

THE DEACONS FOR DEFENSE AND JUSTICE:
ARMED SELF-DEFENSE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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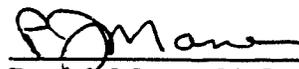


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Chapter One

Beginnings

Paul Farmer brought his pistol. The President of the White Citizens Council was standing in the middle of the street along with several other members of the Citizens Council as well as Ku Klux Klan members. It was the Autumn of 1966 in the small paper mill town of Bogalusa, Louisiana.

Royan Burris, a black barber and civil rights leader, knew why the Klan was there. They were waiting for the doors to open at Bogalusa Junior High. The school had recently been integrated and white students had been harassing and brutalizing black students with impunity. "They were just stepping on them, and spitting on them and hitting them," recalls Burris, and the black students "wasn't doing anything back." In the past Burris had counseled the black students to remain nonviolent. Now he advised a new approach. "I said anybody hit you, hit back. Anybody step on your feet, step back. Anybody spit on you, spit back."¹

The young black students heeded Burris' advice. Fights between black and white students erupted throughout the day at the school. Now Paul Farmer and his band

¹Royan Burris, interview by author, 7 March 1989, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording. The account of this incident is taken from *Ibid.*; *Louisiana Weekly*, 24 September 1966; and *Times-Picayune*, 14 September 1966. Tension was exacerbated at the school by a rumor that civil rights activist James Meredith had been invited to speak at the school. See Lester Sobel, ed., *Civil Rights 1960-66* (New York: Facts on File, 1976), p. 407.

of Klansmen had arrived with guns, prepared to intervene. Their presence was no idle threat; whites had murdered two black men in the mill town in the past two years, including a black sheriff's deputy.

But Farmer had a problem. Standing in the street, only a few feet from the Klan, was a line of grim and unyielding black men. They were members of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a black self-defense organization that had already engaged the Klan in several shooting skirmishes. The two groups faced off: the Klan on one side, the Deacons on the other.

After a few tense moments the police arrived and attempted to defuse the volatile situation. They asked the Deacons to leave first, but the black men refused. Burris recalls the Deacons' terse response to the police request. "We been leaving first all of our lives," said Burris. "This time we not going in peace." Infuriated by the Deacons' defiance, Paul Farmer suddenly pulled his pistol. In a reflex response, one of the Deacons drew his revolver and in an instant there were half a dozen pistols waving menacingly in the air. Surveying the weapons arrayed against them, the band of Klansmen grudgingly pocketed their weapons and departed.

The Deacons for Defense and Justice had faced death and never flinched. "From that day forward," says Burris, "we didn't have too many more problems."²

²Burris, Hill interview.

In the nineteenth century the pine hills of North Louisiana were a hostile refuge for the poor and dispossessed. Following the Civil War, legions of starving and desperate whites were driven into the pine hills by destruction, drought and depleted soil in the Southeast. They arrived to find the best alluvial land controlled by large landowners and speculators. The remaining soil was poorly suited for farming, rendered haggard and fallow by millennia of acidic pine needles deposited on the forest floor. The lean migrants scratched the worthless sandy soil, shook their heads, and resigned themselves to the unhappy fate of subsistence farming.

Upcountry whites eked out a living with a dozen acres of "corn 'n 'taters," a few hogs for fatback, trapping and hunting for game, and occasionally logging for local markets. Not until the turn of the century, when large-scale lumber industry invaded the pines, did their hopes and prospects change. Even then, prosperity was fleeting. By the 1930s, the lumber leviathans had stripped the pine woods bare, leaving a residue of a few paper and lumber mills. Those fortunate enough to find work in the pulp and paper industry watched helplessly in the 1950s and 60s as even these remaining jobs were threatened by shrinking reserves and automation.³

These Protestant descendants of the British Isles were the latest in several generations of whites forced west by a slave-based economy that consumed and depleted

³Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers During Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939). The impact of automation is discussed in Robert H. Zieger, *Rebuilding the Pulp and Paper Makers Union, 1933-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). On the role of blacks in the paper industry, see Herbert R. Northrup, *The Negro in the Paper Industry: The Racial Politics of American Industry*, report no. 8, Industrial Research Unit, Department of Industry, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969). On Bogalusa, Louisiana, see pp. 95-104.

the soil. With the end of the Civil War their plight was compounded by more than three million black freedmen surging across the South in search of work and land.

Emancipation thrust blacks into merciless competition with whites for the dearth of work, land and credit.

The freedmen also looked to the pines for deliverance. Blacks who remained on plantations lived in constant fear of new forms of bondage such as gang labor and share cropping. Thousands of dusty and tattered black families packed their belongings and trekked into the hills to escape the indignities of debt peonage. Like their white competitor, the freedmen sought the dignity and independence conferred by a few acres of land and the freedom to sell their labor.

Through a process of social Darwinism, the pine hills were soon peopled by the most independent and self-sufficient African-Americans; those willing to risk everything to escape economic bondage. Their passionate independence flourished in the hills as they worked as self-employed timber cutters and log haulers. By the middle of the twentieth century many of their descendants had left the land, drawn to the small industrial towns that offered decent wages in the lumber and paper mills.

From the end of the Civil War through the 1960s these two fiercely independent communities, black and white, traveled separate yet parallel paths in the pine hills of North Louisiana. In the summer of 1964, in the small town of Jonesboro, these two worlds would finally cross paths--as well as swords.

Jonesboro, Louisiana was one of the dozens of makeshift mill-towns that sprang up as Eastern businesses rushed to mine the vast timber spreads of Louisiana.

Incorporated in 1903, the town was little more than an appendage to a saw mill--crude shacks storing the human machinery of industry.

By the 1960s Jonesboro lived in the shadow of the enormous Continental Can Company paper mill located in Hodge, a small town on the outskirts of Jonesboro. The New York-based company produced container board and kraft paper at the Hodge facility and employed more than 1,500 whites and 200 blacks. In addition, many blacks found employment at the Olin Mathieson Chemical Company. Those blacks who were not fortunate enough to find work in the paper mill labored as destitute woodcutters and log haulers on the immense timber land holdings owned by Continental Can.⁴

Almost one-third of Jonesboro's 3,848 residents were black. Though by Southern standards Jonesboro's black community was prosperous, poverty and ignorance were still rampant. Nearly eight out of every ten black families lived in poverty. Ninety-seven percent of blacks over the age of twenty-five had never completed a high school education. The "black quarters" in Jonesboro and Hodge consisted of dilapidated clapboard shacks, with cracks in the walls that whistled in the bitter winter wind. Human waste ran into the dirt streets for want of a sewerage system. Unpaved streets with exotic names like "Congo" and "Tarbottom" alternated between being dust storms and impassable rivers of mud.⁵

⁴Daniel Mitchell to Ronnie M. Moore, "Jackson Parish and Jonesboro, Louisiana: A White Paper," [September, 1964], Jonesboro, Louisiana, Monroe Project Files, CORE Papers [hereinafter cited as CORE(Monroe)], State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, [hereinafter cited as SHSW].

⁵Census data cited in Ibid.

Daily life in Jonesboro painstakingly followed the rituals and conventions of Jim Crow segregation. A white person walking downtown could expect blacks to obsequiously avert their eyes and step off the sidewalk in deference. Jobs were strictly segregated, with blacks allotted positions no higher than "broom and mop" occupations. The local hospital had an all-white staff and the paper mill segregated both jobs and toilets. Blacks were even denied the simple right to walk into the public library.⁶

On the surface there appeared to be few diversions from the tedium and poverty. The ramshackle "Minute Spot" tavern served as the only legal drinking establishment for blacks. To Danny Mitchell, a black student organizer who arrived in Jonesboro in 1964, Jonesboro's blacks appeared to seek refuge in gambling and other unseemly pastimes. Mitchell, with a note of youthful piety, once reported to his superiors in New York that most of Jonesboro's black community "seeks enjoyment and relief from the frustrating life they endure through marital, extramarital, and inter-marital relationships."⁷

But there was more to Jonesboro than sex and dice. Indeed, segregation had produced a complex labyrinth of social networks and organizations in the black community. The relatively large industrial working class preserved the independent spirit that characterized blacks in the pine woods. Like many other small mill towns, blacks in Jonesboro had created a tightly-knit community that revolved around the institutions of church and fraternal orders. In the post World War II era, black men in the South frequently belonged to several fraternal orders and social clubs, such as the Prince Hall Masons and the Brotherhood for the Protection of Elks. These formal and informal

⁶Mitchell, "White Paper."

⁷Ibid.

organization provided a respite from the oppressive white culture. They offered status, nurtured mutual bonds of trust, and served as schools for leadership for Jonesboro's black working and middle classes.⁸

In the period of increased activism following World War II, most of Jonesboro's civil rights leadership emerged from the small yet significant middle class of educators, self-employed craftsman and independent business people (religious leaders were conspicuously absent from the ranks of the reformers). While segregation denied blacks many opportunities, it also created captive markets for some enterprising blacks, particularly in services that whites refused to provide them. There were twenty-one black-owned businesses in Jonesboro in 1964, including taxi companies, gas stations, and a popular skating rink.⁹

Jackson Parish (county), where Jonesboro is located, had a small but well organized NAACP chapter since the 1940s. In the 1950s the Louisiana NAACP was gravely damaged by a state law that required disclosure of membership. Rather than divulge their members' names and expose them to harassment, many chapters replaced the NAACP with "civic and voters leagues." Such was the case in Jackson Parish where the NAACP became the "Jackson Parish Progressive Voters League."

From its inception, the Voters League concentrated its efforts on voter registration and enjoyed some success. When the White Citizens Council and the Registrar of Voters conspired to purge blacks from the registration rolls in 1956, the

⁸For a cogent summary of the literature on black fraternal orders, see David M. Fahey, *The Black Lodge in White America: "True Reformer" Browne and His Economic Strategy* (Dayton: Wright State University, 1994), pp. 5-12.

⁹Mitchell, "White Paper."

Voters League retaliated with a voting rights suit initiated by the Justice Department. The Voters League prevailed and federal courts eventually forced the registrar to cease discriminating against blacks, to report records to the federal judiciary, and to assist black applicants in registering. By 1964 nearly 18 percent of the parish voters were black, a remarkably high percentage for the rural South.¹⁰

The Voters League drew its leadership primarily from the ranks of businessmen and educators, such as W. C. Flannagan, E. N. Francis, J. W. Dade and Fred Hearn. W. C. Flannagan, who led the Voters League in the early 1960s, was a self-employed handyman who also published a small newsletter. E. N. Francis owned several businesses, including a funeral home, grocery store, barber shop and dry-cleaning store. J. W. Dade was, by local standards, a man of considerable wealth. Dade taught mathematics at Jackson High School in Jonesboro and supplemented his teaching salary with income from a dozen rental houses. Fred Hearn, another Voters League leader, was also a teacher and worked as a farmer and installed and cleaned water-wells.¹¹

The Voters League never commanded enough votes to win elective office for a black candidate. For the most part, the Voters League was limited to delivering the black vote to white candidates in exchange for political favors. While political patronage offered some benefits to the black community at large, it more frequently created opportunities for personal aggrandizement. At its worse, patronage disguised greed as public service. Some of the Voters League's critics felt that its leaders were principally

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.; Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick, Interview by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, 31 October 1977, New York, transcript notes, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall Papers (hereinafter cited as GMHP), Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereinafter cited as ARC).

interested in gaining personal favors from politicians, and there was credence to the charge.¹²

In truth, the white political establishment offered a tempting assortment of patronage rewards to compliant black leaders in an effort to discourage them from disruptive civil rights protests. Inducements included positions in government and public education, ranging from school bus drivers to school administrators. White political patronage bought influence and loyalty in the black community. The practice testified to the fact that white domination rested on more than repression and fear: it depended on consent by a segment of the black middle class. Conflicts over segregation were to be resolved by gentlemen behind closed doors. Time and again, civil rights activists in Louisiana found the black middle class and clergy to be significant obstacles to organizing. One activist in East Feliciana Parish reported that the lack of interest in voter registration in 1964 could be attributed to, among other things, the "General fear-inducing activity of the very active community of Toms. Every move we make is broadcast by them to the whole town."¹³

Indeed, the mass community meeting which became popular during the civil rights movement, was, in part, employed to limit the opportunity for middle-class leaders to make self-serving compromises. Plebiscitary democracy guaranteed that all

¹²Ibid.; Mitchell, "White Paper." The clientelist relationship between black political machines and the white power structure was noted early on by Gunnar Myrdal. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), pp. 498-9.

¹³"Weekly Report - August 1 - August 4," [August, 1964], Clinton, Louisiana, box 4, folder 13, Southern Regional Office, CORE papers [hereinafter cited as CORE(SRO)], SHSW.

agreements had to pass muster with the black rank-and-file: the working class, the poor, and the youth.

There were good reasons for the suspicions exhibited by the rank-and-file. Black leadership was more complex and divided than the undifferentiated, united image reflected in the popular historical myth of the civil rights movement. The movement did not march in unison and speak with one voice. The black community had its share of traitors, rascals, and ordinary fools. In general, though, the leaders of the Voters League in Jonesboro were honorable men who had the community's interests at heart. Nonetheless, it was difficult for the Voters League to generate enthusiasm for voting rights when the ballot benefitted only a handful of elite blacks in the community. For most black voters in Jonesboro, elections offered little more than an Hobson's choice between racism and racism.

The role of the black church in Jonesboro also contradicts the popular historical picture of the period. Deep divisions existed between the black clergy and the movement in Jonesboro. Only one church in Jonesboro, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, initially supported the movement. Pleasant Grove had a highly active and concerned membership, led by Henry and Ruth Amos who operated a gas station, and Percy Lee Bradford, a cab driver and mill worker. The dearth of civil rights church leaders in Jonesboro was no anomaly. While the clergy played an important role in larger cities in the South, the pattern in small towns was markedly different. In the outback, the black clergy's attitude toward the movement ranged from indifference to outright hostility. Indeed, the clergy's

conservative stance frequently made them the target of protest by black youth in Jonesboro and elsewhere in Louisiana.¹⁴

The conservative character of rural black clergy owed to several factors. Church buildings were vulnerable to arson in retaliation for civil rights activities (churches in the South were frequently located outside of town in remote, unguarded areas). It was common for insurance companies to cancel insurance on churches that had been active in the movement. Moreover, black ministers depended on good relationships with whites to obtain loans for the all-important "brick and mortar" building projects.

But the clergy's conservatism was also emblematic of the contradictory character of the black church. On the one hand, the church was a force for change. It provided a safe and nurturing sanctuary in a hostile and oppressive world. In the midst of despair, it forged a new community, nourished racial solidarity, defined community values, and provided pride and hope.

In contrast to this uplifting role, though, the black church was equally flawed by a fatalistic outlook that bred passivity and political cynicism. Fatalism is a rational and effective adaptation in reactionary times when people live on hope alone. Religion born out of oppression and powerlessness found hope in the promise of a rewarding afterlife. For decades, the black clergy had preached the gospel of resignation and eschewed social and political reform. Like many other religious groups, the black church found something undignified and morally corrupting about politics and the secular world. The church retained elements of nineteenth-century conservative theology that regarded

¹⁴Organized protests against the black clergy in Louisiana are discussed in chapters four and fifteen.

collective human action for political advancement as unnatural and impious. Destiny was divinely ordained.¹⁵

There were exceptions to the conservative churches, and the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Jonesboro was one of these. The church had attracted several firm civil rights advocates and in late 1963 members of the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, along with the Voters League, invited the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to initiate voter registration activities in Jonesboro and Jackson Parish. CORE was part of the new breed of national civil rights organizations, young, energetic, and committed to nonviolent direct action. While the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) dominated the movement in Mississippi, CORE was the principal organizing force in Louisiana. They had been active in Louisiana since the 1960 sit-ins and were preparing a major summer project for 1964.¹⁶

CORE originated as a predominantly white pacifist organization, emerging out of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a Christian pacifist group that had been active since World War I. Formed in 1942, CORE's early leaders were profoundly influenced by the nonviolent teachings of Mohandis Gandhi. At the center of their strategy was the concept of nonviolent direct action; moral conversion through nonviolent protest. CORE

¹⁵The relationship of African-American Christianity to political reform is beyond the scope of this dissertation. A beginning point for the inquiry, though, is Eugene D. Genovese's, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) and, on social gospel influences, S. P. Fullinwider, *The Mind and Mood in Black America: Twentieth Century Thought* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1969). On nineteenth century conservative theology see Henry Farnham May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949).

¹⁶August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

advocated direct action and militant protest, without violence or hatred against the opponent. The organization's principles prohibited members from retaliating against violence inflicted on them. CORE believed that nonviolence would convert their enemies through "love and suffering." The organization had pragmatic as well as philosophical reasons for advocating nonviolence in the South. CORE's black leaders, such as James Farmer and Bayard Rustin, feared a brutal white backlash if blacks engaged in retaliatory violence.¹⁷

Despite its strong commitment to racial justice and community activism, CORE had made only modest progress in the black community in the 1940s and 1950s. But in 1961 it was catapulted into the ranks of national civil rights organizations through its role in the electrifying Freedom Rides. Courageous young CORE activists led integrated groups on bus rides through the South in a campaign to integrate interstate travel facilities. They braved riotous mobs, vicious beatings, firebombs and wretched jails. By 1962 they had triumphed in integrating most bus travel and terminal accommodations.

In 1964 CORE planned an ambitious "Louisiana Summer 1964" project, CORE's counterpart to the Mississippi Freedom Summer project. The Louisiana project was to focus on voter registration and desegregation of public facilities and public accommodations. CORE had already established several local projects in Louisiana, including a beachhead in North Louisiana in Monroe, some sixty miles East of Jonesboro. Monroe's moderate NAACP leadership had invited CORE to organize the community, but CORE had little success until they linked up with more militant working class union leaders at the Olin-Mathieson paper plant. Police harassment and an

¹⁷Ibid., chap. 1 passim.

uncooperative registrar of voters seriously hampered CORE's efforts. From the outset, the civil rights group's presence rankled the Klan, and it was not long before the Klan burned crosses on the lawn of the house where two CORE workers were staying.¹⁸

The first CORE organizers to visit Jonesboro were representative of the social mix of CORE's field staff. Mike Lesser was a white Northerner with no experience in organizing in the South. In contrast, his organizing colleague, Ronnie Moore, was a black native-born Louisianian and a seasoned organizer who had joined CORE after he was expelled from Southern University for a protest in January 1962. Moore was eventually arrested eighteen times and spent a total of six months in jail, fifty-seven of those days in solitary confinement. Beginning in January 1964, Lesser and Moore made several trips to Jonesboro to assist the Jackson Parish Civic and Voters League and local high school students in launching a voter registration campaign. Their initial success prompted CORE to assign several task-force workers to Jonesboro in the late Spring of 1964 in preparation for the summer project.¹⁹

One of the first arrivals for the summer project was a young black woman from Birmingham, Catherine Patterson. Patterson had been deeply moved by an experience at the George Washington Carver High School in Birmingham, where she was a classmate of Fred Shuttlesworth, Jr., the son of Birmingham's firebrand civil rights leader, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. One day young Fred, Jr. arrived at school with his face badly bruised and swollen. A racist mob had mercilessly beaten Fred and his father

¹⁸Mike Lesser, "Report on Jonesboro-Bogalusa Project," March 1965, box 5, folder 5, CORE(SRO); Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁹Lesser, "Report."

during a demonstration. "When I heard about that, it just moved me to action," recalled Patterson two decades later. "I guess I was outraged. It's one thing to hear about it, and it's another thing to see it on television. But to see someone that you are sitting next to in class severely beaten . . . he was a child, just like I was."²⁰

The incident inspired Patterson to plunge into political activism, first leading SCLC demonstrations in Birmingham and later joining CORE after graduating from high school in January 1963. Patterson was first sent to Gadsden, Alabama for nine months of organizing, and then on to Atlanta for nonviolence training. At the training, Patterson met most of the team that would be assigned to Jonesboro for the Summer Project in Louisiana. Among them was Ruthie Wells, a young black woman from Baton Rouge, and the two white activists William "Bill" Yates, a Cornell University English professor, and Mike Weaver.²¹

After completing her training Patterson was dispatched to Jonesboro in the Spring of 1964, joining Danny Mitchell, a Syracuse University graduate student. Eventually the Jonesboro Summer Project contingent comprised half a dozen activists; four blacks and two whites. Fear in the black community was so acute in Jonesboro that no local black family offered to house the CORE activists. The task force workers had to settle for a small house on Cedar Street in the black community, lent to them by a sympathetic black woman who had moved to California. The CORE workers christened the small home "Freedom House" and set about organizing voter registration.

²⁰Catherine Patterson Mitchell, interview by author, 6 June 1993, Asheville, North Carolina, tape recording.

²¹Ibid.

The young activists took seriously their Gandhian belief that their enemies could be converted by the moral strength of nonviolence, and, accordingly, they began earnestly searching for sympathetic white supporters among town locals. It was a short search. Virtually all the town's leaders were segregationists, including Sheriff Newt T. Loe (a "rabid segregationist" noted Danny Mitchell) and Police Chief Adrian Peevy. CORE discovered only one sympathetic white person, the town pharmacist, and this lone convert moved by "love and suffering" preferred to keep his conscience to himself.²²

CORE's belief in the redeemability of white bigots grew from a perilous political naivete and an astounding lack of understanding about Southern history. There were reasons for CORE's confidence in the pacifist model of social revolution. Nonviolence appeared to have succeeded in India, one of the first successful anti-colonial revolutions following World War II. And the wanton violence of World War II had accomplished little more than the destruction of sixty million human lives.

But Gandhi's success blinded CORE to how difficult it would be to transfer the strategy to America. Birmingham was not Bombay. There were critical differences between India's anti-colonial struggle and the black liberation struggle unfolding in the Deep South. East Indians were the vast majority in their homeland, far outnumbering their oppressors who constituted little more than a tiny occupying army. Support for colonialism by the British people was waning in the postwar years. In general, British workers did not believe that their social and economic status depended on the continued exploitation of Indians. Cold war rhetoric exalting democracy and freedom made it difficult for the British to use force to suppress the rebellion. Thus, Gandhi had the

²²Mitchell, "White Paper."

advantage of engaging a distant enemy who was constrained from using violence by domestic indifference and international opinion. Nonviolence succeeded in India only because the British lacked the resolve to use violence.

The United States was a different matter. In contrast to East Indians, blacks were a tiny minority surrounded by a white majority. And unlike the British working class, white Southerners were invested in domination. Slavery protected whites from the harshest work and provided them with economic security, status and privilege. The "peculiar institution" had transformed poor whites into gendarmes for white supremacy. Time and again whites demonstrated that they were willing and eager to defend their caste position at the expense of black life and freedom. Moreover, the geographic proximity of the whites facilitated their use of terror as a political tool. And use it they did. Emancipation made little difference. Whites resorted to wholesale violence to overthrow the biracial Reconstruction governments. In the years of de jure segregation that followed, white social and economic status continued to be predicated on black subjugation. Whites consciously benefited from a system that provided cheap black labor and exempted them from dangerous and demeaning work. The benefits of segregation constantly reinforced white loyalty to racism and violence; and while international opinion may have influenced the British peerage, it meant nothing to planters in the Mississippi delta, let alone "corn and `tater" whites in the piney woods.

It was these underlying material and social interests that made segregation impervious to moral appeal. Few in the United Kingdom believed that Indian Independence betokened the end of British economic security or culture. But southern society rested on white supremacy. The death of segregation meant the death of the old

social order. Segregationists were not far from the truth when they charged that integration was revolution. The new abolitionists were asking Southern whites for more than their hearts and minds: they were demanding their caste status and the privileges pertaining thereto. Little mystery, then, that nonviolence failed to evoke love and compassion in white hearts.

Gandhi had confronted a distant and demoralized enemy constrained by national and international opinion. African-Americans, in contrast, faced an omnipresent enemy, willing--if not eager--to use legal and vigilante violence. White racial identity depended on continued domination and violence, and, as events demonstrated, it would surrender to nothing less than violence. But the idealistic young CORE activists making their way into Jonesboro were not to be deterred by history or realpolitik.²³

The reality of violence, however, soon became a concern for the CORE task force. Police harassment had always been troublesome for civil rights activists in the South, and the Jonesboro police did occasionally tail activists during their voter registration visits in the countryside. But by Southern standards, Jonesboro's police department treated CORE reasonably well. Danny Mitchell described the police chief's policy toward CORE as, "I'm here to protect you . . . but we don't want any demonstrations."²⁴

²³In this respect, the black liberation movement more closely resembled the Moslem experience in India. Like their black counterparts in the U.S., Moslems were a despised minority violently subjugated by a numerically superior oppressor. It is noteworthy that the Islamic movement's strategy of violence in India resulted in political independence and self-determination, in the form of Pakistan. For a comparative study of nonviolence in two countries, see George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) especially pages 225-276.

²⁴Mitchell, "White Paper."

A graver danger was posed by Klan and other racist vigilantes. From the outset, the Freedom House was the target of menacing carloads of young whites cruising through the black community, shouting obscenities and threats. This type of harassment was not new. For years, whites, acting with impunity, would drive through the black "quarters" verbally harassing and physically assaulting black residents. The practice, referred to as "nigger knocking," was a time-honored tradition among whites in the rural South. But the presence of black and white civil rights activists in the community added a frenzied intensity to the ritual. It was not long before verbal assaults turned to violence. In one foreboding incident a gang of young whites broke several windows at the Freedom House. The black community responded to the attacks with a mix of concern and uncertainty. They had never been confronted with the challenge of defending strangers in their midst. Caution was the order of the day. A reckless display of armed self-defense might provoke whites to retaliate with deadly force.

The unwritten racial code of conduct in the South forbade blacks from using weapons for self-defense against white assaults. Whites reasoned that defensive weapons had offensive potential. The code also proscribed collective forms of self-defense, a prohibition no doubt stemming from ancient fears of bloody slave rebellions.

The black community in Jonesboro anxiously searched for a method of defending their charges without violating the racial code of conduct, but the imminent threat of violence left few alternatives. Within a few days, a small number of local black men began to quietly guard the CORE activists in their daily activities. Slowly they appeared, unarmed sentinels, silent and watchful. At first they did nothing more than sit

on the porch of the Freedom House, or follow the activists like quiet shadows as they went about their organizing work.²⁵

Among this initial group of guards was Earnest Thomas, a short, powerfully built twenty-nine-year-old black man who supported his five children as a papermill worker, mason, handyman and bar room gambler. Thomas' life centered on the institutions and amusements of small-town African-American life: he was an occasional churchgoer, a member of the Scottish Rite Masons, and a barroom hustler. Held at arms length by the "respectable" black middle class, Thomas nonetheless commanded community respect for his courage and martial skills. His street savvy and cool, intimidating demeanor earned him the nickname Chilly Willy. "Chilly was very firm," recalls Annie Purnell Johnson, a local CORE volunteer. "He didn't care. Whatever he said he was going to do, he did it." His determination was accented by his penchant for force. "He was violent too," says Johnson. "He could be very violent if he wanted to be. If you pushed his button, he *would* deliver."²⁶

Thomas had been a fighter all his life. It was a lesson he learned early in life. Racial segregation fought a relentless battle against human nature--against the instinctual longing for companionship and shared joy among members of the human race. Frequently the intimacy of everyday life tempted people to disregard the awkward rituals of segregation. In his youth, Thomas had frequented the local swimming hole in Jonesboro, a gentle creek that wound its way through the pines. Its tranquil waters

²⁵Catherine Patterson Mitchell, Hill interview.

²⁶Earnest Thomas, interview by author, 6, 20 February 1993, San Mateo, California, tape recording; Annie Purnell Johnson, interview by author, 15 November 1993, Jonesboro, Louisiana, tape recording.

welcomed children of all colors. Here black and white children innocently played together, splashing and dunking. At a distance, colors disappeared into a shadow silhouette of bobbing heads, the languid summer air disturbed only by occasional shrieks of joy.

Yet, inevitably nature surrendered to the mean habits of adult society. Thomas recalls that sometimes the whites would band together and swoop down on a handful of frolicking blacks, claiming the waters as the spoils of war. On other occasions, Thomas would join a charging army of whooping black warriors as they descended on the stream, scattering a gaggle of unsuspecting white boys. The swimming-hole wars of his youth provided Earnest Thomas with one enduring lesson: rights were secured by force more often than moral suasion.

Thomas attended high-school in Jonesboro through the 11th grade then dropped out and served a stint in the Air force during the Korean War. Like many young blacks in the South, military service dramatically changed his attitude toward Jim Crow. Three years and eight months as an airborne radio operator had afforded him brief and seductive glimpses of a world free of segregation. He met Northern blacks who, with better education and more opportunities, were increasingly impatient with the slow pace of change. Thomas absorbed their restless craving for freedom. The military also provided him, and thousands of other southern blacks, with the tools to realize this dream of freedom: leadership skills and an appreciation of the power of disciplined collective action. Discharged from the service, Thomas spurned the South and journeyed Northward to Chicago. He worked for one year at International Harvester, but soon returned to Jonesboro to raise a family.

Thomas was eager to work with CORE, but he had serious reservations about the nonviolent terms imposed by the young activists. He admired their devotion and energy, but the college students seemed dangerously deluded about the potential for terrorist violence. And CORE made it clear to Thomas that they were unwilling to compromise their stand on nonviolence.

If the CORE activists sounded like missionaries, there was a good reason. CORE was permeated with a religious style of organizing, characterized by an evangelical faith in doctrine and an unswerving belief in a bipolar world of good and evil. For the young CORE activists, nonviolence was more religion than strategy. And religious doctrine, as immutable truth, could not be compromised to suit the sinner. One either accepted or rejected the divinely inspired word. One was either saint or sinner.

Rather than negotiate a strategy with the black community, CORE's support was contingent on local people accepting the nonviolent creed. The creed could never fail the people; only the people could fail the creed. Faith was a pillar of CORE's organizing strategy. The idea that Klansmen could be converted contradicted all reason and experience and required an act of faith comparable to a belief in the divinity of Jesus. If black men resisted these nonviolent teachings, it was no cause to reconsider doctrine. Indeed, the resistance of the damned only confirmed the fallen state of mankind and the urgency of a new dispensation--one that would appear as enigmatic and paradoxical to mere mortals as did the teachings of Christ in his own time. Failure was a sure sign of success.²⁷

²⁷This uncompromising stance, in some measure, derived from nonviolence's categorical religious roots. Gandhi had cloaked his strategy in religious garb, imbuing it with moral authority that resonated with Judeo-Christian beliefs. CORE activists'

But like most black men in the South, Earnest Thomas thought it better to be damned than dead. He and the other men in the defense group politely resisted CORE's attempt to dictate the terms of the local movement.

Thomas quickly emerged as the leader of the defense group. No doubt his military training had accustomed him to organization. While other men would come and go, Thomas made it his responsibility to elevate the level of organization and instill discipline and order. During the day, the guards simply watched and kept their weapons concealed. But the night was different. The veil of darkness provided cover for hooded terrors. The guards knew that a show of weapons would discourage Klan violence. So the night brought the moon, the stars, and the guns.

The guns posed a dilemma for CORE from the very beginning. The defense group had no difficulty in accepting CORE's right to determine its own nonviolent strategy, and on the whole, they thought it an effective one. But they were not prepared to abdicate their responsibility to defend their community. They were not willing to

religious training predisposed them to believe that a single act could corrupt the spirit; that violence had corrupted society as original sin had corrupted man. The absolute, uncompromising nature of nonviolent creed corresponded to the Old Testament doctrine of the Covenant between the Jews and God. According to the Covenant, the Israelites were protected as long as they conformed to God's word. If the Chosen People broke the covenant, a wrathful God exacted his punishment. Salvation was won on terms of repentance and submission to the law.

Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha, suffering that redeems as it converts the enemy, also closely resembled the Christian concept of salvation on terms of repentance. Repentance required suffering, and conscious suffering, submitting to an assailant's violence, was a sign of God's grace. Nonviolence saved the devout as well as the heathen. On nonviolence, Christian doctrine, and religious symbolism, see Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and its Sources*, (New York: The Free Press, 1992) and Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

extend nonviolence to all aspects of the black freedom movement, particularly in the center of a Klan stronghold. That would be suicide. They were outnumbered two-to-one and the police offered no protection.

Underlying the conflict over nonviolence was a deeper issue of autonomy. Who would determine the local organizing strategy for the black movement? National organizations, with their imported strategy, dominated by a coalition of middle class blacks, organized labor, and white pacifists and liberals? Or the local community with their own strategy determined by local experience?

CORE initially won the philosophical argument, overcoming locals with their superior debating skills and the force of a coherent world view and strategy. Thomas and other grassroots leaders were less articulate and lacked the clear world view of their middle class saviors. But slowly "Chilly Willy" and his working class colleagues began to find words for their thoughts and gain confidence in their own judgement and opinions.

Thomas' quest for autonomy was not self-conscious and deliberate. But instinctively he and the defense group began to assert their authority over local matters. They wanted the right to defend their community with force if necessary. CORE balked at these terms and suggested a compromise in which the guards would conceal their weapons during the day. The debate found its way into many late-night discussions around the kitchen table in the Freedom House. Cathy Patterson recalls the activists admonishing Thomas: "Chilly, if you guys are going to be out there with guns, you have to hide them." And Thomas would ask why. "Because you're going to invoke violence," replied the activists. "If you have a gun, you have to be prepared to use it. And we don't

want people to get hurt.” Patterson recalls Thomas patiently listening to their arguments, and then answering firmly, “You’re stepping on *my* toes. *We’re* doing this. We know this town. We know these people. Just let us do it.”²⁸

CORE relented. “What happened was that Chilly Willy and them started going out with us,” recalls Ronnie Moore, and their position was, “O.K., you guys can be nonviolent if you want to . . . and we appreciate you being nonviolent. But we are not going to stand by and let these guys kill you.”²⁹

The defense group’s objection to the nonviolent code went beyond the issue of guard duty. Many of the men, including Thomas, declined to participate in any nonviolent direct action, including pickets and marches because of the rules of engagement set by CORE. “If you were attacked, if you were spat upon, if you were kicked or jeered, we were very clear that we were not to respond to that,” recalls Patterson. CORE quickly discovered that the black men of Jonesboro were unwilling to endure the humiliation attending these restrictions. “There was too much pride to do that,” says Patterson. Nonviolence required black men to passively endure humiliation and physical abuse—a bitter elixir for a group struggling to overcome servility and passivity. Paradoxically, nonviolence compelled black men to sacrifice their manhood and dignity in order to acquire it.³⁰

Nonviolence also demanded that black men forego their right to defend their families. This, too, tested the limits of forbearance. The institution of white supremacy

²⁸Catherine Patterson Mitchell, Hill interview.

²⁹Ronnie M. Moore, interview by author, 26 February 1993, New Orleans, tape recording.

³⁰Ibid; Thomas, Hill interview.

was a complex web of social and political customs, proscribed behaviors, government policies and laws. Some aspects of racism were more enduring than others. At its most innocuous, segregation was little more than demeaning symbolism. For the most part, blacks and whites drank the same water, ate the same foods and rode the same busses. But some racist practices were intolerable insults to black manhood.

Compromising the sanctity of family was one of those transgressions. "The things that go with racial segregation . . . you lived with that," says Cathy Patterson of separate seating and other peculiarities of physical segregation. "They were things you just had to accept." But violence against family and home violated the ancient right to a safe hearth and home. "When they saw their own children get hit or beaten," recalls Patterson, the men "reacted very differently." Nonviolence obliged black men to stand idly by as their children and wives were mercilessly beaten, a debasement that most black men would not tolerate. They clung tenaciously to their fragile claims to manhood and honor. It should have surprised no one that nonviolence ultimately discouraged black men from participating in the civil rights movement in the South, turning it into a movement of women and children. Black men, unlike their crusading saviors, understood that there was no equality without honor.

CORE began to slowly grasp the dilemma they had created for black men. The compromise with armed self-defense provoked "intense philosophical discussion and debates" within the CORE summer task force in Jonesboro. The controversy eventually led some activists, like Mike Lesser, to leave CORE. But for most activists, the palpable fear in Jonesboro was gradually eroding their faith in the grand intellectual theories. There was a conflict over the issue of nonviolence, says Patterson, but "there also was

enough fear that the conflict was more intellectual than it was real.” Patterson herself arrived at what she considered a principled compromise. “During the day I thought it was inappropriate to have anyone with us bearing weapons,” says Patterson. “But when it got dark, we were in a great deal of danger. I had no objections to their presence at night. We were defenseless at night.”³¹

Self-defense became an immediate concern as the movement shifted from voter registration to direct action anti-segregation demonstrations. CORE’s initial voter-registration drive provoked some harassment--generally limited to white teenagers driving through the community, shouting taunts. Most whites regarded CORE’s presence as a nuisance more than a dangerous menace. Voter registration organizing confined CORE activists to the black community, so the organizers seldom crossed paths with local whites. The subdued response by whites was understandable. Despite its symbolism, black voter registration posed little threat to white supremacy and the segregated caste system. Even if all blacks in Jonesboro were registered, they would comprise only one-third of the vote. At best, the black vote could be bartered for influence, but it would not fundamentally alter social relationships. White businesses would continue to thrive on segregated labor, white jobs would remain secure, and life would amble along as usual in the little mill town.

But desegregation was another matter. Segregation was the foundation of the social and labor systems of the South. Whites understood that desegregation challenged the system of privilege that ensured them the best jobs, housing, education and government services. If the segregation barriers fell, white workers lost substantially

³¹Catherine Patterson Mitchell, Hill interview.

more than a separate toilet. The conflict over segregation was ultimately a deadly contest for power--as Jonesboro blacks were soon to discover.

Chapter 2

The Art of Self-Defense

At the beginning of June 1964, the CORE task force in Jonesboro began to plan for direct action desegregation protests to test the new civil rights bill which would become effective in July. The prospect of a militant desegregation campaign similar to Birmingham provoked considerable anxiety in the black community. Many blacks feared that Jonesboro's tiny six-man police department would prove unwilling or incapable of protecting the activists. And it was increasingly clear that Earnest Thomas' informal defense group was an insufficient substitute for police protection.

Taking the initiative to avert a disaster was a newcomer to the black community, Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick. At six-feet-four-inches, Kirkpatrick was an imposing figure. A stern visage and stentorian basso voice gave him a commanding presence and natural leadership qualities. Kirkpatrick arrived in Jonesboro in 1963, an ambitious young high school athletics coach from nearby Homer in Claiborne Parish. In Homer, Kirkpatrick had led his teams to two state championships. Now he had advanced his career as the new physical education teacher and athletics coach at Jackson Parish High School, the black high school in Jonesboro. Though he had no formal religious training, Kirkpatrick had assumed the title of Reverend, a common practice in his day. Kirkpatrick's father had provided him with a religious upbringing, and the elder

Kirkpatrick himself was a Church of God in Christ sanctified preacher who had built an impressive ministry of three churches in Claiborne Parish.¹

Kirkpatrick's optimism about his new position quickly gave way to disappointment. The conditions at Jackson Parish High School were abominable. Jackson High offered no foreign languages. A new library was filled with empty shelves. Textbooks were tattered hand-me-downs from the white schools. Students were routinely dispatched as gardeners to maintain the Superintendent's personal lawn. The only vocational offerings were home economics and agriculture, a curriculum that condemned blacks to lives as maids and sharecroppers. It was these conditions and the threat of Klan violence that motivated Kirkpatrick to become active in the local civil rights movement.²

Kirkpatrick and a group of fellow black leaders began discussing the idea of a black volunteer auxiliary police squad that would assist police in monitoring Klan harassment in the black community. Unlike Thomas' informal self-defense group, the auxiliary police unit would be officially sanctioned, providing legitimacy and respect. It was a bold yet fiscally attractive proposal. The city would enjoy added police protection at no additional expense during the desegregation tests.

Kirkpatrick approached Chief of Police Peevy with a formal request for a special volunteer black police squad to patrol the black community. Much to their surprise, Chief Peevy accepted the proposal and promptly deputized Kirkpatrick and several other blacks, including Henry Amos, Percy Lee Bradford, Ceola Qualls and Eland Harris.

¹Kirkpatrick, Hall interview.

²Ibid.

Peevy issued the squad an old police car with radio, guns, clubs and handcuffs, and local white merchants donated money to outfit the squad in crisp new uniforms. The Police Chief assured them that their police powers extended to whites as well as blacks, and that they could arrest whites if necessary. It was a small development, but Jonesboro had made history by creating the first and only volunteer black police force in the modern civil rights movement.³

Chief Peevy's decision to form the squad appeared uncharacteristically enlightened for a white lawman in North Louisiana, and many in the black community questioned his motives. Some, like Earnest Thomas, suspected that Peevy planned to use the squad as a convenient and politic way to discipline and control the civil rights movement: "They were looking for some black policeman to do their dirty work," scoffs Thomas.⁴

Kirkpatrick understood the dilemma confronting him. He knew that Chief Peevy expected the black police squad to discourage demonstrations and arrest civil rights workers. But Kirkpatrick thought that, despite these limitations, the squad could provide a modicum of protection for the black community and CORE.

It was not the only dilemma Kirkpatrick confronted. Though a respected community leader, Kirkpatrick also occupied jobs that obligated him to the white power structure. He was employed by the public schools as a teacher-coach and also employed by the city as a part-time manager of the public swimming pool. His position as de facto

³Charles White, interview by author, 11 November, 1993, Jonesboro, Louisiana, tape recording.

⁴Thomas, Hill interview.

chief of the black police placed him in a potentially compromising position. Local laws and courts mandated segregation and gave police impunity to disrupt civil rights protests. In his new role, Kirkpatrick would be thrust in the embarrassing position of enforcing segregation laws and thwarting lawful protests. Many agreed with Earnest Thomas' observation that Kirkpatrick was wearing "too many hats."⁵

Among the members of the new police squad were several men who had already worked with Thomas in the informal defense group. They were mature and respected community leaders, like Bradford and Amos, who had been active in the Voters League. All of the volunteers were relatively independent of the white power structure. Amos owned a gas station, Harris was a barber, and Bradford owned a cab service and also worked at the mill. The black police squad began patrolling the community at night in June 1964, assuming many of the duties of the informal defense group. The patrol appeared to deter harassment, and aside from a few incidents, June was relatively quiet.

At the beginning of the Summer, Cathy Patterson and Danny Mitchell were joined by two more black CORE task force organizers, Fred Brooks, a black college student from Tennessee, and Willie Mellion, a young black recruit from Plaquemine, Louisiana. The expanded task force continued its work with the Voters League, concentrating on voter registration. But the implementation of the Civil Rights Act's public accommodations provisions in July 1965 radically changed the strategy of the civil rights movement. Previously CORE's summer project had centered on voter registration, which liberal contributors and foundations had supported financially. Liberals viewed

⁵Ibid.

the vote as key to transforming the South and also hoped that new black voters would strengthen the Democratic Party in the upcoming Fall presidential race.⁶

But for most blacks in Jonesboro, voter registration was more symbolism than substance. As July drew nigh, young people in particular grew increasingly impatient with the racial barriers to education, public accommodations and employment. They importuned the CORE activists with demands for direct action protest to test the public accommodations provisions of the Act.

Local people were not the only impatient ones. On June 22, Fred Brooks, the irrepressible and buoyant young CORE organizer from Tennessee, boldly flaunted segregation laws by drinking from the "whites only" water fountain in the Jackson Parish Court House. Deputy W. D. McBride hustled Brooks into the Sheriff Loe's office and ordered him not to repeat the offense. Brooks spun on his heels, headed toward the fountain and defiantly drank from it again.⁷

Deputy McBride, flustered and seething, ordered Brooks back into his office and hastily summoned Kirkpatrick in his capacity as a police deputy. It was the first test of the black police. When Kirkpatrick arrived, a furious Sheriff Loe cornered Kirkpatrick. "You'd better tell this boy something about drinking from these white water fountains,"

⁶Danny Mitchell, "VEP Field Report," 24 June 1964, 124-770, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Papers, microfilm, ARC.

⁷Danny Mitchell, "A Special Report on Jonesboro, Louisiana," July 1964, box 1, folder 10, Jackson Parish Files, CORE Papers, SHSW [hereinafter cited as CORE(Jackson Parish)].

steamed the Sheriff. "I'm not gonna have this. I'm gonna peel his damn head." The incident ended without an arrest.⁸

Relations with law enforcement continued to deteriorate as CORE stepped up its desegregation protests. On July 4, a sheriff's deputy detained Robert Weaver, a CORE task force worker, and took him to the police station for interrogation and finger printing. Sheriff Loe lectured Weaver that blacks did not need CORE since they could register to vote in Jackson Parish. Loe warned Weaver to leave town by morning and one deputy threatened to "bust his head" if he saw Weaver again.⁹

Ronnie Moore and Mike Lesser became the next victims of the terror campaign. On July 8 the two organizers left Jonesboro for the short one hour drive to Monroe. As they left town, they noticed three carloads of whites abruptly pull onto the highway behind them. Lesser nervously watched in the rear view mirror as the cars trailed behind. He and Moore were seasoned activists who understood the danger posed by the stalking caravan. The two tensely discussed their predicament. With rugged terrain skirting both sides of the road, the only option was to stay on the blacktop. Lesser pushed the accelerator in an effort to outrun the pursuers, but one car in the caravan suddenly passed them, blocking their escape. Moore and Lesser frantically debated whether to ram one of the cars from behind. As the seconds ticked away the two continued to speed deeper into the pine forest and further away from the relative security of Jonesboro. Moore decided

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

that they had to turn around. He ordered Lesser to execute a quick U-turn in the middle of the road.¹⁰

Lesser slammed the breaks and wheeled the car around, placing their vehicle on a collision course with the two remaining pursuers who were blocking both lanes. Ronnie Moore recalls the fatalistic mood. "We decided at that moment that we were going back to the freedom house, either in one piece or with one of those cars." Lesser dropped the accelerator to the floor and streaked toward the oncoming cars. At the last moment one of the pursuing cars veered to the side and was sideswiped as Lesser and Moore sped by. "That was the first game of chicken that I probably ever played," remembers Moore.¹¹

Lesser and Moore sped back to Jonesboro, reaching speeds of one-hundred miles an hour. From the safety of the Freedom House, they called the sheriff's office to file a complaint. Within minutes, Sheriff Loe and members of the black police squad arrived. Loe had already received a complaint from the whites who Moore and Lesser had eluded. To their amazement, Loe ordered the black deputy to arrest Lesser and Moore for reckless driving and leaving the scene of an accident. The deputy refused and Loe eventually departed. Fearing another attack on Lesser and Moore, members of the black squad provided the CORE activists with an armed escort back to Monroe that evening. Sheriff Loe's attempt to have the black deputy arrest Lesser was the first time that the black police failed to perform according to his expectations. It was clear that the squad was not going to be witting accomplices in repression.

¹⁰This account taken from Ibid. and Moore, Hill interview.

¹¹Ibid.

The campaign of harassment against CORE increased in the days following the implementation of the Civil Rights Act. On July 11, six CORE task force members including Brooks, Weaver, Yates and Patterson were stopped by Jackson and Lincoln Parish law enforcement officials along with the Louisiana State Police. Under the pretext of investigating a robbery, the five were photographed and physically threatened before officials impounded and searched the car.¹²

Emboldened by the conduct of law officials, racist vigilantes also escalated their attacks on the movement. On July 13, three whites in a car confronted CORE workers in the front yard of the Freedom House. Harassing the pacifists had become routine for the young hooligans, but on this occasion they were startled by their reception. In a matter of minutes, three of the black police, Kirkpatrick, Eland Harris and Henry Amos arrived. The police ordered the whites to leave. The young men bristled at the command coming from the black officers, but they eventually retreated, punctuating their departure with a threat to return with 125 whites to "make trouble." As word of the threat spread in the black community, dozens of volunteers flooded into the streets with guns. The show of force deterred additional attacks for the day.¹³

The spontaneous show of armed support for the black police reassured them that they could rely on a substantial body of men to complement their ranks when necessary. Ironically, by refusing to protect the black community, the white establishment had inadvertently forced the black community to arm themselves and take responsibility for their own defense.

¹²"Chronology on Jonesboro, July 1964 - January 1965"; Mitchell, "White Paper."

¹³"Chronology on Jonesboro"; *New York Times*, 21 February 1965.

If the harassment was intended to dissuade CORE and the community from demonstrating, the strategy failed woefully. Young blacks were even more determined to test the Civil Rights Act through direct action. The shift from voter registration was reflected in CORE's decision to reorganize into two sections: a direct-action program, coordinated by Fred Brooks, and a voter registration section supervised by Patterson. Two principal targets for desegregation were selected in July: the city swimming pool and the public library.¹⁴

The segregation practices at the public library particularly vexed young blacks. Although their tax dollars supported the library, blacks were prohibited from using the library building and obtaining library loan cards. Their only access to books was the periodic visit by the bookmobile. The library test began with a letter to the head librarian from the Voters League requesting access to library cards. When no response came, a group of young protestors lead by CORE entered the library and attempted to obtain cards on July 22. Within minutes, Sheriff Loe arrived and ordered the protestors out of the library and the doors locked. The protestors left peaceably but renewed their efforts the next day, this time picketing outside the library. Law enforcement officials were once again summoned and promptly arrested 24 people for parading without a permit.¹⁵

Police told the protestors they were being arrested in response to a complaint lodged by a mortuary business located across the street from the library. The proprietor had complained that the chanting protestors were "offending" his deceased clients. The

¹⁴Mitchell, "White Paper."

¹⁵Ibid.

protestors would later muse that it was the first time in history that someone had been arrested for "disturbing the dead."¹⁶

The direct action demonstrations increasingly posed problems for Kirkpatrick's black police squad. Authorities were determined to use the squad to enforce the illegal segregation laws. The predicament came to a head on July 29. As part of the first concerted public accommodations tests, a group of young protestors converged on the M & D Restaurant and Cafeteria in downtown Jonesboro. The restaurant owner, Margaret Temple, refused service to the testers at the front entrance, ordering them to purchase their food at the back door, as was the custom. When the testers refused, Temple angrily shouted, "Y'all damn niggers ought to be out trying to find work to do, because aint no damn nigger coming through my front door as long as I'm running this place."¹⁷

The protestors and cafe owner were at a standoff until Kirkpatrick and another black officer arrived. Temple demanded that Kirkpatrick "come get these damn niggers," but Kirkpatrick ignored her order and, instead, turned to the protestors and asked if they were disturbing the peace. The group responded in unison with a resounding "No!" The commotion quickly attracted a crowd of whites, including an angry elderly white man wielding a stick. Kirkpatrick confronted the white man and stood his ground. The stand off lasted several minutes until a second black officer intervened and abruptly ordered the protestors to "move out."¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid.; Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill interview.

¹⁷On this incident, see "The M and D Restaurant and Cafeteria, July 29, 1964," CORE(Jackson Parish), GMHP; Kirkpatrick, Hall interview.

¹⁸Ibid.

Within a few hours of the restaurant protest, the black police faced another test. CORE moved to its next target of the day, the "whites-only" municipal swimming pool. Testers arrived at 2:00 P.M. and found the pool locked and several parish deputies and city police officers waiting alongside the street. When the pool opened shortly thereafter, the testers attempted to enter but were turned away. Several police officers gathered at the pool entrance, including Kirkpatrick. Police Chief Peevy commanded Kirkpatrick to give the order to the protestors to leave. Kirkpatrick complied, twice asking the protestors to leave. The protestors refused to budge. Peevy grew impatient and, as Kirkpatrick watched helplessly, ordered the white police to arrest fifteen protestors, ten of whom were juveniles. Two mothers of the juveniles were also arrested on charges of "contributing to the delinquency of a minor": allowing their children to participate in the protest. The "contributing" charge was subsequently used to arrest virtually the entire CORE staff in the days that followed. During the next three days of protest, thirty-nine protestors were arrested.¹⁹

The black police had not fared well in their first outing. They had been forced to disband a lawful protest at the M & D restaurant, and then compelled to assist Sheriff Loe in breaking up the swimming pool demonstration. The protest incidents underscored the squad's contradictory and untenable position in the community. It was clear that city officials planned to use them primarily to enforce segregation and squelch protests.

¹⁹Mitchell, "White Paper"; Ed Hollander, "Jonesboro Swimming Pool Arrests," 29 July 1964, Jonesboro, Louisiana, CORE(Jackson Parish), GMHP; Willie Swafford, Jr., "A Statement by Willie Swafford, Jr. of Jonesboro, July 1964, Jonesboro, Louisiana," CORE(Jackson Parish), GMHP; *Louisiana Weekly*, 31 July 1964.

Some blacks in Jonesboro began to wonder if they had merely traded vigilante repression for black police repression.

The wave of protests and arrests quickly brought the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan into the fray. After the day of arrests and turmoil, Jonesboro's black neighborhood was plunged into complete darkness when electricity was mysteriously cut off -- ostensibly to repair the power system. In the darkness Earnest Thomas joined a few friends in front of a local hotel. As the men talked and joked Thomas noticed a flashing red light in the distance. As it grew nearer, Thomas recognized that it was a police car leading a caravan of more than fifty vehicles. Children ran yelling with excitement to greet the parade. But as the caravan grew nearer, Thomas caught his first glimpse of the hooded men who filled each car, tossing leaflets into the street. Thomas was dumbstruck: the assistant chief of police was in the lead car escorting the Klan through the black community. As each car passed Thomas noticed that the license tags had been covered to conceal the identity of the Klansmen. But it was a small town and Thomas and others easily recognized many of the cars as belonging to town locals, including several upstanding white businessmen and even the owner of a local grocery store in the black community.

The site of the hooded convoy sent a shudder of fear through many of the older blacks. But the children, oblivious to the danger, grabbed the swirling leaflets and brought them to their anxious parents. The Klan leaflets warned blacks to distance themselves from CORE and the civil rights movement.

Though the Klan convoy frightened the old, the invasion only further incensed the younger men. A delegation of black men, including Thomas and some of the black

police, drove directly to Police Chief Peevy's house and waited for him to return home. When Chief Peevy arrived, the delegation demanded to know why the police department had escorted the Klan through the black community. Peevy responded stiffly that his department routinely escorted funerals, and he considered the Klan parade as nothing different. The black men were not persuaded. Thomas recalls that they bluntly told Peevy that it would not happen again, "Because *we* won't allow that to happen again. We told him straight up that there would not ever be a passing through the community like that." If it did happen again, "there was going to be some killing going on." The Chief listened stoically in the yard. If he did not respond in word, he did in action; Peevy never again provided an escort for the Klan.²⁰

The Klan convoy was only the beginning of the Klans well-planned night of terror. In addition to the convoy, the nightriders spread across Jackson Parish and dotted the landscape with a score of blazing crosses. A frightening situation was also unfolding at the Court House. Under the cloak of darkness the civil rights protestors held at the Parish jail were besieged by a mob of approximately one-hundred armed whites. They had converged on the jail with their rifles and were threatening the prisoners.²¹

Local CORE activists hastily called Marvin Rich, CORE's attorney in New York, and apprised him of the dangerous mob scene at the Parish jail. Rich immediately contacted Lee White, a presidential assistant, and roused him from his slumber. White, in turn, contacted the Justice Department and arranged for the FBI to intervene. The mob

²⁰Thomas, Hill interview; Kirkpatrick, Hall interview; Charles White, Hill interview.

²¹The jail incident account draws on Rudwick and Meier, *CORE*, pp. 267-268 and *Louisiana Weekly*, 31 July 1964.

was soon dispersed and several armed black men surreptitiously stood guard the rest of the night from adjacent rooftops.

The Klan parade and the mob scene at the Parish jail were the last straw. These were dark days for the civil rights movement across the South. In nearby Philadelphia, Mississippi, the National Guard was combing the woods for Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, the civil rights workers murdered by the Klan--with police complicity. Whatever trust the Jonesboro black community once had for the local police had been extinguished by the recent police harassment and collusion with the Klan.

Moreover, the black police squad had been helpless against the mob action and the Klan caravan. Despite their efforts to the contrary, the squad had become the unwitting tool of the white power structure in neutralizing the protest movement. Kirkpatrick had managed to finesse several encounters, but he could not overcome problems posed by the contradictory role of the squad: in the final analysis, their authority was not derived from the black community, but from the white establishment that supported segregation. It was naive to assume that the custodians of white supremacy would willingly organize and arm their own grave diggers. The only reliable means of defense would be an independent self-defense organization, exclusively accountable to the black community. Power had to be seized, not bequeathed.

The arrogant and insulting intrusion of the Klan in the black community had left many of the black men angry and impatient for action. The practical issue of protecting the community was paramount, but the Klansmen's caravan was more symbol than substance. For many of the black men, the issue was primarily honor, not safety.

Within a few days, a determined group of approximately twenty black men met at the Union hall to discuss forming a self-defense group. The meeting brought together the two groups that had been active in armed defense: Kirkpatrick's black police squad and Thomas' informal vigilance group. The two groupings were virtually indistinguishable, with common goals and overlapping membership.²²

The black police had not been a complete failure. They had kept nightriders out of the black community and had probably deterred police brutality during arrests that they witnessed. The community understood Kirkpatrick's dilemma. Annie Johnson remembers Kirkpatrick as an activist who "could get something started if you listened to him," but also someone who played contradictory roles that sometimes placed him "in between." "But he still took care of his people," says Johnson.²³

Forming the squad had raised community expectations about their rights. That the city had acceded to the request for black police appeared to validate the black community's claim for the right of self-defense. Once conceded, a right is difficult to revoke. Whatever its limitations, the black police squad had consolidated a group of leaders committed to self-defense and trained them in police techniques and modern communications. In effect, the City had inadvertently provided blacks with an opportunity for training in leadership and self-defense. In their effort to subordinate the black community, the white power structure had helped sew the seeds of independence.

²²The precise date of this first meeting is unclear. It probably occurred July 31, 1964. The account of this meeting is taken from, Thomas, Hill interview; White, Hill interview; Kirkpatrick, Hill interview; and Harvey Johnson, interview by author, 14 November 1993, Jonesboro, Louisiana, tape recording.

²³Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill interview.

At the meeting following the Klan caravan, chaired by Kirkpatrick, the most pressing item on the agenda was arranging for increased patrols and coordinating assignments and communication. The Klan parade had caught the community unprepared. Protecting the Freedom House and the community would no longer be left to an informal decision-making process. The primary outcome of the meeting was an organized self-defense group to complement the black police. Unlike the black police, this group would be free to operate as it pleased and beholden to no government agency. Several developments would have to transpire before the organization crystallized, and it would be another six months before the group agreed on a name, the Deacons of Defense and Justice, and adopted a formal leadership structure.²⁴

By the beginning of August, Jonesboro's black community had two security units working closely together: the black police squad and the new self-defense group. The black police squad continued to patrol the community as the new defense group tightened security measures, organizing sentries at the freedom house, escorting CORE workers as they registered voters, and patrolling the community as well. Volunteers had conducted similar activities in the past, but now security was better organized and more diligently attended to. The defense group posted guards at key community entrances and used CB radios to coordinate security. Earnest Thomas made regular guard duty assignments, recruiting from the shift workers at the paper mill.

²⁴Several published sources mistakenly cite this July 31, 1964 meeting as the official beginning of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. The meeting was certainly the impetus for the Deacons, but the organization did not develop a name, organizational identity and formal structure until November 1964. Throughout its life, the organization interchangeably used the name Deacons *of* Defense and Justice and Deacons *for* Defense and Justice. In this manuscript I will use the latter.

Armed with the new defense group and a renewed sense of determination, the community launched a second desegregation offensive in early August. Fred Brooks led a group of five protestors in an assault on the Jonesboro Public library. The testers were nervous, given that the previous library protest had resulted in twenty-four arrests. Within minutes Sheriff's deputy James Van Beasley and another deputy arrived on the scene, demanding that the group "move out." When the protestors stood their ground, Van Beasley returned with a menacing police dog, forcing the group to hastily retreat across the street where they stood quietly. Van Beasley pursued the group across the street and ordered them to "scatter." Kirkpatrick and Eland Harris arrived shortly and began negotiating with Brooks and Van Beasley. They were soon joined by Danny Mitchell. Unable to reach an agreement, the protestors, many of them children, returned to the library with the deputies in pursuit with snarling police dogs. Kirkpatrick stopped the deputies and warned them not to use the dogs on the children. The deputies hesitated. Finally, Van Beasley retreated with the dogs, but later arrested several of the protestors for disturbing the peace.²⁵

Unlike previous encounters, this time Kirkpatrick and the black police stood firm against the white deputies at the library protest. As time passed, Kirkpatrick increasingly asserted his authority as a police officer, even using his police radio to chastise white officers for using racist language on the police band.

The formation of the defense group reflected a profound change in the thinking of blacks in Jackson Parish. A new sense of entitlement and a new combativeness were

²⁵ Will Palmer, Jr., "A Statement by Will Palmer Jr. of Jonesboro," 3 August 1964, CORE(Jackson Parish), GMHP.

emerging in black consciousness. These changes were evident in men and women alike. Shortly after the defense unit formed, the Klan attempted to light a cross at the home of Reverend Y. D. Jackson in rural Jackson Parish. As soon as the torch touched the cross, shots rang out. It was Reverend Jackson's wife unloading her gun at the startled Klansmen. The frightened night riders beat a hasty retreat.²⁶

The white robe and hood were losing their mystique in Jonesboro.

²⁶Reverend Y. D. Jackson, "Statement by Y. D. Jackson." 4 August 1964, CORE(Jackson Parish), GMHP.

Chapter 3

The Justice and Defense Club

August brought a close to CORE's summer project. The task force was disbanded and all but one CORE activist returned home. Danny Mitchell left for his graduate studies at Syracuse University. Cathy Patterson headed for Florida A&M, and eventually transferred to Syracuse where she and Mitchell were married in 1965. Those who decided to stay with CORE, like Bill Yates and Ruthie Wells, were dispersed around the state. The only organizer remaining in Jonesboro was the energetic young Fred Brooks. Brooks was a bright and eager organizer, but sustaining the Jonesboro campaign was a daunting task for the inexperienced teenager.

By most standards, CORE's Summer Project in Jonesboro had been a failure. Though voter registration had been increased, the task force had failed to desegregate the library, swimming pool, and almost all public accommodations. Neither had they succeeded in building a community organization that could survive CORE's departure. Thirty years later Cathy Patterson expressed her disappointment tersely: "I think we left Jonesboro a worse place."¹

¹Catherine Patterson Mitchell, Hill interview.

Despite their failures in Jonesboro, CORE had inadvertently made one significant accomplishment: they had facilitated the formation of the first formally organized paramilitary organization in the modern civil rights movement. CORE's tolerance for self-defense had contributed to the formation of Jonesboro's permanent self-defense organization. Even the CORE activists seemed to recognize that the defense group had taken on a life of its own. "The group protects the community from acts of violence by white terrorists," wrote Mitchell in his final report on Jonesboro. "It is a well organized group that is mobile," and has "acted as a preventative factor during the period when tension was the highest." But Mitchell reserved judgment on the prospects of the group "insofar as they have not been tested under fire."²

By September the task force was gone, leaving the daunting task of organizing to the irrepressible Fred Brooks. Brooks' chances for success were limited by his inexperience and an organizing strategy that evoked little enthusiasm. The community showed little interest in voter registration, though CORE had made voter registration a priority in anticipation of the fall presidential elections. Brooks followed instructions in his attempt to set up a Kindergarten and Freedom School, but the community displayed even less interest in these self-help projects. In truth, segregation and discrimination remained the paramount issue for community people. In Jonesboro, as in thousands of other small Southern towns, the Civil Rights Act had virtually no effect on segregation.

Why did CORE continue to pursue voter registration and self-help projects despite local indifference? The answer lies with the changing priorities of the national

²Mitchell, "White Paper."

civil rights organizations. By the Fall of 1964, most of the mainstream civil rights groups had concluded that direct action protest against segregation had lost its effectiveness. The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act had made equal rights the law of the land, and many black leaders expected Washington to enforce the Act as they turned their attention to broader issues of voting rights and poverty. The new civil rights strategy was shifting focus from civil to economic equality. And there was a greater emphasis on gaining political power through voting rights. The battle had moved from the picket line to the ballot box.

The reasoning behind this strategic shift was understandable. In 1964 the eyes of the nation were focussed on the heated presidential race between Lyndon Johnson and conservative Barry Goldwater. Goldwater, the Republican nominee, had opposed the Civil Rights Act, and many black leaders believed that the presidential contest was critical to the future of the black movement. There was also widespread fear of a white backlash against the civil rights protests, a development that could only benefit the Republicans. With these problems weighing heavily on their minds, the national civil rights organizations subordinated local struggles to the new national agenda. Black salvation would now be found in the Oval Office--not in the streets.³

But resistance to desegregation in the South created a different strategic imperative for local movements, and Jonesboro was no exception. On October 9, 1964, Chief Peevy announced that the City of Jonesboro was dismantling the black police

³For a characteristic African-American perspective on the civil rights movement in the Fall of 1964, see "Worst of Racial Strife Over in South, Some Say," *Jet*, 15 October 1964.

squad. Peevy explained the decision by noting that with CORE's departure demonstrations had subsided and the black deputies were no longer needed. The black community responded to the announcement with a sense of betrayal and anger.

Many in the black community believed that Peevy had capitulated to pressure from the white community. They knew that most whites disapproved of black men armed with guns and badges. The black police had not proved to be dependable minions of the Police Chief either, having refused to arrest and intimidate black protestors. Whites were also incensed when Kirkpatrick used his police powers to defy white racists and chastise white officers.⁴

The black community responded quickly to Chief Peevy's announcement, circulating a petition and organizing a march demanding that the black police squad be reinstated. But their protests were to no avail. Kirkpatrick and his fellow deputies found themselves without an organization. With the squad disbanded, the community turned to the defense group for protection. Ironically, in an attempt to disarm the black community, the City fathers had, in effect, forced blacks to arm themselves--and this time free of external constraints of law or government. An informant would later tell the FBI that the primary catalyst for the paramilitary group, the Deacons for Defense and Justice, was the city government's decision to disband the black police.⁵

But the Deacons did not crystallize overnight. There were formidable obstacles to converting the defense group into a viable organization. Foremost was complacency and

⁴Kirkpatrick, Hall interview

⁵Letterhead Memorandum, March 25, 1965, FBI-Deacons File, No. 157-2466-13.

individualism. Creating a new organization required effort. It upset old routines, disturbed the comfortable anonymity of everyday life, and called on individuals to subordinate individual needs to community interest. Any new organization could upset the social and political arrangements in the community. Leaders had to be chosen, inspiring jealousy and factionalizing.

And there were vexing political concerns. Never had a black community in the South formed an organization that clearly contradicted the orthodox creed of nonviolence. There was a hint of blasphemy in elevating self-defense to an organizational form. Like sin, armed self-defense was practiced more than it was confessed. Through an unspoken agreement, black leaders had protected the movement's nonviolent image by downplaying armed self-defense activities. Better that protection be left to silent men in the shadows of the movement.

But it was primarily the lack of organizational skills that prevented the defense group from becoming a viable organization. Most of the group's members were in the habit of joining organizations, not forming them. The group had met throughout the summer but had failed to develop an organizational and funding structure capable of sustaining them through the inevitable hardships of the movement--a structure that would also provide the wherewithal to expand to other communities. The men were understandably wary of collecting dues, electing officers, and taking responsibility for a new organization. They had the will but not the way. The solution to their dilemma would shortly arrive from Nyack, New York.

Charlie Fenton descended from two generations of white policemen in Nyack, New York. An authoritarian upbringing only succeeded in exciting a rebellious spirit in

the young Fenton. Iconoclastic, even as a teenager, by the time Fenton was sixteen-years-old he had converted to pacifism and dropped out of high school. To escape from home, Fenton joined the Navy on his seventeenth birthday in 1958. He volunteered for the Hospital Corp, assuming he would be armed with nothing more dangerous than a bedpan. He had not anticipated that even corpsman were required to complete boot camp. When handed a rifle in bootcamp and ordered to fire, Fenton balked. His protest cost him fourteen days in the brig.⁶

After four years service as a medical corpsman, Fenton was discharged from the Navy and found his way to San Francisco. The Bay area was a CORE stronghold, and Fenton soon joined the organization and volunteered for CORE's 1964 summer project. The nonviolence training and the bay city's contagious political ferment had transformed Fenton, in his own words, into a "a real gung-ho revolutionary."⁷

Fenton completed a month of training at the CORE center in Plaquemine, Louisiana in May of 1964, and then was assigned to the Monroe project in the northern part of the state. His organizing in Monroe was uneventful, and Fenton returned to San Francisco at the end of the summer when project funds ran out. By October he was eager to return to organizing in the South, and a call to CORE's Richard Haley in New Orleans brought an invitation to return to revive the Jonesboro project. By the first week of November, Fenton had joined Mike Lesser in Monroe. With the Philadelphia, Mississippi murders fresh in their minds, Lesser and Fenton waited for nightfall to make

⁶Charles Fenton, interview by author, 19 February 1965, Memphis, Tennessee, tape recording.

⁷Ibid.

the journey to Jonesboro. They wove through back roads and soon pulled into the back yard of CORE's little Freedom House on Cedar street.

Fenton was both startled and distressed by what he saw. "I got out of the car and realized that I was surrounded, *absolutely surrounded* in an armed camp. They were on top of the roofs, they were under the building . . . they were all around the buildings." The defense group had turned out in full force to welcome Fenton. Fenton perused the scene and slowly walked around the front of the building and onto the porch. The men warmly greeted him with shotguns and rifles in tow. Inside the door Fenton spied several additional rifles leaning against the wall. The effervescent Fred Brooks welcomed Fenton and Lesser and explained that the men had heard that Fenton was arriving and wanted to honor him by organizing the best protection that they could offer. "I was impressed," said Fenton, "but I was not very happy."⁸

Fenton wasted little time expressing his dissatisfaction. "Well, the very first night I was there I told them that I didn't like the guns in the house," recalls Fenton. Somewhat bewildered and dismayed, the men honored Fenton's request and slowly left the house. Some never returned. Fenton wondered if he had made the right decision. Years later he acknowledged the impertinence of his edict to the townspeople. "Here was this snotty nose white boy," Fenton recalled wistfully, "coming to the middle of their war and telling them that I didn't like their weapon of choice."⁹

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

Within a few days Fenton realized that his strict adherence to pacifism was preventing him from organizing the local men. The men were not going to subject themselves to humiliation and physical abuse simply to conform with Fenton's philosophy. And without the men, Fenton's front line protest troops would be women and children. The use of children on marches had stirred controversy during the Birmingham campaign of 1963, but the practice had become widely accepted in the movement by 1965. Fenton deeply opposed the tactic. He was not willing to use children as shock troops against the police and Klan.

Fenton's change of heart was also spurred on by local black leaders. During his first days in Jonesboro, several black leaders had pulled Fenton aside and implored him to be more flexible on the issue of weapons. They told Fenton that the men felt naked without their guns and helpless to assist him "the way they want to be able to do." Fenton was discovering that the black community had their own strategy, inchoate and expressed in action more than in word, but nevertheless, a strategy. They wanted the right to control their movement, even if it contradicted CORE's precepts. Fenton found himself in the dilemma of choosing between democracy and principle. He chose democracy.¹⁰

¹⁰By 1964, many CORE activists, along with Fenton, were growing disenchanted with the nonviolent strategy's missionary style and CORE's inability to establish permanent community organizations. There was a movement inside the organization to shift to a more spontaneous strategy that allowed the community to determine the goals and tactics of local movements, even if it meant abandoning voter registration and desegregation activities. This spontanist strategy became official CORE policy by the January, 1965. One document widely circulated in CORE clearly delineated this debate: "Who Decides," A reprint of an article by Jimmy Garrett...from THE MOVEMENT, April 1965" box 1, file 9, Bogalusa Project Files, CORE Papers, [hereinafter cited as CORE(Bogalusa)], SHSW. See also, Ronnie Moore, "Discussion Draft on Louisiana Project," January, 1965, box 4, folder 2, CORE(SRO). Moore argues that, "Rather than institutors of pre-selected programs, the staff should present the full array of alternatives

During the civil rights movement, there were invariably two strategies competing for the loyalty of the community: an explicit, coherent nonviolent strategy imported by national organizations; and an implicit, inchoate strategy revealed in the attitudes and behaviors of the community. The significance of the Deacons is that, for the first time, a local organization gave a coherent voice to an explicit alternative strategy—one that had previously been implied in the behavior of the community.

Fenton did not abandon his initial goal to form a nonviolent civic group in Jonesboro. Instead, he opted for a two-phase plan. In the first phase, he would help organize a formal self-defense organization. This involved helping the local defense group structure its organization and clarify its goals and program. Once he had gained the confidence of the group, Fenton planned a second phase in which he would gently move the group toward nonviolent community organizing. Fenton hoped that the group would “figure out things they could do for me that didn’t have to have a gun.” In the interim, Fenton would maintain the appearances of nonviolence by requesting that the men not carry their weapons inside the Freedom House.¹¹

Fenton set out energetically to organize a “protective association” that combined activism with self-defense. He arranged a meeting at the Masonic hall where the men would “feel comfortable with their guns.” The first meeting was on a crisp Tuesday night in November 1965.¹²

and allow the community to shape its individual project.”

¹¹Fenton, Hill interview.

¹²Ibid.

The meeting proved chaotic and tense. The gathering brought together a broad range of people with conflicting strategies and political temperaments. There was, as always, the element of fear. Some in attendance were nervous that their names might be leaked to the police or the Klan. Others questioned if the community even needed a new organization; weren't things fine as they were? Others protested that "as soon as we call ourselves something, then somebody will say that we'll have to have dues." And so it went. But there were strong advocates for action, like Thomas and Kirkpatrick. After some vacillating and substantial quibbling, the meeting finally turned the corner. "All of a sudden they were saying 'well let's meet here again next week'," recalls Fenton. The enthusiasm for the self-defense group was infectious. They had crossed the Rubicon.¹³

The meeting at the Masonic Hall represented a watershed in the history of the Deacons. On that night the Deacons were born as *political organization*. Previously the defense group had only been a patrol, a secret auxiliary to a nonviolent organization. Now it was on its way to becoming an independent paramilitary organization with a distinct political agenda that challenged the nonviolent orthodoxy.

Within the next few weeks the Deacons for Defense and Justice quickly took form through a series of Tuesday night meetings at the Masonic hall. The new organization successfully coalesced the defense group and the veterans of the black police squad, combining into one organization all the men committed to armed self-defense.

¹³Ibid.

The role of women in the new organization was problematic. Traditionally, women were excluded from organized self-defense activities in the black community, although they defended themselves and their communities when necessary. Gender divisions also reflected the fact that the Deacons had borrowed many of its practices from black fraternal orders, including male exclusiveness. Typically, if women participated in fraternal orders, they did so as separate "auxiliaries."

No women had participated in the patrols in the summer of 1964 in Jonesboro, but now the defense group was becoming a community organization, and the same gender roles that had encourage male participation were limiting the role of women. Several women, including Ruth Amos, did participate in meetings and play an active role in the Deacons. It was difficult to exclude activist women like Amos because, although self-defense was the male prerogative, civil rights activities were not considered the sole province of men. At one point the group attempted to reconcile the gender conflict by forming a women's auxiliary titled the "Deaconettes," but the effort apparently never took root.¹⁴

It would be several weeks before the group formally adopted the name "Deacons for Defense and Justice," and the origins of the name remains enigmatic. Initially the group referred to itself as the "Jonesboro Legal and Defense Association," and the later, the "Justice and Defense Club" or "J & D Club." In memos to the regional office Fenton euphemistically described the new group as a "home owners protective association." There are several conflicting stories regarding the origin of the name. Several years after

¹⁴Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill Interview.

the Deacons disbanded, Kirkpatrick published and recorded a song, "Deacons for Defense and Justice," that offered one explanation:¹⁵

Then what shall we call ourselves
And still keep our right to be a man
For the time has surely come for us
To take our stand

The man that asked the question threw out an idea:
Let's call ourselves the Deacons and never have no fear,
They will think we are from the church
Which has never done much
And gee, to our surprise it really worked.¹⁶

Kirkpatrick's lyrics suggest that the term "deacons" was selected to beguile local whites by portraying the organization as an innocent church group, an explanation he proffered in at least one interview as well. But there are other more convincing explanations. Harvey Johnson says the group chose the name because the role of the self-defense group was comparable to church deacons "who took care of business in the church." Cathy Patterson recalls that during the summer of 1964 the CORE staff began referring to their guards as the "deacons," because CORE had first worked with them in their capacity as church deacons. When a CORE staff person needed an escort, they would summon "the deacons," and the name stuck. The most plausible explanation is that the name was a portmanteau that evolved over a period of time, combining the CORE staff's first appellation of "deacons" with the tentative name chosen in November

¹⁵Fred Brooks to Ronnie Moore, "Field Report 11-1-64 to 11-15-64, Jonesboro, Louisiana," box 5, folder 4, CORE(SRO); Charles Fenton and Willie Green, "Field Report of Jackson Parish," November, 1965, Jonesboro, Louisiana, box 1, folder 7, CORE(Jackson Parish).

¹⁶Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick, *Black Music* (n.p. , 1980), in authors possession.

1964: "Justice and Defense Club." By January 1965 the group had arrived at its permanent name "Deacons for Defense and Justice."¹⁷

The name reflected the group's sincere desire to identify with traditionally respected symbols of authority, peace, and moral order in the black community. But by combining the terms "Deacons" and "Defense," the group's name also embodied a political paradox that plagued the Deacons throughout their organizational life. The Deacons were attempting to wed two contradictory symbols, Christian pacifism and violence: they hoped to identify with Christianity while defying its teachings.¹⁸

¹⁷Kirkpatrick, Hall interview; Harvey Johnson, Hill interview; Catherine Patterson Mitchell, Hill interview. The first recorded use of the Deacons' name was in a January 6, 1965 FBI memorandum based on an interview with Percy Lee Bradford. See, SAC, New Orleans to Director, January 6, 1965, FBI-Deacons File, no. 157-2466-1.

¹⁸Kirkpatrick's tendency to revise the history of the Deacons deserves some explanation. He, along with other Deacons, has never mentioned in interviews that the Deacons evolved from a volunteer police squad. Indeed, the Deacon's president, vice-president and treasurer were all former members of the police squad. That Kirkpatrick diminished the influence of the church in the group's symbols represents a similar revisionism.

Middle class civil rights activists have gone to great lengths to preserve the movements' memory--and occasionally myths. It is one reason that CORE, SNCC and other national organizations have received disproportionate scholarly attention. The subsequent public careers of many civil rights activists, along with their accessibility by historians, have allowed them to influence historical interpretations. Their memories shape how historians impose chronologies and causality onto a complex social movement, frequently discounting subtle yet important developments at the grassroots.

With the exception of Kirkpatrick, none of the Deacons made an effort to preserve the myth and memory of the Deacons. Kirkpatrick's subsequent career as a folk-singer and minor celebrity activist helped him popularize the Deacon's in songs and interviews. But in the late 1960's, anti-police sentiment was at a fever pitch in the movement, especially among the Black Power and anti-war groups that Kirkpatrick associated with. Kirkpatrick, no doubt, was embarrassed to confess his service as a policeman who had enforced segregation laws. And it would be difficult, if not impossible, for Kirkpatrick to elevate the Deacons to icon status if it were known that they originated as a police squad. Nor was it wise in the late sixties to identify the Deacons with conservative institutions like the Church. It was probably for these reasons that Kirkpatrick omitted the role of the

One of the first challenges for the group was raising funds. It was difficult for an organization like the Deacons to survive without adequate funds to free up members for organizational duties. The defense group had been limited by lack of funds in the past; the men used their own money to purchase weapons, ammunition, gasoline and communication equipment. Chief Peevy had reclaimed the black police squad's radios in October, so the black community lacked even rudimentary communication equipment to monitor Klan and police activities. The Deacons took to fundraising with remarkable enthusiasm and success, raising \$437 in the first two meetings--a substantial sum for a poor community. They used the funds to purchase two citizen band radios and four walkie-talkies.¹⁹

The presence of the new militant organization was a boon to community morale. In contrast to the moribund voter registration campaign, CORE had discovered in the Deacons a strategy that captured the imagination and support of the community and, for the first time, had successfully attracted men into the ranks of the movement. Fenton was ecstatic with the success, reporting back to CORE's regional office that the new organization was responsible for the increase in "community morale, programming, [and] fund raising." Fenton believed he had stumbled upon an organizing strategy that could revitalize CORE: Create hybrid organizations that combined self-defense with community organizing. He boasted to the New Orleans regional office that "the community of Jonesboro is probably the best organized Negro community" in Louisiana

black police and the Church in the genealogy of the Deacons.

¹⁹Fred Brooks to Oretha Castle, Monroe, Louisiana, n. d., box 3, folder 2, CORE(SRO); Brooks to Moore, 15 November 1964.

and recommended that CORE organize similar "home owners protective associations" around the state. The defense group was already energetically recruiting other Jackson Parish communities. "We have arranged for the Jonesboro association to invite a few leaders from the towns of Chatham, Eros, Hodge, North Hodge, [and] Quitman, to attend the meetings of the Jonesboro association, " reported Fenton and Green, "to first, show these invited guests how a community operates when they get organized and secondly, try to establish a home owners protective association, incorporating the entire parish."²⁰

Fenton could take pride in the Deacons, for he had played a critical role in forming the group. A middle-class, self-educated activist, Fenton had contributed organizational skills that helped transform the slipshod defense group into a formal organization. Unlike many of his activist colleagues, Fenton placed his skills in the service of the community, allowing the community to determine the strategy and goals rather than imposing a predetermined strategy. Still, Fenton never abandoned his commitment to nonviolence while he worked with the Deacons. He continued to have faith that the Deacons would eventually gravitate toward nonviolent community organizing. A few months later Fenton told reporters that he hoped the Deacons would "become a civic organization bettering the community and eventually making the defense part of it obsolete."²¹

The new organization also improved its effectiveness by creating a formal command structure of elected officers. Percy Lee Bradford, a mill worker and cab owner,

²⁰Fenton and Green, "Field Report."

²¹Oretha Castle, "Field Report, December 6, 1964 to December 12, 1964," Monroe, box 4, folder 2, CORE(SRO); *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 1965.

was elected the first president of the Deacons. One of the community's most respected leaders, Bradford was a longtime member of the Voters League and had served on the black police squad. Henry Amos, another veteran of the civil rights movement and member of the police squad, was elected vice-president. Bradford and Amos were representative of the social milieu that comprised the Deacons: mature, sober and industrious men, deeply religious and well respected in the community.

Though the Deacons never adopted formal membership rules, the group did adhere to strict recruiting standards. Members had to be United States citizens, at least twenty-one years old, preferably registered voters and of good moral character. In contrast to the Black Panthers, who recruited from the unemployed and criminal element, the Deacons screened members to exclude people with criminal tendencies and quick tempers. Individuals of poor reputation and troublemakers were not accepted.²²

The Deacons began meeting regularly on Tuesdays at the Masonic Hall. Attendance varied from twenty to more than seventy-five depending on the level of activity. Membership was \$10 and monthly dues were set at \$2, and only dues-paying members could vote. The group adopted a standard meeting format using parliamentary procedure, with the reading of minutes and committee reports. All major decisions were made democratically, while day-to-day patrolling and monitoring duties were primarily directed by Earnest Thomas.

Meetings primarily focused on defense logistics. The daily routine of guarding the CORE workers and the community required decisions on assignments, patrol

²²Investigative Report, August 17, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-41.

schedules and equipment purchases. And although their mission was principally defense, the Deacons soon found that they were also the leading civil rights group in Jonesboro, and their meetings soon expanded to address political questions regarding the ongoing desegregation campaign.

In addition to planning defense, the Deacons' meetings also provided moral support for new recruits. The meetings became a pulpit for the new creed of manhood, a crusade against passivity and fear. The Deacons implored, bullied, and shamed potential recruits into accepting their role as defenders of the black community. Charlie White, a young mill worker who had patrolled with the black police squad, recalls that the meetings were intended to instill pride and confidence in a new recruit, and "to get the man to stand up" for the community.²³

Like many of his fellow Deacons, Charlie White believed that the mere presence of black men in the movement deterred Klan and police terrorism. According to White, women and children alone on the protest lines actually encouraged Klan harassment. When black men joined the line, the Klan and police acted with restraint. "You had some people who respect you for being nonviolent," says White. "Then on the other side, you had your people that were trying to run over you because they could. That's where the Deacons come in. When the radicals from the other side came up, we had somebody to take care of them."²⁴

²³White, Hill interview.

²⁴Ibid.

Chapter 4

The New York Times

By the end of November 1964, the Jonesboro Deacons were patrolling regularly, equipped with their new walkie talkies and CB radios. The impact of the Deacons, and Charlie Fenton's organizing skills, on the civil rights campaign became evident by December. During the previous summer, CORE would have been fortunate to attract twenty people to a desegregation protest. Yet on December 16, a massive display of 236 protestors arrived at the Jonesboro library to integrate it. Overwhelmed, City officials quickly conceded and opened the library to blacks, but not before removing all tables and chairs to prevent "race mixing." The absurd furniture embargo did not last long. The black movement in Jonesboro had scored its first major victory.¹

Buoyed by the successful library campaign, activists ushered in the New Year by renewing the campaign to desegregate public accommodations. On New Years Day, 1965, Deacon leader Earnest Thomas boldly led three other blacks into the M & D Restaurant. In June 1964 the black police squad had been forced to scuttle the first integration attempt at the M & D. This time the outcome was quite different. With the Deacons leading the protest, the owner relented and grudgingly served the testers. More restaurant tests occurred on January 2 and 4, meeting with mixed success. One restaurant

¹*Louisiana Weekly*, 2 January 1965.

resisted integration by closing its doors and firing its black employees. A few restaurants would later circumvent desegregation laws by becoming nominally "private clubs."²

. The Deacons reached out to other communities to expand the desegregation campaign through a series of mass meetings. The mass meeting technique represented a rudimentary form of working class control over the black middle class and redefined the political decision-making process in the black community. Prior to the civil rights movement, racial conflicts and issues were normally negotiated by intermediaries: middle class power brokers, the NAACP, or the Voters Leagues. During the civil rights movement, this decision-making process shifted to direct democracy through mass assemblies. In most small and medium-sized cities, the black community would assemble and make decisions by consensus, a process designed to not only build community support, but also to prevent middle class leaders from making secret agreements and compromises with the white power structure.

The desegregation protests spread to nearby Hodge where Fenton and the Deacons led another mass meeting. The increased pace of desegregation activities was lifting morale, and on January 4 Jonesboro community leaders assembled to plan an expanded desegregation campaign. The presence of the Deacons was clearly helping to overcome fear and passivity. In contrast to their past timorousness, three ministers came forward to offer their churches for voter registration.

The Deacons were attracting the attention of more than the community. Local police monitoring CB radio communications soon learned of the existence of the

²"Chronology on Jonesboro," [1965] box five, folder 4, CORE(SRO); *Louisiana Weekly*, 9 January 1965.

Deacons, but apparently made no effort to harass or intimidate the group in its early stages. The FBI first took notice of the Deacons in early January 1965. On January 6 the New Orleans FBI field office sent a coded radio message and letterhead memorandum to J. Edgar Hoover concerning the "Deacons for Defense and Justice." An unidentified source--probably local or state law enforcement officials--informed the FBI that a self-defense unit had been formed in Jonesboro. The memo noted that, although the Deacons' purpose was "much the same as those of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)," the new organization was "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."³

The FBI had little difficulty obtaining detailed information on the new group. In the years to follow, the FBI produced more than 1,500 pages of comprehensive and relatively accurate records on the Deacons' activities, largely through numerous informants inside the organization. It does not appear that any of the informants were exchanging information for money or personal benefit. Most provided information in the misguided belief that they were protecting the Deacons. Informers thought they could protect the organization from criminal prosecution by convincing local and Federal authorities that the Deacons were a benign, nonviolent group. Some thought the FBI would use the information to protect the Deacons from local law enforcement and the Klan. Others were attempting to deflect the FBI's attention from the group by deliberately underestimating the size and influence of the organization. Despite this

³SAC, New Orleans to Director, January 6, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-1; Letterhead Memorandum, "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Percy Lee Bradford, president," January 6, 1964, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-2.

disassembling, the informants became unwitting partners in the disruption of the Deacons. Seemingly harmless information about the Deacon's activities frequently allowed the FBI to identify members and conduct interviews intended to disrupt the group through intimidation. The FBI also used damaging information about members to spread distrust and dissension in the group.⁴

Percy Lee Bradford, the Deacons' President, was one of those who cooperated with law enforcement officials in an effort to protect the organization. In an interview with an unidentified agent on January 5, 1965, Bradford went to great lengths to emphasize that the Deacons were strictly defensive in nature and would use violence as a last resort and only if attacked. Bradford admitted to law enforcement agents that the Deacons had citizen band radios and walkie talkies and that they routinely patrolled the black community. He went so far as to provide names of officers and leaders in the new organization and estimated the Jonesboro group's size at between 250-300 members.⁵

It is doubtful that there were three-hundred dues-paying members in the Deacons. To some degree Bradford was using a tactic with the FBI that became standard practice for the Deacons; exaggerating the organization's size in order to deter Klan and police harassment. The Deacons' leadership in other chapters continued this practice throughout

⁴There are over 1,500 pages of documents in the FBI's file on the Deacons. Almost all of the information was gleaned from interviews with Deacon members or civil rights activists close to the group. Several leaders, including Frederick Kirkpatrick, have acknowledged that they provided information to the FBI in an effort to protect the group. See, Kirkpatrick, Hall interview.

⁵Letterhead Memorandum, "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Percy Lee Bradford, president," January 6, 1964, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-2.

the life of the organization. The only exception was when, in an effort to reduce pressure and attention from law enforcement, informants occasionally downplayed membership figures.

Still, the figure of three-hundred members was not altogether inaccurate. The definition of the term "membership" may vary depending on race, culture, and class. The Deacons employed a criterion for membership far different from that used by white middle class civic groups. In black political organizations like the Deacons, one might be regarded as a member for simply expressing support for the organization's goals and activities. In the fluid world of social movements, an organization may have a small formal membership, but be capable of commanding a large number of supporters. Such was the case of the SCLC, which never comprised more than a handful of members, but could mobilize thousands of supporters.

The Deacons were evolving from a secret society into a political movement for self-defense. As they grew, the terms of membership became more flexible and inclusive. Membership was not restricted to those who paid dues and carried a membership card. The term "Deacon" began to denote a new militant political outlook. At a certain point in the organizations' evolution, simple agreement with the group's principles was sufficient to be considered a member.⁶

There were, in effect, four tiers of membership in the Jonesboro Deacons--a structure that would be reproduced in other chapters. The first tier, the "activist core,"

⁶A similar phenomenon occurred with the Black Panther Party. By 1970 there were thousands of self-proclaimed Black Panthers scattered around the nation, most of whom had never formally joined the Party, nor even met a Party member for that matter.

comprised approximately twenty members who payed dues and regularly attended meetings and participated in patrols. The second tier, "active members" consisted of approximately one-hundred men who occasionally paid dues and attended meetings, but primarily participated in activities only when necessary. The third tier, the "reinforcements," comprised roughly 100-200 men who did not pay dues or attend meetings, but agreed with the Deacons' strategy and could be depended on to volunteer if needed. The fourth, and most amorphous tier, was the "self-proclaimed" Deacons: those individuals who, without official sanction, declared themselves Deacons. Though lacking formal ties to the Deacons, this last group helped popularize the Deacons and their self-defense strategy. In Jonesboro, total dues-paying membership never exceeded 150, but an additional 100 "reinforcements" could be counted on to support and defend the organizations. So Bradford's figure of three-hundred "members" was not far off the mark.⁷

Bradford's January 5 interview with the FBI was the first time the Deacons were forced to explain their philosophy to the outside world. After two months of life, the Deacons still had no written statement of purpose expressing the organization's philosophy, goals and strategy. The Deacons had been called into existence by the exigencies of survival: the Klan had left little time for contemplation and philosophy. Born out of the nonviolent movement, the Deacons now found themselves in the

⁷White, Hill interview; Thomas, Hill interview; Burris, Hill interview. The Deacons chapter formed in Port Gibson is representative of this latter trend. For membership estimates see, Thomas, Hill interview and White, Hill interview. In some reports the FBI estimated total membership at 15,000--an obviously inflated number.

awkward position of challenging the movement orthodoxy on nonviolence. Their initial efforts were halting, confused and frequently contradictory.

In the FBI interview Bradford emphasized that the Deacons were loyal to the precepts of nonviolence. The Deacons were a peaceful organization, Bradford stressed, with goals "much the same as those of the Congress of Racial Equality." This was certainly true with regard to CORE's civil rights objectives. There was, of course, an important difference that did not escape the FBI's attention: unlike CORE, the Deacons were armed and prepared to kill in self-defense. Bradford tried to distinguish the Deacons from vigilante organizations by emphasizing that the Deacons were committed to self-defense, as opposed to retaliatory violence. The challenge for Bradford was to reconcile self-defense with nonviolence. It was a difficult, if not impossible, task.

The FBI found Bradford's demurrals unconvincing. The New Orleans field office promptly reported to J. Edgar Hoover that the new organization was "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." If Hoover was alarmed by this new armed organization, he showed no sign of it. The New Orleans memo to Washington went unanswered for the time being.⁸

But the growing movement in Jonesboro did not escape the attention of the local Klan. Under the cloak of darkness on Sunday morning, January 17, 1965, arsonists struck at two Jackson Parish churches that had been active in the movement. Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, whose members included Deacon leader Henry Amos, was burned to the

⁸SAC, New Orleans to Director, January 6, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-1.

ground. Bethany Baptist Church also went up in black smoke. Both churches were located in remote rural areas that were difficult for the Deacons to protect. The churches continued to be a target for Klan terror, even after having been rebuilt. Bethany Baptist was burned a second time in November 1965, and both churches remained frequent targets of gun fire.⁹

In addition to Klan assaults, law enforcement agencies launched a harassment campaign against the Deacons. On January 30 Percy Lee Bradford and Earnest Thomas had been patrolling during the day and keeping guard over a group of college students who were in town to help rebuild the burned churches. The two Deacons stopped around midnight at the Minute Spot Cafe. Thomas and Bradford stood in front of the cafe talking, with Bradford cradling a twelve-gauge shotgun. Police stopped and arrested Bradford, charging him with displaying a dangerous weapon in a public place while under the influence of an intoxicant.¹⁰

The white community was growing alarmed at this new organization. After living in fear for generations, black community morale was buoyed by the sight of defiant black men, armed and ready to die for their community. Much to the consternation of whites, the Deacons were everywhere: on the rooftops of the Freedom House; patrolling the streets with guns at their sides; marching into segregated cafes. They had reclaimed their community and whites could no longer ignore their existence. The tables had turned.

⁹"Chronology on Jonesboro"; Annie Purnell Johnson, Elmo Jacobs and Fred Lewis, Interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Miriam Feingold Papers, SHSW; *Louisiana Weekly*, 4 December 1965.

¹⁰Letterhead memo, "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Inc., Jonesboro, Louisiana, March 26, 1965," FBI-Deacons file, 157-2466-13.

Now the white community lived in fear. "I know the whites, they were kind of afraid, those that had [black] womens working for them back then," remembers Annie Johnson. "A lot of them were afraid to come and get their day workers." Some whites demanded that their domestic workers find their own way to work. Even the domestics were infected with the new militancy. Many refused to endure the racial insults that came with the job. "Then a lot of the women quit because of different things that was said in the homes while they was there. Remarks and things," says Johnson. "They quit."¹¹

The Deacons did not hesitate to play on the white fears. The group produced a leaflet threatening to kill anyone caught burning a cross in the black community, and then arranged to have black domestic workers leave the leaflets at the homes of their white employers. The Deacons "weren't violent people," says Johnson, "but I think the whites knew that whatever they said they were going to do, they did it."¹²

Until February 1965, the Deacons had remained a clandestine organization. People in the community and law enforcement officials were aware of their presence, as was the handful of CORE staffers around the state, but the Deacons had been content with relative anonymity. They still regarded themselves as merely the defense arm of public civil rights organizations. They had no reason to go public. Secrecy was the best way to protect their membership.

But on February 21, 1965 the Deacons made the irreversible leap into public life. It was inevitable that the Deacons would attract national media attention. Violence

¹¹Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill Interview.

¹²Ibid.; Kirkpatrick, Hall interview.

against the movement had been a mainstay of reporting in the South. Now the story was violence *by* the movement. Veteran reporters were familiar with informal self-defense groups in the South, but the Deacons were different. They were willing to openly extoll the virtues of armed self-defense. And by combining self-defense with political organizing, the group represented an intriguing new direction for the movement.

The Deacons' story broke prominently in the February 21, Sunday edition of the prestigious *New York Times*: the headline read "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro Unusual Town." The story, penned by Fred Powledge, described Jonesboro as an ordinary southern community, relatively untouched by civil rights legislation. He noted that "Whites Only" signs were still posted, several restaurants continued to segregate, and blacks "edge toward the curb when they pass a white man, and their heads bow ever so slightly." But there was one thing different about this secluded redoubt of segregation: "Here the Negroes . . . have organized themselves into a mutual protection association," reported Powledge, "employing guns and shortwave radios."¹³

Powledge painted a sympathetic portrait of the Deacons, focussing on the groups defensive philosophy and portraying them as a stabilizing influence against white terror and police violence. There was no smell of gunpowder and blood here. Indeed, his description of the Deacons as a "mutual protection association," a term Fenton favored, suggested something closer to a genteel civic club. Powledge highlighted the Deacons'

¹³*New York Times*, 21 February 1965.

strong religious convictions, citing Bradford's description of the group's philosophy:

"We pray a lot, but we stay alert too."¹⁴

Powledge let the story unfold through the voices of the Deacons themselves. The Deacons told Powledge that they had deterred, rather than provoked, violence. Their presence had already "kept Jonesboro from developing into a civil rights battleground" and had discouraged police from brutalizing activists. The group had even rescued a young black man from a possible lynching after he was accused of kissing a white girl. Powledge estimated the organizations' size as "between 45 and 150 active members." Sheriff Newt Loe declined to comment on the group, telling the *New York Times* that if he had anything to say, he would "give it to my newspaper boys around here." "We got boys in Shreveport and Monroe who see things the way we do," said the Sheriff.¹⁵

Charlie Fenton was quoted at length in the article, attempting to justify CORE's cooperation with a group that advocated armed self-defense. Powledge observed that Fenton was accompanied by his personal body guard, Elmo Jacobs, a former platoon army sergeant and member of the Deacons. Fenton defended CORE's policy by pointing out that the Deacons were not allowed to bring guns to the Freedom House. He praised the organization as representing the kind of "indigenous organization" that CORE desired to work with. Fenton wanted to reduce his role as group leader and become more of a "liaison and helper." "Hopefully I will be able to help them translate their power into political terms as this thing progresses," said Fenton. He expressed hope that the

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

Deacons would “become a civic organization bettering the community and eventually making the defense part of it obsolete.” Powledge expanded on this theme, noting that the Deacons wanted to extend “their efforts to include other things--negotiating with downtown, becoming more active in Jonesboro politics.”¹⁶

The *Times* article was an auspicious debut for the Deacons. Powledge had not suggested that the Deacons might escalate violence, nor had he highlighted the obvious strategic differences between the Deacons and CORE. Future media coverage would not be as charitable.

In the *Times* article the Deacons had convincingly portrayed themselves as moderates adapting to the realities of white terrorism. They posed no threat to the established organizations and strategies. They downplayed strategic differences with rest of the movement, claiming that they had the same objective: equality and justice. But underneath the carefully crafted image lurked a profound difference. The national civil rights organizations sought equality by shaming the nation with nonviolence. The Deacons sought equality through force and self-reliance.

The *Times* story accelerated the Deacon's transformation from a vigilance group into a political challenge to movement orthodoxy. Self-defense groups had existed long before the Deacons, but they were informal and outside the broader political movement. For the most part, the earlier self-defense groups viewed themselves as apolitical, pragmatic auxiliaries to political organizations. They advanced no strategic vision

¹⁶Ibid.

distinct from the existing civil rights organizations. Moreover, they avoided publicity in order to protect themselves-- and to preserve the myth of a nonviolent movement.

The Deacons broke from this tradition in two important ways. First, they fused self-defense with politics, thrusting themselves in the public arena to compete for the political loyalty of movement activists. Rather than the apolitical arm of another organization, the Deacons were both a self-defense organization and a community-based civil rights organization. Once the Deacons gave a public organizational form to self-defense, they were forced to defend their actions by formulating a coherent philosophy of self-defense. This eventually led them to elevate self-defense to a strategic political alternative to the nonviolent strategy. The Deacons transformed self-defense from the movement's "family secret" into a strategic challenge to nonviolence. They gave explicit politics to what had been implicit in the movement's behavior.

Second, the Deacons had developed an autonomous, locally controlled organization that could survive without external leadership and funding from national pacifist organizations. The Deacons' staff, funding, and political legitimacy flowed from the local community. They flourished or foundered depending on the level of local support. In contrast, projects sponsored and funded by national civil rights organizations could continue to operate, regardless of community support--or even despite local opposition.

In truth, CORE, along with SNCC and most other national civil rights groups, failed to create community organizations that could survive the departure of the national staff. Their local projects invariably employed models and strategies that depended on middle class skills and resources. While this led to short term successes, it also left local

communities dependent on external resources. Public relations, fund raising, paid staffs, and legal strategies all required skills and resources that normally did not exist among poor, uneducated blacks in the rural South. Invariably, when the middle class leaders departed, the organizations they created fell apart.

In contrast, the Deacons, adopted an organizational model and strategy that built on existing skills and resources. Most local men were comfortable with the Deacons' paramilitary structure, modeled after familiar organizational forms, e.g., the military, fraternal orders, and social and benevolent clubs. Nor were the group's goals and strategies an exotic import; black men had been defending themselves and their communities for decades. The Deacons had created an organization that comported with the community's political goals and resources. It did not require members to write press releases, develop legal strategies, and negotiate with the Justice Department.

More significantly, the Deacons' program of violence ensured their independence from mainstream civil rights groups and the black middle class in general. Since liberals and pacifists opposed armed self-defense, the command of self-defense organizations fell to indigenous black leaders. This organizational independence from middle class groups permitted the Deacons to develop an independent political strategy that more accurately expressed the interests of the black working class. Indeed, the Deacons were the *only* national civil rights organization in the South completely controlled by black workers.¹⁷

¹⁷Viewing violence as primarily an ethical question obscures its political function. Goerges Sorel argued that violence guaranteed the political independence of the working class by driving away middle class leaders who favored orderly and lawful reform. While the Deacons were far from a revolutionary vanguard, their advocacy of violence accomplished the same ends--it kept white liberals and middle class blacks at a distance. See, Georges Sorel, T. E. Hulme and Jay Roth, trans., *Reflections on Violence* (New

The February 21 *New York Time* article had overlooked these unique features of the Deacons, although subsequent coverage did recognize their significance. February 21 emerged as a watershed date for the Deacons by ushering in three simultaneous events, each event connected to the other like three heavenly bodies aligning to cast a portentous shadow. First, February 21 was the day that the *Times* article made the Deacons a political reality by thrusting them into the national arena. It was, for political purposes, the Deacons' birth date. Second, February 21 was the day that the Jonesboro Deacons established a chapter in Bogalusa, Louisiana, taking the first step toward converting the Deacons from a local group into a national organization. And third, February 21 was the day Malcom X was gunned down in a hail of gunfire in Harlem. The foremost critic of nonviolence had fallen victim to enemies willing to silence him "by any means necessary."

On the day that Malcom X, the old paladin, had perished, the Deacons were born. Violence had been both executioner and midwife.

Malcom X's death also led to the Deacons' first contact with the revolutionary wing of the black movement. Earnest Thomas was troubled by the news that rival Black Muslims had murdered Malcom, and he persuaded the Deacons to underwrite an investigative trip to New York. Thomas arrived in New York a few days after the assassination and immediately plunged into the heady world of New York's black nationalist community. Unlike Jonesboro, the black activists in New York were heavily influenced by revolutionary nationalist ideologies and Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Black

nationalism in New York comprised many currents. There were black Muslims, representing a mixture of black separatism and religious fundamentalism. There were Garveyites, the ideological heirs of Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist who electrified the black community in the 1920s. There were community and labor activists who identified with the pro-Soviet Communist Party USA and dissident communists who had left the CPUSA for the revolutionism of the Maoist sects. And there were young veterans of the civil rights movement who had been radicalized by their experience in the South and deeply impressed by the revolutionary nationalism of the emerging third world African nations.¹⁸

Thomas drank in this exciting underworld which, for the most part, viewed the Deacons as brethren in the armed revolution. One introduction led to another, and Thomas was quickly exposed to a wide variety of critics of nonviolence and reformism. He met with Malcom X's colleagues and later with Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the nationalist writer and playwright. The New York trip set a leftward political course for Thomas, though he was still far from a Marxist convert.

Before returning to Jonesboro Thomas also made contact with members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). Headed by Max Stanford, RAM was a small national network of Marxist-Leninist black revolutionaries. RAM had been stalwart supporters of Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader who had fled to Cuba to avoid criminal charges arising from his organizing in Monroe, North Carolina. In coming

¹⁸Thomas, Hill interview.

months, the connection between the Deacons and RAM would spark considerable attention from the FBI.

Thomas returned to Jonesboro and within a few weeks the Deacons had consolidated their organizational strength by legally incorporating the group. On March 8, James Sharp, a black attorney from Monroe, filed incorporation papers with the Louisiana Secretary of State. To incorporate a paramilitary black organization in Louisiana during the height of the civil rights movement required a good measure of subterfuge. The Articles of Incorporation buried the Deacons' true objectives beneath several paragraphs of platitudes about good citizenship and democracy. The stated purpose of the new organization was to "instruct, train, teach and educate Citizens of the United States and especially minority groups in the fundamental principles of the republican form of government and our democratic way of life . . ."¹⁹

In addition the Deacons would educate persons about the constitution and the laws of the land, voting rights, citizenship, economic security, and the "effective use of their spending power." Not until the end of the purpose section does the document mention defense:

This corporation has for its further purpose, and is dedicated to, the defense of the civil rights, property rights and personal rights of said people and will defend said rights by any and all honorable and legal means to the end that justice may be obtained.²⁰

¹⁹The Article of Incorporation are contained in SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 26, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-13.

²⁰Ibid.

Mention of weapons and armed self-defense was conveniently omitted. Because of the subterfuge, the charter represented the first time that any Southern state officially recognized a black armed organization.²¹

The charter did not change the attitude of law enforcement toward the Deacons, but it did carry a special significance for the group's members. The Deacon regarded the charter as their own Magna Carta. They were convinced that it gave official sanction to their right to bear arms in defense of their community, and that it prohibited law enforcement officials from interfering with the exercise of this right. It is curious that the Deacons revered a legal document that did little more than delineate rights they had already appropriated. Perhaps the imprimatur of the Secretary of State was impressive to men unaccustomed to civil law.

Regardless, most of the Deacon leaders were convinced that the charter legitimated their right to bear arms in self-defense. "In the charter, we had to protect people's property and churches and so forth," points out James Stokes, a Deacon leader in Natchez. "And therefore couldn't no one take our weapons from us. So we could carry our weapons just like the local law enforcement officers carry theirs." If a policeman

²¹The charter listed Bradford as president, Thomas as vice-president, Charlie White as secretary and Cosetta Jackson as treasurer. Elmo Jacobs was listed as a member of the Board of Directors. Thomas' listing as vice-president introduced the first public note of discord in the organization. Henry Amos had served as vice-president since the group's formation in November 1964, but Thomas managed to substitute his name for vice-president in the incorporation papers--a maneuver that angered Bradford and other officers and led to a permanent rift between Thomas and the rest of the Jonesboro chapter. Thereafter, Thomas identified himself as the Deacons' *national* vice-president. See, Harvey Johnson, Hill interview.

stopped Stokes and objected to his carrying a weapon, Stokes would simply produce the charter like a talisman, and insist that it entitled him to carry a weapon.²²

It was to their benefit that the Deacons did not base their claim to rights on the constitution. Historically there have been two sources of rights: rights by custom, i.e., natural rights, and rights granted by the state, i.e., constitutional rights. Rather than legitimate their claim on the fourth amendment, the Deacons invoked a higher authority; the ancient natural right of a man to defend hearth and home against attack. This was a right that whites found more difficult to dispute--even under segregation laws.

When the Jonesboro town council once criticized the Deacons for turning to weapons, the Deacons defended themselves by arguing that they were living by the same customs as white men. "We weren't trying to do nothing out of order, says Harvey Johnson, a Deacon leader. "But we told them, it's just like if someone is going to come over and run us out of our house. We not going to put up with that."²³

The method that the Deacons used to legitimate their claim to rights helped ensure the group's autonomy. Rights can be beneficently conferred from above or forcibly seized from below. Conferred rights are vulnerable, since they can be rescinded as easily as they were granted. Ultimately, conferred rights are dependent on the good will of the dominant group that grants them.

In contrast, rights seized by force, either by simply assuming these rights or by coercing concessions from the dominant group, are far more secure. They do not depend

²²James Stokes, interview by author, 12 November 1993, Natchez, Mississippi, tape recording.

²³Harvey Johnson, Hill interview.

on the good will of the dominant group, but rather on the capacity of the recipients to defend their gains. By asserting their natural right to armed defense, the Deacons secured a right they could only lose by their own weakness or lack of will.

The nonviolent strategy had made Southern blacks dependent on the sympathy of a fickle white conscience in the North: blacks became the prisoners of white guilt. Unlike natural rights which were divinely-mandated and inalienable, black rights were awarded on the condition of acceptable behavior. If black behavior ceased to meet with white approbation, then whites would withdraw the entitlement. As subsequent events demonstrated, it was not long before whites revoked their largesse.

By the end of the sixties, most whites had lost sympathy for the black movement, angered by the increasing militancy, riots, and claims for compensatory policies such as poverty programs and affirmative action. The retreat from equality began with the Nixon administration and continued through four Republican administrations. There was little resistance to this retreat, other than judicial challenges. These proved ineffective since the limits of black exploitation were, for the most part, set in the streets--not the courts.

There was another dimension to the Deacons that distinguished them from mainstream nonviolent groups. Equality required more than equal civil rights: it also required equal manhood and honor. To be treated as equals, blacks had to be perceived as possessing the same manhood qualities taken for granted by whites. The process by which they gained their rights was as important as the rights themselves. If blacks wanted whites to regard them as their equals, they would have to win their rights in the same manner as their European counterparts--with force.

This the Deacons were prepared to do.

Chapter 5

Not Selma

While the February *New York Times* article sparked some national interest in the Deacons and the Jonesboro campaign, by March 1965 the nations' attention had turned to the unfolding drama in Selma. In the same month, the Deacons' focus shifted from desegregation to education. Emboldened by their successes, young blacks in Jonesboro and throughout the South began to redefine equal rights as consumers and beneficiaries of government services. As they did, they frequently locked horns with middle class members of the black community who propped up the status quo system.

Frederick Kirkpatrick was not only a leader in the Deacons, but also a popular physical education teacher at the Jackson High School. Kirkpatrick carried his activism into the school by quietly discussing school conditions with students and encouraging them to participate in the desegregation protests. Some of his teaching colleagues rebuked him for his actions and he soon received a visit by the black Principal of Jackson High School. Was it true that he had encouraged students to join in the protests, asked the principal? Kirkpatrick admitted that he had. The principal ended the inquiry without taking action against Kirkpatrick, but news of the confrontation soon spread though the school, fueling rumors that Kirkpatrick might be fired.

Kirkpatrick's problem with his black colleagues at Jackson High School was not unusual. In small Southern communities, many black teachers and school administrators were indifferent, if not hostile, toward the civil rights movement. There were many causes for this conservatism, including economic dependency and fear. Black teachers and school administrators served at the pleasure of white school boards--boards that did not hesitate to fire teachers whom they suspected of supporting the civil rights movement. The few teachers who did openly support the movement were often pressured to moderate their activities by colleagues who feared that activism would bring reprisals against the entire faculty. Black administrators were not above occasionally discharging an activist teacher in order save their own careers.¹

But fear and economic insecurity were not the only obstacles to teacher activism. Many teachers thought that civil rights protests undermined self-reliance and violated the creed of self-help. These educators were the political legacies of Booker T. Washington, the nineteenth-century African American reformer who popularized a strategy of black uplift that subordinated social protest to self-help. Teachers who subscribed to Washington's views often disdained protest as vulgar and declassé. Their high status and relative affluence had bred elitism, individualism, and complacency.

It is understandable that black professionals who had overcome the constraints of Jim Crow would have little sympathy for a movement that represented segregation as an insurmountable barrier to personal progress. Success fostered an individualistic

¹The accommodationism of teachers and ministers is a recurring theme in interviews with the Deacons. See Harvey Johnson, Hill interview; Kirkpatrick, Hall interview; and David Lee Whatley, interview by author, 5 May 1993, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, tape recording.

mentality among teachers that was occasionally mixed with a genteel condescension toward the working class “rabble” and street element that comprised the protest front lines.

The class divisions within the black community were clear to the activists who felt the sting of condescension. “I think they [teachers] feel that they've gone through too much to get the job . . . to throw it away behind a movement,” said David Whatley, a militant from Ferriday. “If they would get fired or something, then they would come. But as long as things were going well for them, they made no waves. They would sit in their fine homes, and they would drive their new cars. They didn't feel that they could dirty their reputations.”²

School Boards expected the black principals to maintain discipline among students and prevent civil rights protest in the schools, a task that grew increasingly difficult as students became more active in the movement outside the schools. At Jackson High School, students were coming to resent the servile way that some administrators accommodated segregationist forces. They were impatient with the slow pace of change and primed for battle. The opportunity soon presented itself.

The Selma civil rights campaign was in full swing, and on Sunday, March 7, hundreds of families in Jonesboro sat in stunned silence as they watched news accounts of the violent police attack on marchers on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma. With the images of the Selma attack still swimming in their heads, students returned to Jackson High School the next morning, Monday, March 8, 1965. As the day progressed, the rumor spread that administrators planned to fire Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick added

²Whatley, Hill interview.

momentum to the rumor by discussing his possible termination with students in his physical education class. "Kirk kind of just put a little icing on it and stirred it up a little bit," recalls Annie Johnson, a Jackson High student at the time. The rumored firing infuriated the students. "The kids went nuts over it," says Johnson.³

As the rumor swept through the school, the students abandoned their classrooms and flooded into the halls in a "walkout." Local authorities would later, with characteristic hyperbole, describe the protest as a "riot." In truth, the protest never reached the fever pitch of a full scale revolt, but students did enjoy a few unsupervised hours of protest flavored by juvenile mischief.

Commandeering the school halls, the student vented their anger on symbols of both white authority and black collaboration. At one point students broke the glass frames of wall photographs of the black principal, J. R. Washington, the white Jackson Parish School Superintendent, J. D. Koonce. Another group hurled bottles and smashed the glass on the school trophy case. By noon, school authorities realized that they had lost control of the situation and decided to cancel classes for the balance of the day.⁴

The walkout quickly expanded its scope beyond the issue of Kirkpatrick's rumored discharge. Within days, the protest developed into a full-fledged school boycott, demanding parity with whites and black control of the schools. The Kirkpatrick incident became a catalyst for all the grievances of a lifetime. Significantly, while protests elsewhere sought equality through school integration, the Jackson High School boycott

³Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill interview.

⁴Oretha Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro, Louisiana," n.d., box 5, folder 4, CORE(SRO); Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill interview.

sought equality through control of black institutions--by demanding equal resources within a segregated system. This unusual strategy was the natural product of the protest's structure. Similar to the Deacons, the Jackson High protest was an autonomous movement, initiated and controlled by the community--not outside activists. This independence allowed the students' real concerns and aspirations to surface, leading to an organic strategy that emphasized nationalist goals of community control and power rather than accommodation and integration.

Because the school boycott was overshadowed by the Selma campaign, it unfortunately remains one of the unheralded milestones of the civil rights movement. The importance of the Jackson High boycott lies in the fact that it was the first Southern school boycott organized by black students in the twentieth century. Self-organized and independent, the boycott marked a qualitative leap in militancy and political sophistication by young blacks in the rural South. Young blacks were no longer content to surrender their destiny to the beneficence of white courts and schools. They sensed that salvation lay not with whites, but with demanding parity and local control. Lamentably, integration's subsequent failure to improve black education appears to have confirmed this pessimistic appraisal of white altruism.

With assistance from Fenton and other adults, the students drew up a list of demands to present to the school board. Most of the demands centered on longstanding grievances of unequal distribution of resources. The students demanded physical improvements at the School, including rebuilding the school gymnasium, adding an auditorium, and expanding the "woefully inadequate" library which consisted of a

handful of books and rows of empty shelves. A demand to integrate the schools was added--almost as an afterthought ⁵

Control of the curriculum was an issue as well. Jackson High offered black students only two vocational tracks: agriculture or domestic service. Rebelling against a future of toil in sweltering fields and kitchens, the students insisted that the administration expand the curriculum to include training in auto mechanics and clerical skills. A surprising demand for "Negro history" courses" reflected the growing nationalist consciousness of students.⁶

The students organized the boycott with imagination and verve. The Deacons' direct link to the protest was through Glenn Johnson, student body president and the leader of the student protest group. Glenn Johnson was the son of Harvey Johnson, a founding member of the Deacons. Every day, hundreds of students would rise before dawn, prepare for school and rush to catch the school bus. But instead of attending class, they armed themselves with picket signs and freedom songs and jubilantly protested outside the school throughout the day. When they were not picketing, they organized spirited marches through the community to the school board offices.

They frequently directed their ire at "Uncle Toms" in the black community, marching on black churches that refused to host civil rights activities. At the end of the

⁵Alvin Adams, "3-week School Boycott gets results in Jonesboro, La.," *Jet*, 15 April 1965, pp. 46-48.

⁶*Ibid.*

day, tired but in high spirits, the students filed back into the buses and returned home. The picket line had become their school.⁷

The halls of Jackson High were virtually deserted by the third day of the boycott. Police, the Sheriff's department and segregationists joined forces in a futile attempt to destroy the boycott. They harassed students and arrested several picketers, including Charlie Fenton. But the students had the momentum. On Wednesday, March 12, the School Board relented and closed Jackson High in an effort to deter further protests. They announced that the school would reopen the following Monday, at which time all students would be expected to return.⁸

The school closure was a stunning setback for Jonesboro's white community. They watched in humiliation as power slipped into the hands of defiant black children. Three hundred years of uncontested supremacy was coming to an end. Desperate and angry, the white power elite quickly decided to take drastic action to suppress the rebellion.

On Thursday, March 13, the students returned to picket and march. As they marched around the school singing and chanting boisterously, an ominous drama was unfolding beyond their vision. Several car loads of police quietly converged on the perimeter of the black community. The police quickly set up road blocks at all the principal arteries into the "black quarters," effectively cordoning off the students from the rest of the community. They were assisted by an odd group of volunteers, identified

⁷Ibid.

⁸Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro, Louisiana,"; Mike Lesser, "Report on Jonesboro-Bogalusa Project," March 1965, box 5, folder 5, CORE(SRO).

only as the "Citizens Highway Patrol." The motley group was little more than a deputized posse of white segregationists and Klan members recruited especially for the cordon. The sentries refused to explain the reason for the cordon, saying only that they were containing a "disturbance" at the high school.⁹

The cordon caught the Deacons by surprise. They had not expected the city to resort to such extreme measures. Thomas and a small group of Deacons immediately began to drive from street to street, frantically searching for an unguarded entry point. They feared that the police and Klan were planning violent reprisals against the children at the school, and their apprehension intensified when they learned that the deputies had even refused entry to white journalists and officials of the Justice Department.

The Deacons' fears were justified. Inside the cordon, the police and posse were acting with impunity. One member of the Deacons, Olin "Satch" Satcher, was already inside the black quarters when the roadblocks were erected. Satcher stepped out of his car and coolly began to walk toward his house, with a .22 caliber rifle cradled in his arm. Within seconds a squad of police and posse members descended on Satcher. One of the posse, an elected member of the Jackson Parish School Board, violently assaulted Satcher, clubbing him on the head. After the beating, police arrested Satcher and shuttled him off to the parish jail and subsequently fired from his teaching position.

Sealed off from the students and the black community, Thomas vainly searched for an opening in the cordon. He tried a back road, but was stopped by a deputy and two

⁹On this incident, see, Lesser, "Report on Jonesboro"; Thomas, Hill interview; "Statement by Ernest [sic] Thomas regarding events of March 11, 1965," box 5, folder 4, CORE(SRO); and *Jet*, 15 April 1965.

posse members. Thomas recognized one of the posse as a Klansman who had participated in the Klan parade through the black community the previous summer.

One of the posse members commanded Thomas to leave, punctuating his order by cocking his gun in Thomas' face. Thomas reluctantly retreated, but soon renewed his efforts, this time accompanied by two Deacons, Henry Amos and Charles White. The group probed the perimeter of the cordoned area, but still found all entries guarded. They decided to return to the barricade where Thomas had been turned back and threatened earlier. The car load of Deacons stopped their car fifty feet from the barricade.

As White watched, Thomas and Amos left the car and boldly marched toward the makeshift sentinels. Thomas was mad. He was not accustomed to having a gun shoved in his face, and he was determined to set things straight with the sheriff's deputy who had watched the incident. Thomas confronted the deputy and demanded to know what they were doing: "You got the road blocked," Thomas protested bitterly, "you can't get in and out of town." The deputy ignored Thomas. Thomas then asked the deputy for his name. Why did he want to know? asked the deputy testily. Because he intended to file a complaint, replied Thomas, to find out who deputized the posse member who had cocked a gun in his face at the roadblock earlier in the day.¹⁰

Thomas's audacity sent the deputy into a fit of rage. "Who in the god damn hell do you think you are?" bellowed the Deputy. Thomas sensed the situation was reeling out of control, so he turned away and began to calmly walk back to the car with Amos.

¹⁰"Statement by Ernest [sic] Thomas regarding events of March 11, 1965."

He had taken only a few steps when he heard the ominous click of a shotgun cocking. "Get them up," growled the voice from behind.¹¹

The deputies handcuffed Thomas so tightly that the steel cut into his flesh. As one deputy twisted the cuffs, the other two slapped Thomas and jabbed at his ribs and kidneys with a shotgun and nightstick. One deputy stuck a pistol in Thomas' nose and taunted him. "Smell out of this, you black son-of-a-bitch," barked the deputy. "You better not move or I'll have hair flying everywhere."¹²

Thomas knew his life hung in the balance. Glancing up, he spied a knot of black bystanders atop a nearby hill who were watching the scene unfold. Thomas pointed out the witnesses to the deputy. The deputy surveyed the situation then holstered his gun and loosened the painful handcuffs.

The deputies searched the Deacons' car and found two pistols and a shotgun. Thomas was arrested for threatening a police officer and resisting arrest. One officer claimed that Thomas has threatened him with a pen knife, which they seized as evidence. Later that night Deputy Van Beasley came by Thomas' cell. "God damn it," gloated Van Beasley, "you won't be at that meeting tonight to raise hell." Thomas was held incommunicado for twenty-four hours, refused water, and finally released on bond the next day. The charges were eventually dropped, but one small injustice still bothered Thomas thirty years later. "I never did get that pen knife back," says Thomas wistfully.¹³

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Thomas, Hill interview.

By the end of the day, several Deacons were in jail as a result of their efforts to reach the students inside the cordon. But their sacrifices had been rewarded; by acting quickly and resolutely, they had averted major bloodshed. Their presence, armed and willing to challenge the police, had deterred the police and vigilantes from attacking the defenseless students. The day's events must have confounded the police and the Klan, accustomed to black men obsequiously deferring. The police could ignore the Civil Rights Act and all the blustering threats of enforcement from the North, but the Deacons were something very different. New laws changed nothing in Jonesboro; but new men were changing everything.

Just how dramatically life had changed was born out by a harrowing confrontation that occurred a few days later. The students had gathered for their daily picket at the high school on a bracingly cold March morning. As soon as they arrived, the police on the scene summoned a fire truck. When the fire truck arrived, the police ordered the firemen to prepare to open their hoses on the children in the wintery cold. Fred Brooks, the young CORE activist, had accompanied the children to the picket line, and now watched helplessly as the crisis deepened. Suddenly a car pulled in front of the school. The doors swung open and four Deacons, led by Thomas, got out of the car and began calmly loading their shotguns in plain view of the police. Brooks and the students watched the grim Deacons in stunned silence.¹⁴

The firemen walked toward the students with their hoses in tow. Then Brooks heard one of the Deacons say, "Here he comes. O.K., get ready." Brooks was speechless.

¹⁴The account of this incident is taken from Frederick Brooks, 10 August 1993, interview by author, East Orange, New Jersey; and Annie Purnell Johnson, Hill interview.

"I was scared as shit. It looked like all hell was going to break loose." Brooks remembers one of the Deacons giving the order: "When you see the first water, we gonna open up on them. We gonna open up on all of them." The Deacons then turned to the police and issued a deadly serious ultimatum. "If you turn that water hose on those kids, there's going to be some blood out here today."¹⁵

The police warily eyed the four Deacons standing before them, shotguns loaded and readied, faces grim and determined. Prudence prevailed. The police retreated and ordered the fire trucks to roll up the hoses and depart.

Although it never found its way into the history of the civil rights movement, the Jonesboro showdown was a watershed in the emergence of the new black political consciousness in the South. For the first time in the twentieth century, a paramilitary black organization had successfully used weapons to defend a lawful protest against an attack by law enforcement. Previously, the Deacons had claimed only the right to self-defense against vigilante violence. Now they asserted their right to defend themselves against government harassment and violence as well, and in the course of doing so, redefined power relationships in the South.

The day the Deacons drew their weapons against the Jonesboro police, the black movement ceased to depend on its persecutors for protection. The movement no longer entrusted its rights to the very people who had denied them their birthright. Instead, the black movement forcibly seized the rights that the government had proffered but not enforced. By doing so, the Deacons shifted power and authority from the government to the people. The authority to enforce rights now rested in the hearts of black people.

¹⁵Ibid.

Instead of the idle threats of a distant federal government, the Jonesboro police now faced thousands of black people who considered themselves as Judge, jury, and, if necessary, executioner for their own rights.

The Jackson High school boycott suddenly came to national attention on Sunday morning, March 14. In an appearance on ABC's "Issues and Answers" news program, CORE Director James Farmer unexpectedly announced that the civil rights campaigns in Jonesboro and Bogalusa would be the focus of CORE's next "major project." Farmer recited a litany of crimes committed against the black movement in the two Louisiana mill towns; church burnings, police brutality, and unbridled Klan violence. Farmer expressed frustration with the mounting problem of local police brutality against the movement as it sought enforcement of the Civil Rights Act. His comments reflected the growing consensus among national civil rights organizations that new federal legislation was needed to enforce the act. Calling for a "federal presence" in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, Farmer demanded that federal marshals and FBI agents make "on-the-spot" arrests of local police engaged in brutality or rights violations.¹⁶

Despite the national attention, Jonesboro's establishment continued its campaign of harassment against the Deacons. On Monday the school board abruptly fired Olin Satcher, the Deacon who had been arrested and brutalized during the March 13 siege. The same day police stopped another Deacon, Cossetta Jackson, and arrested him for

¹⁶*Times-Picayune*, 15 March 1965.

possessing two concealed weapons. Police even resorted to confiscating Jackson's CB radio in an effort to disrupt the Deacons' communication system.¹⁷

The police harassment began to concern Federal authorities as they observed from the sidelines. They speculated that the arrests and intimidation might provoke the Deacons to retaliate violently. On March 15 a federal government official who had visited Jonesboro warned the FBI that the Deacons were planning some "drastic action" in the next two or three days. On March 19, FBI headquarters acted on the CRS warning with a memorandum instructing the New Orleans FBI field office to interview members of the Deacons. Headquarters characterized the Deacons as "allegedly formed to provide assistance to Negroes being arrested" and cautioned the New Orleans office that the Deacons were "alleged to be arming." Hoover's hostility to civil rights organizations was well known, and in this context, the New Orleans field office no doubt understood the "interview" order as FBI code instructing them to intimidate members and discourage participation.¹⁸

The FBI commenced a series of interviews in Jonesboro and Bogalusa clearly intended to intimidate the Deacons by suggesting that the FBI was investigating the group for illegal weapons. Typical of these interviews was the night Harvey Johnson was accosted by two FBI agents in front of his house as he returned from a protest march. The agents asked little about the purpose of the Deacons, nor did they raise questions

¹⁷ "Statement by Cossetta Jackson on arrest of March 15, 1965, box 5, folder 4, CORE(SRO); Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro, Louisiana."

¹⁸ Gale to Belmont, Memorandum, March 15, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-10; Director to SAC, New Orleans, March 19, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, not recorded. I am indebted to retired FBI agent Clifford Anderson for his assistance in interpreting the Deacons' FBI files.

about Klan violence or police harassment. Instead, Johnson recalls, they grilled him about illegal weapons. One agent told Johnson, "They tell me you fellows got all kinds of machine guns and hand grenades." Puzzled, Johnson asked where the FBI got their information. They told him in a "Chicago magazine." Johnson waxed indignant, telling the agent, "Where you got that from is just a whole lot of junk."¹⁹

Police and FBI harassment of the Deacons had little effect on the boycott. By the second week the resolve of the town fathers was beginning to weaken as they grew anxious that CORE would make Jonesboro another Selma. For all their bluster and fervid segregationist talk, the town leaders were businessmen, and segregation was becoming bad for business.

Superintendent Koonce began to search for avenues of compromise. Koonce offered to arrange a meeting at the school board office between the school board and fifteen parent representatives. But the proposal excluded students from the negotiation process, and the parents and students rejected the request. They countered with a proposal that the Board meet with all the parents and students at Jackson High School on March 22. The board, desperate but still prideful, agreed to meet with both parents and students, but now demanded that the boycott be canceled and the children returned to school before they would negotiate.

A mass meeting was called to consider the proposal to end the boycott and hundreds from Jonesboro's black community spilled into Johnson's Skating Rink to debate the issue. Some in attendance favored the compromise, but the Deacons aggressively opposed the compromise at the meeting. Thomas and Bradford argued that

¹⁹Harvey Johnson, Hill interview.

the boycott was the black community's only bargaining chip. If the boycott was canceled, the Board would have no reason to agree to the demands. In the end, the Deacons prevailed and the community voted to continue the boycott.²⁰

The boycott debate marked another turning point for the Deacons. By taking leadership in a political dispute, the organization had further transformed itself from an apolitical defense group into a paramilitary political organization. Only six months prior, the Deacons were merely a handful of volunteer policeman protecting their community, making no pretense at politics. Now they were becoming a militant political force in the community.

The Deacons had fused paramilitary activities with political agitation, thus beginning the process of making self-defense into a political issue itself. Charlie Fenton's attempt to convert the Deacons into peaceful reformers had backfired. Rather than weaning the men from armed activism, Fenton had helped create a group that was giving organizational form and political coherence to armed defense. The Deacons' actions during the school boycott were the modest beginnings of a major political challenge to the orthodoxy of nonviolence in the coming years.

On March 22 Jonesboro was buzzing with excitement over James Farmer's visit. Farmer addressed an overflow crowd of 600 people at Johnson's Skating Rink. Speaking with inspired tones in his stentorian basso, Farmer reaffirmed CORE's plan to make Jonesboro a major campaign in the summer, likening the campaign to another "Selma." Farmer said he was "shocked by the fact that in Jonesboro there is practically no

²⁰Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro"; SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 26, 1965, FBI-Dacons file no. 157-2466-13.

compliance with the public accommodations section of the Civil Rights Act nearly a year after passage." He pointed out that four restaurants and the library were still segregated, and blacks still were denied the simple dignity of home mail delivery. Farmer promised to increase staff for the summer project of voter registration and public accommodation tests, and finished his oration to thunderous applause.²¹

Farmer departed for New York and the Deacons returned to expanding their political role in the community. On March 24, Earnest Thomas boldly led a delegation of Deacons into the mayor's office and presented the city with a list of demands for community improvements. The demands centered on an equitable distribution of government services and resources. The Deacons called for a clean-up drive to rid the black community of trash and refuse; they wanted the city to erect street signs and provide house numbers throughout the black section; and, echoing Farmer's complaint, they demanded postal service for the black community.²²

The lack of postal service was particularly irksome to the community. For years blacks had endured the indignity and inconvenience of receiving their mail at Jonesboro's post office, rather than the home delivery that was provided to whites. The simple act of mailing a letter was a needless hardship. To send or receive a letter, blacks had to travel to the post office, often incurring the added expense of cab fare. Thomas was fed up with the practice, and made his resolve clear to the mayor. "I told him that he was going to have mail delivery in thirty days. If not, we were going to file in federal court." The

²¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 23, 25 March 1965.

²²Account of this meeting is drawn from, SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 26, 1965; Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro"; and Thomas, Hill interview.

mayor demurred, claiming that there could be no mail service until the streets and houses were properly named and numbered. "He said it will take longer than thirty days because we got to get street signs and we got to order those." Thomas offered a solution: the Deacons would provide makeshift street signs and house numbers. The mayor agreed and mail delivery started promptly.²³

The list of demands signaled the boycott's radical expansion beyond its original boundaries. What had begun as a protest against the rumored discharge of a teacher, had expanded to broader educational issues, and now to community-based issues. Day by day the realm of the possible expanded in the imagination of the black community.

Despite the drama of the Jackson High School boycott, national attention remained focussed on the Selma campaign led by King and SNCC. On Thursday, March 25, a car load of Klansmen pulled alongside the car of Viola Liuzzo, a white Detroit housewife and mother of five, who was ferrying marchers from Montgomery to Selma. She was accompanied by Leroy Moton, a young black activist. As the car came flush with Liuzzo's, the Klansmen unleashed a volley of gunfire. Liuzzo was killed instantly.²⁴

The nation was stunned and deeply moved by the murder. The Klan had picked the wrong target. In the past their victims had been strangers to most white Northerners. Jimmie Lee Jackson was another anonymous young black man. Schwerner and Goodman were "beatnik" Jewish kids from New York. But Viola Liuzzo was one of their own. Her photograph showed a beautiful young woman with a kind, innocent smile. She was a teacher, a housewife, and a loving mother: in short, the idealized image of white

²³Ibid.

²⁴Sobel, *Civil Rights*, p. 304.

femininity. That the Civil Rights Act was now the law of the land made the attack appear even more senseless and barbaric. President Lyndon Johnson appeared on television the next day, with Hoover at his side, and angrily declared war on the Klan. Johnson called for new legislation to curb the Klan and a special congressional investigation into the terrorist organization. Liuzzo's murder also propelled forward the FBI's secret COINTELPRO project to disrupt the Klan.²⁵

The Klan had always harbored a special hatred for white Yankee civil rights activists. Black activists were a Klan target as well, but the presences of white northerners particularly enraged the hooded nightriders. Liuzzo joined the ranks of a host of white martyrs: Schwerner, Goodman, Jonathan, and Reeb. In Jonesboro, white activists had also been singled out for particularly brutal treatment and threats. In the summer of 1964 the Klan had appeared at the Freedom House and demanded the "two white guys." On another occasion a black man reported to CORE that Police Chief Peevy had asked him to "beat those white fellows to the point of death" in an attempt to drive them out of the community.²⁶

In the wake of the Selma tragedy, news arrived that Cathy Patterson and Danny Mitchell had organized a group of white Syracuse University student volunteers to travel to Jonesboro during spring break. The students planned to help rebuild the two churches destroyed by arson in January. The Deacons were justifiably anxious for their safety.

²⁵*Times-Picayune*, 27 March 1965.

²⁶Daniel Mitchell, "A Special Report on Jonesboro, Louisiana," July 1964, box 1, folder 10, CORE(Jackson Parish).

The Jonesboro community was not deterred by the Selma violence, and instead forged ahead toward a militant confrontation with the school board. The Day following Liuzzo's murder an impressive phalanx of 375 students and parents marched to the school board office in the brisk cold of the early dawn. In a daring maneuver, the protestors surrounded the office and blocked all entrances. The tactic succeeded in closing the School Board offices; even Superintendent Koonce never bothered to report to work.²⁷

Governor John McKeithen knew trouble when he saw it. With the violence in Selma, the Liuzzo murder, and now the Deacons and the militant Jonesboro and Bogalusa campaigns, McKeithen hastened to preempt a bloody battle in Louisiana. On Friday, March 26, as black students and parents surrounded the Jackson Parish School Board office, Governor McKeithen announced that he would travel to Jonesboro the following day to attempt to negotiate an end to the two-week-old boycott of Jackson High School.

McKeithen's announcement marked a turning point in Southern history. No Governor before him had intervened to negotiate a settlement in a civil rights protest in the Deep South. Most Southern Governors were pragmatic men and ardent segregationists; they had no desire to commit political suicide by enforcing the new civil rights laws. They either neglected or openly obstructed enforcement of the new laws. It was politically advantageous for the Governors to allow a crisis to escalate out of control, forcing the federal government to intervene. The tactic relieved them from enforcing the desegregation laws while increasing the Governors' popularity as stalwart defenders of Southern honor. McKeithen departed from this script. "I've been told that I couldn't win

²⁷Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro."

re-election if I came here," said McKeithen in Jonesboro during the negotiations. "But I'm here today. The only person who stands to get hurt here today is your governor."²⁸

We can only speculate as to McKeithen's motives for assuming the role of racial moderate. McKeithen would later say that his actions reflected the growing moderation of his own white constituents. It was true that throughout the South white moderates were increasingly asserting their opinion in support of detente with the civil rights movement. The causes for this change in attitude were complex. Some whites were sincerely troubled by the moral dimension of segregation; others were simply embarrassed by the unflattering media attention focussed on the South. Still others feared that Southern intransigence and violence were damaging the South's economy by hindering its ability to attract new industry.

Politicians like McKeithen also understood that the Civil Rights movement was radically changing the face of Southern politics. As black voting power grew, ardent segregationists found themselves at a disadvantage. It was politically expedient for some politicians to cultivate a new moderate image by currying favor with black voters. Even before the Voting Rights Act, Louisiana had a substantial percentage of registered black voters--more than 16 percent, and the impending voting rights legislation promised to increase this percentage to well more than 25 percent. McKeithen's moderate stance in Jonesboro stood to gain him more votes than he might lose.²⁹

McKeithen had both the Deacons and the Klan to reckon with in Jonesboro, and he had already charted a course to destroy both groups. In early March McKeithen had

²⁸*Times-Picayune*, 28 March 1965.

²⁹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 29 March 1965; *New York Times*, 26 April 1965.

considered having Louisiana Attorney General Jack Gremillion investigate existing laws that could be used to break up the Deacons through arrests. McKeithen had also discussed a plan to discredit the Klan through embarrassing congressional hearings on the group--a request he would make through Louisiana's congressional delegation.³⁰

Regardless of his motives, McKeithen's actions in Jonesboro won him the instant enmity of the Klan. In response to the Jonesboro negotiations, the Klan lit up the night sky in the Baton Rouge area with nearly two dozen blazing crosses, including one boldly ignited near the state capitol.³¹

The momentous negotiations with the Governor occurred over the weekend of March 27-28. Local attorney William "Billy" Baker, an appointed special liaison for McKeithen, arranged an integrated meeting with about forty persons at Jackson High school, including a "school committee" led by Kirkpatrick and several other Deacons.

The negotiations on Saturday, March 27 were a sterling victory for the black community. Faced with the steely determination of the Deacons and the students, McKeithen had conceded virtually all of the boycotters' demands. He agreed to additional textbooks and water fountains, library improvements, and new landscaping and playgrounds. Although he could not promise funds to rebuild the gym, in the aftermath of the boycott voters approved an \$800,000 bond issue for a new gymnasium.³²

³⁰SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 3, 1965, FBI-Deacons file. no. 157-2466-9.

³¹Ibid.

³²*Jet*, 15 April, 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 29, 30 March 1965; Castle, "Activities in Jonesboro."

In return for the concessions, the students agreed to temporarily suspend the boycott and return to school. The students left open the option to protest unresolved grievances in the future, and even issued a statement declaring that they would continue to protest in school through the "observance of prayer and studying of Negro history." A biracial committee was formed to negotiate issues in the future.

The marches and pickets would continue for several months, targeting both school and desegregation issues. But something had changed in the mill town. The change was apparent to Cathy Patterson, the young CORE activist, when she returned to Jonesboro along with a group of fellow Syracuse University students after the boycott. Only seven months had passed since her departure, but Patterson immediately sensed the difference. When Patterson first came to Jonesboro in the Spring of 1964, not a single family offered their homes for lodging, for fear of Klan retaliation. CORE activists had to find separate lodging in a house owned by an absentee landlord. But now, in the Spring of 1965, black families without hesitation invited the civil rights activists into their homes. Patterson observed a new determination and courage in the average citizen. "I think it had a lot to do with the Deacons," reflected Patterson. "And I think it had a lot to do with members of the community sensing their own capacity to protect themselves."³³

The Deacons had succeeded in "getting the men to stand up" as Charlie White said. Blacks no longer needed an FBI agent in every house to defend their rights. They would defend themselves now. In the past Southern blacks had possessed rights but not the will to exercise them. The Deacons rekindled the courage to defend these rights in the souls of ordinary black people. It was a bravery and pride deeply imbedded in the

³³Catherine Patterson Mitchell, Hill interview.

hearts of black men and women; stirred to life during the slave revolts and military service in Union armies; resting dormant during the dark years of Jim Crow and lynchings. Now it was born anew.

“Example is not best way to teach,” said Albert Schweitzer. “It is the only way.” The Deacons were exemplars for the “New Negro” in the South. Their combativeness and willingness to forcibly seize rights rather than have them bequeathed did not disappear along with the Deacons. Instead, these qualities were absorbed into the political consciousness of the New Negro. And when, in Cathy Patterson’s words, blacks sensed “their own capacity to defend themselves,” when they accepted that they were entitled to the same rights, honor, and respect as whites, then the Deacons became unnecessary. In a reciprocal process, ordinary people became Deacons, and the Deacons became ordinary people.

The Jonesboro movement forged ahead and by early April the movement shifted its focus back to desegregating public accommodations, including several restaurants that remained segregated. The campaign expanded to demand an end to occupational discrimination, and protests against police brutality. Student volunteers flooded in from the University of Kansas, Louisiana State University and Southern University at Baton Rouge.³⁴

The influx of white student volunteers caused considerable anguish for the Deacons. They did not want another killing like the Liuzzo murder in the Selma campaign. But the Yankee invasion was bound to inflame the Klan, and on April 9 the racists made their move. During the day, a Kansas University student ran out of gas and

³⁴Castle, “Activities in Jonesboro.”

Elmo Jacobs, a Deacon leader, offered to assist the student in retrieving his car. Jacobs loaded four white students and a friend into his station wagon. As he drove down highway 157, suddenly a brown Chevrolet station wagon pulled in front of Jacobs, bringing his car to a halt. Startled, Jacobs looked through the windshield and saw a single-barrel shotgun emerge from the car blocking his path. The gun let out a deafening blast that left fourteen pellets in Jacobs' door.³⁵

Elmo Jacobs never flinched. "Well, that made me went to shooting," said Jacobs. He quickly grabbed his gun and returned a volley of fire as the stunned students watched in horror. Jacobs' terrified assailants panicked and fled with bullets careening off their car.³⁶

It was the first and last armed attack on a civil rights worker in Jonesboro.

Jonesboro was not Selma.

³⁵This incident taken from *Ibid.*; Elmo Jacobs, Feingold interview.

³⁶*Ibid.*

Chapter 6

The Magic City

In 1905 two Pennsylvania businessmen, brothers Charles and Frank Goodyear, scouted the Bogue Lusa creek area in Washington Parish for the site for a new lumber mill. The Goodyear brothers had made a fortune in coal and lumber in Pennsylvania, and they were now determined to harvest the bounty of Louisiana's expansive long leaf yellow pine stands. The Bogue Lusa creek site was a barren clearing buried in a vast forest of millions of acres of virgin pine. For centuries the area had been home to a few bands of semi-nomadic American Indians. In the nineteenth century a handful of white homesteaders settled the region and took up farming and small commercial logging operations.¹

The Goodyear brothers decided on the Bogue Lusa site for their planned lumber mill and quickly raised fifteen million dollars to erect an enormous saw mill. In 1906 the Great Southern Lumber Company was born, and along with it the city that the Goodyear brothers named Bogalusa--later dubbed "The Magic City" by city boosters.²

¹Quick, Amy, "The History of Bogalusa, the 'Magic City' of Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 29, no. 1 (January 1946) pp. 74-178.

²John Fahey, "Will Bogalusa Survive?," *Times-Picayune*, 28 August 1977.

By 1907 the mill buildings and workers' housing were completed using 14 million feet of timber. The saw mill began operation September 1, 1908 and an adjoining paper mill was established in 1917.

Bogalusa was a classic company town. The Great Southern Lumber Company owned virtually every board and nail in the place. Great Southern owned more than 750 homes, the town hospital, the utility services, and the company stores. The lumber company even trademarked the town's name. The only thing Great Southern did not own were the people who labored in the mill. Nonetheless, the company ruled the institutions that ruled the people: city government, the judiciary, and the police.

Great Southern's workers were hewn from the independent stock of yeoman who peopled the pine country of Washington Parish. They were a coarse lot, hardened by the toil and misery of logging and subsistence farming. They knew nothing of time clocks, shift work, supervisors, and the discipline of modern industry. They had been masters of their few simple tools: the saw, the logging chain, and the mule. The Goodyears were confronted with the daunting task of transforming this headstrong and proud peasantry into a modern, regimented, and compliant workforce.

Like most Northern concerns conducting business in the South, Great Southern honored local segregation customs and reproduced them throughout the town and mill. Workers' housing was strictly segregated by race. In later years this extended to separate housing for Italians and Jews. Schools, parks, public facilities, restrooms, parish fairs, parades, and water fountains were all segregated. Even hospital services were segregated. A black mother could have a baby at the local hospital, but, as a matter of policy, white nurses refused to bathe the child.

Great Southern also segregated jobs and cafeterias, break rooms and bathroom facilities in the mill. Approximately 15 percent of the mill's workforce comprised black men. Although white women worked in the mill, no black women were employed. Blacks were largely excluded from operating machinery and relegated to the arduous "yard" occupations involved in moving and stacking timber.

The black community, which numbered eight thousand by 1965, emerged over the years in several distinct neighborhoods. The community neighboring the business district was dubbed "Jewtown" because of its proximity to Jewish stores in the downtown district. Other districts included "Poplas Quarters" (named in the tradition of "slave quarters"), Moden Quarters, Mitch Quarters, and East Side and South Side.³

The Bogalusa mill remained non-union for its first three decades of operation. In 1919 the mill weathered an abortive organizing drive engineered by the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW led an interracial organizing drive that culminated in the mill police murdering four white unionists who were defending a black union organizer. Although the organizing drive was defeated, Great Southern's management lived in perennial fear of a worker uprising. In the 1920s the mill manager built a secret escape tunnel in the basement of his home.⁴

Swept up in the tidal wave of unionization during the late 1930s, the mill was finally organized into segregated union locals in 1938. But by 1938 the leviathan saw mill, the largest in the world, had consumed all the timber within its grasp. Poor planning forced the mill to switch to processing pulp wood used primarily in paper

³"The Bogalusa Negro Community," May 16, 1965, box 7, file 6, CORE(SRO).

⁴Quick, "The History of Bogalusa."

production. Pulp wood could be processed from young pine trees that only took fifteen years to grow.

Between 1938 and 1965 the mill and city went through a radical transformation. Mill operations were increasingly automated and Great Southern was sold and resold, eventually coming under control of the Crown-Zellerbach Corporation based in San Francisco in 1960. As the mill changed hands, its new owners decided to withdraw from managing workers' housing and city services. Beginning in 1947, the mill owners systematically divested, radically transforming the city's political and social structure. In 1947 the mill closed the last of its company stores. In 1950 more than five-hundred company homes were sold to their occupants and the company-owned hospital was donated to a nonprofit corporation. In the years that followed the company continued to divest all its city services and withdrew behind the mill's gates. The denizens of Bogalusa were left to their own devices to run the city.⁵

Unfortunately the company's gift to the citizens of Bogalusa was a ticking bomb. Between 1961 and 1965, Crown-Zellerbach poured \$35 million into modernizing the saw mill and box factory. The mechanization drive resulted in company layoffs of five-hundred workers, intensifying competition between blacks and whites for the dwindling number of jobs. Crown-Zellerbach did little to assist the city in mitigating the social problems posed by the drastic layoffs. They offered no programs to retrain displaced workers or to attract new industry to the city. While the city's civic and government institutions floundered in the face of these problems, the unions did attempt to fight back.

⁵Fahey, "Will Bogalusa Survive?"

A futile nine-month strike lasted from August 1961 to April 1962. In the end it cost Crown-Zellerbach \$15 million and added to the class and racial tensions in the city.⁶

Though Crown-Zellerbach was the source of virtually all of the economic suffering visited upon Bogalusa, race became the scapegoat. At the same time that Crown-Zellerbach was throwing hundreds of workers into the streets, the Federal Government was pressuring Crown-Zellerbach to end discriminatory practices in hiring and promotions. In March 1961 President John Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925 that mandated a "fair employment policy" to end racial discrimination by companies that conducted business with the federal government. Crown-Zellerbach's government contracts brought it under the provisions of the order, but rather than quickly implement and support these changes, Crown-Zellerbach evaded the new regulations. The paper company fed the fires of racial hatred in Bogalusa by dragging out the divisive negotiations for several years. To add to the growing tensions, the white union local also vigorously opposed the anti-discrimination reforms in an effort to protect the privileged position of whites in the mill.⁷

In May 1964 Crown-Zellerbach finally agreed to implement one fair-employment reform: integrating the process by which temporary workers were selected (the "extra board"). For the first time in Bogalusa's history, unemployed and desperate whites found themselves competing with blacks as equals. The predicament enraged white workers but left them with few remedies. They had lost their last battle with the company in the

⁶Vera Rony, "Bogalusa: The Economics of Tragedy," *Dissent*, 13, no. 4 (May-June): pp. 234-242.

⁷Rony, "Bogalusa," pp. 235-36.

strike of 1962. The only protection they enjoyed was their white skin, and now the federal government, along with the company and blacks, was threatening to deprive them of this remaining privilege. White frustration and anger with the company and government were soon diverted into hatred for a more vulnerable enemy: black labor.

Given the simmering racial and class conflicts, it should come as no surprise that Bogalusa became the site of the most virulent and disciplined Klan offensives in modern history. Unlike most of Louisiana's non-union cities, white workers in Bogalusa were well organized as a result of decades of trade union experience. In the 1960s technology, the drive for profits, and the emerging black liberation movement conspired to deprive them of their perceived birthright. The civil rights movement became the stage for the last battle of organized white labor in Bogalusa. Unable to defeat the company, whites attempted to secure their caste privilege at the expense of black rights. They perceived every concession to integration as a symbolic attack on the status and security of white labor.

This was the boiling cauldron Crown-Zellerbach handed city leaders in 1964. Bogalusa's political and business elites were confronted with two intractable forces. On one side, a well-organized white population, plagued by economic anxiety and racial hatred. On the other side, an increasingly militant black working class, equally well-organized and determined. For fifty years the mill owners had successfully managed the conflict between these groups through authoritarian social control mechanisms. But the mill owners left a power vacuum when they abandoned the city in the 1950s, a vacuum that the Klan would soon fill.⁸

⁸Paul Good, "Klantown, USA," *Nation*, 1 February 1965, pp. 110-13.

The path to Bogalusa for the Jonesboro-based Deacons for Defense and Justice began in the Spring of 1964. A weak and largely ineffective NAACP had existed in Bogalusa since 1950, headed by William Baily, Jr., a retired railroad worker. The NAACP chapter even failed to recruit middle class teachers, the mainstay of the Southern NAACP. The chapter's only victory was a successful voting rights suit filed in 1959 when local segregationists attempted to purge 1,377 blacks from the voter roles.

The leading civil rights organization in the early 1960s was the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League (BCVL), headed by Andrew Moses. Bogalusa, like Jonesboro, had a significant number of registered black voters who could tip the balance in city elections. The BCVL concentrated on voter registration and often used its influence to bargain for political favors. BCVL leaders told one visiting activist that the League was "significant in swinging elections, and for this reason, also, the power structure is willing to listen to them."⁹

By 1964 young members of the Voters League were pressuring Moses to increase the pace of change. Moses and several other respected black leaders began meeting with city official as part of the Bogalusa Community Relations Commission, a biracial commission that the white power structure created to address civil rights issues. The black bargaining team sought desegregation concessions from the city through quiet negotiations. But the commission accomplished little in 1964, other than the hiring of two black deputies and the first all-black garbage truck crew.¹⁰

⁹Lori Davis, Mimi Feingold, and Howard R. Messing, "Summer Parish Scouting Report, Washington Parish," [Summer 1964], box 7, file 6, CORE(SRO).

¹⁰Robert Hicks, Interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, Bogalusa, Louisiana, Miriam Feingold Papers, SHSW.

In May of 1964 CORE created a stir when its New Orleans office announced that it intended to conduct a voter registration drive in Bogalusa. CORE was active in several communities close to Bogalusa, including highly publicized campaigns in Hammond and Clinton. Andrew Moses, the BCVL leader, was not eager to see CORE in Bogalusa. He had always moved slowly and cautiously and his Voters League risked losing credibility with the white power structure if disruptive protests erupted.¹¹

White leaders in Bogalusa were also concerned about CORE. One CORE report observed that "the white community, evidently noting the demonstrations in Hammond and the recently established [CORE] Regional Office in nearby New Orleans, is scared to death of CORE. The Power structure, anxious to attract industry and people to Bogalusa, will do almost anything to keep CORE out." The report added that because the "power structure" feared disruptive protests, they appear "to be willing to give in to at least certain demands . . ." ¹²

To avert CORE's planned intervention, the Mayor and City Commission asked the BCVL to persuade CORE to postpone their planned campaign. On July 10, 1964, Moses led a delegation of three BCVL leaders, all members of the Community Relations Commission, to meet with CORE's Ronnie Moore. Some militant members of the Bogalusa movement questioned Moses' motives. Gayle Jenkins, at that time a young militant member of the BCVL, claims that the black delegation was working at the behest

¹¹On May CORE announcement see, Rickey Hill, "The Character of Black Politics in a Small Southern Town Dominated by a Multinational Corporation: Bogalusa, Louisiana, 1965-1975" (Masters Thesis, Atlanta University, 1977), p. 65.

¹²Davis, Feingold, and Messing, "Scouting Report."

of the city government, and that the city fathers "paid them to go and talk to CORE and ask them not to come in."¹³

Indeed, the meeting had an air of official negotiations about it, with Moses presenting Ronnie Moore with an official letter of representation from Bogalusa Mayor Jesse Cutrer. Moses asked CORE to delay any organizing plans in order to provide time for the Community Relations Commission to resolve problems in an orderly manner. Moore agreed and wrote Mayor Cutrer, saying that the group had decided that they "must remain patient in order to bring about social adjustments." Moore told Cutrer that CORE and the Voters League would give the Mayor "six months to make certain progressive steps toward implementing the provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights Act," during which CORE pledged to stay neutral to allow the Voters League to resolve the problem.¹⁴

CORE had scouted Bogalusa in the Summer of 1964 and thought the city had great organizing potential and was "ripe for CORE's type of program." Discontent with white intransigence ran high. The Civil Rights Act and other Federal civil rights mandates had changed nothing in Bogalusa. Although segregation signs were down at the Crown-Zellerbach papermill, the company left intact separate water fountains and toilets. Blacks were not allowed in the unemployment office during morning hours, and when admitted in the afternoon, whites were allowed to cut in front of them. The Washington Parish Charity Hospital refused black patients except on Thursdays. Lunch counters, restaurants, and nearly all public accommodations remained segregated. Blacks

¹³Rickey Hill, "The Character of Black Politics," p. 65.

¹⁴Ronnie Moore to Mayor Jesse H. Cutrer Jr., 18 July, 1965, box 7, file 5, CORE(SRO).

were limited to “broom and mop” occupations at downtown stores and black neighborhoods lacked street lights, paved streets, and a sewerage system.¹⁵

Bogalusa’s black community certainly had its share of challenges, but it also had the leadership sufficient for the task at hand. Along with the Voters League, there was a well-organized black farmers co-op and the black local of the Pulp and Sulphite Workers Union had developed several young charismatic leaders. The union had a political education committee that had implemented a program for voter education. CORE considered Bogalusa’s black community a “well organized and reasonably informed community.” “In short, we feel that Bogalusa can easily be one of the most exciting and challenging places this summer and for a long time to come,” said one scouting report.¹⁶

But CORE’s optimistic assessment of the papermill town seriously underestimated the organizational strength of the white working class and the Klan. With the decline of the White Citizens Council, several new and violent Klan organizations began aggressively organizing in the Bogalusa area. The Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (OKKKK), founded in Jonesboro and an offshoot of the United Klans of America, began recruiting in Washington Parish in 1963. It publicly announced its presence by burning crosses throughout the area on January 18, 1964. In response, Lou Major, the editor of the Bogalusa Daily News, published an editorial attack on Klan three days later. The Klan retaliated by burning a cross in front of Major’s house. In May

¹⁵Davis, Feingold, and Messing, “Scouting Report.”

¹⁶Ibid.

1964, the Klan conducted its first rally in Bogalusa, no doubt in response to rumors that CORE was planning an organizing drive in Bogalusa.¹⁷

The first public accommodations civil rights protest was on July 3, 1964, when two 12-year-old black girls spontaneously integrated the Woolworth lunch counter, sparking an ugly confrontation with a white mob. The girls' courageous act was the first and last direct action protest in Bogalusa in 1964. Black and white leaders returned to the strategy of negotiations while CORE as the Klan watched from the wings.¹⁸

In October of 1964, the federal Community Relations Service (CRS), the agency responsible for assisting communities in implementing of the Civil Rights Act, convinced Bogalusa businessman Bascom Talley to form a group of white business and civic leaders to provide for orderly desegregation in the mill town. Talley, an attorney and publisher of the Bogalusa *Daily News*, and CRS representatives were concerned that young blacks were growing restless with the snail's pace of change. They hoped that the business and civic leaders could preempt disruptive protests. Talley was something of a liberal anomaly on the race question. He had recently been appointed to the CRS, although prudently omitting the news story from his own paper. A respected member of Bogalusa's business elite, Talley quickly called together a group comprising a few liberal businessmen and several religious leaders, most of them not natives of Bogalusa. The first meeting at Talley's home was attended by two CRS officials; Reverend Jerry M.

¹⁷Good, "Klanton," 110-113; The May rally is referred to in *Activities of Ku Klux Klan Organizations in the United States*, Hearing before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Ninetieth Congress, First Session, October 19, 20, 21, 22 and 25, 1965 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966) volume 3, p. 2413.

¹⁸Rony, "Bogalusa," p. 238.

Chance, minister of the Main Street Baptist Church; Ralph Blumberg, operator of a local radio station; Reverend Paul Gillespie, minister of the Memorial Baptist Church; Lou Major, Editor of the *Daily News*; and Reverend Bruce Shepherd, rector of St. Matthews Episcopal Church.

Talley's group decided on a modest and relatively harmless event to launch their integration efforts. They would sponsor a testimonial dinner for Vertrees Young, the former mayor of Bogalusa, and perhaps the city's most venerated leader. The dinner would feature Brooks Hays, a former Arkansas Congressman, now a Rutgers Professor and CRS consultant. Hays had served as President of the Southern Baptist Convention and a special assistant to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Despite his decidedly liberal credentials, Hays' Arkansas roots would provide an acceptable Southern pedigree. The plan called for Hays to discuss how other communities had successfully integrated public accommodations under the Civil Rights Act. The "Hays Committee," as it came to be known, hoped to exclude potential disrupters from the event by making it by invitation only. The Committee invited a select group of one hundred white businessmen and professionals--and eight black leaders. In early December they formally invited Hays to speak at the Episcopal Church House on January 7, 1965.¹⁹

The Klan responded to the news with an intense, well coordinated and vicious terror campaign against the Hays Committee. The Klan burned crosses at the homes of Committee members. They assailed the Committee members and their families with relentless death threats. They tampered with their phones making them make bizarre noises (it was later revealed that the Klan had members working for the phone company).

¹⁹*Times Picayune*, 6 January 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 6 January 1965.

Night riders silently cruised by Committee members' homes at all hours. The Klan distributed more than six-thousand handbills door to door, carrying the ominous warning that "those who do attend this meeting will be tagged as integrationist and will be dealt with accordingly by the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan." Pressure also increased on the vestrymen of the Episcopal Church, the planned site of the Hays speech. After the Klan burned a cross on the church lawn, the vestrymen quickly withdrew their invitation to the Hays committee.²⁰

As the terror increased it became clear that local officials were allowing the Klan to terrorize openly and with impunity. Bogalusa's OKKKK chapter had at least 150 paid members in the Fall of 1964, and several hundred additional supporters at their beck and call. At the height of the OKKKK's power, it was estimated that Bogalusa had eight-hundred Klansmen, more Klan members per capita than any American city. The liberal press appropriately dubbed the milltown, "Klanton USA."²¹

The OKKKK flaunted its power. It set up headquarters at the fire station, immediately across from the Bogalusa City Hall. It organized a special terrorist squad to specifically conduct well-planned assaults and cross burnings. For months the Klan had been arming its members for guerilla warfare. Howard M. Lee, an auto repair shop owner and an exalted cyclops OKKKK unit leader in Bogalusa, obtained a federal firearms license and began equipping a small army of Klansmen in Louisiana and

²⁰"Fact sheet on Bogalusa, Louisiana," 17 February, 1965, reel 25, CORE Papers Microfilm, ARC; Good, "Klanton," p. 110-11; For earlier Klan leaflets attacking Talley and Lou Major, see, "Published by the Original Ku Klux Klan of Louisiana," [September 1964], box 7, folder 6, CORE(SRO) and Klan leaflet text in *Activities of Ku Klux Klan*, volume 3, pp. 2421-22.

²¹Ibid.

Mississippi in 1964. During the period of May-August 1964 alone, Lee bought 651 weapons and 21,192 rounds of ammunition and then illegally passed along the weapons and bulk ammunition to other Klansmen for resale--without recording the sales or true names of purchasers. In one transaction Lee provided James M. Ellis, another OKKKK Unit leader, with 65 Italian rifles.²²

The terror quickly isolated the Hays Committee from the rest of the community; their few supporters silenced by fear and official complicity. "We were just six guys bucking the whole darn town," said Reverend Bruce Shepherd. City officials were appeasing the Klan, said another community leader, who asked for anonymity when interviewed by the *Nation* magazine. "The Klan cannot survive here unless it has official sanction," he said. City and law enforcement officials had indeed turned a blind eye to the criminal violence, emboldening the Klan to even more flagrant transgressions. The police were riddled with Klan members: eighteen Bogalusa auxiliary police swore out of the Klan in April of 1965 so they could remain officers and deny Klan membership. At one Klan meeting members openly debated a proposal to bomb the Church where the Hays Committee had scheduled their event.²³

²²*The Present-Day Ku Klux Klan Movement*, Report by the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Ninetieth Congress, First Session, 11 December 1967, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967) pp. 106-107; *Activities of Ku Klux Klan*, volume 3, pp. 2525-2529; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 17 June 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 31 July 1965. Lee was sentenced to three years in prison in June 1965.

²³Good, "Klantown," p. 111, 112; A copy of the December 27, 1964 Klan leaflet can be found in *Activities of Ku Klux Klan*, volume 3, pp. 2454. Several other Bogalusa Klan leaflets appear in *ibid.*, pp. 2454-2458. On Klan in the Bogalusa Auxiliary Police, see *ibid.*, p. 2549.

Bogalusa Mayor Jesse Cutrer and Police Commissioner Arnold Spiers attempted to appease the Klan by appearing at a Klan meeting at the Disabled American Veterans Hall on December 19. But it was too late to reverse the momentum the Klan had gained as a result of the leadership vacuum. All Mayor Cutrer could do was take the podium and nervously survey the 150 hooded Klansmen glaring at him through slitted sheets. It was even rumored that one robed Klansman on the dais was a United States Congressman.

The Klan castigated the Hays Committee as integrationists, though none of its members had ever advocated integration. The OKKKK leaflet attacked Talley's *Daily News* as "amalgamationist" and reviled him for concealing his membership on the CRS. Talley was also the Klan's favorite target for class-based attacks on the wealthy. In one leaflet the Klan resorted to doggerel to reproach Talley: "This man would love the nigger, In order to grow financially bigger."²⁴

Moderates like the *Daily News* editor Lou Major were confounded by the bitter response. "I'm neither an integrationist nor a segregationist," Major protested. "We didn't want Bogalusa to become another McComb with bombings and burnings. Now for the first time in my life, I have a loaded pistol in the house." Talley laid the blame for the Klan's success on the failure of white business and government leaders to support the Hays Committee. "There has been a leadership vacuum here and that's what the Klan thrives on," offered Talley. "That and stupidity."²⁵

²⁴Good, "Klantown," p. 111.

²⁵Ibid.

Talley and his besieged colleagues frantically searched for an alternative site for the Hays event after the Episcopal Church withdrew its facility. In the last week of December Klan crosses blazed across town as the Klan intensified its intimidation campaign. On Monday, January 4, with only three days left before the scheduled speaking event, the Hays Committee requested the use of the Bogalusa City Hall. But the Klan had already gotten to the Mayor and the Commission Council. Mayor Cutrer promptly turned down the Committee on the pretense that the event would be a private meeting at public place. In addition, Cutrer rebuked the Hays Committee for interfering with the "quiet progress" that he was making on race relations through the Community Relations Committee. The Mayor's capitulation to the Klan signaled the end of any semblance of freedom and democracy in the mill town. The Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan now reigned supreme.

The appeasement strategy toward the Klan adopted by Bogalusa leaders was not the only path available to them. Only a few miles away in Hammond, Louisiana, town fathers had weathered a similar crisis in the heart of Klan country. In 1963 black high school students in Hammond independently organized a protest march against segregation and forced city leaders to form a Biracial Committee to negotiate their demands. Infamous racist leader Judge Leander Perez of Plaquemines Parish soon caught wind of the integration plans and launched a campaign to reverse the gains blacks had made in Hammond. But the Mayor of Hammond took a hard line against Perez and the Citizens Council--in contrast to the Bogalusa experience. The Mayor refused to allow the Judge to use Hammond's parks for protest rallies and made it clear that Perez

and his followers were not welcome in Hammond. Perez retreated and the city managed a relatively peaceful transition to integration.²⁶

The Hammond episode clearly demonstrated that the Klan could be neutralized by strong moderate leaders. Indeed, the acquiescence to the Klan by Bogalusa's leaders confounded many outsiders. Brooks Hays was dumfounded by the controversy his planned appearance had created. The protests were the product of "a bunch of dunderheads," Hays told one CRS official. In all his experience in the South, Hays had never seen anything like Bogalusa. "That is the goddamnest place I've ever been," said Hays.²⁷

That the Klan had forced out Brooks Hays, President Johnson's top troubleshooter for racial problems, was bound to attract national attention. The local media had kept silent about the Klan attacks until January 5, 1965, when the Hays Committee courageously published a signed editorial in the *Daily News*. The editorial recounted the Klan's terror campaign and condemned the Klan and the cowering performance of the City government. "It is a shame," wrote the six Hays Committee members, "and we are ashamed, that fear should so engulf our community that it strangles free speech and the right of peaceful assembly, and makes a mockery of democracy."²⁸

²⁶"Field Report, Tangipahoa Parish, Hammond, Spring, 1964," ca. 1964, Hammond, Louisiana, box 7, folder 2, CORE(SRO).

²⁷Jerry Heilbron, interview by author, 12 September 1993, Tucson, Arizona, tape recording.

²⁸*Bogalusa Daily News*, 5 January 1965.

The sting of national publicity caused the town fathers to reconsider their ill-fated policy of appeasement. In response to the Klan terrorism, Chief of Police Claxton Knight and Safety Commissioner Arnold D. Speirs announced a \$500 reward for information concerning the cross burnings. And on January 6, Mayor Cutrer went on television to denounce violence and call for "full and complete law enforcement at all times regardless of race, creed, or color." The announcements and official protests against the Klan were empty gestures; Bogalusa city police never made a single arrest for the harassment of the Hays Committee or the scores of cross burnings.²⁹

Crown-Zellerbach shared a great deal of responsibility in the Hays fiasco. There was a growing consensus among business and civic elites in manufacturing centers in the South that integration was inevitable and had to be achieved in an orderly fashion. The divisive campaign in Birmingham in 1963 demonstrated that blacks were willing to plunge the city into anarchy if necessary to achieve their goals. Company towns like Bogalusa that sold products nationally could ill afford this kind of negative publicity; Crown-Zellerbach's paper products were vulnerable to a national boycott. Most Southern business elites came to see that orderly integration was necessary for economic development.

Yet in Bogalusa Crown-Zellerbach had abdicated leadership to a weak and ineffective group of leaders who were no match for a well organized, working-class based Klan insurgency. Had Crown-Zellerbach intervened in behalf of the Hays Committee, the Klan would have faced a formidable foe. But by the time Crown-

²⁹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 3 January 1965; Good, "Klantown," pp. 110-11.

Zellerbach realized the consequences of their silence, the opportunity for a peaceful desegregation had passed.

In contrast, Bascom Talley represented the new Southern businessman guided by enlightened self-interest. Talley was a segregationist, yet he believed that the South would suffer if it held to its old ways. His *Bogalusa Daily News* set a course early on that reflected this perspective. In a trenchant editorial on January 6, the *Daily News* argued that Brooks Hays would have served to reduce racial tensions, smooth the transition toward integration, and avoid racial demonstrations and violence. The *Daily News* feared another Little Rock in Bogalusa, pointing out that racial conflict “wrecks a town’s economy” and “spreads fear and unrest and smears a community’s image statewide and nationally.”³⁰

Louisiana’s Governor John McKeithen was also slow to learn the lessons of Birmingham. Following the Bogalusa incident, McKeithen castigated Brook Hays for meddling in Louisiana’s affairs. “If I were Brook Hays,” said the Governor, “I would stay in Arkansas. They have twice as much trouble as we have.” The Governor declined to visit Bogalusa, saying that his presence would only inflame the local problems. The cross burnings were not a matter of concern either since they didn’t intimidate anyone, including blacks, said McKeithen. “The more we talk about Bogalusa, the more trouble we have,” he complained. “We have had no church burnings here, no bodies pulled from the river, no one shot on the highway as in other states.”³¹

³⁰*Bogalusa Daily News*, 6 January 1965.

³¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 8 January 1965.

Mayor Cutrer joined McKeithen in chastising the Hays committee and attempting to avert the crisis by declaring it resolved. "We have been through a very trying period which has put each one of us to the test," said Cutrer. "And we have come through with flying colors."³²

Cutrer was dead wrong. The Hays incident was the beginning, not the end of Bogalusa's problems. Young blacks in Bogalusa were already upset that the Voters League had kept CORE out of Bogalusa. The League's "quiet negotiations" had accomplished nothing other than delivering the city into the hands of the Klan. The young militants in the League began to pressure Andrew Moses to start testing public accommodations. Simultaneously, Crown-Zellerbach officials were growing nervous about the negative national publicity that the Hays incident had generated. In early January Crown-Zellerbach officials told Cutrer to arrange for an orderly, staged testing of public accommodations. The plan was to test facilities, declare Bogalusa in compliance with the Civil Rights Act, and return to normalcy.³³

With national attention focussed on Bogalusa, Cutrer knew that the Community Relations Committee would have to make rapid progress. He had already notified restaurant and motel owners and told them they were going to have to face the facts regarding the Civil Rights Act. Federal officials were also pressuring Cutrer to comply with the Civil Rights Act or face losing federal funds. Cutrer contacted Moses and other black members of the Commission and arranged for a symbolic, choreographed day of

³²*Times-Picayune*, 12 January 1965.

³³Crown-Zellerbach's role in staging the tests is documented in "Crown-Zellerbach in Bogalusa," 16 May 1965, box 7, folder 6, CORE(SRO) and Rony, "Bogalusa," p. 238; "Field Report January-June 1965."

testing of public accommodations. Cutrer promised that the testers would have adequate protection and that he would ask the Klan not to interfere. Andrew Moses agreed to the plan and reluctantly acceded to the young militants' demand that CORE participate in the tests. Moses and City officials were adamantly opposed to CORE intervening in Bogalusa, but they failed to persuade the young militants. Moses joined three other Voter League members, L.C. Dawson, Robert S. "Bob" Hicks, and Gayle Jenkins, to travel to New Orleans to meet with Ronnie Moore at CORE's headquarters. CORE agreed to assist in the tests and two white CORE staff members were dispatched to Bogalusa, William "Bill" Yates, a former Cornell English Professor, and CORE Volunteer Steve Miller, an Antioch student.³⁴

CORE had initially proposed four days of tests and were not told that the League had agreed to only one day. Prior to the test, scheduled for Friday, January 28, Yates and Miller worked with the Voters League in preparation for the planned day of testing. CORE trained the volunteer testers, most of them teenagers, in nonviolent protest techniques. The League arranged for the public schools to be closed so that the students could participate. The city grew tense as the day of testing grew near. State and city officials took precautions to guarantee an orderly, well-orchestrated desegregation test. Governor McKeithen arranged to have the State Highway Patrol troops present to augment Bogalusa's small city police force. And on the eve of the event, Mayor Cutrer delivered a radio speech urging citizens to avoid the test area and to remain calm.³⁵

³⁴Good, "Klantown," p. 112; "Fact Sheet on Bogalusa, Louisiana"; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 29 January 1965.

³⁵Rickey Hill, "The Character of Black Politics," pp. 67-70; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965," box 7, folder 6, CORE(SRO).

The day of testing went surprisingly well. The Negro Union Hall served as headquarters for the operation, and the testers were shuttled between the hall and the business establishments. Andrew Moses led groups of four in testing sixteen eating establishments, two movie theaters, and the Austin Street Branch of the Washington Parish Library. Seven establishments refused to serve the testers, including Capos and the Dairy Queen. The Klan stayed out of sight for most of the day. There were only a few incidents of harassment, and those were directed at CORE's representative. While Bill Yates was waiting outside Plaza Restaurant, a group of white men jeered him, calling him a "Hebrew" (Yates was not Jewish) and menacingly drawing their fingers across their throats. Police stopped a large group of white men when they threatened to attack Steve Miller and a group of blacks who had just successfully tested the food counter at the Acme Drug Store. Miller had been shuttling the teenagers in his new red Barracuda, a sporty car that his parents had recently purchased for him. Other than these few incidents, the testing went as planned. The Klan had honored its pledge not to intervene. The crisis appeared to be over.³⁶

But there was still the matter of the seven establishments that had refused to comply with the desegregation law. At the end the day the testers assembled for an informal meeting. The mood was exuberant and the testers were feeling exhilarated and confident after a day of daring escapades. One of the teenagers suggested that they continue with more tests. Andrew Moses could not have been pleased with this development, since he had promised the town fathers that there would be only one day of

³⁶*Bogalusa Daily News*, 29 January 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 29 January 1965; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965.

tests. "Everybody was feeling good," recalls Steve Miller, "so the kids especially, as young people will do, they said 'O.K., let's do some more!' So at the end of the meeting, I just yelled, 'O.K. we'll be back Monday!'" It was an impulsive move that added to the tension between Moses and CORE. "I didn't have any sense of what I was doing, but it put Moses on the spot," says Miller. "And he had to call a meeting for 4:00 P.M. that day." But when they arrived for the meeting, the Union Hall was locked. Moses had canceled the meeting.³⁷

The schism between CORE and the BCVL found its way into news reports. Earlier in the day, Moses had told the media that no further tests were scheduled and that injunctions might be sought against the establishments that refused service, but that decision would await a planned evaluation of the days activities. But CORE was sending a different message. CORE's Bill Yates told the media that he planned to remain in Bogalusa for some time, and that there would be more tests at the seven establishments that had failed to comply. Moses and CORE were apparently at loggerheads.³⁸

The showdown between Moses and CORE occurred the following Monday, February 1. Yates and Miller returned to attend an evaluation and victory meeting of the BCVL. Over the weekend the conflict festered between the old and the young in the Voters League. Blacks on the Community Relations Committee had been operating with no accountability to the black community. They were older moderates, hand picked by the white power structure. Young militants like A. Z. Young and Bob Hicks had been

³⁷Steven Miller, interview by author, 28 August 1994, Oakland, California, tape recording.

³⁸*Bogalusa Daily News*, 29 January 1965.

purposefully excluded. The militants had reached the limits of their patience with negotiation and compromise. Had not Moses and his colleagues capitulated to the Klan on the Hays Committee event? Had not "quiet negotiations" meant diversions and preservation of the status quo? Had not the old leaders acquiesced to the City's demand that the tests be limited to one day of empty symbolism that allowed half a dozen businesses to flaunt the law? To the young militants, nothing had changed.³⁹

The mass meeting on February 1 exploded into a sharp debate when Yates and Miller suggested more tests and protest. Andrew Moses held firm. But by the end of the meeting it was apparent that he had lost control of the BCVL to the younger members. Reflecting the new role of teenagers in the BCVL, the group formed a BCVL youth group which was headed by Dan Expose, the son of Gayle Jenkins.

It had been a tense and exhausting meeting, but Yates and Miller were hopeful. The black community had sided with CORE and the two organizers were excited at the prospects of organizing a campaign in Bogalusa. As darkness fell, the BCVL activists grew concerned about the safety of the two CORE workers. CORE had ignored Mayor Cutrer's agreement with the Klan that CORE would visit Bogalusa for only one day of testing. Now Yates and Miller were back in Bogalusa planning additional protests. Moreover, Bob Hicks and his wife Jackie were preparing to violate a strict racial taboo. They had offered to let Yates and Miller to stay at their home that night. No white person had ever spent the night in the "colored quarters" in Bogalusa.

³⁹Rickey Hill, "Character of Black Politics," pp. 67-70; Miller, Hill interview; Robert S. Hicks, interview by author, 25 February 1989, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording.

Bob and Jackie Hicks sat down for dinner that night with their five children and Bill Yates and Steve Miller. When they finished dinner, they retired to the living room to watch television and talk over the day's events. Suddenly there was a knock at the door.⁴⁰

Bob Hicks opened the door and found Police Chief Claxton Knight and a deputy standing before them looking grim. Claxton Knight was the archetypal Southern lawman; a tall, lanky man who always sported a big Stetson cowboy hat. He had come with bad news. A surly mob of whites had gathered on Columbia Street, Knight told Hicks, and they were threatening to come after Yates and Miller. The CORE organizers would have to depart immediately. There was little that could be done to protect them. It might not be a bad idea if Hicks and his family would leave as well.

Bill Yates did not respond well to ultimatums. The professor had an arrogant streak that even tried the patience of his friends. "Bill Yates was a hot head," recalls Bob Hicks. "He had a bad temper, a real bad temper." Yates' temper flared with Chief Knight. The two exchanged heated words, with Yates barking to Chief Knight that he didn't "like the goddamn idea of you trying to run me out of town." Yates paused, then turned to Hicks and asked if he and Miller could stay the night. "Hell yeah," said Hicks defiantly, "you a guest in my house."⁴¹

The two police officers left in a huff. As they walked back to their car, Yates asked if they planned to protect the house in light of the threats. Hicks recalls Knight's

⁴⁰The account of this incident is taken from, Hicks, Hill interview; Miller, Hill interview; and "Fact Sheet on Bogalusa, Louisiana."

⁴¹Hicks, Hill interview.

blunt response. Knight told them, "he wasn't going to play no nursemaid to some niggers and people down here in the house." Knight returned to his patrol car where he sat quietly in the dark for a few minutes with two deputies.⁴²

The news of a white mob set the Hicks household into a panic. They faced the frightening prospect of a Klan lynch mob arriving at their door in the next few minutes. The Hicks family was armed with a rifle, a shotgun, and two white pacifists who refused to touch either. It was a woefully inadequate arsenal. But the Hicks were levelheaded activists and they mobilized quickly. Jackie Hicks quickly began calling friends for assistance. Within minutes the word of the Klan mob swept through the black community. One couple arrived to escort the children to safety. The woman was so nervous that she panicked and drove off, leaving her husband stranded at the house.⁴³

The word got out that the Hicks needed protection, and the black men of Bogalusa responded swiftly. "A lot of black men in the community started coming down," recalls Hicks, and they were talking about how they were "going to kill us some Klan tonight." Chief Knight and his deputies watched in silent disbelief from their patrol car as a line of black men rapidly filed into the Hicks' house--armed with shotguns and rifles. After a few minutes Knight left. Andrew Moses arrived soon afterwards but left to make calls and never returned.⁴⁴

Bill Yates was busy on the phone trying to secure police protection so that he and Miller could return to New Orleans. Using a standard CORE technique, Yates placed

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.; "Fact Sheet on Bogalusa, Louisiana."

calls to CORE contacts around the country, as well as local and national media. Within hours local, state, and federal officials were inundated with hundreds of telephone calls demanding that Bogalusa police provide protection for the two.

Within an hour of Knight's visit, the Hicks' house was reinforced with more than twenty-five fully armed black men. The men sat for hours in tense silence, watching the streets for any sign of danger. Occasionally a police car drove by slowly and shined a spotlight at the house. Finally, Chief Knight returned to the house at about 4:00 a.m.. The phone calls to CORE contacts around the nation had had their intended effect, and Chief Knight now assured Hicks that the CORE workers would be safe.

The truth was that there never was a Klan mob on Columbia Street. The mob story was concocted by Knight to bluff Yates and Miller into leaving Bogalusa. Charles Christmas and Saxon Farmer, the leaders of the OKKKK, had demanded that city officials remove Yates and Miller, and Knight, lacking the nerve to summarily arrest and deport the two CORE workers, had resorted to a clumsy ruse.⁴⁵

Knight's ploy to expel CORE had backfired and converted the civil rights struggle into a contest of honor for blacks in Bogalusa. The phony Klan threats against CORE and Hicks' family had only increased the stakes for the black community. In the past, the Bogalusa Klan had limited its harassment to white accommodationists; now they were threatening the sanctity of the home and the right to free expression in the black community. Defending CORE became a test of manhood and a point of honor for

⁴⁵The Klan's pressure on Cutrer is documented in "Federal Complaint," found in United States of America, by Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Attorney General of the United States vs. Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, an incorporated Association; et. al., 1965, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Louisiana, Civil Action 15793, case records, Federal Records Center, Fort Worth, Texas; Miller, Hill interview.

Bogalusa blacks. And honor was everything to the tough, proud mill workers--white or black. "You had what you would call diehards on both sides," explains Bob Hicks. "Whites in Bogalusa have been diehards for conviction. Bogalusa blacks have been diehards for conviction." Beyond defending their principles, blacks in Bogalusa simply did not like to lose. "They were sore losers," muses Hicks. "In whatever they got involved in, whatever they committed themselves to, they didn't want to lose. They wanted to win. They wanted to come out on top."⁴⁶

The Klan mob incident had started--rather than stopped--the Bogalusa civil rights movement. "Had it not been for that . . . I don't think there would have ever been a movement in Bogalusa," Hicks says. The mob incident was Bob Hicks' personal Rubicon as well: "I took whites into my home. No one else in the Bogalusa Voters League would do that . . . but when I brought them into my home, I was locked in."⁴⁷

⁴⁶Hicks, Hill interview.

⁴⁷Rickey Hill, "Character of a Black Politics," p. 70.

Chapter 7

The Bogalusa Chapter

The following morning Yates and Miller safely departed Bogalusa with a police escort. Their visit had left the city in an uproar. Embarrassed City officials issued a denial that a white lynch mob had threatened the CORE workers. The growing rift between BCVL moderates and militants resurfaced publicly when Andrew Moses told the media that there would be no further CORE activity in Bogalusa without Voters League approval. CORE's second visit had also enraged the Klan, furious that City officials had not expelled the CORE organizers as they had demanded.¹

But CORE was not through with Bogalusa. The intrepid Miller and Yates returned to Bogalusa the next day, Wednesday, February 3. They had been invited by local black union officials to discuss the developments. The CORE workers also hoped to meet again with city officials. Late that afternoon the two CORE workers left the Negro Union Hall in Steve Miller's new Barracuda to depart for New Orleans. The pair soon realized they were being followed by a mysterious car with five white men. The car carried five segregationists, including Delos Williams and James Hollingsworth, members of the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Miller and Yates nervously drove around the black quarters for several minutes, the Klan car in close pursuit. The pair

¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 3 February 1965.

balked at leaving town by the single highway between Bogalusa and New Orleans. It was too risky--a narrow highway with few turnoffs for escape: "We just knew that we weren't going to go out that way," recalls Miller. Finally, Yates decided to attempt to telephone for help from Andrey's Cafe, a small restaurant in the black quarters. He yelled for Miller to stop the car. Miller hesitated, but deferred to the judgement of the older Yates. He brought the car to a halt and Yates quickly jumped from the car and headed to the phone.²

Suddenly the Klan car pulled in front of Miller's car, blocking his path. Shots rang out and a brick was tossed at Miller's car. The Klansmen leapt from their car and caught Yates. They threw him to the ground and violently beat and kicked him, leaving him with severe internal injuries and a broken hand.

Yates finally escaped his attackers and stumbled into Andrey's Cafe. Miller parked his car behind the cafe and joined Yates in the cafe. Inside Andrey's cafe were four or five older men. The eatery was a tiny matchbox of a building, little more than a single room 15' by 15'. The two CORE activists watched anxiously as the first Klan car was quickly joined by at least four other carloads of Klansmen, the deadly caravan slowly circling its prey.

A tense quiet descended on the room as Miller and Yates nervously considered their options. Their first line of defense was visibility. Miller quickly began to feed nickels into the pay phone, making a series of frantic calls. First he called his mother in San Francisco, an activist in her own right, and told her to start a chain of phone calls to

²The account of this incident is taken from Miller, Hill interview; Hicks, Hill interview, and "Federal Complaint."

alert authorities and the media to their plight. Calls soon began to flood into the offices of the Louisiana State Attorney General, the State Police-- anyone who could bring pressure to bear on local authorities. Miller also contacted CORE's New Orleans and Baton Rouge Offices, as well as the wire services. It was a frightening yet exhilarating situation for the nineteen-year-old Miller. "Remember Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney?" Miller asked a UPI reporter on the phone. "Well you're talking to the next ones right here. We're about to get it."³

Within minutes after the attack several black men armed with rifles began to quietly slip into the cafe through the back door. Many were the same men who had guarded the Hicks' house a few days before. They took their positions inside the cafe with efficiency of motion. "I'm sure many of these men were combat veterans," recalls Miller. "They certainly deployed themselves as such." The armed men were a comfort to the two pacifists and a stabilizing presence as the crisis unfolded. At one point Miller panicked when the pay phone wouldn't work. "They cut off the phones. They cut off the phones!" Miller shouted to the men in the room. One of the black men who had been watching Miller calmly diagnosed the problem. "Son, you got to put a nickel in there first."⁴

Even when Miller managed to put the nickel in the phone he still had problems. During the siege, communication with the outside was sabotaged by local white telephone company employees--as had occurred in Jonesboro. Bogalusa telephone operators refused to put calls through to the black community. Phone company

³Miller, Hill interview.

⁴Ibid.

employees outside of Bogalusa were drawn into the unfolding drama. One indignant Boston telephone operator refused to get off the line until she succeeded in connecting her long distance caller to Bogalusa.

As they waited for word from the outside, Miller surveyed the dimly lit garrison and the stern militia standing guard over him. It was philosophical epiphany for Miller. "Up to that point, I embraced the concept of nonviolence," said Miller. Now necessity made him an apostate. "At that point I guess I said, 'Oh, I guess I'm not nonviolent anymore'."⁵

Eventually FBI Special Agent Frank Sass in New Orleans reached Miller on the pay phone in Andreys. The Klan caravan circling the block had melted away at sunset, but it was still unsafe for Miller and Yates to leave the cafe. Agent Sass told Miller not to leave until he could make it to Bogalusa and talk to local authorities. Miller retorted that the agent should not delay calling the Bogalusa authorities; that he and Yates needed protection immediately and they had already notified the media. "The world is watching," Miller warned Sass.⁶

Sass was the resident agent for Bogalusa and was familiar with the recent civil rights activities. He soon arrived at Andreys Cafe but balked at walking into the building. "Steven Miller, come on out," yelled the agent in his distinctive Southern draw. One of the black guards cautioned Miller that the cafe door was illuminated by a light, making Miller a clear target if he ventured outside. "Don't you go out there and silhouette yourself, boy," warned the man. So Miller told Sass to come in if he wanted to

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

talk. The FBI agent opened the cafe door and took a few steps in. He was not prepared for the scene confronting him: The tiny cafe was packed with black men armed with rifles and shotguns. "His mouth dropped a foot," recalls Miller with some amusement. "He literally couldn't talk for four or five minutes. He just stood there stunned."⁷

When Sass regained his composure, he took affidavits from Miller and Yates, surrounded by their armed defenders. By this time the CORE organizers were beginning to grow cocky about their bargaining position--bolstered by the small army at their command. They told Sass that they weren't leaving Bogalusa; they demanded medical treatment for Yates; and they lectured the agent about how "things were getting out of hand" in Bogalusa. The FBI agent did not enjoy the scolding and he soon left without making any promises, only saying that he would talk to state police officials. The black guards waited a few hours for Sass to arrange protection, but when the agent failed to return they decided to move the CORE men to the Hicks house. They concealed them in the back seat of a car and transported them in an armed convoy to the Hicks house. When they arrived, Yates and Miller were greeted by a second defense force, scattered in trees, behind bushes, and inside the Hicks house.⁸

It was imperative to get Yates to a hospital for his injuries but the local hospital was out of the question. By about 10:30 p.m. CORE's regional office had arranged for a State Police escort for Yates and Miller. Four patrol cars soon arrived. The ranking patrolman walked to the Hicks' door. "He came in, took about four steps into the room, and saw all these guys with guns and his mouth fell open and he was rooted to the spot,"

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

says Miller. "He was just dumfounded." The armed guards relished the moment. "I definitely remember these guys were getting a kick out of this, because at that point they were basically holding the upper hand."⁹

Miller and Yates said their goodbyes and thanked their newfound Samurai. As they left the house, they passed Alveria Hicks who sat quietly in a chair with a forlorn look. Miller bent down and gave her a kiss on the cheek, much to the horror of the onlooking white patrolmen. It was a small gesture of gratitude, but one that boldly flaunted the color line. "I was always very proud of that," said Miller thirty years later.¹⁰

City Police escorted Yates and Miller to the edge of town and then State Police formed a convoy for the rest of the trip to the Lake Ponchartrain bridge, and Miller and Yates eventually arrived safely in New Orleans. True to form, Mayor Cutrer and other city officials later denied that the attack occurred, attributing it to the "vivid and unrestrained imaginations" of Yates and Miller. Governor McKeithen chastised the two at a press conference in Baton Rouge, labeling them "professional troublemakers" and speculating that Yates' shattered bones and internal injuries were "self-inflicted." Adopting the same appeasement policy toward the Klan that had brought Bogalusa to the brink of chaos, McKeithen repeated his claim to the media that Louisiana had no racist violence problem. Fortunately, McKeithen didn't believe his own propaganda. The Governor announced in the press conference that state police would provide twenty-four

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

hour protection for CORE--no doubt to protect Yates and Miller from their "vivid and unrestrained imaginations."¹¹

The second attack on Yates and Miller sealed the fate of Andrew Moses in the BCVL. Moses realized that CORE was in Bogalusa to stay and that the testing and other forms of direct action protest would continue, regardless of his promises to the town fathers. Moreover, CORE was now committed to organizing in Bogalusa and most of the BCVL's younger leadership had demonstrated that they would support and defend CORE. Moses had succeeded in losing the confidence of both blacks and whites. Within a few days, Moses resigned. His resignation marked the end of the NAACP strategy of accommodation and negotiation in Bogalusa. The man who would ultimately replace Moses symbolized the new strategy of militant confrontation, coercion, and violence. His name was A. Z. Young.¹²

Forty-two years old, A. Z. Young bridged the old and young generations, combining mature judgement with a youthful passion for justice. The imposing 6'4" goliath was a charismatic working class leader, blessed with a *basso profundo* voice, a flair for the dramatic, and a gregarious personality. Articulate and strong-willed, Young had provided militant leadership for the black local of the Pulp and Sulphite Workers Union for several years. A stint in the army during World War II imparted a military demeanor to Young. He had seen combat, serving as a tank commander in the 761st tank battalion under General George Patton. Young's military experience and years of union

¹¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 5 February 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 5 February 1965.

¹²Rickey Hill, "The Character of Black Politics," pp. 67-68.

activism had schooled him in leadership and the art of negotiating from a position of power.¹³

Young was joined in the BCVL's new leadership by two other emerging leaders: Bob Hicks and Gayle Jenkins. Bob Hicks brought a quiet determination and luminous intelligence to the Voters League. A man of great personal integrity and determination, Hicks had already taken leadership in organizing self-defense in the community. Gayle Jenkins had the best organizational instincts of the triumvirate. As Secretary-Treasurer, Jenkins managed the League's finances. Her quiet and thoughtful manner counterbalanced A. Z. Young's penchant for showmanship and hyperbole.

All three were solidly working class in their backgrounds and political instincts. Contrasting sharply with their middle class predecessors, the new leadership was passionately independent and militant, with political instincts contrary to the political tenets of nonviolence. Where their predecessors had gained concessions through brokering power, electoral bargaining and quiet negotiations--all predicated on accommodating white interests--the new leaders cared little about courting the favor of whites. They eschewed negotiations and deal-making from a position of weakness. They preferred direct action that forced a crisis and coerced concessions. They had no qualms about using force and violence as a political tool, even if it alienated whites.

Nor were the new leaders constrained, as their predecessors were, by genteel aspirations to white bourgeois propriety. While the old BCVL had been mired in an uninspired voter registration campaign, the new BCVL favored a direct challenge to civil

¹³Program for "A. Z. Young Civil Rights March 25th Anniversary Commemoration," 12 November 1992, Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus. In author's possession.

and economic inequality. Their legitimacy rested on community consent, not the blessing of a city hall or national civil rights organizations. Locally led and locally funded, the new Voters League was immune to the pacifist agenda imposed by national organizations and funders.

As the Voters League regrouped in February 1965, the OKKKK was also planning an offensive, encouraged by official appeasement and virtual immunity from prosecution. The OKKKK's strategy was to silence all opposition, black and white. They planned to force businesses that had desegregated to resegregate. And they would coerce elected officials into defying the Civil Rights Act. To accomplish this they would rely on a variety of tactics, including boycotts, mass mobilizations, mob violence, and terrorist attacks.

In the months that followed the OKKKK mobilized large numbers of whites to disrupt picketing, marches, and other forms of desegregation protest. Although the violent attacks on protesters often appeared to be spontaneous, they were actually the work of small, highly organized terrorist squads called "wrecking crews." The wrecking crews were aided by an elaborate communication network of Klan members and supporters linked by phone and citizen band radios. The network allowed the Klan to swiftly dispatch wrecking crews to impromptu civil rights protests.¹⁴

The Klan campaign of intimidation escalated on February 14 when Bob Hicks received a bomb threat by phone. The next day Sam Barnes, a tough ex-convict and BCVL supporter, went to Landry's Restaurant with six black women. Within minutes

¹⁴On Klan strategy and wrecking crews see, *Times-Picayune*, 8 September 1965; "Federal Complaint."

the Klan wrecking crew, led by Virgil Cockern, descended on Landry's. They numbered nearly thirty men, including Sidney August Warner, Delos Williams, James M. Ellis, Charles Ray Williams, and Albert Applewhite. Cockern and another accomplice brandished clubs and threatened to kill Barnes and the black women if they did not leave. Barnes decided to retreat, and returned to the black quarters, with two Klansmen following closely behind.¹⁵

Shortly afterwards, Cockern took his Klan crew to a gas station in the white part of town where four hapless black teenagers had stopped to purchase gas. One of the Klansmen placed a gun to the head of one of the boys and ordered the teenagers to leave the station. Three days later on February 17, Cockern's crew struck again. This time Cockern stopped Reverend Jerry Chance, one of the Hays Committee members, and threatened to harm the minister for his role on the committee.¹⁶

The Bogalusa police made no attempt to stop the attacks, and in fact took pains to arrest blacks who had armed themselves in self-defense. On February 19 the Bogalusa City Police stopped Joshua Mondy, a black activist, for a traffic violation and arrested him for possession of a weapon. In addition to the Klan wrecking crew's violence, racist sympathizers at the telephone company continued to disrupt the phone service of civil rights activists. The phones of Bob Hicks and other activists frequently failed to work or made odd noises and telephone operators refused to assist in long distance calls. A

¹⁵Ibid.; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965." Williams was the only assailant who was not a Klan member.

¹⁶Ibid.; "Federal Complaint."

subsequent investigation revealed that one of the principal Klan leaders in Bogalusa worked as a supervisor at the phone company.¹⁷

The Klan terror campaign culminated in thirty-three incidents in the month following the January desegregation tests. Throughout January and February local and state law enforcement officials failed to arrest a single Klansman, although CORE faithfully reported all incidents. By the third week of February the Klan had silenced most of the white moderates and had forced nearly all of the businesses that had desegregated to resegregate. No example better demonstrated the Klan's power to ruthlessly crush white dissent than the case of Ralph Blumberg.¹⁸

Blumberg was one of the seven original Hays Committee members. In 1961 Blumberg had purchased WBOX, the local Bogalusa's radio station which ran a format of news and country western music. A World War II veteran and a member of Bogalusa's small Jewish community, Blumberg quickly gained a reputation as a successful businessman and respected civic leader. But Blumberg's participation on the Hays Committee brought a sudden reversal of fortune.¹⁹

¹⁷"Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965." Oviad Dunaway, a supervisor at the telephone company in Bogalusa, was the exalted cyclops of the Bogalusa klavern of the OKKKK. Dunaway spoke at a UKA Klan rally near Poplarville, Mississippi on July 17, 1965. *Activities of Ku Klux Klan*, volume 3, p. 2463.

¹⁸"Bogalusa, Louisiana, Incident Summary: January 25 - February 25," [February 1965], box 7, folder 5, CORE(SRO); "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965"; "Federal Complaint."

¹⁹On the Blumberg incident see, "One Mans Stand," *The ADL Bulletin*, May 1965, p. 1; *Times Picayune*, 20, 23, March 1965; "WBOX and the KKK," *Newsweek*, 16 August 1965, p. 75; and Blumberg's testimony in *Activities of Ku Klux Klan*, volume 3, pp. 2415-2438.

The Klan singled out Blumberg for special persecution because he had broadcast the Hays Committee's editorial against the Klan in January 1965. The Klan's campaign against Blumberg was merciless. Nightriders drove nails into Blumberg's car tires and smashed his car windshield. An anonymous caller threatened to kill his wife and children, forcing Blumberg to first send his family to St. Louis, then later to shuttle them around to Jewish homes in Bogalusa and New Orleans. During school hours Blumberg's wife would sit in her car at her children's school to keep vigil over the children during recess.²⁰

The personal threats and violence were accompanied by a Klan campaign to destroy Blumberg's radio station by intimidating sponsors into withdrawing their advertisements. The Klan threatened businesses with a boycott if they continued to advertise on WBOX. One advertiser received a barrage of thirty-seven threatening calls. By March 1965, Blumberg had lost all but six of his original seventy advertisers. Financial ruin was imminent. At first Blumberg endured the harassment in silence. He even met with Klan leaders who denied that they were coordinating the harassment campaign. But on March 18, Blumberg struck back with an editorial calling on Bogalusa citizens to speak out against "the few who intimidate and attempt to control and infect the community like a plague."

Racist terrorists swiftly responded to the editorial. That night under cover of darkness, an assailant fired six shots from a high-powered rifle into the WBOX transmitter. The next day Blumberg's engineer hastily resigned. Blumberg's editorial against the Klan and his appeal for public support predictably failed to garner support.

²⁰"One Man Stands Alone," *The ADL Bulletin*.

Both Governor McKeithen and Mayor Cutrer offered little sympathy and instead castigated Blumberg for sensationalism. McKeithen insisted that the Klan had little influence in Bogalusa and that Blumberg had "done the city of Bogalusa a great disservice" by claiming to be a victim of Klan terror. McKeithen also intimated that Blumberg had an ulterior motive for bringing negative publicity to the city--that Blumberg would soon win a lucrative job from an Eastern newspaper or radio station. Mayor Cutrer dismissed Blumberg's editorial as merely an example of Blumberg's habit of bringing national shame to the community. Cutrer blamed Blumberg for his own predicament, observing that the station owner had broadcast the Hays Committee editorial, an action that resulted in CORE targeting the community. The Mayor also questioned Blumberg's claims about Klan harassment, noting that none of the sponsors had made complaints of intimidation to local law enforcement officials.²¹

By August 1965 the Klan had frightened away all of WBOX's local advertisers, save for Bill Lott, the owner of a local Honda dealership. The radio station limped along with financial assistance primarily from Jewish supporters in New Orleans and New York. More than \$8,000 in contributions was raised, mostly in New Orleans. A New York merchants' group bought one-hundred public service commercials featuring the preamble of the constitution. The national organization of the Presbyterian Church funded a series of half-minute commercials narrated by comedian Stan Frieberg. The advertisements implored Bogalusans to live by the bible and love one another: most white Bogalusans had demonstrated that they were willing to do neither. In November 1965 Blumberg was forced to sell his station and leave his beloved Bogalusa. With his

²¹*Times-Picayune*, March 20, 23 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, March 23 1965.

departure, the Klan had succeeded in driving out the lone voice of white dissent in Bogalusa.²²

As the events intensified in Bogalusa, civil rights lawyers filed a series of federal suits that brought increasing pressure on government bodies statewide. On February 15 a suit was filed in Federal District Court in Baton Rouge requesting the desegregation of state vocational-technical schools, including two located in Bogalusa: the Sullivan Memorial Trade School and the Sidney James Owen School. Judge E. Gordon West took only four days to issue a permanent injunction barring discrimination. The action coincided with another suit filed by the NAACP the same week in Judge West's court seeking to end segregation in all Louisiana public schools.²³

The escalating Klan attacks forced black Bogalusa leaders to seek protection. In early February, Steve Miller and Bill Yates traveled to Jonesboro on CORE business. While in Jonesboro, they met with Earnest Thomas, Frederick Kirkpatrick and other members of the Deacons and discussed the Klan problem in Bogalusa. The Jonesboro Deacons suggested that Yates arrange a meeting with Bogalusa leaders to consider starting a Deacons Chapter. Yates agreed and the meeting was arranged for February 21.²⁴

²²"WBOX and the KKK," *Newsweek*, p. 75.

²³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 16, 21, 17 February 1965.

²⁴The account of the first visit to Bogalusa by the Jonesboro Deacons is taken from, Miller, Hill interview; Thomas, Hill interview; Alcie Taylor, interview by author, 8 March 1989, Bogalusa, Louisiana, tape recording; Kirkpatrick, Hill interview; New Orleans to Director, February 23, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-3; SAC, New Orleans to Director, February 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-4; SAC, New Orleans to Director, February 26, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-6; and "The Deacons," *Newsweek*, 2 August, 1965, pp. 28-29.

On the morning of the 21st, Charlie Fenton packed up his dog Duffy and picked up Thomas and Kirkpatrick for the six-hour journey to Bogalusa. Fenton was driving a CORE station wagon with an ominous history. The station wagon was one of two donated in 1964 for the Freedom Summer campaign in Mississippi. The other station wagon had met with tragedy. It was driven by Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney on the night they were murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

The Jonesboro Deacons' delegation and Duffy headed South to Baton Rouge where they picked up Bill Yates and Steve Miller. The group was nervous about driving the integrated group to Bogalusa through the Klan infested Florida Parishes. Ronnie Moore had secured cooperation from the State Police in the past, so he made a call and arranged for a police escort for part of the trip to Bogalusa.

As they drove along, the conversation turned to nervous speculations about an ambush. The group knew that the Klan was connected through a network of citizen band radios. Kirkpatrick dismissed the nervous chatter, tapping on his bible and reassuring his compatriots, "Don't worry, I got the Good Book." A few miles down the road Kirkpatrick told Miller to pull over so that he could answer nature's call. Miller kept driving, reluctant to stop in the middle of a remote rural area. Kirkpatrick repeated his request but Miller continued to ignore him. Finally Kirkpatrick demanded that Miller stop the car. Miller relented, and Kirkpatrick left the car still clutching his bible. When he returned to the car, Kirkpatrick held the bible up to Miller to reassure him. "Don't worry," Kirkpatrick said with a large smile, "we got the Good Book." Kirkpatrick

opened the bible to reveal a small derringer in a hollowed-out compartment carved in the "Good Book."²⁵

The group arrived at the Negro Union Hall in Bogalusa at approximately 8:00 p.m. Fourteen men were assembled, including Bob Hicks, who had taken the lead in organizing the meeting. Most of those attending were men like Charles R. "Charlie" Sims and Alcie Taylor, who had been instrumental in the informal defense group that had guarded Hicks and other activists.

Kirkpatrick and Thomas entered the Hall with guns in their waistbands. At the beginning of the meeting Kirkpatrick and Thomas drew their pistols and placed them on the table. All the other participants followed suit and the table was soon heaped with guns. The proceedings were tense. "We were all very scared," says Fenton.²⁶

Fenton, the devout pacifist, was assigned to guard the door with his dog Duffy, and ordered not to speak or call attention to himself. He was not to allow anyone in or out. It was, according to Fenton, all very "cloak and dagger" and "high drama" stuff.²⁷

While the Deacons presented a nonviolent image to the media--courting public opinion and favorable publicity--their clandestine organizing meetings allowed them to sound a different theme. Here their goal was to shock black men out of the lethargy of fear and convince them that the Deacons had the requisite courage and martial expertise to counter the Klan. And so they did.

²⁵Miller, Hill interview.

²⁶Fenton, Hill interview.

²⁷Ibid.

Kirkpatrick and Thomas plunged into their presentation with “fiery rhetoric” and “stern admonitions to secrecy and loyalty and discipline,” recalls Fenton. Kirkpatrick lambasted the accommodationist leadership in the black community. “You been led by the tap-dancing Negro, and the head-tapping Negro--in other words, the plain old Uncle Tom,” Kirkpatrick crowed to the Bogalusa group. The nonviolent movement’s preoccupation with “rights” was diverting black men from a more important calling. “You got to forget about *right*, because *right* ain’t gonna get you justice.” If black men wanted justice, they would have to pick up the gun. “Wherever you’re at, you be ready,” Kirkpatrick warned the group:

Keep plenty of stuff in your car and at home. I carry with me almost all the time a hundred rounds . . . Now in my town we have groups patrolling each street. We guarding intersections and every time a white man comes in an automatic radio call is dispatched to a car to stop him and ask him his business. When the policeman come around we right on him too--we patrol him. You got to let him know that as taxpayers, you are the ones who send him to the commode, you the ones that buy his air conditioners, and those big cigars he smokes, and the dirty hat he wears . . .²⁸

Thomas elaborated on how the Deacons used two-way radios in Jonesboro and detailed plans to develop a statewide network of Deacons linked together by radios and employing a secret code. Kirkpatrick touted the benefits of such a statewide network: “If they [white police] get to raising sand in Bogalusa . . . they’ll see us coming down every road all over the state. When you come in with 300 or 400 cars, string out those automobiles up and down. The man gonna think twice before he moves, ‘cause he knows he done moved on the devil’.”²⁹

²⁸“The Deacons,” *Newsweek*, p. 28.

²⁹*Ibid.*

The presentation was a mix of exhortation, exaggeration, and martial posturing--all to good effect. If black men in the South were paralyzed by fear, then these Jonesboro men were the antidote. Thomas's military training showed through. He chastised blacks for buying cheap small caliber weapons, like .22 caliber pistols, and urged them instead to purchase larger weapons, like shotguns and .306 rifles. Kirkpatrick added that if they did buy pistols, they should standardize their purchases with larger caliber .38 pistols, which would also allow them to buy ammunition at a bulk discount.³⁰

The Jonesboro Deacons challenged the Bogalusa men to prepare for major warfare. "Keep plenty of ammo at your house, in your car, wherever you are," Kirkpatrick sternly advised. "Be ready," interjected Thomas. "I carry with me most of the time a hundred rounds. . . We have contacts in Chicago and Houston for automatic weapons--for .50-caliber and 30-caliber." A man in the audience asked if those were machine-guns. "Yeah," Thomas replied, "and we got grenades too. We want to be ready if they want to be violent."³¹

Thomas also discussed how to handle the inevitable problem of local black opposition to a Deacons chapter in Bogalusa. He encouraged the Bogalusa men to meet with local black leaders and influential groups such as ministers and teachers to persuade them to support the new organization. If they refused, then they did not deserve to be

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Thomas quoted in Ibid. Thomas' reference to machine guns would later provide the FBI a pretext to launch an investigation of the Deacons and illegal firearms. There were also rumors that the Deacons had imported 420 Czech machine guns to Baton Rouge in July 1965. In both cases, the FBI never uncovered any evidence of illegal firearms. See SAC, Los Angeles, to Director, April 25, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-129.

leaders. Thomas even offered the services of the Jonesboro Deacons to help persuade black middle class leaders if the local chapter failed to do so.³²

Thomas explained how Bogalusa could affiliate with Jonesboro. The local chapter would assess initiation fees of ten dollars and then monthly dues of \$2. These funds would be used to purchase radio equipment, walkie-talkies, ammunition and literature. Ten percent of the monthly dues would be forwarded to the Jonesboro Office-- now officially the Deacons' state headquarters.

Although Thomas and Kirkpatrick emphasized the defensive role of the Deacons, behind closed doors they proposed an additional tactic: using armed groups to stop police harassment. Thomas suggested that armed patrols could intervene to stop illegal or violent arrests. The mere presence of armed black men could deter illegal arrests, he argued.³³

The meeting lasted until nearly midnight. The assembled group decided to form a Deacons chapter and they immediately elected officers and planned their first organizational meeting for one week later, February 28. The Jonesboro and Baton Rouge visitors prepared to depart but first drove to Bob Hicks' house. Soon after they arrived, they noticed a strange car circling the block. Suddenly, shots rang out and everyone fell to the floor. Within a few minutes reinforcements arrived and word spread that a large

³²SAC, New Orleans to Director, "Deacons for Defense and Justice," February 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-4.

³³The FBI would later seize on these remarks to argue that the Deacons went beyond defensive force and were encouraging attacks on police. See, SAC, New Orleans to Director "Deacons for Defense and Justice," February 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-4 and SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 4, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-8.

caravan of cars had been spotted nearby. It looked like it would be trial by fire for the Bogalusa Deacons.³⁴

The Deacons developed a plan to have several cars leave the house as decoys. Despite the clear danger, Fenton felt reassured by the cool, professional demeanor of the Bogalusa Deacons. They were "in control . . . acting more like an organized unit than it would have been under another circumstance," he recalls. "They knew what they were doing."³⁵

Several cars departed, and when no one appeared to follow, the CORE station wagon left accompanied by several cars of armed men from the Bogalusa chapter. After they had driven what they thought was a safe distance from Bogalusa, the armed escort broke away and returned to the city. But within a few minutes the Jonesboro group realized they were being followed again. Thomas was at the wheel and sped up sending Duffy sliding around in the back of the station wagon. The wagon accelerated to more than one-hundred miles an hour down the two-lane highway. Despite the speed, their pursuers were gaining on them. At the height of the chase Fenton turned around and saw Kirkpatrick sitting ramrod straight in the back seat, his eyes closed tight. He had laid his gun on the seat and was clutching his bible to his chest. Fenton knew they were in trouble. "It scared the hell out of me."³⁶

A few miles ahead loomed a major obstacle: the traffic light in the town of Sun. If they stopped for the light, the Jonesboro group would be a sitting target for their Klan

³⁴Fenton, Hill interview.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

pursuers. The men hastily discussed their options as they sped into the pitch-black night. "All three of us committed that we would rather go through it and die in fire than get stopped," said Fenton. Thomas, exhibiting his gritty nerve, successfully executed a daring turn in Sun and headed back toward New Orleans. He soon lost his pursuers. When they arrived in New Orleans, Fenton called Dick Haley to report the incident. Haley listened sympathetically but reprimanded Fenton for getting involved with the Deacons. The station wagon proceeded back to Jonesboro in the late hours of the night, and the three exhausted men finally arrived in Jonesboro at day break. But the misfortunes were not over. Kirkpatrick was due for work that morning, and with only three miles to go the car ran out of gas. Kirkpatrick got out of the car and ran the rest of the way to work while Fenton walked to retrieve a can of gas. Fenton eventually got the car started and dropped off Thomas and then safely arrived home. Later that morning he left the house in the station wagon to run an errand. His dog Duffy was asleep under the car and was crushed to death. For the sensitive young Fenton, it was a bittersweet ending for what began as an exciting adventure.³⁷

The Jonesboro Deacons' first effort to expand had met with success in Bogalusa. Indeed, the Bogalusa chapter would eventually overshadow the Jonesboro group in organizing strength and publicity. The men in Bogalusa were eager for an alternative to nonviolence. Their motives for joining the Deacons were not much different from the men in Jonesboro: they wanted security, honor, and dignity. The immediate impetus for joining was simply that law enforcement officials had refused to uphold the law and defend black rights. "What these people had in Jonesboro," said Bob Hicks, "is that

³⁷Ibid.; Kirkpatrick, Hall interview.

since we can't get the local officials to protect us in our community, our neighborhood, let's back up on the constitution of the United States and say that we can bear arms. We have a right to defend ourselves since the legally designated authorities won't do it. So this is all we done. That's all."³⁸

³⁸Hicks, Hill interview.

Chapter 8

The Spring Campaign

Bogalusa's black community first learned of the local Deacons chapter the day after the group formed. On Monday night, February 22, Bob Hicks gave a report on the Deacons to a mass meeting of the BCVL as the new chapter patrolled the Negro Union Hall grounds in full force. Hicks discussed his initial organizing meeting with the Jonesboro group and detailed how the Jonesboro chapter operated. "They set up a patrol system for the Negro community," Hicks told the meeting, comprising mostly teenagers. "They got radios, walkie-talkies, grenades, gas bombs, M-1 rifles," Hicks added. Hicks promised that marauding whites would now be kept out of Bogalusa's black community, and the meeting erupted in thunderous applause. "No white person will be allowed in a Negro area at night--salesman or anybody," Hicks assured the cheering crowd. "It takes violent blacks to combat these violent whites. We're gonna be ready for 'em. We're gonna have to be ready to survive."¹

On February 28, the first meeting of the Bogalusa Deacons chapter took place at the Bogalusa Negro Union Hall. Approximately fourteen men attended the meeting.

¹SAC, New Orleans to Director February 23, 1965, FBI-Deacons file teletype 157-2466-3; SAC, New Orleans to Director, "Deacons for Defense and Justice," February 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file 157-2466-4; and *Los Angeles Times*, 2 August 1965.

Law enforcement agencies were prepared and an informant reported back to the FBI the names of ten of the men attending.²

Although Bob Hicks had led the effort to bring the Deacons to Bogalusa, he did not serve as an officer for the new chapter. CORE's attorneys had advised the BCVL to maintain some organizational distance from the Deacons. Hicks occasionally served as spokesperson for the Deacons, especially to the national media, but he continued to work primarily through the BCVL, where he served as vice-president. The organizational distinction between the BCVL and the Deacons was carefully maintained to protect the nonviolent image of the Voters League and CORE. "CORE had represented the pacifist thing," said Hicks. "In order for people to try to support this type of thing, we couldn't bring them [CORE and the Deacons] in together. So we just separated the two." In truth, the two organizations were separate in name alone. From the beginning, the Deacons functioned as an armed auxiliary for the Voters League. Bob Hicks and A. Z. Young, although identifying themselves as officers of the Voters League, were deeply involved in Deacon activities and consistently supported the group's self-defense philosophy. The two organizations were further intertwined by having the president of the Deacons, Charles Sims, also serve as the treasurer for the BCVL.³

At first glance Sims appears a strange choice to head an organization named after Church leaders. Charlie Sims was about as rough as they came. His arrest record carried

²Letter Head Memorandum, "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana Percy Lee Bradford," March 4, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-8.

³Hicks, Hill interview; In August 1965 Sims identified Hicks as "public relations man for the Deacons." See, Charles R. Sims, interview by William A. Price, 20 August 1965, Bogalusa, Louisiana, author's possession.

twenty-one entries dating back to 1957. He prided himself on his rap sheet and bragged that he had frequently been arrested for whipping “white boys on the biggest street they have in the city . . . I wasn’t afraid of the law or nobody else.” He had a reputation as a barroom brawler who strolled about town with a black jack in one pocket and a loaded pistol in the other.⁴

The years of hard living had taken their toll on Sims’ hulking frame. His balding head was sprinkled with gray. A few teeth were missing and his penetrating eyes were frequently bloodshot. Like Earnest Thomas, Sims was a military veteran, having served in Europe with the Army during World War II. He attended NCO school and attained the rank of sergeant as a shooting instructor. He boasted that now at 41 years old, he could still “strike a match at 50 feet” with his rifle.⁵

Sims’ travels in the military had profoundly affected him. “I moved around,” Sims said. “I saw things I never thought about in Bogalusa. I went to the library and I studied.” Like many G.I.s, the freedom Sims experienced in Europe made him more determined to overcome segregation in his homeland. “One day in the Army I see a corporal who was a policeman in Bogalusa,” recalled Sims. “He see me in integrated places and all that. He got out of the service first. He sees me back in Bogalusa--me still

⁴*Bogalusa Daily News*, 12 July 1965; Louie Robinson and Charles Brown, “The Negro Feared Most by Whites in Louisiana,” *Jet*, 15 July 1965, pp. 14-17. Sims quoted in Sims, Price interview.

⁵*Ibid.*

in uniform. First thing he says, 'Remember, you're not in the army now.' I made up my mind then not to be pushed around."⁶

The Deacon leader had been tested under fire in civilian life as well, albeit in circumstances less "sweet and noble" than war. On December 6, 1959, Sims' girlfriend, Beatrice Harry, shot and wounded Sims during a fight. Beatrice was jailed as Sims fought for his life in the hospital. Sims summoned his mother and told her not to allow authorities to prosecute his girlfriend in the event that he died. Beatrice was innocent of wrongdoing, Sims told his mother; she was only defending herself from a potential beating at his hands. Sims lay in hospital for forty days, staring at the ceiling. "You live your life over like that," recalled Sims several years later. "I never took the time out before to sit down and listen to my own thoughts." When he recovered, Sims refused to cooperate in prosecuting Beatrice, and even told the District Attorney that he couldn't read or write so he couldn't sign a statement against her. Sims and his would-be-murderer eventually reconciled and the two were still living together when Sims joined the Deacons in 1965.⁷

Sims never had much interest in politics as a young man. But one day on television he saw a policeman dragging a woman "like she was a piece of wood" during a civil rights protest. The scene stuck in his mind, and soon afterwards Sims joined the Voters League. His military background and pugnacious temperament made him a logical choice for Deacons president. Crude and lacking formal education, Sims was

⁶"Negro 'Deacons' Claim They Have Machine Guns, Grenades for 'War'," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 1965.

⁷Ibid.

nevertheless an articulate and disarming spokesperson for the organization. Moreover, like other Deacon leaders, Sims was economically independent of the white power structure. Indeed, no one was quite sure how Sims made a living. He was an inveterate hustler who inhabited the twilight between casual labor and banditry. He listed his occupations as insurance salesman and cab driver. But mainly he lived, as one friend politely phrased it, "by his wits." He gambled. He hustled. He was beholden to no man. "He was free," said his friend Bob Hicks.⁸

For vice-president the chapter selected Sam Barnes. Barnes was a 55-year-old ex-convict with twelve arrests. He possessed all of Sims' courage and none of his bravado. Barnes had already been on the front line, having been assaulted by the Klan during the February tests. In coming months he seemed to be wherever trouble erupted. Alcie Taylor and Royan Burris completed the list of chapter officers. Unlike Sims and Barnes, Burris and Taylor were reputable figures in the black community. Taylor worked in the paper mill and eventually served as an officer in the Pulp and Sulphite Workers Union. Royan Burris was the youngest in the group. A small, wiry man, Burris ran the local barbershop, the center of communication for the black community. His size was no obstacle to his role as guard. The indomitable Burris was assigned as picketing coordinator for the Voters League, placing the Deacons at the center of all of the League's public protests.

There was an obvious difference between the leadership of the Bogalusa and Jonesboro Deacons chapters. While Jonesboro's leadership was primarily law-abiding and comprised religious community leaders like Bradford, Amos and Kirkpatrick, the

⁸Ibid.; Hicks, Hill interview.

Bogalusa group was dominated by less-than-respectable figures like Sims and Barnes, men who defied law and social conventions. Every black community in the South had at least one man like Sims and Barnes--the legendary "bad nigger" feared by whites and blacks alike. Their reputation for violence served them well in their confrontations with the Klan.⁹

The difference in leadership between the two chapters owed to the fact that in Jonesboro the Deacons played two roles: civil rights organization and paramilitary defense group. In Bogalusa, the Voters League predated the Deacons. This allowed a leadership overlap between the two organizations. It was natural that the Deacons would attract the more combative men, warriors hardened by the military, the streets, or the prisons. Their principal prerequisite was reckless courage--a quality found more frequently in the hustler and street thug than the preacher.

The Bogalusa Deacons plunged into their work. Approximately fifteen men comprised the chapter's core group. Typical of this inner sanctum were steadfast loyalists like Burtrand Wyre. Wyre was a neighbor of the Hicks family and had come to their aid the first night the family was under siege by the Klan. He maintained his vigil over the family for years. "And the onliest time that he would go home was to change clothes," remembers Hicks.

He stayed in my house, slept in my house, sometimes wake up in the morning with just me and him and my wife, all three of us laying down across the bed, asleep in our clothes. And he would take me to work, when he wasn't working or

⁹In an interview in 1994, Deacon member Henry Austin described Sims as a "bullshit artist." Though the term is normally pejorative, in this instance Austin meant the term to be complimentary. The black man most capable of defying whites in the era of Jim Crow had to be skilled at confrontation, bluff, and trickery. Sims and his street-hustler cohorts were masters of that style. See, Austin, Hill interview.

even when I got ready to get off he would be there in a car with somebody to pick me up. He stayed in my house for four years.¹⁰

In addition to the core group the Bogalusa chapter had scores of men called "well wishers." These, perhaps numbering nearly two hundred, were mostly papermill employees who were willing to help with security as needed.

The Bogalusa chapter began regular weekly meetings at the Negro Union hall. Unlike Jonesboro, leadership was concentrated in the hands of one man: Charlie Sims. Sims ran the chapter like the army Sergeant he had been. He managed the money, made the assignments and barked out orders to his subordinates. Even Earnest Thomas, a proud veteran, found Sims' style a touch heavy-handed. "In the meetings, he was like a General; he shouted commands," remembers Thomas. But Thomas respected Sims' effectiveness. "Well, I was impressed that he was militant and that he wasn't going to stand for them running rough shod in the community. So I was impressed with him. He seemed to have a pretty good group together."¹¹

The Bogalusa Deacons began setting up patrols and guarding meetings and homes. As Thomas had predicted, not everyone in the black community welcomed the Deacons. FBI records indicate that at least one black leader provided law enforcement organizations with extensive information on the Deacons. The informant, most likely a moderate black leader hostile to the new group, attended the first Deacons chapter meeting on February 28 and provided law enforcement agencies with a list of ten attendees that he recognized. An FBI report noted that the informant gave the

¹⁰Hicks, Hill interview.

¹¹Thomas, Hill interview.

impression that the Deacons would not be successful "as he was of the impression that his Negro community were not desirous of becoming affiliated in any way with an organization which had as its purpose a defiance of law and order."¹²

Governor McKeithen, who had been deeply involved in the unfolding Bogalusa crisis, learned about the Bogalusa chapter within days of its formation. While McKeithen had appeased the Klan in Bogalusa during the Hays incident, he would not tolerate a black organization that protected the community from Klan terror. McKeithen immediately took steps to destroy the Deacons, asking Louisiana's Attorney General Jack Gremillion to research legal methods for breaking up the new organization.¹³

The Deacons were, even from McKeithen's perspective, only half the problem in Bogalusa. Despite his efforts to publicly deny the power of the Klan, law enforcement officials had apprised McKeithen that the Klan in Bogalusa was "without question the better organized units of all the units in Louisiana." With his appeasement policy toward the Klan failing, McKeithen now contemplated plans to undermine the Klan in Bogalusa. McKeithen considered asking Louisiana's congressional delegation to request hearings with subpoena power to investigate the Klan. According to the FBI, the Governor felt that "if such an inquiry were held into the structure, purpose, and potential for violence, that this public exposure would cause it to dissolve." It is not clear whether or not McKeithen followed through on his plan. The matter became moot when, in the wake of

¹²SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 3, 1965 FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-8.

¹³Ibid.

the Viola Liuzzo murder, President Johnson called for congressional hearings on the Klan which commenced in the Fall of 1965.¹⁴

Governor McKeithen was not the only one monitoring the Deacons. Leroy Collins was the Director of the Community Relations Service (CRS), the government organization created to assist in the orderly implementation of the Civil Rights Act. On March 15, 1965, Collins paid a visit to Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to express his concern about the Deacons whom he likened to the right wing Minute Men organization. Collins requested background information on the Deacons and any information regarding the FBI's investigation.¹⁵

The Deacons first came to the attention of FBI Headquarters on January 6, 1965 in a radiogram from the New Orleans field office. Jonesboro sources told the FBI that the Deacons' goals were "much the same as those of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)," nevertheless the "organization is more militant than CORE and . . . more inclined to use violence in dealing with any violent opposition encountered in civil rights matters."¹⁶

The radio message was followed up by a lengthier Letterhead Memorandum to J. Edgar Hoover. An unnamed law enforcement source had interviewed the Jonesboro chapter president, Percy Lee Bradford. Bradford cooperated fully and said the Deacons were organized to promote civil rights and that their purposes were similar to CORE. He described the new organization as "non-violent" except if attacked they would defend

¹⁴SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 3, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-9.

¹⁵Belmont to J. H. Gale, 15 March, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-9.

¹⁶SAC, New Orleans to Director, January 6, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-1.

themselves. Bradford told the official that the Deacons were equipped with two citizen band radios and walkie talkies and had between 250-300 members. Bradford provided them with names of officer and "group leaders."¹⁷

Hoover apparently paid scant attention to the January memorandum. Then on February 21 the *New York Times* article on the Deacons appeared, quickly followed by a second memorandum to Hoover detailing the first Deacons' meeting in Bogalusa. Hoover was not pleased with this new militant black group that, in Thomas' words, "intended to combat violence with violence." To justify an investigation Hoover focused on evidence of illegal activity by the Deacons. Hoover ordered an immediate investigation by the New Orleans field office in a memorandum that gave special attention to statements made during the Deacons' organizing meetings in Bogalusa. In particular, Hoover focused on Earnest Thomas' claim that the Deacons could obtain automatic weapons--and his advice that armed patrols should intervene to stop police arrests. "Because of the potential for violence indicated, you are instructed to immediately initiate an investigation of the DDJ [Deacons for Defense and Justice]," Hoover told the New Orleans office. He cautioned the office to "be alert" for the spread of the organization and "for any indications of subversive and/or outside influence." Hoover was especially concerned about illegal weapons, and ordered New Orleans to follow up on "Chicago and Houston contacts for automatic weapons." Hoover also ordered the New Orleans office to expand the number of informants within the Deacons

¹⁷Letter Head Memorandum, "Deacons for Defense and Justice, Jonesboro, Louisiana, Percy Lee Bradford, president," January 6, 1964, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-2.

and to conduct "interviews" to discourage "illegal arming and illegal action by the group."¹⁸

Hoover's instructions to conduct "interviews" to "discourage illegal arming and illegal action" was bureau code for an order to disrupt the Deacons in general. The use of intimidating interviews was the first of several steps Hoover would take to undermine the Deacons. Before the year was out, Hoover would also add the Deacons to his subversive index and target the organization for further disruption through COINTELPRO, the bureau's program to destroy black militant groups.¹⁹

The New Orleans field office zealously followed Hoover's orders and commenced a series of interviews intended to intimidate Deacons' members into quitting. Indeed, the field office had begun a campaign to disrupt the Deacons some time before Hoover's orders arrived. On February 25, FBI agents Quackenbush and Sass visited Bob Hicks at his residence and warned him not to get involved with the Deacons. Sass hinted that if any black person shot a white in self-defense, the black person would be charged with murder. Hicks calmly told Sass that self-defense was a constitutional right. Sass angrily stormed out of Hicks' house. Charlie Sims received similar treatment from the FBI.²⁰

¹⁸Director to SAC, New Orleans, February 26, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-6.

¹⁹Thanks to Clifford Anderson for this information on the F.B.I.'s bureaucratic code language.

²⁰A March 20 memorandum indicated that the New Orleans Office had been instructed to conduct these interviews "for deterrent value such interviews have." See, Baumgardener to Sullivan, memorandum, March 20, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-12; "Additions to Bogalusa Intimidation List," [March 1965], box 7, file 5, CORE(SRO).

The Deacons had their work cut out for them. The Klan, equipped with approximately fifty CB radios, constantly monitored police calls which allowed them to coordinate attacks on protestors. On February 21, 1965 the Voters League had initiated a new series of tests at public establishments, frequently led by Deacons. A pattern of Klan response to the tests quickly emerged. As soon as testers arrived, the business manager would tell the testers that he could not serve or protect them. The proprietor would then make a phone call and within minutes a mob of whites would converge on the business.

On February 28, Royan Burris and Bob and Jackie Hicks tested the Redwood Hotel. They were refused service and decided to leave--and not a minute too soon. Within three minutes after they departed, a mob of approximately thirty Klansmen came into the hotel looking for them. Law enforcement officials offered no protection for the testers, but instead regarded the actions as a needless intrusion on their time. FBI agent Sass told one Deacon to stop calling him every time someone was arrested. On another occasion Chief Claxton Knight told Royan Burris that the testing was "raising hell" with his fishing time.²¹

The attacks intensified in March. On March 4 the Klan stopped Reverend Shepherd, a member of the Hays Committee, as he drove down the highway. The

²¹Burris, Hill interview; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965"; "Statement by Mr. Royan Burris," n.d., box 7, file 5, CORE(SRO); *Bogalusa Daily News*, 25 February 1965; "Additions to Bogalusa Intimidation List."

Klansmen ordered Shepherd to leave town or face being killed. A car load of blacks happened upon the scene and rescued the minister from the Klan.²²

On March 17, Deacon leader Royan Burris was stopped by a Washington Parish k-9 unit and three Bogalusa policemen and arrested on a theft charge. The policemen handcuffed the Deacon and slapped and stripped him outside the police station. Inside the police station they formed a circle around him and pushed him around. One officer, Vertrees Adams, brutalized Burris to the extent that he needed medical attention. When released from custody, Burris went to the Community Medical Center to be treated, but was turned away.²³

The harassment continued unabated throughout March and April. The Deacons were simply outnumbered and out-organized by a Klan that was exempt from the law. The Voters League and the Deacons were in a quandary over how to move forward. The intermittent tests were achieving little, other than demonstrating the Klan's strength. The black movement in Bogalusa needed a bold strategic move that would bring national attention and reinforcements. Their prayers were answered on Sunday, March 14, 1965.

On Sunday morning, March 14, CORE Director James Farmer appeared on the nationally broadcast "Issues and Answers" to comment on the civil rights campaign in Selma, Alabama which had dominated the news in March. Farmer departed from the subject of Selma to announce that CORE had selected Bogalusa and Jonesboro as the

²²"Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965"; "Additions to Bogalusa Intimidation List."

²³The account of the arrest and beating incident is taken from Hamilton Bims, "Deacons for Defense," *Ebony*, September 1965, pp. 25-30; *Times-Picayune*, 20 July 1965; "Statement by Mr. Royan Burris"; and Burris, Hill interview.

focus of the national organization's next "major project." Farmer recited the litany of crimes and injustices in the two cities, including church burnings, police brutality and Klan intimidation. Noting that local authorities had capitulated to the Klan, Farmer called for a "federal presence" in the two cities and demanded that Federal marshals and FBI agents arrest police who engage in brutality and violate peoples' rights.²⁴

CORE's shocking announcement guaranteed that Bogalusa -- and the Deacons-- would become a focus of national attention. The news bolstered the spirits of the Voters League and the Deacons while it sent local officials into a panic. Mayor Cutrer reacted swiftly to Farmer's embarrassing charges against the Bogalusa police. In a brief statement, Cutrer denied the charges of police brutality and intimidation and added that, contrary to Farmer's claims, no churches had been burned in Bogalusa (he was right--the church burnings had been in Jonesboro).²⁵

The national publicity about the Klan's terror campaign in Bogalusa was bound to embarrass city officials into taking some symbolic action against the Klan. Later that week Cutrer issued a tepid public statement calling for restraint and lawfulness in response to Farmer's announcement and hinting that the City would take a firmer stand against the Klan's rampant violence and intimidation. Cutrer read a timorous statement by City and Parish law enforcement officials that acknowledged that the city had experienced some cases of what they euphemistically called "malicious mischief," including "throwing of tacks in driveways, breaking of glass, and so forth." The Klan could only sneer at the idle threat

²⁴*Times-Picayune*, 15 March 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 15 March 1965.

²⁵*Bogalusa Daily News*, 15 March 1965.

On March 28 the Voters League organized a successful "Freedom Rally" at the Negro Union Hall. The rally was without incident, but the Klan conducted a series of assaults that tested the Deacons' organization and mettle. A car load of whites chased CORE activists Ronnie Moore, Bill Yates and Kimme Johnson in their car as they tried to leave the rally. They were subsequently rescued by two car loads of armed Deacons who escorted them from the town. Four white men attacked and beat Jones Radcliffe from Bogalusa as he left the rally. Jones managed to strike one of his Klan attackers, so the Deacons provided him round-the-clock protection. The same night a car load of whites forced L.C. Magee off the road and into a ditch as he was coming home from the freedom rally. The following day whites lobbed a can of teargas into the union hall after the Voters League had finished a meeting.²⁶

By the end of March Governor McKeithen was beginning to feel the pressure posed by civil rights conflicts in the Bayou state. On March 26 McKeithen announced plans to negotiate an end to the black student boycott of Jackson High School in Jonesboro. But McKeithen continued to insist that the Klan did not dominate a single community in Louisiana and that Louisiana's racial violence paled by comparison to other Southern states. The only shooting incident that McKeithen could recall was the transmitter shooting at Ralph Blumberg's radio station. "As long as we can keep the thing down to a few bullets in an empty building at night, instead of rape, mayhem, and murder, I feel we have done all right," said the Governor confidently. The next day the

²⁶"Additions to Intimidation List"; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965."

Klan orchestrated nearly two dozen cross burnings in the Baton Rouge area, including one only a few blocks from the state capitol.²⁷

Events in Bogalusa quickened as the community prepared for the CORE invasion. Town leaders had formed a Community Affairs Organization (CAO) the previous February, comprising leaders from civic, labor, and religious organizations. The Committee was created to assist with civil rights issues by exchanging information with the city administration, serving as a sounding board for proposals, and advising the Mayor and Commission Council. Attorney John N. Gallaspy chaired the group, banker Gardner S. Adams served as vice-chair, and ultimately six Crown-Zellerbach officials joined the committee. By March the CAO had made little progress. It had tried unsuccessfully to persuade restaurants to comply with the Civil Rights Act, and had failed in its efforts to secure improvements in the black community such as street lighting.²⁸

Most of the Deacons' early work had, as in Jonesboro, centered on guarding homes, providing security for rallies, and patrolling streets. April brought increased responsibilities as the first of several groups of student volunteers descended on Bogalusa during Spring break. Sixteen CORE volunteers from the University of Kansas arrived the first week of April and began work in Bogalusa on voter registration. The recent Liuzzo murder heightened the Deacons' concern for the safety of the young volunteers, particularly the women.

²⁷*Times Picayune*, 27 March 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 28, 29 March 1965.

²⁸*Bogalusa Daily News*, 26, 28, March 1965; "Caught in the Civil Rights Crossfire," *Business Week*, 7 August 1965, pp. 102-6.

The northern students plunged into what must have seemed a surreal world of danger and violence in Bogalusa. The students had no qualms about accepting armed self-defense in the climate of fear that gripped the mill town. The Deacons taught the volunteers basic security precautions and escorted them around town twenty-four hours a day. Many of the young students were so frightened that they could not sleep the first few nights in Bogalusa--jumping nervously at every noise. The Deacons' nonchalant attitude toward guns alarmed more than one Yankee neophyte. On one occasion the Deacons had to leave a young California volunteer alone in an isolated house. The Deacons issued a gun to the young woman and left the stunned volunteer on her own.²⁹

Anita Levine, 23, a University of California at Berkeley student, arrived in Bogalusa with nine other civil rights workers on April 14. Levine and the other volunteers stayed at ten different homes where the Deacons constantly stood guard at the windows at night. On Easter Sunday Levine and another white volunteer joined her host and two other women to attend a sunrise service at the Methodist Church. "The Deacons had given us instructions to tell them whenever we were going to drive," recalls Levine. The church was only four blocks from the house, so the Deacons instructed Levine to go ahead and they would follow in a few minutes. The women pulled out of the driveway and soon noticed a car tailing them along with two police cars behind it. The trailing car sported a confederate flag license plate, which identified it as a Klan car. The Klansman began to menace the women, passing them and then pulling alongside. Levine pulled in front of the Methodist Church and left her engine running. The four women waited anxiously in the deserted street as the Klan car kept driving up and down in front of the

²⁹Robinson and Brown, "The Negro Feared Most by Whites in Louisiana."

church, brandishing guns out the windows. The police stood by idly in their patrol cars. Finally the Deacons arrived on the scene and the Klan and police cars immediately sped away. It was a frightening experience but one that allowed Levine to see the changing face of Southern blacks as well. "It's so great to see a Negro family in the South that knows its rights and is not afraid," Levine told one reporter.³⁰

Foreboding characters like Charlie Sims, outfitted with pistols and blackjacks, were disarming figures to the Yankee students. But the young volunteers were no less a novelty to their hosts. Working class blacks like Sims and Hicks had never seen privilege and wealth of this magnitude. "Some of the kids were from nice homes," says Hicks. "Lot of their parents were wealthy." Hicks remembers how money was no object for them:

You go get gas, take them somewhere, they'd say 'I'll pay for it. Here it is.' Drop out a credit card there on them. Yeah. And you'd get ready to make a telephone call, and 'No, here, here, take my telephone card.' They had telephone card, credit card. And when they got ready to leave, you pick them up and maybe take them to New Orleans, and they would give you some money to take your car to New Orleans. And they get down there and they'd get on the airplane, hit that airplane, and hit the air, and gone. And go flying all over the country.³¹

Hicks became good friends with Steve Miller's wealthy family in San Francisco. The Millers assisted in fund raising when Hicks traveled to San Francisco. The rich and famous were a heady experience for the papermill worker born in Pachutta, Mississippi. "They had a home sitting way back up there in them hills up there," says Hicks about the

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Hicks, Hill interview.

Millers. "Filthy rich. He, a big time lawyer in San Francisco. When we came into dinner . . . I was sitting there with judges. Big judge. And wife with five or six rings."³²

But middle class whites brought more than money and sweat to the movement: they frequently brought a missionary's arrogant presumptions about their own superior judgement, and little respect for the political wisdom of local people. Hicks encountered this problem with Bill Yates. "When he said something or done something, he wanted you do what he wanted. If you had an idea or different thing, he didn't want to go by your idea, he wanted to do exactly what he said." The imperious attitude was not well received by the fiercely independent black Bogalusans. "Bogalusa was not a part of CORE, wasn't a part of nothing . . . Bogalusa was a town that ran its own movement," says Hicks. "Bill Yates and I fell out about the same thing. That they wanted to come in and tell us what to do, how to do, and when to do."³³

With volunteers flooding into Bogalusa, tension grew as the Voters League announced that they would organize their first civil rights march on Friday, April 9. James Farmer would be flying in as the guest speaker. The announcement that the Voters League was going to march in the middle of the Klan's stronghold sent city leaders into a spin. To head off the protest, the Bogalusa Commission Council quickly passed an emergency ordinance--of dubious constitutionality-- prohibiting mass picketing and protests. The "disturbing the peace" ordinance limited pickets to three and required people to leave a business premises on demand of the business employee or owner. The ordinance also contained provisions aimed at Klan attacks, including a prohibition

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

against disrupting a lawful assembly. But by this point City government had little control over either the black movement or the Klan, and the ordinance was never enforced.³⁴

A pall of fear fell on the city as the day of the momentous march approached. Two days before the march, on April 7, the Klan launched a series of preemptory attacks, singling out student volunteers. Klansmen harassed the K.U. students as they canvassed with local blacks. One Klansmen waved a pistol at Linda Cook, a student volunteer, and shouted, "Now's a good time to kill a white nigger." Earlier in the morning Bill Yates left the Hicks' house and noticed a green pickup truck with three men circling the block. As Yates entered his car, the truck suddenly blocked his path and one of the men leapt from the truck with a blackjack. Yates recognized the man as one of the Klansmen who had attacked him and broke his hand in February. Yates rolled up his window and started the car as the man tried to break his window. Yates put the car in reverse and escaped down the street with the truck in pursuit. He circled the block and returned to the Hicks house. Standing on the front porch to greet the Klansmen was Jackie Hicks--with pistol in hand. The Klansmen wisely retreated.³⁵

That night the Klan struck twice more. In the first incident, Klansmen gathered under cover of darkness on the edge of the black community near the Negro Union Hall. They erected two coffins: One coffin bore Bill Yates' name; the other Bob Hicks'. A

³⁴*Bogalusa Daily News*, 7, 8 April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 4 April 1965.

³⁵"Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965"; *New York Post*, 8 April 1965, p. 12.

sign on the coffins read, "Here lies CORE." The Klansmen illuminated the ghoulish scene with flares and a spotlight and burned a ten-foot cross.³⁶

Later that night Bill Yates and several University of Kansas students were staying at the Hicks house. There were at least seven Deacons posted at the home, some outside concealed behind bushes and trees. Among them was Henry Austin, a young insurance salesman and Air Force veteran from Baton Rouge. At approximately 1:00 a.m. a car drove slowly by the Hicks' house. Suddenly it stopped and a white man emerged from the truck and threw a piece of brick through the rear window of a Volkswagen bus owned by one of the K.U. students. Bob Hicks rushed out of the house and a shot rang out from the car as the white man was pulled back in. Hicks grabbed his pistol and fired two shots at the fleeing car, setting off a volley of fifteen shots from the Deacons. Henry Austin emptied his gun into the Klan car and watched sparks fly off the fleeing vehicle as the Klansmen sporadically returned the fire.³⁷

It was the first shootout with the Klan for the Deacons: the fledgling group had proved themselves disciplined and able. None of the Deacons was injured, but the same could not be said for their Klan attackers. Though never confirmed, rumors circulated that one Klansmen was shot and another killed in the exchange. Black hospital workers reported that the injured Klansmen were secretly shuttled to an Alabama hospital,

³⁶Ibid.; "Bogalusa Riflemen Fight off KKK Attack," *Jet*, 22 April 1965, p. 5.

³⁷This incident account is taken from, Henry Austin, interview by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, 8 October 1978, New Orleans, Louisiana, tape recording, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans; Henry Austin, interview by author, 26 September 1994, New Orleans, Louisiana, tape recording; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965.," *Bogalusa Daily News*, 8 April 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 9 April 1965; *New York Post*, 8 April 1965; and "Bogalusa Riflemen Fight off KKK Attack," *Jet*, 22 April 1965.

ostensibly to protect their identity and police complicity in covering up the attack. As in the past, Governor McKeithen and local authorities downplayed the incident and went so far as to deny that the gun battle ever took place.³⁸

It had been a long night for the Deacons and now they faced the challenge of shepherding the upcoming march. Bogalusa law enforcement officials also braced for the march, reinforcing themselves with additional state police, auxiliary police, and deputized firemen. Black teenagers could not contain their excitement in anticipation of the historic event. On April 8, one day before the march, the teenagers staged a spontaneous walkout and march from Bogalusa's black high school, Central Memorial High School. At 10:25 a.m. a group of two-hundred black students assembled on school grounds and began marching to the downtown area. Within a few minutes Bogalusa police halted the march on the grounds that the students did not have a parade permit. The march ended in a standoff between the students and local police reinforced with snarling dogs in K-9 squad cars.³⁹

Later that day BCVL president A. Z. Young led a delegation of blacks into city hall to protest the decision to halt the students' march and to discuss a list of demands issued by the Voters League two days prior. The demands were markedly different from the focus on civil equality that characterized most civil rights campaigns controlled by national groups. The BCVL reforms bore the distinct imprint of the League's working class leadership, placing less emphasis on civil equality and voting rights, and more emphasis on achieving economic power and parity. The seven demands included a call

³⁸*Bogalusa Daily News*, 8 April 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 9 April 1965.

³⁹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 8 April 1965.

for equal economic opportunity in public and private employment and municipal licensing; equal educational opportunities and desegregated educational facilities; desegregation of all public accommodations and facilities; sewers, paved roads, and adequate street lighting in the black community; enforced housing codes; inclusion of black leaders at a decision-making level on city, parish, and industrial and development planning boards; removal from city ordinances of all unconstitutional discriminatory laws; and employment of black city policemen.⁴⁰

Cutrer was not about to negotiate these and other demands with the militant new leadership of the Voters League. He told the media that he and the Bogalusa Commission Council had been meeting with a "very fine Negro committee" since July of 1963, but the leadership of the Voters League had changed. In effect, the city was refusing to negotiate with the black community's largest civil rights organization. Moreover, the Mayor argued that several demands had already been met; streets in the black community were all paved and street lighting conversion was proceeding. Cutrer added that six blacks had taken the civil service exam for police officer in 1963 but all had failed.⁴¹

The night before the march the Voters League staged a large and enthusiastic rally at Central Memorial High School. James Farmer arrived from New York to serve as the keynote speaker. The Deacons accompanied Farmer from the New Orleans airport and stationed guards inside the High School. Their presence outside the school was

⁴⁰*Times-Picayune*, 9 April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 9 April 1965; "Letter to Police Jury et al," reel 20-43, CORE microfilm.

⁴¹*Times-Picayune*, 9 April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 9 April 1965.

hardly needed. With the eyes of the nation on the small mill town, local authorities had decided not to invite further Klan attacks by their absence. An impressive phalanx of more than one-hundred law enforcement officials ringed the school, including all of Bogalusa's thirty-four member police force, two dozen deputized firemen and sheriffs' deputies, and fifty state police and F.B.I. agents.⁴²

The police cordon around the rally site kept the Klan at bay, forcing them to conduct a simultaneous rally of more than two-hundred across town. At one point the Klan attempted to take a caravan of thirty-two cars into the black quarters but were stopped by city and state police. The Klan would have to wait to exact their revenge.⁴³

The high-school auditorium was packed with spirited young people. Ronnie Moore soon took the stage to encourage the enthusiastic students to boycott classes the next day to attend the march. Moore told the crowd that the march would protest police brutality and economic injustice in Bogalusa. James Farmer followed Moore on the dais and reiterated the Voters League's demands for fair employment and called for Crown-Zellerbach to hire black women and eliminate its segregated promotion system. Farmer chastised the older generation of blacks, telling the audience of teenagers that "if our parents had been willing to go to jail and die, we wouldn't have to go through this." The rally went without incident and the Deacons and the Voters League sent the children home for a night's rest before the big event.⁴⁴

⁴²*Times-Picayune*, 9 April 1965.

⁴³"Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965."

⁴⁴*Times-Picayune*, 9 April 1965.

Tension hung over Bogalusa like an ominous cloud the morning of the march. The Deacons took their places among the marchers. An impressive column of four-hundred marchers departed the Negro Union Hall at 9:07 a.m.. It was only four short blocks to their destination, Bogalusa's City Hall. Word came that huge crowds of Klansmen and their white sympathizers were already gathering along the march route in the main business district. The angry mob of white hecklers far outnumbered the police. The marchers proceeded nervously into the business district with the indomitable James Farmer leading at the front. The scene they encountered was horrific. The protestors were forced to march through a gauntlet of hundreds of shrieking whites, with threats and screams of "niggers" reverberating through the streets. As the marchers approached the corner of Third Street and Columbia, a rabid group of whites bolted into the street and violently attacked the marchers with fists and picket signs. A young Klansman, Randle C. Pounds raced toward Farmer and lunged violently at him with a blackjack. Police caught Pounds at the last moment before he could strike Farmer. The violence was contagious. As the melee spread, white gangs even attacked and beat bystanders, including a *Life Magazine* photographer. In the chaos a white man, Jimmy Dane Burke, attacked an FBI agent who was photographing incidents. A police car, driven by Assistant Chief of Police Terrell accidentally wheeled into the white mob, injuring a young white man.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Accounts of the attack in *Bogalusa Daily News*, 9, 13 April 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 10 April 1965. Police made no arrests at the time, but four days later Klansman Randle C. Pounds was arrested for attempted assault on Farmer. Charles McClendon, Latimore McNeese and Klansman Bill Alford, Jr. were arrested on charges of disturbing the peace for their involvement in the incidents. See, *Bogalusa Daily News*, 14 April 1965 and "Federal Complaint."

Police officials ordered the besieged marchers to turn back, and the group quickly returned to the Negro Union Hall to regroup. Within a few minutes a mob of 300 whites led by the Klan assembled at City Hall and confronted a line of state policeman guarding the building entrance. A delegation of four white men, one identified as the Grand Wizard of the Louisiana Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, conferred with Mayor Cutrer as the restless mob milled around the building. Within an hour the Klan leader emerged from his meeting with Cutrer and told the crowd that the mayor had informed him that the civil rights marchers were going to march a second time later that day with police protection. The Klan leader instructed the mob to disperse and not attempt to prevent the march since they "could not win against either local police or federal officials."⁴⁶

The Klan mob retreated and soon afterwards James Farmer and the Voters League met with Cutrer and Commissioner Arnold Spiers. The meeting was a victory for the Voters League. Cutrer had previously refused to negotiate with the BCVL and Farmer. Not only was he now meeting, but he reassured the black delegation that he would continue to negotiate with the BCVL. Cutrer also assured them that the Klan would not be allowed to congregate in the business district during the second march attempt later in the afternoon. The Mayor kept his word and vehicular traffic was blocked and the march occurred without disruption.

The marchers arrived at City Hall where James Farmer, Moore, and other speakers addressed the crowd with high spirits. Cutrer's conciliatory attitude at the earlier meeting was an encouraging sign. Farmer told the crowd that the mayor had agreed to further talks with the Voters League. Then, to the marchers' amazement,

⁴⁶*Times-Picayune*, 10 April 1965.

Cutrer emerged from City Hall to address the group, and surprised the audience by calling for negotiations rather than demonstrations. The day's events had forced the Mayor to move the debate from the streets to the negotiating table.⁴⁷

The marchers were not the only ones shaken by the attack. In the midst of the confusion, Assistant Police Chief L. C. Terrell had wheeled his police car into Louis Applewhite, a Klansman and nephew of Albert Applewhite, a Klan "wrecking crew" leader. Applewhite was taken to the hospital. Assistant Chief Terrell panicked as he began to realize that he had nearly killed the relative of a major Klan terrorist. The highly distraught officer returned to City Hall and, armed with a shotgun, ensconced himself in the Mayor's Office. Terrell was convinced that the Klan was going to retaliate by killing him. The dazed policeman rocked back and forth in his chair mumbling to himself, "They're not going to kill me. They're not going to kill me." Jerry Heilbron, a CRS representative, was in the room with Terrell. Heilbron watched nervously as the officer continued to mutter to himself, cradling the shotgun in his arms. In Heilbron's words, the officer was "really off his rocker." A local Minister arrived and suggested that the group pray for guidance. Heilbron, the minister, and Terrell got on their knees and prayed. But the group was not willing to leave Terrell's situation to divine intervention. Someone summoned Terrell's doctor who soon arrived and administered a sedative to the troubled officer.⁴⁸

Cutrer stayed true to his promise to negotiate with the BCVL and within days he organized a negotiating group that included approximately sixty white merchants. The

⁴⁷*Times-Picayune*, 10, 11, April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 9, 11, April 1965.

⁴⁸Heilbron, Hill interview.

business group, with the assistance of three representatives of the Federal Community Relations Service, scheduled their first negotiation meeting with Black community representatives on April 13. But the negotiations collapsed before they even started, when the white businessmen refused to meet exclusively with the Voter's League. Instead, the business group demanded that the black negotiating team include representatives of two other moderate black groups. The Voters League responded to the ultimatum by refusing to meet with the business group. To increase the pressure for negotiations, the Voters League announced that they would begin a picketing campaign at downtown stores demanding black employment at the stores.⁴⁹

With negotiations stalled, the Voters League commenced picketing six stores on April 14. The new city ordinance restricted the protestors to only two picketers per store. The situation was particularly difficult for the Deacons. The Deacons stood guard as the picketers were shadowed by Klan picketers who walked alongside carrying signs saying, "White Man give this merchant your business." The following day the Klan threw a firebomb at a house on the edge of the black community where CORE volunteers had stayed. The local fire department refused to respond to the call for help.⁵⁰

If there were ever any doubts that the Bogalusa Police and the Klan were collaborating, the events of April 15 would soon dispel them. Earlier that day Bogalusa Police arrested and detained Charles Williams, a local black man. As Williams was being booked, a door opened to an adjacent room and Williams saw six men dressed in

⁴⁹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 14 April 1965.

⁵⁰*Times-Picayune*, 14 April 1965; "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965."

Klan robes--one of them wearing a law enforcement uniform under his robe. The hooded officer entered the booking room and cursed at Williams, "You black son of a bitch," barked the officer, "pull off the damn cap."⁵¹

Government officials scrambled to head off a major clash. McKeithen made a presentation to the Bogalusa Chamber of Commerce in which he sounded a new theme of reconciliation and patience. McKeithen told the Bogalusa business leaders that their "generation in Louisiana has the responsibility to keep the peace" and to keep their "heads while those about us lose theirs."⁵²

The Easter holiday was rapidly approaching and Mayor Cutrer appealed to the Voters League to halt the picketing for the Easter weekend. The League refused to call a moratorium on picketing until the city agreed to negotiate their demands. But the situation on the picket line was becoming more tense and creating insurmountable problems for the Deacons. Klansmen marched side by side with the black picketers as mobs of whites waved rebel flags and jeered from the sidelines. Law enforcement official stood by idly during the harassment; some police even joined in the heckling. By Good Friday it was clear that the Deacons and the Voters League could not guarantee the safety of the pickets, so they decided to temporarily withdraw the pickets and file a complaint with city officials.⁵³

⁵¹*Times-Picayune*, 29 June 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 29 June 1965; Will Ussery to Ed Hollander, April 16, 1965, box 7, file 6, CORE(SRO).

⁵²*Times-Picayune*, 16 April 1965.

⁵³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 16 April 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 17 April 1965.

Police abuse was becoming a paramount issue of the Voters League, and on Good Friday the League presented Mayor Cutrer with additional demands calling for an “end of unequal enforcement of law in Bogalusa” and “the end of abuses and harassment of Negro picketers.” The League demanded that the city fire officers involved in harassment. They underscored their new demands by announcing that they had invited James Farmer to return to Bogalusa to lead another march to City Hall, this time protesting police abuse.⁵⁴

Farmer returned on April 22 to address an evening rally at the Ebenezer Baptist Church filled with nearly five-hundred people, almost all of them school children. An army of State police guarded all the intersections leading to the church, part of a massive influx of 375 state troopers earlier in the day. The growing generational schism between the young and old was apparent at the rally. Youth leader Don Lambert rose to give a speech chastising adults for not assisting in the civil rights drive. The issue had come to light earlier in the week when CORE spokesperson Wilfred T. Ussery told the media that a militant teenage element in the League was pushing for bigger demonstrations than what the leadership wanted. Ironically, the militant leaders of the Voters League and the Deacons were finding themselves cast as moderates in the rapidly radicalizing movement.⁵⁵

The rally at Ebenezer Church was not the only civil rights event where sharp generational conflicts were manifest. A few weeks later comedian Dick Gregory spoke

⁵⁴*Louisiana Weekly*, 1 May 1965.

⁵⁵Accounts of meeting found in *Times-Picayune*, 23 April 1965 and *Bogalusa Daily News*, 23 April 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 17 April 1965.

at another Voters League rally, offering a humorous respite from the grim business of political protest. Gregory delighted his young audience of more than five-hundred by excoriating old folks as “too lazy or scared” to participate in the civil rights movement. “When you die, Lord knows I hope it’s soon,” Gregory said to the older generation, “then the civil rights movement can move forward.”⁵⁶

As time progressed the Deacons would also become more explicit in their view that the Black freedom movement required a revolution against both the old leadership and the world view produced by the economic reality of the past. Accommodation had been an effective strategy of resistance for the powerless. But times had changed. Deacon member R. T. Young advised young Voters League members that “the young negro must erase the image of the older Negroes--we must turn their young minds to education, one of the biggest weapons.” Young counseled the youngsters that “automation is here to stay and the Negro of the cotton field is gone forever . . . abide by the Constitution of the United States and seek what your government has promised you and mankind.”⁵⁷

Farmer played down the generational divisions in his rally speech, though he reserved criticism for the timorous black ministers who had refused to support the movement and declined to allow their churches to be used for organizing activities. The charges of accommodation peevled many of the black clergy. One minister, Reverend W.

⁵⁶*Bogalusa Daily News*, 2, 3 May 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 4 May 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 15 May 1965.

⁵⁷*Times-Picayune*, 2 April 1966.

J. Nelson, publicly protested to the *Bogalusa Daily News* that he had been unfairly labeled an "uncle tom."⁵⁸

The black movement's resolve and the potential for mass violence was beginning to force both federal and state governments to intervene in the Bogalusa crisis. The U.S. Department of Justice filed the first of several legal actions on April 20 designed to enforce the Civil Rights Act in Bogalusa. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach signed the suit filed in federal district court in New Orleans asking that six restaurants be enjoined from refusing service to blacks. Meanwhile, Governor McKeithen was working assiduously to restart the stalled negotiations in the city. McKeithen was particularly anxious that another major march would ignite open warfare between the Deacons and the Klan. Gun sales had increased dramatically in Bogalusa, a city that was already an armed camp.⁵⁹

On April 22, McKeithen arranged for three state leaders to publicly offer to mediate the crisis: Senator Michael O'Keefe, AFL-CIO State leader Victor Bussie, and Democratic Party leader Camile Gravel. The next day McKeithen met with Bogalusa City officials and the Community Affairs Committee and persuaded them to meet with the "Bussie Committee" mediators on Friday, April 24. Simultaneously, McKeithen was working to persuade the Voters League to suspend its rallies and picketing in exchange for new negotiations. For this task he turned to Vice-President Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey had been in Louisiana two weeks prior and had been following the situation in

⁵⁸*Times-Picayune*, 23 April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 23 April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 25 April 1965.

⁵⁹*Times-Picayune*, 21 April 1965.

Bogalusa. Humphrey contacted CORE's James Farmer and persuaded him to help ease tensions by leaving Bogalusa on the 23rd. Farmer also agreed to cancel a planned rally that was to feature Dick Gregory. On Good Friday, as the Klan taunted black protestors on the picket line downtown, the Bussie Committee began intense meetings with the Voters League and City Officials and the Community Affairs Committee. By the end of the day the Bussie Committee had scored a major breakthrough. The City and the Community Affairs Committee agreed to begin new negotiations with the Voters League the following week. In exchange, the League agreed to suspended picketing. The Voters League and the Deacons had forced the city back to the bargaining table.⁶⁰

McKeithen, feeling that the crisis had been surmounted, withdrew the army of 335 state police from Bogalusa over the Easter weekend. But segregationists and the Klan were not to be denied. The OKKKK distributed several hundred leaflets announcing a boycott of merchants who complied with integration, as well as the *Bogalusa Daily News* and WBOX radio station. On April 27, George L. Singleman, executive secretary of the New Orleans Citizen Council, joined Paul Farmer of the Washington Parish Citizens Council (and brother of Klan leader Saxon Farmer) to announce plans for a major march and rally on May 7 to protest the compromise. Singleman denounced the Bussie Committee and claimed that Bogalusa had been targeted by communists since 1956.⁶¹

⁶⁰*Times-Picayune*, 23 April 1965; *New York Times*, 26 April 1965.

⁶¹*Times-Picayune*, 25, 24 April 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 28 April 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 28, 30 April 1965.

Now McKeithen and Cutrer were forced to take measures to undermine the Klan march and rally. Rally organizers had invited Sheriff Jim Clark of Montgomery, Alabama, a hero to white supremacists. McKeithen personally contacted Clark and convinced the Sheriff to withdraw from the rally. McKeithen had always been a staunch segregationist, but his new conciliatory approach to civil rights groups made him the Citizen Council's new *bete noire*. One Council spokesperson labeled McKeithen an "integrationist" sympathizer and castigated the Bussie Committee as "all out integrationists." Compounding the Council's problems were rumors that the rally was actually being organized by the Klan and that two-hundred black Southern University students planned to attend and disrupt the rally.⁶²

Despite the machinations of elected officials, the segregationists managed to stage an impressive march and rally on May 7. Approximately three-thousand people participated in the march which ended at Goodyear Park. Marchers listened to George Singleman of New Orleans and Judge John Rarick berate Governor McKeithen and other officials for interfering in Bogalusa's affairs (that both Singleman and Rarick were "outsiders" escaped their attention). The rumor that the Klan had actually organized the rally found some evidence on the speaker platform. Among the featured speakers was Saxon Farmer, Grand Wizard of the OKKKK and Jack Helm, leader of the United Klans of America (UKA).⁶³

Despite the Klan counteroffensive, negotiations got under way in May at the office of Jack Martzell, attorney for the city of Bogalusa. Lolis Elie, a black New

⁶²*Times-Picayune*, 6, 7 May 1965.

⁶³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 9 May 1965.

Orleans attorney with ties to CORE, represented the Voters League. On May 16 the talks opened with Elie, Martzell, Mayor Cutrer, members of the Commission Council and the Bussie Committee in attendance. The talks were cordial but tense, with Klansmen circling City Hall in trucks. The initial meeting was productive and attorneys announced that a joint statement on Bogalusa racial progress would be issued at some point and that further conferences were planned.⁶⁴

With the negotiations in progress and the picketing halted, an eerie calm began to envelope the city. There had been virtually no incidents of Klan violence since the City had announced negotiations with the Voters League three weeks prior. The BCVL decided to take advantage of the decreased tensions and quietly integrate Bogalusa's Cassidy Park. Bob Hicks secured permission from Mayor Cutrer in advance and notified the city police and the FBI of their test plans for May 19. On the afternoon of the 19th, Robert Hicks, his wife and son Gregory, approximately twenty other blacks, mostly teenagers, and one white volunteer arrived at the park to integrate it. Sam Barnes, the Deacons' vice-president, came along to guard the group, equipped with his pearl handled .38 revolver. The adults stood by their cars watching the children playing on the swings and merry-go-rounds. Two policemen watched at a distance.⁶⁵

Soon the adults noticed a group of twenty-five white men approaching the park. The white men stopped and spoke briefly to the police. The men then walked toward the

⁶⁴*Times-Picayune*, 17 May 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 17 May 1965.

⁶⁵This account of this Cassidy Park assault is taken from Hicks, Hill interview; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 20 May 1965; *New York Times*, 20 May 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 20 May 1965; and "Federal Complaint." Klan leader Virgil Corkern and his two teen-aged sons were part of the white mob. See, "Federal Complaint."

children brandishing guns and clubs. The leader of the mob took off his belt and wrapped it around his fist. He asked the children on the merry-go-round if they were having fun, then suddenly struck a seven-year-old girl. Mayhem broke out as the white mob charged through the playground ruthlessly attacking the children and women. Bob Hicks and Barnes rushed to their defense as city police waded into the melee indiscriminately clubbing blacks and unleashing their K-9 dogs. One policeman pulled his gun as he approached the children. Jackie Hicks pulled a pistol to fend off the attackers. Sam Barnes also pulled his .38 revolver. Police restrained Bob Hicks as he watched a police dog viciously bite his son Gregory. Hicks could barely contain his rage. He wished he had brought a weapon. "I guess that's about the only time that if I had something, I probably would have done something," said Hicks years later.⁶⁶

During the brutal attack several blacks were injured, including a 75-year-old woman who was knocked unconscious. Sam Barnes was arrested for assault for pulling his revolver to protect the children. As the dust settled, Bob Hicks took the elderly woman and his son Gregory to the Bogalusa Community Medical Center where they were both refused emergency room assistance. Eventually Hicks had to drive ninety miles to find treatment for the two at a New Orleans hospital.

The following day a mob of more than five-hundred whites gathered to prevent a second attempt to integrate the park. When no blacks showed up, a gang of thirty whites brutally attacked Terry Friedman, a *Times-Picayune* photographer, as he walked toward

⁶⁶Hicks, Hill interview.

the park. The group kicked and beat Terry Friedman and threw parts of his camera equipment into a nearby creek as police stood by idly.⁶⁷

Even in the climate of fear, the Bussie Committee was still having success, and on May 23 the committee made a major breakthrough. A. Z. Young and Cutrer signed a six-point agreement in which the city conceded almost all of the Voters League's demands. Cutrer took to the airwaves that night to announce the agreement in a radio speech. Cutrer announced that the Commission Council, with the full support of the Community Affairs Council, planned a series of sweeping desegregation reforms. The city had agreed to repeal all segregation ordinances; open all public facilities and parks to all races; guarantee impartial law enforcement by city police and equal protection of citizens exercising their rights; and hire blacks as policemen and in other city positions. Cutrer also promised to promptly investigate any violations of these strictures by police and enact necessary ordinances regarding sewerage and water distribution to allow indoor plumbing in the black community and paved streets and improved lighting. The Voters League, in exchange, had agreed to cancel its picketing, pending negotiations with the store owners, and defer further attempts to integrate the parks. Cutrer argued that the reforms were necessary to bring city laws in line with Federal Laws, and to restore calm and end the harm to the city's industrial and business growth. The Mayor's message was one of social peace and economic progress through unity.⁶⁸

It was a stunning victory for the Voter's League. Later that night James Farmer addressed a jubilant victory rally, declaring that the Klan had become "a laughing

⁶⁷*Times-Picayune*, 21 May 1965.

⁶⁸*Times-Picayune*, 24 May 1965.

matter." Farmer promised full cooperation with the Mayor and praised Cutrer for having gone further "than any other Southern Mayor." Optimism had to be tempered with caution, though. "Now we must see to it that deeds follow these words," said Farmer.⁶⁹

Not all CORE officials were as sanguine as Farmer. "Mike [Jones] reports that the Negroes' morale is quite low and that a number of whites seem angry at the mayor's conciliatory statement last night," said a CORE report filed on May 24. "He fears that this is just the beginning of [the] expression of white frustration and anger at the mayor's betrayal of them." As it turned out, Mike Jones was right. The Klan had lost the first battle by relying on Cutrer. Within hours of the Mayor's announcement, the Klan would regroup to mount its own lethal counteroffensive.⁷⁰

⁶⁹*Louisiana Weekly*, 30 May 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 24 May 1965.

⁷⁰"Telephone Report from Mike Jones, May 24, 1965," box 7, folder 6, CORE(SRO).

Chapter 9

With a Single Bullet

The morning following Cutrer's speech, Bogalusans awakened to find utility poles plastered with scores of a new Klan poster: "Welcome to the Jungle, J. H. Cutrer, Chief; Victor Bussie, Ambassador; A. Z. Young, Witch Doctor." Later that day a group of whites festooned the City Hall entrance with a sign reading, "Nigger Town, U.S.A." As darkness fell a mob of several hundred whites assembled at Cassidy Park and tore down the gates and signs announcing the park closed by order of the Commission Council. Members of the group raucously paraded around the park, honking their horns in celebration of their victory. An intimidating mob of one-hundred whites invaded a Community Affairs Committee meeting and denounced the Bussie Committee, calling for an end to "meddling in the affairs of Bogalusa." The Committee, badly shaken by the confrontation, quickly began to distance itself from the Bussie Committee and the compromise. It was the first of a series of reversals in the face of the renewed Klan terror campaign.¹

The Klan also flexed its muscles in its first open confrontation with the Deacons. On May 26, 1965, a crowd of students had gathered on the evening of graduation "Class Night" at Central Memorial High School. As the graduation ceremonies were being

¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 24, 25 May 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 25 May 1965.

conducted, a group of approximately seventy-five whites gathered outside the school, including Saxon Farmer and a group of Klansman. Minutes later, A. Z. Young and the Deacons arrived to confront the Klansmen, supported by an equal number of blacks. After an edgy standoff, city and state police descended on the scene and dispersed both groups. A few hours later another Deacon, Fletcher Anderson, 27, was sitting in his car in front of a restaurant when Deputy Sheriff Vertrees Adams approached. Adams ordered Anderson to start the car and race the engine and when Anderson complied, the deputy arrested him for a faulty muffler. During the arrest, Adams discovered a weapon in Anderson's car and added a concealed weapon charge. The Deacon was taken the Bogalusa police station where Adams and other officers lined Anderson up against a wall and punched and kicked him.²

The Klan increased its pressure on local businesses as well. It had been over a month since the Voters League had suspended picketing on Columbia Street, yet none of the businesses had agreed to negotiate the League's demands for jobs. Their patience exhausted, the League decided to renew picketing. On Saturday, May 29, young black pickets appeared in front of stores in the downtown area. The situation soon deteriorated into chaos. The Klan ran amuck in the business district, brutally attacking the young picketers with impunity. Police did little to stop the attacks and harassment; when they did act, they were more likely to arrest the black picketers than the Klan. Seventeen arrests were reported Saturday, eleven of whom were black--including Jackie Hicks.³

²*Bogalusa Daily News*, 27 May 1965; Mike Jones to Ed Hollander, May 26, 1965, box 7, file 6, CORE(SRO); *States-Item*, 1 July 1965.

³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 30 May 1965.

Though the day had been a setback for the BCVL, the violent attacks and arrests of the black children did shake many black adults out of their lethargy. That night hundreds of angry adults attended a huge BCVL meeting at the Negro Union Hall to discuss the day's events. The scene outside the hall was a surreal carnival of hate. Hundreds of whites waited menacingly outside the hall as the BCVL met. Smaller groups of whites stalked the downtown area late into the night. A convoy of ten cars drove past the house where CORE leader Ronnie Moore was staying that night as the Deacons stood guard. The Klan reigned supreme once again in Bogalusa.⁴

For the next few days the Klan escalated its well-coordinated attacks on the pickets. The wrecking crews staged diversionary attacks to draw police off the picket line, then sent flying wedges of Klansmen to attack the pickets with clubs and lead pipes. The Klan assaults became so bold that on May 31 they drove a New Orleans television crew from the city. McKeithen once again deployed state troopers to quell the attacks, and by the end of the first week of June, 212 troopers were in Bogalusa. The Governor was reduced to personally pleading with the Klan and segregationists during a secret trip to Bogalusa. At the same time Mayor Cutrer had retreated from his detente with the Voters League, telling the media that the League was responsible for the increased tensions. In the end, only the League and the Deacons refused to be intimidated by the Klan counteroffensive. Ronnie Moore announced that another major march would occur even if the City refused to grant a permit.⁵

⁴*Times-Picayune*, 31 May 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 30 May 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 5 June 1965.

⁵"Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965"; *Times-Picayune*, 1 June 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 1, 4, June 1965.

The Klan campaign reached a bloody crescendo on June 2. In 1964 Sheriff Dorman Crowe had hired two black deputies, honoring a campaign promise he had made in return for black votes during his unsuccessful reelection bid. The two deputies, O'Neal Moore and Creed Rogers, were limited to patrolling the black community. On the night of June 2, 1965, Moore and Rogers were patrolling as usual. They noticed a pickup truck following them but saw no reason for concern. Suddenly the truck pulled alongside the deputies and several shots from a high-powered rifle rang out. Moore was killed instantly. His partner suffered facial wounds but survived.

Within an hour Ray McElveen, a papermill worker at Crown-Zellerbach, was arrested in nearby Tylertown, Mississippi. McElveen was driving a truck that matched the description of the vehicle involved in the attack. When apprehended, McElveen was carrying membership cards for the Citizens Council of Greater New Orleans and the National States Rights Party, an extremist white supremacist group. McElveen also carried a "Special Agent" card for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety, signed by State Police director Thomas Burbank. McElveen, who was later identified as an OKKKK member, was eventually bailed out by Klan leader Saxon Farmer. In the subsequent investigation even white police investigators became targets for the terrorists. On June 4 unknown assailants fired six shots into the home of deputy Doyle Holliday who was leading the investigation for the Sheriff's department. Within minutes of the shooting an anonymous caller phoned Holliday's house and asked "Did we get anyone?"⁶

Predictably, government officials professed outrage over the assassination of a law enforcement official. McKeithen condemned the Moore killing and offered a

⁶*Times-Picayune*, 8, 10 June 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 6 June 1965.

\$25,000 reward for the killers, but he continued to deny that the Klan was active in Bogalusa--despite the fact that he was secretly negotiating with Klan leaders. Speaking at a press conference following the murder, McKeithen said he was confident that justice would be served and predicted that Louisiana would be vindicated by guilty verdicts against the assassins. "We're going to catch them. We're going to catch them all," promised McKeithen. History would prove otherwise. No one was ever convicted of the murder of O'Neal Moore.⁷

The black community was outraged by the killing. The Deacons mobilized to guard Moore's widow after she received threatening calls, and Earnest Thomas traveled from Jonesboro the day after the shooting to assist the Bogalusa chapter. But Moore's murder temporarily eclipsed the direct-action protests in the mill town in June. On June 25, the campaign broadened to legal strategy when CORE attorney Nils Douglas filed *Hicks v. Knight* in federal court. The League's new tactic sought to have the federal judiciary compel law enforcement officials to protect the first amendment rights of civil rights activists. The suit requested \$425,000 in damages from Police Chief Knight and other law enforcement officials for brutality and harassment of civil rights protestors. It also requested a restraining order to force local and state officials to end their attacks, harassment, and arrests of black demonstrators--and to protect the demonstrators from Klan and civilian attacks as well. Filed on behalf of eleven Bogalusa civil rights activists, including Sam Barnes, the Deacons' vice-president, and several other Deacons, the suit also asked the court to end racial discrimination and segregation in the Washington Parish Jail and to reopen city parks without discrimination. The legal action

⁷*Newsweek*, June 14, 1965, p. 38; *Times-Picayune*, 4, 7, 29 June; 4 July 1965.

listed thirty allegations of brutality, harassment, interference and failure of officers to protect civil rights workers.⁸

Testimony on the suit began the following Monday, June 28, in Judge Herbert W. Christenberry's court in New Orleans. It was the first thorough public airing of police abuse and misconduct in Bogalusa. Activists and Deacon members testified in vivid detail about the wild mob attacks at Cassidy Park; the police beatings of Deacons like Sam Barnes and Fletcher Anderson; and the reports of hooded deputies at City Hall. The defendants countered with testimony from a series of law enforcement officials who claimed to have seen no abuse. FBI Agent Sass took the stand and swore that he had never seen any armed men on Columbia Street, nor had he seen anyone, police or otherwise, harass or beat picketers. Major Tom Bradley of the State police claimed that in his months in Bogalusa he never saw any harassment of demonstrators; indeed, he had never seen a white person even curse a demonstrator. The normally staid Judge Christenberry struggled to contain his skepticism. "You can hear all right?" Christenberry asked the officer.⁹

Christenberry took the case under advisement but his comments during the testimony left little doubt that he would find in favor of the civil rights activists. The trial sent the Deacons into a flurry of activity. Anonymous phone calls were made to Bob Hicks house threatening to kill him and anyone who testified at the hearing. The Deacons tightened security measures and escorted the witnesses to and from court. On

⁸*Times-Picayune*, 26 June 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 27 June 1965.

⁹*Times-Picayune*, 3 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News* 2 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 2 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 2 July 1965.

the evening of June 28 Fletcher Anderson returned home after spending the day testifying in Christenberry's court. Around midnight six white men approached the Deacon member's house and pounded on the door, identifying themselves as policemen. Anderson refused to open the door. Suddenly six shots were fired from outside the house. When Anderson called the police department to report the shooting, he was told "this is what happens to you when you go up against the police department."¹⁰

During the hearings startling news leaked out that, after a two-month moratorium on mass marches, the League and CORE planned to step up their campaign with a bold series of seven marches in seven days. Beginning on July 7, each march would be led by a major civil rights leader, including James Farmer, Dick Gregory, Harry Belafonte, Elton Cox, and James Bevels. Rumors swept Bogalusa that CORE was calling in hundreds of volunteers from around the country for the marches. It appeared that Bogalusa would become the Selma of Louisiana.¹¹

In the days preceding the planned marches, segregationists staged another rally in Bogalusa, this time attracting a crowd of 4,500. The rally featured arch-racist General Edwin Walker, whom Lee Harvey Oswald had attempted to assassinate in the Fall of 1964. Two East Indian students visiting Bogalusa were mistaken as blacks and attacked and beaten by whites during the rally. Governor McKeithen later brushed off the attack

¹⁰"WATS Report, 6-28 to 7-65," box 4, file 2, CORE(SRO); "Summary of Incidents: Bogalusa, Louisiana, January 28 - July 1, 1965"; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 1 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 30 June 1965; "WATS Line Report," [July 1964], box 7, file 6, CORE(SRO); *States-Item*, 1 July 1965.

¹¹Rickey Hill, "The Character of Black Politics," p. 83; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 30 June 1965.

on the students. "You're going to have some there who are going to want to hurt somebody," said McKeithen. "I'm just happy that something worse did not occur."¹²

Tension grew as the first march in the series drew near. It would be the first march since the murder of O'Neal Moore and the filing of *Hicks v. Knight*. The Deacons prepared feverishly despite police harassment. A few days before the march, State Police arrested Sims for speeding following a harrowing high-speed chase in which Sims tried to elude Deputy Vertress Adams. On July 7 approximately 350 protestors, mostly teenagers, began the march to City Hall in a drenching thundershower. CORE organizers were disappointed that adults failed to attend, and their frustration began to show. "CORE is just wasting money here," complained Isaac Reynolds, a CORE field secretary. White bystanders honked their horns to drown out the freedom songs, but otherwise the march made it to City Hall without serious incident. At City Hall, Voters League leaders presented a new list of demands, including that Crown-Zellerbach hire black women, make promotions based on seniority, and dismiss employees that commit violence. The League also asked that the city dismiss outstanding charges against demonstrators, require establishments to desegregate, and require merchants to initiate fair hiring policies.¹³

The Deacons prepared for the second march of the series scheduled for the next day, July 8. Henry Austin was assigned along with Milton Johnson to guard the rear of the march in A. Z. Young's car. The two Deacons were younger than most in the

¹²*Times-Picayune*, 10 July 1965.

¹³On the Sims arrest, see, "WATS Line Report, July 5, 1965," box 7, folder 6, CORE(SRO); *Bogalusa Daily News*, 8 July 1965; *New York Times*, 8 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 7 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 8 July 1965.

organization: Austin was only twenty-one and Johnson, twenty-six. Austin was without question one of the brightest and best educated of the Deacons. Escaping the slums of New Orleans, he served in the Air Force where he had taken a few college classes. Glib and personable, Austin made a good living selling small burial insurance policies. He wore a suit and tie when he made his rounds on Friday night to collect the modest weekly premiums--before the paychecks disappeared. Austin had been O'Neal Moore's insurance man and knew Moore well. The two frequently watched football games together.¹⁴

But Austin's talents were marred by two tragic character flaws: he was a heavy drinker had a volatile temper. Bob Hicks liked the bright young man but considered him a "hot head" who "couldn't control his emotions." While in the Air Force, Austin stabbed a white soldier during an altercation in which the white man had called him a "nigger." Austin spent two years in prison for the crime. It may have been Austin's temper combined with his youth that led Charlie Sims to initially reject his application to the Deacons. But eventually Sims succumbed to Austin's persistent requests.¹⁵

The July 8 march wound its way to City Hall without any significant problems. But as the marchers began the return route, it became evident to Austin that the police were losing control of the white hecklers who lined the streets. The white mob was throwing rocks at Austin and Johnson and jumping on their car. Austin told Johnson to roll up the windows and lock the doors. Suddenly a piece of brick soared from the crowd and struck Hattie Mae Hill, a black teenager. Some volunteers from the Medical Rights

¹⁴Austin, Hill interview; Hicks, Hill interview.

¹⁵Austin, Hill interview.

Committee rushed to the young girl's aid and attempted to move her into a station wagon. The white mob surrounded the frightened child and began hitting her and tearing her clothes. Austin told Johnson to get out and bring the girl back to their car. Johnson leapt from the car and managed to rescue the girl from the mob and throw her into the back seat. Now the mob turned on Johnson, pinning him against the driver's side door and preventing him from escaping. Austin grabbed his .38 caliber pistol, shoved open the driver's door and stepped in front of Johnson to face the angry mob. "I have a gun!" shouted Austin, but his voice could barely be heard over the din of the crowd. Austin fired a warning shot into the air, but the mob continued to advance. Austin took aim and fired three shots into the chest of one of the white attackers, Alton Crowe. The mob recoiled in shock. They stared speechless at the black man holding the pistol.¹⁶

Austin knew that the police would be there in seconds. He calmly threw the gun on the car seat and placed his hands above his head to show he was unarmed. The police arrived and handcuffed Austin and placed him across the trunk of the car as the white mob began to howl. As Austin stood handcuffed a wiry old white woman sprung from the onlookers and began shrieking, "They killed a white man. Kill the niggers!"¹⁷

Austin was in imminent peril of being lynched. Governor McKeithen arranged for Austin to be transferred to a jail in nearby Slidell, but the Bogalusa police panicked at the thought of moving Austin. The detective assigned to escort Austin demanded a machine gun for his car and the police deployed several decoy patrol cars from the

¹⁶The account of this incident taken from Austin, Hill interview; Austin, Hill interview; *Times-Picayune*, 9 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 9 July 1965; *Newsweek*, 19 July, 1965, pp. 25-26.

¹⁷Austin, Hill interview.

Bogalusa jail to mislead the white mob. An officer threw Austin into a patrol car and shouted, "Nigger, lay down in the back seat."¹⁸

Austin made it safely to the Slidell jail. In New Orleans Alton Crowe, the young white man Austin had shot, lay on an operating table fighting for his life. One bullet had missed his heart by inches. Austin had not intended to kill Crowe; he had aimed for Crowe's midriff but the pistol jerked upward at the last moment. But Austin's intentions were irrelevant given the circumstances. "If that man dies," Austin told himself while sitting in jail, "they're damn sure going to electrocute your ass."¹⁹

The Alton Crowe shooting marked a major turning point for the civil rights movement. It was the first time that blacks used armed violence to protect a civil rights march. Henry Austin's bullet had belied the myth of a nonviolent civil rights movement. The shooting also signaled that blacks were prepared to use lethal force if the Federal government failed to protect their rights--a bargaining chip that would ultimately force the Federal government to change its civil rights legal strategy in the South. "It was no longer a situation where they could take advantage of black people with impunity," said Austin thirty years later.²⁰

Austin was puzzled by the response of the policemen who questioned him while he was in custody. It was almost as if they felt betrayed by Austin. They told Austin that he had violated their trust; that they were adequately protecting the march and it was Austin and the Deacons, not the Klan, who had breached the peace. Austin found their

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Austin, Hill interview.

response ironic, since he had only done what the white police officers would have done in the same situation.

Still, there was good reason for the policemen to feel betrayed. Austin violated the racial code of conduct that had manacled black men for three centuries in the South. According to unwritten code, blacks were their masters' wards, be it plantation master or the federal government. The master alone was responsible for protecting his ward. And while ward status protected blacks, it also denied them the full rights and manhood. They had no right to defend themselves against violence, but instead had to rely on the protection of their masters--in this case, the local police. Henry Austin had shattered the ancient code with a single bullet.

Initially A. Z. Young and Charlie Sims denied that Austin and Johnson were members of the Deacons, hoping to distance the Voters League and the Deacons from the shooting. But the denials did not last long. It soon became clear that most of the black community regarded Austin as a hero. After Sims bailed out the young Deacon, Austin returned to Bogalusa to a warm welcome. Men shook his hand and bought him drinks. Elderly women greeted him affectionately on the street and pressed a few dollar bills into his hand. The Crowe shooting did no damage to the Deacons' standing in the black community. The *New York Times* reported that at a mass rally the day following the shooting, A. Z. Young introduced Charlie Sims and four-hundred young black people "leaped to their feet in a delirious ovation."²¹

²¹Austin, Hill interview; *New York Times*, 15 August 1965. Austin admitted to police that he was a Deacons member. See, *Newsweek*, 19 July 1965. Alton Crowe survived the shooting.

Governor McKeithen was not as enthusiastic. In the wake of the Crowe shooting McKeithen pursued “a plague on both houses” strategy toward the Deacons and the Klan. McKeithen condemned both the violent racists and the civil rights groups as equally responsible for the Bogalusa crisis. But while carefully omitting reference to the Klan, McKeithen singled out A. Z. Young and Charlie Sims as “cowards and trash” and argued that no “decent negroes” were participating in the civil rights marches.²²

In the days to follow the Klan reacted to the Crowe shooting by denying the obvious. For a black man to shoot a white man in broad daylight--and live to tell about it--was simply inconceivable to the robed terrorists. The Klan pretended that nothing had changed. One Klan leader, speaking to the *New York Times*, dismissed the Deacons as cowards: “I don’t care how many guns that bunch of black Mau Maus has,” said the Klansman, “they don’t have the prerequisite--guts.”²³

But it was manifest that the Deacons haunted the Klansmen’s thoughts. At a huge Klan rally in Crossroads, Louisiana on July 18, United Klans of America leader L. C. McDaniel promised more violence against the Deacons. “I have never advocated violence,” McDaniel told his audience, “but where such trash as the Deacons for Defense are on the scene, I don’t think protecting our rights could be termed violence.”²⁴

Professional racists Connie Lynch and J. B. Stoner whipped up a crowd of thousands at a Bogalusa segregation rally following the Crowe shooting. Lynch, a

²²*Bogalusa Daily News*, 9 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 10 July 1965.

²³Fred Zimmerman, “Race and Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against White Attacks: Non-Violence Coming to End?” *Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 1965, p. 1.

²⁴*Bogalusa Daily News*, 19, July 1965.

California-based extremist, threatened genocidal warfare in Bogalusa: "We're gonna clean the niggers out of these streets . . . that means bashing heads or anything else it takes. There's lots of trees around here and we don't mind hangin' em." J. B. Stoner, erstwhile Imperial Wizard of the Christian Knights of the KKK, did his best to tap the economic anxiety of the white papermill workers. "Every time a nigger gets a job," Stoner told the rally audience, "that's just one more job that you can't have."²⁵

But behind the bombast and threats was a profoundly distressed Klan. "Most whites don't admit it," wrote the *New York Times* after the shooting, "but the Deacons send a chill down their spines." The truth of this was borne out in subsequent marches. In the days following the shooting the huge mobs of whites disappeared. The Crowe shooting--and increased police presence--discouraged ordinary whites from attending the Klans' counter-demonstrations. The Klan could no longer organize mass attacks on black demonstrations in Bogalusa. And the inability to organize mass direct action protests reduced the Klan to isolated terror tactics and diminished their influence over nonaffiliated segregationists in the mill town.²⁶

The Crowe shooting also marked a political watershed for the Deacons. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for the Deacons to continue to reconcile the group's self-defense philosophy with Martin Luther King's nonviolent strategy. It was clear that the Deacons were no longer simply exercising the right to defend hearth and home. Their actions now implied the right to defend black people against racist violence *anywhere*. Dr. King moved quickly to dissociate himself from the Deacons. "We can't win our

²⁵Bims, "Deacons for Defense"; *New York Times*, 11 July 1965.

²⁶Ibid.

struggle with nonviolence and to cloak it under the name of defensive violence," King said in the wake of the shooting. "The line of demarcation between aggressive and defensive violence is very slim." For King, the key issue was that armed self-defense jeopardized white support. "The Negro must have allies to win his struggle for equality," warned King. "And our allies will not surround a violent movement. What protects us from the Klan is to expose its brutality. We can't outshoot the Klan. We would only alienate our allies and lose sympathy for our cause."²⁷

But the Deacons had made fiction of King's assertion that blacks could not "outshoot the Klan." Bogalusa had demonstrated that simply the *will* to retaliate was sufficient to intimidate the Klan and force the federal government to intervene. Moreover, King's theory that the Klan could be defeated by exposing its brutality had proved false. The majority of whites already knew that the Klan was violent, and yet this did not translate into support for the civil rights movement. Public opinion surveys indicated that whites opposed the Mississippi Freedom Summer project by a 2-1 majority.²⁸

What ultimately prompted federal action against the Klan in Bogalusa was *black* violence, not *white* violence. Racist terrorism had been ever present in the South during the modern civil rights movement. Yet the federal government had never attempted to

²⁷*Louisiana Weekly*, 17 July 1965.

²⁸*New York Times*, 8 July 1964, p. 20. For an assessment of the Justice Department's role in the civil rights era by a Justice Department officer, see John Doar and Dorothy Landsberg, "The Performance of the FBI in Investigating Violations of Federal Laws Protecting the Right to Vote--1960-1967," in *Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities*, United States Senate, Ninety-fourth Congress, first session, volume 6 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976).

destroy the Klan--nor even force local governments to uphold the Bill of Rights. The Justice Department's track record was limited to a handful of voting rights suits that had a negligible impact in white supremacist forces. The FBI's efforts to disrupt the Klan were halfhearted and largely ineffectual. It was the unwillingness of the federal government to move swiftly and dramatically against the Klan that had prompted James Farmer to declare Bogalusa a test-case for the Johnson administration's putative "war against the Klan." Johnson's inaction was possible only as long as blacks remained passive in the face of Klan terror. But when the Deacons threatened to plunge Bogalusa into a bloody civil war, Johnson was forced to act.²⁹

King's response to the Deacons underscored a fundamental feature of the nonviolent strategy: Its goal was to win white support for legislative reforms at the expense of black security, manhood, and dignity. Every tactic of the nonviolent movement was measured against its ability to win white allies. It was a sound strategy for winning legislative reforms, but a woefully flawed strategy for redefining black identity and defeating white terrorism.³⁰

The impetus for building King's biracial reform coalition, on white terms, did not derive exclusively from the quest for political reform. There were pragmatic concerns too. Foremost was that virtually every national civil rights organizations depended on white liberals for funding. National leaders understood that violence jeopardized their political legitimacy and financial support. CORE was already \$250,000 in debt and having difficulty raising money to underwrite its fifteen projects in Louisiana. Writing

²⁹Farmer quoted in *Commonwealth*, 29 July 1965, p. 517.

³⁰*New York Times*, 8 July 1964; *Ibid.*, 2 May 1965.

only days after the Crowe shooting, nationally syndicated columnist Nicholas Hoffman pointed out that CORE's collaboration with the Deacons could cause them to lose "the financial support of Northern liberal whites who are strongly moved by the idea of a nonviolent social revolution." But repudiating paramilitary groups like the Deacons carried a price for national groups as well, observed Hoffman. "If they have nothing to do with local Negroes who arm themselves," said Hoffman, "the locals will have nothing to do with them, and the big groups will lose their position of leadership."³¹

Yet on the grassroots level there was little concern with jeopardizing white support for CORE. CORE's state leaders in Louisiana had always supported the Deacons, and, as Hoffman had pointed out, probably could not have afforded to do otherwise. Richard Haley explained CORE's policy to *Jet Magazine*. "We live with the Deacons, even with our nonviolent philosophy, because we are able to accept each other's positions," said Haley. But like sinners, CORE tolerated the Deacons in order to convert them. "Even in the church you have your sinners: we feel we can demonstrate to these people with our philosophy of love and nonviolence that there is another way."³²

In an internal memorandum Haley sought to clarify CORE's relationship with the Deacons. Haley began by noting that it was "a generally accepted belief among our La. CORE workers that some of our people might have been assaulted or even killed had the Deacons not taken over the job of protection." But the Deacons posed problems for CORE. Some in the media were questioning if CORE had remained faithful to its

³¹*Louisiana Weekly*, 17 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 13 July 1965.

³²"Guns, Pickets Down; Talks Begin in Bogalusa Race Crisis," *Jet*, 24 June 1965, pp. 8-9.

nonviolent principles. They wanted to know if CORE supported the Deacons and worked jointly with them. In addition, the Deacons had asked to use CORE automobiles and radios and had inquired about securing loans. It was clear that CORE needed to establish a "definite policy" toward the Deacons to provide guidelines for staff to standardize its public relations response.³³

Haley conceded that CORE workers were no longer united around nonviolence. He identified several "schools of thought" on nonviolence within CORE: absolutists who rejected all forms of violence; those who regarded nonviolence as only a tactic; those who admired but did not practice the "judicious use of violence"; and proponents of violence.³⁴

Haley thought that Deacons' use of force was comparable to government force. The Deacons were merely acting in place of the police, thus CORE should "regard the protective measures of the Deacons on behalf of CORE as we would regard any other proper police action." Haley proposed a cooperative and reciprocal working relationship with the Deacons. "We look to them to help us in emergencies and in turn, offer to help them in times of crisis." But Haley clearly wanted to limit the level of joint work. He cautioned against becoming "involved in the program of any local organization on a permanent basis" and warned against planning and recruiting for the Deacons or

³³Richard Haley, "Memorandum: CORE, Deacon, Relationship," [1965}, reel no. 19, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, Microfilm Edition, Yale University Photographic Services, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³⁴Ibid.

providing financial support that was “likely to tie together these two groups” and become “damaging to both.”³⁵

“Thus I view it a necessary part of CORE policy that we cooperate with the Deacons as a civic group and, when necessary as a protective agency,” concluded Haley. But CORE staff was to adhere to nonviolent principles. “We are not prepared to violate the basis [sic] principles of nonviolence in conflict situations.”³⁶

The problem of violence was not limited to the Deacons. The Crowe shooting also stimulated a new combativeness among young blacks outside the Deacons. The community as a whole was rapidly absorbing the Deacons’ qualities. In the days following the shooting, young blacks began to independently retaliate against white harassment. When two white men jumped a lone black man near the edge of the black quarters, a group of six blacks attacked the whites and sent them to the hospital. On another occasion two young whites slowly drove by a black drive-in and found themselves dodging bullets. On July 18, four young black men were arrested for shooting at whites in two separate incidents near Bogalusa. So many young people had taken to arming themselves that at one rally Farmer had to tell marchers to “leave your hardware at home.”³⁷

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷*Times-Picayune*, 11, 12 July 1965; News reports identified the four as members of the Deacons, although Sims appeared to deny that they were members. The four were Joe Gatlin, Gerald Simmons, Harrison Andrews, and Lucious Manning; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 19 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 19 July 1965; *New York Times*, 11 July 1965.

The Deacons did not welcome the new combativeness. The media frequently identified the young culprits involved in these incidents as Deacons. Charlie Sims berated the young militants for endangering the movement and issued explicit orders that only the Deacons could carry guns. At a rally in late July, Sims gave a stern warning to the "trigger happy" contingent. "Everything you do, whether you're a Deacon or not, they call you a Deacon. We've got enough trouble on our hands now without you going across town carrying guns and stirring up trouble," Sims told the teenagers. "We've got enough guns to go it without you people."³⁸

The Crowe shooting sent local and state authorities on full alert. Bogalusa city officials vainly sought a restraining order to prevent the League from continuing to march. McKeithen asked the League to stop the marches and sent an additional 125 state troopers to Bogalusa, raising the total to 325. Meanwhile, the National States Rights Party launched their own legal attack on the Deacons, delivering affidavits to Washington Parish officials charging that Charlie Sims and two other civil rights leaders were violating Louisiana's statute forbidding common law marriages (Sims was not married to his companion Bernice Harry at the time). The federal courts also weighed in on the day following the shooting when Judge Christenberry issued a favorable ruling for the BCVL in *Hicks v. Knight*. Christenberry issued an injunction that ordered Bogalusa and State officials to protect civil rights workers against assaults, harassment, and intimidation. The jurist ordered law enforcement officials to stop the use of unnecessary force and to

³⁸*Bogalusa Daily News*, 20 July 1965.

cease unlawful arrests, threats of arrests, and prosecutions. Police were also ordered to stop concealing their identity by covering or removing their badges.³⁹

Despite the Governor's entreaties the League refused to back off and instead announced another march for Sunday, July 11--the same day that segregationists had planned to march in Bogalusa. The League promised additional marches in the future, including a motorcade to the Parish seat of Franklinton. On Sunday, James Farmer led the marchers from the Negro Union Hall toward the downtown area. An eerie silence descended on the march as Farmer walked quietly with his eyes looking straight ahead. The large mobs of whites that normally lined the streets had disappeared, the memory of Alton Crowe fresh in their minds. The marchers entered the downtown shopping district and passed through a subdued crowd of whites. National Guard helicopters hovered menacingly above the white mob as an army of several hundred police stood guard armed with machine guns.⁴⁰

McKeithen decided to make another attempt at mediating the conflict, and on Monday, July 12 the Governor sent his official plane to bring A. Z. Young and Bob Hicks to Baton Rouge. At the Governor's mansion McKeithen implored Hicks and Young to call a thirty-day moratorium on marches---a "cooling off" period to renew negotiations. McKeithen promised to bring the city back to the negotiating table and arrange for segregationists Connie Lynch and J. B. Stoner to leave Bogalusa. Swayed by the Governor's amiable charm--and no doubt impressed by the VIP treatment--Hicks and Young accepted the Governor's moratorium proposal and agreed to present the proposal

³⁹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 11 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 13, 11, July 1965.

⁴⁰*Times-Picayune*, 12 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 12, 15 July 1965.

to the BCVL executive board that night. Following the meeting with the Governor the two activists issued a statement saying that they agreed with the Governor that "the Bogalusa demonstrations are hurting the state and are increasing bitterness between the races."⁴¹

Hicks and Young may have succumbed to McKeithen's charm, but the League's membership was not so easily seduced. When the compromise was introduced at a mass meeting later that night at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, cries of "No, No" rang out and the membership overwhelmingly shouted down the proposal. A somewhat shaken Hicks and Young adjourned the meeting and went into an executive session where the Executive Board formally rejected McKeithen's moratorium proposal. Louis Lomax, a black journalist from Los Angeles, had attended the rally and McKeithen later accused Lomax of turning the BCVL membership against Hicks and Young by promising to raise \$15,000 to continue the campaign. McKeithen claimed that the two League leaders were "lucky to get out of that hall alive."⁴²

But Lomax knew only too well that the League and the Deacons were no quislings. "The genius of Bogalusa is its spontaneity," Lomax told reporters. "The civil rights people are indigenously motivated and indigenously led." Lomax caused a minor controversy when he ridiculed the "Christian Mothers of Bogalusa," a white segregationist women's group that had recently staged a protest at the Federal Building in New Orleans. These were the same "scrawny white women" who came into the black neighborhood "selling goat meat and string beans," joked Lomax. The barb provoked an

⁴¹*Times-Picayune*, 13 July 1965.

⁴²*Times-Picayune*, 14 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 15 July 1965.

indignant editorial in defense of Southern womanhood by the *Bogalusa Daily News*, which defended the white women as “fine ladies.”⁴³

The next day a determined but frustrated McKeithen flew to Bogalusa for a second attempt to negotiate a truce, but not before the Governor sought and received the blessings of what he called Bogalusa’s “white conservatives”—no doubt the Citizens Council and the Klan. The meeting was held in a room at the Bogalusa airport, with the League’s Executive Board attending, along with Louis Lomax, Bogalusa City Officials and representatives of the Community Affairs Committee. At the table the Governor found himself face to face with the Deacons’ leader, Charles Sims. It was a distasteful experience for McKeithen; still, the Governor was making history. He now had the distinction of being the first and only Southern Governor forced to negotiate with a black paramilitary organization. It must have been a heady event for Sims; in a few short months the grisly brawler had risen from hustling in the streets to negotiating with a state Governor.⁴⁴

Little headway was made during the heated meeting. McKeithen refused to accede to the BCVL’s demand that he hire black state police. Cutrer was similarly intractable on the issue of integrating the city police. The Deacons and the League remained defiant and refused to halt the demonstrations. During one angry exchange McKeithen told Sims that he had planned to have the Deacon leader arrested “on general principle” at the League march the prior Sunday. McKeithen told Sims, “I sent word if you were seen, to arrest you. You have been bragging you were going to kill people, you

⁴³*Times-Picayune*, 13, 15 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 15 July 1965.

⁴⁴*Times-Picayune*, 14 July 1965.

were going to have funerals." McKeithen warned Sims that he would have him arrested if he made further threats. Sims was unfazed. The negotiations broke off after an hour and a half and McKeithen sulked back to Baton Rouge. "I don't know anymore that I can do at this time," said the Governor with a note of resignation. "I came over here to meet with colored people to demonstrate to them that I was prepared to humble myself as their governor, to listen to their complaints," said the Governor at a press conference. And how had the League repaid his magnanimity? They "talked kind of ugly" to him, complained McKeithen. "'Go ahead and take it,' I said to myself if it would bring peace to Bogalusa."⁴⁵

Later in Baton Rouge McKeithen publicly lashed out against the Deacons, announcing that he has ordered the state police to confiscate all weapons in cars or on persons in Bogalusa. The confiscation order would apply to both blacks and whites, explained McKeithen, but the Governor left little doubt about who his target was. "We're going to run the Deacons out of business and anybody else that's got pistols and rifles and shotguns," declared McKeithen. Charlie Sims responded to the Governor's threatened confiscation with characteristic aplomb. "I would rather be caught in Bogalusa with concealed weapons," snorted Sims, "than without them."⁴⁶

On July 14 Mayor Cutrer announced that the city had drafted a city ordinance to confiscate guns in the event of an emergency. The League responded boldly to the challenge by promptly organizing a march and rally on Wednesday, July 14 to protest the

⁴⁵*Times-Picayune*, 14 July 1965. Another account of the airport meeting is given in *Time*, 22 July 1965, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

threatened confiscation. It was a protest that Dr. King or any other civil rights leader would have found unimaginable: a nonviolent march demanding the right to armed self-defense.

The march ended with a spirited and defiant rally defending the Deacons. "If it weren't for the Deacons not many of us would be in this church tonight," A. Z. Young reminded his audience. "They would have run us all out of town . . . We got the lowdowndest white people in Bogalusa than anywhere."⁴⁷

Louis Lomax assailed McKeithen's duplicity in threatening to disarm the Deacons while the Klan used guns with impunity. "They talk about picking up guns," Lomax told the crowd. "They didn't talk about it 100 years ago. They only talk about it when Charlie Sims has guns. Why didn't they pick up guns when the two Negro deputies were shot?" Bob Hicks waxed indignant at the Governor's charge that Lomax had swayed the League to reject the moratorium. "We are in command. We run this campaign. This is our town. When the hard fight is over, we have to live in Bogalusa." Hicks told the audience that the state's leaders had created the conditions that called the Deacons into existence. "Guns are the only protection you have if laws are no good," said Hicks. "I don't know if I'd be here today unless I had a gun." It was McKeithen and Cutrer who had created the crisis by abdicating leadership to the Klan, continued Hicks. "The Governor has no power, the mayor has no power and if no one has any power everyone should run around wild." Young summed up the tense, apocalyptic mood of the rally: "We are on the verge of civil war."⁴⁸

⁴⁷*Bogalusa Daily News*, 15 July 1965.

⁴⁸*Bogalusa Daily News*, 15 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 15 July 1965.

Young was not dabbling in hyperbole. The League and the Deacons had pushed the state to the wall. They were inviting volunteers from around the country to flood into the Bayou state and make Bogalusa the Selma of Louisiana. McKeithen panicked at the thought of the Bogalusa crisis sparking a wildfire of protests throughout the state. He frantically sought the assistance of a group of moderate black leaders. McKeithen convened a special Committee to assess the situation in Bogalusa and head off further crisis. The committee comprised the old civil rights leadership who, for the most part, had been superseded by the new militant direct action groups like the League and the Deacons. It included Dr. Albert W. Dent, President of Dillard University, Dr. Felton Clark, President of Southern University, and A. P. Tureaud, attorney for the NAACP. The committee was eventually expanded into a permanent integrated commission, the Louisiana Commission on Race Relations. The BCVL looked askance at the committee. CORE's Richard Haley would later belittle the commission as a committee "of the well-fed to deal with the problem of the hungry."⁴⁹

By Thursday, July 15 the crisis had come to a head. Beginning with the Crowe shooting on July 8, the League had conducted seven days of relentless marches. They had defied the Klan and threatened to plunge Bogalusa into a bloody civil war. People lined up fifteen deep in department stores to buy weapons. McKeithen had failed to negotiate a truce due to his unwillingness to concede any of the League's demands. Now the Governor decided to abandon Bogalusa and turn the crisis over to the federal government. The Governor announced that he was withdrawing 280 of the 370 state troopers, a move that guaranteed a free hand for the Klan.

⁴⁹*Times-Picayune*, 15 July 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 28 August 1965.

Simultaneous to withdrawing his state troopers, McKeithen contacted Vice-President Humphrey and asked him to intervene in Bogalusa. But Humphrey rebuffed the Governor. In the days to follow, Mayor Cutrer and A. Z. Young also sent telegrams to Washington urgently requesting assistance, this time addressed to President Johnson. James Farmer drew a line in the sand when he told the media that Bogalusa would test the sincerity of Johnson's declared war on the Klan--a judgement echoed by the national press. Finally on July 15 Johnson relented and announced that he was dispatching John Doar, the head of the Justice Departments Civil Rights Division, to Bogalusa to negotiate a compromise to the crisis. Bogalusa was to become the first major test of the federal government's will to enforce the Civil Rights Act and end Klan terrorism.⁵⁰

Johnson's emissary to Bogalusa, John Doar, was a legend in the Civil Rights Movement. Doar had been involved in some of the most intense and dangerous civil rights conflicts in the South. But even the veteran trouble shooter found Bogalusa a bit unnerving. Doar arrived in Bogalusa to find Klansmen wandering the streets in full regalia, hobnobbing and joking with local police. It became obvious to Doar that the Civil Rights Act could never be implemented as long as the Klan operated with impunity and local police refused to uphold first amendment rights for protestors. Doar decided on a two-prong strategy to restore order and enforce the Civil Rights Act. First, he would force local authorities to uphold the law. Second, he would destroy the Klan.

To carry out his plan, Doar first had to document violations of Chistenberry's injunction issued in the *Hicks v. Knight* case. He immediately arranged for the FBI to collect evidence of violations of the injunction. He did not have to wait long. In the four

⁵⁰*Commonwealth*, 29 July 1965, p. 517; *Times-Picayune*, 16 July 1965.

short days Doar was in Bogalusa, the Klan staged a series carefully orchestrated attacks against isolated pickets. The smaller guerilla attacks were their only alternative: The white crowds that had spontaneously materialized along the march routes had now evaporated in a cloud of fear. Reminders of the Deacons and threats of retaliatory violence were manifest. "I do not advocate violence and we are going to do whatever we can to keep down the civil war in this area," A. Z. Young was quoted saying in the *Bogalusa Daily News*, "But, if blood is going to be shed, we are going to let it rain down Columbia Street--all kinds, both black and white. We are not going to send Negro blood down Columbia Street by itself, that's for sure."⁵¹

Most whites heeded Young's warning. Only a small group of hard-core Klansmen remained bold enough to risk attacking the rights activists. The Deacons had always had problems protecting picketers and those difficulties were compounded when the picketing spread to Pine Tree and LaPlaza shopping centers located some distance from the Columbia Street stores. The pickets were also more vulnerable given the reduced state police presence which made it easier for the Klan to stage diversionary attacks and quick guerilla assaults. Within days the FBI documented and filmed numerous Klan attacks on pickets and police brutality cases. John Doar personally watched in horror as the Klan attacked ten pickets at the La Plaza Shopping Center, pounding them into the pavement as forty state police stood by idly. When local Bogalusa police finally arrived, they ended up arresting the picketer instead of the Klan attackers.⁵²

⁵¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 18 July 1965.

⁵²*Times-Picayune*, 17 July 1965.

On July 16 the Justice Department began its lethal attack on white resistance in Bogalusa. Signed by Attorney General Katzenbach, Doar filed five federal suits designed to cripple the segregationist movement and assert the federal government's supremacy. Using the attacks at the La Plaza as evidence, first Doar intervened in the *Hicks v. Knight* case, asking that Sheriff Arnold Spiers and Police Chief Claxton Knight be held in criminal and civil contempt for failing to enforce Christenberry's order and allowing the attacks to continue. Doar also filed a criminal bill of information against officer Vertress Adams, charging him with violating the *Hicks* order through four counts of brutality and harassment. By seeking both criminal and civil contempt judgements against the law enforcement officers, the Justice Department was giving Bogalusa lawmen an ultimatum: enforce the law or face fines and jail sentences. Taking aim at the remaining segregated businesses, Doar additionally filed a civil suit against four Bogalusa businesses to force them to desegregate and comply with the Civil Rights Act.⁵³

But the most effective action was Doar's unique suit against the OKKKK asking the federal court to enjoin the Klan from depriving citizens of their constitutional rights through intimidating and threatening civil rights activists, Washington Parish officials, and businesses. The suit charged that the Klan's goal was to deprive individuals of their rights and preserve segregation and white supremacy in Washington Parish. The suit named thirty-five defendants, including twenty members of the Klan and fifteen individuals. Charles Christmas of Amite was identified as the OKKKK's principal leader and Saxon Farmer and Russell Magee were named as Washington Parish leaders. The suit charged that the group operated out of the Disabled Veterans Hall near Bogalusa and

⁵³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 19 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 19 July 1965.

had committed twenty specific acts of intimidation and harassment. The action marked the first time that the Justice Department had used a federal suit to destroy the Klan in the modern South. It would prove a potent weapon.⁵⁴

The Justice Department offensive crushed the white supremacist coup overnight. What was remarkable was how *little* was required to destroy the Klan and restore the moderates to power. The federal government merely threatened city officials with modest fines and light jail sentences. Suddenly Mayor Cutrer was falling all over himself to begin negotiations with the League. Cutrer hastily took to the airwaves to announce his support for the League's right to march and picket and urge citizens to simply ignore the protests. Commissioner Spiers and Chief Knight ran large advertisements in the *Bogalusa Daily News* calling for people to obey the law or face arrests. Civic and religious leaders, at Cutrer's urging, went on the radio and echoed the call to ignore the protests and return the city to order. The *Bogalusa Daily News* mustered the courage to publish an editorial demanding that the city enforce the law. And Crown-Zellerbach began negotiations with the BCVL to end segregation and promotion discrimination in the box factory. Even some Klan leaders jumped on the retreating band wagon too. At a United Klan's of America rally outside of Bogalusa on July 21, UKA leader Robert

⁵⁴*Bogalusa Daily News*, 19 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 20 July 1965. Klan members named in the suit were Dewey Smith, Virgil Corkern, Albert Applewhite, Arthur Ray Applewhite, Louis Applewhite, E. J. Dixon, O'Neal Austin Jones, Delos Williams, James M. Ellis, Hardie Adrian Goings Jr., Esley Freeman, James A. Hollingsworth Jr., Randle C. Pounds, Sidney August Warner, Billy Alford, and Rawlin Williams.

Shelton told some four-hundred Klansmen to ignore the civil rights protests. "Violence is just ammunition for the opposition," Shelton told the crowd.⁵⁵

Business establishments that had refused to integrate--out of fear or otherwise--suddenly opened their doors to blacks. On July 20, Deacon officer Sam Barnes led successful tests at the LaPlaza Restaurant, the Redwood Cafe, and Acme Cafe, this time accompanied by a police escort. In total, five restaurants were tested and all complied with the law. By the end of the month nearly all public establishments were desegregated. Cutrer also arranged for two blacks to take the Civil Service exam for the police department. They passed, with the highest scores ever recorded, and promptly integrated the police force.⁵⁶

After seven months of wanton attacks by the Klan, none of the 40 segregationists arrested for crimes had been prosecuted. Now Bogalusa's judicial machinery went into motion. City Attorney Robert Rester, himself a secret Klan member, stepped up prosecutions of the white attackers. Not everything had changed, though. After pleading guilty to assaulting James Farmer, Klansmen Randle Pounds received a paltry \$25 fine and a suspended sentence.⁵⁷

The hearings on the Justice Department's suits began on July 26, but the court proceedings were for the most part anticlimactic. The Deacons and the Voters League had already triumphed. They had forced the Yankee government to invade the South

⁵⁵*Bogalusa Daily News*, 18, 20, 29 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 22 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 22 July 1965.

⁵⁶*Bogalusa Daily News*, 21, 30 July 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 21, 25, 30 July 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 6 August 1965.

⁵⁷*New York Times*, 19 August 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 20 July 1965.

once again. Virtually all their demands would be met in the coming days. While traditional civil rights groups sought relief through legislative strategies and prolonged legal challenges in the federal courts, the Deacons refused to place their destiny in the hands of a beneficent master. The movement met the Klan head on and rebounded from every attack. The Deacons guaranteed there would be no peace without justice.

The hearings did, for the first time, publicly expose the depth and pattern of official malfeasance and police abuse in Bogalusa. Christenberry convicted Knight, Spiers and one officer of civil contempt, and on July 30 ordered Knight and Spiers to set up a specific plan to ensure protection of civil rights workers. If they refused to comply, Christenberry promised to proceed with criminal charges.⁵⁸

The Deacons occupied center stage during the trial. In addition to being witnesses against the police and the Klan, Sam Barnes had a heated exchange with two white men in the Wildlife building and was threatened by one of them. Christenberry learned of the altercation and summoned Barnes and the two white men to testify. After hearing the testimony of the men involved and witnesses, Christenberry reprimanded all three involved.⁵⁹

With their terrorist wing effectively destroyed, segregationists were reduced to using the first amendment to make their case against the Deacons. During the federal court hearings white women picketers showed up in front of Doar's temporary headquarters at the Bogalusa Post Office to protest the Justice Department's cooperative policy toward the Deacons. Pickets carried signs demanding that the Deacons be

⁵⁸*Times-Picayune* 29, 30 July 1965.

⁵⁹*Times-Picayune*, 28 July 1965.

prosecuted: "Mr. Doar, You have Indicted the Ku Klux Klan, How About the Deacons for Defense?," read one placard. Mrs. Dorothy McNeese, a Varnado resident who organized the protest, called for an investigation of the Deacons and assailed Doar as a minion for the paramilitary group. "We feel that Mr. Doar came to Bogalusa for one purpose only," McNeese charged, "and that was to draw nationwide attention and criticism away from an organization called the Deacons for Defensive [sic] Justice."⁶⁰

McNeese's women's group of approximately thirty continued to picket at Doar's office throughout the week. McNeese claimed that the women were taking the lead in the protests to avoid disturbances. She accused the federal government of initiating a mysterious "Operation Nancy" in Bogalusa, though she declined to give details of the operation. The Deacons remained the focus of the women's protest. "Women and children are uneasy hearing of Negroes carrying guns on the seats of their cars and the recent shootings," said McNeese.⁶¹

McNeese eventually formed a white version of the Deacons. In late July McNeese organized a "women's civilian patrol" with the objective of protecting whites from the Deacons. McNeese claimed that the women's patrol was formed because blacks were intimidating white shoppers and the recent court orders had left whites with no police protection. McNeese described the organization as a "watchdog operation" and claimed to have recruited three-hundred women and already elected "patrol captains." The organization planned to patrol areas around supermarkets and laundromats in Bogalusa. Like the Deacons, the white patrols would use unmarked cars and will take

⁶⁰*Times-Picayune*, 28, 29, July 1965.

⁶¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 29 July 1965.

license plate numbers of "civil rights workers" involved in incidents. They even planned to train women volunteers in the "art of self-defense."⁶²

Nothing much came of the McNeese's "White Deacons." By August, marches and pickets occurred only sporadically. The movement was spent and neither civil rights activists nor segregationists could muster much enthusiasm in the enervating tropical heat of August. Driven underground, the Klan launched a series of bomb attacks in early August. Two motels in Baton Rouge were bombed with a single stick of dynamite, including the Lincoln Motel where Ronnie Moore was staying and the International Motel where a Canadian civil rights medical team had registered. But the bombings could not revive the white mass movement. The BCVL also showed signs of fatigue. Their marches were losing support and, in desperation, the leadership began pushing for night marches to attract more adults. The courts prudently forbade what would have been an extremely dangerous and unmanageable form of protest.⁶³

Like most catalysts in a radical social movement, the Deacons and the League were never content with their achievements--which were substantial. *States-Item* columnist Alan Katz wrote that Bogalusa had taught Southern whites that racist violence only generated national sympathy and resulted in federal repression--at the expense of local control. The Bogalusa civil rights movement had clearly won, said Katz. The City had recognized the Voters League as the primary bargaining agent for the black community. The movement had forced the city to repeal its segregation laws, desegregate public accommodations, and conceded neighborhood improvements--including

⁶²*Bogalusa Daily News* 3 August 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 8 August 1965.

⁶³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 13 August 1965.

blacktopping streets and installing mercury lights. In addition the city was negotiating with the FHA for loans to construct one-hundred low cost housing units.⁶⁴

But Katz recognized an even more significant accomplishment for the BCVL and the Deacons. Katz quoted a 13-year-old Bogalusa girl who had been harassed and arrested during the Bogalusa campaign. "My folk used to be scared of the Ku Klux Klan," said the girl. "I'm not scared of them. I'm not afraid of anybody."⁶⁵

⁶⁴*States-Item*, 9 August 1965.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

Chapter 10

Creating the Myth

The Deacons struggled to define their political image in the media beginning with their first national publicity in February 1965. They soon discovered that creating a political identity was not a unilateral process. The Deacons could not “invent” themselves in isolation; external political developments and perceptions would define the Deacons’ identity as much as their own designs. The Deacons’ image was ultimately shaped by the tension between their quest for legitimacy and the choices forced upon them by white terrorism. On the one hand, the Deacons sought legitimacy by representing themselves as part of the nonviolent movement. On the other hand, Klan terror and police harassment forced them to create an alternative strategy to nonviolence. Compounding this dilemma was another stubborn contradiction: that the violence and militancy that earned the Deacons respect and legitimacy in the local movement, simultaneously cost them legitimacy with the national civil rights organizations and the media.

While there was a significant gap between the media image of the Deacons and the organizational reality, in the realm of politics, myth was reality. The formation of the Deacons’ myth began with Fred Powledge’s *New York Times* article on the Jonesboro Deacons, published February 21, 1965. Powledge’s article was the first attempt by the national media to describe the new political phenomenon, and the Deacons first

opportunity to project an image. In the *Times* article, the Deacons succeeded in portraying themselves as an auxiliary to the nonviolent civil rights movement: a peaceable, law-abiding organization formed in response to Klan terror and police indifference. The Deacons were not harbingers of some impending challenge to the nonviolent orthodoxy, according to the *Times* coverage. Nor was there any suggestion that the armed group reflected a growing disillusionment with nonviolence and established movement leadership.¹

This favorable media coverage continued throughout the Spring of 1965. CORE's sophisticated public relations operation, as well as the presence of its national headquarters in New York City, guaranteed continuing publicity for the Deacons. Although CORE initially downplayed its relationship with the Deacons, it was inevitable that the barrage of press releases and frantic calls regarding CORE's campaigns in Jonesboro and Bogalusa would draw additional media attention to the Deacons.

In April of 1965, CORE's media work helped transform a Deacon-Klan shootout into another favorable front page story in New York City. The incident was the April 7 Klan attack on Bob Hicks' house that resulted in a prolonged gun battle between the Deacons and the Klan. The following day the front page of the *New York Post* carried the dramatic headline: "Klansmen and CORE in Louisiana Gun Battle." Apparently based on an interview with CORE staffer Bill Yates, the story featured a photograph of Hicks brandishing a rifle as he examined the shattered window of a student's van. The article did not mention the Deacons by name, only referring to CORE's armed defenders

¹*The New York Times*, 21 February 1965.

as “Negroes guarding the house.” The *Post* article labeled Bogalusa as the “Klan Capital” of America, an unflattering moniker that gained popularity with the media.²

On June 6, 1965, *New York Times* readers opened their Sunday edition paper to yet another front page story on the Deacons, this time carrying a portentous headline that read “Armed Negro Unit Spreads in South.” Only a few months earlier the *Times* had characterized the Deacons as merely a local phenomenon and a movement anomaly. Now the *Times* was taking a second look at the Deacons, acknowledging the armed group’s growing popularity and the challenge they posed to entrenched civil rights leadership.³

The *Times* article contributed greatly to the image of the Deacons as an expanding political organization that had to be reckoned with. The *Times* highlighted the Deacons’ rapid growth, quoting Earnest Thomas and other sources as saying that the Deacons had “50 to 55 chapters” in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama and as many as fifteen-thousand, although the *Times* cautioned readers that the figures were unreliable and that the Deacons were primarily in Louisiana.⁴

The *Times* article described the Deacons’ activities, including guarding civil rights workers with weapons and the groups’ running gun battles with the Klan. The *Times* quoted the Deacons as describing their organization as law-abiding, and, according to Earnest Thomas, “strictly for defense” and “highly disciplined.”⁵

²*The New York Post*, 8 April 1965.

³*New York Times*, 6 June, 1965.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

The *Times* article marked Earnest Thomas' first appearance as a national spokesperson for the Deacons, and his first opportunity to publicly defend the Deacons' self-defense policy within the existing framework of nonviolence. Yes, civil rights workers willingly took risks on the picket line, Thomas told the *Times*. But hearth and home were another matter. Everyone had the right to defend the sanctity of the home, even the civil rights worker. An activist might forego his right of self defense on the picket line, "But when he goes to bed at night he is entitled to rest without worry," said Thomas. "That's where the Deacons come in."⁶

The *Times* was skeptical that nonviolence could be so easily reconciled with self-defense. The Deacons organization "raises hard questions for advocates of nonviolence," intoned the *Times*. "Should a civil rights organization committed to nonviolence align itself with the Deacons, and accept their services?" Richard Haley answered the *Times*' question with the same ambivalence toward the Deacons that plagued the rest of the movement. The *Times* had pointed out that CORE had a close, and seemingly approving, relationship with the Deacons. Haley admitted the close relationship, but suggested that it was, in part, based on self-interest. "The deacons made the difference between safety and bad health last summer for CORE workers in Jonesboro," Haley said in defense of the group. They "have the effect of lowering the minimum potential for danger now, which can only encourage people to participate in protests." For Haley, there was no contradiction between the Deacons and nonviolence; the Deacons were practicing "protective nonviolence." And though he worked with the Deacons, Haley remained

⁶Ibid.

faithful to his first principles. "But I still have to believe in my own mind that nonviolence is more effective than even the Deacons."⁷

Still, glimpses of Haley's own growing disenchantment with nonviolence came through in his comments to the *Times*. Haley pointed out that the nature of attacks on civil rights workers had changed dramatically in recent months. During the lunch counter sit-ins, white violence was usually limited to dousing a protestor with catsup, or shoving a protestor off a stool, said Haley. Now the attacks were frequently deadly. "The nonviolence theory holds that there is an innate goodness in a man," said Haley, "and that this works on his conscience while he is battering you on the head." This nonviolent strategy had been effective in focussing national attention on the South and winning "sympathetic public opinion" in the North, said Haley, but Northern sympathy was slow to translate into protection -- something the Deacons provided.⁸

The June 1965 *Times* article redefined the Deacons as an alternative to the nonviolent movement, and recognized that the Deacons were more than a defense group-- that they also played a role in changing black political consciousness. "One aim of the deacons," noted the *Times*, "is to dispel an old-Southern white notion that the Negro is docile and will not fight back."⁹

While the *Times* coverage was essentially sympathetic, it was inevitable that media coverage of the Deacons would turn critical. Two developments contributed to this turn of events. First, once the Deacons began to significantly expand and recruit in

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

new areas, they could no longer be dismissed as a marginal phenomenon. Their rapid expansion and growing media exposure threatened the hegemony of traditional civil rights organizations, such as SCLC, that enjoyed liberal media support. Segments of the media felt compelled to neutralize the upstart Deacons who promised to escalate the violence. Second, there were widespread and deserved fears that the summer of 1965 would be wracked by explosive race riots. The previous summer had witnessed several small race riots in Northern cities, including New York and Chicago. Sitting on the powder keg of racial turmoil in major urban areas, some media organizations sought to discredit any organization that legitimated violence as a political tool, fearing that self-defensive violence might ignite a major riot.

Typical of the negative coverage was the shrill attack on the Deacons by the *Los Angeles Times* one week following the *New York Times* story. Los Angeles was a smoldering fire of racial discontent in June 1965, when Charles Sims arrived in the city for the first leg of a California fund raising trip. The *Los Angeles Times* published two articles on the Deacons during Sims's visit. The front page of the June 13, Sunday edition of the *Los Angeles Times* carried the sensational headline, "Negro 'Deacons' Claim They Have Machine Guns, Grenades for 'War'." The lead paragraph reported on a secret meeting in which the Deacons claimed to have "machine guns and grenades for use in racial warfare," and the Deacons didn't make much effort to deny the allegation. "You don't tell your opponents what you are doing in any kind of conflict," Bob Hicks told the *L. A. Times*.¹⁰

¹⁰"Negro 'Deacons' Claim They Have Machine Guns, Grenades for 'War'," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 1965.

The *L.A. Times* article relied heavily on two highly negative FBI reports on two Deacons' meetings conducted in Bogalusa in February 1965. Apparently an informant had surreptitiously tape-recorded the meetings and the resulting information was widely disseminated to the media in FBI memoranda. In one meeting, Thomas and Kirkpatrick claimed to have access to grenades and automatic firearms. At a second meeting, Bob Hicks was quoted as urging participants to forcibly obstruct police from making illegal arrests. "No white person will be allowed in a Negro area at night--salesman or anybody," Hicks had told the meeting.¹¹

The talk about grenades and automatic weapon arsenals had been nothing more than boasts and exaggerations. The Deacons were not preparing for an apocalyptic race war, as the *L. A. Times* insinuated. But the hyperbole was grist for the mill. The damaging FBI allegations found their way not only into the *L.A. Times* coverage, but also became a mainstay for negative media coverage in the months that followed.

Despite their efforts to portray themselves as part of the nonviolent movement, the Deacons were depicted by the *L.A. Times* as a potentially violent organization masquerading as a self defense group. "The Deacons insist their purpose is only defensive," huffed the newspaper, "however at both February meetings they talked of preventing whites from going into Negro residential areas at night" and encouraged "armed confrontation with policemen when negroes are arrested."¹²

¹¹Two representative FBI reports on this meeting are New Orleans to Director, February 23, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-3 and SAC, New Orleans to Director, February 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-4.

¹²*Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 1965.

The paper also highlighted Kirkpatrick's comments quoted in the FBI memorandum in which he urged people to buy high powered rifles and ammunition and boasted that he carried more than one-hundred rounds of ammunition. "It takes violent blacks to combat these violent whites," Kirkpatrick was quoted as saying. "We're gonna be ready for 'em. We're gonna have to be ready to survive."¹³

The story was so critical of the Deacons that the *Times*' readers might have reasonably concluded that the Deacons were more of a threat to peace than the Klan. Indeed, the *Times* failed to mention the Klan carnage visited upon blacks in Bogalusa, ranging from beatings to the recent murder of Deputy O'Neal Moore. The Klan had all but disappeared into smoke on the pages of the *Times*. But if readers were lulled into believing that the Deacons, not the segregationists, were the source of violence in the South, at least one quote may have brought them to their senses. "My men are watching them closely," growled Bogalusa Police Chief Claxton Knight to the *Times*. "If one of them makes the wrong move he's gonna get his head blown off."¹⁴

The *Times* resisted the Deacons' efforts to portray themselves as an auxiliary to the nonviolent movement, and instead defined them as part of an emerging "militant" movement. As with the *New York Times*, the Los Angeles paper recognized that the Deacons' philosophy was inexorably counter posed to nonviolence, and that the paramilitary group was part of a growing revolt against the entrenched civil rights leadership. "The rising militancy of the Deacons," noted the *Times*, "and the expansion

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

of the movement is a new element in the civil rights movement which federal and state officials view with concern.”¹⁵

The harsh treatment of the Deacons by the *L.A. Times* may have been, in part, a reaction to Sims’ hint that the Deacons might organize a chapter in Los Angeles. Since the Deacons’ primary focus had been on the Klan, what conceivable role could they play in California, asked the *Times*? “Man, there’s police brutality and people with that white supremacy stuff everywhere,” replied Sims.¹⁶

Sims’ comments on police brutality would certainly resonate with Northern blacks. But were the Deacons prepared to radically change their emphasis from Klan violence to police violence? Sims was probably thinking aloud in the interview and had not given serious thought to the implications of such a strategic shift. Clearly the Deacons’ leadership was not of one mind. Interviewed by phone in Bogalusa, Bob Hicks openly disagreed with Sims’ proposed Los Angeles Deacons chapter. “They got problems out there just like everywhere else,” admitted Hicks, “but nobody’s shooting at anybody in Los Angeles.”¹⁷

The following day the *L.A. Times* followed up with a second critical article titled “Deacons Chief Defends Aims on Visit to L.A.: “Use of arms Necessary Because of lack of Justice for Negro in South, He says.” The Deacons had “amassed machine guns and grenades and rifles for any eventuality” reported Paul Weeks in the unflattering profile piece. Sims defended the Deacons by arguing that they only resorted to weapons

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

because law enforcement refused to protect blacks in the South. The *Times* was not convinced. "But federal and state authorities are worried," warned the *Times*. "The Deacons, they say, are playing with matches in a powder magazine. Regardless of his words, how can Sims or his associate leaders ward off an explosion when mob passions flare?"¹⁸

There was some justification for the media's skepticism about the Deacons' commitment to purely defensive violence. Sims was tailoring his message to his audience, and the following day he struck a much more militant pose when he appeared on black journalist Louis Lomax's television show in Los Angeles. Now speaking to a sympathetic black studio audience, Sims dropped all pretense of Gandhian nonviolence. In the event of future trouble in Bogalusa, Sims told the audience, "blood would be flowing down the streets like water." The audience greeted the threat with wild applause.¹⁹

The scathing *L.A. Times* rebuke set the pattern for future media attacks on the Deacons. The Deacons' detractors would argue that the self-defense group was taking the law into its own hands--that the Deacons were the black counterpart to the Klan. Evoking images of irresponsible vigilantes and disruptive provocateurs, the *L.A. Times* coverage was the beginning of the media efforts to discredit the Deacons as an extremist "Negro KKK."

¹⁸Paul Weeks, "Deacons Chief Defends Aims on Visit to L.A.: 'Use of arms Necessary Because of lack of Justice for Negro in South, He says,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 14 June 1965.

¹⁹SAC, Los Angeles to Director, June 15, 1965 and Letter Head Memorandum, "Deacon for Defense and Justice," June 15, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-16.

While there was an obvious moral chasm between the actions of the Klan and the Deacons, most white journalists in 1965 made no ethical distinction between offensive and defensive violence. Journalists feared that black retaliation against the Klan or police would only escalate the violence and lead to bloody civil disorders. Anxious about any efforts to arm blacks, large segments of the white media, particularly local news outlets, turned a deaf ear to arguments in support of self-defense.

Nevertheless, most national publications, following the lead of the *New York Times*, were generally sympathetic. In July 1965 the story of the Deacons arrived on the coffee tables of millions of readers in a fairly balanced *Life* magazine article. Columnist Shana Alexander had read the *Los Angeles Times* articles and watched the Louis Lomax television interview, and later arranged an interview with Sims and a young white civil rights worker who had been organizing in Bogalusa in the Spring. The liberal columnist approached the Deacons with a mixture of trepidation and grudging admiration. Had nonviolence run its course, asked Alexander? Was it a luxury reserved for liberals observing the movement at a safe distance? "Both interviews strengthened my conviction that nonviolence must be the moral keystone of the civil rights movement," wrote Alexander. But the terrifying accounts of Klan violence in Bogalusa made her realize "that one's feeling about nonviolence are influenced more by geography and circumstance than by moral principle."²⁰

Alexander's column underscored the martial spirit of the Deacons, characterizing them as "armed Negro vigilantes" led by a "warlike Deacon chieftain." "The Deacons

²⁰Shana Alexander, "Visit Bogalusa And You Will Look For Me," *Life*, 2 July 1965, p. 28.

say they have grenades and machine guns . . . and that they will not hesitate to use their entire arsenal if necessary . . .,” said Alexander--converting the FBI’s allegation into a fact. “Such militancy on the part of southern Negroes is so utterly without precedent that many people don’t know what to make of the Deacons,” said Alexander. Were they truly “freedom fighters” or, as had been rumored, “protection racketeers” or “Mao-inspired terrorist conspirators.”²¹

Sims, with characteristic savvy, cast himself as a reluctant apostate of nonviolence. “I don’t approve of the deacons myself,” Sims mockingly confessed to Alexander, “but we have no choice.” And if Alexander lived in Bogalusa, she wouldn’t have a choice either. “Visit Bogalusa, and *you* will look for *me*,” chastened Sims.²²

Sims punctuated his argument with his trademark blunt frankness. Sims suggested that the three civil rights workers murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964 were victims of nonviolence as well as the Klan. “If we’d had the Deacons there, three more men would be alive in Mississippi today,” Sims told Alexander. “Or else a lot more would be dead.”²³

The Sims interview left Alexander convinced of the necessity of armed self-defense in the South. “If I ever have to go to Bogalusa,” concluded Alexander, “I should be very glad to have his [Sims] protection, despite the fact that where brave men like

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

Sims really belong is not in the Deacons but in the ranks of the Bogalusa police department.”²⁴

A few days after the *Life* column appeared, the Deacons were again thrust into the headlines when Henry Austin, the young Deacon member, shot Alton Crowe during the July 7 march. The shooting propelled the debate on nonviolence into the national arena. One of the first stories to appear after the Crowe shooting was in the *Wall Street Journal*. “Race and Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against White Attacks,” was the headline on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* on July 12, 1965, followed by the portentous subheading that posed the question: “Non-Violence Coming to End?” Penned by Fred Zimmerman, the *Journal* article warned that “fear is mounting that angry Negroes are ready to reject the biblical induction to ‘turn the other cheek’ and embrace an older, harsher code - an eye for an eye.” The *Journal* noted that bands of “militant, heavily armed” blacks were forming in small sleepy southern towns and, unlike mainstream civil rights organizations, they “are locally led, and they share an open contempt for the doctrine of nonviolence . . . ”²⁵

The *Journal* reported that armed groups, primarily the Deacons, had spread to six states and had alarmed law enforcement and moderates who feared a “major bloodletting.” The article detailed the Deacons’ organizing efforts, repeating their claim of fifty active chapters centered in Louisiana and the Mississippi delta, and reporting that new chapters had recently been formed in north Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Fred Zimmerman, “Race and Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against White Attacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 1965, p. 1.

and Alabama. "These groups are all over the state now," Charles Evers, brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, told the *Journal*, "and I'm glad they're around."²⁶

The *Journal's* source for most of this information was probably the Deacons themselves, although Zimmerman apparently corroborated some of the claims through other sources. Even if the Deacons' growth was considerably overstated--and it was-- the resulting media image enhanced their standing as serious and important opponents of the mainstream civil rights movement. In the short time of a few months, the Deacons had evolved from an anonymous guard group into a symbol of the revolt against nonviolence.

The *Journal* touched on the quandary the Deacons posed to mainstream civil rights groups, speculating that some national organizations had refused to disavow the Deacons because they feared the loss of support from local black communities that favored the armed group. James Farmer of CORE told the *Journal* that, although CORE's demonstrations were nonviolent, "I don't feel that I have any right to tell a Negro community they don't have the right to defend the sanctity of their homes." An unidentified SCLC aide told the *Journal* that his organization remained committed to nonviolence, but added that "there is such a thing as the cup of endurance running over." "Dr. King's position makes a distinction between defensive violence and aggressive violence," said the aide. "I think the Deacons come in the category of defensive violence."²⁷

Still, the growing schism in the civil rights movement could not be denied. Other civil rights groups interviewed by the *Journal* refused to concede any ground to the

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

Deacons. Paul Anthony, field director of the respected Southern Regional Council, was deeply troubled by the Deacons. Anthony warned that if "the Deacons really catch hold, it could mean the end of nonviolence in some areas of the South . . . which could cause a wave of violence with national repercussions." And the Deacons were growing increasingly confident in criticizing mainstream civil rights groups. "We're going to have a war, I honestly believe that," Bob Hicks told the *Journal*. "But we're not going to double up like CORE people do when we're attacked."²⁸

Charlie Sims attempted to assuage fears of rampant violence by emphasizing the Deacons' self-discipline and defensive goals. Members were to only use their weapons to defend themselves, Sims told the *Journal*. "We're constantly riding all the members all the time about this," said Sims. Still, the *Journal* was apprehensive about the Deacons, fearing that defensive violence would provoke more Klan violence. "It's true that much of their activity is, in effect, guard duty," wrote the *Journal*. "But to Southern law enforcement agencies and to many groups trying to promote integration without violence---these armed bands are essentially vigilantes posing an increasing threat of bloodshed."²⁹

That the Deacons were becoming a symbol of a new militant challenge to the politics of nonviolence could no longer be doubted. The Deacons had initially sought respect and legitimacy by pledging loyalty to the mainstream groups and their nonviolent philosophy. Now the Deacons were increasingly abandoning this tactic and developing a coherent alternative strategy that justified defensive violence and militant protest.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

In part, the shift was a consequence of clarifying their own thinking, discovering the logical contradictions in their initial approach, and gaining confidence and independence from the support they received from an increasingly militant black community. The mass movement was shaping the Deacons as the Deacons shaped the mass movement. But the media also played a role in the Deacons' strategic shift. By casting the Deacons as symbols of a changing mood among blacks, the media helped anoint them as leaders of the insurgent militant movement.

The transformation of the Deacons into spokespersons for self-defensive violence continued in the media throughout the summer of 1965. On August 2, 1965, only days before the Watts riot, *Newsweek* weighed in with a balanced article on the "highly disciplined group of Negro vigilantes" whose "swift rise" and "spread" presented "nonviolence civil rights groups with a quandary."³⁰

The article reprised the allegation that the Deacons possessed an arsenal of automatic weapons and grenades, and cited a taunting speech in which Kirkpatrick assailed black leaders. "You been led by the tap-dancing Negro, the head-tapping Negro, in other words, the plain old Uncle Tom," Kirkpatrick had told his audience. Kirkpatrick also lambasted the tendency of mainstream groups to equate civil rights with liberation. "You got to forget about *right*," Kirkpatrick said, "because *right* aint gonna get you justice." *Newsweek* labeled Kirkpatrick's comments a "violent repudiation of nonviolent leaders."³¹

³⁰"The Deacons," *Newsweek*, pp. 28-29. The article also gave credit to the Deacons' "counter-intimidation" techniques for discouraging Klan terror in Bogalusa.

³¹*Ibid.*, emphasis added.

Lodged in the "militant" camp by the media and their own rhetoric, the Deacons now found themselves with some unwanted allies. When *Newsweek* questioned Charlie Sims about the similarities between the Black Muslims and the Deacons, the Deacons leader took pains to dissociate his group from the separatists. "I despise the Muslims just as much as I do the Ku Klux Klan," Sims protested to *Newsweek*. "I don't believe in either white or black supremacy. I believe in equality."³²

In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in August 1965, Earnest Thomas echoed Sims' sentiments about nonviolent organizations. "They can come down and play non-violence with those rednecks all they want," Thomas said. "We who live down there have our own way of handling things. We will submit peacefully to legal arrest, but if you think one of us is going to be peacefully hauled off to some jail to get beat up or killed, you'll be making the same mistake some southern sheriff will." The *Chronicle* asked if it were true that the Deacons had an arsenal of machine guns. "I wish they did," replied Thomas coyly. "We don't intend to turn the other cheek. Only a fool does that."³³

On August 15, Roy Reed, writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, produced one of the most extensive and thoughtful stories published on the Deacons. Titled "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," the lengthy article featured several prominent photographs of armed Deacons and a steely-eyed Charles Sims. Reed described the Deacons as an "armed, semisecret, loosely organized federation" that was widely

³²Ibid.

³³Article Quoted in SAC, San Francisco to Director, September 21, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-67.

supported and was “well on their way to community leadership.” The Deacons were not a new or isolated phenomenon either, pointed out Reed, but part of a growing number of self-defense groups that continued a tradition of self-defense dating back to Robert F. Williams and the black men who guarded Daisy Bates in Little Rock. What was unique about the Deacons was that they had given organizational form to the growing disillusionment with nonviolence. “With the Deacons and their organization, the advocates of armed defense have a symbol and a rallying point,” observed Reed.³⁴

Reed saw a major strategic difference underscoring the division between the Deacons and the mainstream civil rights organizations. The division, according to Harvard scholar Dr. Thomas Pettigrew, stemmed from the fact that oppressed communities may choose several paths to liberation, including moving toward their oppressor to “seek equality”—as symbolized by the NAACP and CORE—or to “move against the oppressor and fight him.” The Deacons had taken the second path. Reed alluded to the inflated membership claims, but gave little credence to the figures or to the reports of a cache of illegal weapons. Size was not an important factor for a symbolic organization like the Deacons, said Reed. “The importance of the Deacons at the moment is not in their numbers but in their psychological impact on both whites and Negroes.” And what was that impact? The Deacons were an intimidating symbol to whites. Their willingness to shoot back had frightened whites and reduced harassment in Jonesboro, said Reed, although it had raised racial tension in Bogalusa. Reed recounted several armed skirmishes between the Deacons and the Klan, including the shooting of

³⁴Roy Reed, “The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 August, 1965, pp. 10-24.

Alton Crowe by Henry Austin one month earlier. "Far from dampening the spirit of Bogalusa Negroes, this foolhardy shooting seemed to stir their passions higher," wrote Reed, citing A. Z. Young's ominous warning that, "If blood is going to be shed, we are going to let it run down Columbia Road--all kinds, both white and black."³⁵

The psychological impact of the Deacons on blacks was equally significant. "Part of the Negro's task in his struggle for equality is to convince the nation, and particularly the white south, that he is competitive, that he has will and backbone," said Reed. To do this, blacks had to overcome the deeply imbedded white stereotype of blacks as "docile, unaggressive and martially inferior." In the past blacks used nonviolence to prove their mettle, that they were "tough enough to take it and big enough not to hit back." Now groups like the Deacons in the South, like the Muslims in the North, were choosing a new direction, according to Reed. "They are determined to prove to the white racists, and perhaps to themselves, that the Negro not only can take it but that he can also dish it out." The Deacons had inspired pride in the community and had "proved to be a natural instrument for building community feeling and nourishing the Negro identity." Their strategy demonstrating that they could "dish it out" had also contributed positively to the new Negro identity.³⁶

Reed's analysis was subtle and discerning, and among the first to appreciate that the Deacons shaped white as well as black consciousness. Reed was correct to argue that blacks had to overcome their obsequious image, but he was mistaken in thinking that blacks believed that nonviolence could disabuse whites of the image of blacks as "docile,

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

unaggressive and martially inferior.” Indeed, nonviolence perpetuated the image of blacks as docile and helplessly dependent on the beneficence of whites. The goal of nonviolence was to reveal the *inhumanity* of the oppressor, not the *humanity* of the oppressed. In contrast, the Deacons’ strategy was designed to establish black men as the equals of all men; to claim their rightful place in society as fully human, invested with the same rights, privileges, and prerogatives as whites, and deserving of the same honor, respect--and fear. “They finally found out that we really are men,” Royan Burris told Reed,” and that we would do what we said, and that we meant what we said. They found out that when they ride at night, we ride at night.”³⁷

The growing class tensions within the movement also emerged in the story. The *Times* described Charlie Sims as a “good example of the new non-middle class Negro leader in the Southern Civil Rights movement.” His police record and street-wise demeanor were no obstacles to leadership. “In other times he would have been simply a tough; now he is a hero.” Kirkpatrick also underscored the Deacons’ resentment of middle class black leaders, telling Reed that he was fighting “Uncle Tom” preachers and their fatalist religious belief that “all good things come to those who wait.” Kirkpatrick, a minister himself, scoffed at passive religious doctrine, arguing that “every generation is put here for a purpose, not to lollygag and do nothing.” He planned to enlist young men to dig sewer lines in the black community, and in turn, black residents would be expected to register to vote. “And if they don’t?” asked Reed. “We might have to make ‘em go,”

³⁷Ibid.

replied Kirkpatrick bluntly. "We might have to drag 'em down. You see, they're holding back the whole program."³⁸

Reed touched on how CORE and SNCC had quietly cooperated with the Deacons, but noted that Dr. King had opposed the Deacons' version of self-defense. "The line between defensive violence and aggressive violence is very thin," King had said in July. "You get people to thinking in terms of violence when you have a movement that is built around defensive violence." Sims made little effort to conceal his contempt for King. The Deacons had recently invited a host of civil rights leaders to Bogalusa, said Sims, but not King. "I want everybody here except Martin Luther King," said Sims. "If he came and they gun him, I couldn't protect him, because he don't believe in me."³⁹

While Reed's coverage of the Deacons was generally favorable, he did note a few shortcomings. Foremost was the potential for the Deacons to cross the line from defensive to offensive violence. The Deacons were "poorly controlled" and little more than a loose federation of local chapters, said Reed. Bogalusa's assistant police chief, L.C. Terrell, opined that "this haphazard organizational control could open the door to aggressive terrorism by Negroes." Though this was not an immediate threat, Reed conceded that if blacks began initiating violence, "the Deacons would be its first logical agent."⁴⁰

Publications like *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* shaped the debate within the national movement which, in turn, had local ramifications. But most blacks in the

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

South learned about the Deacons through local white media or national black media. As might be expected, white newspapers in Louisiana gave virtually no coverage to the Deacons and, when they did, it was inevitably negative. The only story in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* was a short disparaging article reporting on the Deacon leaders' arrest records. The same was true for the *Bogalusa Daily News*.⁴¹

The principal black media source of information on the Deacons was the *Louisiana Weekly*, south Louisiana's only black weekly newspaper. For the most part, the *Weekly* provided favorable coverage of the Deacons, beginning with a lukewarm reception in Leon Spivak's syndicated column in March 1965. Spivak, a liberal white columnist, thought that the Deacons were more "constructive" than nationalists, but feared that a "demagogue" might seize control of the organization. In May the *Weekly* carried a wire story on the Deacons by the Negro Press International, a national black news syndicate, titled "Decons [sic] of Defense Ready Should the Occasion Arise." The article reported that a "fierce, new readiness to strike back if attacked has injected a new factor into Louisiana's civil rights problems." The syndicated story quoted Charlie Sims commenting on the distinction between offensive and defensive violence." The only thing I can say is that we will not go on the offense. We are the defensive team. If they come in here to hit us, they will get hit back."⁴²

National black media also had significant influence within the black community. Periodicals like the diminutive *Jet* magazine were widely read by black opinion-makers

⁴¹*Times-Picayune*, 12 April 1965; 31 May 1965.

⁴²*Louisiana Weekly*, 13 March 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 8 May 1965. For other Deacon references, see *Louisiana Weekly*, 19, 26 June; 17 July 1965.

on a grass roots level. In contrast to the white media, the black media universally greeted the Deacons as a positive development and never succumbed to the "Negro KKK" phobia. Perhaps the only distortion in coverage was the tendency of some black media to downplay the political schism in the black movement that the Deacons symbolized.

Jet magazine played a major role in popularizing the Deacons. *Jet* was the most widely read black weekly digests. Much of its coverage of the civil rights movement was gleaned from news services and clippings from other papers. Its youthful staff included reporters like Larry Still, who was highly sympathetic to militant groups counter posed to the NAACP and other mainstream organizations.

Jet carried the *New York Post's* story about the Klan shootout at the Hicks' house in the Spring of 1965, but did not mention the Deacons by name. On June 24 *Jet* published a second story on Bogalusa, this time highlighting the Deacons' impact on whites. "With deadly guns and bullets and the nonviolent philosophy living side by side in tense Bogalusa, La.," wrote *Jet*, "whites in that area--perhaps for the first time in any Deep South civil rights drive--have a clear choice of alternatives." *Jet* clearly viewed the Deacons as a lever to force whites to negotiate with nonviolent leaders--the militant alternative that made reformers look reasonable. But the magazine also took pains to portray the Deacons as part of the nonviolent movement--an image that the Deacons were promoting in their early stage. The Deacons worked with the Voters League and participated in other nonviolent activities, *Jet* said in the Deacons' defense. "Their total program is not centered around guns. The members have been for years demanding proper mail service, improved schools, and paved streets in Negro sections." To fortify the Deacons' nonviolent credentials, *Jet* pointed out that during demonstrations "the

Deacons are unarmed and are totally committed to nonviolence,” The Alton Crowe shooting, of course, would later prove this claim false.⁴³

Jet carried a major story in July based on interviews with Charlie Sims during his Los Angeles visit. Louie Robinson and Charles Brown penned the story, featuring a cover headline that read: “Negro Most Feared by Whites in Louisiana.” The story was a virtual paean to Sims, complete with a photograph of Sims captioned “reflects determination; inward, unswerving courage.”⁴⁴

Sims was at his best in the interview: disarming, unpredictable, and charming. He had honed his new image as a tough-talking militant. Sporting bloodshot eyes and his ragged smile, Sims first apologized to his interviewers for wearing a suit with a white shirt at the interview. “This white shirt makes a good target at night,” confessed Sims whimsically. In Bogalusa he wore overalls. “They have nice, big pockets,” Sims added, “so you can carry your pipe [gun] and plenty of shells.”⁴⁵

Eschewing the white media’s pejorative term of “vigilantes,” *Jet* described the Deacons as “a determined band of heavily armed Negroes who have vowed to defend themselves with guns from marauding whites who have terrorized black communities in the south.” The interview had been conducted in June, and Sims had not yet taken a hard stance against King and the nonviolence movement. Sims said the Deacons were committed to protecting all leaders of civil rights organizations--even those who opposed

⁴³“Bogalusa Riflemen Fight Off OKKK Attack,” *Jet*, 22 April 1965, p. 5; “Guns, Pickets Down: Talks Begin in Bogalusa Race Crisis,” *Jet*, 24 June 1965, p. 8.

⁴⁴Louie Robinson and Charles Brown, “The Negro Most Feared by Whites in Louisiana,” *Jet*, 15 July 1965, pp. 14-17.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

the Deacon's tactics. "As long as his face is black and he is in Bogalusa, we feel his safety is our responsibility."⁴⁶

Sims related a series of violent incidents, all enlivened with his characteristic dramatic embellishments. The Klan had a \$1,000 reward on him, Sims told the young reporters--a dubious claim at best. He recounted a questionable tale about capturing Klansmen during the February Klan attack on Miller and Yates. The Deacon leader also recalled an incident in which Claxton Knight had warned that "whites were massing nearby to break up the meeting" and there was nothing the police could do about it." Sims told Knight "since you brought a message you go back and carry one: Tell them to come on we're going to stack 'em up like cross ties."⁴⁷

Whether or not the exchange actually occurred--and it probably did not--is not particularly important. The Deacons had become a symbolic organization, and their objective, in addition to self-defense, was to project a new black identity based on masculine values, honor, and racial pride. Sims' occasional exaggerations did not distort the essential truth about the Deacons: they were defiant, fearless, capable of violence and impervious to white terror.

"I was a shooting instructor in the Army, and my nerves are pretty good," bragged Sims, "I can strike a match at 50 feet." And he was not to be intimidated:

They know this: they can't frighten me. They can put me in jail but they have to let me out one day. They can't curse and harass me and frighten me. I'm fighting harder now than ever before because I've got something to fight for that the

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

average white man doesn't. I've never been free before and I want a whole lot of freedom.⁴⁸

Near the end of the interview Sims waxed philosophical about his role as paladin in the movement:

Most of us will age before our time--if we make it. But most of us realized when we took this stand the danger we faced. You have to make up your mind that it's now or never. I learned a slogan in the Army and I've always remembered it; 'Alls fair in love and war.' When you don't want me to be free, that's war.⁴⁹

Jet had difficulty finding civil rights leaders in Los Angeles who would speak favorably of the Deacons. Don Smith, the president of the Los Angeles chapter of CORE told *Jet* "this may be a necessary part of the Negro revolution, but philosophically I am opposed to all forms of violence, no matter who preaches it." Reverend Thomas Kilgore chairman of the Western Christian Leadership Conference, was even more firmly opposed to the Louisiana group. "I disapprove of keeping civil rights workers alive with guns," fumed Kilgore. "The non-violent approach has brought pressure to bear on those elements which discriminate. The Bogalusa movement, under the Deacons--a misnomer--represents a danger to 20 million Negroes." Sims had little patience for his critics comfortably ensconced in California: "I wonder if those men think that I risk losing my life for kicks?" asked Sims contemptuously.⁵⁰

The *Jet* article was widely read in the black community and apparently caught the attention of other Southern blacks facing similar problems in their communities. On

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

more than one occasion Deacons chapters were formed by men who had read the *Jet*'s coverage. The magazine followed up with a story on John McKeithen's call for a "cooling off" period following the Crowe shooting and his threat to confiscate the Deacons' weapons. The article noted Louis Lomax's criticism of McKeithen's moratorium on marches, and predicted that, "Bogalusa Negroes are not going to permit their weapons to be confiscated," despite McKeithen's order. *Jet*'s photographs centered on images of the armed movement in Bogalusa, featuring a picture of a gun in Charlie Sims' car and photographs of Henry Austin being led away by state police after the Crowe shooting.⁵¹

The most influential coverage of the Deacons by the black media was also the last major news story on the armed group--and the only major profile of the group to come after the Watts riot. In September 1965, *Ebony* magazine, the leading black monthly magazine, published an extensive story by Hamilton Bims titled "Deacons for Defense: Negroes are fighting back in Bogalusa, other Towns." The headline was superimposed over a stark background photograph of a faceless black man holding vigil in a doorway, the barrel of his rifle raised upward. The extensive five-page story captured the excitement caused by the Deacons, identifying them as "one of the fastest growing" organizations in the civil rights struggle.⁵²

Ebony acknowledged that the Deacons' success was accompanied by controversy and criticism from Dr. King and other civil rights leaders. "For all their effectiveness,

⁵¹"'Let Whites Give Something' Lomax says in Bogalusa," *Jet*, 29 July 1965, pp. 6-7.

⁵²Hamilton Bims, "Deacons for Defense," *Ebony*, September 1965, pp. 25-30.

however," noted *Ebony*, "the Deacons have become perhaps the most criticized and feared Negro organization since the Black Muslims." The Deacons were not the black counterpart to the Klan, as some critics had suggested. "I'm glad the Deacons exist," said James Farmer when questioned about CORE's "strange relationship" with the Deacons. "I know some are comparing them to the Ku Klux Klan. But how many lynchings have they committed? The Deacons are not night riders and anyone who likens them to the Klan is just evading the issue."⁵³

Not only did Bogalusa's blacks believe that the Deacons deterred Klan violence, but with the Watts riot fresh in people's minds, the Deacons now appeared to be a moderate alternative to random violence. "By giving the job to mature and restrained men," *Ebony* argued, "they discourage Negro hotheads, who otherwise might trigger a racial bloodbath in the tense city." The magazine recounted a recent demonstration in which the foreboding Sims mounted the podium with a warning. "I want you to leave your pistols, your knives, your hammers at home," Sims growled. "Leave the protecting to us. That's our job."⁵⁴

Ebony recognized that the Deacons were not some marginal fringe group alienated from the mass movement, but instead an organization that reflected a profound change in the political consciousness of Southern blacks--the emergence of the New Negro. "The Negro in the South is a brand new breed," declared Sims. "He's not the same man he was ten years ago."⁵⁵

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

The *Ebony* and *New York Times Magazine* stories were the apex of national media coverage for the Deacons and crystallized the group's media image as militant reformers and a political alternative to nonviolence. The Deacons had made a remarkable transition in the media from civil rights group to a symbol of armed resistance. It was an image partly of their own design, and partly imposed by the media and pressures from the black mass movement. More than a defense group, the Deacons now posed a credible political challenge to nonviolence. Their credo was simple. They argued that blacks needed to rely on themselves rather than the government for freedom. They sought reform by coercing whites rather than accommodating them. They refused to win white sympathy through ritual self-abuse and passivity. Freedom would be won through fear and respect rather than guilt and pity. In short, they demanded that black men win their freedom by acting like free men.

The national media focus on the Deacons was short lived. By the end of the summer of 1965 the media had lost interest in the Deacons. There were several reasons for this turn of events. Foremost was the Watts riot in August 1965--which changed everything in American racial politics. Now the focus was on Northern blacks and longstanding class grievances that had been subordinated by the nonviolent strategy's emphasis on civil rights. The new issues were police brutality and inequality in employment, housing, and education. Leading the attack on these injustices was the new Black Power movement epitomized by the Black Panther Party. And although the Deacons had helped inspire the Panthers, they were never fully a part of the Black Power movement. The deeply religious rank and file Deacons were not black separatists, Marxists, or revolutionaries. They only desired the same fruits of life enjoyed by whites.

The media also lost interest in the Deacons because there was nothing more to the story. By forcing the federal government to enforce the Civil Rights Act and destroy the Klan in Louisiana, the Deacons had eliminated the *raison d'être* for their existence. Moreover, the Deacons had fulfilled their goal of redefining black consciousness when young blacks began to absorb the Deacons' masculine and martial values.

By the end of 1965 the Deacons had rendered themselves obsolete through their success. Still, they continued to expand.

Chapter 11

Expanding Through the South

Informal self-defense groups had existed in the black community prior to the Deacons' formation, but two factors distinguished the Deacons from their predecessors. First, the Deacons elevated self-defense from a pragmatic activity to a political strategic challenge to nonviolence. They moved from merely protecting the movement to redefining the movement by preaching the gospel of self-defense to black communities throughout the South. Second--and most important--was that the Deacons were organizational expansionists. Unlike their predecessors who were content with local organizing, the Deacons consciously sought to reproduce their organizational model across the country.¹

¹Robert F. Williams, of Monroe, North Carolina, was the first person in the modern civil rights movement to make self-defense a political issue. But Williams lacked an organizational vehicle for this strategy, and, for many civil rights activists, the debacle in Monroe became a persuasive argument against self-defense. On Williams' view of the incident, see Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns*, ed. Marc Schleifer (New York: Marzani and Munsell, Inc., 1962). Similarly, Malcom X's call for Negro rifle clubs in 1964 offered no organizational framework. Other self-defense groups in the South included one formed in August 1963 in Clinton, Louisiana where they guarded CORE rallies. See "Intimidations and Harassments Against Negroes and CORE Workers, Summer, 1963 to Summer, 1964," [August, 1964], box 4, folder 13, CORE(SRO). In Meridian, Mississippi, Reverend R. S. Porter organized a self-defense organization in 1964, which included one white member, Bill Ready. See, Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 108-109.

From 1964 to 1966, the Deacons developed local affiliates in twenty-one cities, seventeen in the South and another four in the North. Affiliates ranged from formal chapters to loosely associated networks of members. Some affiliates lasted only a few months; others endured for several years. But it is clear that the Deacons' organizational breadth and political influence far exceeded previous estimates by historians.²

At the height of his organizing, Sims professed to have formed more than sixty chapters with several thousand members. The claim of sixty chapters is an exaggeration, if by "chapter" Sims meant fully operational and dues-paying affiliates, and the total dues-paying membership nationally never exceeded five hundred. Still, there was something to Sims' use of the number "sixty." FBI records, news reports, and interviews with Deacons yield a total of sixty-four cities in which the Deacons were reported or rumored to have established local affiliates. Always quick to inflate the organization's size and importance, Sims probably stretched the definition of a chapter to include cities with even a single Deacon recruit. If that were the case, he could have easily calculated sixty nominal chapters.³

²One author concluded that the Deacons were a "gigantic hoax," numbering less than twenty-four members in only three chapters; see Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp.345,359. In fact, in Louisiana alone there were formal chapters in Jonesboro, Minden, Homer, Tallulah, Ferriday, Grambling, Bogalusa, St. Francisville, and New Orleans. Mississippi counted active chapters in Natchez, Port Gibson, Woodville, and Columbia. Additionally there were four active chapters in the North: Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, and Newark. The chapters are discussed below.

³A complete reading of the FBI-Deacons files indicates suspected organizing activity in fifty-one cities and counties.

Several factors make it difficult to precisely assess the size of the Deacons' organization, the most significant being that the national leadership did not keep records. In addition, many chapters were clandestine organizations and, to this day, many of their members refuse to discuss the organization. Even the FBI, with its extensive network of informants, frequently failed to uncover chapters until they had been operating for some time.

Notwithstanding their inflated claims, the Deacons were aggressive organizers and did manage to develop an impressive network of self-defense groups in Louisiana and Mississippi. They launched their campaign to expand in the summer of 1965, first targeting Louisiana cities where CORE had been active. The Pelican state became the site of nine formal chapters: Jonesboro, Bogalusa, New Orleans, St. Francisville, Minden, Homer, Tallulah, Ferriday and Grambling (a rumored Varnado chapter was primarily an auxiliary to the Bogalusa chapter).

The Jonesboro chapter took the lead in recruitment in the Northern part of the State. In the fall of 1965 Frederick Kirkpatrick, one of the founders of the Jonesboro Deacons, took a position at Grambling University's physical education department and immediately established a Deacons chapter. There was no significant civil rights movement in the city of Grambling, since the all-black town primarily served as the home for the 350 Grambling University faculty and staff. The Grambling Deacons focused their activity in nearby Ruston, where Civil Rights laws were still flaunted and federal courts were forcibly integrating Louisiana Technical College. Little is known about the Grambling chapter other than that it provided defense for civil rights projects in Ruston and neighboring cities.

Kirkpatrick also took the lead in organizing Grambling students and faculty into a community organization titled the "Great Society Movement." The militant group issued demands including integration of schools and public accommodations, improved curriculum in black schools, and street and plumbing improvements in black neighborhoods. The organization filed desegregation suits on public accommodations in Ruston, protested at the Lincoln Parish School Board, picketed seventeen business establishments which refused to hire blacks, and organized voter registration drives.⁴

Kirkpatrick also organized two Deacons chapters in nearby Minden and Homer in Claiborne Parish. Kirkpatrick had been raised in the Parish and knew the region well. Minden and Homer were only a short distance from Grambling and Jonesboro. Ultimately these four chapters in the North Central part of the state would operate as a regional security network, assisting each other in protecting civil rights activities in the region.

Minden was located in Webster Parish and had garnered national attention in 1947 when a white mob lynched a local black man. An NAACP investigation eventually culminated in a rare federal prosecution. Although the accused murderers were eventually acquitted by an all-white jury, the unprecedented Justice Department intervention, over the vociferous protests of J. Edgar Hoover, had an impact on vigilante terror. The Minden murder was the last lynching in Louisiana.⁵

⁴Investigative Report, November 22, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-176; *Jet*, 19 May, 1966, p. 7

⁵Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, pp. 113-119.

CORE workers arrived in Webster Parish in 1964, full of optimism about developing a project, but soon found their organizing efforts frustrated by the principal black organization, the Better Citizens and Voters League. The Voters League was led by funeral director M. M. Coleman, a conservative middle class leader who was opposed to CORE's emphasis on desegregation, antipoverty projects and job discrimination. Coleman favored voter registration and came to regard CORE as needless intruders. "There is an extreme caste system in Webster Parish," complained one CORE staffer in a memo. "The middle class Negro wants nothing to do with the lower classes." CORE was not alone in its assessment of Coleman. "He wasn't moving," said James Harper, a local activist and Deacons leader. "He didn't want to test the lunch counters. He didn't want to try to integrate nothing. He just wanted somebody to sit and talk about it." Despite widespread dissatisfaction with Coleman's accommodationism, CORE staffers committed a tactical blunder by attempting to prematurely oust him from leadership. The result was 400 black people walking out of a CORE meeting. Eventually CORE and local militants split off into the Webster Parish United Christian Freedom Movement (WPUCFM), headed up by J. D. Hamilton.⁶

In the summer of 1965 CORE workers contacted Earnest Thomas in Jonesboro and indicated that a group of men in Minden was interested in forming a Deacons chapter. The Minden men had learned about the Deacons from Fred Lewis, the leader of the Homer Deacons. Things were heating up in Minden with J. D. Hamilton at the helm

⁶"WATS Line Report," 30 June 1965, box 7, folder 7, CORE(SRO); James Harper, interview by author, 11 November, 1993, Minden, Louisiana, tape recording; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, p. 352.

of the insurgent WPUCFM. The planned marches and threatened boycott of downtown businesses critically increased the need for protection.⁷

J. D. Hamilton and James Harper, a 27-year-old munitions plant worker, traveled to Jonesboro to meet with Earnest Thomas and establish a Minden Chapter. Harper was the son of a lumber mill worker and had served in the National Guard. His commitment to the civil rights movement was rooted in the desire for dignity for his children. He recalls when he was a child white children would pass by in school busses and throw things and shriek racial epithets. "And I felt like things needed to change," said Harper. "For especially if I had kids, I didn't want then to go through this kind of flack."⁸

The Klan had little presence in Minden. Still Harper and other activists were concerned by the lack of police protection. The Minden police department boasted two black officers, but they were seldom sent to investigate harassment of civil rights activists. "When we called them when we was being harassed, they always sent a white anyway," said Harper. Nonviolence was not an option either. Harper participated in some CORE demonstrations, but his notion of manhood prevented him from abiding CORE's proscription against fighting back. "Most of the time, I didn't put myself in a position where it might come to that," says Harper of nonviolent demonstrations. "Because I was going to strike back, and they would blame CORE on it."⁹

Harper was impressed with Earnest Thomas at their first meeting. Thomas told Harper that the lack of police protection in Minden was no anomaly; that in most cities in

⁷"WATS Line Report," 30 June 1965; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, p. 352.

⁸Harper, Hill interview.

⁹Tbid.

the South “you wasn’t going to receive much protection from the police, so we had to protect ourselves.” After the meeting, Thomas sent Harper membership cards and literature on the Deacons and Harper officially established a chapter and Fred Kirkpatrick became the principal liaison from Jonesboro. Thomas instructed Harper that the Deacons were strictly for self-defense and that he should “notify the sheriff’s department, police department, and FBI” in the event of a problem.¹⁰

The Minden chapter began weekly meetings at CORE’s Freedom House and other homes, coordinating closely with J. D. Hamilton’s group. There was no need for patrols in the black community, but the Deacons did guard homes and escort marches. In contrast to Jonesboro and Bogalusa, the Minden chapter enjoyed a cooperative relationship with local police. The Deacons even assisted local police by furnishing them the names and auto license numbers of individuals who harassed civil rights workers. There was only one shooting incident and the Deacons subsequently guarded the activist’s home and pressured the police into arresting the three white assailants. Harper believes that the low level of vigilante terror and police violence can be attributed to Minden’s relatively enlightened white business leaders who reigned in the violent racist element.¹¹

The Minden chapter attracted approximately fifteen members and a much larger group of eager and willing supporters. The chapter comprised young men in their twenties and thirties, most of them military veterans and, because of employment at the nearby

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Investigative report, “Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc.” March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120; Harper, Hill interview.

munitions plant, economically independent of the local white elite. Among the applicants were a number of zealous young men attracted to the romantic image and prestige that the Deacons offered. "They just wanted to have a pistol on," recalls Harper with a smile. "They just wanted to shoot somebody. Yeah, we had them old radicals." Harper screened out the young hotheads in preference to military veterans who could "take an order" and "wouldn't just fire at random."¹²

Although the Minden chapter did not flaunt their weapons as did other chapters, they were armed just the same. On one occasion Harper was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon while guarding J. D. Hamilton. The FBI also visited Harper at his job in an attempt to intimidate him, peppering him with questions about illegal weapons and rumors of planned violent actions. Rather than feel intimidated, Harper found the FBI's attention encouraging. "It made me feel a little better, because it let me know that the word [about the Deacons] was getting around, that somebody else might be getting a little afraid--on the other side of town," says Harper. "They figured that we might be a little more powerful than we were."¹³

Indeed, like other chapters, the Minden Deacons played on white fears and assumed an influence beyond their numbers. In the eyes of whites, the Deacons were synonymous with militant protest in Minden, and whites frequently attributed to the Deacons actions for which they had no responsibility. If there was any sit-in or a protest,

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

Harper recalls with amusement, "you could hear the white guys say: They ain't nothing but the Deacons."¹⁴

Sometimes the mere presence of the Deacons discouraged racist harassment. In one incident Harper received a report that whites were harassing blacks at a recently integrated public pool. Harper summoned the Deacons, and, to his astonishment, the word spread quickly and nearly two-hundred men arrived on the scene. The men exited their cars and began nonchalantly talking with the white adults around the swimming pool. The show of force brought a quick end to the harassment. To be safe, the Deacons sent for sandwiches and drinks and spent the rest of the day leaning against their cars, watching the children peacefully frolic in the pool.¹⁵

The spontaneous turnout of men during the pool incident demonstrated how the martial spirit of the Deacons was rapidly absorbed into the community as a whole. The Deacons had rendered themselves obsolete. By 1967 integration was proceeding smoothly. "The city had gotten better, and the civil rights movement seemed to have moved on," says Harper. "And we started getting pretty good response from the police." By the Fall of 1967 the Minden chapter faded away.¹⁶

Just north of Minden was the site of another Deacons chapter. Homer, Louisiana is nestled in the pine hills of North Louisiana, approximately an hour's drive from Jonesboro. Named after the Greek poet Homer, the city takes pride in its imposing Greek

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.; Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

revival courthouse in the center of the town square. A chapter of the NAACP had existed in the 1940s and reorganized as the Claiborne Parish Civic League (CPCL) during the repression of the 1950s. The CPCL was a weak and timorous organization until January 1965 when a small group of men led by Frederick Douglas Lewis infused the organization with a new militancy. Lewis was elected president of the CPLC and would also become the president of the Homer Deacons chapter.

Lewis was a pugnacious and short-tempered man from Holsey Stop, Louisiana, a small settlement outside of Homer. For most of his adult life, Lewis was disabled and lived on disability benefits, providing him with a measure of independence. He attributed his commitment to the civil rights struggle to an incident from his childhood. He recalls that at the age of twelve, he once overheard a white man tell his father that he would not be permitted to vote. The young Fred Lewis adored his father and thought there was nothing he couldn't do—including vote. The injustice was etched in his mind forever. "And at that age, it never did leave me," recalls Lewis. "And I vowed right then, at the age of twelve, that if I ever got a chance, I was going to hit this thing a blow."¹⁷

The black community in Claiborne Parish resembled the independent industrial working class communities of Jonesboro and Bogalusa. The lumber industry and a nearby munitions plant provided employment for many of the rugged descendants of wood cutters and yeoman farmers. Yet segregation remained entrenched in the spring of 1965. Fear overwhelmed the community as racist forces torched four Black churches and two other buildings where voter registration had been conducted. In May 1965 Fred

¹⁷Frederick Douglas Lewis, Interview by Miriam Feingold, ca. July 1966, tape recording, Miriam Feingold Papers, SHSW.

Kirkpatrick began to organize in Homer, bringing in CORE task force members and a bus load of singing students from Jonesboro. At the same time Pam Smith, a young white student from Massachusetts, arrived to head up a CORE summer project in Homer.¹⁸

By the end of May, Kirkpatrick had organized a Homer chapter of the Deacons, with Fred Lewis serving as President. Since Lewis also served as president of the Civic League, the Deacons and the league were virtually indistinguishable. The Deacons chapter had approximately twenty members and functioned as the armed auxiliary of the Civic League, with their meetings often taking place along with the League's. Although Fred Lewis was technically the leader of the Homer Deacons chapter, George Dodd, a munitions worker, served as the principal coordinator for the chapter. Other officers included Otis Chatman, Joe Lester Green, and Fred Lewis's brother, George Lewis.¹⁹

The summer of 1965 brought intensified activity by CORE in Homer. Pam Smith worked with local activists to organize mass meetings, desegregation tests, and nonviolent workshops. During the summer the CPCL presented a list of demands to the Mayor, School Board, and Parish Jury, calling for desegregation, administrative jobs and black police. The CPLC also targeted the black middle class, organizing a student march and community protest that forced school officials to dismiss an unpopular black

¹⁸Pam Smith and Dan Paik, "Follow-up Scouting Report , May 25, 1965," box 4, folder 12, CORE(SRO); "Field Report, April 25 to April 30, 1965," box 4, folder 6, CORE(SRO).

¹⁹SAC, New Orleans to Director, June 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-18 and Investigative Report, New Orleans, August 17, 1965, FBI-Deacon file, no. 157-2466-41.

principal at Mayfield High School. In addition, Lewis's CPLC had plans to oust five other black principals.²⁰

Initially local law enforcement officials were hostile toward the Homer Deacons, as was demonstrated by an incident involving one Deacon member, Harvey Malray. Malray was one of the first recruits to the Deacons chapter. Courageous but slightly eccentric, Malray prided himself on being a member of an organization comprising, in his words, "classy people." On June 26 Malray had been guarding a fish-fry fundraiser at the Masonic Hall. He left around midnight to go back to the Freedom House to receive his new assignment. As he strolled down the dark road with his shotgun cradled in his arm, a Homer policeman saw him and screeched his car to a halt. "Don't you know it's against the law to be walking up and down a road with a loaded shotgun?" asked the officer. Malray pulled out his wallet and proudly presented the officer with his Deacons' membership card--executing the gesture as if the card conferred obvious and indisputable rights. The flustered officer had to think for a moment, then, with a note of bewilderment, he retorted, "Still, I don't see anything on here about walking up and down a road with a loaded shotgun!"²¹

New rights gave birth to new men. Malray personified the way that the movement changed the black self-image and sense of entitlement. Once the Deacons believed that

²⁰Pam Smith, "Claiborne Parish (Homer) July 12, 1965," box 4, folder 6, CORE(SRO); Pam Smith, "Homer Report," 15 July 1965, box 4, folder 6, CORE(SRO); Lewis, Feingold interview.

²¹"Statement of Harvey Malray," n.d., box 4, folder 6, CORE(SRO); Harvey Malray, interview by author, 14 November 1993, Homer, Louisiana, tape recording.

they had legal authority to exercise their rights, it was difficult for law enforcement to convince them otherwise.

Malray managed to avoid arrest that night but three days later, police arrested him as he stood guard with his shotgun on the porch of the freedom house. While in jail Malray refused to cooperate with the FBI and was eventually bailed out after a few days. Malray persisted in his Deacons' activities, guarding marches in Homer and in Jonesboro where local police brutalized him. Years later when asked why he joined the Deacons, Malray's explanation was simple. "I just wanted something to do for the colored man," said Malray.²²

Change came slowly in Homer, but eventually public accommodations opened their doors, the library was desegregated, and the school system began implementing curriculum reforms. City officials also hired two black officers in August of 1967. Despite the shaky beginning, relations between the Deacons and Homer police improved. On August 20, 1967, the CPCL organized a march to the local school board and, amazingly, local officials asked the Deacons to provide five members to help police the march. Lewis did not mince words with the local officials when he described what they could expect from the Deacons. "You know that it's nonviolent," Lewis told the city officials, "but we can get violent."²³

²²"WATS Line Report, June 29, 1965," box 1, folder 9, Monroe Project Files, CORE Papers, SHSW, Madison [hereinafter cited as CORE(Monroe)]; Harvey Malray, interview by author, 11 November 1993, Homer, Louisiana, tape recording.

²³Lewis, Feingold interview.

More meaningful was the change in black men in Homer. After only seven months of organizing, the Homer Deacons felt confident enough to stage a remarkable nighttime rally in Homer. On New Years Eve, 1965, approximately fifty Deacons from surrounding chapters in Jonesboro, Minden, and Grambling assembled along with local men for a night of celebration in an empty lot owned by Reverend T. L. Green, also a Deacon member. As midnight drew near, the Deacons hoisted an effigy of a Klansman, marked with a crudely penned sign saying simply, "Whitey." The men lit the Klan effigy and roared with hoots and laughter as it burned to ashes. The Klan was vanquished into the night.²⁴

The Homer chapter operated throughout 1965 and appears to have faded out after black officers were added to the city police force. A third Deacons chapter was established in North Louisiana in Tallulah, a tiny cotton town in the Northeast corner of the state. In May 1965, Gary Craven, a young CORE task force member, reported the "beginnings of a Deacons of Defense and Justice Chapter in Tallulah." But the chapter had little to do. Tallulah was a black-majority community with several black policemen who provided adequate protection. And Tallulah's black community had a formidable and fearless leader, Zelma Wyche, who was eventually elected Chief of Police. One CORE volunteer found the level of armed defense startling. "The day before I arrived to Tallulah, the Ku Klux Klan marched in the city," wrote John L. Gee. "The Klan was told

²⁴Harper, Hill interview.

by the sheriff of Tallulah, that the Negroes were armed and they wouldn't be unarmed. The people of the town also marched with their guns."²⁵

The short-lived Tallulah chapter did manage to organize a more active Deacons chapter south of Tallulah in Ferriday, Louisiana. Ferriday was the the birthplace of singer Jerry Lee Lewis and his cousin, controversial television evangelist Jimmy Swaggart. The town's fame for pop icons was only exceeded by its notoriety for human rights violations. Racist repression was so severe that no church or fraternal organization would host civil rights activities. Young civil rights activists were reduced to driving through the black community with a bullhorn to announce makeshift rallies held in empty lots.²⁶

Ferriday sits across the Mississippi river from Natchez, Mississippi. Although the city had a 63 percent black majority, a white minority ruled the city with a Sheriff's office that one activist characterized as "Klan ridden." The black community had been besieged by Klan and police violence. On December 14, 1965, Frank Morris, a Ferriday civil rights leader, was burned to death at his home in an unsolved arson. One month later a local black grocery was fire bombed. In February 1965, racists firebombed two white nightclubs, the "Farm House" and the "Silver Dollar Club," in retaliation for hiring black bands.²⁷

²⁵Oretha Castle and Gary Craven to unidentified, 26 May 1965, box 5, folder 6, CORE(SRO). FBI sources also confirmed that a chapter had been established in Tallulah. See "Investigative Report," March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons File no. 157-2466-120; John L. Gee to David Dennis, [ca. December 1965], Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 1, Ferriday Freedom Movement Files, CORE Papers, SHSW [hereinafter cited as CORE(FFM)].

²⁶Whatley, Hill interview.

²⁷*Louisiana Weekly*, 2 January 1965; Meldon Acheson to unidentified, 10 August 1965, Ferriday, Louisiana, Meldon Acheson Papers, SHSW, Madison; "Chronology of

“Nearly everyone seemed to be paralyzed by fear of the Ku Klux Klan,” wrote Meldon Acheson, a young CORE worker from Tucson. Fear was so rampant that CORE workers could not find lodging in Ferriday’s black community, forcing them to commute from Alexandria to establish a summer project in July 1965. David Whatley, a local 18-year-old activist, saw economic intimidation as another major source of fear in Ferriday. “The older people were afraid, because they had jobs that placed them in white peoples houses as domestic workers, they were afraid to lose their jobs,” said Whatley. “If they found out that their children were involved, they gave them an ultimatum: ‘you get them out or you forget the job’.”²⁸

CORE’s reception in the black community got off to a bizarre start when two black men brutally beat the first white CORE staffer who visited Ferriday. Local civil rights leaders suspected that the two men were acting at the behest of local authorities. Finally, on July 13, a Ferriday black man offered CORE one of his rental properties. Three days later the Klan firebombed his home, and the man asked the CORE workers to move. The Klan then issued an ultimatum that the CORE task force had to leave by Saturday, July 17.²⁹

Instead of retreating, CORE forged ahead and organized their first meeting on the same day as the Klan’s deadline, July 17. CORE met with a group of thirty interested high school youth who also expressed interest in forming a Deacons chapter. But by July

Events in Concordia Parish,” 30 January 1966, box 4, folder 7, CORE (SRO).

²⁸Meldon Acheson to Gary Greenberg, 17 July 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers; Whatley, Hill interview.

²⁹“WATS line report,” 3 July 1965, box 1, folder 3, CORE(SRO).

20 work came to a standstill because locals were afraid to attend a meeting. While Mel Acheson and two other CORE workers waited to return to Alexandria, a white man viciously attacked and beat Acheson, blackening his eyes. Local blacks drove away the attacker and word of the attack spread quickly. Within thirty minutes an angry crowd of more than 250 blacks gathered. The CORE workers seized the opportunity and Archie Hunter, a Brooklyn native, mounted a car and began leading freedom songs. The police soon arrived and arrested Hunter for inciting a riot. But the silence had been broken. "Suddenly several people offered to let us stay with them," said Acheson. The issue now became one of honor. "The negro community feels guilty about letting 2 beatings occur in their neighborhood," reported Acheson, "so I walk around with my black eye and people can't get involved fast enough." In addition, a self-defense group was born overnight in Ferriday when "several local guys got their guns and guarded us that night and plan to continue as long as we're here."³⁰ Later that night electric and phone services were cut in the black community, and the Klan firebombed two homes and shot into the home of CORE sympathizer Martha Boyd. Boyd was prepared and fired back at the nightriders, smashing their windshield.³⁰

The incident sparked a rally of more than three-hundred on July 21. Building on the momentum, CORE organized a mass meeting on July 24 which attracted 250 participants, but, to CORE's dismay, almost all were children and teenagers. On the

³⁰"Louisiana CORE Newsletter." [ca. Summer, 1965], Feingold Collection; Meldon Acheson to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Acheson, 22 July 1965, reprinted in "Richland Boy Beaten in Louisiana CORE Mission-Letter to Parents Outlines," a leaflet distributed by the Richland and Ollie Methodist Churches, Richland, Iowa, n.d., Meldon Acheson Papers; and "Report 7-21-65 by Jim Peters on Ferriday," 22 July 1965, box 4, folder 7, CORE (SRO).

same day CORE met with twenty-four teenagers and formed their mass organizing vehicle, the Freedom Ferriday Movement (FFM). A group of high school students immediately began circulating a petition door to door, and obtained nearly eight-hundred signatures calling for federal protection of "their rights, property, and persons." The petition was sent to Attorney General Katzenbach, along with the threat that citizens would "take measures to protect themselves if the federal government did not intervene."³¹

At the mass meeting on July 24, a small group of young people decided to form a Deacons' chapter. They were assisted by several CORE staffers who had worked with the Deacons in Tallulah, including Artis Ray Dawson. The chapter initially attracted only a few members who patrolled during rallies and protected activists' homes at night.³²

The conditions were so perilous in Ferriday that CORE staffers welcomed the presence of the Deacons. "You should realize, I think, that most people in CORE are committed to nonviolence only as a tactic," Meldon Acheson wrote. "For many, it stops at the end of a demonstration or when the day's work is thru. Most take self-defense at night for granted (protecting the home, and all that)." The armed guards had made the

³¹Meldon Acheson to Mr. Garry Greenberg, Ferriday, Louisiana, 27 July 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers; Meldon Acheson to Mr. Garry Greenberg, Ferriday, Louisiana, 17 August 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers. The youthful FFM found itself competing with an older moderate organization: Father August Thompson, a black priest, headed up the Civic League which was attempting to bring about biracial talks. See Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, p. 401; and Pat Scharber, "Negro Pastor Says People Have Love, But Frustrated, [*St. Paul, Minnesota*] *Catholic Bulletin*, September 1965, found in box 1, folder 6, CORE(FFM).

³²Archie Hunter, "Report," 24 July 241965, Ferriday, box 4, folder 7, CORE (SRO); David Whatley, Hill interview.

night riders edgy as well. Acheson reported that the Klan did not linger in the black neighborhoods. Their tactic was to speed by a house and toss "a badly-made molotov cocktail (usually a gallon jug of gasoline, burning rag on top)" out of the car, and then making a hasty retreat into the night.³³

CORE enjoyed modest success through the rest of the summer, organizing additional marches (though still dominated by children), a voter registration drive, a boycott of the local movie theater, and several desegregation tests. Their successes were remarkable given the age and inexperience of their front line. At a test of Walgreens' lunch counter, one nervous young participant gulped down his coke and, looking around at his fellow testers, nervously exclaimed, "What's taking you so long. Let's go!"³⁴

Meldon Acheson made a sober and honest assessment of CORE's summer project which came to an end on August 23. CORE had emphasized voter registration as a "safe" project that would provide experience for the youth and enable them to move onward to desegregation projects, said Acheson. But the youth had little interest in voter registration, admitted Acheson, and only action could break the grip of fear. "The negroes are still very much afraid of the Klan and similar groups, as well as the police," Acheson said. "But the fear is beginning to channel itself into action instead of the paralysis we found when we came to Ferriday . . . the determination of the youth, and

³³Meldon Acheson to unidentified, Ferriday, Louisiana, 30 July 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers.

³⁴Meldon Acheson to Mr. Garry Greenberg, Ferriday, Louisiana, August 17, 1965, Meldon Acheson Papers.

their example of overcoming fear, has begun to catch hold of their parents and neighbors."³⁵

But there was still ample reason for fear. The Klan renewed their attacks as soon as CORE departed Ferriday. In September, Klansman from Mississippi attacked one dozen blacks picketing the Arcadia Theater and nightriders firebombed two more homes. The Ferriday Deacons' chapter was not much help. Victor Graham had assumed leadership of the chapter, but the group was on shaky ground. Graham was unable to organize regular meetings and had difficulty recruiting a sufficient number of adult men.³⁶

In the fall of 1965, Robert "Buck" Lewis, became President of the FFM and immediately began to reinvigorate the organization. Lewis was one of the few adults in the FFM and was also a college student at Grambling University. On November 20, the Klan fire bombed Lewis's house, and when Lewis, with a gun at his side, summoned the police, he was arrested for aggravated assault in a subsequent argument with police. Lewis was unfazed by the bombing and arrest, and the following Sunday the FFM leader led 150 marchers in a protest against the black Rufus Baptist Church for refusing to allow the FFM to hold meetings at the church. The unwillingness of the local black clergy to aid the movement was a constant problem for Ferriday activists.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶*Louisiana Weekly*, 13 November 1965; "Chronology, January 1966"; The first efforts to organize a chapter in Ferriday are noted in "Non-Prosecutive Summary Report," New Orleans, October 14, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-73.

"So far the Ministers have been making excuses." David Whatley reported to the CORE regional office, "and in general just 'plain scare[d]'.³⁷

The Original Ku Klux Klan (OKKK) responded to the FFM campaign by calling on whites to refuse to negotiate with the civil rights protestors. The OKKK distributed a leaflet that chastised government and business leaders in nearby Natchez for negotiating with blacks. Surprisingly, the Klan broadsheet argued that violence was "not the answer" since it would "only produce more violence." Instead, the OKKK advocated forming an "economic leadership council" and urged Ferriday businesses, who were benefitting from business created by the Natchez boycott, to fire their black employees. Blacks needed the white man to survive, said the OKKK, but "no longer does the White man in Concordia Parish need the Negro." In the world of mechanization, "our cotton crops, our bean corps [sic] and other stable [sic] production can be produced without the Negro hand once touching it."

The gain you are making today is going to be the hand that makes you slave of the very Negro from which You are gaining. The all powerful civic and business groups can stop this if they wish to. They can begin by starting to eliminate the Negro employees now.³⁸

Police also joined in on the assault on the struggling Ferriday campaign. On November 30, two Deacons, Vernon Smith and Joe Davis were patrolling around 10:00 p.m. when city police stopped and arrested them for carrying a shotgun in the back seat

³⁷"Freedom Ferriday Movement Release," 23 November 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 4 December 1965; David Whatley to Rev. Willie Johnson, 29 December 1965, Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 1, CORE(FFM).

³⁸Original Ku Klux Klan, Realm of Louisiana, Concordia Parish, "The Fiery Cross," November 1965, box 1, folder 15, CORE(FFM).

and a pistol in the glove compartment. Artis Dawson, a Deacon leader, and David Whatley went to the jail to inquire about the arrested Deacons and were themselves later arrested by the police.³⁹

Three days later, on December 2, racists fired into three buildings in the black community, including Calhoun's Grocery and David Whatley's house. On the evening of December 18, a gas station owned by Anthony McRaney, a member of the Deacons, mysteriously burned down following an explosion. The damage to the station was compounded by the fact that McRaney's insurance company had recently canceled his insurance. Similar cancellation had occurred with two black churches that had been active in voter registration in Ferriday.⁴⁰

But the attacks on the Deacons backfired, breathing life into the Deacons chapter. By December the chapter had twenty-three members and was meeting weekly. They conducted all-night patrols equipped with walkie-talkies, personal weapons, and three semiautomatic carbines. A large part of their responsibility was to guard the young activist David Whatley. It was rumored that the Klan had offered a \$1,000 reward for the assassination of David Whatley. Whatley had been a special target for the Klan since the Fall of 1965, when he singlehandedly integrated the local white high school. Whatley endured intense harassment at the school. Teachers left the classroom when he entered;

³⁹"Statement by Vernon Smith," box 1, folder 14, 30 November 1965, CORE(FFM).

⁴⁰"Statement by David Whatley," 3 December, 1965, CORE(FFM), GMHP; *Louisiana Weekly*, 4 December 1965. *Louisiana Weekly*, 25 December 1995; "Negro Gas Station Burned after Insurance Canceled: Violence Continues in Ferriday, LA.," News Release, Ferriday, Louisiana, 19 December 1965, CORE(FFM).

students screamed racial epithets at him inside the school; snakes were placed in his locker and his clothes were stuffed into the toilet during physical education class. When he played football during physical education class, his own teammates would tackle him. Coming to and from the school, Whatley had to walk through a gauntlet of Klansmen who routinely waited outside the school to harass him. In response, the Deacons posted guards at his home which also doubled as the CORE headquarters. Whatley wrote the New Orleans CORE office that he clung to life "only by the grace of God and the tiresome and lonely Gardshifts [sic] that we are undergoing every night from six o'clock until six thirty A.M."⁴¹

In the early hours of January 29, 1966, Joseph Davis and Charley Whatley, two Deacon members, were standing guard at David Whatley's house in the cold black night. The guard shifts lasted for twelve long hours, and by 3:00 a.m. the Deacons were chilled to the bone and decided to go inside the house to warm themselves. Within a few minutes, two cars quietly pulled in front of Whatley's home. A white man exited one of the cars, lit the fuse of a dynamite bomb, and tossed it at the house. Joseph Davis heard the suspicious sounds outside and rushed to the door, catching a glimpse of the fleeing bomber. He fired off a round from a .22 caliber pistol and then grabbed a shotgun and fired a second round at the fleeing cars. Seconds later the

⁴¹Investigative Report, New Orleans, December 30, 1965, FBI-Deacons file 157-2466-102. A "guard shift" book is one of the few remaining written records of the self-defense group in Ferriday. See, "Guard Note Booklet," ca. December 1965, Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 16, CORE(FFM); Whatley, Hill interview; David L. Whatley, "Autobiography of David Lee Whatley, n.d., n.p. author's possession; David L. Whatley, "Field Report of Concordia Parish, LA.," Ferriday, Louisiana, 29 January 1966, CORE(FFM), GMHP.

dynamite bomb exploded underneath the bedroom window where David Whatley and another CORE worker were sleeping. The two young men miraculously survived the bombing unscathed; the first stick of dynamite had ignited prematurely and had blown the fuse off the second stick, reducing the impact of the bomb.⁴²

By February 1966, the Ferriday Deacons' chapter slipped into inactivity, primarily because of reduced interest and scarce funds for gas for patrolling. But the Klan was not through. On March 16, 1966, the Klan held an open rally and in May several crosses were burned, including one near Deacon member Anthony McRaney's gas station and another at the high school that David Whatley had integrated.⁴³

With the Deacons in disarray, the FFM desperately needed a new defense group. A new group of CORE workers had arrived in Ferriday 1966, among them was an African student Ahmed Saud Ibriahim Kahafei Abboud Najah--known to local activists as simply Najah. Najah helped organize a new paramilitary defense group appropriately called the "Snipers." He selected approximately nine young men and provided them training in martial arts. John Hamilton, one of the CORE staffers assigned to Ferriday, encouraged the Snipers and hoped that the young group might motivate the older Deacons to reactivate. Although never well organized, the Snipers managed to equip themselves with walkie talkies and began to provide security for local activists. Seven of the Snipers guarded David Whatley when he and his date integrated the high school prom. In the

⁴²Whatley, "Autobiography"; David L. Whatley, "Field Report of Concordia Parish, LA."

⁴³Investigative report, "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc.," March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120.

event of an emergency, Whatley's date concealed a walkie talkie in her purse so that she could signal the Snipers who were patrolling outside the high school. The prom proceeded without incident, primarily because of a strong presence of law enforcement officials, but the teenage Snipers were poised to act if called upon.⁴⁴

Young people remained the backbone of the militant movement in Ferriday, and by the spring 1966, with the Snipers in full bloom, there were additional signs that fear was on the retreat. In response to a Klan leaflet, an anonymous black poet penned a poem that was printed and distributed in white neighborhoods:

As I began to read it my anger grew and bigger,

Because the first line read, "Dear Nigger."

They've scared the people and have them upset.

But I'll get one of those peckerwoods yet.

They still think I'm scared of ghosts.

⁴⁴Little is know about Najah or his place of origin. There is a small collection of his donated by Miriam Feingold at the SHSW. See, El Ahmed Saud Ibriahim Kahafei Abboud Najah Papers, SHSW, Madison, Wisconsin; On the Snipers, see: John Hamilton to Richard Haily [sic], 22 March 1966, Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 5, CORE(FFM); John Hamilton to Mr. Haley, Ferriday, Louisiana, May 1966, CORE(FFM); Unknown to Haily [sic], ca. April 1966, Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 5, CORE(FFM); John Hamilton to Haily [sic], 16 April 1966, Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 5, CORE(FFM); and John Hamilton to Haily [sic], ca. May 1966, Ferriday, Louisiana, box 1, folder 5, CORE(FFM). Najah's paramilitary training efforts were not well received at CORE national New York office. "You indicated that Najah was teaching you Judo, well all that's good, however, we sent Najah a check for \$50.00 for carfare to New York," wrote Fran Crayton from the national office. "...and to this date we have not seen nor heard from him...Please indicate to Najah our total disgust in the way he handled himself in this situation." Fran Crayton to John Hamilton, 23 April 1966, New York, box 1, folder 1, CORE(FFM).

But I'll send them to hell with the DEVIL as their host.

When things are good and going alright

PECKERWOOD stay from around my house at night.

Because after reading the FIERY CROSS.

I'm still the boss.

To find out who's the best you need a good distinguisher,

So I hope you understand -- THE FIERY CROSS EXTINGUISHER⁴⁵

The militant spirit of the poem reflected a general shift toward Black Power politics among young blacks in the summer of 1966. In August 1966, Lincoln Lynch, CORE's leading Black Power militant, toured Louisiana for a series of speaking engagements that culminated in CORE forming the "Louisiana Youth for Black Power" organization. The new Black Power group had representatives from fourteen parishes--mostly CORE strongholds--with Ferriday's David Whatley serving as its first President.⁴⁶

Whatley was drafted into the army in the Fall of 1966 and the Deacons and Snipers both faded away. Robert Lewis, the former leader of the FFM, became the

⁴⁵"The Fiery Cross Extinguisher," Ferriday, Louisiana, spring 1966, Meldon Acheson Papers.

⁴⁶*Louisiana Weekly*, 27 August 1966. Other officers included Steven Ward, Bogalusa, vice-president; Lillie Mae Thompson, Bogalusa, assistant-secretary; and Willie Jackson, Lake Providence, treasurer.

president of a new NAACP chapter, and he, along with other civil rights groups, eventually prevailed and forced city leaders to negotiate their demands in 1967.⁴⁷

In South Louisiana the Bogalusa Deacons took the lead in organizing new chapters. The Bogalusa group visited several towns where CORE had a presence and developed two chapters and numerous contacts. In Point Coupee Parish, where CORE had done some organizing, the Deacons had at least one very interesting member: Abraham Phillips, a leftist and veteran organizer who once worked as a labor organizer for the communist-run SCU. There was also a scattering of cities further South along the Mississippi River where the Deacons advised and assisted local activists. Among these was Plaquemine, a longtime CORE stronghold, Buras, and Donaldsonville. Although the Deacons did not establish functioning chapters in any of these communities, the visits did provide an opportunity to popularize their philosophy of self-defense.⁴⁸

New Orleans was the site of the first chapter in South Louisiana. The chapter was founded by Aubrey Wood, a Texan by birth who served in the Army during World War II and settled in San Francisco following the war. Wood became involved in civil rights protests in San Francisco in 1947. He was a seasoned activist by the time he arrived in New Orleans in 1956. While working as longshoreman in New Orleans, Wood met

⁴⁷SAC, New Orleans to Director, February 6, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-199; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, p. 401.

⁴⁸Robin G. Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p. 169. Thanks to Arthur Carpenter for this citation; Royan Burris, Hill interview; Henry Austin, Hill interview. Bill Yates reported that in May, 1965 Charlie Sims traveled to Donaldsonville on several occasions and met with CORE staff and local people. See, Bill Yates, "Memo," 6 May 1965, box 4, folder 3, CORE(SRO).

Reverend Avery Alexander, a legendary figure in the local civil rights movement. Working with Alexander, Wood became active in the New Orleans movement and eventually left longshore work and established a small restaurant at Jackson and Dryades, in the heart of the black shopping district. He directed the Consumer League's picket committee during the leagues' boycott of white businesses on Dryades Street, and he also advised the NAACP Youth organization when they began picketing stores on Canal Street, New Orleans' premiere shopping district. When CORE descended on New Orleans in 1962, they set up an office in the same building that housed Wood's restaurant. Wood extended his hospitality to the energetic and idealistic young activists; frequently the only meal the task force workers had was the free repast offered by Wood.⁴⁹

Wood first learned about the Deacons when he traveled to Jonesboro with Oretha Castle to help install plumbing in the new buildings that replaced two churches destroyed by arson in January of 1965. He admired what the Deacons had accomplished. "To be where they were, and have the feeling of courage to do what they did, yeah, they impressed me very much."⁵⁰

Wood discussed forming a chapter while he stayed in Jonesboro for several days. "I started talking to the Deacons up there and I got a copy of their charter," recalls Wood. "Their charter was in line with my thinking, so I became involved with them." Although he managed to avoid any direct confrontation with the Klan in Jonesboro, the little Southern town offered a few tense moments. On one occasion he was guarding the

⁴⁹Aubry Wood, interview by author, 21 February, 1989, New Orleans, Louisiana, tape recording.

⁵⁰Ibid.

freedom house in Jonesboro with a group of local men. "The place was just crowded," recalls Wood. But then the crowd started to thin out. "Say, around 3:30, somebody would leave. Around 4:00 some more would leave. When it come around 6:30, it was getting dark, the last of them left--- and left me there alone." Abandoned in a strange house in the dark of night, sitting lone vigil only blocks from the Klan's rallying point, Wood was understandably anxious. "Didn't nothing happen," says Wood, "but it was a hell of a feeling."⁵¹

Wood formed the New Orleans Deacons chapter in the spring of 1965 and became its first and only president. But there was little to do for a chapter in New Orleans. The Klan was never strong in the Cradle of Jazz and mob violence on the picket lines had disappeared by 1965. So most of the New Orleans chapter's activities centered on assisting the Bogalusa chapter and transporting visitors between New Orleans and Bogalusa, with Wood traveling to Bogalusa almost every week.⁵²

Wood recruited approximately fifteen members to his chapter, many of them longshoremen, personal friends, and drinking buddies who frequented the Dew Drop Inn on LaSalle street. The executive committee met weekly and general members met monthly. Members paid modest dues to cover gas and other expenses. Wood recalls his

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²On the New Orleans Deacons Chapter, see Investigative Report "Deacons of Defense and Justice," New Orleans, January 10, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-104; Investigative Report, July 21, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-152; and Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

experience with the Deacons with unabashed pride. "When you're a Deacon," said Wood, "you walk tall."⁵³

Law enforcement in New Orleans also took note of the Deacons. After the passage of the Voting Rights legislation, Wood frequently visited the Registrar of Voters office to help register new voters. These visits often led to confrontations with city officials. On one occasion Wood, in his words, started "raising hell" and "talking loud," and soon found himself handcuffed and arrested. "When I got back to the first precinct, they was going through my wallet to see if there was any identification," says Wood. "And when they seen that membership card for the Deacons for Defense, they said, 'Ohhh. This nigger here is the one. He's a Deacon'."⁵⁴

The New Orleans chapter helped spread the Deacons' creed of self-defense through speaking events and television appearances. Charlie Sims made a presentation with Wood at the International Longshoreman's Association Hall on Claiborne Avenue in 1965. Wood also appeared on a local television show in which the interviewer asked what he thought of communism. "I don't know nothing about no communism," Wood replied tersely. "I don't know nothing about our capitalistic system we have here, because you ain't allowed me to participate."⁵⁵

In February 1966, Joseph P. Henry, Jr., executive secretary of the New Orleans chapter made a strange request of the FBI. Henry contacted the New Orleans FBI office

⁵³Wood, Hill interview.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵"Deacons for Defense and Justice Rally," October 1965, broadsheet, Political Ephemera Collection, Special Collections, Tulane University Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana; Wood, Hill interview.

and asked for a representative to participate in a public debate on "law and citizenship" which the Deacons were organizing. The proposed debate was to include the Mayor of New Orleans and representatives of several civil rights organizations. The FBI declined the invitation, instead offering to send the Deacons several copies of an official FBI pamphlet titled, "The FBI, Guardian of Civil Rights." It was an ironic gesture by a law enforcement organization that had worked assiduously to deprive the Deacons of their rights.⁵⁶

The New Orleans chapter experienced some difficulties as a consequence of the July 1965 Alton Crowe shooting. After the incident, Henry Austin, the Deacon assailant, was moved out of Bogalusa for his own protection and assigned to the New Orleans chapter. Wood was not pleased with his new colleague. "They kind of disorganized us here, by him being here," says Wood. "When the publicity got out that he was in New Orleans and that he was a Deacon, well that kind of frightened off some of our people." Despite the problems posed by his presence, Austin assisted the New Orleans chapter in several organizing forays into adjacent Plaquemines Parish, the dominion of legendary racist Judge Leander Perez. The New Orleans chapter contemplated organizing chapters in Buras and Boothville in Plaquemines, but the level of interest was not sufficient. In addition, geography worked against creating any chapters in Plaquemines. The parish is a narrow strip of land that follows the Mississippi river to the Gulf of Mexico. Only one highway runs through the parish: and with the river on one side, and an alligator infested swamp on the other, the highway made a poor escape route. The Deacons had engaged in

⁵⁶New Orleans, SAC to Director, February 8, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-111.

enough high-speed chases with the Klan that they understood the importance of having multiple escape routes. Austin thought it was "suicide" to establish a chapter unless local members were willing to shoot their way out of the Parish, and, in Austin's opinion, they were not.⁵⁷

Austin eventually left the Crescent City for the North, and the New Orleans chapter continued on until 1967. The only other Deacons chapter in South Louisiana was organized in historic St. Francisville in West Helena Parish. An idyllic town on the Mississippi river, St. Francisville was replete with antebellum mansions and majestic oak canopies. CORE established a beachhead in St. Francisville in 1963, but the town remained one of the most impenetrable areas for CORE. Task force members found a community immobilized by fear, with black workers in the surrounding sweet potato farms living in virtual servitude. After a few years of meager progress, CORE abandoned the river town.⁵⁸

Local activists took up the banner after CORE's departure and by 1967 the movement revived under local leadership. As civil rights activities increased, so too did the need for protection. The Natchez Deacons chapter assisted in forming a St. Francisville chapter through the aegis of the St. Francisville Voters League, headed by a young militant, Reverend George Noflin. The St. Francisville Deacons constituted something of a family enterprise: Noflin's two brothers, John and David, served as

⁵⁷Investigative report "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc.," March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120; Austin, Hill interview.

⁵⁸Wood, Hill interview.

officers in the Deacons chapter. Leo Johnson served as chapter president, presiding over a total active membership of approximately fifteen.⁵⁹

Because of the intense repression, the St. Francisville Deacons operated covertly, limiting themselves to guarding the homes of civil rights activists. But as time progressed they became involved in day-to-day protest activities. In 1967 the St. Francisville chapter organized a picket protest against the "Red and White" department store in downtown St. Francisville. Racist opponents frequently harassed the protestors, and in February 1968 a white man attempted to run a pickup truck between the pickets. The State Police also joined in harassing protestors, arresting approximately thirty-five blacks on various traffic violations on the weekend of February 24-25. The St. Francisville chapter continued to be active until the 1970s, then quietly disbanded.⁶⁰

Mississippi was also prime organizing territory for the Deacons. On August 29, 1965, Charlie Sims and a nine man delegation of Deacons traveled to Jackson, Mississippi to attend a meeting of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP, an electoral civil rights organization led by Aaron Henry, had attracted national attention at the 1964 Democratic Party national convention. The *New York Times* covered the Deacons appearance at the Jackson meeting, which was organized by Ed King, a white teacher and civil rights activist at Tougaloo College in Jackson. The

⁵⁹Reverend George Noflin, interview by author, 4 September, 1993, St. Francisville, Louisiana.

⁶⁰Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI Deacons file no. 157-2466-250; SAC, New Orleans to Director, February 27, 1968, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-264; Noflin, Hill Interview. Several years after the end of the movement, Leo Johnson, leader of the St. Francisville Deacons chapter, was convicted and sentenced to prison for the murder of his wife.

MFDP's invitation to the Deacons reflected the growing disenchantment with nonviolence, but the Mississippi group was not ready to fully embrace armed self-defense. When pressed by the media to explain the relationship of the Deacons and the MFDP, Ed King said that the MFDP was not endorsing the Deacons but merely providing them a forum. "The Mississippi Negro is very interested in them," King told the press.⁶¹

More than three hundred people filled the Negro Masonic Hall and exploded in thunderous applause when Sims was introduced. Sweating profusely in his Sunday suit in the sweltering 99-degree weather, Sims entertained the crowd with his trademark gritty bravado. The Deacon leader taunted the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and scoffed at threats of violence. "I've been shot five times, and shot at ten times," boasted Sims. "So I'm not scared to come to Jackson." His message was a clarion call to manhood, bluntly challenging black men to prove their mettle against the Klan. "It is time for you men to wake up and be men," Sims admonished his audience.⁶²

Sims also spoke of plans to organize a chapter in Jackson and suggested that interested parties confer with him after the meeting. The next day a recruiting team of Bogalusa Deacons was dispatched to Natchez to explore organizing the first Mississippi chapter. Recruiting teams simultaneously departed for the Mississippi towns of Greenville and Columbia.

⁶¹*New York Times*, 30 August 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 11 September 1965. The FBI's account of the Jackson meeting is contained in: SAC, Jackson to Director, September 3, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-59 and SAC, Jackson to Director, October 25, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-78.

⁶²*New York Times*, 30 August 1965.

Mississippi was a formidable challenge for the Deacons. Conditions were so desperate that even the nonviolent martyr Medgar Evers once entertained the idea of armed resistance in the Magnolia state. Both Medgar and his brother Charles were deeply impressed with Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in 1952. In her memoir, *For Us, The Living*, Medgar's wife Myrlie recalls that "Medgar himself flirted intellectually with the idea of fighting back in the Mississippi Delta. For a time he envisioned a secret black army of Delta Negroes who fought by night to meet oppression and brutality with violence." Charles Evers says that he and Medgar went beyond mere fantasies of a Mississippi Mau Mau, and actually began to stockpile ammunition for the revolt. Their father eventually discovered his sons' plans and quickly scuttled the incipient rebellion.⁶³

Now Charlie Sims and the Deacons were preparing to resurrect Medgar's dream of a black army in the heart of Klan country.

⁶³Mrs. Medgar Evers and William Peters, *For Us, The Living* (New York: Ace Books, 1970), pp. 82-84; Charles Evers, *Evers* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971) pp. 74-75.

Chapter 12

Mississippi and Beyond

As the Deacons fanned out around Mississippi, the Klan and other racist vigilantes were launching their own offensive. The first violence came on August 20. Two white civil rights workers, an Episcopal seminarian and a Roman Catholic priest, were on their way to a small grocery store in the black section of Hayneville, Alabama. They were confronted by a special deputy sheriff, Thomas L. Coleman, a member of a prominent Lowndes County family. Without warning, Coleman blasted his shotgun at the two, killing Jonathan Daniels the 26-year-old seminarian. Two days later, three white men wounded a Unitarian minister in a similar shotgun attack as he stood outside his apartment house in Jackson, Mississippi. The bloody assaults were accompanied by a wildfire of cross burnings, including three crosses torched in Philadelphia, Mississippi--apparently in protest of plans to desegregate the city's schools. Klan passions had been inflamed the previous week when officials desegregated Neshoba Central School just outside Philadelphia.¹

During the last week of August, the Klan trained its sights on the black leadership in the city of Natchez in Adams County, Mississippi. The Klan had engaged in

¹Joyce Thomas, "The 'Double V' was for Victory: Black Soldiers, The Black Protest, and World War II" (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1993), p. 121.; Sobel, *Civil Rights*, pp. 360-61; *New York Times*, August 30 1965.

systematic guerilla warfare against the county's black residents since 1964, unchecked by compliant law enforcement officials. Robed hooligans bombed churches and flogged and tortured blacks with impunity. By 1965 the situation had grown so critical that the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights conducted hearings in Mississippi to investigate the wave of violence and intimidation.²

Natchez was the pearl of Adams County. Perched upon a bluff on the winding Mississippi, the city stood like a sentinel over the sprawling river bottom lands in neighboring Concordia Parish. In the nineteenth century the city had prospered as a key commercial and financial center for Mississippi's slave economy. By 1965 Natchez had survived the demise of king cotton and transformed itself into a bustling manufacturing town. Wood products and rubber manufacturing had given rise to a highly unionized and sophisticated black working class, largely independent of the white power structure.

Similar to Jonesboro and Bogalusa, Natchez's mill-town culture produced fiercely independent and courageous black men and women. Their independence derived in part from the protection offered by unions. Trade unions, despite their poor record on racial equality, generally safeguarded the right of black members to participate in the civil rights movement without fear of reprisals by employers. Typical of this practice was the United Rubber Workers Union local at Armstrong Tire Company in Natchez. "There would have been a many one of us that would have been fired from Armstrong," recalls James

²U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Justice in Jackson, Mississippi: Hearing Held in Jackson, Miss. February 16-20, 1965, Vols. I and II* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1971).

Young, a member of the Natchez Deacons, "but the union wasn't going to stand for it. So that's what saved us."³

Ironically, the relative freedom from economic coercion may have contributed to Klan violence. In contrast to the black sharecropper, whites could not intimidate unionized black industrial workers by threatening to deprive them of income or shelter. White elites and competing white workers were forced to turn to other methods of disciplining the black working class. Terrorist violence replaced economic threats as the principal coercive instrument of white supremacy. To a significant degree, the revitalized Klan and the Deacons were both products of the decline of the agricultural oligarchy and its traditional social control mechanisms.

Despite being insulated from some reprisals, voter registration policies still prevented Natchez blacks from translating economic independence into political power. In 1965 Natchez was a black majority city still dominated by a white minority; 12,300 blacks lived under the rule of 11,500 whites. Attempts to implement the 1964 Civil Rights Act had failed miserably as Natchez whites clung unyieldingly to the old traditions.

In the summer of 1965 local civil rights activists launched a boycott of white businesses, targeting stores owned by Natchez Mayor John Nossier. Nossier had incurred the wrath of the Klan for his relatively moderate policies, but also found himself the target of black protest for refusing to integrate the clerical staff at his four stores. The boycott failed to generate enthusiasm among blacks and dragged on through the summer,

³James Young, interview by author, 19 April, 1994, Natchez, Mississippi, tape recording.

little more than symbolic protest. To many it appeared that Natchez had averted the kind of divisive confrontations that had marked the Spring of 1965 in Selma and Bogalusa. Yet the sleepy calm of summer in Mississippi was not to last.

On Friday, August 27, at 12:30 p.m. George Metcalfe casually strode to his car in the parking lot at the Armstrong Tire and Rubber Company. Weary, Metcalfe had just finished an exhausting twelve-hour shift at the plant where he worked as a shipping clerk. Outside the factory gates Metcalfe's life as a clerk gave way to his role as president of the Natchez chapter of the NAACP. Metcalfe's visibility had increased dramatically in the past weeks. He had led a delegation to the city school board demanding that the schools desegregate in conformance with the Civil Rights Act. He had also been recently named as a defendant in a suit filed by Mayor Nosser to prevent the NAACP from picketing his store. The civil rights leader's tenacity was bound to antagonize elements of the white community. Compounding the danger to Metcalfe was the increased tension at Armstrong after the plant cafeteria had recently been desegregated.⁴

Metcalfe eased into his car, put the key into the ignition and turned the switch. A tremendous explosion rocked the windows of the plant as a bomb ripped apart the vehicle and mangled Metcalfe's legs and arms.

Metcalfe clung precariously to life as his blood-soaked body was rushed to the Jefferson Davis Memorial Hospital. As he lay in critical condition in his hospital bed, the bomb's explosion began to reverberate through the black community. But instead of immobilizing the black community with fear, the bomb detonated a new combative

⁴*New York Times*, 28 August 1965, p. 49.

consciousness among Natchez blacks. News of the bombing swept through the black community like a fire storm, burning away the bonds of passivity and fear. "I think one of the greatest mistakes [whites] made was when they bombed George Metcalfe's car," says James Young, a Natchez activist. "Well, that made everybody in this area feel like, 'whether I'm a part of it, they're just subject to do the same thing to me, so I'm coming out front.'"⁵

Theologian Thomas Aquinas once suggested that anger was the precondition of courage. His maxim appeared to be borne out in Natchez the night of August 27. Rage electrified young blacks throughout the community. Indignation metamorphosed into courage; courage into action. Decades of humiliation, frustration, and resignation were eclipsed by a new militant consciousness. Sober and established black community leaders sensed danger in the restive mood and worked frantically to control and redirect the youthful passions. The situation was so forbidding that NAACP state secretary Charles Evers rushed to Natchez to assist.

The brother of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, Charles Evers quickly found himself entangled in the awkward role as conciliator and peacemaker. A group of angry young blacks had gathered early Friday night near Metcalfe's home, which also served as the NAACP headquarters. Evers attempted to calm the crowd, empathizing with their vengeful mood. "If they do it anymore, were going to get those responsible," warned Evers. "We're armed, every last one of us, and we are not going to take it." But Evers

⁵Accounts of the bombing and response are taken from *New York Times*, 28 August 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 28 August 1965; *Louisiana Weekly*, 4 September 1965; and Young, Hill interview.

tempered his threats with a plea for restraint and order. "We want no violence," Evers implored the crowd. "We want no violence."⁶

A few blocks away James Stokes lay sound asleep. A member of the NAACP, Stokes had spent the day helping out at the NAACP office in the wake of the bombing. Stokes was typical of the working class men who were the backbone of the Natchez NAACP. He worked as a printer operator at the International plant making egg cartons, had leadership experience as a union steward and was an army veteran.⁷

The Metcalfe bombing had sent the NAACP office into a flurry of activity that Friday, and Stokes, after putting in a long day at the office, had retired to his house for a few hours rest. He was abruptly aroused from his sleep by a pounding on his door. Two friends were at the door. "Come on let's go," they told Stokes, "all hell broke loose downtown."⁸

It was an apt description. The serene jewel on the Mississippi had exploded into violence. As the night wore on, hundreds of enraged black youth filled the streets of the black business district. Primed for battle, the swarm of youth armed themselves with rocks, bottles, pistols and rifles. James Stokes remembers arriving on the scene and

⁶*New York Times*, 29, 28 August 1965. Years later Evers told the story of how he had arranged for national television crews to tape a local minister bragging about how he "would shoot a white man." "This is the sort of thing that frightens white people," said Evers. "They expected me to say it, but a local jackleg preacher would really have some effect on them." Evers said Natchez's black community was ready for full-scale war. "We had guns and hand grenades, and everything it took to work--and we meant to use them if we had to." Charles Evers, *Evers*, p. 132.

⁷James Stokes, interview by author, 12 November, 1993, Natchez, Mississippi, tape recording.

⁸*Ibid.*

seeing snipers firing from rooftops "shooting at everything that was moving." Roving groups of young blacks roamed the streets, shouting threats at white motorists and venting their rage by hurling bricks, bottles, and tomatoes at police cars. Stokes and a small group of NAACP members quickly joined Evers as he attempted to restore order. The improvised security group gave as much attention to protecting whites as they did blacks. In several incidents, they prevented the agitated crowd from attacking innocent whites who accidentally drove into the fray. But the security group's principal objective was to prevent white police from assaulting young blacks. Stokes and his compatriots were on the streets, "to keep our eyes on police officers," and "to make sure if they shoot somebody, we going to shoot them."⁹

Stokes could empathize with the mob's rage toward the police. As a young boy in rural Adams County he had witnessed police complicity with barbaric racism. "One of my neighbors was running a little social club," he recalls, "and the Klan ran down on this club and took this man out and cut his penis out and drug him up and down the road." Local law enforcement officials participated in the grisly torture. "That night, it was some members of the sheriff's force, police force," remembers Stokes. "All of them was Klan."¹⁰

The day following the bombing, Natchez teetered on the precipice of open rebellion. In the morning a group of black leaders met and hurriedly drew up a list of demands. The bombing had galvanized the black community around a militant program

⁹The account of the riot is drawn from *New York Times*, 29 August 1965, p. 51; *New York Times*, 30 August 1965; and Stokes, Hill interview. Stokes quote in *Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

for equal opportunity. The demands included: hiring at least four additional black police to complement the two currently on the force; desegregating public facilities, schools, parks, hospital, playgrounds and the city auditorium; naming a black representative to the school board; cooperating in a poverty program with funds divided evenly with whites; and issuing a statement denouncing the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and another local white supremacist group, the Americans for the Preservation of the White race.¹¹

In an unusual move, the black leadership also demanded that city employees be required to address blacks with "courtesy titles." For decades whites had addressed blacks with condescending or overtly degrading titles, such as "auntie," "missie," "boy," "hoss," and "uncle." The leadership insisted that city employee address blacks with the respectful titles of Mister and Missus. Civil equality was not sufficient; Natchez blacks wanted dignity and respect as well.¹²

But black leaders issuing demands did little to quell the temper of the young community. As the sun slipped into the Mississippi hills on Saturday, August 28, the tide of anger rose once again. Young men swarmed into the streets to vent their rage. A rock sailed through the air shattering a police car window. Four grim city policemen brandishing shotguns faced off in a tense confrontation with the undaunted crowd. At an open-air rally that night some of the crowd openly spurned the pleas for nonviolence. As community leaders spoke to the crowd, one group began a chant that grew into a defiant

¹¹*New York Times*, 29 August 1965.

¹²*Ibid.*

chorus: "We're going to kill for freedom," rose the chant, "We're going to kill for freedom."¹³

The two days of rioting transformed the terms of the conflict in Natchez. Prior to August 28, whites could expect blacks to respond peacefully and lawfully to Klan terror and police brutality. Blacks now had a new bargaining chip.

The day following the riot, the Bogalusa Deacons had announced in Jackson that they planned to travel to Natchez to develop a Deacons chapter. The presence of Louisiana Deacons in Mississippi posed a dilemma for Charles Evers. Though he would benefit by their protection, to welcome the Deacons into Mississippi could be taken as a sign of weakness on the part of the NAACP, and invite organizational competition. Evers was already fighting off a serious challenge to his leadership by young militants in SNCC and the MFDP. Another organization on his left flank would only add to his troubles.¹⁴

Evers had only a short time to weigh his options. The media was pressuring Evers to comment on the Deacons' planned campaign in Mississippi. Evers finessed the issue by repudiating the Deacons but not armed self-defense. The NAACP leader told the *New York Times* that Mississippi did not need the Deacons because the "state's Negroes are arming and organizing in their own way."¹⁵

Natchez was a political tightrope for Evers. Even his hesitant endorsement of self-defense appeased militants at the cost of rankling the NAACP national leadership.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴*New York Times*, 4 September 1965.

¹⁵Ibid.

Roy Wilkins, the NAACP's national director, told the *Times* that Evers' comments on violence had not been approved by the national office. Evers ignored Wilkins and continued to raise the specter of retaliatory violence, a few days later announcing again that Natchez blacks were arming themselves and were prepared to "fight back."¹⁶

Evers' comments provoked a volley of unheeded criticism from other NAACP leaders in addition to Wilkins. But Evers' decision to ignore the admonitions was a shrewd maneuver. If Wilkins pressured Evers too strongly, the national office risked alienating him and losing control of the Natchez campaign. Competing forces were already descending on Natchez. Within a few days of the bombing, Martin Luther King's SCLC had sent Andrew Young to visit Natchez. Young was assessing the possibility of making Natchez the centerpiece of a campaign for federal legislation against killing a person engaged in civil rights activities. If the NAACP national office could accommodate Evers, the Natchez campaign promised to regain prestige lost to younger and more militant groups such as SNCC and CORE.¹⁷

The rank and file black activists of Natchez were not diverted by the factional maneuvering of the national organizations. They saw a need for organized self-defense and the Deacons were the only organization prepared for the challenge. Stokes, James Young, and the rest of the informal self-defense group that activated following the Metcalfe bombing ignored Evers' rebuke to the Deacons. By the first week of September they had formed a Natchez chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice.¹⁸

¹⁶*Ibid.*; *New York Times*, 9 September 1965, p. 22.

¹⁷*Ibid.*; *New York Times*, 4 September 1965.

¹⁸Stokes, Hill interview.

The group set about building an organization and electing officers. Their first president was James Jackson, a colossal, street-tough man who operated a popular barber shop. Isaac Terell, a sawmill millwright, was elected vice-president; Sandy Nealy became the group's treasurer; James Stokes, the NAACP militant who had assisted in quelling the riot following the Metcalfe bombing, was appointed spokesman. The secretary was James Young, a coworker of Metcalfe's at Armstrong Tire and Rubber. Young had guarded Metcalfe in the hospital and, like most of the Deacons, was an army veteran, having served as a demolition technician in the South Pacific during World War II.¹⁹

The rapidly unfolding events provided the Deacons with considerable work. Mayor Nosser had rejected the demands presented by the blacks leaders the first week of September, and when the black leadership threatened a series of marches, Nosser persuaded Governor Paul Johnson to send a massive contingent of 650 national guard troops to Natchez. The invading force converged on the city on September 3 and promptly sealed off the black community. A strict 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew was imposed. Although prohibition was already in effect in Natchez, city officials banned the previously tolerated bootlegged liquor trade in the black community. City officials also ordered the closure of several black-owned businesses on the theory that they threatened civil order by allowing blacks to congregate on their premises.²⁰

¹⁹Young, Hill interview.

²⁰*Jet*, "Natchez Hurries Bi-Racial Talks as Fear grips City," 16 September 1965, pp. 14-15; *Louisiana Weekly*, 11 September 1965; *New York Times*, 4 September, 1965.

Given that the riots had subsided before the National Guard arrived, many blacks felt that the National Guard's presence was intended to discourage legal protest--not violence. Upon their arrival the National Guard mounted .50 caliber machine guns in the downtown area. Evers and other black leaders debated whether to defy the guns and march. They were confronted with a grim choice. James Young recalls that a guard official told them "if you march, we will open fire." Evers prudently canceled the march and charged that the National Guard was in Natchez with one purpose: to "beat and kill" black citizens if they exercised their right to demonstrate.²¹

The National Guard never had an opportunity to confirm Evers' fears. In response to protests by Aaron Henry, head of the MFDP, Governor Johnson withdrew the troops after three days on September 6. The guard's departure cleared the way for the first of a series of marches in a bitter four-month boycott campaign. Negotiations over black demands soon reached an impasse as city officials remained intransigent. Instead of negotiating in earnest, city fathers grasped for a legal instrument to suppress protest. On September 30 they succeeded temporarily when they secured an injunction from the Chancery Court forbidding demonstrations.

The injunction set off a stunning wave of mass arrests. Between October 1-7, 544 blacks were arrested for violating the injunction, including Charles Evers. But the arrests did little to restrain the increasingly militant youth. On October 5, a group of enraged

²¹Young, Hill interview; *New York Times*, 3 September, 1965.

young blacks attempted to attack a mob of 150 whites and relented only after Evers personally intervened.²²

The mass arrests were another shameful chapter in Mississippi history. Prisoners were herded into buses and shipped two-hundred miles to the infamous state prison at Parchman. At Parchman, guards subjected protestors to unspeakable abuses. The wife and daughter of Deacon leader James Stokes were both arrested and imprisoned. Stokes' wife never recovered from the trauma and she died shortly afterwards.²³

Evers suspended the demonstrations on October 7 after city officials agreed to consider a revised list of NAACP demands. The boycott of downtown stores continued and by October 12 Mayor Nossier admitted that business was down as much as 50 percent. Demonstrations were renewed briefly in mid-October when city officials and black leaders failed to reach a settlement. The business community's support for segregation was quickly eroding and by the end of October most of their resistance to black demands was due to Klan threats and intimidation.²⁴

Throughout the eight-month boycott the Natchez Deacons served as the black community's informal police force, furnishing protection denied by local law enforcement (the police were more accommodating to the dead than the living; funerals were the only occasion when blacks were guaranteed a police escort). Beginning with the Metcalfe bombing, the Deacons regularly patrolled the black community by car and on

²²*New York Times*, 6 October 1965, p. 3; Sobel, *Civil Rights*, pp. 319-320.

²³*Ibid.*; *New York Times*, 8 October 1965, p. 3; Stokes, Hill interview.

²⁴*New York Times*, October 13 1965. *New York Times*, October 14 1965, p. 40; "Natchez Crisis Eases a Bit; City Fathers Still Evasive," *Jet*, 28 October, 1965, pp. 6-7; Francis Ward, "Economic Squeeze Highlights," *Jet*, 11 November 1965, pp. 16-20.

foot to prevent Klan attacks, maintaining contact through a CB radio network. The patrols effectively discouraged Klan harassment without resorting to gunfire, as was necessary in Bogalusa and Jonesboro. White interlopers were stopped and politely yet firmly told to leave the area. "A guy driving through first, you wouldn't say nothing to him," recalls James Young. "You didn't bother him. But now if he just constantly driving through, back and forth, then you stopped him . . . we'd tell him unless he has some business through that way, don't come through no more." The Deacons also guarded the homes of civil rights activists and provided escorts for visiting activists and supporters. Prior to rallies, they inspected the event area and posted guards. In contrast to Bogalusa, the Natchez Klan balked at attacking blacks in their own neighborhoods. Instead, they were constrained to rattling their sabers and organizing patrols in white neighborhoods.²⁵

Most of the Deacons' activity centered on guarding demonstrators during the scores of pickets and marches. The Natchez Deacons were always armed—often openly. James Young walked along the marches sporting a pistol in a side holster. White hecklers lined the streets but generally the presence of armed Deacons curbed violent attacks. The display of resolve and firepower served as a sufficient deterrent. "Just the presence of the Deacons kept a lot of things from happening that would have happened," says Young. Occasionally a white antagonist disregarded the danger. In one incident a white man attempted to disrupt a march when he recklessly steered his car into the line.

²⁵"Natchez Crisis Eases a Bit; City Fathers Still Evasive," *Jet*, 28 October 1965; Young, Hill interview; *New York Times*, 31 October 1966, p. 60.

Within seconds the Deacons converged on the car with weapons drawn and detained the startled driver, later delivering him to the police.²⁶

As the boycott proceeded, the organizational life of the Natchez Deacons fell into a regular pattern. Monthly meetings were scheduled, but during the height of the boycott campaign, the group met daily if necessary. The chapter operated in a modified democratic style. As a paramilitary organization, the Deacons found it necessary to delegate authority to a leader. But the group reserved the right to overrule the leader's decision. As Young describes the process, the leader "would make the decision, or he would say that this is the way that he thinks it should be. Well, if we felt like it was meant to be a little different than that or what not, we would discuss it, and whatever we come up with was what we would do."²⁷

Approximately fifteen men comprised the core of the chapter, regularly attending meetings and performing duties. Complementing this core was a network of roughly one-hundred men who considered themselves members, either formally or informally, and who assisted the chapter when necessary.²⁸

The Natchez Police Department's stance toward the Deacons differed markedly from the belligerent policy of Bogalusa authorities. In general, Police Chief J. T. Robinson followed a neutral policy toward the Deacons, refusing to harass them with arrests or intimidation. Indeed, James Stokes had a surprisingly cordial relationship with Chief Robinson. At one point a Deacon was arrested and assessed a fine following a

²⁶Young, Hill interview.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Group size is drawn from: Young, Hill interview; and Stokes, Hill interview.

scuffle with police. Stokes asked Chief Robinson to intervene, and Robinson complied, paying the Deacon's fine and promising to prevent future incidents.²⁹

Chief Robinson's policy was not all that mystifying. In truth, the police benefited from having a disciplined militia in the black community. "Well really, the Chief always looked to us to help him to keep law and order," says Young. The Deacons purpose was not to provoke confrontations with the Klan, says Young, but rather to minimize conflict. "We were out to see that there were law and order carried out." Nevertheless, Chief Robinson wasn't averse to manipulating the group. On one occasion a black deputy brought Stokes a message offering him a police department job if he would quit the Deacons. Stokes was polite but firm. "I'll tell you like this: I really don't need that job."³⁰

From the outset, the Natchez chapter distanced itself from the Louisiana Deacons organization. The reason for this decision is unclear. It may have been emblematic of the fierce independence of mill-town culture. Or the policy may have been pragmatic. The Natchez chapter had little to gain by submitting themselves to the discipline of the national organization based in Bogalusa. Bogalusa offered meager benefits in return for affiliating. At best, subordination to Bogalusa garnered prestige at the price of independence.

²⁹Young, Hill interview; Stokes, Hill interview. The FBI knew virtually nothing about the Natchez Deacons until 1966. See, SAC, Jackson to Director, October 25, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-78; and Director to SAC, Jackson, January 11, 1966, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-105.

³⁰Young, Hill interview; Stokes, Hill interview.

Typically, most Deacons chapters regarded themselves as an autonomous local organization within a loose federation. This relationship mirrored the independent and democratic nature of most organizations in Southern black communities. Baptist ministers served at the pleasure of the church laity, unlike Roman Catholic, Methodist and other hierarchical denominations. Segregation gave rise to a wide range of locally organized mutual self-help organizations, including benevolent associations, and insurance and burial societies. Additionally, the community was honeycombed with self-organized recreational clubs, including the social and pleasure clubs and travel clubs. These highly independent, localized organizations provided a model for the relationships between the national Deacons organization and its local chapters. In fact, members of the Natchez and Jonesboro Deacons frequently referred to the organization as a "club."

The Natchez group decided to organize under a name other than the Deacons, to ensure that state officials would accept their application for a corporate charter. The group chose the innocently deceptive name "Natchez Sportsmen Club." The name was not without irony; the Klan frequently named their klaverns "sportsmens" clubs to conceal their identity. In public fund raising appeals the Natchez chapter acknowledged the subterfuge, explaining that "the name 'sportsmen club' is used in order to obtain a Mississippi state charter."³¹

As in Jonesboro, the charter carried a special significance for the group. They were convinced that the charter gave state sanction to their right of self-defense, thus protecting them from interference by law enforcement. "In the charter, we had to protect

³¹Director to SAC, Jackson, January 11, 1966, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-105.

people's property and churches and so forth," Stokes points out, "and therefore couldn't no one take our weapons from us. So we could carry our weapons just like the local law enforcement officers carry theirs." When the police challenged Stokes' right to carry a weapon, the Deacon leader would stand fast, produce the charter like a talisman and demand that the police honor his rights.³²

The Natchez Deacons maintained strict membership standards and sought mature recruits, fearless men capable of sound judgment and restraint. The front line against the Klan was no place for hotheads and impulsive youth. The chapter generally attracted men of character and good standing in the community. The mission of the organization appealed to men independent in spirit and mind. "If we thought that they were the type of person who was easily persuaded or swayed, we didn't want that type of person," said Stokes. Most recruits were stable family men, often in their thirties; nearly all were members of the NAACP. Mill workers, log haulers, barbers and contractors, most of the Natchez Deacons had the security of professions that shielded them from economic retaliation.³³

Typical of the members was James Young. Young was forty-one years old when he joined the Deacons in 1965. He had lived his entire life in Adams County. His memories of Mississippi in the 1930s are of an arduous yet peaceful childhood with few incidents of racial harassment. His sharecropper parents lived among poor whites and the children played together unencumbered by the prejudices of their parents. Young

³²Stokes, Hill interview.

³³Ibid.

dropped out of high school in ninth grade to work the fields, and perhaps would have lived out his life on the farm had not the dogs of war invaded the slumbering world of rural Mississippi.

In September of 1943 Young joined the Army and soon found himself loading bombs onto war planes in the South Pacific. The demolition training he received paid few dividends later in life; more profitable were the lessons learned about discipline and collective action. Returning to segregation in Mississippi was a painful and degrading experience for the young soldier. Young sought refuge on his parents' farm to avoid Natchez and the inevitable humiliations attendant to contact with whites. Young recalls the solace of the farm: "It was kind of hard at first," he says. "The main thing about it is you just have to adjust . . . I spent most of my time out there. I didn't even come around to town." The military had taught him to accept the bitterness in life. He says all he could do--all any man could do-- was "adjust and fall in line."³⁴

Risking life and limb for a nation that denied them full citizenship, black veterans like Young returned with rising expectations for democracy and declining tolerance for Jim Crow. "This is what started changing," contends Stokes. "Men vowed, 'If I go to Korea, or Vietnam, I'm damn sure not going to go back home to nothing like the other soldiers did in World War One and Two.'"³⁵

But not all men were prepared to fight for their freedom. There were Deacons who faltered under the pressure of their duties and quit. "The wives was scared,"

³⁴Young, Hill interview.

³⁵Stokes, Hill interview.

explains Stokes. "Or the fellows was scared that they were going to get killed or go to jail--when they were the sole provider." Fear was even more pervasive in the small towns dotting the hills and the delta in Mississippi. Accompanying Charles Evers as body guards on organizing drives, the Deacons frequently arrived at a courthouse rally to find only one or two people in attendance. These visits to remote communities offered an opportunity for the Deacons to spread the gospel of self-defense and recruit new members, but first they had to overcome the ever present nemesis of fear. "We had to sort of get the fright out of any county that we went into," admits Stokes. "We had to get the fright out of those guys."³⁶

The gun was the Deacons' principal organizing tool in these isolated communities. Rural blacks couldn't help but be impressed by the Deacons' audacity. Their exemplary courage mitigated the fear and anxiety that immobilized black men in isolated communities. "We would go to their town, and they would watch us in action, doing *our* job with *our* guns" explains Stokes. "Police officers didn't bother us. If he did, he was in trouble. So therefore, that made him [the black man] not be afraid." The Natchez chapter's habit of openly carrying weapons was a novelty in rural Mississippi. "We were armed at all times," says James Young. "There wasn't no certain time. We were armed day and night...and everybody knew that and I think that's what made it so much the better." Simply the willingness to defend themselves bred confidence. "I didn't

³⁶Ibid.

want to come to the point to have to pull a gun to use it on nobody," says Young, "but knowing that you had the gun was a bit of relief because it was more forceful that way."³⁷

To some observers, the Natchez Deacons did more than bear arms; they recklessly flaunted them. The Natchez chapter developed a reputation for openly carrying their weapons, a practice that disturbed the Bogalusa Deacons. Royan Burris was the Bogalusa chapter officer who initially helped organize the Natchez Deacons chapter. On several occasions he returned to Natchez as a liaison to the Mississippi chapters. He was troubled by the brazen display of weaponry. "The Deacons in Natchez really got violent," recalls Burris. We had to, kind of call their hand because they felt like because, 'we had a charter,' they could just walk around with guns . . . guns everywhere they went. Just like it wasn't nothing. And that wasn't our purpose. They said they just needed to do it because that was the only way they could walk the streets at the time."³⁸

Burris' plea for discretion had little effect. The Natchez Chapter, according to Burris, continued to swagger through the streets "with guns hanging outside like cowboys."³⁹

Like other chapters, the Natchez Deacons regarded nonviolence as a futile strategy. James Stokes equated nonviolence with the passivity exhibited by preceding generations. "They [old people] believed in nonviolence," points out Stokes. And the Klan "had gone out and caught old people who believed in nonviolence, killed them, set them afire, cut their penis out and stuffed it in their mouth, drug them up and down the

³⁷Stokes, Hill interview; Young, Hill interview.

³⁸Burris, Hill interview.

³⁹Ibid.

roads, whipped them with barbed wire." History had turned Stokes against nonviolence.

"I believe if you shoot at me, I'm going to shoot at you."⁴⁰

Nor was Stokes impressed with the partisans of nonviolence. "Those crazy rascals would lay down in the street and so forth," muses Stokes. "The NAACP got rid of CORE and SNCC. After a few people got killed, we just asked them to pack up and leave and let us take care of everything ourselves. Thank you but no thank you."⁴¹

The NAACP under Evers' leadership gave the Deacons ample berth. "The NAACP was a fully nonviolent organization," says Young, and "they still stood for that. But they didn't stand in the way of no one else that decided that it took some violence to protect yourself. They didn't stand in the way of this, no way."⁴²

Although the Natchez Deacons came to an understanding with the NAACP, they did not enjoy acceptance from all segments of the black community. And when they encountered opposition within the black community, fear changed from adversary to ally for the Deacons. As with other Deacons chapters, the Natchez Deacons frequently used violence to discipline critics and collaborators within their own ranks.⁴³

In Natchez this internal intimidation was not carried out by the Deacons themselves, but by individuals associated with the Deacons. A vigilante group of women and men occasionally assaulted blacks who violated the boycott by making purchases at

⁴⁰Stokes, Hill interview.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Young, Hill interview.

⁴³The Deacons were implicated in shooting attacks and other assaults against their black critics in Bogalusa, Natchez, and Port Gibson.

targeted stores. "There was a little group that would go around," says Young, "and if they had violated the boycott, whatever they had, they took it from them and possibly would whup them up." In addition to boycott violators, informants within the black community caused problems by providing whites with critical information about organizational plans and internal conflicts. Because of their regular contact with whites, black domestic workers sometimes came under suspicion. In these cases, women members of the NAACP were encouraged to take measures against informants. "So we'd have these women, that wasn't members of our organization," says Stokes, "they were people in the NAACP... they would go catch them and beat them up." The vigilante groups also attacked black ministers who they thought betrayed the community by providing information to the white community. Stokes, who eventually became a minister, says that some black clergy sold information and campaign endorsements to white politicians. "It almost makes you feel somewhat embarrassed to say you are a minister, because of the things you see ministers do. Every four years they put black people on sale."⁴⁴

The Natchez Deacons had ample funds to carry on their work, thanks to Clifford Box, a Natchez native who made his home in Redwood, California. Box, a postal worker, returned to Natchez for a visit during the height of the boycott and was impressed by the Deacons' work. He arranged for a fund raising tour in California by James Stokes in November 1965. Stokes was a natural choice as a spokesperson for the Deacons. He was a well spoken, articulate man with a flair for the dramatic. He had honed his

⁴⁴Young, Hill interview; Stokes, Hill interview.

leadership abilities as a church deacon and choir director, and had traveled extensively around the world in the army's entertainment unit from 1953 to 1955.⁴⁵

Born in 1928, Stokes grew up on a dusty sharecropper farm on the Linwood Planation, a few miles outside of Natchez. For generations Stokes' ancestors had toiled as slaves and sharecroppers on the plantation. All they had to show for their labor was a small family cemetery atop a hill on the plantation. In the 1960s a highway was charted to carve through the cemetery. The Stokes family had long since left the plantation, and despite the desecration, the plantation owners warned Stokes to stay away from the cemetery and off the property. One morning Stokes strapped on a gun, drove out to the plantation and defiantly marched up the hill to the cemetery. He came down the hill with his mother's tombstone on his shoulder. He took the stone to the cemetery where his father was buried, and laid them to rest together. His defiance toward the white plantation owner was a trait acquired early in life. "My mother used to be afraid for me to leave home, and afraid when I came back," recalls Stokes. "Because, even in my teenage days, I would say something. I don't know. Maybe I was too crazy to be scared."⁴⁶

Stokes exhibited the same outspokenness as a fund raiser for the Deacons during his tour of California. On November 9, Stokes appeared at a speaking event at San Mateo College. A handbill distributed at the event claimed the Deacons purpose was to "protect the lives and property of negro citizens from hooded night riders." The leaflet requested contributions "to purchase such items as Walkie Talkies, Radio equipment, Uniform

⁴⁵Stokes, Hill interview.

⁴⁶Ibid.

Equipment, and cars that are radio equipped to patrol the negro neighborhood.” Though the circular omitted mention of weapons, the FBI reported that in his speech Stokes said that funds would also be used to purchase weapons. Years later Stokes confirmed the report and frankly admitted that the objective of the fund raising tour was to “buy guns.”⁴⁷

Stokes traveled throughout California for approximately a week, speaking at several churches in Redwood and also appearing at fund raising events in Los Angeles, Oakland and San Francisco. He claims to have returned to Natchez with contributions totaling \$7,000, several guns and a donated automobile. All the funds went to purchase additional guns and radios.⁴⁸

Stokes' successful fundraising enabled the Deacons to give their full attention to the boycott, which was entering its third month in November. During the course of the boycott, the old moderate civil rights leaders were displaced by militants such as Charles Evers, Rudy Shields, NAACP director Archie Jones and the Reverend Shead Baldwin. The wintry winds of December finally brought a sober reappraisal of the situation by the white power structure. The boycott had effectively eroded business class solidarity to the extent that twenty-three merchants had already hired blacks as clerks or cashiers. Finally, on December 3, city government and local businessmen conceded defeat. The white elite agreed to one of the most comprehensive racial reform programs in the twentieth century, acceding to virtually all the original NAACP demands. Evers hailed the agreement as the “greatest concession” ever made in the civil rights movement. Evers was right. The

⁴⁷Director to SAC, Jackson, January 11, 1966, FBI-Deacons file, no. 157-2466-105; Stokes, Hill interview.

⁴⁸Ibid.

bombing of George Metcalfe had backfired and fatally wounded Jim Crow in Natchez. Evers and Mayor Nossier announced the accord at a joint press conference, and Evers took the occasion to dance on the grave of Jim Crow. Standing next to the chagrined Mayor, Evers gloated to the media that the black movement had set out to make Natchez “a whipping boy” and warned the rest of Mississippi to “take heed.”⁴⁹

The city agreed to several civil reforms, including integrating schools and hospitals. Although not agreeing to mandatory courtesy titles, government and businesses promised to discharge clerks if they addressed blacks with demeaning terms. In addition to civil reforms, the Natchez elite also consented to several economic equity reforms, including hiring more blacks, upgrading current jobs, enforcing building codes to eliminate slums, creating a biracial committee to advise the City Council, and implementing a beautification program in black neighborhoods.⁵⁰

But the December 3 agreement did not end the movement in Natchez. Picketing at stores continued, and on December 22 a fight between a black picketer and a white man resulted in charges of police brutality. The following day Evers announced that the boycott was in effect again. The boycott formally ended March 3, 1966 when the city agreed to fire two policemen and reinstate several black store employees who had been dismissed in retaliation for the renewed boycott.

⁴⁹Francis Ward, “Economic Squeeze Highlights”; *New York Times*, 4 December 1965, p. 1; *Louisiana Weekly*, 11 December 1965; *New York Times*, 4 December 1965, p. 1.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

The end of the boycott brought an end to the Deacons work in Natchez. The chapter then turned its attention to civil rights campaigns in the surrounding area. On one occasion the chapter provided security for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Jackson, Mississippi and later offered to assist him in McComb. Some of the Natchez Deacons were deputized by Charles Evers and provided security for Evers as he organized in Southwest Mississippi, including trips to McComb, Hazelehurst, and Brookhaven. Although Evers had initially rebuked the Deacons, by the spring of 1966 he apparently began to see the advantages of having a paramilitary group at his disposal. With planned boycotts in the unchartered territories of Fayette and Port Gibson, Evers needed a security apparatus. "Deep down in himself, he knew he needed this protection," said James Stokes. "Because he wasn't going to get it from nowhere else. Nobody else was going to protect him." Evers began cooperating with the Deacons, using one of his assistants, Rudolph "Rudy" Shields, as a liaison. Though he was reluctant to discuss his use of force at the time, years later Evers admitted that he used armed guards and offensive violence in his Mississippi organizing. "We had our protective squad," Evers wrote in his autobiography, *Evers*. "We had our guns. We didn't go around bragging about it, but we were ready to enforce those boycotts, to die if necessary. And they knew we were ready."⁵¹

The Natchez Deacons went on to organize several Deacons chapters and informal groups in Port Gibson, Fayette (where Evers was eventually elected to office), Vicksburg, Kosciusko, Woodville, Centerville, and St. Francisville, Louisiana. The Natchez chapter

⁵¹On Port Gibson, see Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250; Stokes, Hill interview; Charles Evers, *Evers*, p. 134.

continued to meet and maintain activities through 1968. It continues to survive today as the "Natchez Sportsmen Club," having made a peaceful transition to a hunting club.⁵²

Three of the informal Deacons groups that Natchez organized had little activity: Fayette, Kosciusko, and Vicksburg. Fayette, a tiny, predominantly black town a short drive from Natchez, was the site of a NAACP boycott of white stores. Little is known about the Fayette chapter, other than it was headed by J. D. Washington. The Vicksburg chapter consisted of only a few members and had little success. The same was true for the Kosciusko chapter.⁵³

By January 1966, Port Gibson was still thoroughly segregated, untouched by the Civil Rights Act. When Port Gibson's white leadership learned that Charles Evers was planning a campaign in Port Gibson, they quickly sought out a group of compliant black leaders to negotiate a compromise. In response, an NAACP chapter was formed in Port Gibson to represent the black community in place of the white elite's minions. But even the new NAACP chapter, led by a local minister was considered too accommodating by the increasingly militant community. "He was a minister there, but the black community felt like he could be no spokesman for them," says Walker, "because whatever they [whites] told him, he was going to do that."⁵⁴

In the spring 1966, activists presented a list of demands to local authorities but had failed to receive an acceptable response. On April 1, Charles Evers announced a boycott of all white-owned businesses in Port Gibson, hoping that white merchants

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Stokes, Hill interview; Young, Hill interview.

⁵⁴Ibid.

would, in turn, pressure municipal and county government officials to accept the demands. Evers set the tone of the boycott when he announced that “uncle toms” would pay a price for violating the boycott. A local law enforcement official later testified in court that Evers told the rally, “If we catch any of you going in any of them racist stores, we’re gonna break your necks.” Evers denies he made the remark, but, as the events in Natchez demonstrated, the iconoclastic NAACP leader was more than willing to use threats and force to discipline dissidents and ensure unified action.⁵⁵

To assist with the boycott, Rudy Shields helped form the Port Gibson Deacons of Defense and Justice chapter in July 1966. Shields became a chapter member and served as the liaison between Evers and the chapter. A retired professional fighter and streetwise operator, Shields was a popular and accomplished grass-roots organizer. Like Evers, Shields had lived in Chicago for several years and returned to his native Mississippi to organize in the movement.⁵⁶

Although officially a Deacons chapter, the Port Gibson group quickly acquired the name “Black Hats of Claiborne County,” owing to their habit of wearing black hats to identify themselves to police and community members. George Walker, a lifelong resident of the county, became the chapter’s first president.⁵⁷

Walker had learned responsibility at a young age on a sharecropper farm. At the age of nine, Walker took over farming the cotton crop while his father staved off

⁵⁵State Court findings quoted in, “Blacks Terrorized into Boycotting White Stores,” *The Citizen*, November, 1976, pp. 4-14; Evers quoted in *ibid*; George Walker, interview by author, 19 April 1994, Warren County, Mississippi, tape recording.

⁵⁶*The Citizen*, “Blacks Terrorized,” p. 12.

⁵⁷Walker, Hill interview.

starvation by doing "public work," i.e. logging and other forms of hired labor. "We didn't never do nothing but work," recalls Walker. "Didn't think about nothing else. And just trying to do what we was supposed to do: take care of each other." Walker served three years in the Army in Korea as a corpsman and returned to a job at Thompson Funeral Home. He supplemented his income with masonry and electrical work.⁵⁸

In his youth, segregation seemed natural and immutable to Walker. He never entertained the thought of challenging Jim Crow. "It never dawned on me," says Walker. "I just thought this was a way of life." But in the 1960s, when Walker saw the movement unfolding around him, his outlook on segregation began to change radically. "And then after I got involved with everything else, everything started coming out. Looked like the sun was coming out where I could see. And it come to me--well maybe things not supposed to be like this."⁵⁹

As the head of the Port Gibson Deacons, Walker was preoccupied with ensuring that the black community complied with the boycott. Most blacks did, but a few were intractable. The NAACP resorted to forceful tactics to reign in boycott violators. At the regular Tuesday night NAACP meetings, Evers would read aloud a list of boycott violators and warn them that "the spirit's going to get you." In most cases the "spirit" assumed the form of a brick flying through a window. Boycott violators' names were also published in a mimeographed tabloid called the "Black Times."⁶⁰

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰*The Citizen*, "Blacks Terrorized," p. 12; Evers quote in, Walker, Hill interview.

Early in the boycott Evers recruited a group of "store watchers" to enforce the boycott, many of whom eventually made up the Port Gibson Deacons chapter. The watchers frequently used strong-arm tactics to enforce the boycott. They routinely stopped shoppers and intimidated them into not patronizing the store. If the shoppers had already made their purchases, the watchers would seize and destroy the purchased items. Boycott breakers received threatening calls and, on two occasions, assailants fired guns into their homes.⁶¹

The Deacons aided the "watchers" in enforcing the boycott, clearly crossing the line between defensive and offensive force. Their actions won them the enmity of many, particularly middle class blacks and ministers. "The ministers, in general, they were opposed," says Walker. "Some people hated us." Within a few months the Deacons found themselves blamed for any act of intimidation that occurred. Walker says the Deacons "got labeled for harassing people" because of their association with Evers, but he denies that the Deacons were intimidating people. "We were just there to see that the people were protected."⁶²

The Claiborne County Sheriff's office thought otherwise. The Sheriff's office suspected that the Port Gibson Deacons were involved in at least one shooting attack on a black boycott breaker. One night a car cruised by the home of Ed Gilmore and fired several shots into his house. Gilmore, a black mechanic, had been one of the high-

⁶¹*The Citizen*, "Blacks Terrorized," p. 11-12.

⁶²Walker, Hill interview.

profile boycott breakers. Within minutes, Sheriff's deputies stopped Elmo Scott as he and two other Deacons were driving on highway 61.⁶³

Although the Sheriff's office could never prove that the three Deacons were involved in the shooting, they did make a major find in Elmo Scott's car that night. Scott was carrying minutes of the Deacons meetings and a complete membership list of forty-two members. The incident was a convincing argument for the secrecy practiced by most other Deacons chapters. By keeping written records, the Port Gibson chapter had exposed itself to potential retaliation by police and racist forces. Indeed, the Citizens Councils of America subsequently published all of the names of the Deacons.⁶⁴

The Port Gibson chapter held regular meetings at several sites, including the First Baptist Church. Before meeting they would check the church for bombs and then post guards on the roof of an adjacent building. The chapter charged dues to pay for ammunition and individual members paid for their own weapons and CB radios that were used to coordinate actions and monitor Klan activity. The chapter conducted both motor and foot patrols, and even organized regular target practice at a target range south of Port Gibson. "We had our weapons everywhere we went," says Walker. But similar to the Jonesboro chapter, the Port Gibson Deacons did not publicly display their weapons.⁶⁵

⁶³Ibid; *The Citizen*, "Blacks Terrorized," p. 12.

⁶⁴Ibid.; The FBI reported that "members of the DDJ organization are again active in Port Gibson, Mississippi" and that "Negroes wearing black hats were on the streets on January 14, 1967, harassing other Negroes." See, Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

⁶⁵Walker, Hill interview.

In addition to patrolling, their duties included guarding marchers and keeping a watchful eye on picketers at stores. They occasionally exported their services to other towns, as in the case when they provided guard services in nearby Tillman. By staying in contact by CB radios in their cars and homes, the chapters in Port Gibson, Natchez, and Fayette comprised a regional defense network that could instantly summon assistance or communicate alerts.

The CB transmissions could be a source of fear as well as solace. Walker recalls a white man who spewed an unending torrent of threats on the CB radio. "He stayed on his walkie talkie and he was always talking about how he was going to 'send them monkeys back to Africa...going to send them to the moon before June.' The whole situation was scary for me." The murders of the civil rights workers in Neshoba County also haunted Walker and the Deacons. "Didn't nobody really know what was going to happen. The three fellas had just got killed up there. It constantly stayed on all our minds and all our thoughts."⁶⁶

The Klan went beyond mere insults and threats in Port Gibson. Alfred Lee Davis, a Deacon member, was once assaulted by armed white men during picketing at the Jones Furniture Store. Davis refused to back down in the face of a gun, and within minutes George Walker and several other Deacons came to his aid. With his reinforcements at his side, Davis told one of the white men that he didn't have "nerve enough to shoot him." Fortunately, the local sheriff intervened and defused the situation.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

The Port Gibson boycott became a landmark legal case when white merchants sued the NAACP for conducting an illegal secondary boycott. The merchants claimed that the NAACP had no valid complaint against their establishments; that the civil rights groups had targeted their businesses only to pressure city and county officials to accept the demands. After a prolonged court battle, on August 9, 1976, Hinds County Chancellor George W. Haynes awarded a \$1,250,699 settlement to the white merchants.

Walker says that the chapter finally dissolved in 1968 in response to complaints that the Deacons were intimidating blacks in the community. The Port Gibson NAACP had summoned the Deacons to answer a charge that they had thrown a brick at Alexander Collins' barber shop. The Deacons were incensed at having to defend themselves. "We done put our lives on the line out here. If they think that low of us, then we'll just let what happens happen." The need for self-defense did not end with the demise of the Deacons: Only one year later a shooting incident at a church led to a riot and shootout between blacks and the highway patrol.⁶⁸

The Deacons also found fertile organizing terrain in Wilkinson county in Southwest Mississippi. James Stokes from the Natchez chapter organized the Woodville chapter which eventually recruited approximately forty members from Woodville, Centerville, and rural areas in Wilkinson county. William "Bilbo" Ferguson served as

⁶⁸Ibid.

President of the Woodville Chapter and officers included Herman Burkes and Edward Caine.⁶⁹

In 1967 the Woodville chapter's leader, Bilbo Ferguson, was a thirty-two year old scrap metal worker. Raised by his grandparents, his family escaped sharecropping by buying their own land in the 1940s. They lived a humble but relatively independent life raising cotton, sweet potatoes, corn, and a few livestock. A Masonic order member and churchgoing man, Ferguson joined the NAACP in 1964 to, in his words, "help the advancement of black colored people."⁷⁰

Ed Caine, the spokesperson for the Woodville chapter, was a self-employed carpenter. Caine paid a price for his association with the Deacons. Caine lost all of his white customers after word circulated of his Deacons membership. Other chapter members included Henry Jones, another carpenter, Benjamin Groom, a logger, Elmo McKenzie, a saw mill worker, William Davis, and Earnest Tollivar. Nearly all the men were Masonic members as well.⁷¹

The Woodville Deacons chapter worked closely with the NAACP and conducted monthly meetings at the Negro Masonic Temple in Woodville. Attendance varied from a dozen to just two or three members. Although formed in 1965, the Woodville chapter

⁶⁹SAC, Jackson to Director, June 29, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-234; William Ferguson, interview by author, 12 November 1993, Percy Creek Community, Mississippi, tape recording. For a personal autobiographical viewpoint on Wilkinson county's black community, see Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dial Press, 1968).

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ferguson, Hill interview; Herman Burkes, interview author, 11 September 1994, Centerville, Mississippi, tape recording; SAC, Jackson to Director, June 29, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-234.

primarily assisted with marches in Natchez for the first two years of its existence. Then in August 1967, blacks became upset when they failed to win any county posts in the Democratic primary. In September the Wilkinson County branch of the NAACP led a series of protests and launched a boycott in Woodville to secure a new election and the appointment of blacks to Wilkinson County Election Commission. The NAACP was particularly upset with a Board of Education election in which a white candidate defeated a popular black leader, Anselm Joseph Finch. In that election several black teachers had supported the white candidate. The controversy sparked a protest led by James Joliff, President of the Wilkinson County NAACP, a tough uncompromising militant, called for a boycott of white merchants until a new election could be held.⁷²

On September 4, 1967, Joliff led a group of two-hundred blacks and a contingent of armed Deacons in a march to the Wilkinson County Training School on the outskirts of Woodville. The NAACP was demanding that school officials fire "Negro teachers there who did not favor Negroes running in the Democratic primaries." "We are going to have to bury those Negroes who have sold themselves out to the white people," Joliff told the marchers at a rally.⁷³

On the way to the school the marchers were confronted by forty-five steely-eyed Mississippi Highway State Patrolmen. In a subsequent skirmish, three Deacons were arrested for possession of illegal weapons. Later in the day Joliff and the Deacons

⁷²SAC, Jackson to Director, June 29, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-234; Ferguson, Hill interview; Ibid; SAC, Jackson to Director, September 6, 1967, not serialized; Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

⁷³*New York Times*, 5 September 1967, p. 31.

traveled the twenty miles to neighboring Centerville and staged a second march of approximately two-hundred blacks. This time a white man emerged from a gas station along the march route and menaced the marchers with a rifle. In an instant, twenty-five Deacons pulled weapons--carbines, 30-30s, pistols--and surrounded the bewildered white gunman. The gunman wisely retreated back into the gas station. Ferguson was philosophical about the confrontation. "It would have been my time or theirs."⁷⁴

The Deacons' armed action at the march brought Charles Evers into the controversy. Evers arrived in Woodville the following day and addressed a gathering of one thousand blacks at a Methodist church. In typical high-handed fashion, Evers ordered an end to the marches and demonstrations but promised that the boycott would continue. Deacon president Bilbo Ferguson later met with law enforcement officials to discuss the march incident. To mollify the police, the Deacons promised that members involved in the incident would be dismissed, but Ferguson never followed through with the dismissal. Five Deacons, including Earnest Tollivar, were later arrested on charges arising from the September 4th incident.⁷⁵

Lenox Forman, District Attorney for the Southwestern District of Mississippi, was also present at the September 4th march and was perturbed by the spectacle of the armed Deacons walking the streets with impunity. Forman authorized the highway patrol to confiscate the Deacons' firearms--as Governor McKeithen had attempted in Bogalusa in 1965. The NAACP protested the flagrant violation of the second amendment, pointing

⁷⁴Ibid.; Ferguson, Hill interview.

⁷⁵Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

out that the highway patrol was disarming the Deacons but not whites. Confiscating the Deacons' weapons at the September 4th march was not difficult, but Forman had a problem carrying out his policy in the following months. The Woodville Deacons maintained strict secrecy and law enforcement officials failed to learn the identity of all the group's members. As a result, the Mississippi highway patrol resorted to indiscriminately confiscating the firearms of all blacks. With complete disregard for the Bill of Rights, Mississippi law enforcement agents for several weeks arbitrarily stopped blacks in Wilkinson County--sportsmen and Deacons alike--and seized their weapons.⁷⁶

Over the next several months the Deacons guarded NAACP meetings equipped with walkie-talkies and CB radios. "They wouldn't have no meeting without the Deacons," recalls Ferguson. Although the Woodville chapter performed admirably, its record was marred by two shooting incidents. At one Deacons' meeting a young Deacon member argued with Deacon officer Ed Caine, then drew a revolver and shot and wounded Caine. In a second incident Leon Chambers, a young Deacon member from Woodville, was convicted of shooting a black deputy sheriff, Aaron Liberty. Although Gable McDonald, another Wilkinson county man, confessed to the crime, Chambers stayed in prison for several years for the offense.⁷⁷

In addition to strong chapters in Port Gibson, Natchez, and Woodville, there were Deacon groups and individual members spread throughout Mississippi. The Bogalusa and Jonesboro chapters recruited most of these contacts during organizing sorties in

⁷⁶SAC, Jackson to Director, September 6, 1967, FBI-Deacons file, not serialized; *New York Times*, 5 September 1967, p. 31.

⁷⁷Stokes, Hill interview; *New York Times*, 25 February 1973.

Mississippi from 1965 to 1966. Recruiters visited Greenville, Poplarville, Canton, Jackson, Meridian, Tougaloo, Columbia, Hattiesburg, Lexington, Holmes County, and Edwards County. Sometimes the Deacons merely advised local groups on how to set up their own security force. On other occasions they actually recruited members and established nominal chapters.⁷⁸

Typical of Bogalusa's organizing efforts were their activities in Columbia, Mississippi, in Walthal county. After receiving several requests for assistance from Columbia, Deacon members Royan Burris and Henry Austin traveled to the Mississippi town--only an hour's drive from Bogalusa. The Columbia civil rights activists told Burris that the freedom house had been damaged by arson; that whites wantonly drove by and fired shots into the house. "So we asked them, what was they doing, just sitting there letting people shoot at them," recalls Burris. "And they said, 'Well we don't have no other choice. If we shoot, the police arrest us'." Burris had little patience for this rationale. He told the Columbia men, "If I can walk out there and slap you, and you not going to slap me back, then I'll slap you anytime I get ready. But if I figure I'm going to slap you, and I'm going to be slapped back, I'll be skeptical about it."⁷⁹

Burris and Austin began guarding homes in Columbia and organizing a local chapter. To discourage the drive-by shootings without firing at the Klan, Austin worked with local men to booby trap the road. They drove nails into wooden planks, attached ropes to the planks, and then placed them in the road. They waited three nights until a

⁷⁸Recruiting forays are referred to in Thomas, Hill interview; Burris, Hill interview; and Austin, Hill interview.

⁷⁹Burris, Hill interview.

carload of Klansmen fell into the trap, flattening all their tires. The Klan never came back. The Deacons' guns had a chilling effect on the nightriders too, says Burris. The Klan "found out that the same type of guns that they had could kill them--just like they would kill us."⁸⁰

In addition to Mississippi, there were reports that the Bogalusa Deacons were recruiting individuals and forming chapters in Alabama as well. Sims traveled to Eutaw, a small city in Greene County Alabama, and later claimed to have established a chapter there. The FBI received information that a group of black men from Greene County, a SNCC stronghold, had deliberately spread a false rumor that the Deacons had organized a chapter. According to the FBI, the men had spread the rumor as "psychological retaliation to combat the parading and demonstrating of Klansman in and around Greene County."⁸¹

The Deacons also organized in Tuskegee, Alabama, the site of the Tuskegee Institute. A local man sent out a letter to Tuskegee residents soliciting membership in the Deacons organization. At least one meeting was held, but the extent of further organizing is unknown. CORE also had several projects in the Carolinas, and the connection between CORE and the Deacons soon brought the Deacons to the Southeast. Deacons from Atlanta were sent to provide protection at a voter registration

⁸⁰Investigative Report, New Orleans, January 10, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-104; Austin, Hill interview; Austin, Hill interview; Burris, Hill interview.

⁸¹Investigative report, New Orleans, March 28, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120; SAC, Birmingham to Director, September 2, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-56. SAC, Birmingham to Director, September 3, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-576.

demonstration on August 14, 1965 at Plymouth, North Carolina. The Deacons followed up in September offering their assistance again, but it appears that their August visit had achieved the desired results.⁸²

A militant movement in St. George, South Carolina, led to questions about the links between the Deacons and another shadowy self defense group, the Saints of St. George. The FBI suspected that the Saints of St. George was "affiliated" with the Deacons, but no direct link was uncovered. There was no question that blacks in the lowlands of South Carolina were extensively engaged in armed self-defense, Deacons or otherwise. Victoria Delee, a black veteran of the civil rights movement, recalls armed men guarding the homes in Reidsville and Dorchester. The defense activities were in part linked to the unique culture of the lowlands. In contrast to the sharecropping culture in the Northern part of the state, many blacks in the lowlands were independent farmers and tradesmen.⁸³

There was also Deacon activity south of St. George in Jacksonboro, South Carolina. The leader of the Jacksonboro Deacons was Bobbie Cox, a longtime civil rights activist and military veteran. It appears that the activists in Walterboro, Jacksonboro, and neighboring towns coordinated defense activities in the region. In April 1966, a group of fourteen black men claiming to be members of the Deacons attacked

⁸²On Tuskegee, see SAC, Mobile to Director, September 13, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, not serialized; On North Carolina, see SAC, Charlotte to Director, October 1, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-68.

⁸³On South Carolina, see FBI November 19, 1965, FBI-Deacons file; FBI November 26, 1965, FBI-Deacons file; and SAC, Savannah to Director, no form markings, September 25, 1967, FBI-Deacons file, not serialized; Victoria Delee, interview by author, 6 August 1994, Reidsville, South Carolina.

and beat two Klansmen who were putting up posters for a Klan rally. One of the Klansmen was Kelly Morris, the owner of a local cafe. All of Morris' black employees quit when Morris advertised that the profits from his cafe would go to the Klan. Even some local whites boycotted the restaurant. Morris' luck got even worse when he and the Klan subsequently parted ways and Morris himself became a target of a Klan cross burning.⁸⁴

There were reports of the Deacons' organizing efforts in several other states, including Georgia and Florida. At least one report indicates that there were Deacon members in Atlanta, although these may have been members from other chapters staying temporarily in the city. The Deacons also claimed to have chapters in North Florida. An FBI investigation revealed that the Deacons had indeed stirred interest in the region. In July 1965 local blacks gave serious thought to forming a chapter in Jefferson and Madison Counties, but there is no evidence that the chapter ever formed. Unconfirmed organizing activity was also reported in Houston where Kirkpatrick had attended college in the late sixties.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Klan incident cited in SAC, Columbia to Director, [April 13, 1966], FBI-Deacons file, not serialized; Lee Frazier, interview by author, 5 August 1994, Jacksonboro, South Carolina; Reverend James D. Riley, interview by author, 5 August 1994, Jacksonboro, South Carolina.

⁸⁵SAC, Mobile to Director, September 13, 1965, FBI-Deacons file, not serialized; SAC, Savannah, to Director, September 15, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-58; SAC, Savannah to Director, September 22, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-65; Houston reports in "Investigative Report," New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250 and SAC, Houston to Director, March 14, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466 (not recorded).

The Deacons' organizing efforts in the South were significant, certainly more influential than historians have previously recognized. They developed several effective chapters in the Deep South and recruited several hundred members. But more important than size was their influence on the grass-roots movement. Like a single cottonwood tree whose thousands of seeds are carried aloft to distant lands, the Deacons' message traveled far and wide across the fertile terrain of the South. In 1965 Thomas and Sims seemed to be everywhere in the Deep South. They crisscrossed Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, visiting scores of cities and spreading the gospel of self-defense. CORE organizer Ronnie Moore recalls that the Deacons were widely known in the region—by whites as well as blacks. "I think that the greater white community became afraid," says Moore. "You have to understand that the Klan in the south had a free hand with no threat of retaliation in any organized fashion until the Deacons were announced. And just the thought that there might be a legitimate, or reactionary response to Klan activities made the white community afraid." Virginia Collins, a New Orleans black activist, believes that the Deacons were a public expression of an old covert tradition. "Black people always did protect their young, but on the q. t. [quiet]," says Collins. The Deacons transformed a quiet practice into a political right. "It had an impact on all of Louisiana," says Collins.⁸⁶

⁸⁶Ronnie Moore, interview by author, 26 February 1993, New Orleans, Louisiana, tape recording; Virginia Collins, interview by author, 15 March, 1993, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Chapter 13

Up-South

In June 1965 the Deacons began to expand outside the South. Their initial forays into the North were primarily motivated by the desire to raise funds for Deacon organizing activity in the South. But the fundraising efforts in the North eventually led them to attempt to develop Deacons' chapters in Northern cities as well.

In their early stages, the Deacons derived most of their financial support from local sources: chapter fees, membership dues, and community contributions. It is impossible to determine the precise amount of the organizations' income. Few chapters kept financial records and most of the income was collected and controlled by Earnest Thomas and Charlie Sims, neither of whom kept records. Chapters did not closely monitor the treasury nor did they require receipts for reimbursements. Sims and Thomas casually disbursed cash for travel and other expenses.¹

By the summer of 1965, both Sims and Thomas had become full-time organizers for the Deacons, and both felt justified in compensating themselves for their work. Sims apparently used some of the income for his own personal expenses, a questionable but common practice in the civil rights movement. Sims and other members argued that they deserved to be compensated for loss of work due to organizational

¹Austin, Hill interview

duties. Sims normally collected chapter fees himself, so he had wide discretion on how to use the funds. Neither Sims nor Thomas grew rich off the Deacons, but the haphazard bookkeeping and indiscriminate spending raised questions about their motives and fueled ugly rumors about self-aggrandizement.²

As the Deacons' organizing expanded, their need for additional funds soon outstripped local support. National fundraising not only represented a new source of revenue, but it also presented an important opportunity for the Deacons to publicize their unique approach and win political support. The first major contribution to the Deacons from outside of Louisiana was the result of a Los Angeles fund raising effort headed up by black journalist Louis Lomax. Lomax raised \$15,000 for the Bogalusa movement after Sims appeared on Lomax's Los Angeles television show in June 1965. Fifteen thousand dollars was a staggering windfall for a small organization like the League, comparable to nearly two years income for a mill worker. Although Lomax's contribution went directly to the Voters League, it is probable that some of the funds underwrote the Deacons' activities as well (Charlie Sims was the Treasurer for the Voters League).

CORE organized most of the Deacons' fundraising forays to the West Coast. In July 1965 it was Earnest Thomas' turn to tap California for support. By this time, Thomas was billing himself as "Regional Vice-President and Director of Organization" for the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a self-appointed title that gave him autonomy from the Jonesboro Chapter. Thomas arrived in San Francisco the last week of July with

²Ibid.

the goal of raising funds and setting up a "Friends of the Deacons" organization that would serve as a permanent fund-raising support group. Thomas spoke at a CORE-sponsored reception on July 24, 1965 in Berkeley and at a rally at the Macedonia Baptist Church in San Francisco on the following day. On August 5 he attended a reception at the Sun Reporter Newspaper Building to raise funds for bail for eighteen persons jailed in Jonesboro. The two-week trip also produced a sympathetic article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Rights Army -- The Angry 'Deacons'." ³

While in California, Thomas also met with Bobby Seale, a member of RAM, who later helped found the Black Panther Party. Seale was impressed with Thomas and the Deacons and raised the possibility of forming a Deacons chapter in Los Angeles. Thomas let the subject drop, judging Seale too "radical" for the Deacons, but Thomas' visit planted a seed in Seale's mind, and Seale would later say that the Deacons served as an inspiration and model for the Panthers.⁴

The Deacons next turned their eyes north to Detroit. The Motor City had long been a center of black nationalist activity, dating back to the Marcus Garvey movement in the 1920s. Malcom X had spent a great deal of time in Detroit where his brother directed an important mosque for Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. One of the most prominent black nationalist organizations in Detroit was the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL) which was led by Richard Henry and had close ties to Malcom X and other nationalists. Like most black nationalist groups, GOAL admired the Deacons for

³Article cited in, SAC, San Francisco to Director, September 21, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-67.

⁴Thomas, Hill interview.

their willingness to challenge the nonviolent orthodoxy. "Birmingham shows . . . you just can't change the white man by letting him beat you over the head every day," said GOAL leader Reverend Albert B. Cleage in 1963. "I'm sick and tired of singing 'We Shall Overcome'." Socialist as well as nationalist, GOAL charged that the mainstream black civil rights movement was controlled by white liberal institutions that were steering them toward voter registration and desegregation and away from radical economic and political change.⁵

Like many Southern communities, Bogalusa had lost many of its black citizens to the industrial behemoth of Detroit. In August 1965, former Bogalusa residents Clement Johnson, Melvina Dexter, and Dexter's wife arranged for GOAL to sponsor a "freedom dinner" event in Detroit to honor Bob Hicks and raise funds for the Voters League. The League's attorneys had recently advised the League to maintain a clear distinction between itself and the Deacons--although overlapping membership made the distinction a legal fiction. To comply with their attorneys' advice, Bob Hicks attended the Detroit event as a representative of the Voters League, and Charlie Sims attended as the Deacon's official spokesperson.

Hicks and Sims may have been regarded as "militants" in Bogalusa, but their self-defense rhetoric paled by comparison to the revolutionary fervor of their hosts in Detroit. GOAL leader Richard Henry, who would later lead the militant Maoist-oriented Republic of New Africa, told the audience of three-hundred that violence was the only way "of letting 'Mr. Charlie' know that the black people were tired of being pushed around."

⁵Larry Still, "Talk is of a Revolution - Complete with Mixed Blood," *Jet*, 28 November 1963, pp. 14-19.

Emblematic of the changing attitudes toward violence, Congressman John Conyers and Congressman Charles Diggs both took the podium to praise the Deacons and defend the principle of self-defense, with Diggs observing that new situations called for "new techniques."⁶

Hicks and Sims both sounded moderate themes, talking of reconciliation and racial harmony. Sims told the audience that the "white man" respects three things: money, the vote, and force. The Deacons were going to fight until they had the "whole hog," declared Sims, since they were "backed up to the river and will drown or fight." The Detroit event was relatively successful, raising \$509 for the Voters League.⁷

Sims again went on the road in September 1965, this time with A. Z. Young to attend a San Bernardino, California fundraiser for the Voters League. Their old supporter Louis Lomax had organized a "Freedom Festival" at the Swing Auditorium to benefit the Bogalusa movement and the "victims of Watts rioting." Lomax had recruited an impressive line up of famous entertainers for the festival, including actor Dick Van Dyke and comedians Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge.⁸

But things began to unravel as the event drew near. Some of the Festival sponsors and stars withdrew at the last minute because, according to Lomax, the John Birch Society was applying "incredible pressure." The extremist right wing in San Bernardino was familiar with the Deacons: the city was home to Reverend Connie Lynch, the racist

⁶SAC, Detroit to Director, August 12, 1965, August 12, 1965, Detroit "Appearance of Robert Hicks," FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-40.

⁷Ibid.

⁸SAC, Los Angeles to Director, September 29, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-69.

leader who had descended on Bogalusa during the height of activities in July 1965. Lomax and the festival promoters frantically fought to salvage the event in face of mounting pressure. A. Z. Young appeared on local television and later spoke at a Unitarian church, where he was introduced as a member of the Deacons. Young tried to deflect the criticism that the funds raised by the event would help purchase guns and ammunition. Young announced that contributions would only go for children's clothes, and fines and bail for protestors. He told his television audience that the Klan was "on the way out" in Bogalusa. "They still ride, but now they are careful when they ride and where they ride," said Young. Despite Lomax's countermeasures, the right wing's campaign to discredit the Deacons in San Bernardino had considerable effect. Some stars canceled and a disappointingly small crowd of six-hundred attended the festival, entertained by Dick Gregory, singer Sally Jones, and a handful of local groups.⁹

The Deacons also attracted financial and political support from an assortment of Marxist organizations, including the Communist Party U.S.A., the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers World Party, and the Spartacist League. The more revolutionary of these groups, such as the Trotskyite Workers World Party and the Spartacists, admired the Deacons' use of armed violence and viewed the defense group as a precursor of the coming revolution. It was not long before these leftist groups descended on Bogalusa offering assistance and support.

In the summer of 1965, a young college student, Mark Klein, received permission from Sims to raise funds for the Deacons by creating a "Committee to Aid the Deacons."

⁹Ibid.

Klein sponsored meetings and organized a modest fund raising campaign at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas. He continued his work for the Deacons on the Cornell campus in the fall of 1965, but never generated significant funds.¹⁰

The Spartacist League was better suited for national fundraising for the Deacons. A small but highly disciplined Trotskyite faction, the Spartacists had contacts throughout the country. They were perhaps the most radical of the predominantly white leftist groups courting the Deacons. The New Orleans Spartacist chapter arranged a meeting with Charlie Sims and Henry Austin in 1965. The young Marxists began the meeting by melodramatically pulling their guns from under their shirts and laying them on the table. Henry Austin was not impressed. He thought the young leftists went overboard with "a lot of flattery and praise that the Deacons were the vanguard of the coming revolution and this general kind of crap." Austin regarded the Spartacists as reckless dilettantes. "Their attitude was, regardless if it was necessary to have a bloodbath in Bogalusa, they wanted to start a revolution right then and there." The Spartacists offered to assist the Deacons with defense duties and provide them guns if necessary. Though Sims politely declined their offer to help with patrols, he was not one to turn down money. The Spartacists publicized the Deacons in their national paper and organized a "buy a bullet for the Deacons" fund raising campaign that generated some contributions. The FBI suspected that the Spartacists had found an even more lucrative funding source for the Deacons: Fidel Castro.¹¹

¹⁰SAC, San Antonio to Director, August 9, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-35; San Antonio to Director, August 10, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-42.

¹¹Austin, Hill interview.

In the fall of 1965 an unidentified source contacted the FBI and charged that the Spartacists were financing the Deacons and speculated that Robert F. Williams was using the Spartacists to channel funds from the Cuban government to the Deacons. Following his legal problems in Monroe, Williams had fled to Cuba and since 1962 broadcast a radio program in Cuba titled "Radio Free Dixie." The program was beamed toward the United States and could be heard in some areas of the Deep South. Williams took to the airwaves preaching a doctrine of armed revolution to blacks in the South, so it was only logical that U.S. law enforcement officials might suspect a relationship between the Cuban government and the Deacons. Although there was no evidence that the Cuban government was funding the Deacons, the Deacons' close ties to revolutionary black nationalists and white leftists continued to raise suspicions in the intelligence community.¹²

Another leftist ally and funder of the Deacons, though not as radical and sectarian as the Spartacists, was the New York-based Workers World Party. A Trotskyite split-off from the older Socialist Workers Party, Workers World viewed the Deacons as the political heirs of Robert F. Williams and the vanguard of a growing self-defense movement. The emergence of the Deacons was a sign that despite "continuous propaganda of 'turn the other cheek' encouraged by the white ruling class, armed defense will be adopted by the black masses all over the U.S." When Henry Austin shot Alton Crowe in July 1965, the Workers World newspaper praised Austin's actions as

¹²Director to SAC, New Orleans, March 14, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-115; SAC, New Orleans to Director, March 23, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-117.

“commendable.” “Henry Austin, his fellow Deacons for Defense and all who take up arms along with them deserve the respect and support of every honest friend of Black Freedom,” editorialized *Workers World*.¹³

The Deacons’ connection to *Workers World* introduced the Bogalusa Chapter to the rarified world of left-wing politics in New York. In the fall of 1965, *Workers World* organized several New York fundraising tours for the Deacons, featuring Charlie Sims and Bob Hicks. *Workers World* kicked off the fundraising efforts in September, operating under the auspices of the “John Brown Commemoration Committee,” by conducting two fundraising dances for the Deacons.¹⁴

In the same month, the Deacons established a base in New York by creating a support organization, the “Friends of the Deacons for Defense and Justice (FDDJ),” housed at 271 W. 125th Street. The FDDJ chapter was coordinated by Rique LeSeur, a CORE member who had the title of “Special New York Assistant to Charles Sims.” The FDDJ office stayed open for approximately eight months, closing in April 1966. The support organization failed to raise any significant funds. LeSeur, who also served as treasurer of the Staten Island CORE chapter, parted with Sims on bad terms.¹⁵

¹³Phyllis Fishberg, “Klan Stopped Cold When Masses Fight Back,” *Workers World*, 29 April 1965; “Black Armed Groups Spread Across South,” *Workers World*, 10 June 1965.

¹⁴SAC, New York to Director, October 28, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-80; *Workers World*, 14, 28 October, 1965.

¹⁵SAC, New York to Director, June 30, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-140. The Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan has one item of correspondence from LeSeur written on stationary from the “Deacons for Defense and Justice - New York Chapter.” See, Rique LeSeur to unknown, 7 January 1966, Staten Island, New York, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor. Thanks to Caroline Melish for this citation.

Hicks and Sims returned for a second fundraising tour in October. The day before they arrived, supporters organized a street rally in Harlem to benefit the Deacons. Jesse Gray, a Marxist nationalist and respected community organizer, coordinated the rally, which featured speakers Leroi Jones and Mae Mallory. Jones, who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka, was a nationalist leader and celebrated writer. Mallory, an African American woman, had become a minor celebrity on the left when she was arrested along with Robert F. Williams in Monroe. A supporter of Workers World, Mallory took the lead in fundraising for the Deacons in New York, making an impassioned plea for funds at the Harlem rally.¹⁶

Hicks and Sims arrived in New York the following day, October 24, and held a press conference hosted by the Reverend William H. Melish, a radical white minister and member of the Board of Directors of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. As was becoming the practice, Sims and Hicks contradicted each other in their statements. While Sims escalated the rhetoric at the press conference, suggesting that perhaps the time had come to arm people on the picket line, Hicks sounded a more moderate theme and argued that "laws must be obeyed."¹⁷

Later that day, Sims spoke at a luncheon held at the Harlem Unemployment Center, sponsored by the Center's Women's Committee and the Washington Temple in Brooklyn. The following day Sims and Hicks spoke at a rally at Emanuel Temple that

¹⁶SAC, New York to Director, October 26, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-81.

¹⁷SAC, New York to Director, November 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-90.

once again featured Mae Mallory. Mallory highlighted the parallels between Robert F. Williams and the Deacons, but Sims appeared to distance himself from his newfound revolutionary partisans, muting his criticisms of nonviolent strategy and emphasizing the right of self-defense.¹⁸

The fundraising tour was cut short on October 25 when Hicks and Sims had to return to Bogalusa for a court date. Workers World had scheduled several events, including college campus rallies sponsored by Workers World's youth group, the Youth Against War and Fascism (YAWF). A rally scheduled at Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Harlem was conducted in the Deacons' absence. With Jesse Gray once again the rally master of ceremonies, Mae Mallory spoke to an enthusiastic group of four-hundred, asking for \$80 pledges to purchase guns for the Deacons. Several pledges were made and the hat was passed, raising an additional \$126. Sims returned from Bogalusa to continue the tour on October 29. He addressed a rally of three-hundred at a YAWF event at the Academy Hall, raising \$400, and later that night spoke at a Brooklyn event where he raised an additional \$200. In total, the New York tours had yielded nearly \$1000.¹⁹

In December, Sims traveled again to New York for another fundraising event, this time sponsored by popular leftist activist Mary Kochiyama. The trip was nothing short of a calamity for Sims. His car broke down in New York, his clothes were lost, and he raised little money. Sims began the tour by joining SNCC militant Cleveland Sellers in a

¹⁸SAC, New York to Director, November 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-90.

¹⁹*Workers World*, 28 October 1965; SAC, New York to Director, November 24, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-90; *Workers World*, 11 November 1965.

speaking event before a group of 150 at Kochiyama's home. Surrounded by leftist intellectuals and revolutionaries, the grizzled Sims must have felt like a fish out of water. When an audience member asked about the possibility of a black rebellion, Sims replied that even if he were in favor of rebellion, the time was not right. It is likely that Sims had figured out that leftist revolutionaries in New York had more fervor than money. To effectively raise funds, Sims would have to appeal to liberals and downplay the issue of violence. It was a dilemma that the Deacons had avoided in the past when they relied on local support from blacks in the South. Indeed, during his last tour of New York, Sims explicitly denied that contributions would support weapons purchases. He also placed increasing emphasis on centrist themes of jobs and voting. Sims' New York performance reflected the growing division within the Deacons' leadership: while Earnest Thomas was moving toward the left, Hicks and Sims remained anchored in the center, maintaining their distance from their new-found leftist allies.²⁰

In addition to Workers World and the Spartacists, the Deacons forays into the North for fundraising and organizational expansion brought them in contact with a variety of black nationalists. Foremost was the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).

RAM was a loose confederation of revolutionary black nationalists that began forming in 1961 during a National Student Association (NSA) conference in Madison, Wisconsin--at the same meeting that gave birth to the premier white anti-war organization, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). At the conference, Donald Freeman, an African-American student at Case Western Reserve College in Cleveland,

²⁰Investigative report, "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc." March 28, 1966 New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120.

Ohio, met several other black students who shared his emerging militant and nationalist viewpoint. Among them was Max Stanford, a student at Wilberforce College. Freeman and Stanford would eventually become RAM's principal leaders. The fledgling black nationalist network that emerged from the Madison meeting comprised young blacks radicalized by the Civil Rights movement in the South, as well as former members of the Nation of Islam and African nationalist organizations.²¹

In January 1963, a black study group calling itself the Revolutionary Action Movement formed in Philadelphia, organized by Stan Daniels and Playthell Benjamin. One year later the Philadelphia group combined with Freeman and Stanford and crystallized into the secretive cadre organization known as RAM.²²

RAM posed itself as a radical alternative to the mainstream black civil rights movement. The group published two periodicals, *Black America* and *RAM Speaks*, and worked with a wide range of black organizations, including Richard Henry's GOAL in Detroit and SNCC in the South. By 1964, RAM had grown to several clandestine units. Politically it fused nationalism and socialism, and became an openly Maoist communist organization devoted to the overthrow of capitalism. The group adopted a twelve-point program which included a call for rifle clubs and the creation of an underground vanguard.²³

²¹Akbar Muhammad Ahmad, *History of RAM - Revolutionary Action Movement*, (n.p., n.d.), in author's possession, pp. 6-8.

²²Ahmad, *History of RAM*, pp. 10, 20.

²³Ahmad, *History of RAM*, pp.11, 14, 21, 14-15.

Robert F. Williams was an icon for the young nationalists, and accordingly, RAM named him the organization's first International Chairman. Don Freeman became the Executive Chairman and Max Stanford was elected Executive Field Director. Detroit radicals played a prominent role in the organization, with James Boggs serving as the Ideological Chairman, and his wife, Grace Boggs, serving as Executive Secretary. In addition, Detroit GOAL leader Richard Henry, whom the Bogalusa Deacons had worked with, and his brother Milton Henry were both active in RAM.²⁴

Historians normally date the beginning of the modern black nationalist movement with Stokely Carmichael's Black Power speech at the Meredith March in 1966. The chronology fits neatly into the theory that black nationalism emerged as a result of frustration with the slow pace of change. In fact, the turning point for black nationalism came earlier, in 1964, when a series of events galvanized the modern nationalist movement. In March 1964, Malcom X left the Nation of Islam and began forming a secular nationalist alternative which gave impetus to nationalist organizing in general. The birth of RAM in 1964 would eventually give rise to the widely popular Black Panther Party and a range of other nationalist groups in the late sixties. Nineteen-sixty-four was a watershed for important ideological changes in the black nationalist movement as well. In February 1964, Robert F. Williams published an influential article in RAM's *Crusader* titled "Revolution without Violence." Williams departed from his previous position advocating self-defense and now argued for urban mass rebellions and guerilla warfare. Three months later *Monthly Review* published a series of articles on black

²⁴Ibid., 20.

nationalism that generated additional interest in the burgeoning movement. Among influential black activists and intellectuals, black nationalism had become a major political challenge to the nonviolent and integrationist orthodoxy by 1964. Indeed, in September 1965, several months prior to the Meredith March, the "Organization for Black Power," an umbrella group of black power organizations, had already convened a major national conference in Detroit.²⁵

Black nationalists began a concerted effort to influence students in the civil rights movement as early as 1964. In spring 1964, RAM and the Black Liberation Front (BLF) sponsored the Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism at Fisk University. At the conference, RAM sharply criticized SNCC, CORE and other mainstream nonviolent groups. But while the black nationalists were publicly attacking the nonviolent movement, RAM was simultaneously infiltrating CORE and working with SNCC in an attempt to pose an alternative strategy and win recruits to the nationalist movement. As a result of their factionalizing inside CORE and SNCC, RAM seriously antagonized black-white relations in the groups.²⁶

But RAM did manage to gain a beachhead in the civil rights movement in the South, ensconcing themselves in several CORE chapters in Spring, 1964. RAM also proposed to John Lewis that SNCC establish an experimental self-defense project in Greenwood, Mississippi. Though Lewis acceded to the request, Bob Moses soon learned that the Greenwood office was arming and sent Stokely Carmichael to halt the practice.

²⁵*Crusader* article cited in *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁶Ahmad, *History of RAM*, p. 20.

Officially, SNCC did not discourage self-defense by Southern blacks, but SNCC policy dictated that staff remain unarmed. The question of self-defense was splitting SNCC in 1964 in the same way that the Deacons would divide CORE in 1965. One faction argued that SNCC should openly endorse armed self-defense, and the other faction, led by James Foreman and Bob Moses, supported self-defense but argued that it should be clandestine to avoid legal harassment and repression.²⁷

RAM's attempt to import self-defense groups to the South was not unique. In March 1964, Malcom X had issued a call for blacks to form "Negro rifle clubs" to resist racist attacks, proclaiming that the black man should "fight back whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked." Malcom's clarion call went unheeded with a one notable exception. When a white clergyman was crushed by a bulldozer in a civil rights protest in Cleveland, Ohio, the tragedy sparked the development of the Medgar Evers Rifle Club in Cleveland, led by a local black housing inspector, Louis Robinson. In July 1964, Malcom X, growing impatient with the lack of response to his call for rifle clubs, publicly offered to provide defense for Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Farmer in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer. Ironically, the Deacons were quietly organizing their first self-defense group at the very moment that RAM and Malcom X were foundering in their efforts to develop self-defense groups in the South.²⁸

²⁷Ahmad, *History of RAM*, pp. 15, 20, 28; James Foreman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C.: Open Hand Publishing Inc., 1985), pp. 374-375.

²⁸*New York Times*, 13 March 1964; Sobel, *Civil Rights*, pp. 283-284; "North's First Rights Martyr Made in Bloody Cleveland," *Jet*, 23 April 1964, pp. 16-20.

Although stymied in their efforts to build paramilitary rifle clubs in Greenwood, RAM did succeed in establishing rifle clubs in some cities in the North. Following Malcom X's lead, RAM publicly called for northern blacks to form an army of rifle clubs to defend blacks in the South in the coming "civil war." Richard Henry took to the airwaves in the summer of 1964 calling for the "formation of rifle clubs by Negroes all across the North." The rifle clubs were critical, according to Henry, because blacks in the South "will very shortly begin guerilla warfare against white terrorists" and that "white bigots will react by slaughtering wholesale, helpless Negroes---men, women and children."²⁹

RAM's influence would grow in years following 1964. But the organization collapsed in 1967 when several of its members were arrested on charges of organizing a terrorist plot in Philadelphia.³⁰

RAM saw great promise in the Deacons. The Marxist organization believed that black rifle clubs would provide the infrastructure for a revolutionary army, and they were determined to recruit the Deacons to their brand of revolutionary nationalism. But the black nationalists would have no more success in converting the Deacons than had the New York white leftists. "They were very unpolitical," complained Virginia Collins, a RAM member and a lifelong Garveyite nationalist from New Orleans. Collins, the only female RAM member in the South, met with the Deacons in Jonesboro and Bogalusa, but

²⁹Ahmad, *History of RAM*, p. 28; "Form Rifle Clubs, Militant Detroiters Urges," *Jet*, 16 July, 1964, p. 7

³⁰Ahmad, *History of RAM*, pp. 30-31, 33, 35, 16-17. On imprisonment, see, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) files.

had little luck in moving them toward black nationalism. Collins found them independent, stubborn, and lacking the political sophistication to advance beyond their political views. And, according to Collins, the Deacons' men were plagued by the attitude that "women can't tell you nothing." When Collins abandoned her plan to recruit the Deacons, national RAM officials implored her to renew her effort; they were confident that the Deacons could be "politicized" to a revolutionary viewpoint. "If you think so," Collins responded curtly, "then you politicize them."³¹

The Deacons crossed paths with RAM repeatedly in 1965 and 1966, particularly in their efforts to raise funds and develop Deacons Chapters in the North. Their first contact with RAM was through the GOAL fundraiser that Hicks and Sims attended in Detroit in August 1965. Richard Henry was not only the President of GOAL, but he also served as the Treasurer for RAM. The connection with RAM triggered an intense FBI investigation of the links between RAM and the Deacons. RAM was a revolutionary organization with strong ties to communist movements around the world, and the FBI suspected that the Deacons might become the unwitting pawns of political extremists. Several months after the Detroit GOAL event, Sims connected with RAM again, this time appearing with RAM's director, Don Freeman, at a Cleveland event on December 19, 1965.³²

³¹Collins, Hill interview.

³²SAC, Detroit to Director, June 10, 1965, FBI-Deacons file. 157-2466 unserialized; Ibid; "Revolutionary Action Movement," June 10, 1965 and appendix "Revolutionary Action Movement," On Sims' Cleveland appearance with RAM see Investigative report, "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc." March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120.

Of all the Deacons leaders, Earnest Thomas probably had the closest ties to RAM and the black nationalist movement. In September 1965, Thomas represented the Deacons at a conference of several hundred black militants organized by the Organization for Black Power (OBP). The OBP was another attempt by the emerging black nationalist movement to develop a nationwide nationalist coalition organized around a common program. Organized by James and Grace Boggs, attendees included Jesse Gray; John Strickland of the Northern Student Movement; the Associated Community Teams (ACT) represented by Nahaz Rogers and his wife from Chicago; Julius Hobson, chairman of the Washington D.C. ACT chapter; William R. Davis of the Freedom Action Committee of Philadelphia; and popular Detroit activist Reverend Albert B. Cleague, Jr.. The Boggs' were both members of RAM, but were not officially representing the group at the OBP conference. Jesse Gray invited RAM to attend and the organization sent representatives from New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Portland. The RAM invitation upset some members of the OBP steering Committee who feared that RAM was planning to take over the OBP.³³

Earnest Thomas was growing more militant in his politics in late 1965, but he still kept RAM and other revolutionaries at arms length at the OBP conference. Thomas addressed the conference and generally adhered to the Deacons' political program, cautioning the audience against committing acts of violence. The only sign of his changing political views was when he expressed opposition to the Vietnam war.³⁴

³³SAC, WFO to Director, September 9, 1965, FBI-Deacons file originally serialized as no. 157-3022-156.

³⁴Ibid.

RAM quickly established themselves at the OBP conference as the most militant critics of not only the "ruling class," but their nationalist allies as well. As Marxist Leninists, RAM viewed the Vietnam war as an act of American imperialism. At the conference Thomas, the military veteran, listened to RAM members urge blacks to resist the draft, tear up selective service cards, and, if drafted, resist military orders. RAM members also criticized the OBP for being too moderate in their approach to problems of housing, jobs, education, and police brutality. On the second day of the conference RAM caused a stir when ten of their members equipped with M-1 automatic weapons attempted to enter the meeting. The armed group was turned away and told to return without their weapons.³⁵

RAM clearly had the momentum at the conference--and in the mass movement as well. Later that afternoon RAM organized a street rally that attracted several thousand people. Speakers included several militants who would eventually work with the Deacons in the North, including ACT leader Julius Hobson from Washington D.C.. The contacts Thomas made at the OBP conference and other black nationalist events provided a network for building Deacon chapters in the North.

In August of 1965, as events were winding down in Bogalusa and Jonesboro, Thomas and Sims began organizing Deacons chapters in the North, primarily building on a preexisting network of socialist revolutionaries and black nationalists. Because of the political nature of their recruiting contacts, the social composition and political ideology of these Northern chapters were substantially different from chapters in the South. For

³⁵Ibid.; Thomas, Hill interview.

the most part, this Northern organizing was not coordinated between the Jonesboro and Bogalusa chapters. Thomas organized when and where he pleased, regardless of Sims' wishes, and even independent of the Jonesboro chapter-- much to their consternation. Thomas enjoyed some success organizing Northern chapters, with the Chicago Chapter standing out as the most notable.

In contrast, Sims found the North an inhospitable organizing terrain for the Deacons. Nonetheless, Sims managed to form the first northern Deacons chapter in Boston. Sims began by organizing a support group for the Deacons in August 1965, the "Boston Friends of the Deacons." Led by local black activist Roland Bedford, the support group quickly evolved into a formal Deacons chapter. The Boston chapter was closely associated with the Boston Action Group (BAG), a local organization with links to the Maoist-communist Progressive Labor Party, which published a newspaper "Rebellion" and held public meetings addressing hot-topic issues of police brutality and the Los Angeles riot. By October, the Boston Deacons chapter was struggling with only four members and little activity. Sims traveled to Boston in July 1966, to shore up the chapter, but his efforts were to no avail. Henry Austin made a second futile attempt to revive the organization in 1967 during a trip to raise money for ammunition and bail.³⁶

Cleveland became the second target for Deacon organizing in the Winter of 1965. On December 19, 1965, Sims traveled to Cleveland and addressed a public meeting along

³⁶SAC, Boston to Director, October 6, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-70; SAC, Boston to Director, November 3, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-85; Investigative Report, November 22, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-176; Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

with RAM's director, Don Freeman. The following month, Henry Austin, whom Sims had appointed Public Relations Director for the Deacons, spoke at a Socialist Workers Party Forum at the Eugene V. Debs Hall in Cleveland, announcing that he was organizing a local chapter of the Deacons. Cleveland already had one self-defense organization, the Medgar Evers Rifle club formed in 1965 in the wake of a civil rights protest. But the Cleveland Deacons chapter would assume a much more militant and nationalist stance than the Evers Club or the Southern Deacons chapters. Four months later, in April of 1966, Harlell Jones, a local black nationalist, appeared for a taping for a local television program and identified himself as vice-president of the Cleveland chapter of the Deacons. An FBI memo on the interview reported Jones saying that the Deacons were armed with high-powered rifles to protect blacks against the Klan and the police, who were agents of the Klan. Jones also predicted riots in Cleveland and said that the first ones to suffer would be the "uncle tom negroes." Jones also made reference to being a part of the Bandung World, a concept associated with RAM.³⁷

Throughout the 1960's the FBI sought to disrupt the black organizations through its COINTELPRO program, a "dirty tricks" and "black bag" operation. The Cleveland Deacons chapter became a victim of the only documented COINTELPRO operation against the Deacons. Harlell Jones, the self-declared vice-president of the Cleveland Deacons chapter, was raising money for a local community center that served as a black nationalist meeting place, the JFK house. When the FBI learned that Jones was soliciting

³⁷Investigative Report, "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc.," March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120; Investigative Report, "Deacons of Defense and Justice," January 10, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-104.

funds from area churches, they attempted to undermine his fund raising by circulating a phony letter to the churches that condemned Jones and his cohorts as radicals.³⁸

Though the Cleveland chapter never materialized as an active organization, the Bogalusa and Jonesboro Deacons continued to make several organizing and fundraising trips to Cleveland from 1966 to 1967. On October 23, 1966, Earnest Thomas and Henry Austin were back in Cleveland to address a meeting sponsored by RAM, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and the Cleveland Committee to End the War in Vietnam. Austin made a second appearance two days later at a meeting of the Committee to End the War in Vietnam, his comments reflecting his steady movement toward Marxism-Leninism.³⁹

Austin made several trips back to Cleveland working closely with nationalists in the United Black Brotherhood and white anti-war groups. The FBI followed his activities closely, even reporting on an antiwar poster Austin had created and circulated under the auspices of the Deacons. The poster featured a large picture of Uncle Sam with the caption "Uncle Sam Needs You Nigger." The poster also carried the line, "Support white power--travel to Vietnam, you might get a medal." The broadside came to the FBI's attention when a group of young people showed up to sell the poster at a press conference for the Ohio State Communist Party on February 12, 1967.⁴⁰

³⁸SAC, Cleveland to Director, April 21, 1966, not recorded; Investigative report, July 21, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-152.

³⁹Investigative Report, November 22, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-176; Austin, Hill interview.

⁴⁰SAC, Cleveland to Director, June 14, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-221; SAC, Cleveland to Director, March 30, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-205.

Philadelphia was the next organizing target for the Deacons. In December 1965, Sims had established a beachhead in Philadelphia during a fund raising tour. The Bogalusa leader appeared on WDAS radio and attended a small fund raising event hosted by local activist Martha Ricca. Five months later Earnest Thomas leaked the news that the Deacons were organizing a chapter in the city of brotherly love. Thomas had extensive political and personal ties to Philadelphia. He had worked closely with RAM, which had a strong presence in Philadelphia, and the Deacon leader frequently visited his sister who lived there. On April 17, 1966, Thomas made the front page of the Sunday edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, with the headline "Negro Group Vows to make City a Hot Spot." In an interview with a freelance reporter investigating "Negro gun clubs," Thomas had mentioned that the Deacons were planning a chapter in Philadelphia. Philadelphia had been wracked by a riot in 1964, and Thomas predicted a repeat of the riot if conditions did not change in the city. "There will be a lot of killing if something doesn't happen soon," warned Thomas. "The Negro lives in a violent country. We can't see how he can continue to live without weapons." Thomas said the Philadelphia Deacons chapter, which was being organized by an unnamed teacher, planned to create rifle clubs, and arm and train blacks to fight "brutal police and the white man's power." The rifle clubs would "make sure our people know how to shoot so they can defend themselves," said Thomas. "We are going to let the Philadelphia power structure know that we want action and, if there is trouble, we will know how to defend ourselves against the police."⁴¹

⁴¹On the Ricca event, see Investigative report, "Deacons of Defense and Justice, Inc." March 28, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-120. *The*

Mainstream black groups did not welcome the arrival of the Deacons. Sadie T. M. Alexander, Chairman of the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission, scoffed at Thomas' plans for the City of Brotherly Love. "I cannot imagine what the Deacons, residents of Louisiana, know about Philadelphia that would cause them to suggest that their Negro citizens need to be armed."⁴²

While there is no doubt that there were members of the Deacons in Philadelphia, there is no evidence that a Philadelphia chapter was ever formed. The FBI suspected that the chapter's anonymous leader was using the Deacons as a front for local black nationalists (RAM had a strong presence in Philadelphia). J. Edgar Hoover later ordered the Philadelphia office to investigate local Deacons for "information concerning the supply of firearms allegedly in the possession of this group."⁴³

In the spring of 1966, Earnest Thomas was also pursuing a chapter in Washington, D.C., this time through his contacts with the black nationalist Associated Community Teams (ACT). ACT was formed in 1964 to unite black nationalist dissenters opposed to the nonviolent orthodoxy. In contrast to RAM, ACT was not a revolutionary or socialist cadre group. From the outset, the new organization sought a broad base by advocating militant reformism with an overlay of black nationalism.

Philadelphia Enquirer, 17 April, 1965, p.1. On organizing efforts in Philadelphia see also, Director to SACs, Newark, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington Field Office, April 20, 1966, FBI-Deacons file, unrecorded memo; SAC, Philadelphia to Director, April 17, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-127; SAC, WFO to Director, April 29, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-134.

⁴²*The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 17 April, 1965, p.1.

⁴³Director to SACs, Chicago, New Orleans, and Philadelphia, September 14, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-241.

Discussions about forming ACT began at the GOAL conference in Detroit in fall, 1963. The conference came on the heels of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963. The attack, which killed four black girls, was one of several bombings that occurred in 1963 in Birmingham, including a bomb at the home of Reverend A. D. King. The unabated terrorism convinced many black activists that nonviolence was political suicide; that the Gandhian strategy presumed a latent compassion among whites that clearly did not exist. Suffering had not brought compassion. Moreover, in the fall of 1963 whites seemed indifferent to the fate of the Civil Rights bill that was languishing in Congress.

The bombing of Reverend King's home triggered a three-hour riot on May 12, 1963, involving 2,500 blacks. Police were attacked, several stores were burned, and whites were randomly assaulted. Arrayed against the rioters were not only white law enforcement officials, but also black civil defense workers and moderate black leaders. The riot, and subsequent police brutality, forced President Kennedy to dispatch three-thousand federal troops to Birmingham and threaten to federalize the Alabama National Guard.⁴⁴

The church bombing on September 15 ignited a second round of riots in which police killed two young black boys. Dr. King sent an urgent telegram to President Kennedy calling for immediate federal intervention and promising that King would "plead with my people to remain nonviolent in the face of this terrible provocation."⁴⁵

⁴⁴Sobel, *Civil Rights*, pp. 184-185.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 187.

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of the 1963 Birmingham riots. Black retaliatory violence introduced the powerful dimension of force and coercion into the civil rights campaign. The alternatives confronting whites before Birmingham were nonviolent protest or the status quo: now the choice was nonviolence or violent civil disorders. For many whites, the threat of violence transformed King from a radical into a moderate.

It was this combination of black disillusionment and a growing appreciation of the power of violence that gave rise to ACT and other militant organizations in 1964. Prior to 1964, militants and black nationalists had few alternatives to nonviolent organizations. Their choices were limited to the Nation of Islam, black nationalist groups, or one of the Marxist-Leninists organizations such as RAM. But neither Islam nor Marxism-Leninism had proved capable of attracting broad-based black support. ACT attempted to broaden the nationalists' political base by advocating a secular militant reformism. Their strategy might best be described as "autonomist": winning reforms through coercion rather than appeals to conscience or moral suasion. Between the revolutionaries and the nonviolent reformers, ACT was, as they described themselves, a "third force action group" critical of the "polite" tactics of mainstream civil rights organization and unwilling to "function in a manner that is acceptable to white people."⁴⁶

ACT had assembled a broad coalition that included Malcom X; Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell; Gloria Richardson, a popular leader in the militant movement in Cambridge, Maryland; Chicago school boycott leader Lawrence Landry; A.

⁴⁶"Announce Formation of New Super-Militant Group," *Jet*, 7 May 1964. P. 7.

A. Rayner and Nahaz Rogers from Chicago; and Julius Hobson, a militant leader from Washington, D.C. In its first press conference in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1964, ACT launched an attack on the quiescence of the civil rights organizations, condemning the mainstream groups for being ineffective and failing to address the needs of Northern blacks.⁴⁷

Tapping into the ACT network, Earnest Thomas moved to establish a chapter in Washington, D.C. in 1966. Thomas had worked closely with Julius Hobson, the former CORE leader who now headed up the Washington chapter of ACT. On February 26, 1966, Hobson, Thomas, and Dick Gregory spoke at a militant rally of more than three hundred at radio station WUST's Music Hall in Washington. Thomas announced that Hobson would be the coordinator of the Washington Deacons chapter which would be formed the following summer. Thomas said the chapter would train members to deal with "police brutality" and other attacks on civil rights demonstrators. Three weeks later Hobson and some members of ACT and the Deacons picketed the fifth precinct of the Metropolitan Police Department. Hobson told the *Washington Post* that the Deacons in attendance were helping to form a chapter of the Deacons to protest police brutality.⁴⁸

William Raspberry, the black columnist for *The Washington Post*, made a preemptory attack on the Deacons in April. Based on an interview with Hobson, Raspberry penned a column raising questions about the need for a Deacons chapter in the nation's Capitol. Raspberry noted that Hobson had identified police brutality--and city

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸SAC, WFO to Director, March 16, 1966 FBI-Deacons file no.157-2466-116.

officials' tolerance of the misconduct--as key reasons for forming a Deacons chapter. Hobson had resigned from the Police Chiefs Citizens Advisory Board after seeing hundreds of brutality complaints go unanswered, and now, according to Raspberry, Hobson reasoned that this official complacency meant, "Negroes must strike back at brutal officers."⁴⁹

"It is a dangerous theory," warned Raspberry. "It is one thing for a Negro in Bogalusa to take a shot at a fleeing car whose occupants have just fired into a home. It is quite another for an armed group to go gunning for a policeman because they have heard rumors of brutality."⁵⁰

Hobson was furious about the column, and fired off a letter to the *Post* denying that he had "told Mr. Raspberry or any other newspaper reporter that I think the Negro citizens of D. C. should arm and attack the policemen of this city." Hobson said that he had only told Raspberry that "there is widespread police brutality practiced with official sanction against black citizens of this city," and that "the black community should organize to combat this brutality." Hobson signed the letter as "Chairman of ACT and friend of the Deacons of Defense."⁵¹

Apparently Hobson's relationship with the Deacons did not advance beyond the "friend of the Deacons" stage. No Deacons chapter was formed in Washington, and the evidence indicates that the threat to form a chapter was a ruse to force concessions from local authorities, a tactic that the Deacons had used in Philadelphia, Cleveland, and

⁴⁹SAC, WFO to Director, March 31, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-121.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

several Southern cities. Hobson later admitted to FBI sources that he and Thomas had used the Deacons as a psychological ploy; that they had never intended to form a chapter, and, in the FBI's words, had only hoped that the threat would "bring about changes in the attitudes displayed by the privileged toward the less fortunate as it regards jobs, housing, and freedom from police brutality."⁵²

Thomas continued to collaborate with Hobson and ACT throughout the spring of 1966. Hobson held a press conference in April 1966, announcing that a Committee had begun plans for a "Black March on Washington" to protest a scheduled White House conference on civil rights. The conference, titled "To Fulfill Our Rights," had caused resentment among civil rights organizations when the Johnson administration refused to invite representatives of SNCC and CORE. Hobson scolded the administration for failing to include militants and "ghetto organizations" in the planning session. Hobson named Thomas as a member of the planning committee organizing the protest, along with Mississippi civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer and New York activist Jesse Gray. Like many of ACT's national organizing efforts, the protest march fell far short of its plans, ending in a picket line with no Deacons present.⁵³

While the Washington chapter fell flat, at least one Deacons chapter was formed spontaneously in the North--without the knowledge or consent of the Deacons' national leadership. In April 1966, a Newark, New Jersey group of black activists formed a secret chapter of the Deacons out of "admiration" for the group, according to the FBI. The

⁵²SAC, WFO to Director, March 16, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-116.

⁵³*Jet*, 21 April, 1966, p. 5.

bureau learned of the Newark chapter while investigating comments Earnest Thomas had made regarding an anti-Klan rally in Military Park in Newark. The chapter's founder was not named, but evidence points toward Clarence Coggins, a black leftist, a leader in the Negro Labor Vanguard Conference, and an associate of Jesse Gray and other nationalists. The Newark chapter had been quietly conducting meetings at members' homes and had attracted approximately seventy individuals interested in participating. The chapter's leader told the FBI that the group had an "implied" agreement to defend one another from the Klan, and described himself as a law-abiding "god fearing" individual, and assured the FBI that the chapter would even aid in preventing riots in Newark.⁵⁴

Despite Sims' and Thomas' organizing efforts, the Deacons had little success in the Northeast. By 1966, the Boston chapter was inoperative, and the Cleveland and Philadelphia chapters were more myth than substance. Chicago was to be the only success story for the Deacons in Malcom X's "Up-South."

⁵⁴SAC, Philadelphia to Director, April 18, 1966. FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-128; SAC, Newark to Director, May 25, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-136.

Chapter 14

Foundering in the North

The *Chicago Daily News* carried a story on October 15, 1965 that gave the Chicagoans their first warning that the Deacons were heading North. "Militant Negroes Here Forming Armed Unit to Fight the Klan," announced the headline of a story based on an interview with Earnest Thomas. News reports in preceding days had detailed the resurgence of the Klan in nearby Indiana and Wisconsin, and Thomas was pointing to the renewed Klan activity as justification for the Deacon's expansion North.¹

"We believe there are Klansman active in this city and we're confident they have thousands of sympathizers," Thomas told the *Daily News*. The Deacon leader's claims of a mounting Klan resurgence in Chicago were met with considerable skepticism by both blacks and whites. Chicago had its share of racists, as the response to Dr. King's campaign would soon demonstrate, but the windy city's most violent racists were more likely to wear a badge than a sheet. Racism in the North manifested itself in police brutality and discrimination, but seldom as vigilante violence. Thomas recognized the limitations of the Deacons' anti-Klan strategy in the North, and in his public statements he introduced objectives for the group that adapted to the specific local conditions. The

¹"Militant Negroes Here Forming Armed Unit to Fight the Klan," *Chicago Daily News*, 15 October 1965.

Deacon strategy in Chicago would center on self-defense against police brutality and opposition to political corruption. Thomas told the *Daily News* that the Deacons would also “operate freedom patrols” that would “be alert for police brutality against Negroes”—a tactic that the Black Panthers would later successfully exploit. In addition, the Deacons would “campaign against shady deals that are often pulled off on us Negroes.” Thomas assured the *Daily News* that the Deacons were law-abiding and peaceful. “We don’t teach hatred.”²

Following months of futile attempts by the Deacons to fit their philosophy into the Procrustean bed of nonviolence, Thomas’ opening salvo in Chicago marked a turning point in the Deacons political thinking. Evoking the spirit of Malcom X, Thomas bluntly criticized Dr. King and the nonviolent orthodoxy. “Talk doesn’t solve anything,” scoffed Thomas. “We Negroes are not going to gain our freedom by talking. We Negroes can’t continue to let the Klan and similar hate groups trample on us.” Thomas mused that perhaps the difference between him and King was the difference between national and local organizing. “King and I really live in two different worlds,” said Thomas.³

Chicago’s black press had supported the Deacons’ actions in the South, but now balked at the idea of importing an armed black movement to Chicago. The respected *Chicago Defender* sharply rebuked the Deacons, ridiculing the idea that the Klan posed a threat in Chicago. “I don’t know these fellows or anything about their activities,” Timuel Black of the Negro American Labor Council told the *Defender*. “We don’t run with this

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

kind of people.” Reverend Lynward Stevenson, militant president of the Woodlawn Organization, dismissed the Deacons as vigilantes ignorant about democratic politics. The Deacons only “know how to get rid of the Klan,” Stevenson told the *Defender*. “They don’t know anything about law and order and the ordinary ways of achieving justice.”⁴

The hostile reception by the black political establishment did not alter Thomas’ plans. During his visit in October, Thomas appeared on two black radio programs: the Lou House Show and, along with Nahaz Rogers, the Wesley South Show on WVON radio. On the WVON program, Thomas boasted that he could bring ten-thousand Deacons to Chicago to confront the Klan. Listeners who called in sounded dubious. Some callers challenged Thomas’ assertion that the Klan was a menace in Chicago; others chided Thomas for professing that he had ten-thousand Deacons at his disposal. Grasping for a role for the Deacons in the North, Thomas suggested that the Deacons could protect demonstrators from attacks by police, as the Deacons had done in the South. But listeners were not convinced that the safety of protesters was in jeopardy in Chicago. It was a cool reception for Thomas.⁵

While the interview did not go well for Thomas, it did allow him to clarify his views on nonviolence. Thomas told his listeners that many of the civil rights organizations were training blacks “into submission.” In contrast, the Deacons instilled

⁴“Rights Leaders Reject Plan to Start Deacons,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 October 1965, p.3.

⁵SAC, Chicago to Director, November 2, 1965, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-84. This document contains a complete transcript of the WVON program.

manhood in black men, and manhood depended on the willingness to protect oneself. It was a quality missing in most blacks over the age of twenty-one, said Thomas.⁶

Thomas' comments were the most explicit exposition to date of the Deacons' philosophy. Freedom depended on manhood, and manhood meant the will to defend oneself. Without manhood status, all rights were meaningless. Moreover, black men could not attain manhood through nonviolence because nonviolence denied them the right of self-defense. For blacks to be free, whites had to regard them as *social* as well as *civil* equals.

On Sunday, October 24, the Deacons for the first time engaged the partisans of nonviolence in public debate. The West Side Organization (WSO), a Chicago black activist organization, invited Thomas and Nahaz Rogers to participate in a debate on the topic, "Non-violence vs Self-Defense." Their opponents were two of SCLC's ablest representatives, the Reverend C. T. Vivian and James Bevel.

In many respects, Thomas and Rogers were badly mismatched in the WSO debate. Vivian and Bevel were bright, eloquent and formally educated. Thomas had a sharp mind, but he was hardly a polished orator of Vivian's caliber. Rogers, like Thomas, was intellectually nimble but lacked sophistication.⁷

Thomas suspected that the debate was part of an effort by Dr. King to discredit the Deacons before they could get a foothold in Chicago. In the fall of 1965, King was taking his first steps toward organizing in Chicago, and Thomas believed that the Federal

⁶Ibid.

⁷Nahaz Rogers, interview by author, 13 June 1993, Chicago, Illinois, tape recording.

Government, "the man," had anointed King the leader of the movement in the North. "Well they was trying to ostracize me," charged Thomas years later. "You know, King and them was moving into Chicago. I don't know why he was moving into Chicago, but he was moving in and they had the blessing of the man."⁸

Despite the mismatch of oratorical skills, Thomas and Rogers had a sympathetic audience at the debate and fared better than expected. SCLC had made a serious tactical error by opposing self-defense before a Northern black audience. "They brought their best speaker, and that's Vivian," recalls Thomas. "And this little country boy, they was going to eat me alive. But they made a mistake. The audience was more with me." The Deacons could be reasonably criticized on many issues, but SCLC had challenged the Deacons on their strongest point, the right of blacks to defend themselves against violent attacks. "They couldn't shoot a hole in that, because everyone had a right to protect home and family," recalls Thomas. "They never tried that again," says Thomas.⁹

During his speaking tour of Chicago, Thomas met Edward "Fats" Crawford and Claudell Kirk, two local activists who began assisting Thomas in quietly recruiting members for a Chicago Deacons chapter. Crawford, a seasoned community activist who was heavily involved in Chicago electoral politics, would eventually become the primary driving force for the new chapter.

But it would be several months before Thomas would galvanize the Chicago chapter. In the interim, he continued to publicize the Deacons in the North through

⁸Thomas, Hill interview.

⁹Ibid.

speaking events in the Chicago and Detroit area. In the same manner that the Workers World Party had adopted Charlie Sims and the Bogalusa Deacons in New York, Thomas would find similar patrons among white leftists in the Midwest. The Socialist Workers Party, another Trotskyite Marxist organization, assiduously courted Thomas, inviting him to speak at several forums around the Midwest. On February 18, 1966, Thomas was the featured speaker at the "Friday Night Socialist Forum" in Chicago. The Deacons had over five-hundred armed members and sixty-two chapters, Thomas told the audience, and the new Chicago chapter would become the regional headquarters of the North. Reflecting his radicalization toward left-wing politics that was occurring during the winter of 1965-1966, Thomas laced his speech with a class-analysis of black problems, arguing that social welfare legislation of the Great Society was a ploy by the rich to perpetuate their own power. For Thomas, the problem was no longer a few Klansman, but rather the entire American ruling class and government.¹⁰

The nonviolent movement's reliance on direct action was a diversion from effective change, Thomas told his audience of leftists. Civil rights demonstrations were a "game" and anti-poverty legislation had been enacted to placate black people. The only people benefiting from reform legislation were "fat politicians." "They get the cream while the masses get the non-fat milk," quipped Thomas.¹¹

Thomas ridiculed the idea that education would bring economic equality--another deception of the nonviolent strategy, he charged. Racial discrimination was the culprit,

¹⁰Letterhead Memorandum, "Deacons for Defense and Justice," February 28, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-113.

¹¹Ibid.

not the lack of skills. But inequality had its price. Thomas predicted a "black revolution" in Chicago during the coming summer that would make it unsafe for whites to travel in black neighborhoods. The threat of violence went well beyond the limits of self-defense. At one point in his address Thomas warned that for every Deacon killed, the Deacons would respond by killing three whites.¹²

Significantly, for the first time Thomas publicly criticized U.S. foreign policy and the war in Vietnam. The Deacons leader pointed out that a high percentage of soldiers in Vietnam were black, and hinted at a genocidal plot. "I guess the power structure feels if they can kill off seven or eight million of us that will solve the problem."¹³

Two months later Thomas addressed another SWP forum in Detroit, part of a tour to raise funds for a Chicago Chapter. Thomas laid out plans to make Chicago the training center for a Deacons organization that would have chapters in every major northern city by the summer of 1966. Similar to his performance at the Chicago forum, Thomas departed from the "self-defense" rhetoric and ominously hinted that the Deacons would retaliate against FBI or CIA informants in the organization.¹⁴

The Detroit speech marked the end of Thomas' short relationship with the SWP. The socialists had asked to see his comments before he spoke in Detroit--a thinly veiled effort to censor his remarks. The SWP was probably concerned about a reprise of anti-Jewish comments that Thomas allegedly made at the Chicago forum. FBI records

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴"Investigative Report," July 21, 1966, New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-152.

reported that in commenting on the Watts riot, Thomas had argued that Jews were exploiting blacks, and that blacks had probably burned Jewish stores to destroy credit records. Thomas balked at the SWP's attempt to muzzle him. "I told them my speech is in my head," recalls Thomas. And even if he could produce written remarks, his new socialist friends shouldn't expect him to share their views. "I'm not a left winger," Thomas told his Trotskyite associates. "I'm just a capitalist that don't have a damn thing." His rebuke had its effect on the SWP. "I never had an invitation from them again," said Thomas.¹⁵

By April 1966 Thomas had yet to establish a Chicago chapter, and he soon found himself competing with the Bogalusa Chapter in their efforts to organize in Chicago. Thomas had isolated himself from the Louisiana chapters, having severed relations with the dwindling Jonesboro Deacon chapter and anointed himself "vice-president and regional organizer" for the Deacons--a title that allowed him to organize chapters in the North without interference from Jonesboro or Bogalusa. His decision to unilaterally recruit in the North antagonized relations with both the Jonesboro and Bogalusa chapters. Soon the Bogalusa Deacons were on their way North to test the waters in Chicago.

In April 1966, Charlie Sims, Sam Barnes and A. Z. Young traveled to Chicago and held a press conference at the home of Lavernon Cornelius, a Bogalusa native. Cornelius announced that the Deacons had been clandestinely recruiting for six months and had established a Chicago chapter at the request of the Olive Branch Masonic Lodge of the Prince Hall Masons (Cornelius served as Grand Master of the branch). Cornelius

¹⁵Ibid.; Thomas, Hill interview.

was joined by Ray McCoy, a wealthy Chicago funeral home owner and also a native of the Bogalusa area. Cornelius said that Chicago needed "a Negro Group that believed in defense and justice at any price." He added that the Deacons were "primed to fight a war to protect Negro rights" and noted that "only last week a cross was burned on a lawn in Waukegan. There's no doubt that we need a chapter here." Cornelius also suggested that the Deacons might provide defense at polling places.¹⁶

The announcement was clouded with confusion. While Cornelius clearly stated that the Deacons would conduct armed activities in Chicago, Hicks and Young later characterized the Chicago chapter as merely a support group for the movement in the South. Indeed, a second article on the Deacons appeared on April 6 in the *Chicago Daily News* bearing the headline, "Not trying to start Movement in North" and "Negro Vigilantes Here Will Aid Dixie Fight." In that article Sims told the paper that the Deacons were starting a branch "to help in the struggle in the South . . . We're not trying to come up here and start a movement." A. Z. Young said that they hoped to raise money for the defense of ninety children and six adults arrested the previous fall. Young also mentioned that the Bogalusa group was seeking support for a 105-mile march to Baton Rouge. "We're going to clean up the whole state of Louisiana. The whole state is out of line."¹⁷

¹⁶Cornelius quoted in SAC, Chicago to Director, April 5, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-123. Slightly different versions of the articles of April 5 and 6 were published in different editions of the *Chicago Daily News*. Quoted material here is gleaned from the *Chicago Daily News*, 6 April 1966 and articles quoted in SAC, Chicago to Director, April 5, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-123 and SAC, Chicago to Director, April 13, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-125.

¹⁷Ibid.

The Chicago press conference underscored the growing schism between Thomas and the Bogalusa Deacons. While Thomas was openly vilifying Dr. King and nonviolence, A. Z. Young went to great lengths to affirm the Deacons' loyalty to the nonviolent movement and to extend an olive branch to King. Young said that his group wanted to confer with the SCLC leader and "ask his support in our struggle in Bogalusa." "King has been misled about Deacons and the Voters League in Bogalusa," said Young. "The Bogalusa Voters League is non-violent, just like Dr. King's organization. And the Deacons are nonviolent--up to a point." Emphasizing the Deacons' peaceful objectives, Sims suggested that the Chicago Deacons chapter might get involved in voter registration, and could endorse Dick Gregory who was planning a run for mayor. "We're a defensive organization, organized to defend people," Sims said. "We have a constitutional right to defend our home, our children's lives. In the South the [white] man is making us pick up arms in order to live . . . While the Northern Negro can use ballots instead of bullets, there's a need for Deacons anywhere in the country where black men exist."¹⁸

The Chicago press conference and subsequent rally backfired badly on the Deacons, creating more controversy than benefits. Election officials publicly protested against the Deacons' announcement that they planned to provide armed guards at polling places. Oscar Stanton DePriest, grand master of the Prince Hall Masons, disputed Lavernon Cornelius' claim that the Masons had requested the Deacons to form a Chicago chapter. DePriest ordered a "sweeping investigation" of the Olive Branch Masonic Lodge

¹⁸Ibid.

and ordered Cornelius to "cease and desist" any activity connected with the Deacons.

Masonic leaders also canceled a planned contribution to the Deacons from the Masons.¹⁹

The Bogalusa group had failed to form their Chicago chapter. A Z. Young found the experience discouraging. "I raised more money in San Francisco when I was there by myself than we have been able to scrape up here," complained Young afterwards.²⁰

One month after the Bogalusa Chapters' abortive organizing effort, Thomas appeared on the pages of *Newsweek* touting plans for a Chicago chapter. The tough-talking pool-hustler didn't hesitate to berate Martin Luther King's efforts to import nonviolent strategy to Chicago. "I don't see where in hell nonviolence is going to solve anything," Thomas told *Newsweek*. "When you deal with the beast, you better deal with him appropriately." Thomas punctuated his attack on nonviolence with a call for blacks to arm themselves. "The black man is a fool if he doesn't have a gun or two--and ammunition in abundance," said Thomas. The Los Angeles Watts riot was an argument for more violence rather than less. "Throwing bricks is going out of style," said Thomas. "Thirty black people and only four whites died in Los Angeles [in the riots]. We've learned from that--it won't happen again."²¹

Newsweek questioned how successful the Deacons' anti-Klan strategy would be in Chicago, given that "racial discrimination there goes in many guises, but bed sheets are not among them." Exhibiting the same ambiguity that plagued the Bogalusa chapter's foray into the North, Thomas insisted that the Chicago chapter would primarily support

¹⁹*Chicago Daily News*, 8 April 1966; Hicks, Hill interview.

²⁰"Deacons Come to Chicago for Money and Muscle," *Jet*, 21 April 1966

²¹"The Deacons Go North," *Newsweek*, 2 May 1966, pp. 20-21.

the movement in the South, through fund raising and—a new twist—bringing blacks, instead of whites, into the South to aid the movement. Thomas said that he picked Chicago because the Deacons could raise money for Southern operations through initiation fees of ten dollars, membership dues of two dollars a month, and selling “Friends of the Deacons” bumper stickers for fifty-cents. But Thomas intimated that the Deacons might get involved in armed actions in Chicago. “Chicago is no different from anywhere else,” said Thomas. “The Southern red-neck lets you know where he’s at. The Northern red-neck is a little smarter; but they are still exploiting my people.” Echoing Malcom X’s famous dictum, Thomas added, “I believe in freedom by any means necessary.”²²

In early May 1966, Thomas opened a Deacons for Defense and Justice office at 1230 Pulaski on the West Side. The chapter elected officers, with Thomas serving as president, Fats Crawford as vice-president, and Claudell Kirk as secretary. The first public appearance of the Chicago chapter was on May 23, when Thomas appeared for a second time on WVON’s Wesley South radio program. During the interview, Thomas made a series of exaggerated claims that tested the credulity of his black listeners. Thomas claimed that 455 members had already joined the Chicago chapter since he began his effort in October 1965, and that the Deacons now had sixty-seven chapters nationwide. The Deacon leader also bragged that he was taking two-thousand Deacons to Washington, D.C. for the June demonstration protesting the White House Conference on Civil rights (in fact, no Deacons attended the demonstration). He followed up with the

²²Ibid.; On the Deacons’ Chicago tour, see “Deacons Come to Chicago for Money and Muscle,” *Jet*, 21 April 1966, p. 5.

preposterous claim that he was summoning fifteen-thousand Deacons to Chicago in the next three months. The hyperbole only prompted black listeners to call in and openly ridicule Thomas for his obvious exaggerations.²³

Given the hostile reception from the local black community, it was not surprising that the Chicago chapter's first major project took the Deacons back to the South. On June 5, 1966, James H. Meredith began a quiet 220-mile protest pilgrimage from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. The iconoclastic and inveterate loner set off on his solitary journey joined by only a few supporters. His goal was to encourage black voter registration and draw national attention to the "the all-pervasive and overriding fear that dominates the day-to-day life" of blacks in the South. Now a Columbia University Law School student, Meredith had first attracted international attention during his efforts to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962. Little had changed in Mississippi since his graduation from Ole Miss in 1963. Segregation remained virtually undisturbed by the Civil Rights Act, and blacks received little federal protection from the newly enacted Voting Rights Act.²⁴

On the second day of Meredith's pilgrimage near Hernando, Mississippi, a white man emerged from the brush along the highway and fired three shotgun blasts at the civil rights leader. Meredith miraculously escaped the attack with only superficial wounds. But the shooting triggered a major reaction by national civil rights organizations

²³SAC, Chicago to Director, June 8, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-137; "Investigative Report, July 21, 1966," New Orleans, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-152.

²⁴John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle of Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 389-391.

determined to use the incident to call for additional voting rights and poverty legislation and highlight the failure of state and local governments to fulfill the promised rights. On June 7, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of the SCLC, Floyd McKissick, national director of CORE, and Stokely Carmichael, chairman of SNCC, announced that the three organizations would continue Meredith's march to Jackson. The subsequent "Meredith March Against Fear" was the last great march of the modern civil rights movement, stretching out for nearly three weeks and covering 260 miles.

The Chicago Deacons became involved in the march immediately. When the news of the Meredith shooting reached Chicago, Thomas departed the city with a contingent of Deacons bound for Memphis. They planned to join forces with Deacons from Mississippi and Louisiana. Thomas pulled his van into the Lorraine Motel and quickly caught the attention of Memphis police as the Deacons piled out with M-1 rifles and bandoliers. A police superintendent questioned the Deacons and ran arrest warrant checks. The group checked out clean but the superintendent was still wary of the surly looking armed gang. He asked Thomas why they were so heavily armed. "That's the only way I'm going to Mississippi, sir," replied Thomas coolly.²⁵

Thomas talked briefly with Dr. King that night. Although the two had crossed swords in the media in the past, Mississippi had a way of making friends of old enemies. They appeared to put aside their differences and King even took to calling Thomas "Deac." Tuesday night Dick Gregory told Thomas that there was a meeting in King's room at the Lorraine. As soon as they entered the room Hosea Williams, an SCLC aide,

²⁵Thomas, Hill interview.

immediately protested Thomas' presence. "Well I'm going to tell you right now, there ain't going to be no Deacons on the march," Williams announced. Tempers flared for a moment as King calmly sat on the edge of his bed quietly eating a steak. Carmichael and McKissick, who supported the Deacons, were present along with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the National Urban League. The NAACP and the Urban League were appalled at the idea of armed guards in the march and adamantly opposed the Deacons. Thomas fumed at Williams and warned him that SCLC risked losing the support of rank-and-file blacks, "because you getting people hurt, and you get back on them god-damn planes and you fly off and forget about them." The Deacons weren't going to allow that to happen again. This was going to be a "different march," promised Thomas. King looked surprised and quit carving his steak for a moment. "Deac, you mean you're going to march?" asked King. "I don't have no intention of marching one block in Mississippi," Thomas told King. "But we're going to be up and down the highways and the byways. And if somebody gets shot again, they going to have somebody to give account to for that."²⁶

The Mississippi Delta was SNCC country and King could ill-afford to alienate the young radicals. He would need their support and organizational network in the region if the march were to succeed. To many who listened to the debate at the Lorraine that night,

²⁶There are several differing historical accounts of this meeting. I have combined Thomas' recollections with David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), p. 477; Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 397-398; and Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1973), p. 162.

King's silence appeared to be tacit support for SNCC and the militants. SNCC not only demanded that the Deacons be invited to guard the march, but also argued that the focus of the march should be "an indictment of President Johnson over the fact that existing laws were not being enforced." Reflecting the growing "black power" politics in SNCC, Carmichael also demanded that whites be excluded from the march. Wilkins and Young opposed SNCC's strategy as divisive--and they wanted nothing to do with the gun-toting Deacons. The two moderates left the meeting and the remaining organizers drafted a march "manifesto" that contained much of SNCC's militant rhetoric. By the end of the night King reluctantly agreed that the Deacons could remain in the march.²⁷

Why King assented to having the Deacons on the march remains something of a mystery. He may have assumed that the armed group would not become a media issue, given Thomas' assurances that the Deacons would not carry weapons on the march. Still, it was a risky concession for King. The attitude of Southern blacks toward nonviolence was changing and the media was alert to symbols of the growing political schism. NAACP leader Charles Evers received deafening applause when he told a Mississippi rally that he and his follower were coming to Meredith's aid "like Buck Jones and Tim McCoy," the popular matinee gunslingers. Meredith himself bluntly repudiated nonviolence while recuperating from his wounds. He told reporters that before the march he had debated whether to bring a gun or a bible. To his regret, he chose the bible. "I was embarrassed because I could have knocked the intended killer off with one shot if I had been prepared," said Meredith. "I will return to the march . . . and I will be armed

²⁷Dittmer, *Local People*, p. 393.

unless I have assurances I will not need arms. I believe in law and order, but if the whites continue to kill the Negro in the South, I will have no choice but to urge them [Negroes] to go out and defend themselves." Meredith had little to say about the Deacons, other than he did not "favor" the Deacons—or any group for that matter. The Deacons would be there to protect Meredith just the same. "If a white man starts shooting again," Thomas told reporters, "you'll know where to find him."²⁸

As the march continued, the Deacons positioned themselves in cars in front of and behind the marchers. Some Deacons walked in the march guarding King, but without weapons. They scouted the march route, guarded campsites, and escorted travelers to the Memphis airport at night. Charlie Sims brought a contingent of Deacons from Louisiana, and the New Orleans and Jonesboro Chapters also sent members. "I was carryin' two snub-nosed .38s and two boxes of shells," recalled Sims, "and had three men ridin' down the highway with semi-automatic carbines with thirty rounds apiece . . . See, I didn't believe in that naked shit no way." Although there were rumors that 350 Deacons were at the march, the figure was probably closer to thirty. As promised, the Deacons kept a low profile. Nonetheless, the march was a milestone for the Deacons and the civil rights movement. The Meredith March, the last great civil rights march of the century, became the first national march to officially embrace armed self-defense.²⁹

²⁸"Meredith Threat to Arm Not the Answer, says Dr. King," *Jet*, 23 June 1966, p. 16-19.

²⁹Interview in Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), pp. 416-423; *Ibid.* p. 422; Thomas, Hill interview.

On June 9, Armistead Phipps, a 58-year-old black Mississippi marcher, collapsed and died of a heart attack. "Dr. King was asked to preach his funeral, and that was way up in the Delta," recalls Sims. King's principles didn't prevent him from accepting a Deacon bodyguard:

[King] preached his funeral, but he would not go into the Delta unless I carried him. And he knowed the only way for me to carry him in the Delta, I had to carry him with my guns and men, not his . . . So, when the chips were down, I won't say the man woulda picked up a gun, but I'll say this, he didn't run one away."³⁰

Despite their efforts to remain out of the public eye, the Deacons' role in the march soon surfaced in the media. On June 13, Thomas got involved in a heated debate with a white pastor who had objected to the Deacons carrying weapons at the march campsite. Thomas told the pastor that he was wrong to tell blacks not to fight back when their lives were at stake. The argument spread among marchers throughout the camp until CORE field secretary Bruce Baines admonished the group not to air their dispute in front of the press. It was too late. *The New York Times* carried a story on the argument and quoted Thomas as saying that the Deacons were guarding the campsite at night "with pistols, rifles and shotguns" and providing armed escorts of marchers who traveled at night to the Memphis airport. "But we don't take guns with us when the people are marching," said Thomas. "The march is nonviolent."³¹

Floyd McKissick attempted damage control by telling the *Times* that he had no knowledge of weapons around the campsite and that he had talked "way into the night" telling the Deacons and the marchers that the march "must remain nonviolent." Not

³⁰Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, p. 422.

³¹*Ibid.*; *New York Times*, 14 June 1966, p. 19.

everyone agreed with McKissick. Earlier in the day Bishop Charles Ewbank Tucker of the African Methodist Church gave the blessing for the marchers and added his own opinion on nonviolence. "Any Negro or white has the right to defend himself with arms," Bishop Tucker told the marchers, and "any man who didn't ought to take off his pants and wear skirts."³²

Tension began to grow between SCLC and the Deacons. On June 21, King asked Thomas if the Deacons could set up a series of radio base stations along the march route. King said that he feared that there were "dark days ahead" for the march and the communication system would aid security (pay phone lines were frequently cut along the route). Thomas agreed and left for Jonesboro to retrieve the radios. In his absence, King left the Meredith March and took approximately twenty persons to Philadelphia, Mississippi, to attend a memorial service for the three civil rights workers slain there two years before. King lead a memorial march in Philadelphia that was quickly surrounded by a mob of several hundred armed whites. A group of twenty-five whites broke away from the mob and viciously assaulted the marchers. Half a dozen black marchers vainly fought back as police and FBI looked on for several minutes. Later that night marauding whites made four gunfire attacks on the black community, including an attack on the headquarters of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Blacks at the headquarters returned fire during two of the attacks and wounded one of the white assailants.³³

³²Ibid.

³³Thomas, Hill interview; *New York Times*, 22 June 1966, p. 1.

Thomas was furious with King when he returned to the Meredith March and learned of the detour to Philadelphia and the subsequent attacks. Right or not, Thomas suspected that the radio errand was a ruse to prevent him from accompanying King to Philadelphia. "This is the end of this," Thomas told King's aides in disgust.³⁴

Relations between King and the Deacons were clearly strained by the incident. The same day as the Philadelphia fiasco, the Meredith March arrived in Indianola where SNCC field secretary Charles McLaurin led marchers in a chant for "black power"-- a chant that Carmichael had first introduced in the March at Greenwood. King flew from Philadelphia back to Indianola where he addressed a rally that night. He took the opportunity to bitterly condemn the Deacons and the Black Power advocates. "Some people are telling us to be like our oppressor, who has a history of using Molotov cocktails, who has a history of dropping the atom bomb, who has a history of lynching Negroes," said King. "Now people are telling me to stoop down to that level. I'm sick and tired of violence."³⁵

King's harsh criticism of the Deacons had the ring of hypocrisy to Thomas and other Deacons. It was true that King had opposed the Deacons participating in the March. But he had not declined their services when he traveled to the Phipps funeral in the Delta. And King had personally asked Thomas to assist in march communications. Still, the Deacons could hardly expect King to remain silent in the face of their own vitriolic attacks on the champion of nonviolence.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵"Dr. King Score 'Deacons," *New York Times*, 22 June 1966, p. 25.

The Meredith March ended without incident and the Chicago Deacons returned to the windy city to begin the process of building a chapter around urban issues. During the summer of 1966, the Pulaski Street headquarters began to come to life, taking on the trappings of Northern militants such as the emerging Black Panther Party. The storefront window featured a rifle balancing the scales of justice. Some of the Deacons donned berets like the Panthers, and the local chapter offered free training in martial arts. Comprising no more than ten to fifteen active members, the Chicago chapter began an effort to establish offices in surrounding communities, including Harvey and Evanston. The FBI kept a close watch on the Chicago chapter, and when a small riot erupted on August 4 in nearby Harvey, the FBI suspected that the Deacons had supplied weapons to youth involved in the shooting, though there was no evidence.³⁶

The Chicago chapter did not restrict its activities to support work for the Southern movement, as Thomas had promised, but instead became involved in local black issues. In August 1966, local courts issued an injunction preventing Dr. King and SCLC from marching through the volatile white neighborhoods of Gage Park and Cicero. In response, the Deacons joined several militant groups in threatening to march, despite the order. A planned march on August 28 through Cicero, a racist stronghold, particularly troubled law enforcement officials because of the potential for violent attacks by whites, and retaliation by blacks. It was rumored that young blacks were practicing with weapons in preparation for the march. But once Dr. King acceded to the injunction and pledged a

³⁶On the Deacons and the Harvey incident, see SAC, Chicago to Director, August 10, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-158.

moratorium on the marches, SCLC condemned the militant's plan for the Cicero march. In the end, the Deacons' threatened march failed to materialize.³⁷

The Chicago chapter's relationship with King was cloaked in mystery. The Deacons provided security for King at speaking events in Chicago, and later when King traveled in the South. But King's lieutenants were divided over the role of the Deacons, with Jesse Jackson adamantly opposing any contact between King and the Deacons. In the end, Fats Crawford and the Deacons, working through intermediaries like activist Bennet Johnson, provided security for King, but not openly as Deacons. Crawford, although formally chapter vice-president, began to play a more prominent role, in large part because of Thomas's frequent absences. Thomas still had a wife and several children in Jonesboro, and he was constantly traveling between there and Chicago.³⁸

Thomas' life took a bizarre twist in July 1966. A writer for NOW magazine contacted Thomas and indicated that exiled nationalist leader Robert F. Williams was interested in meeting with Thomas in Cuba. Thomas leapt at the opportunity, and was soon on a plane to Mexico City. As soon as he arrived in Havana, Thomas learned that Williams had departed the previous day for the Peoples Republic of China. Williams had

³⁷SAC, Chicago to Director, August 22, 1966, not recorded and FBI August 29, 1966.

³⁸The FBI reported that approximately forty Deacons guarded King during a speech on July 29, 1966 in Chicago. See Investigative Report, November 22, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-176. On Deacons secretly guarding King, see interview with John Harris, a Chicago chapter member: John Harris, interview by author, 23 January 1994, Chicago, Illinois, tape recording.

told the Cubans that he wanted to visit the communist country, but in fact, he had become disillusioned with Castro's Cuba.³⁹

Thomas was assigned an interpreter and was taken on a series of tours, including the Cuban countryside. He quickly tired of the official tours and political propagandizing. Thomas informed his hosts that he would not participate in any more tours, preferring to mingle with the common working people. The Deacon leader took advantage of his liberty and walked the streets of Havana, chatting with ordinary people. He met bricklayers (his old trade) and learned that they earned a paltry eighty-five cents an hour yet were forced to pay \$24 for a fifth of rum--a profound injustice to a drinking man like Thomas.⁴⁰

The Cuban government treated Thomas considerably better than their bricklayers, providing him with a free hotel, sumptuous meals, and all the perks of a visiting dignitary. He met with military officials, including a Cuban General, "Commandant Bayou," who had received training in New Orleans. The General, who had been treated as a white during his stay in segregated New Orleans, recounted how his American superiors had once reprimanded him for politely stepping off the sidewalk to allow a black couple to pass. Later, Thomas attended the annual ceremony commemorating the July 26th revolution, and was assigned a prestigious seat only a few rows from Castro. The pool hustler from Jonesboro was coming up in the world.⁴¹

³⁹Thomas, Hill interview.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Thomas, Hill interview.

But Thomas never received an introduction to Castro, and after a few days in Cuba he began to run afoul of the government. Part of his difficulties arose from his characteristic frankness. Thomas had noticed early on that a clear color line divided blacks and whites in Cuba. When Cuban officials inquired about his impression of Cuba in comparison to the United States, Thomas replied indelicately, "I see the same thing. I see a lot of black people working on the farm and I see all the white folks got the best jobs. I don't see no difference." His criticisms did not endear him to his hosts.⁴²

Within a few days after his arrival Thomas asked Cuban officials to allow him to travel to China to meet with Williams, but the Cuban government dragged their feet in providing an exit visa, no doubt a consequence of increasing tensions between the Chinese and Soviet blocs. Growing impatient with the bureaucratic delays, Thomas attempted to secure an exit through several of the embassies in Havana. He had little luck with the African embassies and the North Vietnamese offered to help on the condition that he would urge black U.S. troops to refuse to fight in Vietnam. "I said shit with that. I can't do that," recalls Thomas. Finally he went to the Chinese embassy and, after they contacted Williams in China, the embassy arranged to expedite his departure. After four weeks in Cuba, Thomas left for China by way of Europe.⁴³

Thomas rendezvoused with Williams in China and began another whirlwind tour of official sites: military bases, war museums--in Thomas's words, "nothing of interest." He admired the Chinese for not attempting to proselytize him as the Cubans had. After

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

two weeks in China, Thomas departed for the United States. Originally he planned to arrive in the United States through New Orleans, but the Chinese government warned that he might encounter difficulties with U.S. Officials, so he returned through Canada and drove across the border.⁴⁴

The news that Thomas had traveled to Cuba and China sent the FBI into an apoplectic fit. The FBI knew that the Deacons had close contact with revolutionary nationalists and suspected that the defense group had purchased hundreds of automatic weapons. After Thomas returned to the United States via Canada, the FBI received information that he had served as a courier for Chinese funds for RAM or other Maoist groups. FBI headquarters sent their forces scurrying from London to Hong Kong to determine where Thomas had been and whether he had been a conduit for Chinese money to RAM or other U.S. revolutionaries. Hoover ordered the New Orleans SAC to monitor “[deleted] to determine if [deleted] has handled large sums of money recently, particularly since his return from Europe.” The New York SAC was instructed to see if Thomas had contact with RAM since his return, and Hong Kong was queried about Thomas, RAM and connections to China. Thomas denies that he served as a courier for the Chinese. Robert F. Williams, in an interview shortly before his death, refused to confirm or deny the reports.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵SAC, Chicago to Director, July 19, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-153; Director to SAC, New Orleans, October 12, 1966, not recorded; Hong Kong to Director, July 20, 1967 and July 28, 1967, not recorded; Thomas, Hill interview; Robert F. Williams, interview by author, 11 November 1995, tape recording.

Rubbing shoulders with Third World revolutionaries had some effect on Thomas, but it is doubtful that it significantly changed his political views. Thomas did not return a Marxist-Leninist; he was too firm in his convictions to succumb to revolutionary politics. He would be a prize catch for any of the leftist groups, but they all found his political stubbornness impenetrable. "Everyone was trying to get a hold of him," remembers RAM leader Virginia Collins, but "Chilly Willy just couldn't catch on."⁴⁶

Leftists were not the only unrequited lovers of the Deacon leader. Elijah Muhammad's black Muslims made a concerted effort to recruit Thomas to the Nation of Islam (NOI). After Thomas appeared on Wesley South's radio program in the spring of 1966, Dick Durham, the editor of the NOI's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, sent members of the Fruit of Islam to the Deacons' office on North Pulaski and requested that Thomas come for an interview. It was not the first contact with the Muslims for Thomas and the Deacons. The Muslims had a strong presence in Monroe, Louisiana and frequently traveled to Jonesboro to sell *Muhammad Speaks*. When the NOI group was harassed by local police in Monroe, Thomas led a delegation of Jonesboro Deacons to confront the Mayor and Police Chief. The Muslims were also actively recruiting in Bogalusa as early as 1965.⁴⁷

Durham interviewed Thomas and published an article about the Deacons in *Muhammad Speaks*. In the weeks to follow, Elijah Muhammad invited Thomas to his palatial home for several Sunday dinners. It was an impressive experience; bountiful

⁴⁶Collins, Hill interview.

⁴⁷Thomas, Hill interview.

meals in a luxurious setting, complete with celebrity dinner guests like Muhammad Ali. But one of Elijah Muhammad's habits annoyed Thomas. At their first dinner the Muslim leader was fasting and did not join Thomas in eating. Thomas, the small town Southerner, found this behavior inexplicably rude. He told Muhammad that it made him "feel bad" to be eating while his host ate nothing. The next time Thomas was invited, Muhammad joined in the meal.⁴⁸

But the food and flattery did little to win Thomas to Islam. When Muhammad finally asked Thomas to join the NOI, the Deacon leader warned him that the Muslims would only be gaining a hypocrite, not a convert. "I smoke, I drink, and I don't have any intention of quitting either of them," Thomas told Muhammad. Thomas also had some trepidations about the Muslims. He had heard the dark rumor that Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's mentor, had mysteriously disappeared and that some suspected foul play. He also objected to the Muslim's separatist political program. Thomas sought justice within America, not without. "I don't want no separate state," he told the Muslims. The Muslim's radical ideas and asceticism were a bit much for the old barroom pool hustler. The Muslims told Thomas that if he joined them, he would have to learn Arabic so that he could read the Koran. Thomas had heard enough. "I can hardly speak English," said Thomas, "and they wanted me speaking Arabic."⁴⁹

By the fall of 1966 Thomas had returned to his family in Jonesboro, leaving the Chicago chapter to the leadership of Fats Crawford. The chapter allied itself with a host

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

of emerging Black power groups that formed the Community Coalition for Black Power (CCBP). The CCBP linked the Deacons with a broad range of groups: radicalized Chicago chapters of CORE and SNCC; Lawrence Landry and Nahaz Rogers of ACT; the W. E. B. Dubois Club; activists like Monroe Sharp; and members of the two major youth gangs, the Blackstone Rangers and the Vicelords. Through the CCBP, the Deacons became involved in several community protests with mixed success. They also did community organizing independently, as in November 1966, when the chapter organized a protest against Clark Super Market. The action succeeded in forcing the store to raise the wages of black workers and increase business with black wholesalers.⁵⁰

The chapter encountered some police harassment. In one incident the Deacons accused the Chicago police of shooting out the front window of their Pulaski Street office. But the Chicago chapter's encounters with law enforcement were usually quite different from the experience in the South. Some of the chapter's activities skirted the boundaries of the law, especially in the area of fundraising. White businesses on the West Side, desirous of good relations with the militants, supplied a significant portion of the Deacons' funds. In the process of soliciting funds from businesses, the Deacons walked a thin line between fundraising and extortion. At least one local business accused the Deacons of extorting money from them, a charge that led to the arrest of Fats Crawford, though no charges were filed. The Deacons became involved in another controversial incident in nearby Gary, Indiana. Richard Hatcher, a black political leader, was running for Mayor when another black candidate with the same name placed his name on the

⁵⁰SAC, Chicago to Director, November 7, 1966, not recorded.

ballot. It was an obvious attempt to confuse voters and take votes from Hatcher. The Chicago Deacons were called in to assist. What they did in Gary remains a mystery. All that is certain is that the second candidate withdrew his name from the ballot, complaining that he had been "coerced" by unnamed parties.⁵¹

In November 1966, Crawford was forced to close the Deacons' office at 1230 Pulaski. In the coming months he occasionally rented hall space at the Democratic party office at 712 Pulaski for Deacon activities. The Chicago chapter continued to struggle throughout 1967 to find an issue that would galvanize support. Thomas was frequently on the road--at times traveling with the militant Stokely Carmichael.

Occasionally the Chicago chapter reverted to the Deacons' traditional role of defending homes. Carrying weapons in Chicago was not as risky a proposition as it had been in the South. Working through a sympathetic black detective agency, the Chicago chapter had obtained official permits to carry weapons. In January 1967, the Deacons offered to employ these weapons to protect two black families who were under attack for integrating a suburban white neighborhood, but the families never responded to the offer.⁵²

Anti-police brutality organizing took center stage with the Deacons in the winter of 1967. On February 17, 1967, Chicago Police shot and killed George Jennings, a young black man. The shooting sparked angry protest in Chicago's black community, and the

⁵¹"Investigative Report," New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250; Thomas, Hill interview.

⁵²SAC, Chicago to Director, January 16, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-186; Thomas, Hill interview.

Deacons, collaborating with ACT, quickly plunged into organizing demonstrations and rallies. But while Crawford was operating under the Deacons' banner in community organizing, he was also moving the organization in the direction of electoral politics. In February 1967 the Deacons and ACT co-sponsored rallies supporting independent aldermanic candidates like Curtis Foster. Crawford also helped form the Garfield Organization, an umbrella group initially created to support Curtis Foster's bid for office. The Garfield Organization eventually evolved into a combination of electoral campaign committee and community organizing group. Most of the Deacons joined the Garfield Organization which Foster headed. Crawford soon moved the remaining Deacons' office furniture into the Garfield Organizations office on North Keeler Street.⁵³

Within a few months the Deacons took a dramatic detour from their community organizing strategy to work on an ill-fated voter registration project in Mississippi. In April 1967, Crawford, Foster of the Garfield Organization, and Doug Andrews of ACT, traveled to Indianola, Mississippi to assist in a voter education project organized by Chicago socialite Lucy Montgomery, a wealthy contributor to the civil rights movement and an heir to the Montgomery Ward fortune. Crawford, whom, Montgomery described as "fearless," brought along a small contingent of Deacons to provide protection.⁵⁴

The project had a strangely nostalgic quality to it: reprising the voter education projects of the South, several years after the tactic had run its course in the civil rights

⁵³SAC, Chicago to Director, February 21, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no.157-2466, not recorded; SAC, Chicago to Director, March 31, 1967 FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-208.

⁵⁴Lucille Montgomery, interview by author, 29 May 1993, Chicago, Illinois, tape recording.

movement. But Lucy Montgomery was a patrician iconoclast with a penchant for quirkiness. Her political interests shifted from one social justice cause to another in the sixties; her organizing exploits dutifully reported in the society page of Chicago papers. Montgomery had campaigned against nuclear testing in the early sixties; then detoured to the Dominican Republic in 1963 to work with the poor during the short-lived leftist administration of Juan Bosch; and finally, in 1964, joined the civil rights movement. Montgomery wanted to conduct workshops in preparation for Freedom Summer, and she plunged into the project with upperclass panache. At one event, Montgomery presumptively began to collect names and numbers in a meeting where she was a virtual stranger. "I had the gall to pass around a legal pad asking for everyone's phone number and address," recalled Montgomery. "They must have thought I was crazy."⁵⁵

The odd caravan that entered Mississippi from Chicago must have provoked some curious if not baleful stares. One of the cars held Fats Crawford, Montgomery, the white socialite activist, and Crawford's two menacing German shepherd attack dogs, Otto and Freda. Montgomery crouched down on the car floor to avoid attracting attention to the integrated delegation.

The Mississippi excursion was nothing short of a disaster. Amzie Moore, the venerated NAACP activist, was responsible for organizing the voter education workshops, but he had no funds nor staff. "When I got there, he hadn't done anything," recalls Montgomery. Only four or five people attended the workshops. "My god," Montgomery told herself, "I got all these people organized for this." The experience was

⁵⁵SAC, Chicago to Director, May 5, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-217; Montgomery, Hill interview.

even more discouraging for some of the black activists Montgomery had recruited from Chicago. Curtis Foster, of the Garfield Organization, returned to Chicago complaining to his friends that Mississippi blacks were "politically dead."⁵⁶

But the experience was not entirely disheartening for Crawford and the Deacons. Crawford got to meet Fannie Lou Hamer, Lawrence Guyot, and other lions of the civil rights movement. Fear was still palpable in the Delta, and the Deacons, equipped with the two attack dogs, did an admirable job of providing security at workshops and rallies. And Lucy Montgomery, despite the project's failure, could add at least one new milestone to her life: she got to sample her first plate of chitlins.⁵⁷

Crawford was deeply moved by the level of poverty he saw in Mississippi, and, in July 1967, the Chicago Deacons shifted from voter registration to a strategy of humanitarian aid, this time working with the CCBP in "Operation Opportunity" and the "Mississippi Misses Me" projects. The programs provided food and clothing to the poor in Mississippi, and enjoyed the support of Muhammad Ali who helped raise funds for the project. An entourage of fourteen blacks in three vans departed for Mississippi in late July, with Crawford leading the way accompanied by his two German shepherds. Police stopped the caravan on its way to Mississippi, suspicious of the small army of blacks sporting "black power" buttons. The police released the caravan but Doug Andrews,

⁵⁶Ibid.; SAC, Chicago to Director, April 24, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466, not recorded.

⁵⁷SAC, Jackson to Director, April 18, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-214; FBI-Deacons file; Chicago to Director, April 21, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466 no recorded Montgomery, Hill interview.

anticipating more problems in Mississippi, telegraphed the Jackson FBI and Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson, requesting that the caravan be "given adequate protection."⁵⁸

The humanitarian aid mission was completed without incident and the Deacons returned to Chicago in August and began working with ACT to build the Chicago Black Youth Alliance, a coalition to reduce gang violence through building alliances between rival gangs. The Deacons had always had a close relationship with Chicago's powerful street gangs. In the spring of 1967, Earnest Thomas had joined Stokely Carmichael in speaking to several hundred gang members at a unity dance at Princeton Hall. The dance nearly erupted into a riot when one of the speakers made a reference to one of the gangs, the Blackstone Rangers. But the Deacons' gang work, like so much of the Chicago chapter's organizing, was inconsistent and largely ineffective.⁵⁹

The Chicago chapter's dilemma was the same one that plagued all the Northern chapters: inadequate strategy and ideology. Unlike the Black Panther Party, the Deacons lacked a clear revolutionary vision that could attract militant young blacks. Even with the adjustments made to adapt to the concerns of Northern blacks, the Deacons' admixture of self-defense rhetoric, community organizing, and racial pride, could not compete with the Panthers' romantic revolutionary image. Moreover, the Deacons' call for manhood through violence had little appeal in the North, where fear and servile attitudes were

⁵⁸SAC, Chicago to Director, August 4, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-236; SAC, Jackson to Director, August 15, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-238; "Investigative Report," New Orleans, Louisiana, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250.

⁵⁹SAC, Chicago to Director, July 7, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-228; SAC, Chicago to Director, May 16, 1967, not recorded.

virtually nonexistent among blacks. Despite their criticism of the nonviolent movement, the Deacons had framed their politics in the same language of rights and liberties. Once those rights and reforms were secured--as they had been by 1965--the Deacons lost their *raison d'être*.

By December, 1967--a short twenty months after the chapter had formed--the Chicago Deacons chapter was a shell of an organization. The chapter still maintained an office at the Garfield Organization headquarters on North Keeler, but membership had dwindled to five members. Crawford, with his fondness for electoral politics, was devoting most of his time to planning for his own campaign for an Alderman seat in the election scheduled for February 1968. By December 1967, the chapter ceased to exist.⁶⁰

Occasionally rogue Deacon chapters cropped up in the North. In 1967 a Minneapolis activist, Matthew Eubanks, publicized a meeting to organize a chapter of the Deacons. The meeting was to feature H. Rap Brown, but Eubanks could not raise the \$1000 speaking fee Brown required. The Bogalusa chapter learned of the Minneapolis activities and promptly contacted Eubanks and reproached him for unauthorized organizing. The Minneapolis chapter never materialized.⁶¹

⁶⁰"Investigative Report," New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250. Despite the demise of the chapter, the FBI continued to take an interest in the activities of its leaders, placing at least two members on the FBI's security index. SAC, Chicago to Director, December 20, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-253 suggests that two members have a "propensity for violence" and should be included on the "rabble rouser index."

⁶¹SAC, Minneapolis to Director, December 29, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-254; Thomas, Hill interview.

There were reports of Deacon organizing in Los Angeles, Detroit, and San Diego, but none of these resulted in functioning chapters. The Deacons forays into the North had failed--even in Chicago where they had experienced leadership. Fats Crawford had experimented with a variety of political alternatives to the Deacons' self-defense strategy, including community organizing against police brutality and discrimination, electoral politics, and humanitarian and political aid for Southern blacks. But none of the approaches resonated with Northern blacks. Meanwhile, black militants were flocking to the Black Panthers and other black power organizations that projected revolutionary and separatist images.⁶²

While the Deacons helped inspire the formation of the Black Panthers and other militant organizations, they failed to make the transition to a national organization themselves. Their emphasis on the right of self-defense was both their strength and weakness. While it provided legitimacy in the South, where their foe was vigilante violence, it failed in the North against police brutality--violence cloaked in state legitimacy. The Deacons had pinned their legitimacy on constitutional rights, the rule of law and order, rather than revolutionary rights, the right to disobey law and authority. The latter path, taken by the Panthers, had its own perils as well.

In 1967 Thomas ceased organizing for the Deacons and began traveling as a combination body guard and political activist for Stokely Carmichael. Thomas returned to Louisiana in May 1967, guarding Carmichael during a speaking engagement at

⁶²Investigative Report, New Orleans, November 22, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-176. On San Diego, see, Ibid. and Investigative Report, New Orleans, January 10, 1966, FBI-Deacons file no.157-2466-104.

Southern University at Baton Rouge. In an incident outside the university, police arrested Thomas on a concealed weapon charge. Thomas failed to appear for a June 14 hearing and subsequently was found in contempt of court and received a sentence of fifteen days in jail and a \$500 fine.⁶³

By 1968 Thomas had left the Deacons for a new career. On his way back from China, Thomas had met football and movie star Jim Brown at the London airport. The two developed an instant rapport and Brown soon asked Thomas to come to work for him as a bodyguard. Thomas jumped at the opportunity and was soon on his way to California, leaving the Deacons and the civil rights movement in his past.⁶⁴

⁶³"Investigative Report," New Orleans, November 27, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-250; Thomas, Hill interview.

⁶⁴Thomas' chance meeting with Jim Brown placed the celebrity under added FBI scrutiny. A memorandum from the Cleveland SAC detailed Brown's current movie production and included a transcript of a speech Brown gave in January during a "Jim Brown Farewell Night" at the Cleveland Arena. The memo also mentioned outstanding paternity charges against Brown. See SAC, Cleveland to Director, February 28, 1967, FBI-Deacons file no. 157-2466-200.

Chapter 15

A Long Time

The Deacons' victory in Bogalusa in July 1965 coincided with several momentous events that would dramatically alter the group's future course. The Watts riot in Los Angeles erupted the first week of August and radically changed black political consciousness unlike any event in modern history. For the first time in the twentieth-century, racial politics were shaped by the threat of black violence and civil disorder. The Watts rebellion not only provided blacks with the strategic bargaining option of violence, but it also shifted the nation's focus from civil inequality in the South to economic inequality in the North.

By 1965 the civil rights movement's singular focus on civil inequality had become an albatross around the neck of the black liberation movement. The strategy implied that civil discrimination was the primary cause for racial economic inequality, an argument that conservatives would later exploit in their battle against affirmative action and other compensatory programs. Nothing in the civil rights strategy explained the legacy of racism, nor suggested that enormous educational and economic resources would have to be marshaled to reverse the effects of three centuries of oppression. Although the Deacons were critics of the nonviolent movement, the defense group's future was inextricably bound to the fate of the civil rights movement.

The Voting Rights bill, enacted only days before the Watts riot, also undermined direct action politics in the South and shifted the focus away from the Deacons. As hundreds of thousands of blacks flooded the voter rolls in the South, blacks gained a new bargaining power that made direct action unnecessary. There was also fear that direct action protests during the 1965 presidential elections might cause a white backlash against the civil rights movement, and the prime beneficiary would be the arch-conservative Barry Goldwater, who had opposed the Civil Rights Act.

By the fall of 1965 the Deacons had become victims of their own success. The Deacons had compelled the federal government to enforce black rights and destroy the Klan in Bogalusa. As the Klan went, so too would the Deacons. The Deacons had also popularized attitudes that gave birth to a new black identity in the South. Southern blacks had internalized the Deacons' combativeness and political militancy, so there was no longer a need for a distinct paramilitary group.

Although July 1965 was the apogee for the Deacons, the Bogalusa chapter still had unfinished business at home. In the fall of 1965 the concerns of young blacks began to take center stage in the Bogalusa movement. In October 1965, several hundred students boycotted classes and marched to the annual Washington Parish Fair. The students were protesting a school policy that released white students from classes for three days to attend the fair, while black students were given only one day. The student protestors marched through the fair grounds, drawing little more than a few critical stares from the hundreds of whites in attendance. The protest was also aimed at black teachers who had crossed the picket line at the fair to work on an exhibit. It was not the first time that middle class blacks had been singled out for organized protest in Bogalusa. Earlier

in the year Bogalusa students had marched in protest against black ministers who refused to participate in the movement or honor the downtown boycott.¹

One week later the Deacons became embroiled in a controversial school boycott. School integration had never been a paramount issue for the Bogalusa movement. Instead, the October school boycott focused on demands for equal distribution of resources, consistent with the Bogalusa movement's emphasis on moral and economic equity. The BCVL Youth Organization demanded improved facilities, equal expenditures, new books (rather than castoff books from white schools) and foreign language course offerings. The youth group also called for more and better teachers and demanded disciplinary action against teachers who were perceived as hostile toward the movement. In addition, the students demanded an end to the degrading practice of forcing black students to cut the lawn at the Superintendent's home. Leading the student boycott was Don Expose, son of BCVL officer Gayle Jenkins. After the School Board rejected the demands, students boycotted classes and picketed the school gates and staged militant marches to the School Board offices.²

The School Board countered with a new tactic. With the Klan in retreat, local courts and police now became the principal instruments of repression. At the request of the School Board, on October 19, District Judge Jim Warren Richardson signed an injunction prohibiting the BCVL from encouraging or assisting school children to absent themselves from school. Simultaneously, Washington Parish District Attorney W. W.

¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 12, 16 October 1965.

²*Bogalusa Daily News* 18 October 1965; Rickey Hill, "The Character of Black Politics," p. 86.

Erwin filed a criminal bill of information against leaders of the BCVL charging them with contributing to the delinquency of school children.³

Undeterred by the legal actions, the following day BCVL and Deacon leaders joined a group of more than two-hundred for a protest march to the School Board building. A few minutes before the march was to begin, City police swooped down on the site and arrested virtually all of the League and Deacon leaders. Among those jailed were all the Deacons' elected officers: Charlie Sims, Fletcher Anderson, Royan Burris and Sam Barnes. Police also arrested BCVL leaders Robert Hicks and Gayle Jenkins. A. Z. Young, who was hospitalized at the time, was the only leader to escape arrest. All were charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor.⁴

If the city fathers had hoped to neutralize the movement by beheading its adult leadership, they had seriously underestimated the determination and organization of the youth. When informed that they could not march, the militant group of two-hundred students began shouting "let's go to jail." They forged ahead with the march forcing police to arrest forty-six students, including march leader Don Expose. A second march staged later that day led to another twenty-one arrests.⁵

By nightfall all the adult leaders, with the exception of Sims, remained in jail. The arrests sent tempers flaring in the black community. At 10:00 p.m. a large angry crowd of approximately 250 blacks gathered at the Negro Union Hall and began a spontaneous march to protest arrests earlier that day. Charlie Sims was the lone

³*Times-Picayune*, 20 October 1965.

⁴*Louisiana Weekly*, 6 November 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 21 October 1965.

⁵*Louisiana Weekly*, 6 November 1965; *Times-Picayune*, 21 October 1965.

remaining adult leader on the scene, joined by Henry Austin, who had heard of the arrests and had traveled from New Orleans to lend a hand. When the police learned that the marchers were moving toward the downtown area, they quickly sent all available units to the scene. There the police were confronted by a mob that was a far cry from the polite, nonviolent marchers that had walked the picket line the summer before. "You could have heard them for three or four blocks, whooping and hollering, calling us cowards," bristled Chief Knight. The crowd began chanting "Freedom" and--more ominously--"War."⁶

Police claimed that the crowd tossed beer bottles at them. Whatever the provocation, there is little doubt that police grossly overreacted. Instead of asking the marchers to disperse, Chief Knight sent the police into the crowd to disperse it. The result was nothing short of a police riot. Police stormed through the black community, wantonly arresting innocent bystanders, people returning from work, people eating in restaurants, even business owners in their own establishments. When Police found Henry Austin in the Bamboo Club, they dragged him out and brutally beat him with clubs. "You niggers aren't going to rule this town," one policeman screamed at Austin. Police indiscriminately clubbed and manhandled children and pulled hapless passerbyers from their cars and beat them. Reverend Nathan Lewis went to the police station to bail out his son-in-law and afterwards was stopped, roughed-up, and arrested by police for possession of a pocketknife. One policeman threatened the minister that he might be found with "a weight around your head in the Pearl River."⁷

⁶*Times-Picayune*, 7, 30 December 1965.

⁷*Ibid.*; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 2 November 1965; Austin, Hill interview; *Times-Picayune*, 29 December 1965.

The "Bloody Wednesday" attack, as it came to be known, brought Bogalusa police officials back into federal court where Judge Christenberry aptly described the events of the night as "more like East Germany than the United States." Charges under *Hicks v. Knight* were filed against several officers, including Vertrees Adams, Sidney J. Lyons and John Hill. At the hearing Judge Christenberry lectured police officials for engaging in a "deliberate scheme to harass these people and throw them in jail."⁸

Bloody Wednesday left the League and the Deacons in bad shape. Bail for the arrested marchers drained the League's resources. The Boycott had little success and students soon returned to school. By the end of the year the BCVL's focus shifted from school issues back to equal employment. In November the BCVL launched a new boycott of twenty-four stores that had still not hired blacks. The picketing was effective, and by December Bogalusa shop owners admitted that business was down--although they accused the League of frightening away blacks through threats and intimidation. There was some merit to their claim. For most ordinary blacks in Bogalusa, the civil rights movement had ended in the summer of 1965. It is difficult to sustain interest and support for any social movement for long periods, especially when the movement's goals appear to be accomplished. Christmas holidays were approaching and the temptation to slip downtown for a little holiday shopping was irresistible to some. It became difficult for the League to recruit pickets and the group increasingly turned to threats to enforce the boycott.⁹

⁸*Times-Picayune*, 28, 29, 30 December 1965.

⁹*Times-Picayune*, 21 November 1965; *Times-Picayune* 8 December 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 5 December 1965.

“Warning, Warning, Warning,” read one BCVL leaflet distributed to shoppers.

“Any persons found shopping at any of these stores will have to pay *the penalty*.

Cooperate and together we shall overcome. Don’t cooperate and we shall overcome *you* along with the *white man*.” During a rally in January 1966, A. Z. Young berated the black community for lack of participation. “I am not getting the cooperation you promised me,” Young lectured his audience. “You promised 24-hour-a-day cooperation. I have been embarrassed at marches and rallies by your not turning out.” Young accused the BCVL youth organization of “dragging its feet” and he laid the blame on parents who prevented their children from participating. “You had better join me,” Young warned his audience. “If you don’t join me, we are out to get you, baby.”¹⁰

Occasionally the Deacons made Young’s threats a reality. On April 16, 1966, several shots were fired at the home of Reverend Herrod Morris, a longtime black critic of the BCVL. Shots were also fired at the home of another black resident, Raleigh Lucas. Several weeks later Sam Barnes, the Deacons’ vice-president, and George Skiffer were arrested and charged with attempted murder for the shooting incident at the Morris home. Although there was enough evidence to indict Barnes and Skiffer, the case never came to trial. Barnes, the 55-year-old Deacon officer, died of a heart attack a few weeks after his arrest.¹¹

The Klan was also having trouble sustaining interest in the fall of 1965, having lost the ability to organize mass marches and counter protests. The night riders were

¹⁰“Bogalusa Voters League Boycott List,” n.d., box 1, folder 6, CORE(Bogalusa); *Bogalusa Daily News*, 5 December, 30 January 1966; *Louisiana Weekly*, 6 February 1966.

¹¹*Bogalusa Daily News*, 7 June 1966.

reduced to an occasional skirmish with local blacks. In September, only a few days before the OKKKK federal hearing was to open, police arrested Saxon Farmer for brandishing a .38 caliber pistol during a brawl between blacks and whites at the Bogalusa Dairy Queen.¹²

The Klan hearing began September 7 in New Orleans with a special three-judge panel composed of Christenberry, Robert A. Ainsworth, Jr., and John Minor Wisdom. Seventy-one witnesses were sworn in, including members of the Deacons, the BCVL, CORE, Bogalusa city officials, and FBI agents. The Klan defendants appearing before the court were Charles Christmas, the OKKKK's Grand Dragon of the Sixth Congressional District, and Saxon Farmer, the sixth district's Grand Titan. In what would prove to a fatal blow to the Klan, the court subpoenaed Christmas and Farmer to produce Klan records including a "list of members and officers." The Court also demanded records for several affiliated and phony "front" organizations that the OKKKK had created to protect itself from legal action, including the Anti-Communist Christian Association (ACCA), the name that the OKKKK had assumed in spring 1965. Other organizations targeted by the court included the Bogalusa Rifle Club, the United Conservatives, the Young Conservatives of Bogalusa, and the Minutemen of Bogalusa.¹³

The subpoena for the Klan's membership list proved troublesome for Christmas and Farmer. The Klan survived on secrecy. No Klan leader could afford to make public the organization's membership list. At first Christmas and Farmer feigned ignorance

¹²*Bogalusa Daily News*, 3 September 1965.

¹³*Times Picayune*, 8 September 1965.

before the court. Christmas told the court that he knew nothing about the ACCA--or any other Klan front groups, for that matter. Although Farmer admitted that he was the vice-president of the ACCA, the Klansman denied the existence of any Klan membership lists or other records.¹⁴

The federal judges were not amused by the Klan leaders' memory lapses. Under sharp questioning led by Judge Wisdom, Christmas eventually admitted that the Klan and the ACCA often met in the same place and used the same oath. But Christmas described the ACCA as something akin to a benevolent society. Indeed, he told the court that he had left the Klan because "some of us felt that there were some facets of the activities in the Sixth District that we did not agree with. We were opposed to violence and coercion." Christmas said that had hoped to transform the image of the Klan through the ACCA. "We felt that we had to improve the public image of the KKK to that of a more law-abiding organization."¹⁵

Christmas admitted that the OKKKK had maintained a "bureau of investigations" and a secret "wrecking crew"--which he characterized as peacekeepers. "That was one of the big reasons for the change," Christmas said of the wrecking crew. "I guess you might call it the police force. We of the ACCA felt that this should be left to the regularly constituted police officers of the community."¹⁶

After considerable threats by the Judicial panel, eventually the ACCA's financial officer, John Magee, agreed to turn over the ACCA financial records. Magee admitted

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵*Times-Picayune*, 9 September 1965.

¹⁶*Times-Picayune*, 8 September 1965.

that Saxon Farmer controlled the ACCA funds in Washington Parish and he testified that the ACCA's policy was to destroy all records.

Still, Christmas and Farmer balked at handing over the Klan's membership list. As the hearing progressed, there were ominous reports of a hurricane stirring to life in the Gulf of Mexico. With the storm looming, Judge Christenberry had little patience for Farmer wasting the court's time. "I suggest that it might be better to let the hurricane hit over Parish Prison with Mr. Farmer in it until he decides to tell the truth," Christenberry told Farmer's attorneys. At first Farmer was intractable. "I will just have to go to prison because I have no lists," insisted Farmer. But the idea of a prolonged stay in the steamy Orleans Parish Prison apparently weakened the Klansman's resolve. Farmer and Christmas soon arrived in court with an ACCA membership list containing eighty-seven names. The Justice Department later supplemented the list by introducing into evidence a second list of 151 names of Bogalusa Klan members which they obtained from a former Klan official turned informant, Clayton Hines. Although most of the names on the list were relatively anonymous citizens, at least one name raised a few eyebrows in the courtroom: Bogalusa City Attorney Robert Rester.¹⁷

The scope of the Klan's terror campaign in Bogalusa never came to public light at the hearing. To spare themselves the embarrassment of a public airing of their crimes, Christmas and Farmer admitted to most of the counts against the OKKKK, including the numerous assaults and intimidations against civil rights workers, business people, Judges, Congressmen, and even Governor McKeithen. The evidence that did emerge indicated

¹⁷*Times-Picayune*, 10, 12 September 1965.

that the Klan had been behind most of the seemingly spontaneous violence in Bogalusa. FBI Agent Sass, whose memory had also failed him in previous hearings, now recalled that he had seen Klansman Adrian Goings Jr. dispense baseball bats and two-by-four clubs to a group of young white teenagers in a parking lot near a civil rights protest. Armed with the bats and clubs, the teenagers were then apparently deployed for attacks by Randle C. Pounds, the Klansman who had assaulted James Farmer.¹⁸

The hearings did not go well for the Klan, and on December 22, the three-judge panel issued a permanent injunction against the OKKKK. Naming a total of 234 OKKKK members in Washington Parish, the injunction forbade Klansmen from harassing and intimidating blacks who were exercising their civil rights, voting rights, or pursuing equal employment. Klansmen would face fines or jail if they threatened or intimidated blacks, business owners, or city officials and employees. The court also ordered Christmas and Farmer to maintain a record of members of the ACCA and the OKKKK, and to post copies of the injunction in a conspicuous place where they met. Federal marshals flooded into the Parish in the following weeks and individually served the injunction papers on all 234 Klan members. Saxon Farmer remained defiant in the face of a defeat. "So what?" Farmer said of the injunction. "I think the decision was actually rendered before we entered into the hearing."¹⁹

Along with the federal judicial attack on the OKKKK, Congress opened a second front against the Klan. In the fall of 1965 the House Un-American Activities Committee

¹⁸*Times-Picayune*, 9 September 1965; 4 December 1965.

¹⁹*Times-Picayune* 23 December 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 2 February 1966; *Times-Picayune*, 4 December 1965.

(HUAC) announced plans for a public investigation of the Klan in response to President Johnson's call for hearings following the Viola Liuzzo shooting. HUAC announced that it was subpoenaing at least fifteen members of the OKKKK from the Bogalusa area. In protest of the hearings, the Klan covered the Deep South with a firestorm of burning crosses the first week of January. In Mississippi the Klan ignited 134 crosses. Several hundred crosses were set ablaze in Louisiana's Southern "Florida parishes." Nearly one-hundred crosses were burned in Tangipahoa Parish alone. But while crosses flared throughout Louisiana, the Klan in Bogalusa could barely muster a flickering flame. Waiting until the late hours of the night, the Bogalusa Klan managed to ignite only a handful of crosses--safely on the outskirts of town.²⁰

Several OKKKK members eventually testified before HUAC in October 1965, although the hearings never made headlines in Louisiana. Nevertheless the hearings, combined with the federal injunction and massive police infiltration, did much to drive the remnants of the Klan underground. HUAC's final report was a damning condemnation of the Klan, and stood in stark contrast to the findings of a similar investigation into the Klan conducted by the Louisiana Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities. The Louisiana committee issued a final report that likened Klan secrecy and intrigue to the "Halloween spirit that is common to most Americans."²¹

²⁰*Times-Picayune*, 1 December 1965; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 4, 9 January 1966.

²¹*Times-Picayune*, 25 January 1965. The HUAC hearing resulted in six volumes of testimony and reports, contained in *Activities of Ku Klux Klan* and *The Present-Day Ku Klux Klan Movement*. The court records of the federal court's injunction against the OKKKK contains a complete list of the 234 OKKKK members who were served with the restraining order. See, *United States vs. Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*, Federal Records Archives, Fort Worth, Texas.

Deprived of the ability to mobilize large-scale demonstrations and direct actions, penetrated by government informers, and discredited in the public eye, the remaining Klan members retreated into a world of clandestine terror and paranoia. Racial stereotypes of blacks had historically swung between two opposite images: the harmless man-child (Sambo) and the lustful beast (Nat Turner). When the Deacons exploded the notion that Southern black men were emasculated and passive, whites inevitably resurrected the old bestial stereotype--and all the fears of black vengeance and rebellion that had haunted whites from the days of slavery. This paranoia came into play in the bizarre Mississippi Klan Panic of 1965.²²

In November 1965, J. H. Wood, a member of the United Klans of America (UKA), contacted Washington County Deputy Sheriff Earl Fisher of Greenville, Mississippi with an odd tale of a black conspiracy and imminent race war. The Klansman told Deputy Fisher that he and his associates had uncovered a conspiracy in which the Deacons and the Black Muslims were smuggling guns, automatic weapons, and thousands of rounds of ammunition into Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico. The Klan was convinced that the Deacons and the Muslims had joined forces to foment a violent revolt against whites in the South. Though dubious, Deputy Fisher began investigating the allegations. Fisher talked to other UKA members who had staked out the Delta Memorial Gardens Cemetery outside the city limits of Greenville. The

²²Slave revolt panics periodically swept across the South in the nineteenth century. In Mississippi the paranoia was heightened by emancipation, as in the case of the 1865 insurrection panic in Mississippi. See, Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi 1865-1890*, The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science, vol. 28 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 218.

Klansmen claimed they had observed several suspicious black burials in recent months. One burial was mysteriously attended by only one person. In another burial the Klan claimed there was no record of a recent death. The Klansmen were convinced that the Deacons were concealing weapons and ammunition in empty graves. The Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms Department also became interested in the Klansmen's claims and even interviewed Earnest Thomas about the allegations.²³

The Klansmen made Fisher an offer. They would lead him to the graves where the weapons were if the Klan would receive a percentage of the guns and ammunition to protect whites against the planned uprising. They also insisted that if weapons were found, that the Highway Patrol should post guards at every black cemetery in the state. The Klan was in panic over the prospects of the looming race war, and even offered to help the Highway Patrol contain the Deacon-Muslim conspiracy. "One of our members is in tears out there thinking about those guns," said UKA Kleagle Ernest Gilbert.²⁴

Deputy Fisher was growing concerned that the rumor of a black revolt might spread in the white community. His fears were well founded. Paranoid fantasies of bloody and vengeful black revolts were deeply imbedded in the Southern white psyche, dating back to the times of slavery when revolt was a real threat. The Deacons had jogged the phantom memory to the surface.

Compounding the problem was that the Klan was insisting on massive publicity to unmask the black insurrection. "They wanted ABC, NBC, CBS, and the Jackson

²³"Miss. KKK Scared Stiff: Say Black Muslims Hide Guns in Graves, Coffins," *Jet*, 2 December 1965, pp. 6-8; Thomas, Hill interview.

²⁴*Ibid.*

Newspapers on hand when the graves were opened," said Fisher. Fisher feared a riot if the rumors reached the white public. The anxious deputy contacted the Mississippi State Attorney General who authorized the investigation to continue. Fisher then secured permission to exhume the grave of an elderly black man where the Klan believed weapons had been secreted. To minimize publicity, the police dug up the grave at night, working secretly and under armed guard. At last they reached the coffin and anxiously pried off the lid. Inside they found the remains of James Turner, a 64-year-old black man who had been buried on November 4. There were no guns.

Fisher invited the local media to examine the ridiculous scene at the cemetery the following day. "This was done to disprove once and for all that Negroes are not stashing guns," solemnly announced Fisher. "The Black Muslims and the Deacons for Defense and Justice are not in here creating an uprising." The photograph accompanying the news story pictured three slightly befuddled deputy sheriffs peering into a gaping and harmless grave. To add insult to injury, Fisher announced that his office was now opening an investigation of the Klan.²⁵

Despite the rash of cross burnings in January 1966, the Klan was virtually dead in Louisiana. Their offensive in 1965 had included hundreds of cross burnings and assaults, twenty-two shootings, twenty-eight bombings and arson. But they had lost their ability to intimidate blacks. On January 28, 1966, James Farmer returned to Bogalusa for the first large march in several months. In response, the Klan held a rally and burned five crosses in a circle around Ebenezer Baptist Church. Initially the League decided to retaliate by donning Klan robes and parading through Bogalusa to ridicule the Klan as cowards. The

²⁵Ibid.

provocative plan was dropped, but a rally on January 29 provided a forum for the League to issue a stern threat to the Klan. "Thursday there were four crosses burned in the Negro section of town," A. Z. Young told a rally audience. "They don't scare us," continued Young. "But if any more are burned, we'll strike a match on you baby." The audience roared its approval. Charlie Sims echoed Young's message. If the police attempted a repeat of "Bloody Wednesday," the Deacons would "come off of defense and go on offense," promised Sims.²⁶

As the rally ended, Fletcher Anderson joined Charlie Sims on the stage and donned a wrinkled sheet with a pointed Klan hood painted with the letters "KKK." Anderson pronounced the Klan officially "dead" and pranced around the stage in his costume to gales of laughter from the audience.²⁷

The Bogalusa Deacons continued to operate sporadically until 1967, but most of their activities ceased after the end of 1965. There were few marches but the Klan had faded away and black police now patrolled the community. There were still occasional isolated racially motivated attacks. In March 1966, a white man shot and wounded a black army Captain, Donald R. Sims, as Sims talked on a public phone in downtown Bogalusa. Sims, not related to Charlie Sims, was home on leave and was dressed in civilian clothes at the time. The shooting was universally condemned--even by the Klan. In New Orleans, Grand Dragon Jack Helm announced that the UKA was offering a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of Sims' assailant. Within days

²⁶*Louisiana Weekly*, 29 January 1966; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 28, 30, January 1966; *Times-Picayune* 6 February 1966.

²⁷*Bogalusa Daily News* 30, January 1966; *Louisiana Weekly*, 6 February 1966.

Thomas Bennett, of Bogalusa, confessed to the crime and was charged with attempted murder. He later explained that Sims angered him when the serviceman had remained on the pay phone preventing Bennett from using the phone. Bennett was bailed out by seven people, including local Klan leader Saxon Farmer, and Ray McElveen, the white man accused of murdering Deputy O'Neal Moore.²⁸

A few months later the Deacons were involved in an incident that led to charges against Deacon leader Fletcher Anderson. Anderson, Layton Griffin, Jr. and CORE field secretary Bruce Baines were eating at the ACME Cafe when Anderson went outside to investigate a group of white men standing next to his car. Four of the men attacked and beat Anderson leaving him bloodied in the parking lot. When Baines and Griffin went to investigate, they were also attacked. Griffin pulled a pistol and fired two shots into pavement and one shot at the cafe entrance. The three were later arrested, but never prosecuted, for attempted murder of Beulah Crockett and Ruby Lumkin, two ACME cafe waitresses.²⁹

On July 30, 1966, John W. Coplin, Jr. ruthlessly gunned down Clarence Trigg, a 24-year-old black construction worker and civil rights activist. Coplin and Homer "Kingfish" Richard Seale, both white Bogalusa residents, had picked up Burnett Crain, a nineteen-year-old white woman from nearby Varnado. The two men began to scuffle in the front seat and the car veered off the road into a ditch. Clarence Trigg saw the accident and, playing the good Samaritan, approached the car and asked Burnett if she

²⁸*Times-Picayune*, 12, 13, 14, 16, March 1966.

²⁹*Times-Picayune*, 15 May 1966; *Times-Picayune*, 23 July 1966.

were hurt. Without warning, Coplin fired the fatal shots at Trigg. When Royan Burris went to the scene of the murder to provide police with information on the assailants, he was arrested for interfering with police.³⁰

The Deacons followed CORE as it veered toward black power in 1966. James Farmer had stepped down as CORE's director and was replaced by the young militant Floyd McKissick. In the summer of 1966, CORE's Associate Director, Lincoln Lynch, another black power advocate, toured Louisiana for two weeks speaking at several Deacons strongholds, including St. Francisville, Ferriday, Tallulah, Minden, and New Orleans. His trip culminated in CORE forming a new organization, the "Louisiana Youth for Black Power," led by David Whately of Ferriday.³¹

In September 1966, the BCVL escalated its own black power rhetoric, stirring a storm of controversy. During an interview on WDSU television in New Orleans on September 16, Bob Hicks bemoaned the slow pace of change and intimated that violence was necessary. "The federal government won't do anything, the state government won't do anything, so somebody has to die," said Hicks. "It won't do any good for a Negro to die, so somebody else has got to die." A. Z. Young took the same tact at a subsequent rally. "If you own a gun buy plenty of ammunition for it and get ready to use it," Young said, "because we might have to burn this baby down." Hicks' and Young's threats

³⁰*Times-Picayune*, 15 May 1966; *Times-Picayune*, 22 July 1966; *Times-Picayune*, 2 August 1966, *Times-Picayune*, 31 July 1966.

³¹*Louisiana Weekly*, 6, 27, August 1966. The black power group had representatives from fourteen parishes. Other officers included Vice-President Steven Ward, Bogalusa, Secretary Bertha Reed, Lake Providence, Assistant Secretary Lillie Mae Thompson, Bogalusa, and Treasurer Willie Jackson, Lake Providence.

provoked a near-hysterical response by Bogalusa whites. Gayle Jenkins did her best to defuse the situation. "You know A. Z. as well as I do," Jenkins told reporters. "He makes all those kinds of statements."³²

But Robert Rester, Bogalusa City Attorney--and Klan member--was not willing to forgive Young's hyperbole. Rester announced that he would ask the 22nd District Court to convene a Washington Parish Grand Jury to investigate the Deacons and "inflammatory" statements by BCVL. The investigation would determine if the BCVL "advocates violence" and if the Deacons "have violated state statutes on purchase, sale, or possession of firearms."³³

Rester's threats never bore fruit but they represented the white political establishment's new strategy of using the courts to neutralize the League and the Deacons. In addition to Rester's threats, City officials sued several League and Deacon members in the fall of 1966.³⁴

The last armed confrontation between the Deacons and the Klan occurred the same day as Hicks' television appearance, on September 12, 1966. A rumor had spread that James Meredith had been invited to speak at the newly integrated Bogalusa Junior High. Black and white students had been involved in a series of fights in recent days, adding to the tension. A group of fifty white men and twelve women, many of them Klan

³²*Bogalusa Daily News*, 16 September 1966; *Times-Picayune*, 16 September 1966.

³³*Bogalusa Daily News*, 16 September 1966. In July of 1967 City Attorney Rester and nine other men were charged with littering for throwing Klan leaflets on lawns. See, *Bogalusa Daily News*, 28 July 1967.

³⁴*Times-Picayune*, 22 December 1966.

members, assembled outside the school a few hours before classes began. They were led by Paul Farmer, the Citizen's Council leader and brother of Klan leader Saxon Farmer. Hicks, Young, about twenty members of the BCVL and the Deacons arrived at the school. Guns were drawn but police eventually persuaded the Klan and the Deacons to leave. It was the last time that the Klan used force in an effort to intimidate the Black community in Bogalusa.³⁵

The BCVL's protests revived in July 1967, for the first demonstration in nearly a year. "The people of Bogalusa are probably wondering why we are starting our demonstrations again," Young told a rally audience, "Well it's to let them know that we have the same problems with which we began this program. We have accomplished a few things but have not gotten into the mainstream of life here in Bogalusa."

There are no Negroes except at the broom and mop level at United Gas, Louisiana Power and Light, Southern Bell, and here at city hall. Turn in your phones, turn your lights off and stop paying your water bill; let them know how important Negro money is and they begin to hire Negroes.³⁶

Fifty-six persons were arrested at the march on July 4 for marching without a parade permit. Charlie Sims, who was also arrested later, promised that if any protestor was injured in jail, he would "have so many Deacons in here it'll be like a flood. They'll have to call out the national guard and blood will flow in the streets."³⁷

³⁵The account of this incident is taken from Burris, Hill interview; *Bogalusa Daily News*, 16 September 1966; *Times-Picayune*, 21 September 1966; and Sobel, *Civil Rights*, p. 407.

³⁶*Times-Picayune*, 3 July 1967.

³⁷*Times-Picayune* 5, July 1967.

The League organized a second march, this time to the Parish seat in Franklinton. The march highlighted a wide range of issues, including the release of the two white men who killed Clarence Trigg and the "inferior status under law" that blacks continued to endure. The BCVL was determined to prove that blacks could "travel the highways of Louisiana" without fear.³⁸

The twenty-one-mile march began Sunday, July 23 with twenty-one adults and eighty-seven juveniles. The group arrived at the Washington Parish Courthouse in Franklinton on the 24th, where they were exhorted to revolution by CORE's Lincoln Lynch. "There's a new movement afoot," Lynch told the rally audience, "Its not civil rights any longer--it's the movement of revolution."³⁹

Some call it black power, others may call it the black revolution, but it's all the same. If those rednecks in Bogalusa wont hire you, don't picket at their stores anymore, run them out of your neighborhood. The days of black people clapping their hands and singing are over and many of you are going to be asked to kill for freedom - and you'd better be ready to kill.⁴⁰

A. Z. Young echoed Lynch's revolutionary theme. Referring to the release of Clarence Trigg's killers, Young told the rally, "There's a penalty for killing birds out of season, but there is never any penalty for killing a Negro---there has never been a white man convicted for killing a Negro in the history of Washington Parish." Young added that he was going to see Governor McKeithen about the situation and if he didn't get any

³⁸*Times-Picayune*, 23, 24, July 1967.

³⁹*Times-Picayune*, 25 July 1967.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

results, "Get Ready, LBJ, to open those pearly gates. They talk about Watts and the burning--everything will burn in the state of Louisiana," shouted Young to an ecstatic crowd. "Burn, burn, burn."⁴¹

Building on the momentum of the Franklinton march, the League announced an even more ambitious protest trek from Bogalusa to the state capitol in Baton Rouge. The march would culminate in a rally in Baton Rouge featuring black power firebrands H. Rap Brown and Lincoln Lynch. The 105-mile march route would take the League through Klan strongholds in Tangipahoa and Livingston Parishes.⁴²

The march began on August 10 with a meager forty-four participants. Though it had little support, the Baton Rouge march became one of the most highly publicized marches in Louisiana history. A small contingent of Deacons, including Hicks' body guard, Burte Wyre, walked with the marchers. But the Deacons were little help on the isolated highway far from Bogalusa.

During a rally in Hammond a group of blacks attempted to be served at the Riverside Inn. They were refused service and one black was beaten. The group soon returned with a more dramatic strategy for integrating the Inn. Shouting, "we want beer," the young black men fired a shotgun into a group of whites near the Inn entrance, wounding four whites. A. Z. Young later denied official reports that the blacks involved in the shooting were part of the march.⁴³

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²*Times-Picayune*, 11 August 1967.

⁴³*Times-Picayune*, 15 August 1967.

The last leg of the march tested the mettle of even the bravest marchers. Livingston Parish stood between the marchers and Baton Rouge, with only a small contingent of state troopers standing guard. A Klan stronghold with virtually no black population, the Parish had a deserved reputation as dangerous to blacks. The militant tone of the march had attracted statewide attention. Governor McKeithen blustered with threats to arrest anyone at the Baton Rouge rally who made "inflammatory statements." In Tangipahoa a group of whites broke through state troopers and attacked the marchers. The next day McKeithen dispatched 150 state police to guard the march which had dwindled down to only six participants.⁴⁴

A second attack in Satsuma forced state police to wade into a mob of seventy-five whites, slugging away at them with carbine butts and billy clubs. Several whites were left bloodied and eight were arrested for disturbing the peace or simple battery. The following day McKeithen called out 650 national guardsmen to protect the march in Livingston Parish and announced that he would go on statewide television to urge calm. Young halted the march in Walker on Wednesday night to allow the marchers to rest. The marchers' fate now lay with McKeithen. Young abandoned his militant rhetoric, now sounding more like Martin Luther King than Malcom X. "We're not going to protect ourselves; we're just going to march," Young told reporters. "We'll be watched over by the same one who has been protecting us all these years--God Almighty."⁴⁵

⁴⁴*Times-Picayune*, 16, 17, August 1967.

⁴⁵*Times-Picayune*, 18 August 1967.

By Friday, August 18, the march had taken on a surreal quality. With additional protection, the marchers grew in number from six to ninety for the last few miles of the march. They were accompanied by a formidable army of nearly 1,000 troops: 825 Louisiana National Guardsman and 170 state police. National guard helicopters roared above the highway as a magnetic sweeper cleared the highway of roofing nails scattered by the Klan. Wilting in the 97-degree August heat, guardsmen lined the highway with rifles with fixed bayonets. State police stood by nervously fingering submachine guns with live ammunition. Law enforcement officials discovered sections of wire under the twin spans crossing the Amite river on highway 190, in what appeared to be an aborted plan to blow up marchers. "If they hadn't had the Louisiana National Guard, it would have been a slaughter camp," Young said later.⁴⁶

The marchers arrived in Baton Rouge on Saturday. McKeithen had fifteen-hundred national guardsmen standing by for the rally with "shoot-to-kill" order if a riot erupted. McKeithen told state police officials that if any speaker made "treasonous or seditious statements" they were to "arrest them on the spot." Several hundred blacks attended the rally which turned out to be relatively peaceful. At one point about 150 blacks splintered off from the main rally and threatened to sit-in on the Sate Capitol steps. In a strange role reversal, it was Charlie Sims who intervened and persuaded them to abandon their plan and rejoin the rally. Later that night spontaneous violence did break

⁴⁶*Times-Picayune*, 19 August 1967.

out in Baton Rouge's black neighborhoods, as gangs of youths roamed the streets breaking windows and hurling fire bombs.⁴⁷

The Baton Rouge march marked the last public action for the Bogalusa Deacons. The chapter ceased to meet in 1968. Bogalusa continued to be plagued by white resistance to school integration, but there was little violence. BCVL and Deacon members, including Hicks and Young, ran unsuccessfully for public office. In the 1970s blacks finally won office and the BCVL evolved into a traditional political club, endorsing candidates and striking deals with political power brokers. Of all the BCVL and Deacons' leaders, A. Z. Young was the only one to continue to lead a public life. Young campaigned vigorously for Edwin Edwards in his successful 1972 gubernatorial bid, and Edwards later rewarded Young by appointing him to an office in his administration. Young continued to play a prominent role in Democratic party politics until his death in 1993.

Charles Sims, the old lion, retired to a quiet life of odd jobs and bar tending. He grew bitter with the years, disappointed that young people had failed the struggle--that they had "let it fall back in the same shape." He was also convinced that unscrupulous journalists had exploited his story without financially compensating him. Plagued by health problems in his final years, Sims died quietly in 1989 in Bogalusa.⁴⁸

To this day, many of the Bogalusa Deacons insist that the organization never disbanded. It is still alive, they say, only awaiting the call to arms. Charlie Sims was

⁴⁷*Times-Picayune*, 21 August 1967.

⁴⁸Lisa Frazier, "Thank you, Mr. Young," *Times-Picayune*, 6 December 1993.

once asked how long the Deacons would be needed in the civil rights movement. "In 1965 there will be a great change made," Sims said, alluding to the newly enacted Voting Rights Act. "But after this change is made, the biggest fight is to keep it," continued Sims. "My son, his son might have to fight this fight and that's one reason why we won't disband the Deacons for a long time. How long, Heaven only knows. But it will be a long time."⁴⁹

⁴⁹Sims, Price interview.

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