

## **“Crusaders” (1999)<sup>1</sup>** *Timothy B. Tyson*

“Mae, turn on the radio,” her neighbor called out. “There’s something on WLIB that you would be interested in.” Mae Mallory, a thirty-two-year-old African American woman, dark-skinned and heavysset, turned the dial on her radio and heard a voice that changed her life forever. As a Young girl growing up in a black ghetto in Macon, Georgia, Willie Mae Mallory had tried to roller-skate on a freshly blacktopped hill in a white neighborhood—the streets where she lived were not paved. White children blocked her path, and “a fight ensued and I fought back,” Mallory recalled. “I took off my skates and I bloodied their heads.” Another time, a white girl slapped Willie Mae and sent her home crying; Mallory’s mother told her to go back and hit the white girl “or I wasn’t going back into that house. And the girl’s mother called the police.” A series of similar clashes landed young Mallory on a train bound for New York City, where she lived with several other family members in her grandmother’s one-room apartment in Brooklyn. “My mother could see I wasn’t going to make it so good in the South,” she recalled.

In the North, Mallory’s festering rage collided with a string of employers, the welfare bureaucracy, and the city school board. During the early 1950s, Mallory joined the Communist Party, in part as a reaction to domestic anticommunism, which puzzled her greatly. “Every time I raised a question of better wages, better working conditions, and equality for black people,” she said, “somebody would tell me that was communist. Then when I would pick up the newspaper, all I could hear was [Senator Joseph] McCarthy accusing somebody of being a communist.” It appeared to Mallory that “the communists were the only ones who wanted these good things and here was somebody who wanted to put them in jail. So I decided I better seek out the communists.” Impressed at first, Mallory joined the party. But soon she discovered that the organization’s genuine commitment to interracialism was not matched by a deep understanding of African American life or a demonstrable ability to deliver on their manifestos for black liberation. “I could see that they didn’t have the answers,” Mallory remembered, “and the whole bottom of my world just fell out.”

Disillusioned with the Communists, Mallory wandered through the various black nationalist circles of Harlem in the mid-1950s. “I went to the nationalist movement just to listen,” she said, “and they talked a real militant thing but nobody did anything, you know. They didn’t have any answers and the men had contempt for the women.” Mallory decided to “set out on my own, to work with this group and with that group and the other group.”

According to a history of Harlem politics and culture, Mallory became “a prominent Harlem resident and community activist and part of a group known as the Harlem Mothers who brought a desegregation case against the school system along with eight other mothers and won the case.” As the freedom movement began to quicken in the late 1950s, the broad-shouldered black woman would watch with great interest but always held herself back. “I knew that I

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couldn't follow any discipline of a nonviolent demonstration," Mallory said later. "So I never bothered to go out on any of the picket lines or anything."

In the summer Of 1959, however, her Harlem neighbor called out to Mallory and she turned on the radio to hear Robert Williams tell the NAACP convention that black men needed to stand up, defend their homes and families, and treat black women with respect. Virtually no one had stood up for Mae Mallory or treated her with respect, so far as she was concerned. "So I heard it and I said, 'My God, you know, this is only right,'" she recalled. "So instead of going to work that day, I got up and went in the streets and organized some support for Robert Williams, a man that I had never met." After the NAACP upheld Williams's suspension, Mallory and her political allies "decided that, well, we'll all join his chapter." Mallory and her friends began to raise money in Harlem to support Williams. Two years later, Mallory would find herself huddled in Robert Williams's house in Monroe, clutching a machine gun and wondering whether anyone there would live through the night.

Like Mae Mallory, black activists in the late 1950s cast about for weapons in the fight against white supremacy and struggled to give real meaning to victories already formally won. The Supreme Court's *Brown* decision inspired mostly opposition; across the South, historian Adam Fairclough has written, the decision "unleashed a wave of racism that reached hysterical proportions, drowning out the voices of moderation and compromise." In the years to come, the reactionary politicians that massive resistance produced would become the unwitting accomplices of Martin Luther King Jr. and his SCLC organizers. White violence was an indispensable element in the street-theater morality plays that helped win passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the late 1950s, however, these dramatic victories certainly did not seem inevitable.

In the long run, too, the meaning of these policy achievements cannot be divorced from the freedom movement's creation of a new black sense of self, anchored in age-old traditions of struggle but generating new possibilities of individual self-respect and collective aspiration. Indigenous activism, rooted in race pride and citizenship traditions, made it possible for black men and women to win concrete victories that then fed that sense of African American pride and democratic self-assertion. When national organizations such as the NAACP and SCLC finally won federal legislation, it was left to ordinary black citizens to render those laws meaningful on the local level. As James Edward McCoy, an African American leader in Oxford, North Carolina, tartly observed of the measures regarding public accommodations, "Somebody still had to walk in there and get kicked in the ass."

In 1959 and early 1960, amid an atmosphere of political stalemate and white intransigence, Robert Williams moved both to strengthen the local movement in Monroe and to reach out to a national audience with speeches, writings, and broadcasts. His message was neither racially separatist nor rigidly ideological. Though Williams underlined the fact that "both sides in the freedom movement are bi-racial," his emerging philosophy reinvigorated many elements of the black nationalist tradition whose forceful emergence in the mid-1960s would become known as Black Power. Williams stressed black economic advancement, black pride, black culture, independent black political action, and what he referred to as armed self-reliance. He connected the Southern freedom struggle with the anticolonialism of the emerging Third World, especially African nations. In the late 1950s, when other integrationists focused on bus boycotts and voter

registration, Williams insisted on addressing persistent black poverty: “We must consider that in Montgomery, where Negroes are riding in the front of buses,” he said, “there are also Negroes who are starving.” His approach was practical, eclectic, and improvisational. There must be “flexibility in the freedom struggle,” he argued, and tactics must emerge from the urgent realities of the confrontation itself. At the core of his appeal, however, stood his calls for absolute equality under a fully enforced U.S. Constitution, backed by an uncompromising resistance to white supremacy.

At the same time, a growing controversy over violence and nonviolence arose within the black freedom movement, revealed by Williams’s censure by the national NAACP but spurred by the brutal realities that confronted the movement across the South. When Williams issued his call for self-defense, Martin Luther King Jr. and many other prominent activists seem to have realized how deeply such words resonated among their constituents. Just as Wilkins had found it necessary to do battle with “Lancelot of Monroe,” King soon took the field against Robert Williams. In a published written debate, the minister not only felt compelled to embrace self-defense himself but also to caricature Williams’s views in an effort to stem his influence. More than King’s considerable persuasive skills, the sudden emergence of the student movement after the Greensboro sit-ins on February 1, 1960, temporarily set aside the debate over violence and nonviolence and gave the battalions of nonviolent direct action their compelling historical moment.

When we look back at history, however, it is important to resist the temptation to view all events as part of an inexorable chain of causality leading inevitably to the present. Nonviolent direct action was a fortunate but certainly not an inevitable course of strategy. Nor did it have deep roots in Southern black culture. Though nonviolence was compatible with the distinctive Afro-Christianity of the black South, it was not interchangeable with it. To understand its full-blown emergence with the sit-in movement in the spring of 1960, we must understand what nonviolence was and what it was not. We must understand, too, that for most black Southerners nonviolence was a tactical opportunity rather than a philosophical imperative. Thus we must reconsider that time before the sit-ins swept the South, before the founding of SNCC, before the Freedom Riders rolled through Dixie, before Albany and Birmingham and Selma etched their mark on human history, and before the dream of Martin Luther King Jr. captured the moral imagination of the world, when the course of events still might have gone quite differently.

In the wake of his showdown with the national office of the NAACP in the summer Of 1959, Williams returned home determined to push the freedom struggle forward in Monroe and across the country. Although he had achieved notable success at using the press to his advantage in the kissing case, Williams realized that even the black press could not be relied on to support the bold strokes that were needed to break the racial stalemate. “My militant philosophy had evoked the enmity of most of the so-called black establishment,” Williams wrote later.” His potential adversaries, moreover, could snipe at him from any number of prominent podiums in American culture. Roy Wilkins, for example, not only commanded considerable influence in editorial offices around the country, but he could pillory Williams in the pages of *The Crisis*.

And so Robert Williams, like his grandfather before him, became an editor and publisher. On July 26, 1959, the Williams family launched *The Crusader Weekly Newsletter*. Like Williams’s entire career, *The Crusader* was an expression of homegrown black Southern

radicalism that emerged from local black traditions and communities of resistance but took on international political implications. “I felt like we needed a way to get out our own side, our own story,” Robert Williams said.

“What we were trying to do was actually to counteract Roy Wilkins and *The Crisis*,” Williams explained.” According to Mabel Williams, however, the decision to start *The Crusader* was not entirely a response to the NAACP controversy. A year earlier, in the summer Of 1958, she later wrote, Mabel, her husband, and Ethel Azalea Johnson first discussed founding a newspaper. “The three of us sat on the front porch discussing local happenings and world affairs,” Mabel Williams wrote. “The conversation as usual drifted to our pet subjects: how the white press slanted and distorted facts of incidents regarding Negroes, and our great need for a news media that would be able to tell the whole story.” The friends agreed that they should try to start a publication of their own, but they could not imagine how the necessary funds could be raised. “The next few days found us in and out of office machine companies, trying to find a bargain in a mimeographing machine and supplies with an installment plan,” she wrote. But it would take more than a year before they could act on their plans, and in the end it was the impending collision with the national office of the NAACP that made *The Crusader* both necessary and possible.

About two weeks after Mae Mallory heard Robert Williams on the radio defending himself against the national office of the NAACP, FBI agents reported to J. Edgar Hoover that Williams had “recently begun selling a weekly newsletter known as *The Crusader* on the streets of Monroe.” Local informants provided copies of the first four issues, and agents noted that it “consist[ed] of approximately four letter-size mimeographed pages.” It was rough-hewn but passionate journalism, and the front page boasted a hand-sketched castle logo. “None of us knew much about mimeographing at first,” Mabel wrote, “as evidenced in our first issue; nevertheless, we were proud and happy over it, and bought books on mimeographing so as to try and improve as we went along. We had only purchased enough supplies to last us a few weeks,” she continued, “and with no more money to buy supplies we went with our Newsletter to the local people, who gladly paid their dime to read it.” By the time the civil rights establishment had crushed Robert Williams at the 1959 NAACP convention, the Monroe activists had painstakingly rolled three issues of *The Crusader* off the new hand-operated mimeograph machine. Copies circulated in the corridors at the convention and throughout the streets of Harlem, FBI agents noted. “People who expect the Union County Branch of the NAACP to die are going to be disappointed,” *The Crusader* declared after Williams went down to defeat at the convention. “THE UNION COUNTY BRANCH HAS WON THE RESPECT OF THE ENTIRE WORLD.”

From the start, the banner mission of *The Crusader* remained “ADVANCING THE CAUSE OF RACE PRIDE AND FREEDOM.” Its title fittingly echoed the late Cyril V. Briggs, Harlem organizer of the left-wing African Black Brotherhood, whose newspaper of the same name had issued a “Declaration of War on the Ku Klux Klan” in 1921, as the Klan rose to heights of national power and political influence. “With the murderer clutching at our throats,” Briggs wrote in the hooded order’s heyday, “we can ill afford to choose our weapons, but must defend ourselves with what lies nearest whether that be poison, fire, or what.” Williams chose his newsletter’s title in honor of Briggs, whom he had heard about many years earlier, probably during his stay in Harlem.

Robert Williams served as editor, while Mabel Williams worked as circulation manager and wrote an occasional African American history column titled “Looking Back.” She also proved talented at sketching hilarious and often brilliant editorial cartoons. One early drawing showed an angry mouse chasing a startled cat and yelling, “I tol’ya you’d push me too far one of these days!” Azalea Johnson managed the newsletter’s finances and wrote a marvelous weekly column called “Did You Know?” From the very first issue, *The Crusader* took an uncompromising stand against white supremacy and black accommodationism. “We know the Uncle Toms will scream loud and long, but they have a vested interest in the oppression of our people,” the first issue declared. “We know there can be no progress without friction, so we won’t expect smooth sailing. We are in the field now and surely the battle cometh.” From the outset, even the advertisements slammed segregation: “Why stand on the streets to eat when you can enjoy a delicious meal in Leo’s Grill sitting down?”

*The Crusader* linked its local readers to African American history and to broader worlds of politics and culture. An article by Mabel Williams on black women in South Africa’s antiapartheid movement, for instance, connected caste and sex in that country to the lives of women in Monroe. *The Crusader* celebrated the music of Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong at the same time that it touted performances by Monroe’s own Taylor Gospel Singers and the Five Trumpets of Wingate. Mabel Williams wrote a one-page history of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad but also published slave stories she collected from Mama Stitt, her hundred-year-old next-door neighbor. One issue featured historical accounts of slave insurrections drawn from the work of Herbert Aptheker. Alongside Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, however, stood an admiring profile of Monroe’s own George H. Rushing Sr., a retired tradesman and schoolteacher whose patient, steady work as an independent artisan and voting-rights activist offered a local model to the young.

At first the newsletter depended strictly on local readers and NAACP volunteers; friends helped run off copies, fold and stack them, and deliver the papers to the surrounding countryside. Black children hawked the newsletter on street corners. For Mabel Williams and her women friends, “a usual Saturday” meant driving to dozens of places within a thirty-mile radius of Monroe, delivering *The Crusader* to supporters in Wadesboro, Peachland, Polkton, Marshville, and Wingate. They drove “for hours, canvassing from door to door, chatting with the people and walking for miles.” This was one way, in fact, that the women kept the NAACP chapter growing, starting 1959 with 92 dues-paying members but expanding to 121 official members by October. In a period when NAACP chapters across the South dwindled dramatically, the Monroe branch thrived. “People know that they can call in the middle of the night and I’ll help them,” Mabel Williams told Anne Braden in 1959. “We’ve been under attack by everybody and we’re still growing.”

What started as an NAACP branch newsletter quickly reached a small national audience. “We operated on this [purely local] basis for about a month when we decided to do some promotional mailing,” Mabel Williams recounted. “Robert had acquired many friends through his traveling and speaking,” she observed, “and after his statement that Negroes would have to ‘meet violence with violence,’ many more people with the same opinion had written to him. To these, and many more whom we believed wanted to hear the truth, went *The Crusader*. The response was good and we started receiving subscriptions.” The success of the sample mailings

surprised them, yielding first hundreds and soon a couple thousand subscribers across the country.

Looking at *The Crusader* with the historian's privilege of hindsight, it is striking how the newsletter defies the conventional narrative of the black freedom movement that begins with civil rights and ends with Black Power. In fact, virtually all of the elements that we have come to associate with the Black Power movement that gained national attention after 1965—anticolonial internationalism, black pride, economic nationalism, cultural politics, and armed self-defense—resonated in these pages as early as 1959. "Through *The Crusader*, we became the first civil rights group to advocate a policy stressing Afro-American unity with the struggling liberation forces of Latin America, Asia and Africa," Robert Williams wrote some years later. "We steadfastly maintained, in the face of vigorous opposition from white liberals and the black bourgeoisie, that our struggle for black liberation in imperialist America was part and parcel of the international struggle."

Africa seemed to echo from every page of *The Crusader*, frequently in expressions of international solidarity but often as a display of black self-affirmation, an emphasis that mirrored the Marcus Garvey movement of the 1920s. "Did you know," Azalea Johnson asked her readers, that "the Black people of Africa have race pride and want their race to remain black; that Blacks feel mighty good in their own company and are fighting to redeem their country for themselves?" In the first issue, Mabel Williams sketched a cartoon depicting a young African man dressed in a business suit and tie, returning to Africa after his education in the United States, his suitcase bedecked with university pennants. Protruding from the graduate's back pocket was a newspaper with headlines about rape and lynching in the United States. Throwing his arms around his father, who wore African garb and carried a spear, the young man declared, "My father, you don't know how happy I am to be back home away from those savages." In an accompanying article, Robert Williams added, "We like to think of Africa as the land of savages and jungles, but there are not many jungles more savage than this section of America called Dixie." While this recognition of African heritage does not fit the popular image of either the small-town South or the 1950s, black intellectual Harold Cruse observed in 1968, at the heyday of Black Power's discovery of Africa, that "the awareness of Africa was never as scarce among black people as many present-day experts make out."

Like the Garveyites who preceded him and the Black Power advocates who followed him, Robert Williams stressed economic development, but he hit segregation just as hard. *The Crusader* persistently managed to blend these issues. Mabel Williams noted that the Union County Industrial Development Commission, though supported with tax dollars from black as well as white citizens, recruited firms that respected the local color line and hired only white skilled workers. The industrial commission bragged in its literature about the extensive vocational training available to high school students in Union County, she pointed out, even though "the Negro students of Union County do not receive this type of training."

Azalea Johnson's "Did You Know?" column urged readers to spend their money with black entrepreneurs or with white businesses that employed black workers. "Since the 'good white folks' here are determined to keep us out of employment in Union County," she wrote, "we should be just as determined in where we spend our money." When local white employers proved willing to hire black working people, however, *The Crusader* was quick to acknowledge and

reward them. “The local THRIFTY FOOD STORE is the first Monroe store to lower the color bar and hire Negro youths,” Robert Williams announced in 1960. “This should be a cue for people of color to buy at THRIFTY.”

Unlike either the Garveyites or the supporters of the Black Power movement, Williams remained an integrationist and was never reluctant to acknowledge the contributions of white supporters. “The struggle for human rights is a moral struggle, actually, not just a struggle of black against white and vice versa,” he wrote. “Both sides of the human rights struggle are integrated,” Williams pointed out. He freely acknowledged that a few African Americans supported segregation. “Most of these are either ill-informed or mercenary crumb snatchers,” he argued. “In any event,” Williams insisted, “the strange case of Jim Crow justice cannot be stereotyped with a label of black and white. All Negroes are not enlightened enough to be integrationists and all whites are not stupid enough to be segregationists.”<sup>31</sup>

Williams was similarly evenhanded regarding the role of organized religion. Quotations from the Bible adorned every copy of *The Crusader*, and “Church News” was a regular feature. Both Mabel Williams’s “Looking Back” features and Azalea Johnson’s “Did You Know?” columns revealed deep and sincere Christian commitments. Even so, Robert Williams frequently mounted blistering attacks on black ministers——”brown-nosing vampires,” he once charged——”who judge the worth of Christian individuals on the basis of real estate holdings.” At the same time, when local black ministers complained to white authorities in the fall of 1959 about a man in Monroe who accosted black women on back streets and tried to make them “dance” by shooting near their feet, Williams congratulated “the ministers who have come to the defense of our women who were the victims of the mad white gun slinger.” Though Williams saved his most brutal invective for white segregationists who claimed to be Christians, he recognized the sacrifices that white Christians across the South made every day. “Today many white ministers are being driven from their pulpits because of moral stands based upon the teachings of Christ that stress brotherhood free from racial bigotry,” he wrote. “White teachers are being barred from Southern classrooms because they dare teach American principles of democracy.”

Williams was fond of unleashing the kind of red-white-and-blue rhetoric that white citizens relished at Fourth of July celebrations, but he typically deployed it for purposes that few white people dared to support——armed resistance to white terrorism, for example. “Tom Paine, Washington, Jefferson, and Patrick Henry were all honorable men,” he wrote, “who are supposed to represent the true spirit of America. These noble men advocated violence as a vehicle of liberation. They are not considered wild-eyed, bloodthirsty fanatics by a long shot.” Almost all white men and boys owned guns in Monroe; shooting clubs, firearms training, and hunting season were all part of daily life. Military service and the willingness to defend home and family were universally admired among white Southerners. The attitude of white liberals toward violence, Williams pointed out, depended a great deal on the color of the perpetrators and the victims. “One of the quickest ways for an Afro-American to lose some of his white friends is to advocate self-defense against white racist savages,” he wrote in *The Crusader* in 1960. “Our belief in this principle has cost us some of our phoney white friends, however, we have also gained some true ones.”

Not all of Williams’s white liberal friends deserted him, even in Union County. Harry G. Boyte, a liberal activist in nearby Matthews, retained his warm respect for Williams despite their

disagreements about tactics. Boyte, who later became the first white staff member of the SCLC, considered Williams a serious political threat to the success of nonviolent direct action.” But he knew from firsthand experience that his friend was not a vicious or reckless person. “I was always convinced that Robert never would have initiated any violence,” Boyte wrote, “although I felt that he did, indeed, feel an obligation to be prepared to defend his home and family as well as his neighbors.” Boyte, a native of Union County—the street that the Williams family lived on was named after his great-grandfather—acknowledged that “a real onslaught of violence” by whites there remained an ever-present possibility. Sitting in a swing on his own front porch, Williams told Boyte, “We don’t want bloodshed. But we will not avoid it if they force it upon us.”

If concerns and emphases that in the mid-1960s would be considered aspects of the Black Power movement were already reflected in *The Crusader* in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one of the main sources was Azalea Johnson. Johnson supported herself by selling insurance to black people in Monroe, a job that introduced her to many black citizens and permitted her the independence to pursue her community activism with less fear of white economic reprisals. Her regular “Did You Know?” column, which she wrote from 1959 to 1961, showcased a mind deeply enmeshed in the freedom struggle and expanding with every passing day. In the early columns, the question—“Did You Know?”—would be followed by nuggets collected from J. A. Rogers’s *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro*, a format that no doubt eased a fledgling writer’s task.” Within a few months, however, Johnson was producing increasingly confident and graceful essays whose central theme was a fiery Christian vision of racial and social justice. Azalea Johnson chose her pen name shrewdly, calling herself “Asa Lee,” which was how black people in Monroe pronounced her first name. This ruse allowed friends to know exactly who was writing but made it more difficult for enemies to find her.

Black pride, historical understanding, and sharp insights into the subtle social and psychological dynamics of race marked Johnson’s writings throughout her stint with *The Crusader*. “What is wrong with being born black?” Azalea Johnson demanded to know. “Did not God make me in His own image?” Her explanation was historical and mirrored Marcus Garvey’s earlier assertion that “the world has made being black a crime.” Like Garvey, Johnson was intent on making it a virtue. “This brainwashing scheme starts in early childhood when children first learn to talk,” she wrote. “They are taught that a black cat is a bad-luck cat; black Friday was a terrible day in America,” she continued. “Blackmail is a bad crime and white means pure, good, spotless and Caucasian people.” Azalea Johnson found a leading dictionary, she said, that defined “black” as “Negro, dirty, filthy.” But there was no need for African Americans to be “ignorantly ashamed” of their color, Johnson maintained. “The Bible really originated in Ancient Egypt,” she wrote, “where the population, according to Herodotus and Aristotle, was black.”

Christianity was both a source of personal strength and a language of political struggle for Johnson. Her weekly column always closed with a passage from Psalms or Proverbs, and her own writing often rang with the cadence of the King James Bible: “I stretch forth my hands to Thee,” she prayed in print, “they are black hands, O Lord, but surely Thou doest not hold that against me, for they are the hands that Thou didst give me.” Like her slave forebears who adopted the Christianity of their masters and molded it into a distinctive Afro-Christian theology of liberation, Johnson wielded her faith like a weapon: “I have often wondered how the white

people can read the words of our Lord and sing the sacred hymns of Zion, and not allow any of the words to penetrate deeply enough into their hearts to cause them to treat the Negro people right.”

She was almost as hard on the black church as she was on white Christians. “The [black] church proclaims that ‘all things are possible through God,’ and yet our ministers are acting like God’s powers are limited and the white man is the supreme being,” she wrote. While God did make all things possible, in her view, Johnson refused to “believe that He is coming down here in Monroe and sit-in at lunch counters or enroll our children in integrated schools, or apply for jobs in industrial plants for us.” Irrate at local clergymen for not supporting the civil rights movement, Johnson eventually declared that “most of the preachers here should be given a one-way ticket out of Monroe.”

Johnson supported integration in schools and public accommodations but had no illusions that the fall of barriers in those spheres would end the racial chasm in American life. She criticized “near-sighted” black leaders for pursuing integration, “which is fine,” she said, “BUT they should be turning hell over to secure jobs for the Afro-American worker. Seek ye first the jobs,” she argued, echoing the voice of the Scriptures and the views of Booker T. Washington, “and all these other things will be added unto you.” Johnson always kept her eyes on economics, assailing white businesses that would not employ blacks, attacking the local welfare bureaucracy for barring eligible blacks from government aid, and advising African Americans to “teach their children to patronize members of their own race or whites who are free of prejudice.”

The link between local poverty, white supremacy, and black illiteracy was clear to Johnson, who had great faith in the power of education. Children “who can’t go to school because they don’t have decent shoes and clothing” ended up illiterate, with minds “shackled to the babblings of others,” Johnson wrote. Black children used the raggedy, cast-off books discarded by white schools, attended classes in buildings that lacked basic equipment, and abandoned their education to pick cotton at harvesttime. When black children turned ten, Johnson wrote, white welfare authorities would “advise the parent to take them out of school to work, to boost the family income.” Many black workers labored in an undocumented realm of marginal employment, performing day labor for small amounts of cash. These jobs were “off the books,” and hence white employers were not required to observe minimum-wage laws. The domestic jobs available to black women paid from \$10 to \$15 for a full week’s work, and many black men had to take jobs outside their communities and commute. Under crushing financial burdens, sometimes black families kept older children out of school to babysit for younger siblings. “Committees have gone before the local all-white school board, about employing a [black] truant officer,” Johnson wrote, but white school authorities “aren’t going to pay someone to MAKE Afro-Americans go to school. They don’t care if you never learn anything.” Illiteracy among black citizens bolstered a sense of white superiority and undermined black assertiveness, she observed, and “that way [whites] can keep the black race subservient to them.”

Johnson and the other activists who clustered around Robert Williams were not the only black crusaders who challenged the boundaries of segregation in Monroe. Dr. H. H. Creft Jr. launched a campaign to open the municipally owned Monroe Country Club to all citizens. When Creft and other black professional men showed up with their golf clubs at the city’s golf course, dumbstruck city officials permitted them to play. “*The Crusader* bows to the courageous Negroes

who integrated the local golf course,” Robert Williams congratulated them. “The golf course is now added to the library [as an example] of local integration without incident.” Soon thereafter, however, the black physician showed up with out-of-town guests—a privilege white members routinely enjoyed—and found himself accosted by the course “pro” and screaming, cursing members of the all-white city recreation board. Although the black foursome ignored the white men and finished their round of golf, soon afterward Creft petitioned the city unsuccessfully to extend membership to all citizens. Only in America, Williams snorted, was it possible that “two doctors, a successful businessman, and a college student would not be considered good enough to play golf on the same course with rednecked crackers.”

While it was one thing to permit a black doctor to play on the golf course, provided he did not get “uppity” and act like a regular member, the white authorities in Monroe were not about to permit African American citizens to join the Monroe Country Club. This would have meant granting black children access to the swimming pool, of course, a goal that Williams and his NAACP branch continued to pursue in 1960 for the fourth consecutive summer. “Will Negroes be barred from their tax-supported lily-white swimming pool again this summer?” asked Azalea Johnson. “The national office of the NAACP has issued a statement that they will support all Negroes who attack segregation with peaceful demonstrations.” The strategy now, apparently, was to establish the best possible grounds for an NAACP-sponsored lawsuit. “It is now left to us Negroes to start a peaceful demonstration to the swimming pool,” Johnson continued, “but let us not stop at recreation—jobs, to me, are more important, education comes next.” It appears that Williams was actually a more enthusiastic integrationist than Azalea Johnson and many other blacks in Monroe.

On August 18, 1960, the *Monroe Enquirer* reported that “a small group of Negro boys, led by Robert F. Williams, NAACP head, was denied admission to the Monroe Country Club Pool Tuesday afternoon. Williams, who has led similar groups to the pool, told a news service that his next step would be court action.” Between August 14 and August 21, Williams and a number of black young people sought entrance on three separate occasions to the otherwise public swimming pool. Williams told newspaper reporters that he “wanted to be sure that we had a clear-cut case legally and that we were turned away on the basis of race.” Each time, local whites gathered menacingly and recreation officials refused to admit the black children. The protesters were called “niggers” and were “threatened with violence,” according to Williams, and the manager refused to let them swim. “One white woman threatened to slap one of us,” Williams told the UPI stringer from Charlotte. “I told her that if she did it, it’d be the last person she ever slapped on this earth.” Not only were whites in Monroe unwilling to obey the law, Williams complained, but they “do not even intend to adhere to the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine. The city of Monroe deserves an Oscar for stupidity in race relations.”

While Williams and the Monroe NAACP pushed forward the local freedom struggle, they reached out to connect their efforts with allies across the nation. The immediate goal was to organize Union County’s poor blacks by furnishing the economic relief that the local welfare bureaucracy denied them. “We not only struggled for integration,” Robert Williams recalled, “we were very conscious of the fact that there was a need for raising the economic level of the poor people.” Azalea Johnson reminded readers in the fall of 1960 that “many Afro-American pre-school-age children can be seen on the streets, ragged and barefooted.”

In part through *The Crusader* and in part through political networks he had built during the kissing case and during his collision with the national office of the NAACP, Williams solicited support for CARE—*The Crusaders Association for Relief and Enlightenment*. According to *The Crusader*, “40 women have organized here to distribute the C.A.R.E. packages” that soon poured in by the truckload from “people of all races from all over America to the needy of Monroe and Union County.” The Good Samaritan Club of Los Angeles sent twenty-one boxes of new and used clothing and \$300 in cash that first year. The SWP, Conrad Lynn claimed, dispatched “a caravan of trucks” with food and clothing for the women of CARE to distribute among the poor. By the end of 1960, relief packages arrived almost daily, and the women of CARE kept busy passing out clothes, shoes, and canned goods among the poor of Union County. The women not only funneled aid from all over the country but undertook local projects that both raised money and celebrated Southern black culture. “Chitterling dinners will be on, Saturday, January 21, from 11:30 AM until ?” *The Crusader* announced in early 1961. “Plates will be delivered in the city. Call AT3-2776 or contact any member of C.A.R.E.”

In Harlem, Ora Mae Mobley (Robert Williams’s first cousin), Mae Mallory, and others organized a support group for the Monroe crusaders. “Our little group decided that, well, we’ll all join his chapter,” Mallory recounted. “We called ourselves ‘the Crusader Family,’ because he put out a little pamphlet at that time called *The Crusader*,” she continued. “We decided, let’s send people *The Crusader* for Christmas instead of Christmas cards because this is a greater message, you know, than Hallmark.” Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, a central figure in both Communist and nationalist political circles in Harlem from the 1920s to the 1970s, rallied the support teams for Robert Williams. Williams dispatched bundles of *The Crusader* to his Harlem supporters, who “would seal it, distribute it, and pass out copies to spread to other people.” Robert and Mabel Williams visited New York City regularly and took folks from Monroe with them. “We developed quite a friendship at that time,” Mae Mallory remembered, “Rob Williams, his wife, Mrs. Johnson, the other members of the Crusader Family, and myself.”

In 1959 and 1960 Williams tended his Harlem ties assiduously. He was bound for New York City on February 12, 1960, he told George Weissman of the SWP, but could not stay at Weissman’s Manhattan apartment as he often had in the past. “The friends in Harlem want me to stay there while in N.Y.—then, too, I guess it’ll be good for contacts.” Williams became a regular visitor to Louis Michaux’s National Memorial African Bookstore on 7th Avenue Off 125th Street, “the House of Common Sense and the Home of Proper Propaganda,” its awning sign proclaimed. Michaux welcomed Williams to the platform the bookstore provided for the legendary Harlem street speakers of the day, which included, among others, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Carlos Cooks, and Edward “Pork Chop” Davis.

Williams found ready support among black intellectuals in Harlem, especially Julian Mayfield and a circle of friends that included John Hendrik Clarke, John Oliver Killens, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and other “nationalist oriented individuals from Harlem,” in Harold Cruse’s assessment, “not to speak of certain writers with muddled views on integrationism and nationalism. They all saw something in Monroe that did not actually exist—an immediately revolutionary situation.” Cruse, who would later publish his classic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, considered himself an authority on which developments in African American politics were truly “revolutionary” in their approach; in retrospect, his acerbic

observations seem more divisive than instructive. Regardless of whether Cruse's measure of Monroe's possibilities or Williams's magnetism was accurate, however, clearly the NAACP president from Union County had a strong appeal among black radicals of various stripes. "In the North," Cruse wrote, "the bulk of Williams's supporters in the young generation were nationalists. Neither Clarke nor Mayfield, however, belonged to this group, and even [LeRoi] Jones had not yet fully arrived [as a black nationalist]."

Harlem radicals supported Robert Williams with guns and money. Julian Mayfield and John Hendrik Clarke, a prominent black writer and historian from Harlem, came to Union County in early December 1960 with a truckload of clothes and weapons for the Monroe insurgents. "We had weapons that people had bought and sent in from the North and different places, mostly from Harlem," Williams recalled. Mayfield found that "black people there in Monroe carried themselves with a pride and a dignity that I could not find matched nowhere else." What Williams called "armed self-reliance," Mayfield observed, "was the dominant philosophy of black people in this county." Though Mayfield found Monroe itself "dreary" and even "ugly" in appearance, the town's African American citizens astounded him with their happy determination and racial pride. "This is before we had the slogan 'black is beautiful' or anything like that," Mayfield laughed, "and I just fell in love with the town and kept going back." Years later, Mayfield wrote an unpublished autobiography in which he disclosed that "a famous black writer made touch with gangsters in New Jersey and bought me two sub-machine guns which I took to Monroe." Williams may not have been the best-known black activist in the United States, but he was probably the best armed.

The most notable of Williams's contacts among the Harlem nationalists was Malcolm X, minister at the Nation of Islam's Temple Number 7. "I spoke in the Muslim temple when Malcolm X was the minister at 116th Street," Williams recounted in 1968. "Every time I used to go to New York he would invite me to speak." Williams first met Malcolm X in 1958 and was deeply impressed; according to Williams, Malcolm collected funds to support the movement in Monroe. The charismatic Muslim minister persisted in "bringing me into the temple and raising money to support me, and they were giving me money every time I would go to the temple," Williams said. Malcolm X would tell his congregation "that 'our brother is here from North Carolina, and he is the only fighting man that we got and we have to help him so he can stay down there,'" Williams recalled. In later years, Malcolm claimed that Williams "was just a couple of years ahead of his time."

The FBI took note of the alliance. In 1959 J. Edgar Hoover warned his Charlotte, North Carolina, office about Robert Williams's "recent activities in connection with the Nation of Islam at New York" and ordered that a file be opened with respect to Williams and the Nation of Islam. "I was the only leader of the NAACP who could have associated with all kinds of people—the nationalists and all," Williams recalled. "I was the only one from the NAACP who could go down in Harlem and stand on a ladder on a corner and speak there."

These new contacts among the nationalists did not necessarily diminish his ties to the white left. "Even if I stay up in Harlem," Williams reassured George Weissman, "I'm sure I'll see a great deal of you while I am there." Williams reached out across the spectrum of American dissidents during this period, with particular success among the New York intellectual left. Williams received support from James Baldwin and many other black intellectuals and artists.

Conrad Lynn organized black and white leftist writers such as Weissman, Truman Nelson, Lonnie Cross, and John Hendrik Clarke into the Coordinating Committee for Southern Relief in 1960 to help raise money for Williams. Neither a nationalist, a Marxist, nor a liberal, exactly, the NAACP leader from Monroe reached out to potential allies in all these camps while remaining committed to equal rights for all under the U.S. Constitution.

As he had in Monroe, Williams courted a broad circle of friends in New York City and made allies who subscribed to a wide variety of ideologies. Never doctrinaire, Williams considered the idea of a separate black nation unworkable and was never a nationalist “to the point that I would exclude whites or that I would discriminate against whites or that I would be prejudiced toward whites.” His socially conservative streak mirrored certain Muslim doctrines, and he agreed with them on the necessity of self-defense but regarded their religion as a hindrance. The problem with Communists in general, Williams insisted, was that Marxism did not let them put race first. Their formulaic insistence that class struggle preceded all other matters prevented Communists from understanding the range and complexity of African American historical experiences.

White liberals had the same problem for different reasons. “The traditional white liberal leadership in civil rights organizations, and even white radicals,” said Williams, “generally cannot understand what our struggle is and how we feel about it. They have always made our struggle secondary.” To Williams, “flexibility” and “armed self-reliance” were more compelling than nonviolence, in part because of the unpredictable and specific day-to-day demands of building local movements, in part because he believed that self-defense would help avert violence, but in large measure because of the primary necessity of building African American manhood and self-respect. “A man cannot have human dignity if he allows himself to be abused,” Williams wrote, “to allow his wife and children to be attacked, refusing to defend them and himself on the basis that he’s so pious, so self-righteous, that it would demean his personality if he fought back.”

Williams’s mix-and-match skepticism about the various strains of communism, nationalism, and nonviolence did not mean that blacks should separate themselves from either the nonviolent movement or their many dependable allies among white Americans, especially the white left. “I never would have been able to remain in the South as long as I did if it had not been for the support that I got from some white people in the North,” Williams acknowledged. Williams steadfastly ignored the inevitable charge that he or his leftist allies were pawns of Moscow. “We have been accused of being communists,” *The Crusader* declared on its second birthday, “this is not true. We have been accused of being Muslims. We are not. We have been accused of being black racists,” Williams continued, “this is not true. We have been accused of being agitators, to this charge WE PLEAD GUILTY!” The Monroe contingent, Williams maintained, were simply homegrown “radicals dedicated to the cause of freedom without compromise.”

The eclectic Williams took his friends where he could find them, courting the Nation of Islam but retaining his ties to the SWP and other Trotskyite groups. Beginning in November 1958, *The Militant*, the SWP’s weekly newspaper, published dozens of articles about Williams and the struggle in Monroe—twenty-five articles on the kissing case alone. If the black nationalists in Harlem overestimated Monroe’s importance, as Cruse claimed, the SWP trotted

right alongside. *The Militant's* attention to Monroe dwarfed its coverage of many important developments for the American left in 1958 and 1959, including the Cuban revolution, the anticolonial uprising in the Belgian Congo, or even the surging African American freedom movements in Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama.

Not only did Robert Williams have strong ideas of his own, but he was not afraid of other people with strong ideas. In 1959 Carey McWilliams, editor of the left-liberal weekly *The Nation*, asked Williams to consider writing for the magazine and requested a subscription to *The Crusader*. "I think you are the most dynamic rebel in America today," radical activist Slim Brundage of Chicago wrote to Williams. Despite his vow to meet violence with violence, in the spring of 1960 Williams took five African American students from Monroe to nonviolent direct action workshops sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee in Chapel Hill. In the fall Robert and Mabel accompanied Azalea Johnson and several other women from Monroe to a week-long workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

Searching for allies, Williams undertook two speaking tours through the South during the fall of 1960, carrying *The Crusader*, its staff, and his fiery message of armed self-reliance and eclectic radicalism with him. In South Carolina he addressed black audiences in Columbia, Greenville, and Charleston; in Georgia, he spoke to NAACP chapters in Savannah, Macon, and Atlanta. He delivered another speech to receptive black citizens in Jacksonville, Florida. "I was confronted with this new wonderful spirit rising throughout Dixie—this determination to break the chains of bondage and the spirit of valor of a people who just a few years ago were submissive peons," Williams wrote later. In Savannah, Williams found a militant NAACP chapter with solid financial backing from local black business and labor leaders. One black union leader, Williams recounted, stood up and told the Savannah NAACP "that I was right when I said that we must meet violence with violence." Following Williams's speech in Atlanta, "a university professor was energetic about the new militant spirit on the part of the masses and very hopeful that new militant leadership will replace the old Uncle Toms." On the whole, Williams reported, "all signs point to increased resistance" to white supremacy, but "our struggle now is disorganized and merely a network of pockets of resistance. There must be an effective media of communication before we can have efficient, concerted mass action." This was the new, enlarged mission of *The Crusader*: "to be the voice of a united people charging Jim Crow in his last stand."

Williams's growing network of supporters never remotely threatened to vault him to a position of nationally recognized leadership in the freedom movement comparable to that of Martin Luther King Jr. or Roy Wilkins. His estrangement from the national office of the NAACP and his alienation from the black church left him no institutional base among black Southerners, even though he spoke their language in a powerful idiom. Williams articulated black anger with considerable force and even humor, but the black freedom movement had more gifted orators. Nor could Williams muster the money to field teams of organizers like those that soon would be employed by the SCLC and SNCC. White liberals were hardly prepared to endorse a program that included armed resistance. Building a militant black movement "was a long, slow process, too long for the short time in which a well-heeled Gandhist movement could confuse and demoralize our people," Williams lamented later, as he watched the Black Power movement catch fire too late for him to lead it.

In the period from 1959 to 1961, however, the FBI remained uneasy about his mounting influence. “Williams has traveled extensively throughout the United States and has associated himself with numerous organizations,” J. Edgar Hoover wrote to the Charlotte office of the FBI, among them many NAACP branches, CORE, the Nation of Islam, the SWP, and his Harlem boosters. “In his travels, Williams has made speeches before numerous local chapters of these groups or met with local representatives.” The FBI’s files on Williams, the report continued, “reflect numerous instances where groups in various sections of the country have proclaimed and demonstrated their sympathies with Williams and have sent him money.”

The FBI actively sought to keep Williams unemployed, a campaign that FBI agents diligently recorded in his subject file. Local whites, too, applied economic pressure in whatever ways they could. “They were hoping to really starve me out,” Williams said, “but actually what they did was to make me a full-time professional agitator.” Money, though much too little, dribbled in from all over the country. His brothers, John and Pete, who lived in Detroit, had good jobs and helped him out regularly. “Pete’s the one who gave him money to arm himself,” John Herman Williams recalled. “Pete said, ‘If you’re going to do this, you’ve got to be prepared,’” and gave Robert Williams a substantial sum of money for guns and ammunition. There were other relatives whose support for Robert Williams helped to keep his family afloat. “We had an aunt who was worse than Robert,” John Williams said. “Aunt Cora [Bass], she was really on his side, She was really a fighter.” In Monroe, Williams could count on his close friends to provide steady and considerable financial support, and many local people gave him small sums. His tastes were not expensive, and his house belonged to the family free and clear. Neither local adversaries nor the FBI managed to sink Williams financially, no matter how much they abhorred his influence.

Not only J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI but Martin Luther King Jr.’s SCLC watched the growing influence of Robert Williams with apprehension. “The idea of striking back appeals to human nature,” Harry Boyte wrote in 1961, after he had become an aide to King. Self-defense “meets a steady response among the downtrodden, grass roots of the southern Negro population. Although most national Negro publications officially support non-violence,” Boyte continued, “even among their staff members there are many who secretly support a policy of retaliation.” For several years Williams had “succeeded in reaching these grass roots,” according to Boyte, and “exercised great influence in Union County and beyond because of his militant position and refusal to submit to intimidation.” Boyte believed that “through his newsletter, *The Crusader*,” Williams’s philosophy was “very far-reaching and poses a real threat to more peaceful and nonviolent methods of solving our problems.” It is important to remember that when Boyte wrote these words, nonviolent direct action had only barely been tried. The SCLC still drifted almost aimlessly, the NAACP still viewed King as a threat, and the mass of African Americans generally ignored the initiatives of both the NAACP and the SCLC. Shortly after *The Crusader* began to spread its confrontational appeals, the first biography of Martin Luther King Jr. appeared, a glowing portrait written by L. D. Reddick, a member of the SCLC’s board of directors. The book was titled *Crusader without Violence*. It is not clear that the title was a rejoinder to Williams, but it certainly situated the book within a lively and important public discussion that now welled up within the movement.

“The great debate in the integration movement in recent months has been the question of violence vs. nonviolence, as instruments of social change,” Anne Braden wrote in early 1960. “The nonviolent way was brought dramatically to the public consciousness by the successful Montgomery bus protest Of 1955-56. This 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.’” Editor of the *Southern Patriot*, a movement newsletter sponsored by the Southern Conference Educational Fund, Braden observed the internal politics of the movement with considerable clarity. Her husband, Carl Braden, had resigned from the CCRI after the 1959 NAACP controversy. “Frankly,” Carl Braden wrote to George Weissman, “I incline more to the King philosophy than to the Williams philosophy.”

As veteran leftists, the Bradens certainly recognized the deep class dimensions of the 1959-60 debate over nonviolence. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Dr. King remained loyal to his roots in the black upper classes and played a decisive role in the struggle of the traditional leadership to maintain control over the blossoming and sometimes unruly black freedom movement. The controversy over nonviolence demonstrated the persistence of these class divisions. During the SCLC’s long campaign in Albany, Georgia, for example, poor black youths stoned police cars while King and others struggled to control the black underclass that, though uninvited, had joined the protest. In Birmingham, King and his organizers worked the taverns and pool halls, attempting unsuccessfully to prevent lower-class blacks from pelting the police with rocks and bottles. Looking back on the 1959-60 dispute during the height of the 1963 Birmingham crisis, Anne Braden knew that black violence was “much more widespread than it was in 1960” and observed that “where retaliatory violence has erupted, it has been among those who have little to gain from the original limited goals of the nonviolent integration movement. It has been among the poor and the disinherited, the unemployed and the untrained, who care little about the right to eat in a restaurant because they hardly have enough to buy beans for their own table.” Torn between her class sympathies and her racial politics, Braden sided with King but pointed out that the debate over nonviolence in the Southern freedom struggle reflected “much misunderstanding of both positions.”

Both nonviolence and armed struggle resonated in the history of the black South. The tradition of armed self-defense, rooted in the unforgettable experiences of slave resistance and Reconstruction militancy, had survived what historian Rayford Whittingham Logan called “the nadir” of African American life at the turn of the century. After an 1892 triple lynching in Memphis, black editor Ida B. Wells “determined to sell my life as dearly as possible” and urged other black Southerners to do the same. “A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every home,” Wells wrote. “When the white man...knows he runs as great a risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he would have a greater respect for Afro-American life.” In 1901, W. A. Pledger of the *Atlanta Age* told the Afro-American Press Association that many whites “are afraid to lynch us where they know the black man is standing behind the door with a Winchester. But they arrest us and then attack us defenseless in jail and lynch us.” When white mobs raged through the street of Atlanta in 1906, W. E. B. Du Bois hastened home to defend his wife and family. “I bought a Winchester double-barreled shotgun and two dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot,” he wrote later. “If a white mob had stepped

on the campus where I lived I would without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass.” Even Robert Moron, president of Tuskegee Institute, prepared to defend Booker T. Washington’s legacy with shotguns when Tuskegee was menaced by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.” In the 1930s, black Communist Harry Haywood saw “a small arsenal” when he attended a Share Croppers’ Union meeting in Dadeville, Alabama. “There were guns of all kinds,” he recalled, “shotguns, rifles and pistols. Sharecroppers were coming to the meeting armed.” Thirty years later, when SNCC organizers came to Lowndes County, Alabama, black farmers showed up for meetings armed and ready. One black sharecropper told Stokely Carmichael, “You turn the other cheek, and you’ll get handed half what you’re sitting on.” Robert Williams grew up in this tradition, and he was not the only one.”

This sensibility was not foreign to Martin Luther King Jr. or to other members of his generation of black Southerners. In 1955 a black women’s newsletter published in Jackson, Mississippi, announced that since “no law enforcement body in ignorant Miss. will protect any Negro who had membership in the NAACP,...the Negro must protect himself.” The editors warned “the white hoodlums who are now parading around the premises” that the editors were “protected by armed guard.” Dr. T.R.M. Howard, an affluent African American physician and political activist in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, wrote to the national office of the NAACP in 1955 that “we have had all kinds of threats, so much so that we have found it necessary to see that our house is under the proper kind of protection twenty-four hours a day.” The Reverend Glenn Smiley, who visited King’s home on behalf of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1956, as the Montgomery Bus Boycott was taking hold, wrote back that “the place is an arsenal” and that men with guns guarded King’s home. In a history of American nonviolence written by Staughton Lynd, not one of the twenty-seven entries listed prior to the emergence of Dr. King reflects either Southern or African American origins.

No one, not even Dr. King, was more closely identified with the principal of pure philosophical nonviolence than SNCC leader Bob Moses. From the beginning, however, SNCC organizers knew better than to push nonviolence on reluctant black Southerners. “In terms of the organizing,” SNCC’s Charles Cobb observed, “you didn’t go to these towns and somehow enter into a discussion of violence and nonviolence.” When white terrorists attacked the home of Hartman Turnbow, a local black farmer and SNCC stalwart in Holmes County, Mississippi, Cobb recalled, Turnbow “pushed his family out the back door and grabbed the rifle off the wall and started shooting. And his explanation was simply that ‘I was not being,’ as he said, ‘non-violent, I was protecting my wife and family.’” Even Bob Moses acknowledged how deeply his pacifist convictions violated the mores of the black South. “Self-defense is so deeply engrained in rural Southern America,” Moses told SNCC volunteers in 1964, “that we as a small group can’t effect it. It’s not contradictory for a farmer to say he’s nonviolent and also to pledge to shoot a marauder’s head off.”

Unlike nonviolence, the roots of a distinctive Afro-Christianity reached as deep as the racial bondage under which that faith was forged. Gathering in the dark woods and slave cabins of the South, enslaved Africans had transfigured, the Christianity thrust upon them by their masters, creating a theology of liberation that affirmed their humanity and undermined their oppression. Gandhi’s ideas about nonviolent direct action had been circulating among the black intelligentsia since the 1930s and reached a much broader audience during A. Philip Randolph’s

MOWM during World War II. Bayard Rustin, one of the key links between the MOWM and the emerging black freedom movement, helped teach King about nonviolent direct action. What King did with Gandhian nonviolence, however, was not unlike what his slave forebears had done with Christianity. He adapted rather than adopted it, articulating nonviolence in the language of the black church and grafting it onto the most compelling cultural tradition of the black South.

Williams, in fact, gently explained his differences with King in terms of both King's theological training and his own military experiences. "This is why I never criticized Dr. King very much on his tactics, just the fact that he said violence would demean a person and reduce him to the level of the enemy," Williams observed. "Well, I didn't go along with that, but he was trained in a school of divinity so it would only be natural....My training had a military background." A prince in America's black elite and a "Morehouse man" bearing a doctorate of religion from Boston University, King carried the banner for nonviolence with a passionate spiritual grace that few could match. In late 1959 and early 1960, King came after Robert Williams.

Before he took on King, the man from Monroe confronted other crusaders for nonviolence. In a series of public debates in New York City on October 1, 1959, Robert Williams and Conrad Lynn faced Bayard Rustin, David Dellinger, and A. J. Muste. Muste was the elder statesman of American pacifism. Earlier that year he had been arrested at age seventy-four after he climbed a fence to trespass at a nuclear missile site in Omaha, Nebraska. Rustin had organized the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation in which black and white activists—including Conrad Lynn, ironically—boarded southbound buses to test the Supreme Court's ruling that segregation laws were unconstitutional in interstate commerce. Rustin narrowly escaped a Chapel Hill lynch mob and served several weeks on a North Carolina chain gang. An adviser to Dr. King during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rustin helped to organize the SCLC and remained one of King's closest counselors. Dellinger, a leading pacifist editor and activist, was a Yale graduate who had studied at Oxford, Yale Divinity School, and Union Theological Seminary.

"Nonviolence is a powerful weapon in the struggle against social evil," Williams conceded to the pacifists. "It represents the ultimate step in revolution against intolerable oppression, a type of struggle wherein man may make war without debasing himself." The problem as Williams presented it, however, was that nonviolence depended on the conscience of the adversary; rattlesnakes, he observed, were immune to such appeals, as were many Southern white supremacists. "When Hitler's tyranny threatened the world," Williams argued, "we did not hear very much about how immoral it is to meet violence with violence," Williams argued. "Even the Christian church was willing to 'Praise the Lord and Pass The Ammunition,' and by doing so we all stayed free." Williams noted, too, that Gandhi's old ally, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India, had recently threatened violent resistance to Chinese aggression. "It does one's heart a little good," Williams quoted Nehru as having said, "to speak in a proud, defiant language." George Weissman wrote to Carl Braden in Louisville that Williams had drawn "a large audience to his debate with the pacifists at Community Church here and handled himself very well."

In a widely reprinted debate first published in *Liberation* magazine in September and October 1959, Williams advocated armed self-reliance while Martin Luther King Jr. explained the social organization of nonviolence. Williams recounted his optimistic return to civilian life in

Monroe after the Supreme Court's decision in 1954. "The hope I had for Negro liberation faltered," he said, when "acts of violence and words and deeds of hate and spite rose from every quarter." Among the well-armed white population, Williams asserted, "there is open defiance to law and order throughout the South today." Where law had broken down, only self-defense could deter the attacks of white terrorists who commit violence in the service of their own sincere beliefs and time-honored prerogatives. "Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized," Williams stated, "but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist."

Avoiding philosophical abstractions, the Monroe NAACP leader recapitulated the now-familiar tales of white supremacist outrages in Union County over just the last few years: Ku Klux Klan rallies attended by thousands, Klan raids led by police cars, gun battles in black neighborhoods, brisk acquittals of white men whose attacks on African American women they scarcely bothered to deny, and white terrorism that abated only when black men with guns protected their community from the nightriders. "I daresay that if Mack Parker had had an automatic shotgun at his disposal," Williams wrote of the black man lynched in Mississippi that spring, "he could have served as a great deterrent against lynching." Williams expressed "great respect for the pacifist" but declared that he himself was not a pacifist and that he could "safely say that most of my people are not." Rather than submit to violence, "Negroes must be willing to defend themselves, their women, their children and their homes," he asserted. "Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone."

King's lofty essay, "The Social Organization of Nonviolence," acknowledged that the civil rights movement had "reached a stage of profound crisis." The Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the triumph in Montgomery had yielded only small tokens, elaborate evasions, and widespread terrorism. African Americans were frustrated, he said, and their "current calls for violence" reflected "a confused, anger-motivated drive to strike back violently, to inflict damage," and were "punitive, not radical or constructive."

"It is unfortunately true that however the Negro acts, his struggle will not be free of violence initiated by his enemies," King acknowledged. Only three paths presented themselves. One could practice "pure nonviolence," King said, but this method "could not readily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage." A position that encompassed legitimate self-defense was the only practical stance. "Violence exercised merely in self-defense," King conceded, "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." Clearly, King the politician located his constituents in this position. "When the Negro uses force in self-defense," King continued, "he does not forfeit support—he may even win it, by the courage and self-respect it reflects." The third and entirely unacceptable position, King continued, "is the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously." Here, then, was the pale beyond which King sought to cast his adversary. "Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no collective and practical alternative," King insisted. "He argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms. There are other meaningful alternatives." In any case, King asserted, "there is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men."

In fact, King explained, “in Mr. Williams’s 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 hall and corridors, and refused to leave until their colleague was released.” Neither side, in King’s account, “attempted to unleash violence.” Fortunately for King, the debate was not face to face. Williams had been present at the jailhouse and could have affirmed, as *Jet* reported in its account of Dr. Perry’s abortion arrest, that the black crowd was armed with guns and knives and threatened to tear down the building. Williams might well have noted, too, as King did not, that because whites controlled the legal machinery, Perry was sitting in a North Carolina prison as King celebrated the purportedly nonviolent achievement of his alleged freedom.

There were several other ways in which the King-Williams debate was stacked against Williams. *Liberation* was a pacifist publication edited by David Dellinger. Bayard Rustin and A. J. Muste were both closely affiliated with *Liberation*. In fact, it is possible that Rustin actually drafted King’s essay; he had written at least one other piece for *Liberation* under King’s byline. Dellinger was an earnest admirer of Dr. King and a committed pacifist; his editorial format required Williams to write first and then permitted King to respond at length and at leisure.

These advantages, coupled with the minister’s formidable eloquence, enabled King essentially to invent his own Robert Williams, a black Geronimo plotting bloody raids against the white man. He then responded to that Robert Williams rather than to the calm but defiant man who had spoken. Williams, lacking the polish of theological training and combative in his tone, left himself vulnerable to such distortions. It is crucial to note, however, that the philosophical position from which King centered his argument—preferring nonviolence but endorsing the principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed—was in fact the same position that Williams had taken. Under any circumstances, Williams was no match for King in a debate. But the fact that King felt that he had to address Williams’s challenge, and then sought to occupy the same ground on which Williams took his stand, was telling. Julian Bond, then a student activist in Atlanta, recalled reading the debate and “believing that Williams had gotten the better of it” and “that Williams was not the figure King and others depicted.” (In 1960 Bond helped found SNCC, and in 1998 he was named head of the NAACP.)

Anne Braden, herself committed to nonviolence and to Dr. King’s leadership, reprinted the debate in the January 1960 issue of the *Southern Patriot*, noting the confusion among freedom movement activists with respect to both King and Williams. No one disputes the right to defend home and family, she said. “What the nonviolent movement says is that the weapons of social change should be nonviolent.” But neither is it fair, she pointed out, to call the issue “a question of aggressive violence by Negroes to attack white people. Williams has never advocated this. What he believes is that an armed Negro community becomes a deterrent to violent white attacks and thus may lessen violence ultimately.” Williams merely articulated “what many people feel,” Braden observed, “and what many more people will express unless change comes rapidly.”

Actions speak louder than words, and it was African American college students in North Carolina whose boldness pushed aside these arguments among their elders. On February 1, 1960, 4 students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro walked into Woolworth’s Department Store at about 4:30 in the afternoon, sat down at a segregated lunch

counter, and asked to be served. Denied service, the young black men kept their seats until the counter closed. The following day, 23 classmates joined them at the counter. The next day, there were 66; the day after, 100; and on the fifth day, 1,000 students marched through downtown Greensboro to demand equality. Within two months, the sit-ins had spread to fifty-four towns and cities across nine states of the old Confederacy. In April, Ella Baker convened a conference at Shaw University in Raleigh at which she helped give birth to SNCC. SNCC rang in an aggressive, student-led phase of the freedom movement that shattered the uneasy racial stalemate that had hovered over the South since 1954. As Williams had predicted back in 1951, black college students with little to lose and a world to gain had become the most militant force in the freedom movement.

On March 1, one month after the first sit-ins in Greensboro, Williams led about a dozen black youths into Gamble's Drug Store in downtown Monroe. By this time, the sit-in movement had spread to dozens of cities across the South. "We became the thirteenth town in North Carolina to start sit-in demonstrations," Williams stated. Taking seats on the lunch counter stools, they asked to be served. Like hundreds of his colleagues across the South, the manager decided to close the lunch counter.

After ten minutes, the group got up and walked to nearby Jones Drug Store, where they again sat down and asked to order food and drink. "They had tried us once before," the manager, W. R. May, recalled, "but I had locked the doors before they got in." May told Williams that he did not serve black people sitting down and asked the group to leave. "They wouldn't leave so I got my coat and left the store to get a warrant," the manager stated." One of the owners, Doland Jones, negotiated with Williams while May was gone and apparently persuaded the protesters to leave the building. Williams returned moments later to buy a pack of cigarettes, according to Jones, and the police arrested him on the sidewalk as he departed.

The arrest of Robert Williams did not stop the sit-in campaign in Monroe. Released from jail, Williams rejoined his young followers, and they renewed their nonviolent protests against lunch counter segregation, developing their own unique tactics. Moving unpredictably from one establishment to another in downtown Monroe, the black protesters kept white merchants off balance. With four drugstores in downtown Monroe and other lunch counters, it was hard to stop them. "Clusters of white spectators gathered on sidewalks watching the Negroes move from one store to another," the *Charlotte Observer* reported. "The Negroes remained in each store only a short time, usually until the management closed the counters."

Leading a passive resistance campaign, Williams still managed to sound like a warrior. "We're using hit-and-run tactics," he told reporters. "They never know when we're coming or when we're going to leave. That way we hope to wear them down." At Easter, the student protesters asked townspeople to refrain from holiday shopping in downtown Monroe to support the sit-ins. "Did you know," Azalea Johnson wrote in a column after Williams's trial, "that after the manager of Jones Drug Store here made the statement in court, 'We don't serve niggers,' Afro-Americans who respect themselves don't go in Jones Drug Store?" *The Crusader* called for boycotts against businesses hostile to blacks and took credit for the fact that Jones Drug Store went out of business the following year. Secrest Drug Store, still in downtown Monroe more than thirty years later, simply removed all the stools from its lunch counter and served everyone

standing. “It was more for business reasons,” A. M. Secrest recalled, “than for any great moral thing.”

When Williams’s trespassing charges came before the court on May 10, an all-white jury sentenced him to thirty days at hard labor or a \$50 fine and a two-year suspended sentence with a “good behavior” stipulation that would have blocked his participation in civil rights demonstrations. “I had a ‘nigra’s’ chance,” Williams wrote the following week, “and in a southern kangaroo court a ‘nigra’s’ got about as much chance as a pegleg man in a rump-kicking contest.” His attorneys immediately filed for appeal, but Williams was briefly jailed anyway. “Even though two men were waiting to go my bond,” Williams joked, “the state had to take the dangerous stool sitter bandit into custody while the lawyers prepared the necessary legal papers.” Forced into a double line of prisoners and marched under guard down Main Street in handcuffs, Williams counted himself “honored,” he said. “I had never felt prouder in my life.”

The subsequent series of legal appeals, which went all the way to the North Carolina Supreme Court, lasted for months, during which the sit-in movement in Monroe never let up. The main difference between the sit-ins in Monroe and those that swept the South during the same period, according to Williams, was “not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins.” Sit-in participants elsewhere were stabbed, beaten, and fumigated; they had cigarettes ground out on their skin and ketchup and sugar poured on their heads. “We had less violence because we’d shown the willingness and readiness to fight and defend ourselves,” Williams said, perhaps overlooking differences between North Carolina and the Deep South. “We appeared as people with strength, and it was to the mutual advantage of all parties concerned that peaceful relations be maintained.” The sit-ins continued all spring and into the summer and flared from time to time for the next year, sometimes organized by young people who had little connection to Williams and sometimes led by the stool-sitter bandit himself. “They were always doing something,” the manager of Jones Drug Store recalled. “It’s a wonder somebody didn’t kill him.”