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# Review of "The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement" by L. Hill

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more generally will welcome his nuanced analysis of native people's responses to well meaning but ultimately racist state initiatives.

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Christopher R. Boyer

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

By Lance Hill (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. x plus 363pp.).

In his *Deacons for Defense*, Lance Hill directs long overdue attention to the Deacons for Defense (DFD) and what he rightly calls, "The Myth of Nonviolence." Using an impressive array of sources including: archival materials, government documents, FBI files and a substantial body of oral history, Hill argues "that black collective force did not simply *enhance* the bargaining power of moderates; it was the *source* of their power."<sup>1</sup> Even the limited success of civil rights organizations such as SNCC, CORE, the NAACP or the SCLC depended upon the threat of collective black violence in the form of Malcolm X, urban rebellions or the DFD. As one of African Americans' most successful, if least remembered, indigenous working class political movements in the South, the significance of the Deacons for Defense rested not only in their advocacy of armed self defense, but also in the ideological challenge they represented for middle class black leadership.

The Deacons were organized in Jonesboro, Louisiana in 1964 by local Blacks to protect the larger community and civil rights activists from the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilantes. However, they also represented, "a growing disillusionment of working-class blacks with the pacifistic, legalistic, and legislative strategies proffered by national organizations."<sup>2</sup> The Deacons often clashed with middle class black leadership as well as the Klan. Considering their rapid expansion from Jonesboro to Bogalusa to an organization with twenty-one chapters and a national profile, Hill rightly argues that the platform of armed self-defense held deep resonance in working-class black communities throughout the nation. Despite public perception to contrary the Deacons were "not ideologues or revolutionaries" as much as they were pragmatic reformists. Hill asserts, "They were simply hardworking men,—barbers, mill hands, factory workers, church deacons—who wanted nothing more than quality and justice within the framework of the traditional American dream." (217) Though the history of the Deacons was "purposefully forgotten" due to their stance on self-defense, their efforts resulted in material gains for rural blacks in Louisiana and Mississippi and neutralized the impact of the Klan; and much like the "New Negro" movement of the 1920's the Deacons helped usher in a new era where fear and passivity were replaced by dignity, manhood and a new sense of self-determination.<sup>3</sup>

While *Deacons for Defense* provides a powerful antidote to the "Myth of Nonviolence," Hill perpetuates other no less enduring 'myths' of what constitutes a political movement as well as of the overall goals of modern civil rights movements. Hill acknowledges African Americans' prior use of armed self-defense, but he dismisses it as a genuine form of political resistance saying:

But individual acts of self-defense did not in themselves constitute a sign of militancy or a leap of consciousness. Physically defending oneself can be motivated by nothing more than common sense and the instinct to survive. Armed resistance had no political significance until it became collective and public and openly challenged authority and white terror.<sup>4</sup>

For Hill the Deacons were political because they were collective, public and sought to expand organizationally.<sup>5</sup> By privileging the "official transcript" of resistance, he ignores scholarship on everyday forms of resistance.<sup>6</sup> As Kelley notes in his *Race Rebels*, infrapolitics and organized resistance "are two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working class resistance."<sup>7</sup> Not only does the accumulation of individual acts of resistance shape the nature of power, Kelley's assertion that one way to conceptualize the modern civil rights movement as "a public declaration of a hidden transcript; a direct challenge to Jim Crowism by people who had heretofore resisted quietly" holds particular resonance for the emergence of the DFD in 1964.<sup>8</sup> By placing the Deacons and armed resistance in what Hunter termed "an arsenal of everyday tactics of resistance," the linkages between African Americans' belief in self-defense or the emergence of collective self-defense in instances such as the Tulsa Riot of 1921, offer a more nuanced view of the DFD as well as of the meaning of self-defense in the daily lives of African Americans. Perhaps then the Deacons were organized less as a reaction to rising Klan violence and the lack of enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, than as an outgrowth of long-term strategies of African American resistance.

Not only does Hill fail to challenge "myths of the political" he also reinforces the "myth" that the modern civil rights movement held a "singular obsession with civic equality."<sup>9</sup> The notion that the nonviolent movement "deflected attention from economic and social forces that reproduced inequality and racism—for example, discrimination in employment, housing, and education . . ." perpetuates a "myth" no less problematic than the "myth of non-violence." As early as 1944, Rayford Logan's "What the Negro Wants" listed "equality of opportunity" and "equal pay for equal work" along with suffrage, an end to segregation, and human dignity among his prerequisites for first-class citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Montgomery Improvement Association demanded jobs and respect as well as an end to segregation, and even a cursory glance that the placards held during the 1963 March on Washington reveals that African Americans envisioned housing, full employment, an end to police brutality as well as civil equality as fundamental aspects of freedom.<sup>11</sup>

Hill's limited conception of politics and the goals of the modern civil rights movement as a whole are indicative of a larger limitation of his approach in *Deacons for Defense*, namely that the study is primarily a study of race relations rather than an attempt to excavate the internal lives of the Deacons and the communities in which they exist. Despite these limitations and some historical inaccuracies, such as mistaking 1908 as the founding of the NAACP instead of February 12, 1909; or suggesting that states in the Deep South began to ignore federal authority, the Constitution and Bill of Rights in 1960, *Deacons for Defense* grapples with a topic of great importance to our historical understanding of civil rights.<sup>12</sup> In addition to examining the role of armed self-defense, Hill indirectly challenges historians to continue to rethink black freedom movements

in relationship to gender and manhood; the divergent strategies of civil rights organizations; the role of indigenous working-class blacks; the importance of our collective memory or amnesia as well as how we choose to remember those civil rights movements themselves.

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## ENDNOTES

1. *Ibid.* p. 263.
2. *Ibid.* p. 3.
3. *Ibid.* p.265.
4. *Ibid.* Footnote 4, p.276.
5. *Ibid.* p. 48.
6. Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (North Carolina, 2004); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997); Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990) & James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985). Hill cites none of the literature on everyday forms of resistance.
7. Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels*, p.33, & 8–9.
8. *Ibid.* p. 77.
9. Lance Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, p. 235.
10. Rayford Logan, ed. *What the Negro Wants* (Chapel Hill, 1944) p. 14.
11. Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Year, 1954–1965* (London, 1988) p. 76, &199. Page 199 contains a photograph of the March on Washington in which signs represent a wide array of African Americans' demands for equality.
12. Lance Hill, *Deacons for Defense*, p.166 & 3. The roots of Southern states' resistance to federal authority or to upholding equal protection of the law are longstanding and numerous. For instance, Governor Orville Faubus' refusal to integrate Little Rock schools, or the Southern Manifesto in which at least 81 congressmen vowed to defy the Brown Decision.

*El rostro de la comunidad: la identidad del campesino en la Castilla del Antiguo Régimen.* By Jesús Izquierdo Martín (Madrid: Consejo Económico y Social—Comunidad de Madrid, 2001. 795 pp.).

Izquierdo Martín investigates a range of political theories dealing with the individual, equality, and rational choice, and covers political and sociological tra-