of a local organization such as the Deacons was effective against Klan-violence in rural areas in the Deep South. But in the big cities, the Ku Klan Klan was not the biggest threat in the lives of black citizens. In the cities, police violence and government oppression were the most pressuring topics.

Chicago

Despite Thomas' relatively mild stance during the meeting in Detroit, he was still highly dedicated to expand the Deacons to the North. FBI sources indicate that Thomas made several contacts in Chicago in 1965 and another memorandum states that a Deacons office was opened there in July 1966.[118] Although the Chicago chapter was never channeled through the Jonesboro headquarters and therefore never officially affiliated with the Louisiana Deacons, the presence of the Chicago chapter was quite noticeable and caused a lot of local media and police attention. When Martin Luther King spoke at a civil rights meeting in Chicago, the FBI reported that approximately forty black men, who indicated they were Deacon members, guarded the area to reportedly protect King and other civil rights leaders while carrying firearms. When Carmichael spoke to a group in Chicago around the same time, a comparable amount of supposed Deacons provided armed protection. The group did not take an active part in the meetings, but only guarded the speakers.[119] In Chicago, the first and only big city chapter was mostly involved with local black issues. When two black families moved into a prominently white neighborhood, they were met with white harassment. According to FBI statements, the Chicago Deacons warned that if the police failed to give these families adequate protection, the Deacons

[117] "Organization for Black Power (OBP)," 9 September 1966, FBI Files.

[118] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matter (Organization)", 31 January 1967, FBI Files; Hill, *The Deacons*, 370.

[119] "Activities of known or alleged Chapters of the DDJ," July 1966, FBI Files.

would have men patrol the area instead, to protect the families. After the Deacons' warning, the police patrol cars in the district were put on special notice and no more incidents occurred.[120]

However, the appearances of the Deacons in Chicago were received with skepticism, especially after Thomas appeared on several radio programs. During those radio appearances, Thomas developed a habit of making exaggerated claims. He claimed the Chicago chapter had 455 members and he would be able to summon thousands of Deacons to Chicago in the next three months to combat the Klan in Chicago and protect demonstrators from police violence. Listeners who called in were skeptical and aggravated with Thomas' statements, especially with regard to his announcement of bringing thousands of Deacons into the city;

> "Will you listen to me […] now you know you ain't got no fifteen thousand Deacons. There ain't an organization among the Negroes today got fifteen thousand Negroes in it."

Callers accused Thomas of inciting violence by building up more hatred between the black and white population. One caller was infuriated that Thomas came to Chicago in the first place. "We don't want no pistol packing Deacons here. I'm a Negro myself and I'm going to tell you so far as I'm concerned, you should never have come here!"[121]

Black citizens of Chicago did not recognize the picture Thomas painted of Klan-threat. Although Klan-terror was often tolerated by local authorities in southern states such as Louisiana, it was forbidden by federal law. Therefore, organizations such as the Deacons could refer to laws such as the Civil Rights Act for their legitimacy of being a protective squad. Furthermore, the Louisiana Deacons only had a relatively small population to cover. Contrary to the situations in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, in Chicago there were no caravans filled with hooded racists. Instead, the black population of Chicago faced the daily threat of police brutality. Chicago black leaders and activists believed that police brutality needed a very different approach than Klan-terror. Big city police departments often enjoyed the unconditional support of the state and federal government, and were therefore practically inviolable. A black protectionist squad, armed with guns and rivals, would not stand a chance against a well-equipped police department. Timuel Black, the president of the Negro American Labor Counsel of Chicago ridiculed Thomas and the Deacons and stated that they only knew how to get rid of the Klan, but did not know anything about law and order, and "the ordinary ways of achieving justice." Black deemed the national statements and appearances of Thomas as nothing more than propaganda to scare off Klansmen.[122]

Fading Away

According to FBI investigation, the Bogalusa chapter was increasingly dissatisfied with Charles Sims as president. Several members dubbed Sims "too militant". He was growing more towards the militant Black Power activists and thereby estranged himself from the Louisiana Deacons,

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[120] "Move ins, one zero three one five dash one nine South Morgan, Chicago, Illinois, January thirteen last, RM., Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, RM (Chicago File one five seven dash five seven two)," 14 January 1967, FBI Files.; Hill, *The Deacons*, 391.

[121] ""Hot Line" Interview, May 23, 1966, 11:00-12:00, Wesley South moderator," 23 May 1966, FBI Files.

[122] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matter," 26 October 1954, FBI Files.

who did not intend to become a revolutionary force. The Bogalusa chapter was content with its strategy of determining Klan-violence by self-defense, and Royan Burris was eventually elected president of the Bogalusa chapter instead of Sims.[123] In Chicago, Thomas received virtually no support from Civil Rights groups, and his performances in the big city created more controversy than benefits for the expansion of the Deacons. At the same time, it became apparent that he was isolating himself from the Louisiana chapters, too. In Jonesboro, the same sentiment lived among local Deacon members, who did not recognize northern calls for revolution, and did not share Thomas' prospects of expansion. In fact, FBI files dating from the summer of 1966 claimed that he was no longer a representative of the Louisiana Deacons and his title as Northern Regional Vice President was self-appointed; "He claims to be a public relations man. He talks big, "puffs" himself up and is a name dropper and a "gasser"."[124] In reality, he acted on his own, without support from his former Jonesboro chapter. Another report from November 22, 1966, informed the headquarters that Earnest Thomas was dropped as vice president of the Deacons for Defense of Jonesboro at an unknown time.[125]

Nevertheless, Hill describes how many left-wing and revolutionary black nationalists tried to recruit Thomas for their cause, but Thomas refused and continued his efforts to establish more Deacon chapters. After he appeared on a radio talk show in Chicago in 1966, Elijah Muhammad even asked Thomas to join the black separatist Nation of Islam. Federal agents feared in November 1966 that Thomas was attempting to set up an organization paralleling the Black Muslims, but one in which he was the national leader. In reality, as Hill describes, Thomas declined the Muslim's offer because he was not willing to convert to Islam. and because the Muslims were too radical for him.[126] A similar situation occurred when Thomas traveled to California a year before and met with Bobby Seale. Seale, who would eventually establish the Black Panther Party together with Huey P. Newton, posed the idea of founding a Deacons chapter in Los Angeles. Thomas was flattered by Seale's adoration for the Deacons, but he too appeared "too radical", and the Deacon dropped the subject of an LA chapter. The Black Panther Party, which was established by Seale in October 1966, turned out far more militant and radical than the Deacons ever were. However, Seale and Newton would later claim the Deacons served as an inspiration for the formation of the Black Panther Party.[127]

Thomas occasionally claimed to have set up Deacon chapters in several cities on a militant basis, but according to members interviewed by federal agents, the efforts on the part of Thomas were entirely on his own and were not supported or condoned by the Deacons of Jonesboro. The organizations' headquarters never received any requests for chapters from

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[123] "Deacons of Defense and Justice (DDJ) Bogalusa, Louisiana, Chapter," 29 July 1966, FBI Files; "Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC.," 22 November 1966, FBI Files.

[124] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated," 23 December 1966, FBI Files; "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Incorporated, Racial Matter (Organization)," 19 December 1966, FBI Files.

[125] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC.," 22 November 1966, FBI Files.

[126] Ibidem; Hill, *The Deacons*, 396-397.

[127] Hill, *The Deacons,* 342; Rickey Hill, "The Bogalusa Movement: Self-Defense and Black Power in the Civil Rights Struggle," The Black Scholar 41, No. 3 (November 2010) 43-54.

anywhere outside of the state of Louisiana.[128] A contradicting outcome, given that Thomas himself had firmly addressed the importance of establishing new chapters through the Jonesboro headquarters during his very first speech in Bogalusa in 1965, but was now trying to establish unofficial Deacon chapters. Thomas continued to represent himself as the spokesman for the Deacons, but according to an FBI report from November 27, 1967, he was the only Deacon members from Louisiana known to still be active at this point. At the same time, Thomas was often absent at his small Chicago chapter, because his wife and children still lived in Jonesboro. When Thomas flew to Cuba in July 1966 to meet with Robert F. Williams, which never happened, it sparked a short reemergence of intensive FBI interest. Especially after Thomas continued his travels to China, the bureaus interest in the Deacon leader peaked. But no substantial results came for Thomas' visits, and the FBI soon learned the Deacons were no longer an extensive threat. The bureaus' top priority was drawn away from Thomas, as the militant Black Panther Party was expanding from Oakland, California.[129]

By the late 1960s, the Deacons in rural Louisiana recognized their presence was no longer a crucial necessity for the protection of the black community. The Deacons in the rural South had formed an armed squad which scared off Klan-violence and reduced police interference. The black men had organized out of necessity and by 1968, the organization's local objectives were realized. Most members did not care for national expansions and felt no need to initiate new objectives for the organization. They believed the organization had lived up to its expectations and was no longer required. As a result, Deacon membership rapidly decreased. By March 1968, the FBI reported that the Jonesboro Deacons had become inactive and were of little to no significance, except for a few members who remained involved with other civil right organizations.[130] In January of 1967, agents already discovered the phone number of the Deacons Chicago chapter to be disconnected. The Chicago group was in extremely poor financial condition and in 1968 it was practically a non-existent organization.[131] After he returned from China, Thomas shortly joined SNCC's Carmichael as his personal Deacon-bodyguard and spokesperson, but he soon dropped his organizing activities and left the Deacons that year. According to Hill to explore a new career as a bodyguard for football and movie star Jim Brown.[132] More news of inactive Deacon chapters was reported by the Jackson office, who informed the FBI headquarters that the Natchez Deacons "feel they are no longer needed."[133] Although the Natchez Deacons were never an official division of the Louisiana Deacons, they had followed approximately the same path as the Louisiana chapters did. Their presence had minimalized Klan-terror and by the end of the 1960s the group felt like their

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[128] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, INC.," 22 November 1966, FBI Files.

[129] "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc.," 27 November 1967, FBI Files; Hill, *The Deacons*, 398-402.

[130] "Monograph on Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc. Research-Satellite Matter," 26 March 1968, FBI Files.

[131] "Deacons of Defense and Justice Incorporated (DDJ) Racial Matter (Organization)," 30 January 1967, FBI Files; Hill, *The Deacons*, 394-395.

[132] Hill, *The Deacons,* 406.

[133] "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Incorporated," 2 October 1968, FBI Files.

organization was no longer needed. News of the disbandment of the Homer chapter quickly followed. The final FBI report on the activity of the Deacons for Defense and Justice was sent out on October 15, 1970, declaring that during the past six months, there was no Deacon activity in Bogalusa: “As of this date the Bogalusa Unit is completely inactive.”[134]

The self-defensive civil rights organization never expanded substantially outside of Louisiana. Earnest Thomas’ failed efforts to expand the Deacons for Defense and Justice to the North display an inherited contrast between the Deacons and the Black Power movement. The Deacons’ original strategy of self-defense against rural Klan-violence did not catch on beyond the rural South. The rural versus urban divide was crucial for the Thomas’ intended expansion. In the urban areas, Black Nationalist groups embraced the Black Power movement and merged the ideology with a revolutionary concept of black militancy, whereas the Deacons’ vital goal remained to eliminate Klan violence by the means of armed self-defense. The northern cities did not embrace the Deacons’ philosophy in the same way the rural towns of Jonesboro and Bogalusa had embraced it. Furthermore, most Deacon members did not share Thomas’ determination of expansion and by 1968 most of the southern Deacons agreed that their mission was accomplished.

[134] “Memorandum, Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc. (DDJ) RM (Organization),” 15 October 1970, FBI Files.

Conclusion

The short existence of the Deacons for Defense and Justice had a considerable effect on the civil rights struggle in the South. Aggravation over local government's reluctance to execute the Civil Rights Act of 1964, combined with outrage over racist violence and the unwillingness of the federal government to provide protection, instigated a regional sentiment among African Americans in the South in 1965. The nonviolent movement decreased in popularity, as its effectiveness was disputed among the black community. Furthermore, the non-violent strategy's adherence to submissiveness constrained the efforts of civil rights activists to recruit black men to the movement's cause. The Freedom Summer, in an effort to improve the southern situation, only increased a white violent response and had deathly consequences for civil rights activists and the black community. But instead of scaring off activism, white vigilante violence fueled the black community's need for protection and self-defense. The story of the Deacons displays the determination of a rural black community to obtain the autonomy over their own lives. The Deacons for Defense and Justice were created in the vacuum of a changing sentiment, in which armed resistance became a crucial factor of the struggle for black equality in the South.

The Deacons' presence was a defensive necessity, which proved to be imperative for the protection of the black communities in the Louisianan towns on several occasions when black citizens were attacked by vigilantes. The local Klan chapters initially responded to CORE activism and the Deacons by lashing out, but the violent racists soon learned that this new defensive squad would respond to violence with violence. To many white assaulters, the aspiration to suppress black integration with violence did not outshine the risk of getting killed by an armed group of black men. Subsequently, the number of violent Klan-attacks declined. The Deacons were able to organize based on the strategy of self-defense, because they were established as a self-reliant organization, independent from the big national civil rights organizations. The defensive civil rights group did not rely on an overarching parent organization, but instead held the autonomy over the organization in their own hands, which was an important development for black self-reliance in the rural South. The Deacons created an organizational model from skills and resources provided by the local black community. Furthermore, the self-defensive civil rights organization was under full black control, which highlighted the desire for self-determination. Black southern men who were forced to defend activists by means of armed resistance were proud of their ability to protect themselves and their communities, as self-defensive violence became an assertion of black manhood. The Jackson High school boycott in Jonesboro became the first public display of the local black community's demand for black control over black institutions, which correlated closely to the all-black control the Deacons had over their organization

While keeping in mind the complex tensions between the priorities of rural black communities and national civil rights organizations, the vacuum in which the Deacons were created influenced the CORE workers in Jonesboro as well. Eventually, members of CORE and SNCC would become vocal advocates for the Black Power movement, as the self-defensive approach and the demand for black autonomy became increasingly appealing to African American activists, causing a deeper rift between supporters and opponents of nonviolence. Examples of self-defensive organizations in the South, such as the Deacons, inspired other

activists to explore the effectiveness of armed resistance. The involvement of the Deacons with organizations such as CORE and SNCC marked a change of sentiment in the civil rights movement. The armed organization's involvement with civil rights demonstrations such as the Meredith March could have only happened while the broader sentiment of the movement was already heading more towards black militancy.

The Deacons fused a strategy of self-defense with political organizing by placing themselves within the public debate on civil rights and armed resistance. The Deacons entered a national platform through appearances on radio shows and interviews. Once the group gave an organizational form to self-defense as part of the civil rights movement, they had to explain their strategy on a public platform. The Deacons' national representation received a positive response from black nationalist activists, who praised the armed men for their brave initiative, while receiving negative responses from inherently non-violent organizations such as the NAACP and the SCLC, who condemned the Deacons' use of violence. But throughout the nation, the decreasing popularity of nonviolent submissive activism became visible. Among black activists, the sentiment of black self-protection and self-determination advanced into an emergence of the Black Power movement. As 1965 and 1966 were commencing, the full-hearted nonviolent organizations, under the leadership of King, desperately tried to contain the militant influence of Black Power. But the ideology that revolved around black autonomy rooted in black civil rights activism, and consequently changed the civil rights movement.

In 1968, Benjamin Muse wrote in his book that the Deacons' philosophy was a harbinger of "a large element of impatient, sullen Negroes." His description of the Deacons as simply impatient is problematic. The southern vacuum of desperation in which the Deacons were created, originated from centuries of violent suppression and the recent unwillingness of governmental institutions to provide protection under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Above all, southern African Americans had been patient for a long time. Whether or not the movement's shift towards black militancy was righteous or the most effective is a question to which this thesis does not have an answer, and is perhaps a matter of opinion. However, what can be said after thoroughly researching the Deacons as a civil rights organization is that the group of armed men certainly did not exist of a bunch of "sullen Negroes," united only by the emerging ideology of Black Power. The Deacons were highly organized on a local level, portrayed a well-formulated strategy of self-defense, and were successful in fulfilling their objectives of minimizing local Klan-violence. Hill even concludes his research by stating that sophisticated black political figures such as Robert F. Williams and Malcolm X all called for a broad self-defense organization in the south, but failed in their efforts to develop such an organization. Whereas "a handful of working-class black men in Jonesboro found the Holy Grail."[135]

The Deacons for Defense and Justice were of indisputable importance for the development and improvement of safety in the black neighborhoods. They were indeed important and successful actors at a time when civil rights thought in the South was changing. For many black activists the Deacons were an example of brave manhood, and they became an inspiration for the expansion of black self-defensive organizing. For example, for Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton's formation of the Black Panther Party in 1966. However, describing the Deacons for Defense as the "Holy Grail" of broad self-defensive organizing is perhaps an

[135] Hill, *The Deacons,* 223.

exaggeration. The Deacons were highly successful in decreasing the amount of Klan attacks and protecting civil rights activists in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, but were unable to establish a coherent organization on a national level. First of all, the Deacon leaders created a tendency of exaggerating numbers. When Sims and Thomas first claimed to have over 50 chapters and 5000 members, the numbers already seemed exaggerated, and within months FBI research affirmed that these numbers were incorrect. The Deacon leaders' obvious brags on a national platform did not help increase their popularity in the big cities, which became apparent when Thomas was confronted by aggravated citizens on the radio.

When "Black Power" was thrown into the civil rights movement during the March Against Fear, the Deacons were present and played an important role, but the organization never truly fitted into the Black Power movement. They were not nonviolent, but they were no real militants either. The organization's call for strictly defensive violence turned out not to be relevant enough for black activists outside of Louisiana. Moreover, the southern Deacons never intended to be a voice of revolution. Although several members and leaders certainly grew more radical over the years, they remained primarily focused on defense against vigilante violence from the Ku Klux Klan. The Deacons' original strategy of self-defense worked out perfectly in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, but did not catch on beyond the rural South. The rural versus urban divide was too big for the Deacons to overcome. In the rural areas, the concepts of black autonomy and Black Power were embraced as part of a necessary strategy against vigilante terror. In the urban areas, the Black Power movement was embraced by Black Nationalist groups and morphed into a new form of black militancy, which was created in a vacuum of revolutionary thought. This displayed an immense contrast to the Deacons' "simple" goals of eliminating Klan violence from southern black lives. Thomas overestimated the importance of defense against Klan-violence outside of rural Louisiana. The Deacons' approach therefore never reached success in the big cities.

As Klan violence declined in the rural Louisianan towns, the necessity of having the Deacons for Defense around for protection declined too. Few Deacon members shared Thomas' determination of expansion, and the black southern men certainly did not share the northern militants' revolutionary visions. By 1968 most of the southern Deacons agreed that their existence was no longer necessary. As a result, the Deacons for Defense and Justice only existed for short period of time during the most hectic years of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In August of 1965, when the Deacons in Jonesboro were quite recently established, Thomas was asked about the future of the organization. The Deacons' vice president replied:

> "We hope it won't be necessary to have an organization such as the Deacons in the future. If we get the protection, we hopefully might be able to disband in a couple of years or sooner."[136]

Even though Earnest Thomas changed his mind along the way, his aspiration from August 1965 became reality. The Deacons turned out to be a crucial factor for the expulsion of Klan-violence from rural towns such as Bogalusa and Jonesboro. However, the organization as a defensive necessity lost its purpose by the end of the decade, and faded into the background of increasing northern black militancy.

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[136] "Group Formed to Help Arm Negroes," 8 August 1965, FBI Files.

This research has indicated the role that the Deacons for Defense played in the southern civil rights movement between 1964 and 1968, but in order to determine the exact influence the Deacons had on the metamorphosis of the national civil rights movement and the development of the Black Power ideology on a national scale, further research is necessary on black activist thought in the 1960s in relation to Southern black self-defense. Some historians have argued that the Deacons were part of the new era of violent self-defense, or even that the Deacons were the original agitators for a new sense of black self-determination throughout the nation, which instigated the creation of other black militant organizations. However, while narratives are being rediscovered, further research is necessary to discover the actual influence that small southern armed organizations such as the Deacons had on the development of large northern organizations such as the Black Panther Party.

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