Bond, Julian and Andrew Lewis (eds) Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table (New York: American Heritage) 1995

UNIT 10-11

IS VIOLENCE NECESSARY TO COMBAT INJUSTICE?

Robert F. Williams and Martin Luther King, Jr.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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

FOR THE POSITIVE

WILLIAMS SAYS "WE MUST FIGHT BACK"

Robert F. Williams

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

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

I returned to civilian life in 1955 and the hope I had for Negro liberation faltered. . . . Acts of violence and words and deeds of hate and spite rose from every

Southern Patriot, January 1960.

quarter. . . . There is open defiance to law and order throughout the South today. . . . I have become disillusioned . . .

What Will Deter?

Laws serve to deter crime and protect the weak from the strong in civilized society. Where there is a breakdown of law. . . . where is the force of deterrent? . . . Only highly civilized and moral individuals respect the rights of others. . . . The Southern brute respects only force. Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist. . . .

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

In 1957 the Klan moved into Monroe and Union County (N.C.). . . . Their numbers steadily increased to the point wherein the local press reported 7500 at one rally. They became so brazen that mile-long motorcades started invading the Negro community.

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

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

A group of nonviolent ministers met the City Board of Aldermen and pleaded with them to restrict the Klan from the colored community. The city fathers advised these cringing, begging Negro ministers that the Klan had constitutional rights to meet and organize in the same way as the NAACP.

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

"Sick Inside"

On May 5, 1959, while president of the Union County branch of the NAACP, I made a statement to the United Press International after a trial wherein a white man was supposed to have been tried for kicking a Negro maid down a flight of stairs in a local white hotel. In spite of the fact that there was an eyewitness, the defendant failed to show up for his trial, and was completely exonerated.

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

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

TAUGHT TO FIGHT

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

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

FOR THE NEGATIVE

KING SEES ALTERNATIVE IN MASS ACTIONS

Martin Luther King, Jr.

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

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

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

"NO COMPROMISE"

The Negro was the tragic victim of another compromise in 1878, when his full equality was bargained away by the Federal Government. . . . There is reason to believe that the Negro of 1959 will not accept supinely any such compromises in the contemporary struggle for integration. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

VIOLENCE CONFUSES

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

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

Does this leave the Negro without a positive method to advance? Mr. Robert Williams would have us believe that there is no effective and practical alternative. He argues that we must be cringing and submissive or take up arms. To so place the issue distorts the whole problem. There are other meaningful alternatives.

The Negro people can organize socially to initiate many forms of struggle which can drive their enemies back without resort to futile and harmful violence. . . . Many creative forms have been developed—the mass boycott, sitdown protests and strikes, sit-ins,—refusal to pay fines and bail for unjust arrests—mass marches—mass meetings—prayer pilgrimages, etc.

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

However, it is necessary that the mass-action method be persistent and unyielding. Gandhi said the Indian people must "never let them rest," referring to the British. He urged them to keep protesting daily and weekly, in a variety of ways. This method inspired and organized the Indian masses and disorganized and demobilized the British. It educates its myriad participants, socially and morally.

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

Boldness Needed

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

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

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