

Blacks, Gun Cultures, and Gun Control: T.R.M. Howard, Armed Self-Defense, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi

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T.R.M. Howard was a leading civil rights activists and businessman in Mississippi in the mid-twentieth century. Having grown up in the gun culture, he armed himself for self-defense against racist, helping to set a pattern of affirmative self-defense which was followed by other civil rights leaders.

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Few blacks in Mississippi were more assertive in confronting Jim Crow and disfranchisement in the 1950s than Dr. Theodore Roosevelt Mason Howard. When he spoke out, it was hard to ignore him. Howard was not only one of the wealthiest blacks in the state but headed the largest civil organization in the Delta. In honor of his efforts, *The California Eagle* called him the “Most Hated, and Best Loved, Man in Mississippi.” From the beginning, armed self-defense was an important component of Howard’s civil rights strategy. In this respect, he followed in a long tradition that later found expression under the leadership of Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina, and various civil rights activists in the Deep South in the 1960s who relied on the often interrelated strategies of “God, Gandhi, and Guns.”ⁱ

YOUTH

Howard was born in the small town of Murray in Calloway County, Kentucky, in March 1908. Unlike many other civil rights leaders of his generation, he grew up in rural poverty. His childhood was steeped in Kentucky’s gun culture, where firearms and hunting were ubiquitous. Murray was in the center of the black patch in the western part of the state, so named because of its high quality of tobacco. At the time of Howard’s birth, a secret society, the Night Riders, was launching violent attacks as part of an effort by planters to force up tobacco prices.ⁱⁱ

About a quarter of Murray’s population of 2,139 was black in 1910, a proportion much higher than the county average. Though the town and county had cast their lot with the Confederacy during the Civil War, race relations at the turn of the century were relatively good by western Kentucky standards. Not one lynching had occurred there. But, to the extent that a condition of racial peace and good will existed, it was only superficial.ⁱⁱⁱ

Events in the months during and after Howard’s birth threatened to destroy this outward harmony. In March, the *Paducah Evening Sun* reported that the first “real night riders have appeared in Calloway county” and were intimidating independent growers and burning barns. A few tried to scare blacks into leaving Murray. The dangers of violence heightened in April when a county judge warned that Night Riders were about to “swoop down on Murray and burn property and beat her citizens.”^{iv}

The planned sack of Murray fell apart after the governor sent a detachment of troops. Although the announced targets of the Night Riders were prominent merchants and bankers, the record of recent attacks in

nearby Marshall and Trigg counties indicated the likelihood of atrocities on a much broader scale. Murray's blacks could have anticipated an orgy of racial killings and ethnic cleansing.^v

Despite the subsequent demise of the Night Riders, the threat of lynching always lurked in the background. The rope and faggot claimed the lives of fifty-four blacks in Kentucky between 1900 and 1919. In January 1917, lynching fever reached Murray when a mob threatened to storm the jail holding Lube Martin, a black man who was under arrest for killing a prominent white in a probable act of self-defense. Governor Augustus O. Stanley, an avid opponent of lynching, had other ideas. Taking the first train to Murray, he successfully shamed the crowd into dispersing.^{vi}

It is almost certain that Howard, then eight years old, was aware of the Lube Martin affair. Murray was, after all, a small town and its black community was smaller still. Moreover, his house was only a few blocks from the shooting and only a little farther away from the courthouse where Governor Stanley had faced down the mob. Lube Martin's brother, Chester Martin, who had witnessed the killing and remained in Murray for the rest of his life, was certainly aware of Howard. More than two decades later, he visited him in Mississippi and later commented with pride on the local boy who made good.^{vii}

The events of 1908 and 1917 left a lasting imprint on Murray's black community and probably Howard. One lesson taken by many in the younger generation was the need to be prepared to shoot back. During the 1890s, Ida Wells-Barnett had framed the idea in terms that many blacks in Murray would have understood. Noting that blacks in nearby Paducah had warded off attacks, she recommended that "a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give . . . The more the Afro American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched."^{viii}

At about the time that Lube Martin was nearly lynched, Howard was perfecting his hunting skills with the family shotgun. He was expected to contribute to the meager family budget. He later recalled that his mother gave him twenty cents each Sunday to buy four shells. Her instructions were to return with either two rabbits or two squirrels, or one of each for the dinner table. She warned not to waste shells on quail because "there wasn't any meat on 'em." While his weapons of choice and necessity changed over time, guns always remained an important part of Howard's life.^{ix}

When he was only twelve, Howard caught the eye of Dr. Will Mason, the white head of the local community hospital. Mason, a Seventh Day Adventist, encouraged the young boy's ambitions to be a doctor. Later, he helped to pay for Howard's college education at three Adventist colleges. During the late 1920s, Howard showed his gratitude to his white mentor by changing his name to Theodore Roosevelt *Mason* Howard. Howard received his M.D. in 1935 from the College of Medical Evangelists (now Loma Linda University) in California.^x

DOCTOR, BUSINESSMAN, AND COMMUNITY LEADER

In 1942, Howard became chief surgeon at the Taborian Hospital of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, a fraternal organization, in the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Within five years, he had founded various business and community enterprises, including an insurance company, hospital, home construction firm, and a large farm where he raised cattle, quail, hunting dogs, and cotton. He also built a small zoo and a park, as well as the first swimming pool for blacks in Mississippi. In 1947, he broke with the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, and founded his own fraternal organization, the United Order of Friendship of America. It established a rival hospital just across the street from the Taborian Hospital.^{xi}

From the onset, Howard had to contend with Mississippi's discriminatory gun control laws. Sheriffs routinely denied concealed carry permits blacks, including prominent leaders such as Howard. But Howard later boasted that he found a way to evade the law. He said that had a secret compartment in his car where he could stow his gun if the police pulled him over. Several years later, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that as Howard "rode the highways, he would take the gun from its secret hiding place and put it in his lap . . . always cocked!"

An arrest record from 1947, when Howard's car was stopped for speeding in Leland, is consistent with the newspaper description. As the officer approached, he noticed that five of the occupants were hurriedly pulling guns from their belts and throwing them on the floor. Howard was the only one who did

not have a gun, perhaps because he stowed it away just in time. The other men were not so lucky. Each had to pay a fine of 100 dollars on the charge of carrying a concealed weapon without a permit.^{xiii}

Because the permit system did not apply to unconcealed weapons, Howard took advantage of his legal right to have weapons in open view in his car. Like many Mississippians, black and white, he had a long gun prominently displayed in the rack on the window of the back seat.^{xiii}

Howard entered the civil rights limelight after 1951 by founding the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. The youngest official of the Council was Medgar Evers, whom Howard had hired to be an agent for his insurance company. The Council mounted a successful boycott of service stations that denied restrooms to blacks. It distributed 20,000 bumper stickers bearing the slogan, "Don't Buy Gas Where You Can't Use the Restroom." The Council organized yearly rallies (sometimes drawing audiences of 10,000 or more) for civil rights and voter registration. Each of these events featured nationally-known speakers, such as Rep. William Dawson of Chicago, Alderman Archibald Carey of Chicago, Rep. Charles Diggs of Michigan, and NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall.^{xiv}

MISSISSIPPI GUN CONTROL

As black assertiveness increased, whites showed heightened interest in tougher gun control. Proponents of legislation did not hide the fact that race was central to their concerns. Of course, this was not new. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several southern states had enacted gun control laws that restricted access of cheap handguns to blacks. The term "Saturday Night Special" originated during this period as a racial slur.^{xv}

In January 1954, an editorial in the *Clarion Ledger* of Jackson (which had the highest circulation in the state) stressed the dangers posed by .22 caliber pistols and rifles. Focusing on the example of an "allegedly 'crazed' Negro" who killed three white men," it lamented that these "weapons are easily obtained and ammunition for them can be bought almost anywhere." If this problem continued, the editorial recommended "legislative action dealing with control of the sale of weapons and ammunition or the keeping of records of all such sales."^{xvi}

In October 1954, a more ambitious proposal "to require registration of all firearms and records on all sales of ammunition" came close to becoming law. The sponsor, Rep. Edwin White, noted with alarm that many blacks were buying guns and concluded that the bill would protect "us from those likely to cause us trouble." The Mississippi House approved the bill but it failed to get out of committee in the Senate. In the end, Mississippi's vibrant gun culture was too strong an obstacle repressive legislation. Still, it was a near thing.^{xvii}

RACIST DANGERS

Howard had run afoul the White Citizens Councils which had launched a credit squeeze against blacks who took part in the civil rights movement. He was instrumental in organizing a national campaign to encourage black businesses, churches, and voluntary associations to transfer their accounts to the black-owned Tri-State Bank of Memphis. The funds swelled to nearly 300,000 dollars and were made available for loans to victims of the squeeze.^{xviii}

As if this were not enough, Howard's speeches, which were widely reported in the white press, were often highly inflammatory. In 1955, he told a crowd of several thousand in Mound Bayou that the late Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, an extremely virulent racist even by the standards of the time, was now living in hell and had recently "sent a direct message to the capital at Jackson asking to stop treating the Negroes so badly in Mississippi and to give them a break, because they have a Negro fireman down there that keeps the fire mighty hot." Because the story apparently went over so well, it became a staple in later speeches. While characterizing economic pressure as "a flop," he counseled against complacency because "the next round will be a well-organized wave of violence."^{xix}

Despite Howard's highly visible militancy, he was apparently never attacked. It helped, of course, that he lived in Mound Bayou, where any white person stuck out like a sore thumb. But this does not provide a complete answer because Howard often traveled to other communities. It is likely that he also gained some

indirect protection because of his remaining business and personal ties to members of the white elite in the Delta, who still gave him some grudging respect and owed him favors.^{xx}

One of the most important deterrents to any attack, however, was that whites knew that Howard and his followers could respond with deadly fire. Also, it was difficult for any shooter to get in close enough to make a successful kill, much less escape. The Regional Council of Negro Leadership's reliance on armed self-defense was still fairly informal, however. Although members carried guns when they were in public, the Council never aspired to the same degree of training and paramilitary organization that would characterize groups such as the Monroe, North Carolina branch of the NAACP in the late 1950s, the Tuscaloosa Citizens for Action in 1964, or the Deacons for Defense and Justice of Bogalusa in 1965.^{xxi}

The threat of violence rose to a much higher level of intensity after the murder of Emmett Till in August 1955. The subsequent events represented the culmination, and the beginning of the end, of Howard's career in Mississippi. Howard was instrumental in finding witnesses and uncovering evidence in the hope of securing a conviction against the two men arrested for the crime.^{xxii}

Even before the trial, the Howard home in Mound Bayou was taking on the character of a "black command center" and safe haven for journalists, witnesses, and prominent visitors. Mamie Bradley, Emmett Till's mother, stayed there, as did Rep. Charles Diggs of Michigan, who was an observer. The tight security left a deep impression on guests. It was so formidable that journalists and politicians from a later era might have used the word "compound" rather than "home" to describe it. According to Simeon Booker, a correspondent from *Jet*, Howard's "security program was a model of dispatch and efficiency." Strangers had to pass through a checkpoint and guards were on duty around the clock. Bradley particularly remembered "an old man with a long shotgun and I understand he really knew how to use it."

Firearms were ubiquitous, including a pistol strapped to Howard's waist. When Cloyte Murdock of *Ebony* had difficulty getting her luggage through the front door, she looked around the corner and saw a cache of weapons on the other side. Another visitor spied a magnum pistol and a .45 at the head of Howard's bed, a Thompson submachine gun at the foot, and "a long gun, a shotgun or rifle, in every corner of every room." Each day, Howard escorted Bradley and Diggs from Mound Bayou to Sumner, where the trial took place, in an armed car caravan. Bradley asked to ride in Howard's air-conditioned Cadillac, but he refused saying that the target was too tempting for snipers.^{xxiii}

THE MOVE NORTH

Despite the efforts of Howard, Medgar Evers, and many other black civil rights activists and journalists, an all-white jury acquitted the accused killers of Till in September 1955. Three months later, Howard sold most of his real estate and announced that his family had moved out of the state for their own protection. He soon followed them and set up a thriving medical practice in Chicago.

Although the cycle of violence was an important factor in his flight, he probably had other reasons as well. Howard was an intensely ambitious man. Especially as economic pressure bore down, he might have seen the possibilities for future business successes as limited and dwindling. As blacks migrated to the North in increasing numbers, the potential customer and membership base for his organizations and enterprises promised only to shrink. He could continue on as before, perhaps, but he was not a man to be content in a world of limits. In the short term, white pressure had only accelerated the process.^{xxiv}

White segregationists expressed glee at Howard's departure. In "Good Riddance," the *Jackson Daily News* editorialized that by deciding to leave Howard had "rendered the greatest service he has yet performed for the state. Dr. Howard is not a desirable citizen. He is a radical agitator who devotes much of his time to stirring up ill feeling between the races . . . Howard's room is much preferred to his company. All possible speed should accompany his going."^{xxv}

Although he no longer had to live in constant fear of attack after he moved to Chicago, Howard did not put away his guns. In the public mind, he became increasingly identified with his favorite past-time of big game hunting, and he made several trips to Africa for this purpose.

It was far more than a hobby. To display his trophies, he established a "safari room" in his South Side mansion that was often made available for public tours. Howard was equally comfortable using guns for recreation as well as personal protection. As historians such as Charles Payne, John Dittmer, Simon Wendt,

and Akinyele O. Umoja have shown, armed self-defense was a key component of civil rights activism in Mississippi during the 1960s. In taking a stand, the civil rights activists were following a path blazed by men such as Dr. T.R.M. Howard.^{xxvi}

ENDNOTES

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- iii. U.S. Census, 1910, Kentucky, Calloway County, Magisterial District 1, Murray City; U.S. Census, 1920, Kentucky, Murray Magisterial District 1, Murray Town; and Kirby Jennings, *The Story of Calloway County, 1822-1976* (Murray, Kentucky, 1980), 31.
- iv. *Paducah Evening Sun*, March 3, 1908; George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynching."* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 139; Cunningham, 136; *Paducah Evening Sun*, April 3, 1908; quoted from April 29, 1908 issue of Calloway Times, reprinted in undated and untitled newspaper, file on Night Riders, Pogue Library, Murray State University.
- v. Cunningham, 1983, 137; *Paducah Evening Sun*, April 2, 1908, April 3, 1908, April 15, 1908, August 7, 1908.
- vi. Wright, 71, 80; *Paducah Evening Sun*, April 25, 1908; *Murray Ledger*, August 24, 1916, November 23, 1916, August 11, 1910, November 2, 1916; Thomas Randolph, "The Governor and the Mob," *Independent* 89, February 26, 1917, 347-48; and Waldrep, 186.
- vii. Chester Martin, Interview, late 1970s, in possession of the author; and U.S. Census, 1920, Kentucky, Murray Magisterial District 1, Murray Town, 42:16A.
- viii. Wright, 160-61.
- ix. Barrett B. Howard, telephone interview, March 27, 2000; and "Dr. Howard's Safari Room," *Ebony* 24, October 1969, 138.
- x. Hodding Carter, "He's Doing Something About the Race Problem," *Saturday Evening Post* 218 (February 23, 1946), 64. The first known appearance of Howard's new middle name was in T.R.M. Howard, "The Hour Has Come," *Oakwood Junior College Bulletin* 15, (March 1928), 6.
- xi. David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 185, 188-89; and David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito, "T.R.M. Howard, M.D.: A Mississippi Doctor in Chicago Civil Rights," *The A.M.E. Church Review* 67 (July-September 2001), 54-55.
- xii. *Labor's Daily*, October 14, 1955, United Packinghouse Workers of America, Papers; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 1, 1956, NAACP Administration, 1959-1965, General Office File, Crime, Mississippi, 1956-1965, Group III, Box A91; and Mississippi, State Sovereignty Commission, G.B. Swafford to J.P. Coleman, April 24, 1958, folder on T.R.M. Howard, Mississippi, Sovereignty Commission Files, Document, Howard, T.R.M., Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson,
- xiii. Edward Boyd, telephone interview, October 27, 1995.
- xiv. Beito and Beito, 54-55.
- xv. Robert J. Cottrol and Raymond T. Diamond, "The Second Amendment: Toward an Afro-Americanist Reconsideration," *Georgetown Law Journal* 80 (1990), 309; Clayton E. Cramer, "The Racist Roots of Gun Control," *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy* 4 (Winter 1995), 20-21; and B. Bruce-Briggs, "The Great American Gun Control," *The Public Interest* 45 (1976), 37, 50.

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- xvii. *Southern School News* 1, October 1, 1954, 9.
- xviii. Beito and Beito, 56.
- xix. *Louisiana Weekly*, May 7, 1955.
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- xxiii. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 152-56; Mamie Till-Mobley, telephone interview, September 28, 1999; Carolyn P. DuBose, *The Untold Story of Charles Diggs: The Public Figure, the Private Man* (Arlington, Virginia: Barton Publishing House, 1998), 51; Simeon Booker, *Black Man's America*, 166; and Homer Wheaton, telephone interview, June 14, 2000.
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- xxv. *Clarion Ledger*, January 1, 1956; and *Jackson Daily News*, December 17, 1955
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