

The Deacons for Defense and Justice



In 1964, the Deacons for Defense and Justice were formed by black men in Jonesboro, Louisiana to protect the black citizens and civil rights activist from the Ku Klux Klan. Armed self-defense was inconsistent with the non-violent philosophy adopted during the civil rights movement. Two military veterans named Earnest "Chilly Willy" Thomas and Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick were the original founders of the Deacon for Defense. The organization grew in popularity because it appealed to sections of the civil rights movement who no longer believed that non-violence was a sound strategy. Thomas and Douglas created an organization that would discourage Klan attacks, as well as, help prevent activist and black community members from police and fire hose attacks. The Deacons made headlines when their defensive activities forced then Louisiana Governor John McKeithen and Jonesboro city leaders to compromise with civil rights activist.

As the Deacons grew in numbers and popularity they begin to open chapters in different cities. In 1965, Thomas and Kirkpatrick established a second chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Bogalusa, Louisiana. After working with the black leaders in Bogalusa, Thomas and Kirkpatrick left the chapter under the leadership of Robert "Bob" Hicks, Charles Sims, and A. Z. Young; the Klan was attacking the blacks in Bogalusa so the people organized to defend themselves. The first black Deputy Sheriff of Washington Parish, Louisiana was assassinated by racist whites; the murder increased the tension between the Klan and the Deacons. The tension grew so tough that

federally regulated reconstruction-era laws were instituted to protect civil rights activist. In 1966, civil rights activist James Meridith was embarking on a march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi called the March Against Fear. Meridith was shot and severely wounded by white supremacist, Stokely Carmichael and many other activists completed the march for Meridith but the idea of self-defense was more prominent.

Charmichael was instrumental in convincing Dr. Martin Luther King and other leaders that the Deacons can be integrated into the movement, provide protection and the unity of the movement would be maintained. By 1965, the Deacons were being investigated by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, COINTELPRO tactics were unleashed upon the Deacons enabling the FBI to obtain substantial information about the organization. Disloyal black FBI informants were feeding the FBI information about the activities the Deacons engaged in, these tactics helped members of the Deacons become continuously harassed, arrested and questioned by the FBI. As the years passed, other organizations emerged and began to overshadow the Deacons as far as public attention. The presence of the Black Panther Party took away much of the FBI attention that was usually reserved for the Deacons. By 1968, the Deacons disbanded but in their short time they made a huge impact.

The Deacons helped change the ideas and strategies of civil rights organizations and helped lay the foundation for organizations such as the Black Panther Party to exist. They understood that non-violence was a tactic that can be used, but non-violence is not always the best course of action. They often challenged the KKK and Louisiana police who were looking to harm black people. In all, the Deacons were able to organize twenty-one chapters and forty-six affiliate chapters across the country. Historian Lance Hill wrote the following about the Deacons; “the hard truth is that these organizations produced few victories in their local projects in the Deep South—if success is measured by the ability to force changes in local government policy and create self-governing and sustainable local organizations that could survive when the national organizations departed ... The Deacons' campaigns frequently resulted in substantial and unprecedented victories at the local level, producing real power and self-sustaining organizations.” The Deacons were not fully accepted when they were created, over time it was understood that they were not organized to incite violence but only to protect their people from white supremacist. To the entire Deacons for Defense and Justice, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

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J.A. Ward

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2XUeyWqJL0&t=114s>

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