

NEGROES WITH GUNS: Rob Williams and Black Power

By Sandra Dickson, Churchill Roberts, Cara Pilson and Cindy Hill

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Credited with inspiring the Black Power movement, Robert Williams led his North Carolina hometown to defend itself against the Ku Klux Klan and challenge repressive Jim Crow laws. *NEGROES WITH GUNS* follows Williams's journey from southern community leader to exile in Cuba and China, a journey that brought the issue of armed self-defense to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.



FROM THE FILMMAKERS

We hope that in viewing *Negroes with Guns* you will take the same remarkable journey that we took in making this film. We're sorry to say that we knew little about Robert Williams until five years ago. But after we began researching his life, talking with those who knew him and reading his writings and those of others, we realized that this courageous and complex man challenged our understanding of the traditional and popular view of the civil rights movement as well as conventional societal notions of acceptable dissent and patriotic behavior.

We talked to many who knew him, who stood side-by-side with him on picket lines or in front of African-American homes, guns in hand, defending their families against marauding Klansmen. We also listened to more than twenty hours of audio interviews of Rob Williams as well as numerous programs of his Radio Free Dixie broadcast from Cuba, and in doing so, we discovered a man whose respect for law made him reluctant to abandon his belief that the prevailing racist legal and judicial system might change through reasoned discourse and non-violent activism. At the same time, we discovered a man whose passion for justice and years of shame drove him to become a public symbol



for the anger that every Black man felt when he was called "boy" or was forced to look the other way when his wife, daughter or son were humiliated.

Our journey as filmmakers was made all the richer by the opportunity to get to know his wife, Mabel—a remarkable woman whose quest for justice was every bit as strong as her husband's and her ability to forgive seemingly unparalleled.

Our hope is that the film will help restore Robert and Mabel Williams to their rightful place in the pantheon of important civil rights figures and will make all of us examine our own notions of acceptable dissent and what it means to be a patriot.

SANDRA DICKSON

THE FILM

Before Malcolm X, there was Robert F. Williams. *NEGROES WITH GUNS* documents the work of this forgotten Civil Rights fighter who inspired the Black Panthers and the broader Black Power Movement by daring to advocate for armed self-defense in the face of racist terrorism of the Jim Crow South.

Williams' story is much more than a re-hash of the historical debate over non-violent versus violent resistance in the struggle for Civil Rights. His activism raises questions about which leaders are remembered and celebrated (and why) and whether guns are essential to self-defense, American manhood, or the preservation of dignity. As the film makes clear, Robert Williams was no simple ideologue. The way he handled difficult decisions and circumstances provided inspiration to those around him and may inspire viewers to re-think some of their assumptions about how social change happens.

People Who Appear in *NEGROES WITH GUNS*

Robert Williams

Beatrice Colsom, Monroe resident

Yusef Crowder, Black Guard member

Roy Crowder, Monroe protestor

John McDow, Black Guard member

Tim Tyson, biographer

Mabel Williams, activist and Rob's wife

Julian Bond, NAACP Chair

John C. Williams, Rob's son

Constance Lever, Freedom Rider in Monroe

James Forman, civil rights activist

Clayborne Carson, historian

Ron Stephens, historian



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Robert Franklin Williams was born in Monroe, North Carolina in 1925. As a young man he worked for the Ford Motor Company in Detroit until he was drafted into the United States Army in 1944—where he learned to take up arms.

After the war Williams returned to Monroe and married Mabel Robinson, a young woman who shared his commitment to social justice and African American freedom. In response to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Klan activity in Monroe skyrocketed, intimidating African Americans and nearly shutting down the local chapter of the NAACP. Williams revived it to nearly 200 strong by reaching out to everyday laborers and to fellow black veterans.

When assaults on local black women were ignored by the law, Williams filed for a charter from the NRA; the Black Armed Guard was born. During a 1957 integration campaign that faced violent white resistance, Williams' armed defense guard successfully drove off legions of the Klan. His acceptance of armed resistance placed Williams at the center of a debate among advocates for civil rights: follow the non-violent principles that came to be identified with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., or protect black communities with force when necessary.

In 1961, trumped-up accusations of kidnapping forced Williams and his family to flee the U.S. They spent five years in Cuba where he wrote, *Negroes With Guns* and produced *Radio Free Dixie* for the international airwaves. They later moved on to China, where they were well received, but they always longed for home. In 1969, Williams exchanged his knowledge of the Chinese government for safe passage to the States. Rob and Mabel lived their remaining days together in Michigan. When he died in 1995, Williams' body was laid to rest in his hometown, Monroe.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

General

- Which scenes from *NEGROES WITH GUNS* were most powerful for you? Why do you think you found those moments powerful? Describe any part of the film that “spoke truth” to you.

Struggling for Civil Rights

- Had you heard of Robert Williams or Radio Free Dixie before seeing this film? If so, where and when? If not, why do you think Williams isn’t as well known as other civil rights activists?
- Given what you see in the film about circumstance in Monroe, North Carolina, did Williams’ call for community members to arm themselves seem reasonable to you? Why or why not? In the context of the broader struggle for civil rights, what were the risks, rewards, and drawbacks of his call for armed self-defense?
- In your view, what accounted for the different ways in which Williams was viewed by members of his own community and/or by others in the civil rights movement? Why did some contemporaries feel threatened by the actions that others saw as a source of empowerment?

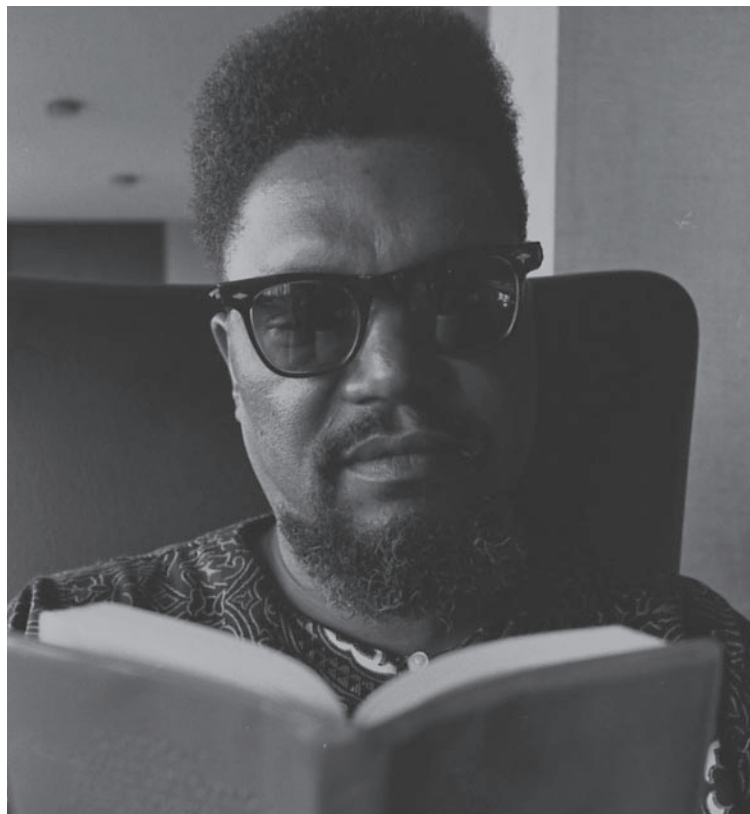
Strategies for Fighting Injustice

- In your view, should people have the right to defend themselves with guns? Why or why not? In your view, how critical is the right to own weapons to one’s ability for self-defense? Does current U.S. gun policy reflect your views about self-defense? If not, what would you like to see changed?
- Williams explained that he favored action only in the absence of government protection saying, “If the law won’t do it, we will.” In your view, when if ever, would it be appropriate or necessary to take the law into your own hands?
- Williams says that no person who lives under tyranny can be guilty of treason. What do you think? Is it impossible to betray a government that does not protect your rights as a citizen?
- Why was Williams’ group labeled “communist” even though he was not a communist? What impact did the label “black militant” have? How about “radical” or “revolutionary”? What kinds of labels are used today to discredit or dismiss people, groups, or ideas or shut down dialogue?
- Would you describe Robert Williams as a “freedom fighter”? Why or why not?

- Did the film provide you with any insights about current struggles for justice? Are people who call for armed self-defense today reflecting Williams’ ideology, or have the differences in historical circumstance changed the meaning of a call to arms?
- Williams was one of the first civil rights leaders to draw international attention to the struggle for civil rights. What were/are the links between struggles for civil rights in the U.S. and the historical struggles of developing nations for independence?

Being a Man

- In Williams’ view, what is the link between fighting and dignity? If you were teaching a child today how to act with dignity, what would you recommend they do in the face of confrontation? Would your advice be different for a boy than for a girl? Why or why not?
- Williams’ father was called a “good man” for working hard and not fighting back in the face of abuse by white men. How was the definition of being a “good man” different for whites than for blacks? Is it still different? If so, in what ways?
- Williams says that it is “time for negro men to stand up and be men.” What does his argument for armed self-defense say about what it means to be a man?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Form a book club to read and discuss Robert Williams' book, *Negroes with Guns* as well as other texts about the history of the struggle for civil rights and racial justice in the U.S. Write reviews of the books you read for local newspapers, newsletters, or a blog.
- Set up a display with a picture of a white man holding a gun and a picture of a black man holding a gun. Invite people to write captions for each photo. Analyze and report on the responses you get, highlighting what you learn from the differences in descriptions of the two pictures.
- Create an exhibit covering the history of your community during the time period in which Robert Williams was active (1950s-1970s). Note how different kinds of people in the community felt about the struggle for civil rights and the use of violence. Conduct oral history interviews if needed. Arrange for your exhibit to be displayed in a public place, e.g., a library, bank lobby, school, etc.
- Find additional venues to screen *NEGROES WITH GUNS*, including colleges, universities, high schools, youth centers, and civic groups.

For additional outreach ideas, visit itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

Websites

www.jou.ufl.edu/documentary/negroeswithguns—The official website of *NEGROES WITH GUNS* includes very interesting stories about the making of the film. To purchase copies of the film, visit California Newsreel: www.newsreel.org

<http://www.old-yankee.com/rkba/pws.html> - This gun-rights website includes the full text of "People with Strength," a pamphlet written contemporaneously by journalist Truman Nelson describing many of the events in Monroe, NC that are recounted in the film.

www.naacp.org - The website of the NAACP includes information on the history and philosophy of the organization, though it does not specifically include information about Williams or Monroe, NC.

www.itsabouttimebpp.org - This website of the Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni includes a broad range of information on the history, philosophy, and activities of the organization. Also see www.blackpanther.org.

Books

Robert Williams, *NEGROES WITH GUNS* (Wayne State University reprint, 1998) – orig. pub 1962 by Marzani & Munsell

Timothy Tyson. *RADIO FREE DIXIE: ROBERT WILLIAMS AND THE ROOTS OF BLACK POWER* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999) – A biography of Robert Williams by an historian featured in the film.

ROBERT AND MABEL WILLIAMS RESOURCE GUIDE (The Freedom Archives, 2005) – A collection of documents, speeches, transcripts of radio shows, etc.

NEGROES WITH GUNS: *Rob Williams and Black Power* was funded by the University of Florida; College of Journalism and Communications and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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