

Robert Williams and Violence: The Lasting Impact of the Unique Movement in Union County,
North Carolina

Harrison Diggs

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Dr. Tamura

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The fight to gain equality in Union County, North Carolina was a movement different from many others across the United States during the 1960's. In Monroe, North Carolina, a man named Robert Williams took over as head of the Union County NAACP and brought a philosophy unlike what was being preached from the figureheads of the civil rights movement. Robert Williams grew up being taught to cherish his heritage and fight for what he believed in from his grandmother who was a former slave. Prior to her death, she gave Williams a gun as a gift to symbolize their families fight to combat racial oppression. Williams joined the marines after high school hoping to pursue a career in journalism, but was instead subjected to be a supply sergeant where he experienced significant discrimination. This experience in the Marines created Williams' passion to incite change and do it in a different manner: violently.¹

Williams' philosophy of violent protesting was widely not accepted during the time of the Civil Rights Movement. He was regarded as overly militant and often reprimanded for spreading a message different to other leaders. For this reason, his legacy is largely left out of the nonviolent lens that dominates the Civil Rights Movement narrative. However, Robert Williams' impact extends beyond just the integration of a pool and the fight for justice in Union County. Violence and the militance shown by Robert Williams in Monroe helped create the success of nonviolence in the South. Violence served as the backbone for the nonviolent actions to occur and laid the groundwork for future movements in America.

Marcellus C. Barksdale details the unique movement created by Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina. Before Robert Williams took over as president of the Monroe NAACP in the late 1950's, membership was slim at only 6 people. The branch was proposed to be

¹ "Independent Lens . NEGROES WITH GUNS: Rob Williams and Black Power . Rob Williams | PBS," accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/negroeswithguns/rob.html>.

dissolved, but was kept alive by Williams' obstinate objections. When Williams was elected president, only one member remained, Dr. Albert E. Perry. Williams sought to strengthen the organization and "went to the people" to solve this. Williams "recruited in the pool rooms, on the farms, on the street corners, in the cafes, and in the private homes of black residents of the city".² Through his recruiting, Williams was able to create a working-class group of 250 new members. This group exhibited tremendous strength in the fight for racial equality, persevering through the horrific acts of whites in Monroe against them. One of the greatest examples of the strength demonstrated by Williams' movement was in the fight to integrate the local community swimming pool.³ In Monroe, there existed no swimming pool for African Americans to swim, despite the suggestions of a separate pool being built by the city. The need for a pool reached a dire state in the late 1950's when two children drowned swimming in a local creek.⁴ The need for the pool led to a picketing started by Williams which was met by violence by local whites. Despite a "pattern of attempted intimidation and terrorism" from local opposition, Williams and his fellow protestors fought back in self defense with the use of guns and unbreakable determination. Williams and his fellows remained armed and strong through attempts on Williams' life and African Americans throughout the town. In Barksdale's mind, "the most immediate gain made by blacks in Monroe as a result of the freedom struggle was psychological".

Timothy B. Tyson similarly analyzes the great impact Robert Williams and his movement had and its correlation to "Black Power". According to Tyson, "Robert F. Williams

² Marcellus C. Barksdale, "Robert F. Williams and the Indigenous Civil Rights Movement in Monroe, North Carolina, 1961," *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 2 (1984): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717599>.

³ Robert Williams tells of his first hand experience in the picketing of the community swimming pool in his book *Negroes with Guns*

⁴ Robert Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Marzani & Munsell), 4-6

illustrates that “the civil rights movement” and “the Black Power movement”, often portrayed in very different terms, grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom”.⁵ Williams' story reveals that African American political action and “armed self reliance” could coincide with legal efforts and nonviolent protest. Williams was able to adopt his philosophy which ignited many elements of what would become known as Black Power in the mid 1960's. Williams stressed “black economic advancement, black pride, black culture, and independent black political action” despite being seen as having radical ideas by many fellow civil rights activists. During the late 1950s when many activists focused on voting and sit-ins, Williams tackled African American poverty saying, “We must consider that in Montgomery, where Negroes are riding in the front of buses, there are also Negroes who are starving”.⁶ Williams exhibited a relentless passion to achieve his goals for complete racial equality in the United States.

Detesting of the ideologies of Robert Williams came at the highest level of those leading the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr and Robert Williams philosophies differed in vast ways. Both men promoted a common goal of equality, but differed in the way they wanted to go about it. The debate began in 1959, when in a New York Times article Williams called for African Americans to “meet violence with violence” after a white man was acquitted for the rape of a white woman.⁷ King rejected Williams' claim for African Americans to take up arms writing that “Mr. Williams would have us believe that there is no effective and practical alternative” than

⁵ Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998): 541.

⁶ Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle.”, 559.

⁷ Stanford University, Stanford, and California 94305, “Williams, Robert Franklin,” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, July 13, 2017, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/williams-robert-franklin>.

that to violence.⁸ King defends his dismissal of violent measures through an example of the success of nonviolence set within Williams own hometown of Monroe, North Carolina. In Monroe, the police unjustly imprisoned an African American doctor leading to the people of Monroe marching to the police station and refusing to leave until the doctor was let free. Due to the mass amounts of people, the police were left with no other option than to let the doctor go with no retaliation from either side. King aims to exhibit that “there is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men”.⁹

King and Williams' relationship heightened to its highest tension in 1961 when a SNCC representative was sent to Monroe to support the early organization of the Freedom Rides. King was invited to participate in these rides in Monroe, but turned down the offer. Upon hearing of King's decision, Robert Williams sent King a telegram saying, “No sincere leader asks his followers to make sacrifices he himself will not endure. You are a phony... If you lack the courage, remove yourself from the Vanguard. Now is the time for true leaders to take to the field of battle”.¹⁰ Williams frustration with King stemmed from King's refusal to help Monroe, but Williams still maintained respect for King. In his book *Negroes with Guns*, Williams states that he does “not advocate violence for its own sake or for the sake of reprisals against whites” and also is not against “the passive resistance advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King and others”.¹¹ Rather Williams felt he differed from King in his belief in “flexibility in the freedom struggle”.¹²

⁸ Stanford University, Stanford, and California 94305, “The Social Organization of Nonviolence,” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, July 28, 2014, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/social-organization-nonviolence>.

⁹ University, Stanford, and California 94305, “The Social Organization of Nonviolence.”

¹⁰ University, Stanford, and California 94305, “Williams, Robert Franklin.”

¹¹ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 4.

¹² Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 4.

Williams not only feuded with King, but many other prominent civil rights activists. James Forman details the rivalry between Williams and Roy Wilkins in his book The Making of Black Revolutionaries. The relationship started when a man named Louis Medlin was found not guilty of assault with intent to rape while the victim was sentenced to two years in prison. Robert Williams attended these trials and outside the courthouse is where he uttered his famous statement, “we must meet violence with violence”.¹³ That next day Williams received a call from Wilkins asking to confirm that he had made this statement the previous day. According to Wilkins, “it would be impossible for people to distinguish between what Williams said as a person and what he was saying as the president of the Union County chapter of the NAACP”.¹⁴ For this reason, Wilkins suspended Williams for six months from his role in the Union County NAACP. Wilkins additionally instructed a stenographer to take down this conversation with Williams about his statement and took the appeal to the NAACP convention, where a 764 to 14 vote was casted in favor of Wilkins.

When the story of the Civil Rights Movement is told, it is mainly through a nonviolent lens. The leadership and speeches of Martin Luther King, and the freedom riders are the images that come to mind when thinking of the movement. Violence is portrayed as different, and it was condemned by leaders such as King and Roy Wilkins for going against the common message. In actuality, violence was the backbone for creating the nonviolent movements. When characterizing the violent protesting measures, guns are most frequently used as this landmark. The protesters in Monroe brought guns to their picketing’s of the local pool and threatened to shoot if need be. The presence of guns extended beyond just Williams and his movement though.

¹³ “Black Thought and Culture,” accessed April 8, 2020, <https://bltc-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/cgi-bin/BLTC/hub.py?type=getdoc&docid=S16340-D023>.

¹⁴ “Black Thought and Culture.”

Guns could be found all around those prominent in the Civil Rights Movement. As Timothy B. Tyson says in *Robert F. Williams and the Promise of Southern Biography*, “Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Daisy Bates in Little Rock, Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore in Mississippi, and thousands of other black southerners used guns and guards to defend themselves”.¹⁵ So violence did not truly just extend to Williams. Violence and guns are what made leaders like King feel safe to be able to proceed with nonviolent measures. Upon visiting Martin Luther King’s house in 1956, Glen Smiley “reported to his colleagues that King had armed guards and observed that “this place is an arsenal.” So, King may have denounced Williams in the public, but in the private he realized the importance that violence had to his movement. Additionally, Williams did not disagree with the concept of nonviolence, he actually believed in it. What separated Williams and King was Williams willingness to broadcast the importance of violence as a successful method to fight oppression. For Williams, violence provided a significant psychological gain to those fighting oppression and created fear in those who create the oppression. The militancy Williams exhibited was important for the protection and safety of African Americans during the time.

Another major figure of the movement Thurgood Marshall took similar measures to King. When traveling it was said that “Marshall did not travel the South relying on legal strategies, but upon men with shotguns and, in Marshall's case, reportedly even machine guns”.¹⁶ So it was clear that the importance of guns and violence was understood, but a nonviolent platform continued to be told by leaders. Williams remained the sole activist calling for the use of weapons and militancy in the face of injustice.

¹⁵ Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams and the Promise of Southern Biography,” *Southern Cultures* 8, no. 3 (2002): 38–55.

¹⁶ Tyson, “Robert F. Williams and the Promise of Southern Biography”, 38-55.

The violent protesting additionally extends beyond the Civil Rights Movement into the formation of the Black Panther Party. Huey P. Newton, a founder of the Black Panther party cites Williams' *Negroes with Guns* as his "single most important influence".¹⁷ Williams' philosophy greatly impacted Newton's goals in the creation of the party and the stance the party took. Malcolm X additionally credits Williams for being "a couple years ahead of his time" and laying "good groundwork" for the movements that were soon to come.¹⁸ Williams took a stand that others feared to do and managed to create his own movement that truly embraced his philosophies. Although frequently denounced during the Civil Rights Movement the credit came quietly later.

Robert Williams' story and his movement have a broader place in the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement than it is told. It is not just a unique instance of a group of people coming together under a specific philosophy to fight injustice, but it has greater value upon the shaping of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. The use of violence was a psychological booster for the people of Monroe and sent a clear message that they were not backing down. Violence additionally extended outside of just Monroe. Many other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement took the same measures of taking up arms, but failed to preach the message of violence to the public that Williams did. Leaders like King and Thurgood Marshall required the use of arms for protection of themselves so they could carry out the fight for justice and the militance required for many of the sit ins fit in right with Williams philosophy. Williams was able to foster the success of nonviolence through the use of taking up arms and aid in the greater fight for justice among African Americans. His philosophies also manifested in a more publicized way in future

¹⁷ Tyson, "Robert F. Williams and the Promise of Southern Biography", 38-44.

¹⁸ Tyson, "Robert F. Williams and the Promise of Southern Biography", 38-43.

years through the Black Panther party which willingly took on the ideals he so desperately urged for years prior. So, despite the narrative that may be told, Robert Williams legacy expands far beyond just the militant leader who disobeyed the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. Rather he was a pioneer who through philosophy of taking up arms, created the groundwork of success in violence and nonviolence, while setting up for future movements down the road.

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