



Radio Free Dixie:

Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power

by Timothy B. Tyson

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We're all familiar with images from the nonviolent civil rights movement: snarling dogs, fire hoses, and protesters knelt in prayer. *Radio Free Dixie* tells the story of the other civil rights movement: the one in which African Americans—many of them World War II veterans—took up arms to defend their communities from racist law enforcement officers and the Ku Klux Klan. Author Timothy Tyson—associate professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison—also exposes the ways in which sexuality was used by white men in the pre-civil rights South to subjugate Black women and demonize Black men.

The focal point of *Radio Free Dixie* is the life of Robert F. Williams, the man considered the father of the Black Power movement. Williams was born in 1925 in Monroe, North Carolina: a small town that was home to many former slaves, including his grandparents. On the other side of Monroe's tracks lived *Jesse Helms*, the U.S. Senator, and his policeman-father "Big Jesse." One of Williams's most terrifying childhood memories was watching "Big Jesse" drag an African American woman down the street by the ankle. The woman screamed as her back scraped the pavement. White onlookers hooted and laughed.

Williams's outrage at racism, and his desire to do something about it, increased during his two stints in the military: in the mid-1940s (when he was drafted into the army) and mid-1950s (when, due to lack of employment opportunities, he enlisted in the marines). Williams protested his second-class treatment at the hands of white officers by writing letters to elected officials. At one point he refused to salute the American flag and was given 180 days in a military prison. Williams received an undesirable

discharge from the Marines in 1955.

Much of the book is set in the mid-to-late 1950s, a formative period in civil rights history. The Supreme Court, in 1954, handed down their landmark school-desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, providing reason for optimism. At the same time—perhaps as a backlash to the Brown decision—Klan membership grew dramatically and brutalization of African Americans increased. In the area of Williams's hometown of Monroe, Klan rallies in 1956 drew upwards of 15,000 participants. Due to fear and intimidation, NAACP membership rolls shrank and some chapters disbanded.

Williams and his friend Albert E. Perry (a medical doctor and veteran of the armed services) took over the Monroe NAACP around that time and recruited many new working-class and unemployed members, as well as the 40 or so African American men who had faced down the Klan with guns a decade earlier. (The Klan had tried, unsuccessfully, at that time, to capture the remains of a Black man from a funeral parlor and drag them through the streets of Monroe.) Williams led his NAACP chapter in campaigns to desegregate Monroe's public library and municipal swimming pool. In response to these efforts, the Klan staged rallies and motorcades. The latter activity involved driving through Monroe's black neighborhood honking, shouting obscenities, and firing guns. When the Klan began shooting at Dr. Perry's home, NAACP militiamen surprised the assailants by firing back from behind sandbag barriers.

Williams's radical tactics and advocacy of armed self-defense gained him fame and notoriety, and both the respect and disdain of the nonviolent civil rights movement. During a 1959 debate over tactics with Martin Luther King, Jr., Williams stated: "Where the law has broken down, self-defense is necessary. Nonviolence is a very potent weapon where the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist." Also during 1959, Williams's words earned him a six-month suspension from the national NAACP. In response to the acquittal of a white man who was clearly guilty of having attempted to rape a pregnant African American, Williams stated: "Since the federal government will not bring a halt to lynching in the South and since the so-called courts lynch our people legally, if it's necessary to stop lynching with lynching, then we must be willing to resort to that method."

Williams was forced into exile for eight years in the 1960s by a false charge of kidnapping a white couple. He spent his first four years in Cuba and the next four in China. While in Havana, Williams broadcast a weekly radio show called "Radio Free Dixie" that could be heard all across the United States. Williams used the airwaves to denounce white supremacy and play African American music. Williams was also an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War. In 1964 he traveled to Vietnam and was received as a guest of Ho Chi Minh.

Williams was allowed to return to the United States in 1969 and the kidnapping charge was officially dropped in 1976. Williams spent the final two decades of his life in the small fishing community of Baldwin, Michigan, and continued his involvement with the local branch of the NAACP. Williams died in 1996 of Hodgkin's disease. At his funeral, Rosa Parks hailed Williams for his "courage and commitment to freedom" and stated: "the work that [Williams] did should go down in history and never be forgotten."

In a 1997 article in the NAACP's newsletter *The Crisis*, two years prior to the publication of *Radio Free Dixie*, Tyson wrote: "The struggle in Monroe finds no place in our cinematic confections of the civil rights movement. Robert Williams eludes our recollection because in our memories we have polished the movement smooth, grinding off its rougher edges and grittier realities, forgetting how we won and lost and at what bitter cost." R

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But Radio Free Dixie reveals that both movements grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom. As Robert Williams's story demonstrates, independent black political action, black cultural pride, and armed self-reliance operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protest.