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## Correcting the Record (A Bit) on Violence in the Civil Rights Movement

By **David J. Garrow**, author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement

By Lance Hill University of North Carolina Press, 363 pages, \$34.95

The word "nonviolent" is featured in so many thumbnail descriptions of the Southern civil rights movement in the 1960s that the phrase "civil rights movement" can sound incomplete without it: "nonviolent civil rights movement."

Lance Hill wants to upend that convention. His thorough and original history of the Deacons for Defense and Justice--a gun-toting, African-American, self-defense organization that flourished in eastern Louisiana and southwestern Mississippi in the mid-'60s--is more than an impressive account of a now-obscure group that left no written records. "The Deacons for Defense" is also a forceful, though sometimes overstated, challenge to the shelfful of civil rights histories that tell a story in which nonviolence was in-deed an essential and defining quality of the Southern movement's success.

Hill, who is executive director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University in New Orleans, highlights and celebrates the Deacons' use of defensive violence--"collective acts intended to protect the black community from police or white terrorist violence"--and their exclusively working-class membership.

The first Deacons chapter grew out of a black auxiliary police squad in the small town of Jonesboro, La., in 1964. In places like Jonesboro, passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 brought about little of the desegregation of public facilities the law mandated. Instead, Ku Klux Klan violence against civil rights activists surged all across the Deep South, and when whites attacked Jonesboro's black community without police intervention, the black auxiliaries, along with other local men, transformed themselves into an independent and well-armed self-defense squad. Recollections of why the men chose the name "Deacons" differ. One founding member said it was because the self-defense group was similar to deacons, "who took care of business in the church."

The "activist core" of the Jonesboro Deacons, Hill says, "comprised approximately 20 members who paid dues and regularly attended meetings and participated in patrols." Three months after founding the first chapter, they branched out to establish a second in Bogalusa, a racially violent town in eastern Louisiana. That same day, a prominent story in The New York Times first publicized the Deacons' existence and political significance. That national recognition, Hill says, "transformed self-defense from the movement's 'family secret' into a principled challenge to nonviolence." The spotlight that story cast upon black Southerners' willingness to arm themselves also coincided with another event that cast a pall of gunplay over the movement: Later that day Malcolm X, the most prominent black advocate of self-defense, was shot to death in New York City.

Bogalusa, Hill says, became "the largest and most famous" of the twenty-odd Deacons chapters that sprang up in 1965-66. The word "notorious" could also describe the chapter, for while the Jonesboro men were "primarily law-abiding," Hill says, the Bogalusa group was dominated by Charles Sims, "a barroom brawler" with a long arrest record. Hill describes Sims as "an inveterate hustler who inhabited the twilight between casual labor and banditry" but adds that Sims was "an articulate and disarming spokesperson" for the Deacons, notwithstanding his lack of formal education.

Just as in Jonesboro, the Bogalusa group was strikingly small. "Approximately fifteen men comprised the chapter's core," Hill reports, but "leadership was concentrated in the hands of one man: Charlie Sims." Three months after the group's founding, a black deputy sheriff, O'Neal Moore, was assassinated by a known Klansman, and Bogalusa teetered toward open warfare. A month later, white thugs attacked a black protest march that armed

Deacons were guarding. When one Deacon was grabbed by the mob, another, Henry Austin, drew his pistol "and fired three shots into the chest of one of the white attackers, Alton Crowe."

Hill says the shooting "marked an unheralded but significant turning point in the black freedom movement. It was the first time in the modern civil rights struggle that a black organization had used lethal force to protect civil rights marchers." Austin's barrage meant "the Deacons were no longer simply exercising the right to defend hearth and home," and in Bogalusa, "most of the black community regarded Austin as a hero."

Hill believes the Deacons represented a "revolt against nonviolence" and "a symbol of a sea change in black consciousness" that became more visible with the "Black Power" slogan in mid-1966. Although the Deacons' "total national membership was approximately 300," Hill says, "Size was unimportant for a symbolic organization like the Deacons." What was most important, he says, was "the sweeping psychological transformation that the Deacons had produced" among black residents in places like Bogalusa.

Hill also contends that in many of the small towns where Deacons chapters led local movements, they "exacted sweeping concessions" from local whites "without benefit of federal intervention." Natchez, Miss., is one example Hill emphasizes, but his endorsement of the Deacons' approach--"a strategy that eschewed appeals to northern conscience and instead forced local concessions through a combination of legal protest, economic coercion" (boycotts of white-owned businesses) and, "most importantly," armed self-defense--downplays two major problems.

First, by 1966 the new federal civil and voting rights laws had begun to wipe away legal segregation and discrimination everywhere.

Second, the Deacons' dividing line between self-defense and out-right thuggery was murky and often ignored. "[T]he Natchez Deacons frequently used violence to discipline critics and collaborators within their own ranks," Hill flatly reports. "It was a pattern of anti-middle-class violence that was a signature of the Deacons throughout the region."

Hill may not intend to romanticize this conduct, but he glosses over how in some instances the Deacons' behavior duplicated that of their original enemy, the Ku Klux Klan. He reports how in Bogalusa in early 1966, unidentified Deacons "fired several shots at the home of the Reverend Herrod Morris, a longtime black critic." Similarly, in Port Gibson, Miss., where the Deacons chapter "frequently used strong-arm tactics" against blacks who patronized white stores, Deacons "fired several shots into [the] house" of one boycott breaker, Ed Gilmore. Hill says that according to the head of the Port Gibson Deacons, the chapter "dissolved in 1968 in response to complaints that it was intimidating blacks in the community." The others all faded away too.

Full and honest reporting is commendable, but Hill's conclusions minimize the loathsome aspects of the Deacons' ferocity and exaggerate the positive effects. His assertion that the Deacons "neutralized the Klan in the South" is a wild overstatement, as is his contention that most Southern black activists were coerced into embracing nonviolence: "[I]n good part, northern liberals, pacifists, and leftists managed to impose nonviolence on the movement because they possessed superior organizational and funding resources." Hogwash. Statements like those will lead some readers to think Hill has shoot-from-the-hip problems of his own.

Hill may be fundamentally wrong to claim that "[f]orce made the difference between success and failure" in towns like Natchez and Bogalusa, but his more nuanced argument that "segregation yielded to force as much as it did to moral suasion" is an important corrective to popular simplifications. "The Deacons for Defense" is thus much like the Deacons themselves: far from perfect but still highly valuable.

PHOTO: (Book cover.)

PHOTO: Charles Sims, leader of the Bogalusa, La., chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, in 1966. Tribune file photo