

The Ballot AND the Bullet: Non-Violence, Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement

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HIST 581 Civil Rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In April, 1964, Malcolm X spoke to members in attendance at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. In his speech, he posed a question to the audience, “I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet.”<sup>1</sup> The question that this “founding father” of the Black Power movement asked is a philosophically fundamental one of strategy and tactics and less about whether or not it was within the African American’s right to defend their rights, “by whatever means necessary.”<sup>2</sup> On that point, Malcolm X said yes in no uncertain terms, but as a source for change to the systemic racism in the United States and its long history, he recognized that there was merit to peaceful efforts, “the ballot,” to long term change. The debate between the merits and liabilities of the philosophies of non-violence and armed self-defense have raged for a century or more and the results are as murky as ever. While both of these philosophies have had their struggles and successes, the pursuit of armed self-defense as a *primary* strategy in the struggle for civil rights may appear to be an untenable approach for long term success in the movement for racial equality and social justice. Ironically though, Curtis J. Austin suggests that it may be an integral facet of the non-violent approach that has enjoyed more success in the long term and that the two have been intertwined from the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

Jeanne Theoharis examines the non-violent civil rights movement through the lens of one of its most revered heroines, Rosa Parks. While Theoharis is not satisfied with the overly simplistic, mythology surrounding the life of Parks, she would agree that even the flawed legend

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet* (speech, Cory Methodist Church, Cleveland Ohio, April 3, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet*.

<sup>3</sup> Curtis Austin, *Up Against the Wall: The Role of Violence in the Making and the Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 11-12.

of Parks recognizes, albeit inadequately, the significance of her role in the civil rights movement and the non-violent protests of civil rights inequities. Theoharis, describes the life, work, struggles, and achievements of Mrs. Rosa Parks in great detail, and uses her life to parallel the those same trials of the movement's non-violence ideology. The story of Rosa Parks, then, is a metaphor for the legacy non-violent movement she worked so hard to employ for social change. The honors and recognition that we currently wrap Rosa Parks in, from her work in the NAACP before her "small act" in Montgomery to the 40 years of work after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, stands as a testament to the way our nation views King's ideology and the long term gains of the non-violence movement she was a symbol for.

But indeed, that story is incomplete. And the reality that Theoharis shows us in the background is one that is built on a foundation of self-defense. Theoharis describes the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the event that sparked Parks' legend, as a hard fought but successful struggle against the Jim Crow South. But she also describes how it was one fraught with the potential for violence from both sides of the color line. In her analysis, the idea of non-violence was, "not the way most white or black Montgomerians dealt with social problems."<sup>4</sup> While the use of violence to reestablish the old white hierarchy might seem predictable, it might come as a surprise to find that many blacks in Montgomery owned guns themselves, indicating that the notion of *armed* self-defense was not a new one. Even Dr. King, according to Bayard Rustin, had firearms in his home. Rustin continued to suggest that it may have been the struggle of the bus boycott that convinced King of the value of non-violence.<sup>5</sup> Theoharis also describes how Parks' views on self-defense evolved and her involvement in the Black Power movement. Parks

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<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 99.

could better see, later in life, the limitations and frustrations of non-violence if it was, “one sided.”<sup>6</sup> While the legacy of non-violence is the one that lives on today, it may have only been successful because of the fundamental concept of armed self-defense that had existed decades before.

Austin describes these roots as well, through the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party. Austin describes the way frustration in the mid 1960s led to the growth of the more militant Black Power movement. Austin’s history reflects similar themes to Parks’ late chapters. The movement was attractive to frustrated young African Americans, fed up with the meager gains they saw from King’s approach. The ideologies of Black Power from Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers was a natural extension of those frustrations. Austin does explain though, the limitations of this movement as well. Internal disputes wracked the organization, violence spilled over into rivalries within the group and with other factions like Karenga’s US, the wrath and animosity of the police and existing power structure that the BPP’s tactics and rhetoric inspired all led to their undoing. Ironically, the militancy that made the BPP so attractive to so many, “worked to their disadvantage, inflaming public opinion.”<sup>7</sup> The fact was, unlike the peaceful tactics of Parks and King, the BPP instilled fear in most moderate whites that prevented any real cooperation or sympathy. The most effective part of the legacy of the Panthers was their non-violent programs that were community oriented: free breakfast for children program and the BPP’s health care clinics.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 212-213.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis Austin, *Up Against the Wall: The Role of Violence in the Making and the Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis Austin, *Up Against the Wall: The Role of Violence in the Making and the Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, 64.

But Austin describes the history that led to the successes of non-violence. The history he describes dovetails with Theoharis' last chapters. He describes, in his early history of the Black Power movement, the rising militancy of African Americans in the South in the 1930s and 1940s with Robert Williams, the Deacons for Justice and Defense and John Hulet and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (who's symbol becomes the namesake of the BPP) in response to the violence perpetrated on African Americans who tried to assert their civil rights. It was their militancy and armed self-defense ideology that allowed for non-violent action to exist in the first place where, "their concept of retaliatory violence indeed helped the civil rights movement remain nonviolent."<sup>9</sup>

The histories of Theoharis and Austin, then, seem to suggest that non-violence and armed self-defense are not exclusive ideologies. They exist in an oscillating cycle that promotes the aims of each ideology. While the limitations of each ideology birth a new cycle into the other, the dynamics of each are intertwined with each other. It might suggest that Malcolm X, in 1964, may have given his listeners an incomplete set of choices that lacked the probable third choice: the Ballot *and* the Bullet.

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<sup>9</sup> Curtis Austin, *Up Against the Wall: The Role of Violence in the Making and the Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, 10.