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Conceptions of Revolution and Violence, 1961–1967

By the summer of 1961, Monroe, North Carolina, had become a pressure cooker under intense heat. Year by year, conflict between insistent advocates of racial integration and indignant white supremacists had compounded the pressure. Incidents of white-on-black violence occurred almost daily, and Robert Williams, a local African American organizer with an international reputation for militancy, was repeatedly subjected to death threats. The threats were not idle: several attempts had, in fact, been made on his life. As if in retaliation, a string of arsons damaged conservative businesses. When idealistic young "Freedom Riders" came to town and decried racial inequality in front of the courthouse, the city fathers ordered that they be sprayed with insecticide.

The explosion occurred on Sunday August 27, when white rage coalesced into mob violence against the biracial courthouse picket. The demonstrators were beaten bloody, then arrested for "inciting a riot." Such treatment was chillingly common for the Freedom Riders, who had been assaulted in numerous locales in the course of efforts earlier in the summer to desegregate Greyhound bus stations. Civil rights activists in Monroe had declined to join their picket line for just this reason. "We had an agreement with the students that they would do the picketing in a nonviolent way around the courthouse," Mabel Williams, the wife of Robert, later disclosed, "but when they came back to our community, that we would always protect our community with guns."[1] Rather than aspiring to transform their oppressors spiritually, as did the out-of-towner Gandhian Christians, those in the Monroe civil rights contingent contented themselves with a more worldly aim: teaching white supremacists to keep their hands to themselves.

They had had some success doing so. In 1957 the group put an end to the terri-

fying "nightriding" of the Ku Klux Klan chapter in Union County, in which Monroe was located, by repelling one of its nocturnal motorcades with a barrage of gunfire. Most of the men in the close-knit civil rights circle were veterans who not only knew how to use weapons but felt entitled to do so in defense of their rights as citizens. Female members were no less assertive: they, too, participated in the organization's National Rifle Association–sponsored Rifle Club.

On the afternoon of August 27, 1961, Monroe's black civil rights activists were as prepared as they could be for the impending assault on their community. In response to reports of attacks on isolated African Americans in other parts of town and of the city's jailers torturing detainees, the organizers gathered at the Williamses' home. They erected barricades to seal off the street in front of the house and took up sentry positions with rifles in trees. Williams unpacked two machine guns that had been bought with funds raised by northern colleagues, including Malcolm X, the fiery minister of the Nation of Islam's No. 7 mosque in Harlem. He loaded them and placed them on his front porch under the care of two deputies, then distributed sticks of dynamite with prepared fuses to other reliable cohorts. State troopers set up a perimeter around the neighborhood, not to disarm Williams and company, but to prevent their would-be assailants from getting themselves killed.

As day receded into night, National Guardsmen and vigilantes poured into town. Monroe's chief of police, A. A. Mauney, phoned Williams and declared: "Robert, you have caused a lot of race trouble in this town, now state troopers are coming and in 30 minutes you'll be hanging in the Court House Square."[2] At that point, Williams recalled, "I realized that this thing was not just a local matter, that the U.S. government had entered into the picture. And they were just as determined to destroy me as the Ku Klux Klan."[3] It was clear to Williams that his continued presence in the city would precipitate a bloodbath. "I thought [staying] would get a lot of people killed and I didn't want that to happen," he remembered. His own prospects were dim: even if he survived a confrontation, he would face a "legal lynching" in the courts. So he chose flight. Within two months, he, his wife, and their children surfaced in Cuba under the protection of Williams's personal friend President Fidel Castro.[4]

In principle, the right to armed self-defense was universally acknowledged in the civil rights movement. In a debate with Williams, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. conceded that "all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal. . . . [v]iolence exercised in self-defense." He continued: "The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi."[5]

Roy Wilkins, the staid president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), acknowledged in his autobiography, "Like

Williams, I believe in self-defense."[6] Yet, in 1959, Wilkins orchestrated Williams's ouster from the NAACP after Williams had declared to the press that, in the absence of credible legal protection, blacks must meet white "violence with violence." Before he was run out of the country by law enforcement, Williams was run out of the mainstream civil rights movement by conservatives.

Williams had felt confident taking such a strong public stand because he knew he spoke for the rank-and-file of the Union County chapter of the NAACP, of which he was president. Within the national organization the chapter had a unique constituency—the young and the poor—because Williams's recruitment drive had been atypical: "We got some of the 'worst element' we could find," he explained provocatively. One biographer writes that "Williams painstakingly recruited from the pool halls, beauty parlors, street corners, and tenant farms," a far cry from the well-heeled or socially climbing base of the country's most culturally conservative and tactically restrained civil rights organization.

The NAACP and other prominent civil rights organizations would pay a high price for discouraging the efforts of lowly blacks to organize themselves. Without leaders who spoke directly to poor blacks in their own language, little recourse remained to the urban poor but inchoate outbursts. Once these fires started, they threatened to burn every obstruction in their path.

SEEDS OF REVOLUTION

Throughout the 1960s, Robert Williams would associate with the world's most successful revolutionary leaders, those of Cuba, Vietnam, and China. His insistence on armed self-defense and commitment to internationalism made him one of the most influential forefathers of the late 1960s Black Power movement. Yet despite some violent manifestos, he was never a revolutionary: he always sought to fulfill the promise of America rather than to destroy the country and create something else. "I had always considered myself an American patriot," he later explained. To him, the Constitution was a document of infinite promise: the problem was the failure of racist, ignorant, and willfully oppressive whites to abide by it.[7] In his frustrated patriotism, he resembled many white militants. As one remarked in the late 1960s: "I became a radical when I realized I wasn't going to become president."[8]

The concept of revolution percolated into the civil rights and student movements of the early 1960s not by way of practitioners of violence but via pacifists. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the most innovative and courageous civil rights group of the early 1960s, began using the word "revolutionary" to describe themselves as early as 1961. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the primary voice of the youthful upsurge on white campuses, picked up the word from them. The Quaker pacifists associated with *Liberation* magazine reinforced the idea that revolution was the proper goal of activism.[9]

In his contemplative chronicle of the militant young civil rights activists of the SNCC, Clayborne Carson writes of this early period: "For them the word [revolutionary] did not imply a desire to overthrow the federal government, but rather indicated a need to challenge both the segregationist social order and the more moderate civil rights organizations." Likewise, early SDS members understood the "revolution" of their southern counterparts as a challenge not only to southern apartheid but to poverty itself and the morally bankrupt policies that allowed it to fester.[10]

Inspired by southern campaigns to redress racial inequality, a cohort of white students resolved to bring the civil rights struggle into northern ghettoes. This decision set the course of the brewing conflict that was to come between youths and their government. In the South, de jure segregation could be dismissed as an antiquated throwback inimical to the interests of the United States at home and abroad. In the North, however, comparably potent de facto segregation called into question the presumed enlightenment of the society as a whole. The federal government was often an ally—if a reluctant one—in the southern civil rights struggle, but once the campaigns came north, a Democratic administration had little to offer but a co-optive and short-lived "War on Poverty." Radicals' persistence brought them into conflict with the economic inequalities inherent in capitalism. No longer simply do-gooders, they themselves became a threat to "American interests." The intransigence that met the efforts of idealists produced a much more ambitious program of change, one that had little chance of resolution without bloodshed.

On April 15, 1965, Students for a Democratic Society organized the first mass protest against the war in Vietnam in Washington, D.C. Twenty-five thousand people attended, far exceeding the organizers' expectations: it was, at that point, the largest peace demonstration in U.S. history. Though this quintessentially "New Left" organization—like its "Old Left" predecessors—compulsively composed position papers, it also exhibited a propensity simply to plunge into the country's problems and seek solutions while immersed. In response to the demands of an expanded public platform, however, the organization sharpened its political line.

At another massive anti-war rally in D.C. that winter, SDS president Carl Oglesby characterized the underlying system dissidents objected to as "corporate liberalism." He carefully distinguished corporate fealty from the humanism most of his listeners avowed. This distinction, however, did not catch on. From Oglesby's speech forward, radicals denounced liberalism and would define themselves against its adherents, whom they vehemently condemned for their insidious complicity with a system that waged war abroad and denied many of its citizens civil rights at home.

The expanding divide between liberals and radicals often occurred along gen-

erational lines. This tension was reproduced in the micro-generations within Students for a Democratic Society. The first SDSers were "junior achievers" with experience in student leadership and publications dating back to high school. They primarily attended elite colleges in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions. Many of their parents were ex-communists, socialists, and liberals, who had influenced their children from an early age by discussing politics at home.

The students' proximity to power was tangible. Tom Hayden, an early SDS recruit, remembers: "Many of us were student leaders who were conditioned to believe that if you spoke out, you would get a hearing from the Kennedy administration." Upon the completion in June 1962 of "The Port Huron Statement," SDS's expansive distillation of its worldview, Hayden and SDS founder Al Haber promptly drove to Washington, D.C., and delivered a copy to White House historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who promised he would pass it on to the president.[11] The assassination of President Kennedy the next year drove a sharp wedge between the coalescing youth culture and the country it thought it knew.

By mid-decade a new breed of activists, differing markedly from their predecessors demographically and programmatically, manifested themselves within SDS. In his definitive account of the organization, Kirkpatrick Sale characterizes the newcomers as "middle-American activists . . . raised in the individualistic heritage of the frontier"; they were "anarchists" rather than "politicos." Previously unexposed to left-wing intellectualism, they scornfully contrasted "talk" with "action" and "thinking" with "doing." This emphasis on physical tangibility could be traced to their origin in rawer, less-permissive parts of the country where engaging in oppositional politics—be it hippie dress, long hair, and drug use or clean-cut petition drives—could carry severe consequences.[12] A former SDSer recalled that the new breed, to which he belonged, was "more natively radical. Their radicalism came from almost a nihilism, a root and branch rejection of the society. A profounder kind of alienation than people in the East."[13] This population would do for SDS what the poor of color were doing for the civil rights movement: drive it forward with destructive abandon, constantly thwarting efforts to calm and contain it.

The development of an ornery, rebellious rank and file reflected the success of the civil rights and students movements, which aimed to draw the disenfranchised into meaningful participation in political life. In doing so, they wished to revitalize the country's existing institutions. Yet, as previously dispossessed constituencies awakened to their own potential power, they unloosed pent-up rage caused by the wrongs they continued to suffer. As the alienated came to the fore, many of them declared that society was hopelessly corrupt and that new structures must be created to meet their needs.

Militant politicos turned their eyes to communist revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, which were making conspicuous progress in addressing economic,

gender, and racial inequalities. In February 1967, Greg Calvert, national secretary of SDS, gave a speech in which he explained what people in the organization found inspiring about a Third World guerrilla campaign. Calvert declared:

> [W]hen the Guatemalan guerrillas enter a new village, they do not talk about the "anti-imperialist struggle" nor do they give lessons on dialectical materialism—neither do they distribute copies of the "Communist Manifesto" or of Chairman Mao's "On Contradiction." What they do is gather together the people of the village in the center of the village and then, one by one, the guerrillas rise and talk to the villagers about their own lives: about how they see themselves and how they came to be who they are, about their deepest longings and the things they've striven for and hoped for, about the way in which their deepest longings were frustrated by the society in which they lived.
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> Then the guerrillas encourage the villagers to talk about their lives. And then a marvelous thing begins to happen. People who thought that their deepest problems and frustrations were their individual problems discover that their problems and longings are all the same—that no one man is any different than the others. . . . [O]ut of discovery of their common humanity comes the decision that men must unite together in the struggle to destroy the conditions of their common oppression.
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> That, it seems to me, is what we are about.

The "Guatemalan guerrilla" approach, applied on American campuses, was highly effective. One SDSer raved to another: "You'd be astonished at the reception this gets, when people realize that they aren't alone, that the failures and the problems they ascribe to themselves stem in large part from the society in which they live and the images of themselves they accepted from society." Obviously electrified by martial language, Calvert characterized the upwelling of disenchanted youth precipitated by the campaign as "an indigenous revolt."[14] A first-page story in the *New York Times* titled "The New Left Turns to Mood of Violence in Place of Protest" opened with the line, attributed to Calvert, "We are working to build a guerrilla force in an urban environment."

The article elicited widespread opprobrium both in the country as a whole and in SDS itself. It was symptomatic of a problem that would soon reach crisis proportions: the inability of organizations to constrain their spokespeople, who often took more aggressive stands than those they represented. According to Sale the *Times* article "alarmed most of the constituency, which shied [away] from violence and was by no means ready for guerrilla warfare."[15]

Yet Calvert had not spoken of armed combat. With the exception of some grim locales in the South, organizers in the United States were not compelled to pick up arms in order to stay alive long enough to organize people around collective concerns. But as the Indochinese charnel house burned brighter and the right-wing backlash against the newfound assertiveness of ethnic minorities and the young intensified, many in the movement concluded that, as repression increased, they too would need weapons to protect themselves in their quest for power.

A CLOSING CIRCLE

As domestic radicals came to identify more closely with revolutionaries abroad, potentially revolutionary developments accelerated at home. Urban riots, in particular, shook the nation. Race riots had occurred cyclically in U.S. history and, up until the 1960s, invariably consisted of whites terrorizing minority ethnic populations: African Americans, Chicanos, or Chinese, depending on the region. The first black riot against white oppression occurred in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. No deaths occurred, but the prospect of an uninhibited display of what would soon be called "black rage" was not one that whites relished. Some white politicians came to the negotiating table. Others instructed their police protectors to draw the line.

The Watts riot in South Central Los Angeles commenced on August 14, 1965. Its fires burned for five days, consuming $200 million worth of property. An occupation force of sixteen thousand predominantly white law enforcement officers and National Guardsmen were called in to quell the black uprising. At that point, Gerald Horne writes, "what began as a black revolt against police quickly became a police revolt against blacks."[16] Thirty-four people were killed in the course of the suppression, over a thousand wounded, and thousands more arrested. With its widespread arson, looting, and sniper fire, Watts marked the beginning of what, in the words of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "in any other country . . . would have been called a permanent state of urban guerrilla warfare."[17] Daryl Gates, a field officer with the Los Angeles Police Department who would rise to the post of police chief by the time of the 1992 LA riot, remembers that in the wake of the 1965 rebellion, he and his colleagues "began reading everything we could get our hands on concerning guerilla warfare."[18]

It was none too soon. A comprehensive list of "every definable instance of left-wing terrorism and sabotage" in the United States drawn up in 1970 showed a sharp increase from 1965 on. Sifting through the daily newspapers of seventeen cities throughout the country, the maverick monthly magazine *Scanlan's* documented sixteen such actions in 1965, 34 in 1966, 56 in 1967, and 236 in 1968. In 1969, the number doubled to 503. By the time the periodical stopped counting in September 1970, there had already been 546 actions, for a grand total of 1,391 in less than a five-year period.[19] The Treasury Department, using much less exclusive criteria for an overlapping period, put the number at over 5,000.

Life magazine had no qualms about calling what occurred in Newark, New Jersey, in July 1967 an "insurrection," and a "predictable" one at that. Police brutality provoked the initial outburst. New Jersey's all-white National Guard occupied the black areas of the city to reassert control. The Guardsmen, drawn from New Jersey suburbs, considered blacks vectors of the disorder that was threatening their own modest comforts. Their conduct presented the country with the prospect of an open race war in which whites, armed with tanks and guns, were

granted free rein to vent their frustrations on any unfortunate with dark skin. In retaliation for black looting of white stores, soldiers and state troopers smashed or shot up the storefronts of businesses that displayed posters proclaiming "Soul Brother" in their windows.[20]

Such petty vindictiveness paled in comparison to the price community residents paid in blood and tears. The Guardsmen, state troopers, and predominantly white local police killed at least twenty-one black people (their wild "friendly fire" also likely resulted in the demise of a white detective and a white fireman, deaths that were initially blamed on snipers). One thousand people were injured in the disturbance, while 1,400 were arrested. Those enforcing martial law killed at least one young man in cold blood, and were not shy about making remarks to one another such as: "What should happen is they should line up all the niggers and kill them."[21]

As a counterforce to the immediate possibility of suffering a similarly overbearing occupation, African Americans in other New Jersey ghettoes hastened to augment their arsenals. This tactic had a certain grim efficacy. On Sunday, July 16, ghetto residents in Plainfield, New Jersey, beat a white police officer to death after he shot and killed a young black man outside a housing project. In preparation against invasion by other policemen and the National Guard, young blacks raided an arms manufacturing plant and distributed carbines among themselves. State and local officials opted for cordoning off the black section of the inner city, rather than penetrating it at a high cost to life and limb.[22]

That same summer in Detroit, it took 10,000 National Guardsmen, plus army paratroopers, to put down what enthusiastic militants quickly dubbed the "Great Rebellion." The official death toll was the highest yet—forty-three—as was the number arrested: 7,200, many of whom suffered acute deprivations while in detention.[23] Though popularly perceived as another "black riot," disquieted police discovered that the majority of snipers they captured in the disturbance were displaced Appalachian whites.[24] This presented another direction in which the country could deteriorate: bitter street wars between the have-nots and the protectors of the haves. The force of the insurgency stimulated some radical brains nourished on tales of the Russian Revolution to imagine the Motor City as an American Petrograd; others pictured it as a starting-off point for a guerrilla campaign against the U.S. government.[25]

Robert Williams was, by this time, relocating from Cuba to China. Throughout his exile, he edited *The Crusader* newsletter, in which, from 1964 on, he called for African Americans to wage guerrilla warfare against their government in order to force it to deliver on its democratic promises.[26] Though periodically blocked by the U.S. Postal Service, the publication was circulated among left-wing revolutionaries around the world. Williams remembers being credited by a high-ranking North Vietnamese official during one of his visits to Vietnam in the late 1960s for providing the inspiration behind their turn to urban warfare. "We read your publication on urban guerilla warfare and we realized we had to go into the city," Williams

FIGURE 1. Illustration from Robert Williams's *The Crusader* inciting African Americans to race war. *The Crusader* 9, no. 2 (Sept.–Oct. 1967).

recalled being told. "And when we looked at your people in the city of Detroit and what they had done to it, we decided to have the Tet Offensive."[27]

Regardless of whether or not this conversation ever took place—even if it did, Williams's hosts may have been flattering him—the claim itself reveals the deep interconnection between domestic revolt and Third World revolution. In retaking Detroit, soldiers freshly returned from Vietnam were deployed against U.S. citizens for the first time. For a moment, the urban disenfranchised and the Vietnamese communists had exactly the same enemy.

In 1966, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the charismatic Argentine doctor who had transformed himself into a guerrilla *comandante* in the victorious Cuban revolution, delivered a bitter rebuke to his fellow revolutionary internationalists. The conflict between the United States and the Vietnamese "patriots" was on his mind. Deeply impressed with the latter and disturbed by the inadequacy of aid from their supporters, Guevara did not mince words: "The solidarity of the progressive world with

the Vietnamese people has something of the bitter irony of the plebeians cheering on the gladiators in the Roman Circus. To wish the victim success is not enough; one must share his fate. One must join him in death or in victory."

Guevara appealed to the imagination of those he sought to persuade. "How close and bright would the future appear if two, three, many Vietnams flowered on the face of the globe," he queried, "with their quota of death and their immense tragedies, with their daily heroism, with their repeated blows against imperialism[?]" Such a development would force the United States "to disperse its forces under the lash of the growing hatred of the people of the world!"[28]

Guevara's charge was clear: pick a struggle and claw at the *yanqui* behemoth until it kills you or groans its last. His missive was addressed to the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, not to those in "the belly of the beast," as the early Cuban nationalist José Martí famously described his time in the United States.[29] But Guevara did cite disruptions in the United States as a promising sign. The letter was published in 1967, the year the Che mystique hit full force in the U.S. protest scene: olive drab military surplus jackets and boots became all the rage, as did imitations of his beard and hairdo. Che posters peppered the walls of collectives and dorm rooms. One of the most popular featured an image of the adopted Cuban sporting his communicable grin under the engagingly vulnerable phrase: "At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love." In his 1965 essay "Socialism and Man in Cuba," from which the quotation was drawn, Guevara continued: "It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality." He reconciled the apparent contradiction between loving and killing with the conciliatory meditation: "Perhaps it is one of the great dramas of the leader that he must combine a passionate spirit with a cold intelligence and make painful decisions without flinching."[30]

"Two, Three, Many Vietnams" turned out to be Guevara's final public address. In October 1967 he was executed in Bolivia while practicing what he preached: guerrilla warfare. In this last communiqué, it was "cold intelligence" on which he placed his emphasis. "Our soldiers must be . . . effective, violent, selective, cold, killing machine[s]." The reason? "[A] people without hate cannot triumph over a brutal enemy."[31]

Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America,* which followed on the heels of Guevara's salvo, identified the crucial innovation of the Cuban revolution as the centralization of the political power of the revolutionary forces in the guerrilla band, which Guevara termed the *foco* (focus). While the enforcement of the demand of self-defense for those to whom it had been customarily denied remained a revolutionary goal in the United States, Debray set the bar even higher by scornfully dismissing self-defense with an increasingly common revolutionary put-down: it was reformist.[32] Debray discounted self-defense for the same reason that militants from the United States, such as

Williams, had promoted it earlier in the decade: "self-defense undermined the security of the civilian population."[33] Debray imbued his notion of "total war" with the considerable prestige of the Cuban revolution—his tract was first published by the Castro regime.[34]

U.S. radicals' psychological identification with their Third World counterparts obscured the material differences between them. Domestic radicals were located in the most powerful country the world had ever known, while the guerrillas with whom they identified dogged crumbling regimes and even then suffered enormous casualties. Despite the destabilizing influence of intensifying horrors in Vietnam, many domestic radicals maintained their ability to discern the tactical differences dictated by their physical circumstances. Of these, some vehemently rejected the importation of guerrilla tactics into the United States as wildly inappropriate and dangerously counterproductive. Yet a vocal minority considered such distinctions in tactics—and the inherent risk differential—an unethical acquiescence to an international ranking in which the lives of the affluent were more highly valued than those of the destitute. To announce their noncollaboration, they too proclaimed that "total war" was the way to go.