

NO PAIN, NO GAIN: Why the Civil Rights Movement Became Increasingly Violent

Amy Williams

Abstract

The African-American Civil Rights Movement was a campaign against the racial segregation and black discrimination that gripped America and the world from the 1950s to the late 1960s. It was characterised by civil resistance, nonviolent protest and civil disobedience.

This article discusses the effectiveness of the tactic of nonviolence in the movement. In doing so, it first defines the philosophy of nonviolence and the aim of those using this strategy in order to assess whether their goals were achieved and whether the strategy was effective.

The article will then discuss why the movement became increasingly violent in the 1960s. It becomes evident that whilst some saw nonviolence as a way of life, others saw it simply as a tactic. The latter group grew disgruntled with the apparent lack of progress and success achieved by nonviolence and therefore adopted another strategy; self-defence. Others took a more radical turn and supported the revolutionary Black Power movement. This group arose to public attention at this time, with their militant image, attitude and rhetoric, and fought for separatism and self-determination.

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The philosophy of ‘nonviolence’ was promoted by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist Pastor, Ph.D. graduate and preeminent leader in the American civil rights movement. It was first adopted by the *Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee* (SNCC), a small adjunct of the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (SCLC), of which King was the first president. SNCC described nonviolence as the foundation of their ‘purpose, the presupposition of [their] belief, and the manner of [their] action’.¹ As Richard Gregg emphasised, nonviolence was a ‘political strategy as well as moral commitment.’² The philosophy was drawn from ‘the Bible, Thoreau, Niebuhr, Gandhi and others’³ and likened blacks to ‘Christian prophets and martyrs’.⁴ They stated that nonviolence ‘seeks a social order of justice permeated by love’.⁵ At the centre of the nonviolence was an emphasis on ‘agape’ love, love that transcends natural affection⁶ and as such, great courage and self-control was required to outwork this philosophy.⁷ As Martin Luther King Jr said, ‘we must keep

¹ SNCC: *Founding Statement* from “‘Keep on Walkin’, Keep on Talkin’”: Civil Rights to 1965’ in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds), *‘Takin’ it to the streets’: A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp.21-22.

² Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Civil Resistance and Social Movements, Sociology Compass*, 7, 2013, p. 591.

³ Isaac, W. Larry et al, ‘Movement Schools’ and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement, found in Nepstad, Sharon Erickson, and Kurtz, Lester R., *Nonviolent Conflict and Civil Resistance, Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, Volume 34, Bingley: Emerald Group, 2012, p.171.

⁴ Simon Wendt, ‘They Finally Found Out that We Really Are Men: Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era’, *Gender & History*, 2007, vol.19 no.3, p.547.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *The Power of Nonviolence* from “‘Keep on Walkin’, Keep on Talkin’”: Civil Rights to 1965’ Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds), *‘Takin’ it to the streets’: A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.16.

⁷ King, *The Power of Nonviolence*, p.17.

moving with wise restraint and love and with proper discipline and dignity'.⁸ However, nonviolence was not a passive or inactive philosophy. One writer wrote that 'nonviolence is not docility, [it] is the courage to be – in very personal terms'.⁹ Therefore, workshops were conducted with two objectives; firstly, educating the activists about the philosophy of nonviolence and examples of the philosophy outworked elsewhere and secondly, practical role-playing¹⁰ that left them feeling as if they were prepared for anything, even death'.¹¹ The philosophy refused to succumb to physical and personal violence, instead aiming to attack the 'evil system'.¹² Nonviolent resisters believed that individual white supremacists were sick with an evil disease and in need of training, rehabilitation and most importantly, mercy.¹³ The end goal of the activists was 'reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community'.¹⁴ Did these nonviolent activists achieve this goal? In order to answer this, the objectives of the nonviolent resisters will first be examined as a basis to determine the effectiveness of their tactic.

One objective was to achieve a 'moral edge' and expose the brutality of the white supremacists. The strategy of nonviolence provided an 'answer, the key, to the age-old riddle... how do the relatively powerless confront power without succumbing to its violent tactics (thus perpetuating a vicious cycle) and without

⁸ King, *The Power of Nonviolence*, p.17.

⁹ Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p.84.

¹⁰ Isaac, *Movement Schools*, p.171.

¹¹ James Farmer, *The Freedom Rides* from "Keep on Walkin', Keep on Talkin'": Civil Rights to 1965' Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds), 'Takin' it to the streets': *A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.23.

¹² King, *The Power of Nonviolence*, p.16.

¹³ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.83.

¹⁴ King, *The Power of Nonviolence*, p.15.

committing self-annihilation in the process?’¹⁵ Those in favour of nonviolence fully believed that to respond violently would be ‘stooping’ to the level of their aggressors. As one activist said, ‘I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism’.¹⁶ They questioned how one could justify fighting against violence with violence. Furthermore, they attempted to ‘invoke shame in their assailants’ by ‘accepting suffering and refusing to strike back’.¹⁷ In this way, the strategy gave the Black Americans a moral edge. Gregg argued that ‘when non-violent resisters do not retaliate, their opponents lose moral balance or credibility’.¹⁸

In addition to achieving a moral edge, a nonviolent response to unjustified savage attacks clearly showed who was the aggressor, and who was the victim. Nepstad points out that if activists did respond in violence, the state could ‘claim that force was necessary to bring the situation under control however, if they remain peaceful, external observers [were] likely to denounce the force as excessive and unnecessary’.¹⁹ Santoro claims that the resisters were successful in this regard as he notes that many white segregationists found it ‘increasingly difficult to maintain their long-held invidious moral distinction between blacks and whites as a result of the glaring symbolic contrast evident in the sit-ins’.²⁰ The media images of innocent black teenagers like ‘lambs to the slaughter’,²¹ violently sprayed with high powered fire hoses and being bitten by police

¹⁵ Isaac, *Movement Schools*, p.170.

¹⁶ King, *The Power of Nonviolence*, p.17.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nepstad, *Nonviolence Civil Resistance*, p.591.

¹⁹ Nepstad, *Nonviolent Civil Resistance*, p.593.

²⁰ Wayne A. Santoro, (2008), *The Civil Rights Movement and the Right to Vote: Black Protest, Segregationist Violence and the Audience Social Forces*, Volume 86, Number 4, p.1397.

²¹ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.83.

dogs, shocked both audiences in America and across the world²². Therefore, as Nepstad argued, the movement used nonviolence 'as a technique for turning state repression to a movement's advantage²³ by exposing the unjustified brutality of their aggressors and reinforcing their superior morality. The activists were successful in their goal to achieve a moral edge and expose the brutality of white Americans using nonviolent means. However, this perhaps clouded the more pertinent problem; racism and discrimination. As Charles Payne stated, 'the reaction of the nation seemed *more a reaction to the violence* used in defence of white supremacy than to white supremacy itself.'²⁴

Nonviolent activists believed that responding to violence would only make things worse. Activist Jim Lawson concluded that the only reason he would not retaliate was 'because then I will be in the hospital two weeks instead of one, and will be useless to the movement during that extra week'.²⁵ Another resistor stated that 'violence doesn't guarantee you any safety at all'²⁶ and another concluded that 'if you're lying out on the street, you're not doing anybody any good'.²⁷ However, others believed that although 'nonviolence [was] a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilised... non-violence [was] no match or repellent for a sadist'. Williams argued that 'turning the other cheek' was an 'invitation

²² Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.543.

²³ Nepstad, *Nonviolence Civil Resistance*, p.590.

²⁴ Charles Payne, 'Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches' in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*, Second edition, Steven Lawson and Charles Payne (eds), Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc: Lanham, 2006, p.132.

²⁵ *Letters from Mississippi* from "'Keep on Walkin', Keep on Talkin'": Civil Rights to 1965' in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds), *'Takin' it to the streets': A Sixties Reader*, Second edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.31.

²⁶ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.84.

²⁷ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.82.

that the white racist brutes will certainly honour by brutal attack on cringing, submissive Negroes'.²⁸ Unfortunately this cynical assessment was true. Nonviolent means were no deterrent for violent attacks: many suffered serious injuries, others were imprisoned and some died in pursuit of civil rights. Therefore, nonviolence was not a 'safer' tactic as some assumed.

Another goal of nonviolence was to promote voluntary change in their aggressors; it appealed to the 'conscience of white Americans to impel them to support the civil rights movement'.²⁹ As Nepstad noted, 'the aim [was] not to humiliate or defeat the opponent but rather to convince oppressors to voluntarily change'.³⁰ This idea came from the Gandhian concept of 'satyagraha' where the goal was to 'get opponents to acknowledge injustices and oppressive conditions'.³¹ Martin Luther King Jr. explained that nonviolence did not 'seek to defend the opponent but... to awaken a sense of moral shame... [and ultimately] redemption and reconciliation'.³² In this sense, nonviolence is the 'sword that cuts without wounding'.³³ Hogan confirms this and adds that the purpose of nonviolence was to 'offer closed people the opportunity to discover a more open way to live'.³⁴ It is difficult to assess whether it achieved a genuine change in the mindset of white Americans, however it is clear that, whilst many were shocked by the unjustified violence publicised in the media, the violence and stigma continued.

²⁸ Akinyele Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next: Armed Self-Defense, Revolutionary Nationalism, and the Southern Black Freedom Struggle*, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 15:3, 2013, p.220.

²⁹ Wendt, *The Finally Found Out*, p.548.

³⁰ Nepstad, *Nonviolent Civil Resistance*, p.591.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.132.

³³ Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.132.

³⁴ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.83.

Nonviolent civil disobedience was implemented with the aim of creating ‘crises of local, national and even international proportions that actively forced white authorities to yield to black demands’.³⁵ This ‘strategy of chaos’ was created in order to ‘disrupt the U.S economic and social order’.³⁶ Many of the civil rights leaders learned that it was ‘disruption and potential embarrassment that got the national machinery in motion’.³⁷ This idea, that was most evident in the Freedom Rides of the 1960s, came from Mohandas K. Gandhi the initiator of the nonviolent liberation campaign in India.³⁸ The activists would first write to the president, government and several departments, including the FBI, to state that they planned to deliberately violate civil laws such as the segregated seating requirements on buses. James Farmer, director of the *Congress of Racial Equality* (CORE), a Gandhian protest group initially organised back in the 1940s,³⁹ explained that they would be ‘absolutely nonviolent throughout the campaign’ and would ‘accept the consequences of [their actions]... [it] was a deliberate act of civil disobedience’.⁴⁰ As more activists became involved in these nonviolent strategies, including some whites, the police began to lose legitimacy and respect. As Nepstad noted, ‘the more people that refuse to cooperate, the more difficult it is for the state to maintain control, and the more likely it will lose its allies’.⁴¹ Therefore, civil disobedience was a form of non-violent

³⁵ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.548.

³⁶ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.232.

³⁷ Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.133.

³⁸ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, New York: Vintage Books, 2007, p.120.

³⁹ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, p.243.

⁴⁰ *The Freedom Rides* from “‘Keep on Walkin’, Keep on Talkin’”: Civil Rights to 1965’ in *Takin’ it to the streets’: A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, edited by Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds), New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.23.

⁴¹ Nepstad, *Nonviolent Civil Resisters*, p.594.

coercion⁴² and it succeeded in applying pressure to the government and local services.

Was nonviolence, therefore, effective in achieving its goals? Akinyele states that the ‘contributions of nonviolence to challenging U.S. apartheid cannot be denied’. Activists succeeded in establishing a moral edge over their opponents, exposing the unjustified violence of white supremacy and applying pressure on the government and economy. However it failed to eradicate racism at its core and failed to end police brutality. By the late 1960s, ‘reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community’⁴³ was certainly not evident. However, creating publicity of the issue, one of their primary goals, was one of the successes of the nonviolent movement. One protestor, referring to the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 stated that if policemen and state troopers were to continue ‘to beat heads [they’ll] have to do it... in front of CBS, NBC and ABC television cameras’.⁴⁴ The activists were right. Santaro claims that the civil rights issue was ‘virtually unrecognised as a problem until the early to mid-50s’ but by the mid-1960s, ‘audience attention had clearly shifted’.⁴⁵ Santaro looks to polls on the nation’s most important problems which reveal that during the 1940s-50s, less than 5 per cent listed civil rights as the most important issue but by the 1965, more than 50 per cent listed civil rights as the most important problem.⁴⁶ Santaro suggests that this was particularly due to the ‘Birmingham demonstrations, the March on Washington, the bombing deaths of four black girls in a Birmingham church, Freedom Summer and the Selma campaign’.⁴⁷ By the late 1960s it is evident that ‘whites were afraid of the

⁴² Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.548.

⁴³ King, *The Power of Nonviolence*, p.15.

⁴⁴ Santaro, *The Civil Rights Movement*, p.1394.

⁴⁵ Santaro, *The Civil Rights Movement*, p.1396.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Santaro, *The Civil Rights Movement*, p.1397.

alternatives’ to nonviolence so nonviolence in itself did not achieve these changes, fear of the ‘what ifs’ did. As Payne argued, ‘fear of the escalating black militancy and the threat of black violence were indeed among the primary considerations in the administration’s key civil rights decisions’.⁴⁸ Therefore, whilst the protestors gained widespread publicity using nonviolence, the dread of increasing violence, not nonviolence itself, promoted change.

However, this fear soon became a reality with an increase in violence emerging in the late 1960s. Whilst groups like SNCC had been ‘founded upon strict nonviolence principles’, evident in their name ‘Student *Nonviolence* Coordinating Committee’, by late 1965, ‘shot guns and other defensive weapons were visible’.⁴⁹ Many protestors were becoming disillusioned with nonviolence and the lack of success it had achieved within the movement and therefore sought new tactics. One particular reason they became increasingly violent was their growing dissatisfaction with the government. Nepstad explained that some were ‘disillusioned by the state’s failure to deliver its promises’ during the Kennedy administration and felt that ‘non-violent methods did not have sufficient power to coerce the state to act’.⁵⁰ Though they had achieved legislative changes, such as the *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which achieved desegregation in public schools, and the Voting Rights Act,⁵¹ which prohibited racial discrimination in voting, the bills had certainly fallen short of their wider objectives. For example, John Lewis claimed that the Civil Rights Bill did not ‘protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire

⁴⁸ Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.134.

⁴⁹ Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.397.

⁵⁰ Nepstad, *Nonviolent Civil Resistance*, p.594.

⁵¹ Bates, *The Upheaval of Jim Crow*, p.81.

hoses, for engaging in peaceful demonstrations...'⁵² During the Johnson administration, they felt the frustrations of being sent to fight in the Vietnam war to 'protect [white American] foreign holdings while denying [them] the basic necessities for human survival'.⁵³ This was impounded by Johnson's failed War on Poverty. Therefore, many angry, frustrated and dissatisfied activists turned to violent demonstrations.

Self-defence garnered support amongst many who felt they could not justify neglecting the safety of their fellowmen and women. Some activists felt conflicted between adhering to the nonviolent ideals and defending their people. Andrew Young wrote that during the Birmingham campaign of 1963, he would avoid being near women as he 'didn't trust [himself] not to defend them if they were attacked'.⁵⁴ Robert Williams agreed and wrote that how could any man have 'human dignity' if he allows himself to be abused or his family attacked.⁵⁵ One demonstrator exclaimed he had attended 'too many memorials, too many funerals' and that they were 'SICK and TIRED' of the continual police brutality.⁵⁶ During the Freedom Summer of 1964, Eugene Nelson stated that whilst the 'movement may be non-violent... the people here are by no means so when it comes to protecting their families and property'. Wendt explains that 'self-defence [therefore] became a pragmatic necessity'⁵⁷ especially in the south as neither federal nor state authorities were committed to the safety of African

⁵² John Lewis, *Wake Up America*, from Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, "Keep on Walkin', Keep on Talkin'": Civil Rights to 1965' in *Takin' it to the streets': A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.27.

⁵³ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.231.

⁵⁴ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.543

⁵⁵ Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.132.

⁵⁶ *Letters From Mississippi*, p.34.

⁵⁷ Wendt, *Protection or Path toward Revolution?*, p.321

Americans.⁵⁸ This was exacerbated with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. that left many activists believing that nonviolence was no longer viable.⁵⁹ Many protestors, even within SNCC, began to be convinced by the ‘separatist speeches of Malcolm X and... Frantz Fanon’.⁶⁰ Malcolm X, a Black Muslim leader who one historian described as a ‘more ominous threat to white America’⁶¹ than King, argued that self-defence was a human right. In 1963 he stated that, ‘Any Negro who teaches other Negroes to turn the other cheek in the face of attack is disarming the Negro of his God-given right, of his moral right, of his natural right, of his intelligent right to defend himself’.⁶² Elijah Muhammad agreed, arguing that they ‘would have been justified by God and the divine law of self-defence to fight and defend themselves against such savage dog and human attack’.⁶³ Malcolm X claimed that the time had come for the American Negroes to fight back ‘whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked’.⁶⁴ Consequently some activists took matters into their own hands. Armed with pistols and shotguns, they guarded the homes of prominent activists and on several occasions, successfully prevented bomb attacks.⁶⁵ Therefore, conflicting emotions around self-defence is one reason why the movement became increasingly violent amongst some activists.

⁵⁸Wendt, *Protection or Path toward Revolution?*, p.323

⁵⁹ Cleaver, *Requiem for Nonviolence*, from “‘Say It Loud, Say It Proud’: Black Nationalism and Ethnic Consciousness’ in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, *‘Takin’ it to the streets’: A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.131.

⁶⁰ Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.397.

⁶¹ Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.323.

⁶² Wendt, *Protection or Path toward Revolution?* p.325.

⁶³ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.230.

⁶⁴ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution?* p.325.

⁶⁵ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution*, pp.321-322.

Thus, there were some within the protest movement who became dissatisfied with nonviolence as a tactic and sought more defensive strategies. Also at this time, we see a rise in the Black Power movement. The movement involved some who were never convinced by nonviolence and who favoured more militant and violent means and others who initially attempted nonviolence but became angry and revengeful as the police brutality and discrimination continued. The Black Power movement was therefore a ‘multidimensional movement with multilayered ideologies and agendas’.⁶⁶ However, Akinyele argues that the ‘leading ideological tenet of the Black Power movement... was revolutionary nationalism’. It had the objective of ‘securing self-determination and state power for Black people and a radical transformation of the social, political, and economic order’.⁶⁷ Whilst they endorsed nonviolent direct action,⁶⁸ they were ‘pro-armed self-defence’⁶⁹ and aimed to ‘repel and resist white terrorist violence’.⁷⁰ Wendt argues that the ‘ultimate goal’ of the movement’s self-defence was ‘not simply the safety of the Black community but the creation of a new and just social order that would have to be brought about by revolutionary violence if necessary’.⁷¹ They pushed for changes in education including teaching black history, hiring black teachers and embracing black culture.⁷² They sought a higher standard of living such as full

⁶⁶ Simon Wendt, Protection or Path Toward Revolution?: Black Power and Self-Defense, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 9:4, 2007, p.320.

⁶⁷ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.224.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.218.

⁷⁰ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.219.

⁷¹ Wendt, *Protection or Path toward Revolution?*, p.329

⁷² Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p.226.

employment, decent housing and an end to police brutality.⁷³ They fought for power to ‘determine their own destiny’⁷⁴ and wanted independence from government initiatives such as the Great Society programs.⁷⁵ Stokely Carmichael, a former Howard University student who had come south for the Freedom Rides⁷⁶ and remained to become one of SNCC’s ‘most charismatic and successful field organisers’⁷⁷ was shifting from backing nonviolent protest and toward black nationalism⁷⁸ and insisted that they ‘reject the American dream as defined by white people and... work to construct an American reality defined by Afro Americans’.⁷⁹ In this sense, their call for black self-determination and pride, self-help and black education, combined with ‘revolutionary diction’, was distinctly different and more radical than the early objectives of the nonviolent activists.⁸⁰

One of the strong philosophies behind the Black power movement was independence and self-sufficiency. This is evident in their use of self-defence. These Black Americans believed they were capable of defending themselves and should not rely on white help or white approval to achieve their goals.⁸¹ It is also seen in their emphasis on the need for Black leadership⁸² and the right to organise themselves without white interference⁸³. Some refused

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Self, *American Babylon*, p.227.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Robert and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.398

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Robert and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.396.

⁷⁹ SNCC, *The Basis of Black Power: SNCC from “Say It Loud, Say It Proud”: Black Nationalism and Ethnic Consciousness* in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds), *‘Takin’ it to the streets’: A Sixties Reader, Second edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.120.

⁸⁰ Self, *American Babylon*, p.231.

⁸¹ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.234.

⁸² Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.232.

⁸³ SNCC, *The Basis of Black Power*, p.117.

any moral and material support from white lawmakers and white liberals and rejected the pervasive assumption that ‘moderate whites could assist the freedom movement’.⁸⁴ They went so far as to label Martin Luther King Jr. a ‘modern Uncle Tom’ who ‘served only as pawns in the white man’s scheme to keep African-Americans passive and powerless’.⁸⁵ Stokely Carmichael argued that accepting white leadership only reinforced black inferiority⁸⁶ and said that allowing whites to be ‘the brains’ behind the movement only reinforced that blacks were unintelligent and incapable.⁸⁷ Therefore unlike the early civil rights activists, they pushed for the movement to be ‘black staffed, black controlled [and] black financed’⁸⁸ and this accounted for their emphasis on *self-defence*.

One observation that also seeks to explain the shift towards self-defence and violence in the civil rights movement is the issue of class. It was believed that the early civil rights movement, with the exception of the grassroots based SNCC,⁸⁹ was ‘bourgeois in orientation’. Instead, the Black Power movement drew on the disenfranchised and unprivileged sections of the Black population.⁹⁰ Due to segregation, this population was concentrated ‘together in urban centres, creating a “lumpen proletariat”, ignorant but teachable, [and] the core of a revolutionary movement’.⁹¹ Bates notes that many of the urban black Americans ‘thought middle-class leaders of the southern movement knew very little about the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Wendt, *Protection or Path toward Revolution?* p.325.

⁸⁶ SNCC, *The Basis of Black Power*, p.117.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ SNCC, *The Basis of Black Power*, p.119.

⁸⁹ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.229.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Self, *American Babylon*, p.228.

poverty of the urban poor'.⁹² Furthermore, Payne argues that the issue of self-defence would have 'made a good deal more sense to the average African American... than talk about redemptive suffering and turning the other cheek'.⁹³ They claimed that 'most integrationists were seeking upward mobility'⁹⁴ rather than a more radical and revolutionary 'structural transformation of the system'.⁹⁵ Rather than work within the framework of the society, they sought to achieve the basic interests of the masses including their 'life needs, aspirations [and] their fighting determination to achieve freedom and human dignity'.⁹⁶ In this sense they also 'refused to pander to the convenient race-only discourse that attracted many'.⁹⁷ Wendt argues that it was this fighting spirit and emphasis on self-defence and 'the gun' that attracted the 'vast majority of party members'.⁹⁸

Whilst initially some activists viewed the 'strength',⁹⁹ 'self-control and courage'¹⁰⁰ of nonviolence as a 'boost to their male identity', many began to regard the 'effeminate submissiveness'¹⁰¹ and 'powerlessness'¹⁰² of nonviolence as a threat to the black

⁹² Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Upheaval of Jim Crow: African Americans and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the 1960s*, *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s*, David Farber and Beth Bailey (eds), New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, p.86.

⁹³ Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, pp.132-133.

⁹⁴ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.229.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey Ogbar, 'Rainbow Radicalism: The Rise of Radical Ethnic Nationalism' in *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, p.189.

⁹⁸ Wendt, *Protection or Path toward Revolution?* p.327.

⁹⁹ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.556.

¹⁰⁰ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.548.

¹⁰¹ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.544.

¹⁰² Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.555.

manhood.¹⁰³ Speaking of the famous ‘sit-ins’, Malcolm X derided, ‘anybody can sit... It takes a man to stand’.¹⁰⁴ Some described nonviolence as ‘absurd, erroneous and deceitful’.¹⁰⁵ James Farmer stated that ‘the idea that violence could be greeted with love generally evoked only contempt’¹⁰⁶. Some black militants described nonviolent resisters as ‘misguided hypocrites’ and cowards hiding behind a ‘love everybody teaching’.¹⁰⁷ This is said to have ‘seriously hampered’ the efforts of the civil rights activists to win over African Americans to the movement’s cause’.¹⁰⁸ They instead looked to self-defence as a symbol of their dignity and masculinity. Isaac states that ‘years of internalised racism – feelings of self-doubt, inferiority, shame, and anger – had to be converted into an engine of pride, strength and, determination’¹⁰⁹ and as such self-defence ‘ultimately came to be utilised mainly as a symbol of militant black manhood’. Wendt argued, ‘although radical groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) conceptualized self-defence as a revolutionary alternative to nonviolence, it ultimately served primarily as a gendered symbol of defiance and male psychological empowerment’.¹¹⁰ Activists drew on the Old Testament law of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’¹¹¹ to justify their stance rather than the ‘love everybody teaching’¹¹² of Jesus. Not only was self-defence an affirmation that Blacks had rights and worth, but they argued that it forced whites to accept this too. Black militants believed that ‘[standing] up and

¹⁰³ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution?* p325.

¹⁰⁴ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.555.

¹⁰⁵ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.556.

¹⁰⁶ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.547.

¹⁰⁷ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution*, p.325.

¹⁰⁸ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.544.

¹⁰⁹ Isaac, *Movement Schools*, p.170.

¹¹⁰ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution*, p.321.

¹¹¹ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution* p.325.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

[speaking] their mind’ would win them ‘respect’ and ‘honour’ from whites. One activists said, ‘they finally found out that we really are men and that we would do what we said, and that we meant what we said’.¹¹³ Wendt argued that ‘only armed resistance... would ultimately compel whites to give blacks the respect they deserved’. This expression of manhood was also evident in the black activist’s masculine and militant appearance. They chose to wear black berets, leather jackets, gloves and dark sunglasses,¹¹⁴ generating ‘fear among whites and undoubtedly [instilling] pride and self-respect in those who wore it’.¹¹⁵ This militant image is epitomised in the infamous picture of Huey Newton posing as a ‘masculine warrior’,¹¹⁶ armed with a shotgun in one hand and an African spear in the other. Black Americans had felt ‘dehumanised, marginalised, and exploited’ and hence took to a hyper masculinity.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the black militants approach ‘functioned mostly on a symbolic level, namely as a means of gaining publicity, as an affirmation of Black manhood, and as tool to recruit new members.’¹¹⁸ Therefore, many favoured self-defence as they felt it restored their dignity and manhood.

By the mid-1960s, there were sharp disagreements within SNCC about strategy. They were divided on black separatist rhetoric, white involvement in the movement and political control¹¹⁹ and they ‘challenged the notion that [nonviolence] was the sole strategy and tactic to be employed in the Black freedom struggle’.¹²⁰ Some of these differences were between North and

¹¹³ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.550.

¹¹⁴ Ogbar, *Rainbow Radicalism*, p.161.

¹¹⁵ Wendt, *They Finally Found Out*, p.557.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Isaac, *Movement Schools*, p.182.

¹¹⁸ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution?* p.327.

¹¹⁹ Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.397.

¹²⁰ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.220.

South members. Many in the South, who had grown up under segregation, were not ‘intrigued’ by talk of ‘separatism’.¹²¹ There is also evidence of more of an adherence to nonviolence in the South, perhaps due to Southern influences such as Martin Luther King Jnr. and the *Southern Leadership Conference Committee* (SCLC). For many in the South, nonviolence was a ‘calling’ or a ‘way of life’. Their Northern counterparts, on the other hand, embraced it as a means to an end. However, they were not initially or even ultimately separate groups. Therefore, whilst historian Payne notes that the ‘masses were committed to change, not particular methods’,¹²² perhaps this is truer in the North.

Therefore, as is evident there was a shift towards self-defence amongst the Black Americans but this was not met with acceptance from either nonviolent activists or white Americans. It resulted in a violent ‘wave of government repression’. In some ways, the Black Panther Party, the more extreme tenant of the Black Power movement, tainted the call for self-defence as they ‘remained inextricably linked to guns and violence’.¹²³ The media ignored their humanitarian work with poverty and aid and instead ‘continued to focus on the organisation’s paramilitary character’¹²⁴ despite the fact that self-defence appeared after these pursuits on the Black Panther Party’s ten-point platform.¹²⁵ Advocates of nonviolence condemned the Black Panther Party as ‘black racists’¹²⁶ and leftists saw them as an ‘irresponsible, careless, and disorganised band of immature radicals’.¹²⁷ Wendt argued that ‘self-defence... obscured some of the most important messages of

¹²¹ Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.397.

¹²² Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.132.

¹²³ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution?* p.328.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.232.

¹²⁷ Ogbar, *Rainbow Radicalism*, p.189.

Black Power and contributed to the resentment and subsequent misconceptions that burdened the movement'.¹²⁸

Historians have debated as to whether there was an abrupt change in ideology and technique amongst activists during the civil rights movement. There is evidence that there were negative reactions to nonviolence in the early 1960s¹²⁹ but as Hogan states, by the late 1960s, 'nonviolent direct action would become almost wholly discredited',¹³⁰ and by 1966, SNCC and CORE 'openly embraced' armed self-defence.¹³¹ One writer described SNCC as now 'a rival of the same SCLC that had midwived its birth'.¹³² One explanation for the change from nonviolence to self-defence is that it was never a unified movement but rather evolutionary and adaptable. Payne explains that 'uncritical normative interpretations can... lose touch with the evolving consciousness of activists [and] can understate the importance of pressure... in generating change, and they can create in retrospect a sense of consensus and unity that did not exist at the time'.¹³³ Hogan confirms this and adds that the civil rights activists had to 'cope with the fact that their tactics could be altered, changed, and ultimately driven by white violence'.¹³⁴ The SNCC activists, for example, were very purposeful and reflective. They 'studiously reflected upon the interaction afterward and incorporated their findings into their next action'.¹³⁵ One historian states that this 'ability to innovate and remain open to new approaches despite careful planning' was a

¹²⁸ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution?* p.328.

¹²⁹ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.230.

¹³⁰ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.81.

¹³¹ Umoja, *From One Generation to the Next*, p.236.

¹³² Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.228.

¹³³ Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, p.135.

¹³⁴ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.57.

¹³⁵ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.69.

'remarkable quality of SNCC'¹³⁶ especially considering the fast paced and unpredictable nature of the events at this time. In this sense, scholars have questioned whether the Black Power movement was a 'phase of the civil rights movement or a different and separate development'.¹³⁷ Even Martin Luther King, who was committed to nonviolence as a 'way of life' suggested that self-defence might be necessary for preservation and black pride.¹³⁸ This therefore cast doubts on the traditional interpretation that regarded the Black Power movement as an 'abrupt rupture' with the nonviolence idealism and instead 'hints at neglected continuities between the two eras'.¹³⁹

Ultimately nonviolence was successful in publicizing the issue of segregation and Black American civil rights. It exposed the violence of white supremacy and achieved legislative change. However, with the increasing police brutality, dissatisfaction with a lack of federal and state support and growing class divide amongst Black Americans, a more violent movement emerged. Self-defence emerged as a tactic that gave pride and dignity to the activists and helped them realise their self-worth. Therefore, Hogan argues that 'both nonviolence and armed self-defence fed the trail to freedom'.¹⁴⁰ Whether nonviolence or self-defence were successful, the civil rights activists 'could not be repressed'¹⁴¹ and they continued to 'engage in new tactics because they had escaped from the immobilising consequences of their own fear'.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.69.

¹³⁷ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.50.

¹³⁸ Roberts and Klibanhoff, *The Race Beat*, p.401.

¹³⁹ Wendt, *Protection or Path Toward Revolution?* p.321.

¹⁴⁰ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.85.

¹⁴¹ Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.92.

¹⁴² Hogan, *Many Minds*, p.92.

About the Author

Amy Williams recently completed a Bachelor of Education (Middle School/Secondary)/Bachelor of Arts (History and English) and is currently finishing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History at Flinders University. Her research interests include the Holocaust and 19th century America, with a particular focus on the 1960s and the Christian Right.