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**“The Ballot and the Bullet: Armed Self-defense in the Alabama Black Belt, 1965-1966”**  
**Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Ph.D.**  
**The Ohio State University**

On April 3, 1964, at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, Malcolm X, recently emancipated from Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, delivered “The Ballot or the Bullet,” one of his most famous speeches. With prophetic vision he declared: “If we don’t do something real soon, I think you’ll have to agree that we’re going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It’s one or the other in 1964.”<sup>1</sup> For Malcolm, the relationship between the ballot and the bullet was clear. If white Americans continued to deny African Americans their constitutional right to vote, then African Americans would have to resort to force of arms to secure it. In his view the ballot and the bullet was an either/or proposition. But for those fighting for racial justice in the rural South, there was no clear line separating ballots and bullets. Rather than being either/or, the relationship between ballots and bullets was both/and.

The movement to secure the vote in Lowndes County, Alabama, a typical Black Belt county sandwiched between Selma and Montgomery, exemplified the both/and relationship that existed between ballots and bullets in the rural South during the peak of the black freedom struggle. To make clear this relationship, I examine in this paper the intersection between the Lowndes County voting rights campaign, white violence, and African American armed self-defense.

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<sup>1</sup> George Breitman, ed., Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (New York: Grove Weidenfeld), 25.

Lowndes County was 718 square miles of extreme racial oppression. A decade after the U.S. Supreme Court ordered school desegregation with “all deliberate speed,” Lowndes schools remained completely segregated. Unemployment and underemployment, brought about by agricultural mechanization and increased dairy farming, perpetuated obscene levels of poverty. In fact, Lowndes was the poorest county in Alabama, ranking dead last in per capita income. According to veteran SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael, local conditions were so oppressive that the county “actually made the Mississippi Delta look advanced.”<sup>2</sup>

Absolute political exclusion perpetuated the racial status quo. At the start of 1965 there were 5,122 African Americans of voting age in the county; precisely none were registered to vote. At the same time, more whites were registered to vote than the 1,900 who were eligible. Absolute disenfranchisement reflected the thoroughness with which whites kept African Americans out of politics. So complete was this exclusion that not a single African American had held public office in the county in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Racial terrorism guaranteed white political hegemony. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white violence remained a regular part of everyday black life. Real and perceived infractions of the racial code resulted in about a dozen spectacle lynchings, scores of murders, and countless whippings between 1900 and 1950. The principal practitioners of racial terrorism were large landowners. This custom, which dated from the antebellum era, rendered vigilante groups redundant, and as a result, the Klan never took root locally, a development that had a significant impact on the form African American armed self-defense took in the 1960s.

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<sup>2</sup> SNCC, “Special Report,” (February 1965), 2, SNCC Papers, Box 35, Folder 5, MLK Archives; SNCC, The General Condition of the Alabama Negro (Atlanta: SNCC, 1965), 24-26, Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia; and Carmichael, Ready for Revolution, 457.

By mid-century, the task of controlling black labor and regulating black behavior fell increasingly on the shoulders of the county sheriff and his deputies. An anonymous letter sent from Lowndes to the national headquarters of the NAACP in July 1944 hints at the abuses of Sheriff Otto C. Moorner, the county's chief lawman in the 1940s and 1950s. "I am writing this association to see if any thing can be don about the High Sheriff of Lowndes County in Alabama," began the note. "He is beating people unmerciful just because they are [unprotected] by the law." The author cited one example of Sheriff Moorner jumping out of his patrol car and giving a "licking" to a black man who was on his way to the doctor because the man was not at work.<sup>3</sup>

The county sheriff emerged as the primary enforcer of the racial code for several reasons. First, the involvement of lawmen in acts of racial terrorism gave the impression of order and legality, which was important since the federal government was beginning to frown on mob violence, and state politicians, concerned about the perceptions of northern investors, were beginning to do the same. Second, the automobile allowed lawmen to establish a presence in every corner of the county. Third, the telephone made rapid response possible by allowing instant communication between landowners and the sheriff's office.

More than a century of racial terrorism had made it clear to African Americans that whites would not hesitate to use violence to protect the racial status quo. Thus, the probability that whites would resort to violence to defeat civil rights activism was very high. Consequently, in February 1965, when local people began to organize for the vote, they consciously rejected nonviolence, both as a way of life and as a tactic. This decision led them to partner with Stokely

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<sup>3</sup> The author of the letter explained that he was afraid to sign his name because he lived in the county. "Yours for investigation" to NAACP, New York office, (5 July 1944), NAACP Papers, Part 8, Series B, Reel 20, Frame 284.

Carmichael and SNCC, who by 1965 had embraced armed self-defense, at least unofficially, rather than with Martin Luther King, Jr. and SCLC, who remained firmly committed to nonviolence. It also prompted local people to avoid direct action protest. Indeed, the Lowndes movement had no marches, sit-ins, stand-ins, pray-ins, or wade-ins. Teenagers did picket a few local stores, but they did so only once, and against the wishes of the movement's adult leadership. Quite simply, nonviolence was a non-issue.

An entrenched local gun culture bolstered disinterest in nonviolence. As a rural county, hunting was a way of life, meaning that gun ownership was ubiquitous. As one longtime black resident explained, everyone kept a shotgun behind the front door because they never knew when dinner was going to run by. Moreover, there existed in the county a tradition of armed self-defense that stretched back to Reconstruction. On countless occasions after emancipation, African American men and women flashed pistols, shotguns, and rifles to deter assaults, and used these weapons when simply displaying them failed to dissuade would-be white assailants. The absence of workshops on nonviolence also kept the ideology from gaining a foothold in the county. Since nonviolence was not an indigenous ideology, its advocates used workshops to win converts. Without intense and sustained instruction, nonviolence failed to capture the imagination of local people.

Once African Americans began organizing for the vote, the county's white powerbrokers, which included, in addition to large landowners, small businessmen and public officials, resorted to violence. It is important to note, however, that they did not do so immediately. At first, they tried to exploit the economic vulnerability of the movement's local leaders. For example, large landowner Fred Holladay called due the home mortgage of movement leader Sidney Logan, Jr. Buster Haigler, a leading moneylender, did the same on home loans made to frontline activists

Cato Lee and Threddie Lee Stewart.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, those who employed local leaders fired them summarily. The superintendent of education, for instance, relieved Sarah Logan, a public school teacher of twenty-one years, of her duties, for housing and feeding SNCC organizers.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, white powerbrokers pressured private businesses to dismiss movement leaders. John Hulett, the chairman of the local movement organization, lost his job with Alabama Power in this way. Economic retaliation, however, did not stop local activism.<sup>6</sup>

The steady rise in the number of African Americans attempting to register to vote, which jumped from a few dozen in March 1965 to more than a thousand in July, transformed what whites had perceived initially as a manageable annoyance into a serious crisis. And as movement momentum increased, whites picked up their guns. Local activists and outside organizers were their initial targets. On August 20, 1965, Tom Coleman, a 52 year-old, part-time, unpaid, deputy sheriff, and the brother of the superintendent of education, shot and killed white SNCC volunteer Jonathan Daniels, without provocation, in broad daylight, and within eyesight of the county courthouse.<sup>7</sup> On September 1, 1965, nightriders fired repeatedly into the home of Pattie Mae McDonald for allowing movement activists to use a vacant two-room house on her property as a freedom school. “It is a shame we cant [sic] rent our own house to who we want to, and stay

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<sup>4</sup> “Complaint,” Muffin Miles, et al. v. Robert Dixon [Dickson], Jr., et al., (10 January 1966), 7-8, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 60, Folder 17.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Logan was a wife and mother of nine. She was an active member of Ash Creek C.M.E. Church in Gordonsville where she taught adult Sunday school. She was also a member of St. Francis Pride Eastern Stars. “Sarah B. Logan announces candidacy,” Lowndes Signal (February 1974), 1; “Sarah Logan announces for Democratic Committee,” Lowndes Signal (7 March 1974), 1; and Interview with Sarah Logan by author, (15 September 1998).

<sup>6</sup> SNCC press release, (29 December 1965), 1, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 35, Folder 5.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed examination of the life and death of Jonathan Daniels see Eagles, Outside Agitator.

home in peace,” said Mrs. McDonald. “[I]t is a miserable life to live.”<sup>8</sup> On December 30, 1965, four men in a red pickup appeared at the home of local leader Mathew Jackson, walked brazenly up to his front door, and opened fire with rifles and shotguns. “It was as though they were going hunting,” said an eyewitness to the shooting.<sup>9</sup> On February 16, 1966, nightriders returned to Mathew Jackson’s home and once again directed a torrent of gunfire at his house. According to SNCC organizer Carmichael, violence of this sort just kept “cropping up.”<sup>10</sup>

With the exception of the murder of Jonathan Daniels and Viola Liuzzo, who was killed in Lowndes by Klansmen from Birmingham on the last day of the Selma to Montgomery March, the violence that kept “cropping up” drew little attention from the mainstream press and the federal government. Part of the reason for this was that the victims, other than Liuzzo and Daniels, were black. The lack of organized Klan violence added to the disinterest of the press and federal officials. Klan violence was sensational, and thus newsworthy, and that which was newsworthy drew the attention of Washington insiders. Thus, in the absence of white victims and Klan violence, the national press paid scant attention to the dangerous conditions under which local activists toiled. The nightly news did not run stories about nightriders, assassins, arsonists, or bombers spreading havoc in the dead of night, and the New York Times did not cover the multiple shootings at the Jackson homestead. Moreover, Lyndon Johnson’s White House, Robert Kennedy’s Justice Department, and J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI saw no need to take action to protect

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<sup>8</sup> Affidavit of Pattie McDonald, (5 August 1965), MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 45, Folder 12; Pattie McDonald to Silas Norman, (17 August 1965), MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 94, Folder 4; “Baby narrowly escapes Ala. nightriders shots,” Jet (23 September 1965), 6; SNCC WATS Report, (1 September 1965), MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 41, Folder 1; “Alabama SNCC daily report,” (1 September 1965), MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 45, Folder 3, and Interview with Pattie Mae McDonald by author, (24 September 1998).

<sup>9</sup> SNCC WATS Report, (4 January 1966), 2, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 41, Folder 6; and Interview with Emma Lee Jackson, (4 August 1968).

<sup>10</sup> SNCC WATS Report, (18 February 1966), 1, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 41, Folder 9.

the innocent. Consequently, violence of this sort generated no moral outrage among white Americans. It simply created fear, causing many local people to shun the movement. Even more disturbing, it cost lives. If in any way local people could have avoided it, they would have. Unfortunately, there was no sidestepping racial terrorism. Local people and the organizers working with them had no choice but to live with the uncomfortable knowledge that each day they spent organizing for the ballot might be their last and that few people, other than family members and fellow activists, cared.

Local activists understood that organizing for the ballot and trying to give meaning to it by forming a third party put their lives at great risk. When Sidney Logan, Jr., a World War II veteran, ran for county sheriff, whites spread word that they “better elect fifty-two sheriffs cause we gonna kill one every week.” Despite the threat, Logan remained defiant. The would-be sheriff declared: “If I [have] to lose my life for what I think is right, I ain’t backing down, cause I done made up [my mind].” His defiance was partly born of knowing that the black community stood with him in armed solidarity. “If they kill one [sheriff], we gonna put another one in,” said movement activist Frank Miles. “We ain’t planning [on] backing down. One day somebody’s gonna get tired of killing, or else we’re gonna start killing too. If trouble get in our way, we’re gonna walk through it.”<sup>11</sup>

Frank Miles was serious. Indeed, movement leaders responded to white violence by defending themselves. “In Lowndes County no one will protect Negroes,” explained Miles. “We

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<sup>11</sup> Sidney Logan, Jr. and Frank Miles as quoted in “Lowndes County Freedom Organization leaders talk about their party,” The Movement (June 1966), in Carson, ed., Student Voice, 126; Terrence Cannon, “War on poverty hits Lowndes,” The Movement (June 1966), in Carson, ed., Student Voice, 253; and The Black Panther Party. Speech by John Hulett. Interview with Stokely Carmichael. Report from Lowndes County (New York: Merit Publishers, 1966), 14.

have to defend ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> They began by moving their shotguns from behind front doors to behind bedroom doors, and relocating their pistols from the backs of closets to the tops of nightstands. Soon, they began stockpiling weapons. Since they could not purchase guns and ammunition locally because every gun shop within reasonable driving distance stopped selling weapons to Lowndes County’s black residents as soon as the movement started, they smuggled what they needed into the county. Friends and relatives living outside Alabama served as couriers. The daughter of local leader Mathew Jackson, whose home was a favorite target of whites, routinely purchased weapons and large quantities of ammunition in Georgia where she worked as a schoolteacher, and turned them over to her father on her trips home. In this way, the homes of many activists became fortresses. Bessie McMeans, who lived in the notoriously violent town of Fort Deposit, kept a gun by her bed and another dozen or so stacked on the mattress that she had placed in her living room. Also, when canvassing, local leaders began carrying pistols in their pockets and purses, and stowing rifles and shotguns under the seats of their cars. It must be said that black leaders armed themselves without discussion. That self-defense was the correct course of action, if not the only course of action, was beyond debate.

Unable to stop the movement by assaulting local leaders, whites tried to intimidate the movement’s supporters. In the fall of 1965 they began evicting plantation workers and sharecroppers who had attended mass meetings, attempted to register to vote, or had taken an interest in the movement in some other public way. Frosty Morn, for example, evicted Willie Jackson and his family of thirteen from their home of 20 years. E. R. Meadows gave notice to Viola Luscard that she and her family had to leave his plantation, after 60 years service, by

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Miles, Jr. as quoted in “Lowndes County Freedom Organization leaders talk about their party,” The Movement (June 1966), in Clayborne Carson, ed., The Student Voice 1960-1965: Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Westport, Connecticut: Meckler, 1990), 126.



year's end. He also tossed Amanda Glover and her family of eight off land they had sharecropped for 35 years, and Caldonia Davis off land she had worked for 25 years.<sup>13</sup>

The evictions were demoralizing, but local people rallied, constructing a tent city to keep evictees from having to leave the county.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, whites began shooting at the tents the night they appeared. "Tent City was like a shooting gallery for the local folks in Lowndes County," recalled SNCC's C. J. Jones. "They used to come by there three or four times a week and shoot into Tent City, and you have to remember that there were women and children living in Tent City."<sup>15</sup>

When whites trained their guns on the broader movement community, African Americans organized for collective self-defense. They guarded the homes of those targeted by whites, kept watch over Tent City, organized armed caravans to and from mass meetings, and stationed armed sentries outside of churches during meetings. They also guarded SNCC's freedom house, and provided SNCC field secretaries with armed escorts and with weapons of their own.

It is important to note that local movement activists rarely brandished weapons publicly. They did not display rifles on automobile gun racks or carry unconcealed handguns into the courthouse. They knew that there was no need to parade around the county with weapons drawn either to recruit African Americans or to make whites aware of their commitment to self-defense.

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<sup>13</sup> "Complaint," Muffin Miles, et al. v. Robert Dixon, Jr., et al., (10 January 1966), 8; Edward Rudd, "Freedom City, Alabama: Lowndes families start tent village," Southern Courier (8-9 January 1966), 1; and SNCC News Release, (28 December 1965), 2, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 35, Folder 5.

<sup>14</sup> SNCC Press Release, (28 December 1965) and (29 December 1969), 1, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 35, Folder 5.

<sup>15</sup> SNCC, "Fact sheet - Lowndes County, Alabama Tent City," (5 February 1966), 1, MLK Archives, SNCC Papers, Box 46, Folder 11; "Complaint," Miles v. Dixon (10 January 1966), 10; and Interview with Cornelius (C. J.) Jones by Mildred Black, (25 July 1973), Alabama State University Archives, Center for Higher Education Statewide Oral History Project, No. 38.

Everyone already knew that they were prepared to “meet violence with violence”; there was no need for suicidal displays of bravado.

It is equally important to point out that armed self-defense in Lowndes was loosely organized. The county’s black residents never formed a paramilitary group such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Certainly, they had the ability to do so. They had organized and sustained a central movement organization, the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights, as well as several auxiliary groups, including the Lowndes County Land Co-Op and the Lowndes County Freedom Party. Their decision not to organize a self-defense group was partly a function of the nature of the threat that they faced. White violence emanated from diffuse sources, but rarely from the Klan, which operated sporadically, and seldom from the sheriff’s office, which was better suited for regulating individual behavior as opposed to movement behavior. Thus, unlike Jonesboro and Bogalusa, Louisiana, where the Deacons took root, no readily identifiable terrorist group existed in Lowndes for a black paramilitary organization to defend against. And unlike Oakland, California where the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was born, the police were not the primary source of violence. In addition, nearly universal black gun ownership, coupled with the strong bonds that existed between movement participants, which was a function of the movement having been organized primarily around kinship, friendship, and community ties, made it easy to coordinate self-defense as needed. Also, since the leaders of the local movement organization took no particular interest in nonviolence, as either a tactic or a way of life, there was no need to create a separate organization committed explicitly to self-defense in order to protect a nonviolent persona. In other words, when it came to armed self-defense, the Lowndes County voting rights movement had nothing to hide.

The unstructured nature of armed self-defense in Lowndes demonstrates that the absence of groups such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense did not mean that the grassroots rejected armed self-defense. On the contrary, in those places where these groups failed to establish a presence, black folk embraced self-defense fully. Clearly, then, organized armed self-defense extended beyond black paramilitary groups. The Deacons and the Panthers, therefore, were exceptional only in their formal organization, not in their willingness to defend the black community. Thus, in trying to locate and understand black self-defense during the civil rights movement, it is essential to look to the background, at the subtle ways black folk fought back, in addition to the foreground, at the dramatic ways they engaged in self-defense.

The custom of large landowners resorting to violence to preserve the status quo prompted white powerbrokers to fall back on murder and mayhem in 1965 when economic reprisals failed to halt voting rights agitation. Thus, from a local white perspective, there was an intimate connection between the ballot and the bullet, with whites using the latter to help ensure their control over the former. At the same time, the longstanding African American tradition of self-defense, coupled with an entrenched gun culture and the absence of movement workshops on nonviolence, led local voting rights activists to engage in armed self-defense. With nonviolence a non-issue, ballots and bullets, for the county's black residents, became inseparable. To separate the two, therefore, is to create a false dichotomy that actually reinforces the mistaken notion that the civil rights movement was essentially a nonviolent crusade. Thus, in trying to make sense of the black freedom struggle, particularly in the rural South, it is essential to focus on the ballot *and* the bullet, rather than the ballot *or* the bullet.