

“The Social Organization of Nonviolence”

October 1959
New York, N.Y.

This defense of nonviolent resistance appeared in Liberation as a response to an essay by North Carolina NAACP leader Robert F. Williams that challenged the strategy of “turn-the-other-cheekism” in the face of racist terror.¹ In his September article, Williams had argued that “nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no match or repellent for a sadist.”²

Though King points out that the principle of self-defense “has never been condemned, even by Gandhi,” he rejects Williams’s suggestion that black people take up arms: “There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men.”³

1. Williams, “Can Negroes Afford to Be Pacifists?” *Liberation* 4 (September 1959): 4–7. Williams had been suspended from the NAACP in May 1959 for allegedly advocating violence (for more on Williams’s suspension, see King, Address at the Fiftieth Annual NAACP Convention, 17 July 1959, pp. 245–250 in this volume). King had previously published three articles in *Liberation* (“Our Struggle,” April 1956, and “We Are Still Walking,” December 1956, in *Papers* 3:236–241 and 445–451, respectively; and “Who Speaks for the South?” *Liberation* 3 [March 1958]: 13–14).

2. Williams praised King as “a great and successful leader of our race” and explained that nonviolence was “made to order” for the Montgomery bus boycott, but he cautioned against conflating the various aspects of the southern struggle: “In a great many localities in the South. Negroes are faced with the necessity of combating savage violence. The struggle is for mere existence.”

3. A. J. Muste originally solicited King’s article for inclusion in the September issue of *Liberation* (Muste to King and “Draft of prospectus for September issue of *Liberation*,” both dated 10 June 1959). King

★ The Great Debate

Is Violence Necessary to Combat Injustice?

For the Positive: Williams Says 'We Must Fight Back'

By ROBERT F. WILLIAMS

In 1954, I was an enlisted man in the United States Marine Corps . . . I shall never forget the evening we (heard) the historic Supreme Court decision that segregation in the public schools is unconstitutional . . .

At last I felt that I was a part of America and that I belonged. That was what I had always wanted, even as a child.

I returned to civilian life in 1956 and the hope I had for Negro liberation faded. . . . Acts of violence and words and deeds of hate and spite rose from every quarter . . . There is open defiance to law and order throughout the South . . . I have become disillusioned . . .

What Will Deter?

Laws serve to deter crime and protect the weak from the strong in civilized society. Where there is a breakdown of law . . . where is the force of deterrent?

Only highly civilized and moral individuals respect the rights of others . . . The Southern lute respects only force. Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist . . .

I have great respect for the pacifist, that is, for the pure pacifist . . . I am not a pacifist and I am sure I may safely say most of my people are not. Passive resistance is a powerful weapon in gaining concessions from oppressors, but I venture to say that if Mark Parker had had an automatic shotgun at his disposal, he could have served as a great deterrent against lynching . . .

In 1957 the Klan moved into Monroe and Union County (N.C.) . . . Their numbers steadily increased to the point



Robert Williams

wherein the local press reported 7500 at one rally. They became so brazen that misbehaving motorists started invading the Negro community.

These hooded thugs fired pistols from car windows . . . On one occasion they caught a Negro woman on the street and tried to force her to dance for them at gun point . . . Drivers of cars tried to run Negroes down . . . Lawlessness was rampant . . . instead of coming, we organized an armed guard . . . On one occasion, we had to exchange gunfire with the Klan.

Each time the Klan came on a raid they were led by police cars. We appealed to the President of the United States to have the Justice Department investigate the police. We appealed to Governor Luther Hodges. All our appeals to constituted law were in vain . . . A group of nonviolent ministers met the

City Board of Aldermen and pleaded with them to restrict the Klan from the colored community. The city fathers advised these cringing, beggling Negro ministers that the Klan had constitutional

Editor's Note

The great debate in the integration movement in recent months has been the question of violence vs. nonviolence, as instruments of social change. The non-violent way was brought dramatically to the public consciousness by the successful Montgomery bus protest of 1955-56. The debate, long smoldering under the surface, was precipitated last spring when Robert Williams, Negro leader of Monroe, N. C., made his much-publicized statement that Negroes must "meet violence with violence." Much misunderstanding of both positions has followed. In the opinion of Patriot editors, the most meaningful and enlightening discussion of the issue was presented in the September and October issues of the socialist publication, Liberation, in the form of articles by Mr. Williams and by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the non-violent movement. We reprint excerpts from both articles here.

rights to meet and organize in the same way as the NAACP.

Not having been infected by turn-the-other-cheekism, a group of Negroes who showed a willingness to fight caused the city officials to deprive the Klan of its constitutional rights after local papers told of dangerous incidents between Klansmen and armed Negroes. Klan mobsters have been ignominiously banished from the City of Monroe . . .

"Sick Inside"

On May 8, 1959, while president of the Union County branch of the NAACP, I made a statement to the United Press International after a trial wherein a white man was supposed to have been tried for kicking a Negro man down a flight of stairs in a local white hotel. In spite of the fact that there was an eyewitness, the defendant failed to show up for his trial, and was completely exonerated.

Another case in the same court involved a white man who had come to a pregnant Negro mother's home and attempted to rape her. In recorder's court the only defense offered for the defendant was that "he's not guilty. He was just drunk and having a little fun." . . . A white woman neighbor testified that the woman had come to her home excited, her clothes torn, her feet bare and begging her for assistance; the court was unmoved . . .

This great miscarriage of justice left us sick inside, and I said then what I say now. I believe Negroes must be willing to defend themselves, their women, their children and their homes. They must be willing to die and to kill in repelling their assailants . . . Negroes must protect themselves, it is obvious that the federal government will not put an end to lynchings; therefore it becomes necessary for us to stop lynching with violence . . .

Taught to Fight

Some Negro leaders have cautioned me that if Negroes fight back, the racist will have cause to exterminate the race . . . This government is in no position to allow mass violence to erupt, let alone allow twenty million Negroes to be exterminated . . .

. . . It is instilled at an early age that men who violently and swiftly rise to oppose tyranny are virtuous examples to emulate. I have been taught by my government to fight . . . nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone.

Paradoxically, the struggle for civil rights has reached a stage of profound crisis, although to outward aspect is distinctly less turbulent and victories of token integration have been won in the hard-

For the Negative: King Sees Alternative in Mass Actions

By MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

the Negro acts, his struggle will not be free of violence initiated by his enemies, and he will need ample courage and willingness to sacrifice to defeat this manifestation of violence. But if he seeks it and organizes it, he cannot win.

Does this leave the Negro without a positive method to advance? Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no effective and practical alternative. He argues that we must be arming and substituting or take up arms. To do these the issue dictates the whole problem. There are other meaningful alternatives. The Negro people can organize socially to initiate many forms of struggle which can drive their enemies back without resort to futile and harmful violence . . .

King sees that mass creative forms have been developed—the mass boycott, sit-down protests and strikes, sit-ins, refusal to pay taxes and



Martin Luther King, Jr.

built for unjust arrests—mass marches—mass meetings—prayer pilgrimages, etc.

There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men. Our enemies would prefer to deal with a small armed group rather than with a huge, unarmed but resolute mass of people.

However, it is necessary that the non-violent method be persistent and unyielding. Gandhi said the Indian people must "never let them rest," referring to the British. He urged them to keep protesting daily and weekly, in a variety of ways. This method inspired and organized the Indian masses and disorganized and demobilized the British. It stimulates its myriad participants, socially and morally. It is this form of struggle—non-cooperation with evil through mass action—"never letting them rest"—which offers the more effective road for those who have been tempted and goaded to violence.

Boldness Needed

It needs the bold and the brave because it is not free from danger . . . It requires dedicated people, because it is a back-breaking task to arouse, to organize, and to educate tens of thousands for disciplined, sustained action.

Our present urgent necessity is to cease our internal fighting and turn outward in the enemy, using every form of mass action yet known—create new forms—and resolve never to let them rest. This is the social lever which will force open the door to freedom.

Our powerful weapons are the voices, the feet, and bodies of dedicated, united people . . . Greater tyrants than Southern segregationists have been outbid and defeated by this form of struggle. We have not yet used it, and it would be tragic if we spurn it because we have failed to perceive its dynamic strength and power . . .

resistance areas of Virginia and Arkansas.

The crisis has its origin in a decision rendered by the Supreme Court more than a year ago which upheld the pupil placement law. Though little noticed then, this decision fundamentally weakened the historic 1954 ruling of the Court. It is imperceptibly eroding the basis of a de facto compromise between the powerful conflicting forces . . .

Token integration is a developing pattern. This type of integration is merely an affirmation of principle without the substance of change . . . Full integration can easily become a distant or mythical goal . . .

'No Compromise'

The Negro was the target victim of another compromise in 1958, when his full equality was bargained away by the Federal Government . . . There is reason to believe that the Negro of 1960 will not accept slightly any such compromises in the contemporary struggle for integration . . .

It is axiomatic in social life that the imposition of frustrations leads to two kinds of reactions. One is the development of a wholesome social organization to resist with effective, firm measures any efforts to impede progress.

The other is a confused, anger-motivated drive to strike back violently, to inflict damage . . . It is positive—not radical or constructive. The current calls for violence have their roots in this latter tendency.

Here one must be clear that there are three, different views on the subject of violence. One is the approach of pure nonviolence, which cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage.

The second is violence exercised in self-defense, which all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal.

The third is the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously. To this tendency many Negroes are being tempted today.

Violence Confuses

There are inescapable perils in this approach . . . The greatest danger is that it will fail to attract Negroes to a real collective struggle, and will confuse the large uncommitted middle group, which as yet has not supported either side . . . It is unfortunately true that however

The Louisville-based newspaper *The Southern Patriot* features articles by King and Robert F. Williams debating the role of violence in the struggle for integration (January 1960). Reprinted with permission from Anne Braden.

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Paradoxically, the struggle for civil rights has reached a stage of profound crisis, although its outward aspect is distinctly less turbulent and victories of token integration have been won in the hard-resistance areas of Virginia and Arkansas.

The crisis has its origin in a decision rendered by the Supreme Court more than a year ago which upheld the pupil placement law. Though little noticed then, this decision fundamentally weakened the historic 1954 ruling of the Court. It is imperceptibly becoming the basis of a *de facto* compromise between the powerful contending forces.

The 1954 decision required for effective implementation resolute Federal action supported by mass action to undergird all necessary changes. It is obvious that Federal action by the legislative and executive branches was half-hearted and inadequate. The activity of Negro forces, while heroic in some instances, and impressive in other sporadic situations, lacked consistency and militancy sufficient to fill the void left by government default. The segregationists were swift to seize these advantages, and unrestrained by moral or social conscience, defied the law boldly and brazenly.

The net effect of this social equation has led to the present situation, which is without clearcut victory for either side. Token integration is a developing pattern. This type of integration is merely an affirmation of a principle without the substance of change.

It is, like the Supreme Court decision, a pronouncement of justice, but by itself does not insure that the millions of Negro children will be educated in conditions of equality. This is not to say that it is without value. It has substantial importance. However, it fundamentally changes the outlook of the whole movement, for it raises the prospect of long, slow change without a predictable end. As we have seen in Northern cities, token integration has become a pattern in many communities and remained frozen, even though environmental attitudes are substantially less hostile to full integration than in the South.

Three Views of Violence

This then is the danger. Full integration can easily become a distant or mythical goal—major integration may be long postponed, and in the quest for social calm a compromise firmly implanted in which the real goals are merely token integration for a long period to come.

The Negro was the tragic victim of another compromise in 1878, when his full equality was bargained away by the Federal Government and a condition some-

consented on 22 June but was tardy in producing this article, which Stanley Levison may have helped him prepare (Levison to King, 1 September 1959; see also Muste to King, 27 July 1959). In a 29 October letter, SCEF's Anne Braden asked King's permission to publish excerpts of this article alongside portions of Williams's article, noting that she found King's essay "one of the best brief statements of the case for non-violence" she had ever read; King consented on 2 November ("The Great Debate: Is Violence Necessary to Combat Injustice?" *Southern Patriot* 18 [January 1960]: 3). King's essay was later reprinted, with minor changes, in Williams's book *Negroes with Guns* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), pp. 11–15.

Oct what above slave status but short of genuine citizenship become his social and political existence for nearly a century.⁴

1959 There is reason to believe that the Negro of 1959 will not accept supinely any such compromises in the contemporary struggle for integration. His struggle will continue, but the obstacles will determine its specific nature. It is axiomatic in social life that the imposition of frustrations leads to two kinds of reactions. One is the development of a wholesome social organization to resist with effective, firm measures any efforts to impede progress. The other is a confused, anger-motivated drive to strike back violently, to inflict damage. Primarily, it seeks to cause injury to retaliate for wrongful suffering. Secondly, it seeks real progress. It is punitive—not radical or constructive.

The current calls for violence have their roots in this latter tendency. Here one must be clear that there are three different views on the subject of violence. One is the approach of pure nonviolence, which cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage. The second is violence exercised in self-defense, which all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi, who sanctioned it for those unable to master pure nonviolence.⁵ The third is the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously. To this tendency many Negroes are being tempted today. There are incalculable perils in this approach. It is not the danger or sacrifice of physical being which is primary, though it cannot be contemplated without a sense of deep concern for human life. The greatest danger is that it will fail to attract Negroes to a real collective struggle, and will confuse the large uncommitted middle group, which as yet has not supported either side. Further, it will mislead Negroes into the belief that this is the only path and place them as a minority in a position where they confront a far larger adversary than it is possible to defeat in this form of combat. When the Negro uses force in self-defense he does not forfeit support—he may even win it, by the courage and self-respect it reflects. When he seeks to initiate violence he provokes questions about the necessity for it, and inevitably is blamed for its consequences.⁶ It is unfortu-

4. King refers to the Compromise of 1877, in which the disputed outcome of the 1876 presidential election was resolved in favor of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes. To placate southern Democrats, Republicans agreed to withdraw remaining federal soldiers from the South, effectively ending the era of Reconstruction.

5. In an 11 August 1920 essay, "The Doctrine of the Sword," Gandhi wrote: "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence. . . . I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless victim to her own dishonour" (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 18, July–November 1920 [Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965], p. 132).

6. The October issue of *Liberation* included an NAACP rejoinder to Williams, which explained that Williams's disciplinary suspension was "based upon his call for aggressive, premeditated violence. . . . No action was taken against Mr. Williams for the advocacy of self-defense" (NAACP, "The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case," *Liberation* 4 [October 1959]: 7–8). In his article, Williams rejected the

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nately true that however the Negro acts, his struggle will not be free of violence initiated by his enemies, and he will need ample courage and willingness to sacrifice to defeat this manifestation of violence. But if he seeks it and organizes it, he cannot win. Does this leave the Negro without a positive method to advance? Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no effective and practical alternative. He argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms. To so place the issue distorts the whole problem. There are other meaningful alternatives.

The Negro people can organize socially to initiate many forms of struggle which can drive their enemies back without resort to futile and harmful violence. In the history of the movement for racial advancement, many creative forms have been developed—the mass boycott, sitdown protests and strikes, sit-ins,—refusal to pay fines and bail for unjust arrests—mass marches—mass meetings—prayer pilgrimages, etc. Indeed, in Mr. Williams' own community of Monroe, North Carolina, a striking example of collective community action won a significant victory without use of arms or threats of violence. When the police incarcerated a Negro doctor unjustly, the aroused people of Monroe marched to the police station, crowded into its halls and corridors, and refused to leave until their colleague was released. Unable to arrest everyone, the authorities released the doctor and neither side attempted to unleash violence.⁷ This experience was related by the doctor who was the intended victim.

There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men. Our enemies would prefer to deal with a small armed group rather than with a huge, unarmed but resolute mass of people. However, it is necessary that the mass-action method be persistent and unyielding. Gandhi said the Indian people must “never let them rest,” referring to the British. He urged them to keep protesting daily and weekly, in a variety of ways. This method inspired and organized the Indian masses and disorganized and demobilized the British. It educates its myriad participants, socially and morally. All history teaches us that like a turbulent ocean beating great cliffs into fragments of rock, the determined movement of people incessantly demanding their rights always disintegrates the old order.

It is this form of struggle—non-cooperation with evil through mass actions—“never letting them rest”—which offers the more effective road for those who have been tempted and goaded to violence. It needs the bold and the brave because it

accusation that he was promoting anything other than self-defense: “How can an individual defend his person and property from attack without meeting violence with violence? . . . I could never advocate that Negroes attack white people indiscriminately. Our branch of the N.A.A.C.P. in Union County is an interracial branch.”

7. Albert Perry, Williams's vice president in the Union County NAACP, was arrested and charged with performing an abortion on a white woman in October 1957. Assuming the arrest to be retaliation for Perry's efforts to desegregate the local swimming pool, a large crowd of black residents gathered at police headquarters and successfully demanded his release. According to one account, the armed crowd “surged against the doors, fingered their guns and knives until Perry was produced” (“Is North Carolina NAACP Leader a Marked Man?” *Jet*, 31 October 1957, pp. 10–11).

Oct 1959 is not free of danger. It faces the vicious and evil enemies squarely. It requires dedicated people, because it is a backbreaking task to arouse, to organize, and to educate tens of thousands for disciplined, sustained action. From this form of struggle more emerges that is permanent and damaging to the enemy than from a few acts of organized violence.

Our present urgent necessity is to cease our internal fighting and turn outward to the enemy, using every form of mass action yet known—create new forms—and resolve never to let them rest. This is the social lever which will force open the door to freedom. Our powerful weapons are the voices, the feet, and the bodies of dedicated, united people, moving without rest toward a just goal. Greater tyrants than Southern segregationists have been subdued and defeated by this form of struggle. We have not yet used it, and it would be tragic if we spurn it because we have failed to perceive its dynamic strength and power.

Cashing In on War?

I am reluctant to inject a personal defense against charges by Mr. Williams that I am inconsistent in my struggle against war and too weak-kneed to protest nuclear war.⁸ Merely to set the record straight, may I state that repeatedly, in public addresses and in my writings, I have unequivocally declared my hatred for this most colossal of all evils and I have condemned any organizer of war, regardless of his rank or nationality. I have signed numerous statements with other Americans condemning nuclear testing and have authorized publication of my name in advertisements appearing in the largest circulation newspapers in the country, without concern that it was then “unpopular” to so speak out.⁹

PD. *Liberation* 4 (October 1959): 5–6.

8. Williams titled the final section of his article “King Cashes in on War” and criticized King’s inconsistent stance on violence: “Even Negroes like King who profess to be pacifists are not pure pacifists and at times speak proudly of the Negro’s role of violence in this violent nation’s wars. . . . King may not be willing to partake in expeditions of violence, but he has no compunction about cashing in on the spoils of war. There are too many Negro leaders who are afraid to talk violence against the violent racist and are too weak-kneed to protest the warmongering of the atom-crazed politicians of Washington.” Williams referred to remarks King made on black participation in World War II at the 17 July 1959 NAACP convention (see p. 249 in this volume).

9. In the 1962 reprint of this article in Williams’s *Negroes with Guns*, this paragraph began: “To set the record straight on any implications that I am inconsistent in my struggle against war and too weak-kneed to protest nuclear war, may I state that repeatedly, in public addresses and in my writings, I have unequivocally declared my hatred for this most colossal of all evils and I have condemned any organizer of war, regardless of his rank or nationality.” For more on King’s support of anti-nuclear efforts, see Norman Cousins and Clarence Pickett to King, 9 March 1958, in *Papers* 4:379–380, and King to Cousins, 1 April 1959; see also “Humanity Has a Common Will and Right to Survive!” *New York Times*, 13 August 1959.