

**LOCKING UP
OUR OWN**

**CRIME and
PUNISHMENT in
BLACK AMERICA**

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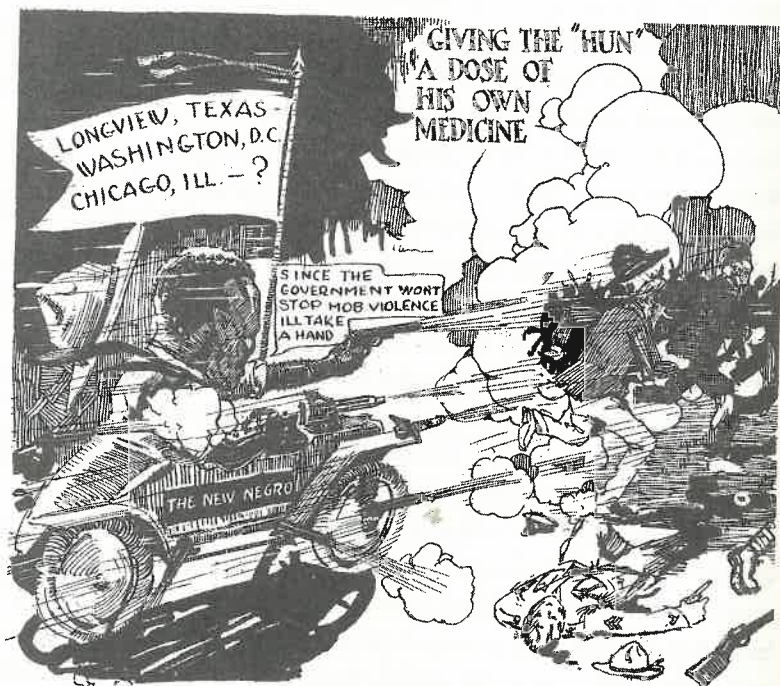
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Guns remained essential to black self-defense into the twentieth century. Beginning in 1917, a series of violent racial conflicts erupted in many northern cities. Labeled "race riots" by the white press, they are more accurately described as organized white-on-black violence. As the historian David Krugler explains, "African Americans were not so much rioting as fighting back, counterattacking, repelling violence; above all, *resisting*."⁷⁹

D.C.'s armed response was led by its black World War I veterans, most of whom had fought in the 368th and 372nd Infantry regiments.⁸⁰ Upon their return, these men found that racial segregation had become more entrenched under the leadership of Woodrow Wilson, the same president who had sent them off to war. Wilson restored segregation in federal government agencies and buildings, where screens were put up to separate black and white workers, and in 1915 he showed the racist film *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House.⁸¹ When the Boston newspaper editor Monroe Trotter led a black delegation to Washington to complain about Wilson's policies, the president is alleged to have told them, "Segregation is not humiliating, but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen."⁸²

In 1919, when a white mob mobilized to attack blacks in D.C., the city's black veterans were prepared to defend themselves and their families. As a military intelligence agent wrote in a confidential memo shortly before the fighting, "these officers and soldiers returning to their homes in Washington have told their grievances and . . . have boasted of their ability to handle guns and of their determination to use the arms in their possession rather than submit to unjust treatment."⁸³ Meeting at the intersection of Seventh and T Streets, NW, black drivers assembled a convoy and headed to Baltimore, returning with trunks full of weapons. The fighting with the white mob lasted five days, and although black casualties were higher, the two sides were more closely matched than was true in other cities.

The resistance by D.C.'s black veterans earned the praise of the NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson, who said, "The Negroes saved themselves and saved Washington by their determination not to run, but to fight . . . fight in the defense of their lives and their homes. If the white mob had gone unchecked—and it was only the determined effort of black men that checked it—Washington would have been another and worse East St. Louis." *The Messenger*, a publication cofounded by the labor organizer A. Philip Randolph, cited D.C.'s armed resistance as evidence that a "New Negro" had arrived. D.C.'s fighting blacks were hailed as an alternative to old-guard black establishment leaders like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, whom the paper lampooned for encouraging blacks to "be modest and unassuming" and to "forget our grievances."⁸⁴



THE "NEW CROWD NEGRO" MAKING AMERICA SAFE FOR HIMSELF
(*The Messenger*, 1919)

The same refrain was heard throughout the twentieth century. From the anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells ("A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give") to Malcolm X ("It is lawful for anyone to own a rifle or a shotgun and it is everyone's right to protect themselves from anyone who stands in their way to prevent them from obtaining what is rightfully theirs"), the list of African Americans who invoked gun ownership as a tool of racial self-defense reads like a Who's Who of black America.⁸⁵

The black tradition of arms was especially familiar to someone like John Wilson, who had spent much of the 1960s in SNCC. Southern-born SNCC members such as Fannie Lou Hamer spoke openly about their guns: "I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch won't write his mama again."⁸⁶ SNCC members from the North took note of how well armed their hosts were. Remembering his years in the South, my father, James Forman, wrote, "self-defense—at least of one's home—was not a concept new to Southern blacks in 1963 and there was hardly a black home in the South without its shotgun or rifle."⁸⁷ SNCC's Julian Bond agreed: "Almost everybody with whom we stayed in Mississippi had guns." Although these guns were principally for hunting, Bond noted that "they were there for other purposes, too."⁸⁸ Soon the SNCC workers adopted the practices of their hosts. The historian Clayborne Carson estimates that by the end of the summer of 1964, almost all SNCC fieldworkers were armed.⁸⁹

By the late 1960s, blacks got a reminder about why they might want to hold on to their weapons: Longtime gun control opponents suddenly became interested in restricting access to guns when blacks began to brandish them publicly and politically. In California, for example, elected officials—including Governor Ronald Reagan—rushed to enact strict gun control laws after members of the Black Panthers (the full and neglected name of the group being the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) armed themselves. The sponsor of the gun control

bill, Don Mulford, denied that race had played a role, but black legislators knew better. As one of them pointed out, Mulford had dropped his opposition to gun control only after "Negroes showed up in Oakland—his district—with arms."⁹⁰ The next year, Congress passed its first gun control legislation in thirty years. Though the law was generally weak, Congress did try to limit the availability of one class of guns: inexpensive, poor-quality handguns called Saturday night specials.⁹¹ The journalist Robert Sherrill wasn't the only one to conclude that a law singling out guns favored by the poor was a law "passed not to control guns but to control blacks."⁹²

D.C.'s black nationalists, including Doug Moore, Stokely Carmichael, and the Black United Front (BUF), certainly saw it that way. On April 5, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King was assassinated, as grief turned to rage in D.C. and other cities, Carmichael and SNCC held an emergency press conference at the New School for Afro-American Thought, located just north of Fourteenth and U Streets. "When white America killed Dr. King last night, she declared war on us," said Carmichael. Later in his statement, he added, "There no longer needs to be intellectual discussion. Black people know that they have to get guns."⁹³ In November of the same year, Carmichael told a crowd of more than nineteen hundred at Howard University that they must "be willing to live, to fight, and kill for one's own people."⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the BUF, led by Carmichael and Moore, protested local gun control proposals; in August 1968, the group resolved that "D.C. gun-control legislation is a white racist means of taking away from black people an instrument of self-defense."⁹⁵ The next month, both neighboring Maryland counties—Montgomery and Prince George's—rejected gun control measures, leading the BUF to reiterate its opposition to gun control. Both Montgomery and Prince George's counties were majority white at the time, and using an argument that Moore would deploy again seven years later, the BUF said that it made no sense for "68 percent black Washington" to adopt gun control "while the surrounding 95 percent white suburbs with no similar gun control legislation are actively being urged to arm and are arming."⁹⁶