

Interview with Robert F. Williams (Feb. 26, 1925-Oct. 15, 1996), president of the Union County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Monroe, N. C., 1959.

(Video courtesy Prelinger Collection)

Williams, a former Marine, was the first modern African American leader to both call for and practice armed self-defense against white racist attacks, intimidation and threats. His articulation of this right anticipated by five years the more famous call made by his friend Malcolm X after the latter broke with Elijah Muhammad's conservative Nation of Islam (NOI) on March 8, 1964.

"Negroes With Guns" (New York: Marzani and Munsell, 1962; reprinted Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998), a small book based on interviews with Williams; "The Crusader," a militant newsletter edited by Williams at Monroe and, after he was forced into exile in 1961, Cuba and the People's Republic of China; and Williams's "Radio Free Dixie" radio broadcast from revolutionary Cuba all exerted a powerful challenge to the tactic and philosophy of nonviolent direct resistance that dominated the civil-rights movement.

Williams served as one of the chief models for the self-defense posture of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) of Alabama, better known as the original Black Panther party, which was formed in early 1965 with the assistance of members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), including Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture), to mobilize independent black political power against the exclusion, marginalization and exploitation by the racist local Democratic party.

The LCFO, in turn, inspired the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), formed in October 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby G. Seale at Oakland, Calif., which borrowed from Williams's example and Malcolm X's rhetoric on self-defense.

The interview with Williams is excerpted from "Integration: Report I," directed by Madeline Anderson (Andover Productions, 1960), which profiled the modern civil-rights movement from 1957-60, including sit-ins, marches, boycotts and rallies at Montgomery, Ala., Brooklyn, N. Y., and Washington, D. C.

The woman sitting next to Williams is his wife, Mabel, and the bespectacled man is veteran civil-rights attorney Conrad J. Lynn, Williams's lawyer. The narrator is playwright and author Loftin Mitchell.

One of the singers is Maya Angelou, then a Calypso singer and dancer, who would later become an accomplished poet, an award-winning writer, journalist, activist, actor, director and a teacher.