



# This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible

By Charles E. Cobb

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Visiting Martin Luther King Jr. at the peak of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, journalist William Worthy almost sat on a loaded pistol. “Just for self defense,” King assured him. It was not the only weapon King kept for such a purpose; one of his advisors remembered the reverend’s Montgomery, Alabama home as “an arsenal.”

Like King, many ostensibly “nonviolent” civil rights activists embraced their constitutional right to selfprotection—yet this crucial dimension of the Afro-American freedom struggle has been long ignored by history. In *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed*, civil rights scholar Charles E. Cobb Jr. describes the vital role that armed self-defense played in the survival and liberation of black communities in America during the Southern Freedom Movement of the 1960s. In the Deep South, blacks often safeguarded themselves and their loved ones from white supremacist violence by bearing—and, when necessary, using—firearms. In much the same way, Cobb shows, nonviolent civil rights workers received critical support from black gun owners in the regions where they worked. Whether patrolling their neighborhoods, garrisoning their homes, or firing back at attackers, these courageous men and women and the weapons they carried were crucial to the movement’s success.

Giving voice to the World War II veterans, rural activists, volunteer security guards, and self-defense groups who took up arms to defend their lives and liberties, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* lays bare the paradoxical relationship between the nonviolent civil rights struggle and the Second Amendment. Drawing on his firsthand experiences in the civil rights movement and interviews with fellow participants, Cobb provides a controversial examination of the crucial place of firearms in the fight for American freedom.



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### Editorial Review

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\*Starred Review\* Given the violent resistance to equality for African Americans during the civil rights struggle, many viewed the tactics of nonviolence as either docile or naive or both. Cobb argues that the effectiveness of nonviolence speaks for itself in shining harsh light on the moral outrage of racism and in transforming large swaths of the black population into activists, but he also examines the armed self-defense that undergirded it. Cobb, a former field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, reviews the long tradition of self-protection among African Americans, who knew they could not rely on local law enforcement for protection. Martin Luther King Jr. himself, after the fire bombing of his home, kept weapons in his house to protect his family. Cobb offers a collection of memories of freedom fighters and a broad historical perspective, from slave resistance to the Deacons of Defense and Justice, as evidence of the human impulse to self-protection that counterbalanced the tactics of nonviolent resistance.

Understanding how the use of guns makes this history of the civil rights movement more compelling to readers, Cobb is, nonetheless, focused on the determination of ordinary citizens, women included, to win their rights, even if that meant packing a pistol in a pocket or purse. --Vanessa Bush

### Review

“When night riders attacked his home, twentieth-century Mississippi civil rights leader Hartman Turnbow ‘stood his ground’ and lit up the night to protect his family. Charles Cobb’s ‘stand your ground’ book, timely, controversial, and well documented, contravenes a history as old as George Washington and Andrew Jackson and as new as George Zimmerman and Michael Dunn. Don’t miss it.”

**—Bob Moses, former director of SNCC's Mississippi voter registration program and founder and president of the Algebra Project**

“Popular culture washes the complexity out of so many things. Charles Cobb works mightily against that torrent. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* shows that the simplistic popular understanding of the black freedom movement obscures a far richer story. Cobb defies the popular narrative with accounts of the grit and courage of armed stalwarts of the modern movement who invoked the ancient right of self-defense under circumstances where we should expect nothing less. This book is an important contribution to a story that is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.”

**—Nicholas Johnson, Professor of Law, Fordham Law School, and author of *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms***

### A 2015 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award nominee

“[A] richly detailed memoir...”

**—New York Times Book Review**

“Terrific”

**—Denver Post**

“Cobb's long-essay format brings the Freedom Movement to life in an unexpected way, shaking up conventional historical views and changing the conversation about individual freedom and personal protection that continues today...A nuanced exploration of the complex relationship between nonviolent

civil disobedience and the threat of armed retaliation.”

—**Shelf Awareness for Readers**

“[A] revelatory new history of armed self-defense and the civil rights movement...”

—**Reason**

“Masterfully told...[A] challenging and important new narrative...”

—**The Root**

“[A] brilliant book...A serious analytical work of the African-American southern Freedom Struggle, Cobb's book...deserves a prominent place on everyone's reading list.”

—**Against the Current**

“This is an important and mind-opening book of recent American history and social change that is still evolving. It will open a lot of minds in America, and maybe even the United Nations, to the true importance of self-defense as a civil and human right.”

—**The Gun Mag**

“*This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* jostles us outside the ho-hum frame of ‘pick up a gun’ vs. ‘turn the other cheek.’ Charles Cobb's graceful prose and electrifying history throw down a gauntlet: can we understand any part of the Freedom Struggle apart from America's unique romanticization of violence and gun culture? This absorbing investigation shows how guns are often necessary, but not sufficient, to live out political democracy.”

—**Wesley Hogan, Director, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University**

“Powerfully and with great depth, Charles Cobb examines the organizing tradition of the southern Freedom Movement, drawing on both his own experiences as a field secretary with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) working in the rural black belt South and contemporary conversations with his former co-workers. While Cobb challenges the orthodox narrative of the ‘nonviolent’ movement, this is much more than a book about guns. It is essential reading.”

—**Julian Bond, NAACP Chairman Emeritus**

“Blending compelling experience with first-rate scholarship, Charles E. Cobb Jr. traces the way that armed self-defense and nonviolent direct action worked sometimes in tension but mostly in tandem in the African American freedom struggle. Crafted with powerful clarity and engaging prose, Cobb's book deploys the intellectual insights of both everyday people and excellent historians to make the case that it wasn't necessarily ‘non-nonviolent’ to pack a pistol or tote a shotgun in the civil rights-era South—but grassroots activists often found it necessary. This is easily the best, most accessible, and most comprehensive book on the subject.”

—**Timothy B. Tyson, author of *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* and *Blood Done Sign My Name***

“In this challenging book, Charles Cobb, a former organizer, examines the role of guns in the civil rights movement.”

—**Mother Jones**

“This book will have readers who might have *nothing* else in common politically reaching for a copy.”

—**PJ Media**

“Cobb brilliantly situates the civil rights movement in the context of Southern life and gun culture, with a thesis that is unpacked by way of firsthand and personal accounts.”

—**Library Journal (starred review)**

“Cobb...reviews the long tradition of self-protection among African Americans, who knew they could not rely on local law enforcement for protection.... Understanding how the use of guns makes this history of the civil rights movement more compelling to readers, Cobb is nonetheless focused on the determination of ordinary citizens, women included, to win their rights, even if that meant packing a pistol in a pocket or purse.”

—**Booklist (starred review)**

“Persuasive.... Cobb's bracing and engrossing celebration of black armed resistance ties together two of founding principles of the Republic—individual equality and the right to arm oneself against tyranny—and the hypocrisy and ambiguity evident still in their imbalanced application.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“Charles Cobb, Jr.'s *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* is a marvelous contribution to our understanding the modern Black Freedom Struggle. With wonderful storytelling skills and drawing on his unparalleled access to movement participants, he situates armed self-defense in the context of a complex movement and in conversation with both nonviolence and community organizing. Cobb writes from personal experience on the frontlines of SNCC's voter registration work while also using the skills of journalist, historian, and teacher. The result is a compelling and wonderfully nuanced book that will appeal to specialists and, more importantly, anyone interested in human rights and the freedom struggle.”

—**Emilye Crosby, author of *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* and editor of *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up***

“This long overdue book revises the image of black people in the South as docile and frightened. It tells our story demonstrating that black people have always been willing to stand their ground and do whatever was necessary to free themselves from bondage and to defend their families and communities. This is a must-read for understanding the southern Freedom Movement.”

—**David Dennis, former Mississippi Director, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Director, Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project**

“A frank look at the complexities and contradictions of the civil rights movement, particularly with regard to the intertwined issues of nonviolence and self-defense.... Thought-provoking and studded with piercing ironies.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“What most of us think we know about the central role of non-violence in the long freedom struggle in the South is not so much wrong as blinkered. Or so Charles Cobb says in this passionate, intellectually disciplined reordering of the conventional narrative to include armed self-defense as a central component of the black movement's success. Read it and be reminded that history is not a record etched in stone by journalists and academics, but a living stream, fed and redirected by the bottom-up witness of its participants.”

—**Hodding Carter III, Professor of Public Policy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

“*This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* is the most important movement book in many years. Charles Cobb uses long-standing confusion over the distinction between violence and nonviolence as an entrée to rethinking many fundamental misconceptions about what the civil rights movement was and why it was so

powerful. This level of nuance requires a disciplined observer, an engaged participant, and a lyrical writer. Cobb is all these."

—Charles M. Payne, author of *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*

"*This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* is a powerful mixture of history and memoir, a scholarly and emotionally engaging account of a dark time in our recent history. This is one of those books that is going to have people from across the political spectrum buying it for different reasons. One can hope that those on both left and right can learn from this book."

—Clayton E. Cramer, author of *Armed America: The Remarkable Story of How and Why Guns Became as American as Apple Pie*

#### About the Author

**Charles E. Cobb, Jr.** is a former *National Geographic* magazine staff writer and a former field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and has also served as a Visiting Professor in Brown University's Department of Africana Studies. A veteran journalist, he is an inductee of the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame, and his reporting has won multiple awards. Cobb lives in Jacksonville, Florida.

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**Matthew Williams:**

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**Lidia Mejia:**

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