

aren't familiar with the literature on distributive justice, will likely get a good deal more out of it. I fear many people new to thinking about politics from a philosophical perspective will naturally drift toward precisely the confused theory Jasay eviscerates. His clarity and directness will serve that audience well, and he has quite a lot to teach them.

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This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible

Charles E. Cobb Jr.

New York: Basic Books, 2014, 293 pp.

Charles Cobb's excellent book *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* teaches two important lessons that will make some people uncomfortable. The first lesson is summarized in the subtitle: the exercise of Second Amendment rights was a sine qua non for the survival and success of the Civil Rights Movement in the South during the 1960s. The second uncomfortable lesson, for some people, is that community organizing is vital to democracy. *This Nonviolent Stuff* is not the first book about armed self-defense in the Civil Rights Movement, but it does make a vital and unique contribution.

Nicholas Johnson's *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (Prometheus, 2014) surveyed the long history of self-defense by black people in America—from Frederick Douglass advising how to resist slave-catchers, to Otis McDonald winning his Supreme Court case in 2010. This survey includes a long chapter about the Civil Rights Movement, and it is the best introduction to the subject. As a law professor, Johnson pays careful attention to the national leaders of the civil rights organizations and their formally expressed views.

The other major, prior book on the subject is *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* by Lance Hill (University of North Carolina Press, 2004). This overlooked gem tells the history of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed community defense organization founded in southeastern Louisiana in 1965. Especially in the Louisiana panhandle and in southwestern

Mississippi, the Deacons were immensely successful at suppressing Klan violence and promoting the repeal of segregation. The Johnson and Cobb books both include careful analysis of the Deacons, but of course not in the detail provided by Hill.

What makes *This Nonviolent Stuff* so powerful is that it provides the perspective of the community organizers themselves and explains why they overcame their aversion to forceful self-defense. In contrast to conventional histories of the Civil Rights Movement, which concentrate on famous leaders, *This Nonviolent Stuff* is history from the ground up.

Cobb was a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, working in the rural Deep South. In conformity with SNCC's name, Cobb began his organizing work strongly committed to nonviolence. Even more deeply invested in nonviolence was another community organizing group, the Congress of Racial Equality. CORE had roots in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the world's leading ecumenical organization of Christian pacifists. So how did these people end up with guns?

To begin with, they went to places which already had lots of guns. The rural South has a very strong gun culture. "Gun control," such as restrictive licensing laws, originated in ex-Confederate states when white supremacists attempted to prevent freedmen from defending themselves. Nevertheless, by the middle of the 20th century, black farmers and residents of small towns had a healthy supply of firearms. Many black men had become proficient shooters during their service in World War II or Korea. They had an established tradition of self-defense—of using their arms to deter and drive off whites who might come to their homes and threaten their families.

The civil rights community organizers were housed with local families. And the families made it quite clear to their long-term guests that if Klansmen showed up to attack the organizers, there was going to be an armed response. When the organizers traveled, especially at night, there was grave risk of homicide by the Klan, other terrorist groups, or unorganized thugs. So the community tended to insist that the organizers be provided with armed escort. The organizers had mixed feelings about this, but they believed that their job was to help the community empower itself and not to try to impose their values on the community.

Besides that, there was the practical fact of survival. Getting roughed up by the police at a lunch-counter sit-in while the national

press was filming and photographing was an outstanding tactic to win Northern sympathy. But there was nothing to be gained in allowing oneself to be murdered late one night on a rural road, knowing that the local law enforcement agency sympathized with (or was run by) the Klan and would do nothing to apprehend the perpetrators.

Moreover, the organizers could see what guns meant to the community itself. As Cobb explains, community organizing is not about telling people what to do. Empowering the community means helping individuals take whatever steps are personally appropriate for them. Cobb recounts the story of an elderly black man, Joe McDonald, whose shotgun was confiscated on a pretext because he was letting civil rights workers live in his home in the small town of Ruleville, Mississippi. The civil rights workers told him he had a right to a gun, and they showed him a history textbook that contained the text of the Second Amendment.

So McDonald drove to the city hall and told the mayor to give him his shotgun back. When the mayor refused, McDonald showed him the textbook page with the Second Amendment and insisted that he had a constitutional right to his gun. The mayor complied, and when McDonald arrived home, he stepped out of his pickup truck “triumphantly raising the shotgun above his head.”

Drawing up the courage to stand one’s ground did not always have to take place at a voter registration office or a segregated lunch counter.

For a while, when the SNCC and CORE community organizers wrote field reports to send back to their national headquarters, information about armed defense tended to be discretely omitted. But over time, the community changed the organizers, and the organizers changed the organizations. Today, Roy Innis, who has been national chairman of CORE since 1968, also serves as an elected director of the National Rifle Association.

The image of armed black people was certainly not something that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was promoting. But as Cobb details, it was a part of the Civil Rights Movement that he was willing to discretely accept. On June 6, 1966, James Meredith (the first black student at the University of Mississippi) was shot and wounded while conducting a march to encourage voter registration.

Leading civil rights organizations banded together to continue the “Meredith March against Fear,” from Memphis, Tennessee, to

Jackson, Mississippi. With King's consent, armed security was provided the entire way by the Deacons for Defense. Four thousand new voters registered; fifteen thousand marched into Jackson along with Dr. King on June 26, the largest civil rights march in the state's history.

Presumably the most common guns on the march were those that the Deacons preferred as standard equipment, namely, .30 caliber M1 carbines (whose standard magazines are 15 or 30 rounds) plus .38 Special revolvers. The M1 was a classic citizen-soldier rifle from World War II, and the U.S. government's Civilian Marksmanship Program had put hundreds of thousands into civilian hands at steeply discounted prices via NRA-affiliated gun clubs. Virtually alone among major U.S. sporting organizations, the NRA had never adopted a whites-only standard for membership.

Deterrence worked, and, although there were confrontations with aggressive Mississippi police during the Meredith March, nobody on either side fired a shot.

The many thousands of empowering steps on that march provided a foundation for even more voting and organizing in the coming years. Political power did grow out of the barrel of a gun—not in the Maoist sense of using guns to suppress the political expression of other people—but in the deeply American sense of using firearms to defend the exercise of other fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and voting.

In those days in the South, it was the Second Amendment that was “the guardian of all other rights.”

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