

Whitewashing Black History

By James Clark

In his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell characterized the government's authoritarianism by saying "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."¹ With this powerful quote, Orwell touched on the immense role a people's history plays in their ability to achieve self determination, as well as the capacity for the distortion of history by those who write and teach it. The Civil Rights movement was a watershed period in American history that helped shape the social and political climate at the time, as well as what would follow. Yet, in the remembrance and teaching of such an important topic, we see the misunderstandings, distortions and oversimplifications that Orwell warned against. Through a variety of sources, we will examine this perception of history in relation to the issue of violence and the aims of the Civil Rights movement as well as its implications for the future.

When examining history, it is important to venture from the published scholarly works and hear what less remarkable but no less relevant people have to say about their experiences at the time or what they have learned about what happened. To accomplish this, I interviewed a number of individuals of varying demographics and backgrounds. Lora Lofton is an eighty-one year old black woman who grew up in Oakwood, Texas and recalls having to "go through the back" at public establishments as a child because she was black.² Sedalia Johnson is an eighty year old black woman who grew up in a small town in east Texas.³ Elizabeth Kaul Clark is a fifty-one year old woman who grew up in Mission Woods, Kansas, outside Kansas City, and she also happens to be my mom.⁴ Stephanie Vu is nineteen, of Vietnamese descent and a friend of mine. She grew up moving around the United States often.⁵ Finally, Andy Hatch is seventeen and white, and

was studying the Civil Rights movement at his public high school in Katy, Texas at the time of our interview.⁶

Perhaps the most misunderstood and distorted aspect of the Civil Rights movement is the issue of violence and non-violence. The dominant view is that the Civil Rights movement was exclusively non-violent, with the exception of a few radical militants mostly in the late 1960s. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. especially is seen as the shining beacon of the non-violent approach to civil rights. Ms. Lofton, Ms. Johnson, and Ms. Clark all expressed their belief in the use of non-violence as well as their affinity for Dr. King.⁷ When queried about the more militant segments of the civil rights struggle, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Clark were rather hostile, believing that these more militant activists were “detrimental”⁸ to the struggle because they “just added more hate.”⁹

The reality of the civil rights movement, however, was far more complicated than the standard dichotomy of gratuitous violence versus strict non-violence. More often the question was “In which situations is the use of force appropriate?” The right to self-defense, “even involving weapons and bloodshed,” was upheld by even the most devoted adherents to the non-violent program, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁰ Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation noted Dr. King’s armed guards and was prompted to describe Dr. King’s house as “an arsenal.”¹¹

Fundamentally, this position was no different than that taken by the more typical militants of the Civil Rights movement like Malcolm X or the Black Panther Party, which upheld their right to bear arms in what they considered to be self-defense. The Panthers were even originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.¹² What certainly is

arguable is the point at which self-defense stops and aggression begins, but the basic principle of self-defense still stands.¹³

The major difference between the “violent” and “non-violent” camps was the role of self-defense in their political program and their portrayal by the media and the history books. While not abandoning the right to self-defense, the “non-violent” civil rights leaders continued preaching and leading non-violence in public, whereas for the more militant groups, arms played a central role in their outward projection to the public, making it easy for the media and history to ignore the other facets of their political program.¹⁴ It allowed strong advocates of armed self-defense like Robert Williams, described by astute historians as “typical” of his demographic of black Civil Rights activists in the south and a receiver of broad local support from that demographic,¹⁵ to be cast as a “pariah” of the Civil Rights movement by the New York Times Magazine.¹⁶

While many people who “didn’t have anything to do with” the more militant segments of the civil rights struggle, like Ms. Lofton, recognized that these radicals “did some good things...were working for the same thing [as the “non-violent” part of the movement],” and “weren’t part of the problem,”¹⁷ it was all too common for many others to see the strong self-defense advocates as the opposite side of a coin of hate and violence.¹⁸

This distorted legacy of what the more radical and militant segments of the struggle accomplished is carried into the conventional history of the movement today. Alamo Community Center staffer Pamela, 50, asserts that while “no one really understood [Malcolm X] at the time,” “[n]ow we do.”¹⁹ Yet, today’s youth still seem unaware of his real significance or what he stood for. While Stephanie Vu knows a little about Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, she does not credit her high school with any of