

January 11, 2013

HUFF
POST POLITICS

MLK and His Guns

One issue on everyone's mind this Martin Luther King Jr. day was gun control. King's calls for resolving our differences through peaceful nonviolence are especially poignant after Jared Loughner gunned down six people and wounded several others in Tucson. Amid the clamor for new gun laws, it's appropriate to remember King's complicated history with guns.

Most people think King would be the last person to own a gun. Yet in the mid-1950s, as the civil rights movement heated up, King kept firearms for self-protection. In fact, he even applied for a permit to carry a concealed weapon.

A recipient of constant death threats, King had armed supporters take turns guarding his home and family. He had good reason to fear that the Klan in Alabama was targeting him for assassination.

William Worthy, a journalist who covered the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, reported that once, during a visit to King's parsonage, he went to sit down on an armchair in the living room and, to his surprise, almost sat on a loaded gun. Glenn Smiley, an adviser to King, described King's home as "an arsenal."

As I found researching my new book, *Gunfight*, in 1956, after King's house was bombed, King applied for a concealed carry permit in Alabama. The local police had discretion to determine who was a suitable person to carry firearms. King, a clergyman whose life was threatened daily, surely met the requirements of the law, but he was rejected nevertheless. At the time, the police used any wiggle room in the law to discriminate against African Americans.

Ironically, the concealed carry permit law in Alabama was promoted by the National Rifle Association thirty years earlier. Today, the [gun rights hardliners](#) fight to eliminate permits for concealed carry, as Arizona has done.

Eventually, King gave up any hope of armed self-defense and embraced nonviolence more completely. Others in the civil rights movement, however, embraced the gun.

One of the most indelible images of the 1960s is a photograph from *Life* magazine of Malcolm X looking out a window with a long M-1 carbine in his hands, the rifle pointed up to the sky. For blacks unhappy with the progress achieved by King's marches, the gun became a symbol of the "by any means necessary" philosophy.

The Black Panthers took Malcolm X's approach to the extreme, openly carrying guns as they patrolled for police abuses on the streets of Oakland. They even made guns part of their official uniform, along with the black beret and leather jacket. Every member learned about Marxism and firearms safety.

California passed a law to disarm the Panthers and then Congress, after King was assassinated by James Earl Ray, passed the Gun Control Act of 1968 -- the first major federal gun control since the 1930s. These laws fueled the rise of the modern gun rights movement, which self-consciously borrowed tactics from the civil rights movement.

One lesson the gun advocates took was from the early King and his more aggressive followers: If the police can't (or won't) to protect you, a gun may be your last line of defense. Inspired by that idea, the gun lobby has grown so strong that even after the Tucson mass murder there is almost no likelihood of new gun laws being passed.

Whether a broader acceptance of the King's later pacifism would have made us safer than choosing guns, we will never know.

Follow Adam Winkler on Twitter: www.twitter.com/@adamwinkler