

“The Deacons are Somewhere Nearby”:
How Bogalusa’s Deacons Bolstered the Civil Rights Movement

by

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Abstract

The Deacons for Defense and Justice—specifically the Bogalusa, Louisiana chapter—made a lasting impression on the debate between nonviolence and self-defense in the American civil rights movement. With an awareness of the influence of media, especially in regard to its coverage of the tense social atmosphere of the 1960s, the Deacons successfully implemented and justified the practice of self-defense with guns. During the summer of 1965, the city of Bogalusa witnessed the eruption of a chaotic racial situation that had been developing for decades. Mass attention, ranging from that of civil rights activists to media journalists, centered on the city as local and regional whites clashed with Bogalusa's black community. The Deacons challenged the effectiveness of nonviolent activism through their application of self-defense to bolster this disadvantaged populace. Despite its sole aim to protect the black population, the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons found itself invigorating the broader civil rights movement and successfully navigating the media landscape.

The Activist-Media Exchange in the American Civil Rights Movement: An Introduction

National and local news played a prominent yet complicated role in the American civil rights movement. This media had countless implications for the movement—both progressive and regressive in nature. The persistence of media coverage equipped civil rights leaders and activists with consistent publicity. This attention demanded their participation in a largely unfamiliar societal arena. Regardless of the intention and accompanying perspective of media coverage, a nationwide reliance on news permitted widespread and intimate engagement with the movement. The movement's participants confronted a reality exemplary of the fight or flight dilemma as the opportunity for media attention materialized. Activists could either act presentably to an increasingly national audience, or disregard such implications of “acceptance” to retain allegiance to their respective ideals. The realization of these approaches admittedly reflected much more multifaceted interaction with and reaction to not only the media, but also American society as a whole. Regardless of mutual success or failure, the routine struggle between activists and media personnel to maintain authority on a presumed nationally honored high ground revealed a deeply-rooted tension.

The nature of the relationship between those within the media and the movement ranged from hospitable and affirming to harsh and dismissive, as clarified by the evolution in perception of the media's role by both activists and media personnel in subsequent decades. For example, while participating in the conference “Covering the South: A National Symposium on the Media and the Civil Rights Movement,” Representative John Lewis, who played a crucial leadership and activist role during the movement, admitted that “The civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings if it hadn't been for the news

media.”¹ On the other hand, Enterprise-Journal editor Charles Dunagin recognized the lack of correspondence between the movement and the media, reflecting that “the biggest failure of the Mississippi press during the civil rights struggle was in not getting the ‘behind-the-scenes’ story.”² This “behind-the-scenes” narrative reflected the humanity, and in turn, morality that consistently defined the movement. The media conversely satisfied and repelled the activists who served as their subjects by misrepresenting this reality.

Strategic self-analysis was vital to the success of those engaged in the fight for equality due to the complexities of the communication between the movement and its contemporary examination by the media. The civil rights movement required consideration and contemplation by all who interacted with the media, but participants within the localized realm had to overcome the burden of not only being misinterpreted, but also overlooked. The adoption of nonviolent protest as the key to the achievement of equal rights emboldened the movement’s internal and national frames of support and strained the acceptance and success of other approaches to protest and activism. Through its depictions in and engagement with national media, the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice successfully maintained its presence as a self-defense entity while also influencing local and national debate on the preferred method of successful protest.

The Interplay between Self-Defense and Nonviolent Protest: An Examination

There was constant communication between the different methods of activism and protest throughout the civil rights movement. The shift by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from the promotion of

¹ David Treadwell, “Journalists Discuss Coverage of Movement: Media Role in Civil Rights Era Reviewed,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1987.

² Treadwell, “Journalists Discuss.”

nonviolent passive resistance to the endorsement of armed self-defense “as a legitimate and viable tactic in the struggle to achieve civil and human rights” reflected the significance of this exchange.³ Martin Luther King, Jr. maintained the moral and practical value of nonviolent activism. However, the promotion of a need for change in approach by the movement reached a growing number of those affected by the racial status-quo. The persistence of racial inequality and injustice inspired increased examination of the effectiveness of nonviolence even as the national movement maintained allegiance to the practice. Dissatisfaction within southern black communities, and specifically that in Bogalusa, Louisiana, consistently erupted due to racial biases in local, regional, and state police forces and “major public and private sectors.”⁴ Similarly, the presence of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations reminded the black population of the racial reality of the South. For example, in his recounting of the Bogalusa experience, Ivory Perry, a black activist with decades of field experience, recalled that “On more than one occasion automobiles with one high-beam headlight, purportedly a secret sign of the Ku Klux Klan, forced him off the road.”⁵ While there were instances of prominent self-defense efforts in the first half of the 1960s, such as that of Robert F. Williams’ NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina, self-defense remained a subsidiary within the arena of activism.

The early dismissal of self-defense largely resulted from the fear that “the use of force by Black people and the movement would only serve to alienate White liberal and the general White population.”⁶ Proclamations for the fulfillment of unconditional

³ Akinyele O. Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (1999): 558, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645870>.

⁴ Rickey Hill, “The Bogalusa Movement: Self-Defense and Black Power in the Civil Rights Struggle,” *The Black Scholar* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/blackscholar.41.3.0043>.

⁵ George Lipsitz, “Bogalusa: Civil Rights in a Southern City,” in *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 94.

⁶ Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet,” 561.

nonviolence—such as the Southern Leadership Conference’s declaration that “Even in the face of death, not one hair of one head of one white person shall be harmed”—served as assurances of the existence of a tolerable and nationally agreeable approach to the attainment of equality.⁷ Such sentiments proved satisfactory for the national audience while those actively engaged in the South experienced their baselessness first-hand. As clarified by CORE’s Richard Haley, “this nonviolent strategy had been effective in focusing national attention on the South and winning ‘sympathetic public opinion’ in the North, but northern sympathy was slow to translate into protection.”⁸ Organizations, including SNCC and CORE, turned to more forceful forms of engagement in the South as the southern reality remained largely unchanged despite the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They retained faith in their field work practices, but promoted protective services in order to fully excel in their efforts.

While organizations involved in the South—specifically SNCC and CORE—had drifted toward armed resistance and defense throughout the first half of the 1960s, they widely accepted the approach by 1965. Although some members had always carried guns, the organizations recognized the need for all-encompassing forms of protection. In his work *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed*, Charles E. Cobb recognized the dilemma of complete nonviolence, writing, “Few had any training in nonviolence beyond a few workshops to prepare them to sit in or walk picket lines. Even fewer had any grounding in nonviolence as a philosophy or way of life.”⁹ Nonviolent activism may have been the customary approach, but

⁷ Umoja, “The Ballot and the Bullet.”

⁸ Lance E. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 133.

⁹ Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 93.

its success depended on unrealistic circumstances. Civil rights activists either personally carried guns or accepted the protective services of others as a result of this shift in mindset. On the national stage, leaders such as Malcolm X proclaimed self-defense as the future of the movement. The attachment of these often controversial leaders, such as Malcolm X and North Carolina's Robert Williams, to self-defense added complicated implications to the proposition of guns in the movement. However, their justifications for self-defense mirrored the sentiments and experiences in the South, as seen in Malcolm X's remark that "It is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks. It is legal and lawful to own a shotgun or a rifle. We believe in obeying the law."¹⁰

Malcolm X increasingly associated himself with the brand of self-defense previously maintained by Williams. They believed that the incorporation of guns was secondary to the insurance of safety. Although guns may have been required to achieve and preserve protection, their use was never an attempt to overwhelm the movement's moral core. While this allegiance inevitably suffered from intentional and inadvertent misinterpretation by both supporters and those in opposition within the movement, media, and broader public, the early positioning of self-defense received tentative respect by actors situated firmly in the nonviolent camp. This underlying relationship, which was rarely acknowledged by the media and general populace, reflected a shared history in the tradition of activism. While Martin Luther King, Jr.'s faith in nonviolence was widely considered and advertised as the core of his identity, his beliefs were the result of years of experience with and without the presence of guns. For example, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, King had a gun and

¹⁰ M.S. Handler, "Malcolm X Sees Rise in Violence: Says Negroes Are Ready to Act in Self-Defense," *New York Times*, March 13, 1964, 20.

allowed an armed group to protect his parsonage.¹¹ Despite the often justifiable classification of King and Malcolm X's relationship as adversarial, the two leaders increasingly found common ground following Malcolm X's departure from the Nation of Islam. In fact, his dissolution from Elijah Muhammad reflected the dismissal of overt violence. The true nature of these relationships and the accompanying exchange in beliefs ultimately became obscured as a result of the aforementioned failure by the media to maintain comprehensive coverage.

Regardless of the supposed character of these leaders, their arguments provided a solution to the uphill battle presented in personal testimonies and national reports on the South's situation. Many leaders of this developing shift in approach acknowledged the value of nonviolent civil rights efforts in the South, but considered presumably nonviolent acts as symbolic rather than transformative in nature. For example, following his split with Elijah Muhammad in March 1964 , Malcolm X emphasized the need for reformed protest methods in the South, stating, “Good education, housing and jobs are imperatives for the Negroes, and I shall support them in their fight to win these objectives, but I shall tell the Negroes that while these are necessary, they cannot solve the main Negro problem.”¹² Blacks could often attain significant yet surface-level change with the traditional strategy of nonviolent protest. However, the establishment of equality required more commanding action. Malcolm X, with the freedom to act without restraints charged by Muhammad, pronounced his intention to travel south and correct the misguided administration of civil rights activism. He clarified his goals for this undertaking and vowed to “join in the fight wherever Negroes ask for my

¹¹ Christopher B. Strain, “The Ballot and the Bullet: Rethinking the Violent/Nonviolent Dichotomy,” in *Understanding and Teaching the Civil Rights Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 87.

¹² M.S. Handler, “Malcolm X Splits with Muhammad: Suspended Muslim Leader Plans Black Nationalist Political Movement,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1964, 1.

help.”¹³ Malcolm X would not enforce specific ideals or convictions, but instead serve to embolden those activists desirous of concrete and irreversible racial advancement. Malcolm X’s immediate shift to the South following his separation from Elijah Muhammad reflected the region’s increasingly tumultuous and multifaceted nature of struggle and resistance.

News coverage of Malcolm X’s departure from the Nation of Islam highlighted his shift to the South and analyzed possible implications of this venture. In his *New York Times* article “Negroes Ponder Malcolm’s Move,” Fred Powledge considered the developing discussion on Malcolm X’s arrival in the South, writing that while some civil rights leaders believed he would be warmly received, others found his popularity dependent on his presence in “the white man’s newspapers and television networks.”¹⁴ Similarly, his introduction into the South encouraged varying predictions of the future of conflict and success in the fight for racial equality. According to civil rights leaders, the recent lack of significant progress in the movement dissatisfied many blacks. This stagnation resulted in growing intrigue with Malcolm X’s approach. Activist Bayard Rustin acknowledged this body of support, remarking that while many of Malcolm X’s proposals for structural equality remained too radical, blacks identified with his “analysis of the evils that are being practiced on the Negro people.”¹⁵ Malcolm X’s proclaimed mission to aid southern efforts sparked excitement among media, principals of the civil rights movement, and the broader southern populace. This breadth of interest revealed the active and complex interplay of self-defense and nonviolent activism.

¹³ Handler, “Malcolm X Splits,” 42.

¹⁴ Fred Powledge, “Negroes Ponder Malcolm’s Move: Differ Over Significance of His Political Effort,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1964, 46.

¹⁵ Powledge, “Negroes Ponder.”

The presumed ineffectiveness of nonviolent efforts compared to the practice promoted by Malcolm X led southern blacks to increasingly consider self-defense as a necessary tool to attain genuine equality. This demographic had faced an unequal playing ground for decades; the continued lack of progress translated into a seemingly inescapable burden of injustice. Confrontation of the South's racial reality needed to be direct and incontestable due to the ineffectiveness of nonviolence when acting against such a structure of discrimination. When reflecting on his hesitation for nonviolence, Charles "Chuck" McDew, who served as the chairman of SNCC from 1960 to 1963, remarked, "when Gandhi used [nonviolence] in India, the tactic of having people lay down on railroad tracks to protest... it worked... But if a group of black people lay down on railroad tracks here, in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, any of these Southern states, a train would run you over and back up to make certain you're dead."¹⁶ As exemplified by McDew's blunt counter to nonviolence, opposition to protest efforts often translated into an intensification of injustice and violence. The viability of self-defense strengthened as growing numbers of southern blacks and activists identified with McDew's sentiments.

Support for the shifting analysis of the validity of nonviolent protest and the accompanying promotion of self-defense fluctuated within the movement and the nation at large. The excitement sparked by such activity invigorated coverage by national media on the movement, leading to the designation of nontraditional activists as instigators and dependents of media attention. For example, as mentioned earlier, some civil rights leaders believed that Malcolm X's forthcoming possible success in the South would rely on his coverage by "the

¹⁶ Charles F. McDew, interview by Joseph Mosnier, *Civil Rights History Project*, Library of Congress, 2011.

white man's newspapers and television networks."¹⁷ The numerous facets and complexities of self-defense remained overlooked and simplified as a result of both the national intrigue for the practice and the accompanying speculation of its presence in the media. This superficial summation of self-defense resulted in an omission of the underlying retainment of nonviolent tradition held by many activists working under the self-defense umbrella.

During its early years of implementation, self-defense, and specifically that practiced with guns, acted alongside the nonviolent approach. As previously noted, Martin Luther King Jr., himself, owned a gun during the early stages of his civil rights career. Similarly, prominent promoters of gun use, such as Malcolm X and Robert Williams, acknowledged the importance of nonviolence at some point in their careers. This shared affirmation by activist groups predominately practicing either self-defense or nonviolence often disappeared under the media's speculative eye. Thus, the maintenance of the bond between self-defense and nonviolence depended on commentary by the practitioners themselves. This assignment pulled self-defense activists outside of their sphere of action and into the broader situation in the South. Localized efforts shifted to region-wide exchange, and community-based groups witnessed an introduction of more developed organizations conducive to national attention. Their growing engagement with the media often complicated efforts within the movement. Despite this development, self-defense activists maintained their sole intention to serve and advance the black community.

In many ways, the national perception of these actors directly conflicted with the mission of self-defense. Success in the promotion and implementation of self-defense depended on the method's viability as an instrument to advance the civil rights movement.

¹⁷ Powledge, "Negroes Ponder."

On the other hand, the media's service to its audience required interpretation and coverage that replaced the authority of self-defense as a necessary and appropriate practice with the glorification of guns and violence. Rather than drawing the vital distinction between the mission of self-defense and the function of guns, the media presented the two subjects as synonymous and dependent on one another. National media largely dismissed the South's reality of poverty and struggle resulting from racial segregation and discrimination in favor of the debate between and accompanying pursuit of self-defense and nonviolence. The probability of violence and conflict when practicing self-defense primed the approach for national attention. This allure moved activists to strategically position themselves as protectors of southern communities and their overlooked black populations. Subsequent reproach by the media in response to this intentional presentation lacked legitimacy, as activists practiced what they preached. Growing acceptance and implementation of self-defense required increased consideration and strategy by its practitioners. Without such focus, the validity of self-defense within the broader civil rights movement would have diminished.

The Rise of the Deacons for Defense and Justice

The shift towards the self-defense approach by organizations engaged in the South paralleled the surge in national pronouncements for reformed action. As field-workers embraced this change, additional organizations either developed or intensified their efforts. For example, CORE's warming up to self-defense coincided with the establishment of the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Bogalusa and the two parties soon found support and assistance in one another. Following the arrival of CORE director James Farmer in Bogalusa in June 1965, detectives warned him of an assassination plot. Farmer refused the detectives'

offer of protective services in favor of support from the Deacons. Following this experience, along with various other interactions with the Bogalusa community, Farmer remarked that “we have no right to tell Negroes in Bogalusa or anywhere else that they do not have the right to defend their homes. It is a constitutional right.”¹⁸ As evidenced by this remark, the justification for self-defense and the bearing of guns often focused on the approach’s legality. Louisiana’s renowned status as the “Sportsman’s Paradise” strengthened the defense for the bearing of guns in self-defense.¹⁹ Charles Sims acknowledged the paradox between the normalcy of guns and resistance to their use in self-defense efforts, explaining that “having a weapon’s nothing new. What bugged the people was something else—when they found out what was the program of the Deacons.”²⁰

The Deacons, and more broadly all activists practicing self-defense, struggled to maintain a legitimate standing within the civil rights movement due to the misinterpretation of gun-use. The presence of guns became synonymous with the provocation of violence when in reality, it helped to alleviate the fear prompted by white violence. The national media legitimized the misconstrued role of guns through its routine questioning of the morals and intentions of activists practicing self-defense. The credibility of self-defense as an alternative to nonviolence remained uncertain despite its increased validity. This analysis, whether warranted or unjust, resulted from and led to debate within the civil rights movement. Nonviolence remained the nationally acceptable method of activism, while self-defense had supposedly dangerous implications. The rise of the Deacons in Bogalusa

¹⁸ Christopher B. Strain, “‘We Walked Like Men’: The Deacons for Defense and Justice,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 48, www.jstor.org/stable/4233369.

¹⁹ Strain, “‘We Walked Like Men’,” 49.

²⁰ Ibid.

revealed this intricate situation and reflected the successful maintenance and invigoration of self-defense as activism and protest.

Believing that nonviolence had failed to win equal rights and ensure racial justice, the Bogalusa chapter organized and promoted itself around the doctrine of self-defense. Bogalusa, once referred to as “Klantown USA,” faced a tense and often violent racial atmosphere throughout the 1950s and 1960s.²¹ Bogalusa’s white community persistently responded to the country’s gradual adoption of measures of racial equality with social, employment, and economic discrimination. The thriving Ku Klux Klan and broader white populace (including many of the city’s authorities) thwarted pursuits by both blacks and whites to remake Bogalusa. The local Ku Klux Klan, self-titled as the Original Ku Klux Klan of Louisiana, emphasized its displeasure with the city’s growing interest in integration in an affirmation of the group’s presence in Bogalusa. In response to news of an upcoming meeting of integrationists, the organization warned that it “is strongly organized in Bogalusa..., [has] members in every conceivable business..., and will know the names of all who are invited to the Brooks Hayes meeting.”²² The intentions of this meeting, which was set to take place on January 7, 1965, were supposedly to plan “the integration of [the white community’s] Church, Schools, Businesses, Restaurants, Hotels, Motels, etc....”²³ According to the authors of the statement, these acts for integration in Bogalusa would embody visiting speaker Brooks Hayes, a “traitor to the South.”²⁴ In reality, Hayes’ meeting, which was organized in cooperation with “the federal Community Relations Service,” aimed to provide

²¹ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 86.

²² E. Gerald Pines, “Appendix 3,” in *Murky Waters: The Struggle to Integrate Bogalusa Louisiana* (Elderberry Press, 2004), 66.

²³ Pines, “Appendix 3.”

²⁴ Ibid.

local business owners with “strategies for meeting the public accommodations requirements of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”²⁵ It reflected an attempt to correct long-ignored national mandates. This act, along with subsequent attempts to fulfill orders resulting from civil rights victories, invigorated the white opposition. In response to growing national criticism and rebuke as the fight for equality intensified, Bogalusa’s Ku Klux Klan attacked the media. The KKK reported that the author of the particularly critical article “Klan Town U.S.A.,” “which accused Bogalusa of being dominated by the Ku Klux Klan,” was a “freelance, alcoholic reporter.”²⁶ They further alleged that local reverend, Bruce Shepard, who released an anti-KKK joint statement with the Hays Committee in the *Bogalusa Daily News*, “can be observed frequently emerging from the Cuban Liquor Company with an arm load of liquor.”²⁷ Through their verbal and physical counters to these sources of backlash—such as the aforementioned *Bogalusa Daily News*, which “did not print one single word in the defense of Bogalusa” as national media “was tearing Bogalusa into shreds,” and “Black Muslims [sic]… who commit murder and commit arson all over the country in a period of one week”—the Klan aimed to return the city to its natural order.²⁸ These individuals justified their efforts as an attempt to preserve “stability,” but, for them, “stability” meant the continuation of white supremacy.

The forces of white resistance in Bogalusa disregarded federal actions such as Executive Order 10925, an attempt to “encourage equal employment opportunities in firms with federal contracts,” or the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, which attempted to prohibit *de jure*

²⁵ Pines, “Appendix 3.”

²⁶ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Activities of Ku Klux Klan Organizations in the United States: Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-ninth Congress, first[-second] session*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966, 2455.

²⁷ U.S. Congress, House, Committee, *Activities*, 2455.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

segregation.²⁹ Much of the refusal stemmed from Crown Zellerbach, a paper company that ruled the town.³⁰ In 1964, Crown Zellerbach “provided 70 percent of Bogalusa’s income...with its \$19 million payroll, and [its] company-backed candidates dominated local politics.”³¹ Many of the company’s white employees actively participated in the local Ku Klux Klan chapter. For these white workers, the company symbolized more than an opportunity for employment, it bolstered the argument “that [Bogalusa] has always been a Klanish City from the days of the Great Southern Lumber Company until now.”³² Resistance to the civil rights struggle only intensified after the mechanization of the paper mill. Between 1960 and 1965, Crown Zellerbach released five hundred employees, with blacks making up three hundred and ninety of those laid off.³³ The decrease in employment opportunities at Crown Zellerbach heightened competition between white and black workers. This angst often bled into everyday life in Bogalusa, exacerbating racial tension. The unequal distribution of resources, as presented in “Bogalusa: Civil Rights in a Southern City” in George Lipsitz’ book *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*, became increasingly pronounced and realized within the black community. According to Lipsitz, “the city had no black doctors or nurses; the local medical facilities treated black patients only on Thursdays and even then only after whites. Tax money for street repairs and sewer construction went disproportionately to white neighborhoods... Only 1,500 blacks had succeeded in registering to vote in Bogalusa.”³⁴ Despite the supposed racial progress throughout the nation, Bogalusa’s black community faced a hapless future.

²⁹ Lipsitz, “Bogalusa,” 98.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² U.S. Congress, House, Committee, *Activities*, 2455.

³³ Owen James Hyman, *Corporate Organization and Social Control in the New South: Bogalusa, Louisiana, 1902-1980* (Hammond: Southeastern Louisiana University, 2012), 65.

³⁴ Lipsitz, “Bogalusa.”

Due to the intensification of white aggression alongside the diminishment in black opportunity, local blacks organized the Civic and Voters League in 1965. Bogalusa lacked connections to the black church, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), or a black college, and thus, resources for effective and efficient action were limited.³⁵ This dearth in community support prompted the Civic and Voters League to turn to CORE in order to achieve meaningful progress. CORE's subsequent arrival in Bogalusa led to the heightening of tensions. White violence became routine and quite public, placing activists at greater risk. For example, Chief of Police Claxton Knight and Deputy Sheriff Doyle Holliday warned CORE organizers Bill Yates and Steve Miller "that a mob of two hundred people had gathered downtown with the intention of lynching them."³⁶ This warning was not unique; threats of violence plagued CORE's stay in Bogalusa. Local businesses had to accept the status quo of segregation or face closure.

Bogalusa began to attract national attention as this situation worsened. College students and social activists joined CORE and the Civic and Voters League in the fight. Their activism pressured local and state leaders to confront the issue of continued discrimination and white supremacy, leading to further division. State officials reluctantly complied with some national demands, resulting in backlash at the local level. Authorities still hesitated to enforce the law in spite of increased scrutiny and criticism. When recounting an incident of harassment by Bogalusa's whites, Ivory Perry lamented that "city police officers, state troopers, and U.S. Department of Justice special representative John Doar" did not try to stop the violence.³⁷ National attention on Bogalusa intensified as the situation exacerbated. The

³⁵ Lipsitz, "Bogalusa."

³⁶ Ibid., 100.

³⁷ Ibid., 107.

deterioration of Bogalusa's situation shifted national media coverage from discussion on the overall struggle to the burgeoning Deacons for Defense and Justice.

The Deacons existed only in Jonesboro, Louisiana prior to the establishment of the Bogalusa chapter. Like Bogalusa, and much of the South in general, Jonesboro ignored the Civil Rights Act. Outside legal action was routinely pursued, but the town's white population actively resisted desegregation through structural maneuvers and violence. The origins of the Jonesboro chapter paralleled those of Bogalusa's Deacons—black men in the community were inspired to form a defensive unit following the introduction of nonviolent activism and the subsequent white backlash. Local whites purposefully ignored the group despite its occasional appearances in national media and acknowledgement by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). For example, in his article for *The New York Times*, Fred Powledge wrote that "Sheriff Newt Loe of Jackson Parish, of which Jonesboro is the seat, declined to comment on the Deacons to a reporter."³⁸ Information about the Deacons largely remained underground through this dismissal. Likewise, incidents of harassment and violence in response to the presence of the Deacons rarely attracted attention from the national media.

While Jonesboro's chapter of the Deacons received minimal attention by the national media, Bogalusa's Deacons quickly emerged in the national spotlight. Although there were countless factors involved in this elevated media attention, such as the efforts of CORE, the introduction of the FBI, and claims of corruption in Bogalusa, the Deacons consistently remained at the center of analysis and debate. Bogalusa's chapter was formed in the late spring and early summer of 1965, and the group was immediately placed at the heart of the situation in Bogalusa. Their forceful engagement with white supremacists in defense of the

³⁸ Fred Powledge, "Armed Negroes Make Jonesboro an Unusual Town," *New York Times*, February 21, 1965, 52.

Civics and Voters League, CORE field workers, and other civil rights activists gave the group an authority within the broader civil rights movement. The frankness of their self-defense approach simultaneously clashed with and aided the nonviolent efforts already practiced throughout the South. The Deacons did not shy away from their methods and found gratification in the fulfillment of protection through armed defense. Due to the group's promotion of its role as both necessary and justified, it successfully served alongside nonviolent efforts rather than in opposition to the more nationally accepted practice. All facets of the black community acknowledged the presumably endless lack of progress, allowing for at least minimal communal unification. For example, following a meeting between Governor McKeithen and "Negro leaders," Voters League vice-president Robert Hicks bluntly stated that "The governor has no power... All he should do is give everyone constitutional rights and he wouldn't have to call a meeting." Reflective of the Deacons' defense of their operation with guns, Hicks maintained that "guns are the only protection you have if laws are no good" and remarked, "I don't know if I would be here today unless I had a gun."³⁹ The Deacons translated these personal sentiments—held by community members holding varying degrees of influence—into an organized operation. Since the state of Louisiana chartered the group "to instruct, train and teach citizens, and especially minority groups, in the principles of democracy," its implementation of self-defense maintained a sense of both authority and morality.⁴⁰ The Deacons served to achieve rightful equality rather than to promote unjust acts of violence.

Along with the group's self-prescribed purpose, members regarded their motives and practices as warranted. The Deacons' preaching of the necessity of self-defense routinely

³⁹ John Fahey, "Help in Bogalusa, President Asked," *Times-Picayune*, July 15, 1965, 2.

⁴⁰ Roy Reed, "The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night," *New York Times*, August 15, 1965, 11.

challenged the call for nonviolent protest, securing communal support for their approach. Individual Deacons found fulfillment in their roles through this praise. For example, Royan Burris, a member of the Bogalusa chapter, remarked that “I feel like people look up to you for being a deacon. They show a great deal of respect for you, because they know you are the one source they can depend on.”⁴¹ Such faith in the Deacons was justifiable, as their presence reduced “open harassment and night riding” by white supremacists, and specifically the local Klan chapter.⁴² Violence by whites was no longer free from backlash, as seen in this recounting: “On July 8, during a civil-rights protest march, a Bogalusa Deacon pulled a pistol in broad daylight and put two bullets through a white man who attacked him with his fists.”⁴³ The direct response by the Deacons gave Bogalusa’s black community a newfound sense of security. In an article for *The New York Times*, Roy Reed reflected that, a few days after an instance of successful self-defense, “400 Negroes at a civil-rights mass meeting leaped to their feet in a delirious ovation when Charles Sims, the president of the Bogalusa Deacons chapter, was introduced.”⁴⁴

A Multifaceted yet Deliberate Approach: The Deacons and the Media

While much of the media’s analysis of the role of Bogalusa’s Deacons in the promotion of self-defense was relatively superficial, some examinations went beyond the traditional arguments and ventured into the underlying reasons for successful or failed protests. For example, in his analysis of the Deacons, Reed related their approach to those of other groups in the South. He stated that Floyd McKissick, the national chairman of CORE, “told newsmen a few days ago that Negroes band together spontaneously in North Carolina

⁴¹ Reed, “The Deacons.”

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Reed, “The Deacons.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

when violence threatens.”⁴⁵ Reed acknowledged that such impromptu acts of self-defense could be successful, but highlighted the chaos surrounding North Carolina’s Robert F. Williams as proof of the need for strictly organized action. Reed did not explicitly state that the Deacons exemplified the necessary structure, but repeatedly implied it in his numerous pieces on the group. The Deacons’ self-defense activism was presented as both responsible and acceptable through this commentary.

The group could justify its acts of self-defense due to this self-proclaimed and nationally-acknowledged (at least by some among the media) strict organization. In contrast to local white supremacists, who often acted without regard to media coverage, the Deacons stated their intentions and fulfilled them responsibly. Their status within the black community testified to their success. Reed recognized this prestige, remarking that “the Deacons have proved to be a natural instrument for building community feeling and nourishing the Negro identity.”⁴⁶ Much of the Deacons’ success in promoting and practicing black community engagement revolved around the fact that many of its leaders and members were already actively involved in their community. These men, such as the chapter’s leader Charles Sims, embodied the group’s ability to transform men who worked traditional jobs and pursued normal lives into meaningful actors within their community. The Deacons excited a sense of purpose and stability in response to the decades of insecurity prompted by Bogalusa’s allowance of discrimination. The Deacons made available a newfound communal respect and identity that allowed Bogalusa’s black community to no longer suffer from outside obstruction of opportunity. The seeming naturality of this transformation within the black community gave the Deacons a humanity that countered the injustices cast against

⁴⁵ Reed, “The Deacons,” 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

them. Sims, who worked part-time as an insurance salesman and had a “pre-civil-rights police record including such offenses as assault and carrying a concealed weapon,” was now a symbol of justice.⁴⁷ Sims and his peers purposefully presented themselves as normal men fighting against years of abuse and disadvantage as the Deacons advanced on the national stage.

The Deacons boldly expressed their confidence in the practice of self-defense in all of their interactions with the national media. They frequently made a point of stating their bearing and use of guns. For example, Reed reflected that when Sims carried his gun (which was all of the time), “If the lump causes him discomfort when he sits down, he simply pulls the pistol out and tosses it like a package of cigarettes onto the nearest table.”⁴⁸ He did this, knowing that it had the effect of “unnerving the faint-hearted and enhancing his reputation as a hell of a fellow.”⁴⁹ Sims’ bold self-confidence contrasted with traditional assumptions of the status of the black male. Guns had always played a defining role in the culture of the South and Sims reminded the national audience that blacks practiced this tradition as strongly as their white counterparts. Following centuries of physical and psychological abuse, blacks seized the tool with which whites had suppressed them. The Deacons retained notions of moral superiority by practicing reactionary self-defense, which in turn elevated their status as community leaders and defenders. This identification with both intimidation and virtuous protection provided the Deacons with the ability to maneuver inquiry by both the civil rights movement and the national media. For example, in an interview with *Times-Picayune* journalist Bill Crider, Charles Sims followed his declaration of the Deacons’ large supply of

⁴⁷ Reed, “The Deacons,” 22.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

guns with the clarification that “[the Deacons] will not go on the offense. We are the defensive team. If they come in here to hit us they will get hit back.”⁵⁰ By phrasing his response in this way, Sims managed to reiterate that while the Deacons’ practices diverged from the nonviolent approach, their implementation of active protest remained disciplined and appropriate.

Nonviolent activism routinely faced indictments of continuing the emasculation of the black male. The intentional lack of active response to verbal and physical abuse by whites permitted the continuation of centuries-long injustice for many blacks, specifically men, in the South. The Deacons openly promoted a bold, gun-yielding, and above all else, masculine black male to oppose this dehumanization and emasculation. At the Negro Masonic Hall in Jackson, Mississippi, Sims proclaimed, “It is time for you men in Jackson to wake up and be men.”⁵¹ Royan Burris also acknowledged the relationship between masculinity and self-defense, stating that “They finally found out that we really are men, and that we would do what we said, and that we meant what we said.”⁵² The media’s coverage of the Deacons, which often highlighted the success at maintaining a forceful presence, reinforced these proclamations of secured masculinity.

While this clarification of the Deacons’ interpretation of self-defense often comforted black and white activists who felt defenseless against threats of violence, it also called into question the group’s motives. Writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, Fred L. Zimmerman expressed concern about the future of nonviolent protest and cast self-defense efforts—specifically those of the Deacons—as a threat to the civil rights movement. Zimmerman’s

⁵⁰ Bill Crider, “Deacon’ Groups Form in Towns,” *Times-Picayune*, April 12, 1965, 43.

⁵¹ Strain, “We Walked Like Men,” 53.

⁵² Ibid., 54.

use of severe and often frightening language throughout the article reflected his sentiment towards the Deacons. For example, he referred to the self-defense groups in the South as “bands of militant, heavily armed Negroes...[who] share an open contempt for the doctrine of non-violence.”⁵³ In response to the pronouncement by one leader of the Deacons that “If the Klan tries to hit us, they will get hit back,” Zimmerman remarked that “There could be ‘hitting back’ in many a town this summer, for the armed bands are growing rapidly.”⁵⁴

Zimmerman acknowledged the presence of the Klan and other white supremacist groups in Bogalusa but failed to emphasize their role in the tense racial situation. Instead of listing the countless acts of violence and injustice by Bogalusa’s whites, he focused solely on the calls for “violence” within the black community. Comments by local blacks, such as, “If violence has to settle this, then the sooner the better” were compared to those by Klan members.⁵⁵ Zimmerman presented the Deacons and the KKK as equals in intention and action, when in reality, the Deacons served as protection against Klan activity. The presence of firearms within Bogalusa’s black community was distorted into a communal infatuation with guns. Zimmerman quoted one woman as saying “I’m going to get me a machine gun or some hand grenades” and reflected that “Mr. Hicks [the vice president of Bogalusa’s Civic and Voter League] hauled out a loaded 30-30 Winchester rifle for the visitors’ inspection.”⁵⁶ Zimmerman acknowledged the group’s insistence that it served only to protect and defend, but countered by writing, “to Southern law enforcement agencies—and to many groups trying to promote integration without violence—these armed bands are essentially vigilantes

⁵³ Fred L. Zimmerman, “Race & Violence: More Dixie Negroes Buy Arms to Retaliate Against White Attacks Secret Societies Are Formed In Many Towns; Rights Groups Caught in Middle Non-Violence Coming to End? Race & Violence: More Negroes Take Up Arms Against White Attacks,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 1965, 1, 18.

⁵⁴ Zimmerman, “Race & Violence,” 1.

⁵⁵ Zimmerman, “Race & Violence,” 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

posing an increasing threat of bloodshed.”⁵⁷ In essence, Zimmerman positioned the group in opposition to all other bodies involved in the civil rights movement.

While Zimmerman admittedly recognized the arguments in support of and in opposition to the Deacons, he ultimately presented the Bogalusa chapter as a threat to continued progress. The inclusion of Paul Anthony’s remark that “If the Deacons really catch hold, it could mean the end of non-violence in some areas of the South” revealed the extent to which the Deacons’ opposition considered their self-defense efforts as a threat.⁵⁸ Similarly, the addition of Ozell Sutton’s accusatory statement that “Someday there’s going to be a real bloodbath somewhere. I hate to say it, but by nature Negroes aren’t any more non-violent than anybody else” implied that the Deacons’ motives were violent by nature.⁵⁹ Zimmerman intensified the dilemma between nonviolent and self-defense activist efforts through his distortion of the Deacons’ approach. Zimmerman simultaneously provided fuel for and against the group’s self-promotion as a determined and legitimate force for protection by sensationalizing the Deacons and the assumed “controversy” around them. He also misread the racial situation throughout the South (and specifically Bogalusa). Without awareness of the realities on the ground, Zimmerman badly misrepresented the Deacons.

One method the Deacons used to counter the accusations of Zimmerman and his ilk was to present themselves as a uniform and continuously expanding organization. The group routinely discussed their presence throughout Louisiana (and more broadly, the South) in vague and exaggerated terms and emphasized their implementation of reactive violence rather than unwarranted assault. For example, Earnest Thomas, the vice president of the

⁵⁷ Zimmerman, “Race & Violence,” 18.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1, 18.

Bogalusa chapter, told Reed that “Many Louisiana parishes (counties) have deacons.”⁶⁰ Reed recollected that “[Thomas] declined to name the towns where the deacons are organized on the ground that advertising them might be construed as provoking white extremists.”⁶¹ Such mystery surrounding the Deacons elevated their standing in the local and national civil rights movement, leading to heightened authority as a group. The Bogalusa chapter could not be easily dismissed as a band of “militant, heavily armed Negroes,” as they were supposedly organized at the local, regional, and national levels of the movement.

Implications of the Deacons’ Intricate Presentation

If ambiguity surrounding the magnitude of the Deacons enhanced their mystique, it also intensified reluctance within the broader civil rights movement to accept their assistance. A 1965 article in the *Chicago Daily Defender* discussed this rift through an analysis of sentiments expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Farmer. While King “contends no form of violence can be entertained due to the danger that such action might lose many white allies of the movement,” Farmer proclaimed that it was important “to let the Klan know that the Negro as whole is not non-violent.”⁶² The troubling vagueness of the classification “self-defense” was clear to King, as he stated, “The line of demarcation between aggressive and defensive violence is very thin.”⁶³ The omnipresence of self-defense activism could no longer be denied as a result of the establishment of the Bogalusa chapter and their subsequent engagement with national media. King recognized this and promptly stated his position on the subject. While his perspective reflected the nationally preferred and

⁶⁰ Reed, “The Deacons,” 24.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² “Violence Issue Brings Rift in Rights Forces,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 6, 1965, 3.

⁶³ “Violence.”

accepted method of action, the rise of the Deacons helped promote self-defense as an alternative.

It proved an attractive alternative for many as black activism continued to meet with violence and intimidation throughout the South. Only fourteen days after the release of his expansive overview of the Deacons, “The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night,” Reed wrote a piece on the situation in Natchez, Mississippi. Charles Evers, who had previously remarked that “he had armed men guarding the homes of Negroes who were threatened,” played a significant role in the Natchez situation.⁶⁴ Although Evers discouraged violence, he challenged the continuation of white terrorism, saying, “If they do it any more, we’re going to get those responsible. We’re armed, every last one of us, and we are not going to take it.”⁶⁵ His boldness and determination paralleled that of the Deacons, and in fact, the group’s branches were slowly reaching Natchez. According to James Jackson, “a chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice was to be organized soon” in the city.⁶⁶ The enthusiastic embrace of the group’s presence throughout the South reflected their successful promotion through both local action and engagement with national media.

Along with its prevalence in prominent national publications, the Bogalusa chapter was covered in *Jet*, a magazine marketed to African-American readers. *Jet* featured a piece on the Deacons’ status in Bogalusa in its July 15, 1965 issue. Charles Sims, the chapter’s president, used this opportunity to promote the group’s success. According to Sims, “in a time of need he can muster more than 100 armed men in 15 minutes, day or night.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ “Violence.”

⁶⁵ Roy Reed, “Bombing Angers Natchez Negroes: Rights Leader Calms Crowd—Investigation Pressed,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1965, 51.

⁶⁶ Reed, “Bombing Angers Natchez,” 51.

⁶⁷ Charles Brown and Louie Robinson, “The Negro Feared Most,” *Jet*, July 15, 1965, 16.

Although Sims acknowledged that his identifiability was a hindrance to the Deacons' covert approach, he boldly stated that “[whites] know that whenever they see me, the Deacons are somewhere nearby.”⁶⁸ Sims exaggerated the Deacons' prestige through these claims, which in turn heartened local and regional black communities. Sims' interview with *Jet* was also a strategic move, as the magazine provided its majority black audience with an intimate and informative account of the Deacons, and specifically one of its leaders. The interview featured personal and race-specific questions, such as, “How does it feel to live 24 hours a day in open warfare with a hostile community?”⁶⁹ Sims' response that the Deacons were unable to get adequate sleep humanized the group. Sims referenced his service in the military and the reactionary nature of his self-defense activism to remind *Jet*'s readers that the Deacons had highly skilled and veteran leadership with the sole intention of defending against aggression. For example, by reflecting, “I learned a slogan in the Army and I've always remembered it: ‘All's fair in love and war.’ When you don't want me to be free, that's war,” Sims reinforced the Deacons' credibility as enforcers of justified violence.⁷⁰ In contrast to Zimmerman's accusations of the Deacons' desire for militarism, *Jet* presented the group as morally righteous and secure.

Sims' discussion with Louis Lomax on a Los Angeles-based “two-hour weekly television show” revealed the Deacons' oftentimes simultaneous failure and success on the national stage.⁷¹ Sims recognized Lomax's audience, but did not shy away from his transparent position on the merits of guns and self-defense. Regarding his professional dress, he stated, “I don't usually dress like this. I don't need a tie, and this white shirt makes too

⁶⁸ Brown and Robinson, “The Negro Feared Most.”

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Brown and Robinson, “The Negro Feared Most.”

⁷¹ Ibid.

good a target at night. Now I wear overalls. They have nice, big pockets so you can carry your pipe [gun] and plenty shells.”⁷² This open deviance from the traditional suavity of the civil rights movement deterred many people involved in the fight for equality. For example, Reverend Thomas Kilgore, chairman of the Western Christian Leadership Conference, remarked, “I disapprove of keeping civil rights workers alive with guns. 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.”⁷³ In contrast to these pronouncements against self-defense, personal testimony by activists provided the national media with validation of the group’s necessity and virtue. A white woman, Mrs. Anita Levine, recounted her experience as a worker for the Bogalusa Civic and Voters League. She argued that without the Deacons, she would have suffered at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan. Levine reflected that on one occasion, “The cars kept going up and down in front of the church with men inside with drawn guns. I knew they weren’t there to protect me....”⁷⁴ Before the situation worsened, “four Deacons drove up and got into my car...The three cars which had been passing immediately sped away.”⁷⁵ Her mention of the Klan emphasized Bogalusa’s reality of seemingly constant violence by whites. Such a revelation was significant, as the television show’s audience was largely from Los Angeles, and thus, few viewers had personal experience with the South’s racial situation. Following the interview, Sims acknowledged the audience’s (and specifically those people with dissenting views) separation from the threat of constant racial violence, commenting “I wonder if those

⁷² Brown and Robinson, “The Negro Feared Most,” 17-18.

⁷³ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

men think that I risk losing my life for kicks? Most of the time I sleep—when I sleep at all—with my shoes on.”⁷⁶

The persistent attention placed on the Deacons provided ample opportunity to promote their practice of self-defense, but it also revealed fissures in the group. The Deacons were controversial, and they inevitably encountered internal and external strife. The July 1, 1965 issue of *Jet* provided a brief discussion of the supposedly strained relationship of Charles Sims and his wife. According to this short commentary, Sims was giving a televised speech when “his alleged common-law wife, 41-year-old Bernice Harry, bolted through a door and attacked him with a vengeance only a woman can muster.”⁷⁷ *Jet*’s inclusion of such a theatrical glimpse into the life of Charles Sims cast the Deacons as less stable than typically assumed. Disdain for the group, which had been rooted in their “violent” approach, was emboldened by such seemingly embarrassing incidents. Their presumed inability to maintain stability in their homes led to questioning of the Deacons’ intentions as an organization.

This questioning of the morality of the Deacons often resulted in misleading and slanderous classifications of the group. For example, white locals in Bogalusa commented that the Deacons were “protection racketeers” and “Mao-inspired nationalists.”⁷⁸ This resistance to the Deacons was largely rooted in the awareness that their organization embodied the rise of the powerful and purposeful black male. As one person wrote to the editor of *Ebony*, “This organization in effect explodes the myth of the moral weakness and petticoat and pulpit subordination of the Negro male.”⁷⁹ Considering this transformative influence of the Deacons, the group’s defamation by the local and national media

⁷⁶ Brown and Robinson, “The Negro Feared Most,” 19.

⁷⁷ “Deacon For Defense Defenseless Against Wife,” *Jet*, July 1, 1965, 44.

⁷⁸ Shana Alexander, “‘Visit Bogalusa and You Will Look for Me’,” *Life*, July 2, 1965, 28.

⁷⁹ L.Y. Lemon, “Letter to the Editor,” *Ebony*, November, 1965, 13.

simultaneously encouraged its opposition and empowered members of the local, regional, and national black communities. One person in Bogalusa acknowledged this effect, stating, “Watching the Deacons in Louisiana, one is struck repeatedly by the pride they inspire among Negroes...the Deacons have proved to be a natural instrument for building community feeling and nourishing the Negro identity.”⁸⁰

The self-prescribed and embraced role of the Deacons reflected this newfound power in the black male. They preached their allegiance to the black community over personal desires, and their actions almost always echoed this proclamation. Their welcomed engagement in the community justified self-defense as a practical form of protest and support. In an interview, James Farmer, the national director of CORE, recognized the intimacy of this relationship, stating, “You must understand, when a man’s home is attacked that’s not the movement, that’s his home.”⁸¹ For the Deacons, the movement was not a national operation, but instead a deeply personal fight for stability and safety. The seemingly slow and meditated action promoted by nonviolent activists was ineffective in countering challenges to daily life. Nonviolence required a patience that the Deacons and their likeminded neighbors could no longer justify. The often-shared military experience (specifically that pertaining to World War II) of community members and leaders allowed for direct comparisons between the brutality of war and the situation in Bogalusa. By establishing this connection, usually in discussions with members of the media, activists opposed to nonviolence credibly promoted more forceful action. Just as Sims justified his bearing of guns by highlighting his military service, Voters League president A.Z. Young

⁸⁰ Reed, “The Deacons,” 22.

⁸¹ Simon Wendt, “‘Urge People Not to Carry Guns’: Armed Self-Defense in the Louisiana Civil Rights Movement and the Radicalization of the Congress of Racial Equality,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 45, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 280, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4234031>.

defended his support for the Deacons with the remark, “I put in 168 days of straight combat in Europe in World War II when I was a platoon sergeant in a tank outfit. The way things are now, things are about as bad as they were then.”⁸² In this statement to *States-Item* reporter Bill Crider, Young implicitly argued that the current nonviolent approach would not result in a changed situation. This anxiety was acknowledged in “The Jackie Robinson Column” distributed by the Associated Negro Press International—New York. Jackie Robinson, the famed professional baseball player who integrated Major League Baseball, remarked in his column that “Time and again, we have warned that if the United States Government and the Justice Department could not find some way...to arrest the insane and brutal beatings, killings, church and home bombings...the Negro would finally say: ‘scuse me, Dr. King’ and stand up and fight back.”⁸³ These justifications for the Deacons cast self-defense as a necessary response to inaction by governmental bodies and the nonviolent approach at large.

A Successful Movement: Consideration for Self-Defense

The distinction between intimate participation in and detached observation of the South’s struggles accentuated as the Deacons became a prominent yet complicated topic of discussion and debate. In her piece “Visit Bogalusa and you will look for me,” Shana Alexander acknowledged this discrepancy when discussing her experience as an outsider engaging the Deacons in Bogalusa. Alexander wrote, “But [her interviews with ‘the warlike Deacon chieftain of Bogalusa’ and ‘a young white girl civil rights worker’] also reminded me that one’s feelings about violence are influenced more by geography and circumstance than by moral principle.”⁸⁴ While those who actively participated in protest efforts in the South

⁸² Pines, *Murky Waters*, 158.

⁸³ “Deacons Will Stay Unless U.S. Moves,” *Pittsburg Courier*, July 31, 1965, 10.

⁸⁴ Alexander, “Visit Bogalusa,” 28.

often acknowledged the necessity of the Deacons (and protective services in general) for successful activism, those remaining outside of the South criticized self-defense through an inexperienced lens. Dedication to nonviolence was easy to proclaim, but reality oftentimes required a more direct counter to the threat and implementation of physical violence.

James Meredith, who had been a strong opponent of self-defense and presumably “violent” protest methods, realized the validity of being able to protect oneself. Following an attack by a white gunman during the Mississippi March Against Fear in 1966, Meredith told reporters “I’m sorry I didn’t have something to take care of that man.”⁸⁵ Despite this incident of violence, CORE announced the continuation of the march under the protection of the Deacons. This decision, which was supported by Floyd McKissick and Martin Luther King, Jr., antagonized other leaders in the movement. On the other hand, Cleveland Sellers, who worked with SNCC, remarked that “[The Deacons] would tell us certain things we needed to know along the way. They would go into wooded areas. They would check cars out. They would keep their eyes on all of those things, but the spirit was around self-defense.”⁸⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., who had previously dismissed the Deacons as a threat to effective protest, recognized the value of self-defense in collaboration with nonviolence. Likewise, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael recognized the significance of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s participation in the march. Just as the Deacons’ services would contribute to its success, King’s presence would undoubtedly bring national media attention. Such coverage inevitably revealed the congruence of self-defense by the Deacons and the nonviolent efforts espoused by Dr. King.

⁸⁵ Wendt, “Urge People,” 281-82.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 282.

Although nonviolence served as effective sermon material, and undoubtedly contributed to the goal of racial equality, its success varied due to its inability to fully address violence by whites. Both sides of the debate on the value of self-defense, and specifically that practiced by the Deacons, were closely interconnected. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, CORE member Bayard Rustin dismissed all forms of violence in the movement: “I’m against the Klan doing it. I’m against the Minutemen doing it. I’m against the Negroes doing it—for any reason.”⁸⁷ Meanwhile, CORE field worker Mike Lesser recognized the South’s reality of violence, remarking, “we are preaching non-violence, but [we] can only *preach* non-violence. We cannot tell someone not to defend his property and the lives of his family, and let me tell you, these 15-20 shotguns guarding our meetings are very reassuring.”⁸⁸ The Deacons overcame and challenged the barriers of not being nonviolent through such validations of self-defense.

Much, if not all of the debate surrounding the Deacons and the broader promotion of self-defense, was rooted in the maintenance of a successful civil rights movement. Organizations participating in the movement recognized the need for support from white Americans, and thus, they aimed to present themselves as flexible and peaceful partners rather than as forces of supposed society-altering change. In his article, Simon Wendt recalled this situation, writing, “[CORE’s] legitimacy as an acceptable civil rights organization as well as its financial wellbeing depended almost exclusively on white Northern liberals, who easily confused the acknowledged right of self-defense with the specter of ‘black violence’.”⁸⁹ The growing acceptance of the Deacons’ protective services

⁸⁷ Wendt, “Urge People,” 277.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 279.

by CORE field workers fueled questioning within the organization and in its larger bodies of support. Due to this pressure rooted in their association with the Deacons, CORE and its president, James Farmer, promoted the Deacons' practice of self-defense as nonviolent in nature. During an appearance on the CBS broadcast *Face the Nation*, Farmer emphasized that the Deacons "used their weapons only in self-defense and accepted the nonviolent discipline during demonstrations."⁹⁰

Among many activists within the movement, opposition or reluctance towards self-defense was rooted in conflicted sentiments. For example, Ivory Perry recognized the value of the Deacons in ensuring the safety of nonviolent activists but remained firmly opposed to all forms of possible violence. He reflected that "I don't even hate the Ku Klux Klan. I don't like what they stand for, but to just come out and say I hate them and I wish all of them was dead, it just ain't me."⁹¹ Like Perry, other activists put their faith in nonviolence while also recognizing the significance of self-defense. Nonviolent protest was the principal goal, but people had the right to protect themselves. This acknowledgement alongside strong appeals for the end of self-defense efforts fueled and complicated analysis by the national media. Exaggeration and simplification resulted from the lack of a clear and widely-embraced position among activists. This ambiguous communication intensified as national attention focused on the Deacons.

Varied interpretations of passive resistance resulted in the routine stimulation of debate on the effectiveness of nonviolence. As successful (and safe) protest became increasingly difficult, evidenced by the persistence of attacks by Bogalusa's white supremacists, the Deacons' services gained value with the civil rights movement. The

⁹⁰ Wendt, "Urge People," 280.

⁹¹ Lipsitz, "Bogalusa," 114.

recognition of the validity of both nonviolence and self-defense resulted in the blurring of their distinctiveness. The reluctant, yet firm acceptance by nonviolent activists of the protection provided by self-defense activism affirmed the integrity of the Deacons. The shared accusation of Governor McKeithen's ineptitude in providing aid strengthened the bond between the activist parties. As the utilization of guns remained a suspect method for some political leaders, such as McKeithen, the protection secured by their presence became increasingly evident. This reality translated into more intense support for the Deacons in the face of threats of arrest and legal punishment.

Despite warnings reflective of generalizations and simplifications of Bogalusa's racial reality, such as Governor McKeithen's remark to the author of "Disarm Deacons, Others, Governor Tells Troopers" that "We're going to run the Deacons out of business..." , the Deacons continued to successfully position themselves as necessary and appropriate factors in the fight for civil rights. The Deacons maintained a sincere—and thus compelling—voice in the media in spite of the governor's brief and orchestrated engagement with "newsmen" to counter the supposed threats of resistance in Bogalusa. For example, the Deacons unwavering position on the best approach for civil rights success diverged from Governor McKeithen's conflicting conclusions on the situation in Bogalusa. On the one hand, the governor called for peaceful interaction between whites and blacks and pleaded for the removal of all concealed guns. On the other hand, he recognized the persistence of opposition by the city's white community and ordered this demographic to accept racial progress. Local blacks knew the improbability of such a change, which in turn invigorated their loyalty to resistance by force. While McKeithen traveled to Bogalusa with the goal of assisting in the establishment of order, he disregarded local black sentiment with his warning

to Charles Sims—“And I sent word if you were seen, to arrest you. You have been bragging you were going to kill people... I was going to arrest you on general principles. And I meant it.”⁹² In reality, Charles Sims’ supposed “bragging” acted to embolden the struggling black community during a time when the white community actively flaunted its ability to intimidate and control almost all facets of Bogalusa society.

The Deacons’ Lasting Role in the Changing Racial Reality

The Deacons received the majority of their media coverage in the span of a few months due to the escalation of tension and the resulting action in Bogalusa in the summer of 1965. Informed and intimate analysis and interpretation of the group ensued as it made almost daily appearances on the national stage. The Deacons were featured alongside the larger situation in not only Bogalusa, but also the South in general. Thus, they were presented as both actors in and responders to the racial situation. The group successfully maintained its structure and spread its promotion of self-defense as resistance and activism in spite of the risk of the distortion of its principles and intentions. The group’s disregard for celebrity and widespread acceptance materialized through its frank interviews with national reporters.

The Deacons aimed to justify their presence in the civil rights movement, which was welcomed by many people struggling against the racial status quo of the South. For example, in the “WATS Reports” for July 20, 1965, Mike Maller wrote, “Up in Morehead a Deacons for Defense has been organized. Most of the members are in their early 20’s. The men heard about the Deacons in Louisiana, and decided to form the group on their own.”⁹³ Similarly, Reverend Edwin King of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party expressed his support

⁹² John Fahey, “Governor’s Bogalusa Peace Plea Rejected,” *Times-Picayune*, July 14, 1965, 1.

⁹³ “WATS Reports,” July 20, 1965, Freedom Summer Digital Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society Digital Collections, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/68154/rec/2>.

for the Deacons. He acknowledged the virtue of self-defense, remarking “when the organized government doesn’t protect the citizens, then maybe all the Deacons have done is to organize an honest police force....”⁹⁴ Edwin King’s comparison of the Deacons to “Dr. King, people from SNCC, people from CORE, somebody from the NAACP,” alongside the remark that “We want people in Mississippi to know what Negroes are doing all over the United States” revealed the group’s success at promoting its position as nationally significant.⁹⁵

Although the Deacons’ presence in national publications waned as the situation in Bogalusa stabilized, the national attention on legal reprimands against Bogalusa’s white leaders and police force prompted further justification for self-defense activism. This disciplinary action, sanctioned by the federal government, began to materialize as early as July 1965 and continued through the early months of 1966. In his article “2 Bogalusa Aides Held in Contempt By Federal Court,” which was published on July 30, 1965, Reed reported that “Federal District Judge Herbert W. Christenberry held the two top police officials of Bogalusa in contempt of court...for failing to protect civil rights demonstrators from racist assailants.”⁹⁶ The fact that Bogalusa’s presumed enforcers of protection and stability faced possible jail sentences for permitting violence revealed the harsh reality throughout much of the South. Demonstrators practicing nonviolence needed an alternative source of protection due to the consistent failure by the police to fulfill their role. Reed also highlighted the fact that Public Safety Commissioner Arnold D. Spiers and Police Chief Claxton Knight “must face a Federal Court jury trial in a criminal contempt proceeding.”⁹⁷ The corruption in

⁹⁴ “Reverend Edwin King to Hinds County Freedom Democratic Party,” August 30, 1965, Freedom Summer Digital Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society Digital Collections, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/40430/rec/10>.

⁹⁵ “Reverend Edwin King.”

⁹⁶ Roy Reed, “2 Bogalusa Aides Held in Contempt By Federal Court,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1965, 1.

⁹⁷ Reed, “2 Bogalusa Aides.”

Bogalusa was not the result of individual acts of malpractice, but rather representative of societal structure. This oppression was even more significant considering the extent of tension in Bogalusa. With the inclusion that “Gov. John J. McKeithen has had as many as 380 of the state’s 584 state police officers in Bogalusa in recent weeks,” Reed emphasized the magnitude of this reality.

Federal District Judge Christenberry aptly summarized the situation, observing that “Bogalusa’s troubles seemed to be caused by a small, hard core of white persons ‘who simply will not recognize that Washington Parish is part of the United States and that its inhabitants are subject to the laws of the United States’.”⁹⁸ This group of resistant whites successfully maintained their reign of terror despite the abundance of police officers involved in Bogalusa. In his article, Gene Roberts discussed the likely impact of “sharp cutbacks...in the number of troopers on duty in this racially torn town.”⁹⁹ The racial conflict stressed in “2 Bogalusa Aides Held in Contempt By Federal Court” became increasingly unsolvable. During a march to the City Hall, civil rights activists had not encountered violence, but “bystanders [had] jeered, honked horns and waved Confederate flags.” The presence of a substantial police force successfully prevented violence, but the departure of state police officers meant an increasingly bleak future for Bogalusa’s civil rights efforts. While Roberts did not reference the Deacons, his conclusion on the future outlook of the Bogalusa situation implied the need for an alternative source of protection.

Reed’s article “Judge Denounces Bogalusa Police: Sees ‘Deliberate Scheme’ to Harass and Beat Negroes,” published on December 30, 1965, provided an update on the legal

⁹⁸ Reed, “2 Bogalusa Aides,” 23.

⁹⁹ Gene Roberts, “Bogalusa Forces Cut By Louisiana: City Officials Express Fears for Safety of Population,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1965, 24.

situation in Bogalusa. In the hearing for Chief Claxton Knight's trial for civil contempt of court, "witnesses for the Negroes testified that the police snatched Negroes from cars, beat others in bars and clubbed many on the street...."¹⁰⁰ Although there was no mention of the Deacons' presence in Bogalusa, the inclusion of this testimony along with other examples of the injustices implemented and permitted by the police vindicated the Deacons' self-defense activism. Many of the articles written during the summer of 1965 failed to highlight the extent of corruption by white officials in Bogalusa, and thus, the necessity of the Deacons was often considered dubious. Such clear descriptions of Bogalusa's reality emphasized the fact that without acts of self-defense, local blacks and civil rights activists would have suffered from a consistently tumultuous situation.

Although legal action progressed slowly, the enforcement and growing maintenance of the law prompted a significant shift in the behavior of not only Bogalusa's population, but also many people throughout the South. The presence and success of the Justice Department in Bogalusa translated into both voluntary and begrudging pronouncements for structural and societal reform. Bogalusa mayor, Jesse Cutrer, responded to the Justice Department's arrival by announcing on local radio stations that he supported "the [Voter League's] right to march and picket" and called on civic and religious leaders to follow suit.¹⁰¹ Even Crown Zellerbach, which had served as a base for white supremacy for decades, began "negotiations with the Voters League to end segregation and discrimination" in its factory.¹⁰² The Bogalusa situation settled considerably as the summer of 1965 came to an end, with all sides—

¹⁰⁰ Roy Reed, "Judge Denounces Bogalusa Police: Sees 'Deliberate Scheme' to Harass and Beat Negroes," *New York Times*, December 30, 1965, 11.

¹⁰¹ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 157-58.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 158.

including members of the Ku Klux Klan, visiting civil rights activists, and the Deacons—slowing down their activities.

Along with its role in pressuring the “the city to repeal its segregation laws, desegregate public accommodations, and concede neighborhood improvements,” the Bogalusa civil rights movement, and specifically the Deacons for Defense and Justice, had inspired the vitalization of black identity.¹⁰³ When reporting on the aftermath of these developments, Alan Katz spoke to one thirteen-year-old girl who remarked, “My folk used to be scared of the Ku Klux Klan. I’m not scared of them. I’m not afraid of anybody.”¹⁰⁴ Reed’s article, “The Deacons, Too, Ride by Night,” emphasized the role of the Deacons in this community-wide transformation. Reed argued that the group’s services not only ensured that nonviolent activists, and more broadly, black community members and their white compatriots, could protest and live without fear of white backlash, but also affirmed their equality. This revelation and the subsequent embrace of a sense of self and purpose persisted after the easing of tension in Bogalusa.

The various media reports pertaining to the legal facets of the racial scene in Bogalusa unquestionably validated the Deacons. They were rarely referred to explicitly, but even this absence confirmed their success as an activist group. The Deacons promoted themselves as practitioners of localized self-defense and maintained a disregard for national glorification. The group achieved national prominence, but they engaged the spotlight solely to justify their efforts and promote the morality of self-defense. For the Deacons, and more broadly, Bogalusa’s black community, the injustices highlighted in the media were part of a

¹⁰³ Hill, *The Deacons for Defense*, 160.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

decades-long reality. Violence against blacks was not simply the result of the introduction of the civil rights movement.

John Herbers' piece "Ex-Klansman Tells of Flogging Youth," published on January 12, 1966, highlighted the deeply rooted prejudice against blacks. The titular ex-Klansman, John H. Gipson, explained to the House Committee on Un-American Activities how "he was initiated into a Klan 'wrecking crew' by anonymous masked men and how Klansmen planned and carried out a flogging and burning of churches."¹⁰⁵ Although these activities took place in neighboring Slidell, Louisiana, they reflected the situation in Bogalusa. Herbers remarked that "The Ku Klux Klan still controls Bogalusa, La., despite a Federal Court injunction, exposure of its membership and massive anti-Klan efforts by the Justice Department and civil rights groups" in an article published six days before the release of "Ex-Klansman."¹⁰⁶ This admittance of Bogalusa's unresolved racial turmoil emphasized the dominance of white supremacy. The reality of injustice remained firmly in place despite the numerous civil rights victories in Bogalusa throughout the summer of 1965. National coverage on the continuation of discrimination and violence in Bogalusa either implicitly or explicitly related this state of affairs to the effectiveness of both law enforcement and activist efforts. Long-sought progress would ultimately be achieved in Bogalusa, largely as a result of the previously discussed introduction of the Justice Department. White supremacy's durability when confronted with progress towards racial equality highlighted the unyielding reality that had defined Bogalusa throughout the previous decades. This exposé validated the

¹⁰⁵ John Herbers, "Ex-Klansman Tells of Flogging Youth," *New York Times*, January 12, 1966, 19.

¹⁰⁶ John Herbers, "Klan is Said to Retain Its Control Of Bogalusa Despite Court Order: Owner of Radio Station Tells House Panel of Campaign That Forced Him to Move," *New York Times*, January 6, 1966, 11.

Deacons' success in overcoming such seemingly permanent forces of obstruction while simultaneously elevating the notions of black pride and self-determined action.

The revelation of white supremacy's past domination of Bogalusa bolstered the Deacons' lasting significance and allowed for increased acknowledgement of the struggles and subsequent actions of blacks—specifically those in the South. The Bogalusa chapter brought attention to a racial reality that had been shrouded by events in the broader civil rights movement by obtaining a national audience. In his coverage during the Mississippi March of Freedom in 1966, Paul Good recognized the failure of many reporters, writing that only a few acknowledged the black majority “whose atrophied political instincts were still held in check despite the Voting Rights Act, by threats of dispossession from the land, firing from job, or retaliation.”¹⁰⁷ While attention focused on national movers in the civil rights movement often inspired positive reform, it inevitably led to frequent disengagement with the larger population actually experiencing injustice. The Deacons' retainment of a localized identity throughout its interactions with national media reinforced the group's status as a service for the people. Bogalusa's discriminatory practices were largely structural and a part of daily life. Thus, reporting on the Deacons' presence in Bogalusa emphasized the city's authentic and localized struggle. Foundational and established institutions, such as Crown Zellerbach, employed black and white community members while simultaneously permitting the blossoming of racial tension. The Deacons confronted this complicated and intimate relationship, which expanded outside of the workspace and into the city's streets and neighborhoods, and maintained its loyalty to the local black populace. The group remained

¹⁰⁷ David Carter, “From ‘We Shall Overcome’ to ‘We Shall Overrun’: The Transformation of US Media Coverage of the Black Freedom Struggle, 1964-68, in Comparative Perspective,” in *Media and Revolt: Strategies and Performances from the 1960s to the Present* (Berghahn Books, 2014), 188.

grounded in Bogalusa even after its services expanded elsewhere. While this association could have strained national interest for the Deacons, they successfully maneuvered this expansion.

The Peculiar Success of the Deacons for Defense and Justice

The Deacons for Defense and Justice were admittedly absent from many of the later analyses on the situation in Bogalusa, but this omission was not emblematic of their ineptitude or insignificance. The self-defense group had fulfilled its intentions of protecting both the local black community and the activists involved in Bogalusa. Although there remained a long battle against racial injustice in Bogalusa and the South at large, the Deacons had succeeded in maintaining their practice of self-defense activism and proven its effectiveness. The abundance of reports on the group throughout the summer of 1965—which promoted its successes, questioned its methods and morals, and ultimately provided the Deacons with the means to advance their cause—served as evidence of their lasting significance in Bogalusa. Without the Deacons' preservation of self-defense activism, the ability for CORE, the Civics and Voters League, and other civil rights entities to successfully practice nonviolent protest would have waned considerably. Likewise, the Deacons' purposeful positioning on the national stage sparked debate on the validity of self-defense and nonviolent activism among both participants in the civil rights movement and the national populace. The Deacons were not conventional, nor did they promote themselves as such, and yet their engagement with national media provided them with an influential voice.

The Deacons embodied the successful implementation of self-defense, and specifically that achieved with guns. Their simultaneous recognition of the value of nonviolence and the need for determined self-defense struck the core of the civil rights

movement. Despite the routine claim that guns were counterproductive to the movement, there was never “massive retaliation by local, state, and even federal authority” to their use by the Deacons within the law.¹⁰⁸ In *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, Cobb recognized this reality, writing, “There was no meaningful difference between white responses to armed resistance by blacks and white responses to nonviolent resistance by blacks.”¹⁰⁹ The community-based approach of the Deacons helped instill an emboldened sense of pride in blacks throughout the nation. The group’s successful application of self-defense reinvigorated the value of localized civil rights efforts, leading to increased success of and attention to the movement throughout the South. The Deacons believed themselves to be an honest and necessary force in the South despite the complicated nature of gun-use in activist efforts. As the concept of Black Power found support, which in turn led to an intensification of the movement’s presumably “violent” faction, the Deacons maintained their distinctiveness. In response to the rise of Black Power, Charles Sims argued that “I don’t wanna live under Black Power. I don’t wanna live under white power. I want equal power, and that’s what I push.”¹¹⁰ The group’s intentions had always been to assist in the achievement of equality.

The Deacons’ proclamation of self-defense in correspondence with nonviolence shunted widespread condemnation and invalidation. On the other hand, some activists, such as a growing number of southern CORE members, identified with the notion of black nationalism advancing throughout the nation—specifically in northern cities. For example, the Brooklyn chapter of CORE called for the endorsement of self-defense by the National

¹⁰⁸ Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, 184.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Strain, “We Walked Like Men,” 59.

CORE leadership and “a representative of the Nation of Islam had been invited to speak” at the 1965 National CORE Convention.¹¹¹ While the call for self-defense reflected the Deacons’ services, the rising chastisement of nonviolence marked a distinct shift in procedure. At the convention, Bogalusa Deacon representative Earnest Thomas recognized the growing estrangement with nonviolence and argued for a retainment of the traditionally accepted protest method. Charles Sims’ aforementioned disregard for “Black Power” in favor of “equal power” further reflected this awareness of the underlying implications of the dismissal of nonviolence. Success with self-defense, as experienced by the Deacons, largely coincided with responsible yet intentional exchange with national media. Contrarily, activists heralding the complete dismissal of the movement’s nonviolent standards faced reluctant and largely dismissive acceptance by the media and broader civil rights movement.

Although the Deacons’ influence had largely waned by the time of SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael’s “Black Power” proclamation in 1966, the group’s embodiment of self-defense increasingly exemplified a justifiable distinction within the broader civil rights arena. The Deacons inspired resistance by southern and northern whites, which in turn led to an intensification of conflict and debate, but the group also practiced within controlled limits. Coverage by *The New York Times* and accounts by visiting activists affirmed the Deacons’ positioning within the civil rights arena as a legitimate and appreciated force in spite of early reports of their militancy and threatening presence. The employment of the group’s services at the James Meredith March in June 1966 by nationally established promoters of nonviolence further validated the Deacons’ application of self-defense. The group’s recognition as justifiable practitioners of self-defense both created opportunities for further

¹¹¹ Wendt, “Urge People,” 281.

self-characterization in the media and provided the Deacons with the resources to impact the movement.

In contrast to the Deacons' maintenance of respectability under an eye of multilayered speculation, CORE's shift to more uncompromising efforts rooted in "Black Power," which largely took shape after Bogalusa's departure from the national stage, complicated the organization's status within the movement and encouraged growing disdain by national media. Stokely Carmichael's failure to position "Black Power" within the respected boundaries of the civil rights movement, evidenced by his acknowledgement that "whites get nervous when we don't keep talking about brotherly love," contrasted with the consistent insistence of the Deacons' credibility as a beneficial service to the movement.¹¹² CORE's national standing admittedly required a level of engagement exceeding that of the Deacons, as exemplified by the relative fading of the Bogalusa chapter as conditions in the city no longer captured national attention. The Deacons' achievement of stabilized positioning elevated its impact onto the national stage even though it maintained a more localized structure and scale. They effectively preserved their identity in spite of the intensive analysis and scrutiny encouraged by national reception.

Although the Deacons' presence in the civil rights movement diminished as the situation in Bogalusa settled, their embodiment of self-defense rooted in the black community had a lasting impression on the movement and the nation at large. The ambiguities presented in the group's engagement with national media, largely revolving around its composition and expansion, ensured the Deacons' legacy. As Sims once remarked, "Anytime a Negro and a white man have any kind of round up and the Negro decide he going

¹¹² Wendt, "'Urge People,'" 283.

to fight him back, he's a Deacon.”¹¹³ The group’s mark persisted even after its departure from the national scene. The Deacons’ implementation of self-defense with guns highlighted the inequalities of the South and contributed to the development of black upliftment. The Deacons called out discrimination whenever their bearing of guns was threatened, citing Louisiana’s lax laws regarding guns. When reflecting on this situation, Sims stated, “We found out in Bogalusa that that law meant for the white man, it didn’t mean for the colored. Any time a colored man was caught with a weapon in his car, they jailed him for carrying a concealed weapon. So we carried them to court.”¹¹⁴

The Deacons highlighted and confronted defining components of the South’s racial situation through their practice of self-defense. While the group ensured its legacy through localized efforts and engagements with the civil rights movement, it achieved the necessary credibility and authority through its exchange with national media. Under the national spotlight, the Deacons highlighted their surpassing of the respected norms of the civil rights movement. The Deacons were not the first nor the last example of self-defense, but they fueled a much-needed excitement in the civil rights movement. In his criticism of the 2003 film *Deacons for Defense*, Christopher Strain affirmed the group’s legacy, writing, “Perhaps the film’s greatest shortcoming is that it sensationalizes a story that needs no aggrandizement from Hollywood....”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Wendt, “‘Urge People’,” 61.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Christopher Strain, “Reviews of Books,” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 5 (December 2003): 1575, <https://doi.org/10.1086/530143>.

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