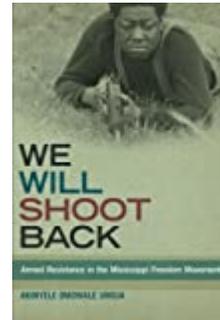


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Charles E. Cobb Jr.** *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 320 pp. \$27.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03310-2; ISBN 978-0-8223-6123-7.

**Akinyele Omowale Umoja.** *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement.* New York: New York University Press, 2013. 351 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-2524-5; \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4798-8603-6.



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## Arming for Freedom

In his speech to Peace Corps volunteers on December 12, 1964, Malcolm X asserted, “I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in these positions to block things that you and I need. Because this is the situation, you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn’t mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don’t even call it violence when it’s self-defense, I call it intelligence.”[1] Akinyele Omowale Umoja’s *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* and Charles E. Cobb Jr.’s *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* capture the succinct truth of Malcolm X’s statement. Umoja and Cobb center armed self-defense in

their narratives of the grassroots freedom rights movement and highlight local African American leaders and organizers within the long tradition of armed resistance.

Drawing heavily from their own experiences and relationships in the movement, Umoja’s and Cobb’s books rest on the assertion that “although nonviolence was crucial to the gains made by the freedom struggle of the 1950s and ’60s, those gains could not have been achieved without the complementary and still underappreciated practice of armed self-defense” (Cobb, p. 1). Affirming Malcolm X’s assertion, Umoja and Cobb recognize armed resistance as a “major tool of survival” that provided the space for civil rights work, a point reflected in Cobb’s subtitle (Umoja, p. 2). Armed self-defense was not exceptional or marginal, but pragmatic, essential, and effective, and both authors trace its long history among African

Americans in the South. These studies demonstrate the importance of bottom-up approaches to movement history in revealing the integral role of local organizers as well as the dangerous, barely visible work of organizing in the South (Cobb, p. 246).

While Umoja employs the term "Black Freedom Struggle" and Cobb enlists the term "Freedom Movement," both authors present armed resistance within the "historic fight ... for liberation and human rights" rooted in the battle for emancipation from enslavement (Umoja, p. 6). Within the Black Freedom Struggle, Umoja and Cobb locate the civil rights and Black Power movements as distinct, yet related periods and emphasize the "continuity," but not static practice, of armed resistance (Umoja, pp. 4, 6).

Influenced by the consciousness and culture of his earlier years in Compton, California, and activism in the Black Power movement, Umoja examines armed resistance to challenge misrepresentations of African American southerners as "docile and intimidated" and the southern movement as "solely nonviolent" (Umoja, p. 255). Armed resistance allowed African Americans to overcome fear created by white oppression and was the critical "tool" for organizing "Black political, economic, and social liberation" in Mississippi (Umoja, p. 2). Umoja identifies two periods of armed resistance during the Black Freedom Struggle. The first period, from the legal and violent defeat of Reconstruction to the 1950s, built a foundation of African American self-sufficiency that would support and sustain the second period in the 1960s and 70s.

By the early 1950s, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) became the "cornerstone" of the Mississippi movement, and its head, Dr. T. R. M. Howard, personified the long tradition of armed resistance (Umoja, p. 30). Both Umoja and Cobb point out that Howard and the RCNL's use of armed self-defense was not unique or marginal, but typified the pragmatic self-defense readily employed to protect "any prominent black civil rights advocate who valued his or her life" (Cobb, p. 133). The RCNL cultivated local leadership of the Mississippi movement, including Aaron Henry, Amzie Moore, George Lee, and Medgar Evers, who, with Howard's exile to Chicago, became the center of the state movement through his leadership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although Evers was inspired by the Kikuyu Land and Freedom Army and its war for liberation in Kenya, he remained committed to the mainline

program of the NAACP. However, as head of the Mississippi NAACP, Evers's practice of armed self-defense demonstrated that armed resistance "was not exceptional" during this early period (Umoja, p. 48). As the 1960s progressed, covert and individual armed resistance as exemplified by Howard and Evers became increasingly open and organized.

Both authors detail the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality's (CORE) commitment to nonviolence, but emphasize how interaction with local African Americans who were part of "the indigenous armed resistance tradition" such as Moore, E. W. Steptoe, Vernon Dahmer, Laura McGhee, Hartman Turnbow, and C. O. Chinn transformed individual organizers and their larger organizations. Armed self-defense and nonviolence worked together in "complementary" ways, and both authors consider how organizers representing organizations committed to nonviolence navigated local practice of armed resistance. Yet the armed protection and support provided by local leaders allowed these organizations to operate and demonstrated the efficacy of armed resistance, which challenged and eventually eroded individual and organizational commitment to nonviolence.

Umoja and Cobb identify Freedom Summer in 1964 as a significant turning point that challenged SNCC and CORE's organizational commitments to nonviolence and the point when individual, covert, and informal armed resistance became increasingly organized and overt. While SNCC reached a consensus not to allow field-workers to carry weapons, Cobb indicates that immediate local situations still determined individual responses to white attacks. According to Umoja, for SNCC, this transition away from nonviolence was also influenced by the brief involvement of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) in Freedom Summer. The murder of Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner that summer pushed CORE further away from its commitment to nonviolence. Umoja's discussion of RAM's participation in Freedom Summer and influence on SNCC's growing support for Black Nationalism and armed resistance provides an important new "layer" to the story of Freedom Summer (Umoja, p. 4).

After 1964 armed resistance became more organized, overt, and open. Umoja looks closely at Natchez and the formation of the Deacons for Defense, the Black United Front, the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA), and the United League (UL). Umoja states that the Deacons for Defense's par-

ticipation in the 1966 March Against Fear further asig-nified that the Movement had entered a new periodâ of armed resistance and Black Power (Umoja, p. 147). The âNatchez Modelâ demonstrated that armed resis-tance could limit white terrorism and bolster economic boycotts and became commonly employed throughout Mississippi. African American support for boycotts was enforced and protected by Rudolph Shields, who led the âenforcer squadsâ or âDa Spiritâ that became models for effective boycotts throughout the state. Black Power and Revolutionary Nationalism increasingly influenced Shields who left the NAACP in 1970 and formed the Black United Front (BUF), an umbrella organization that sup-ported economic boycotts and armed resistance and fo-cused on such issues as education, employment, police brutality and justice, and housing.

While the BUF represented the Mississippi move-mentâs turn to organized and open armed resistance in the late 1960s, the PGRNA identified the black-majority counties in western Mississippi or âKush districtâ as the location to build a sovereign black nation. Umoja deep-ens our understanding of the PGRNA and local move-ment history with his discussion of local support for the PGRNA, efforts to purchase land, Land Celebration Day, and the violent raid on the PGRNA headquarters in Jackson in 1971. Umoja emphasizes the evolution of armed resistance and shows how it provided space for civil rights work, but as illustrated by the PGRNA, the movement itself had changed, Umoja explains, and armed resistance supported revolutionary goals. Fur-thermore, Umoja challenges interpretations of the 1970s as a period of âlullâ or âretreatâ with his discussion of the UL, which superseded the NAACP for black militancy in Mississippi in the late 1970s (Umoja, p. 213). The ULâs successful boycott in Byhalia in 1974 built new momen-tum for the Mississippi movement and demonstrated that white intimidation of African Americans was over.

Rooted in his personal experience as a Mississippi field secretary of SNCC from 1962 to 1967, Cobb testi-fies to the transformative power of organizersâ interac-tion with African American southerners, particularly Ella Baker. âWe in SNCC,â Cobb confirms, âwere radicalized by working with people in their homes and communities much more than by ideologyâ (Cobb, p. xii). Like Umoja, he argues that armed resistance provided the space and support necessary for successful civil rights work. Cobb similarly locates armed resistance within a long history, originating with the fight for emancipation. Cobb de-tails the armed resistance of African American veterans of the First World War during the interwar years, not-

ing that it was rare, unorganized, and individual. Cu-riously, he does not mention the African Blood Broth-erhood or large-scale battles in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Elaine, Arkansas.

World War Two intensified African American self-determination and, according to Cobb, marked the pe-riod when âthe modern civil rights movement truly be-ginsâ (Cobb, p. 86). Cobb emphasizes the importance of military service for local freedom rights leaders, in-cluding Medgar and Charles Evers, Aaron Henry, Robert Williams, and Moore (who brought Bob Moses and SNCC to Mississippi). Like Umoja, he emphasizes how inter-action with local people transformed SNCC and CORE workers and their larger organizations. Cobb explores the history of Jonesboro, Louisiana, and the local pres-ence of CORE that gave rise to the Deacons for Defense. According to Cobb, the Deacons were âunprecedentedâ because they were the first organized and open self-defense organization that âdirectly challenged the civil rights establishmentâsâ strategy of nonviolence and in-fluenced CORE to repeal the nonviolence plank from its constitution in 1966 (Cobb, pp. 208, 203).

The shooting of James Meredith during his 1966 March Against Fear displayed and accelerated the frag-mentation of the movement that developed during Free-dom Summer, according to Cobb. Unlike Umojaâs study, which proceeds through the 1970s, Cobbâs discussion largely ends with the march, which he suggests marked an âinevitableâ and long developing âevolutionâ influ-enced by the 1964 betrayal of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in Atlantic City and the formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama (Cobb, p. 227). Punctuated by Stokely Carmichaelâs call for Black Power, this transition disrupted âa consen-sus designed to win popular support and federal back-ing for the civil rights movementâ (Cobb, p. 223). For Cobb, Black Power indicated burgeoning African Amer-ican political power, Black Nationalism, and black con-sciousness reflected in the Black Arts movement (Cobb p. 13). While Cobb mentions Malcolm X, the Black Pan-ther Party, and anticolonialism movements during this transition, his discussion of these influences could have been more deeply explored. While Umoja explores RAM, the Black Panther Party, and the PGRNA, and while both authors detail the influence of Kenyaâs revolution on Medgar Evers, readers may be curious how additional anticolonial voices and wars for liberation in Africa and even Cuba informed armed resistance in the South.

Cobb argues that African American armed resistance

diminished by the late 1960s because whites concluded that violence was ineffective and counterproductive in stopping black political momentum (Cobb, p. 16). He maintains that by the late 1960s, increased African American access to mainstream politics eroded grassroots organizing and the need for armed self-defense. On the other hand, Umoja broadens this time frame, asserting that support and participation in paramilitary organizations only declined by the 1980s as African Americans achieved greater political power and representation. Umoja also attributes this decline to the effective repression of COINTELPRO and a 1969 Mississippi law that banned economic boycotts.

Both Umoja and Cobb complicate the traditional non-violent movement narrative and erode reductionist caricatures, tropes, and labels of gun-toting hypermasculine violent militants versus nonviolent pacifists. Cobb, like Umoja, argues there was no clear, sharp line that divided nonviolence and armed self-defense; they assert that local decisions to use armed resistance were based on the pragmatism of survival and the immediacy of situations rather than ideology (Cobb, pp. 144, 145). Blurring these false and artificial distinctions, both authors affirm the compatibility of nonviolence and armed resistance (Cobb, p. 149). Moreover, both authors challenge the stereotype of African Americans in the South as docile and intimidated (Umoja, p. 255). Cobb also highlights the northern perception of the southern movement as solely nonviolent and passive, which, according to Cobb, stunted the development of organized national struggle (Cobb, p. 236). Umoja and Cobb studies avoid the pitfalls of the Long Movement paradigm, which often collapses the civil rights and Black Power movements into one movement and erases the regional variations between racist oppression in the South and the North.[2] Still, while both authors affirm the distinctiveness of southern oppression, scholars may benefit from continuing to explore the exchange and interaction of activists, strategies, tactics, and ideology between the

North and South.

Both studies persuasively argue that day-to-day realities of grassroots work, local practice and a sense of obligation, trust, and loyalty directed the actions and decision of organizers and often transformed their personal beliefs about armed resistance (Cobb, pp. 140, 148). As Umoja asserts, by the mid-1960s, individual, clandestine, and informal armed resistance that supported civil rights activity became increasingly organized and open in support of Black Power and, in the case of the PGRNA, revolutionary goals.

Umoja and Cobb detail the effectiveness and evolution of the tradition of armed resistance in the South, particularly in Mississippi, during the Freedom Movement. While armed resistance failed to preserve the lives of many activists, it did keep many others safe, empowered local people in their own communities, and provided courage and support for successful civil rights work and revolutionary goals. These studies capture the complexities of the civil rights and Black Power movements during the Freedom Movement and explain how interaction with local people transformed individual activists and organizations. In a deepening field of study, Umoja and Cobb offer two of the sharpest and clearest analyses of armed resistance and grassroots organizing during the Black Freedom Struggle.

#### Notes

[1]. Malcolm X, "Speech to Peace Corps Workers," December 12, 1964, <http://malcolmfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/speech-to-peace-corps-workers-december.html>.

[2]. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The Long Movement as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265, 281.

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