

# “Direct Confrontation”

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From “Black Swan”, Essays on the Civil Rights Movement in  
St. Augustine in 1963 and 1964

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It was in the summer of '63 that the throttle of peaceful protest was held wide open. In brief: it was an escalation of highly organized peaceful protests met by escalating beatings with pipes, assaults with bricks, bombings, fire bombings, nocturnal “drive by” shootings and other forms of terror and attempted murder. On one side you had unarmed teenagers, professionals, reverends, rabbis, NAACP leaders and college students, both black and white. On the other side you had the local police, armed citizens, the KKK, self-serving politicians, corrupt FBI agents and a judge with a talent for fancy footwork that he employed with enthusiasm to dance around the Constitution. Add a soundtrack and you have all the makings of a good urban musical except that good people – real people - lost their jobs, their homes, their teeth, their health and their freedom with fines and sentences of extraordinary size and duration.

It is the broad strokes and the patterns in this conflict that interest me now that the epoch of the civil rights movement has ended. For example: By 1963 the strategies and tactics of the civil rights movement had been well explored in other states and were known to police, some of whom studied the writings of Ghandi as they devised countermoves of their own. This essay examines the moves instead of the people who made them. Consequently, many of the people who will forever be remembered as heroes are not named here. I intend no offense. For those who require a more precise historical treatment, I refer you to the dispassionate accounts written by credentialed historians that I shall list elsewhere in these essays.

Here's my problem: If I give you a blow by blow account of these events your eyes will glaze over in disbelief as you reach for the Excedrin or the liquor cabinet, or both. So I offer the following overview instead. I think of the “direct confrontation” as consisting of four “waves”.

## The First Wave

Pick a city at random and ask one of its government officials - in private after few drinks - what the purpose of city government is, and he might respond truthfully saying: “to serve as a super-corporation, in favor of the corporations that sustain its tax base”.

I imagine St. Augustine officials breathed a collective sigh of relief in 1962. Woolworth's faced the “Plaza de la Constitucion”: A small, lovely park downtown that most tourists would eventually walk through or by on their way to happily part with their money at one of the many shops nearby. After several lunch counter “sit ins” at Woolworth's in '60 and '61, it appeared

that the number of blacks in St. Augustine willing to directly challenge authority using methods of peaceful protest could be counted on two hands. A handful of black students acting together and a singular mature man acting alone could hardly be construed as a "movement". They were dispatched quickly with arrests and fines, restoring order. In 1963, marches continued in Albany NY, a riot rocked Los Angeles in April and President JFK federalized Mississippi troops at Ole Miss in September. But St. Augustine was quiet and plans were already being drawn for it's 400<sup>th</sup> year birthday party - just 2 years off - that would raise the city's visibility as a tourist destination; a quiet and orderly city with no significant "negro problems".

Surely, city officials salivated at the prospect of spending their \$350,000 federal grant to fund the celebration. Imagine the gnashing of teeth that commenced upon learning that a federal department of government had advised Vice President LBJ to rescind the grant, thus honoring the request of Fanny Fullerwood of the local NAACP. I suspect that city officials saw this as a curve they could pull out of. But for a black maid to meddle with their world - and especially their money - must have come as quite a shock. Fullerwood and her colleagues had launched a political salvo of respectable power over the color line that bounced, spun and then rolled dangerously close to the city's machinery of commerce. The more perceptive among city officials might have seen this as a precursor of new local NAACP tactics and a new willingness to fight. But in my experience, this type of realization is more likely to occur when people face an adversary that they respect.

## The Second Wave

**Ask a marine why prolonged contact with an adversary is undesirable and he will likely say: "because the adversary will adapt to your tactics".**

The second wave of peaceful protest commenced with still more lunch counter "sit-ins" by teenagers at various establishments. Seeking creatively to adapt to this well-known tactic, City officials intimidated most of the arrested teenagers and their families into signing contracts that prohibited further protests in return for their freedom. Four teenagers refused - "The St. Augustine Four" as they were known - and they served 6 months in a combination of jail time and reform school for attempting to sit at the counter and order a bite to eat at Woolworth's in July, 1963.

In a change of tactics, the Foot Soldiers raise the stakes by holding a mass protest on Labor Day resulting in 26 arrests. I suspect this was a calculated move: I doubt that the mass protest was sufficient to overwhelm the police department but it may have enough to demonstrate a new level of resolve, build confidence and overcome the fear of arrest. City officials adapted by targeting a leader: For his crime of peaceful protest, Reverend Eubanks was sentenced to six months in jail.

The mass protest was followed by a series of violent reprisals by the KKK and other segregationists, including attempted murder, fire bombings of homes and a parked car and

drive-by shootings. It seems to me that the reprisals were the “X factor” in all of this. It was no doubt easier to anticipate the actions of baton wielding police operating in the light of day, than the actions of the KKK that - since its sinister birth - had delivered violence too difficult to contemplate; ghastly, unbelievable cruelty almost always delivered by mobs against lone individuals. Naturally, the KKK and other groups operated freely without police interference, leading me to reflect that the two may have been operating in concert.

In a bold move, the Foot Soldiers placed riflemen in Lincolnville to defend against “night riders” who had acquired the unfortunate habit of perforating the homes of certain blacks with small arms fire. The use of weapons of any kind was in clear opposition to Martin Luther King’s doctrine of peaceful protest. Even in self defense, violence had not been allowed. This change in tactics seems quite sensible, as an unfamiliar vehicle full of rambunctious gun-toting white males en route to the known addresses of leaders in an all black neighborhood was probably easy to spot if one was prepared for it. Also, I imagine that these night riders were unaccustomed to being shot at. A mob is a pretty scary sight, but I imagine that as individuals they bore a closer resemblance to deputy Barney Fife (from the Andy Griffith Show) than soldiers ready to operate while under fire themselves. A couple of roving squad cars would probably been sufficient to deter the attacks in the first place. To my knowledge, there is no record of the police ever intervening to protect the people of Lincolnville from night riders. This comes as no surprise.

### The Third Wave

If you could ask Ghandi how to peacefully overwhelm a criminal justice system, he might respond saying: “Provide more prisoners than could ever be managed by their system”.

In March of 1964, black leaders reached out to MLK, Jr. and the SCLC for help and then met with King in Orlando. It had been nearly a decade since Rosa Parks sparked the beginning of this “movement” that now drew its power from a diverse group of skilled people who knew how to communicate their message, train marchers, organize large events and stay alive. To use a sports metaphor, they were a “machine”. King’s response was immediate. March through June was a period of concentrated demonstrations and arrests. College students from northern cities were brought to the city, probably to overwhelm the so-called “criminal justice” system as well as sustain higher levels of peaceful protest. Speed was probably the key, as they were depending on well-known tactics in a city that had proven to be surprisingly viscous. The “surge” must have worked, for in May of 1964 NBC News conducted their first interview with the mayor who insisted that the city had no “negro problems”.

King raised the stakes once more by leading marchers himself. Andrew Young (who later became the 14<sup>th</sup> US Ambassador to the United Nations and mayor of Atlanta) later said that he took the worst beatings of his life in St. Augustine and suffered wounds that greatly affect his health to this day. King, who had survived one stabbing and one fire-bombing in other

states (not including the attack that took out the front of his house while his family was inside of it) sidestepped death once more: An unknown assailant fire-bombed the cottage where King was lodged near St. Augustine after a local paper published its address.

After enduring assaults by supremacists in broad daylight, operating under the watchful eye of the police, hundreds of peaceful protesters were arrested and jailed. City authorities adapt to the well-used tactic of overwhelming courts and jails with massive numbers of arrests by housing the arrested in an outdoor stockade with no shade from the blazing Florida sun that was prepared in advance.

In June, supremacists made the unusual move of marching through the black neighborhood of Lincolnville in a peaceful protest of their own, while the residents made fun of them from their properties. This interesting change in tactics may have been intended to demonstrate that the mobs were capable of delivering effective violence directly to black neighborhoods on a much larger scale than before. If so, then I don't think it worked. This time the supremacists exercised enlightened self-interest as they operated in the light of day and almost certainly left their rifles somewhere else.

#### The Fourth Wave

Ask a revolutionary guerrilla operating in South America how to defeat an overwhelmingly superior national guard, and he might answer: "by using those instances when the guard viscosly overreacts as a tool for eroding their public and political support".

It was the summer of 1964. Protests continued in St. Augustine while the Civil Rights Act lay in a state of suspended animation in the US Senate. There appeared to be enough support in the Senate to pass the bill and President Lyndon B. Johnson's pen lay ready to sign it into law. Even southern conservatives like Texas governor George Bush, Sr. finally reversed himself to support the bill over the doctrine of "states rights". As a combat veteran, Bush Sr. appealed to his constituents, asking (and I paraphrase here): "What do I say to the black soldier who fights against communism and then returns home?" The war in Vietnam, the cold war and the spotlight on America created new inescapable political vectors. But all of this was in jeopardy: Opponents filibustered the vote on the bill. The two-thirds vote needed to end the filibuster could not be met and the entire Civil Rights Act was in danger of defeat.

Even if the bill was passed, there was no guarantee it would actually be effective. No one knew better than the black citizen the difference between the declaration of a national law and its observance and enforcement. The victory of Brown over The Board of Education in 1954 stood as a perfect example of this: A national law - a Supreme Court decision - was ignored by the State and mocked by home grown terrorists and a suspiciously absent police force. And speaking of the police - who was the greater believer in justice: The dentist, guilty of peaceful protest, who stares in horror at his deliberately broken hands knowing that the Civil Rights Act

would only mark the beginning of a long arc toward justice? Or the Sheriff who wore the law as a cloak to conceal his ghastly career as a defender of racism? Yes, the Civil Rights Act promised to open a door on a new possible future - if it passed at all - but the entire population would be the architects of that future.

On June 18th, a group of protesters integrated the Monson Motor Lodge swimming pool. At some point, a police officer jumped into the pool with his baton raised to commence an attack and the owner poured a container of muriatic acid into the pool. I understand that police and supremacists were very efficient at confiscating cameras and viscously attacking reporters. Happily, the Monson Motor Lodge incident was captured on film and the photos were widely printed in prominent newspapers both within and outside of the US. The movement in St. Augustine is credited with having helped motivate senators to meet the two-thirds vote needed to end the filibuster. The senate then voted to pass the bill and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on the second of July. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was followed almost immediately by organized attempts by blacks to “test” compliance with it. Supremacists responded quickly with violent reprisals including beatings and one fire-bombing, until August 13<sup>th</sup> when blacks tested 17 restaurants in St. Augustine and were accepted at all of them. To my knowledge, the people who operated the restaurants treated their new black customers with respect. Still, I hope they took time to examine their food before they ate it.

I believe that the civil rights movement in St. Augustine was a “Black Swan”: A relatively small, highly improbable event outside the compass of prediction (except by those few who planned it), that triggered a larger event – with massive consequences - and then was overlooked in hind-sight. The story of the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers is largely unknown. Major, scholarly books on the history of the civil rights movement refer to St. Augustine only briefly, if at all. As the lives of the Foot Soldiers begin to quiet down, people like myself are only now learning their story by way of the internet, self-published books and independent documentary films.

I can count on one finger the number of times I’ve done something that even remotely bordered on bravery. Its one thing to experience fear for a minute or two, but to walk up to fear repeatedly; to “permit it to pass over you and through you” (as Frank Herbert put it in another context) even as it cripples the man next to you, well that’s another matter. I’d like to think I have that kind of iron but I’m not really sure. One thing is certain: They should have invented a special award for the blacks who were the very first to eat in those 17 restaurants that were “tested” in August of 1964. That’s when I would have jumped off the train and walked home. Like the general said to captain Willard in Apocalypse Now: “I don’t know how you feel about this shrimp, but if you eat it, you’ll never have to prove your courage in any other way”.