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Fight the Power: Protest, Showdown and Civil
Rights Activity in Three
Southern Cities 1960-1965.

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Kyle T. Scanlan
August 2001

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Dr. Dale Schmitt

Keywords: Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King,
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ABSTRACT

Fight the Power: Protest, Showdown and Civil Rights Activity in Three Southern Cities, 1960-1965

by

Kyle T. Scanlan

This thesis describes the significant events of the Civil Rights Movement from 1960 to 1965, examining the campaigns of Albany, Georgia in 1962, Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, and Selma, Alabama in 1965. In the wake of the Freedom Rides of 1960-61, Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was looking for a way to dramatically reveal the racial injustice of the South. Stumbling into a campaign in Albany, SCLC found the right method in the use of nonviolent direct action. While Albany was a failure, it was this campaign that led to the campaigns of Birmingham and Selma, which resulted in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Through confrontation with law enforcement, SCLC was able to effect meaningful social change.

The research for this thesis included both primary and secondary sources. Newspaper accounts, especially from the *New York Times*, were used as well as magazine articles. All three main chapters contain accounts by the participants, activists, and politicians.

The conclusion from the research would indicate that it was through the use of confrontation with Southern law enforcement that the Civil Rights Movement was able to force the federal government act on civil rights legislation.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Thomas
R. Peake, the man who first taught me
the wonder of the Civil Rights
Movement and just how vital
and meaningful
Dr. King's dream is.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my Thesis Advisor, Dr. Elwood Watson, for his help and guidance in completing this project. I would also like to thank my friends for lending their support and providing an outlet when things looked bleak. Also, thanks to my father, for his help, both financial and otherwise, to aid in making this project a reality. And finally I would like to thank Max Hermann for providing the employment and patience that allowed me to not starve as I completed this thesis.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.2
DEDICATION.3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.	4
 Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.	6
2. ONE SHREWD YET RETROGRADE SHERIFF.	13
3. CONFRONTATION IN THE STREETS.38
4. AIN'T GONNA LET NO ONE TURN ME ROUND.70
5. CONCLUSION.92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.95
VITA.99

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States essentially began the same time that the country did. Beginning with the Abolitionist movement to end the "peculiar institution" of slavery, through the Civil War and Reconstruction, and into the Industrial Age, the United States has always grappled with the problem of race. In his 1903 classic study on race relations, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois wrote that, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."¹

DuBois was not far off in his assessment. During this century race had become the number one social ill in the nation. It was disguised as class struggles, economic woes, wars and manifested itself in other forms.

There were many valiant attempts during the Twentieth Century to improve the state of race relations, but all of them were doomed to minimal success. DuBois and Booker T. Washington were both great leaders, but their squabbling over methods and ideology derailed many of their best

¹ WEB DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A.C. McClurge and Co., 1903), xi.

efforts. Marcus Garvey, the flamboyant leader of the UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association), had one of the largest followings of any Black leaders in the history of the United States, but rampant corruption within his organization coupled with the chronic investigations and his eventual imprisonment by the federal government ended his career. All of these leaders were unable to see their goals reach fruition. Decades would pass before the desolate plight of Black Americans would etch itself into American society.

In the 1950s, a series of several victories in the courts engineered by Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund culminated in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision seemed to open the floodgates for change.² The case, which struck down the 1896 precedent of "separate but equal", established in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*³ marked the beginning of the erosion of entrenched systematized segregation. This decision was really the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement, marked with effective protest and actual results. Harry

² 347 U.S. (1954).

³ 163 U.S. (1896).

Ashmore went as far as to say, "without the *Brown* decision, there would have been no Civil Rights Movement."⁴

The Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56 was one of the earliest events in the modern Civil Rights Movement. Under the leadership of MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association) President Martin Luther King Jr. Blacks used the nonviolent resistance technique of a mass boycott on the city bus system. After a protracted campaign, the Montgomery Improvement Association forced the end of segregation on public transit in the city. King, who was quite interested in social justice and equality, saw that he had the model for bringing about the end of Jim Crow in the South.

Meanwhile in Little Rock, tensions were building in 1957 as Arkansas attempted to comply with the *Brown* decision. That fall, as the plan of integration was being carried out, violence erupted. President Eisenhower was forced to federalize the Arkansas National Guard and call in regular US Army troops to allow nine teenage children the right to attend school. Due to the shorter time span of events and the confrontational spectacle that erupted, this made for greater public exposure for television cameras. It

⁴ Harry Ashmore, Civil Rights and Wrongs: A Memoir of Race and Politics, 1944-1994, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 96.

was Little Rock that first placed the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement dramatically into the nation's living rooms, and it was this campaign that gave King an education on how to manipulate the modern media to aid his efforts.

With the arrival of television, King saw that his philosophy of nonviolent resistance had a natural ally. The point of nonviolence is to protest injustice and oppression while at the same time rising above the temptation to uselessly fight back violently in a battle that cannot be won. With the aid of television, King hoped to build on the lessons of Montgomery and Little Rock and use nonviolent resistance tactics to educate the nation to the racial injustice that was rampant in the South. Then, with the nation suitably outraged, the government would be forced into protecting the rights of Black Americans. Vilifying local Southern authority as the bad guys on television would allow victory for the movement.

The years from 1960 to 1965 were the high water mark of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Under the leadership of Dr. King's organization, SCLC, (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference), the Movement managed to change the nation.

In 1962 in Albany, Georgia, SCLC and SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) attempted to wage the first large scale campaign to secure integration of public facilities and voting rights in the city. Here, the Movement was met with defeat due to the skillful, yet, retrograde intelligence of Sheriff Laurie Prichett. Prichett was well schooled in the methods of Martin Luther King and was well aware of King's use of Gandhian tactics. The Albany Sheriff knew what the campaign was designed to do, provoke him and his men into violence, thus Prichett used nonviolence to combat nonviolence, therefore, stymieing the efforts of King and his supporters.

King knew that in the wake of failure at Albany, the Movement needed to do something profound in 1963. Little could he have dreamed that it was the events of that year that would result in Congress passing the following year meaningful civil rights legislation for the first time since Reconstruction. In 1963, SCLC decided to implement a campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. Here they met their desired result, as police chief Bull Connor reacted in the manner SCLC anticipated. The mass arrests of protesters were accompanied by the use of fire hoses and police dogs, and the nation watched the coverage on television, stunned.

Violence got so bad that President Kennedy was forced to station troops in various parts of the state to be used if the situation did not calm down. By the summer of 1963, with Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill on the floor of Congress, civil rights organizations staged the March on Washington to apply pressure to the government. With 250,000 marchers standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King gave his legendary "I Have a Dream" speech.

That September, tragedy once again occurred in Birmingham, as a bomb killed four Black girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Violence erupted, and by the end of the day six people were dead. In November 1963 John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas and Lyndon Johnson became President. Johnson's legislative skills aided in passing Kennedy's bill, and in 1964, President Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁵

On the heels of a victory in Birmingham, King's next focus was voting rights. While launching the statewide Alabama Project, SCLC decided to stage a campaign in Selma, Alabama. Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark harbored many of the racist values of Bull Connor, and once again SCLC planned on exposing the violence of the police to demonstrate the evils of Jim Crow. In this campaign, the

movement was emphasizing the injustice of being deprived of the right to vote. The campaign went smoothly until March 7, 1965. While beginning a planned march to the state capital, the marchers were routed by police with tear gas, cattle prods, and billy clubs. "Bloody Sunday" was the turning point. The march went on, and as President Johnson was forced to get involved, he decided that the time was now right to force a voting rights bill through Congress. His Administration had been stalling on sending more civil rights legislation to Congress, but Johnson decided that King had given him a perfect opportunity to pass a voting rights bill. The President turned out to be correct, and on August 6, 1965, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁶

These events changed the lives of all Americans. Due to the combination of good leadership, determination, influence, as well as intense coverage by the media, segregation faced a severe setback in the American South.

⁵ 377 U.S. (1964).

⁶ 437 U.S. (1965).

CHAPTER 2

ONE SHREWD, YET RETROGRADE SHERIFF

Martin Luther King, Jr. formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 in the hope that the future that held the dissolution of racial equality.¹ Dr. King, fresh off the victory of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, had an ultimate objective, racial justice, and he had a refined method of nonviolent resistance that he intended to employ. However, what King lacked was a specific area in which to implement these plans. In 1961, with the ever increasing idealism sweeping the nation with the inauguration of John F. Kennedy, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized, and it was with this young, energetic group that an explicit plan of attack against segregation came to fruition. The use of sit-ins, boycotts, voter registration drives, and freedom marches were all planned and organized.² Forced to capture the attention of young people, SCLC was looking for something to captivate the nation as Montgomery had done.

¹ Andrew Young, An Easy Burden: the Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America (New York: Harper Collins: 1996), 1.

² James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 145.

At this point, the movement turned its attention towards Albany, a small town in southwest Georgia with great racial diversity and deeply rooted racist sentiments. SNCC had agreed to send two activists, Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon, into Terrell County, where Albany was located, to begin organizing the black community through voter registration. Many activists viewed Terrell County as the most stagnant and formidable county in the South. The Black community was terrified of economic retribution by the White community, and the White community was comforted by the considerable financial advantage they held over the Blacks.

Terrell County was located in one of the most unfavorable areas for African Americans in the United States. The names the activists had associated with the counties in Southwest Georgia told the story: "Dogging Douglas", "Unmitigated Mitchell", "Lamentable Lee", "Unbearable Baker", and "Unworthy Worth".³

Dr. King and SCLC did not organize the Albany campaign and they were never in control of the demonstrations. They were invited to Albany by SNCC. They arrived on the scene to find a Black community that was largely inactive in the

³ Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 248.

context of the Movement. It was said that, "even the local NAACP was quiet until the 1961 Interstate Commerce decree ordering integration of buses and depots."⁴ Tension in the city culminated when the two young SNCC workers, Cordell Reagon and Charles Sherrod, arrived in Albany in October of 1961 to prepare for the voter registration campaign. The two field workers received very little support from the black community.⁵ Many people, including ministers, felt that if they allowed the activists into their homes, it would endanger themselves and their families by provoking white supremacist reaction. After a month, both men had generally won the community over, but there was still a small degree of bitterness towards the "outsiders."⁶

It came as no surprise that when SNCC sent Sherrod and Reagon to the hot, southwest corner of Georgia the two of them encountered a formidable task: Albany. In his seminal work on race relations *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois presented a portrait of the landscape, " For a radius of a hundred miles about Albany stretch a great, fertile land,

⁴ Thomas Peake, Keeping the Dream Alive (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987), 88.

⁵ Jim Bishop, The Days of Martin Luther King (New York: GP Putnam and Sons, 1971), 248.

⁶ Peake, Keeping the Dream Alive, 88.

luxuriant with forests of pine, oak, ash, hickory, and poplar, hot with the sun and damp from the rich swampland; and here the cornerstone of the cotton kingdom was laid.”⁷

The most effective tool that the segregationists had in their arsenal was fear. If the black community feared unwarranted violence from the police, they would remain quiet. If the black community feared the unpunished vigilante beatings or lynching by incensed mobs, they would remain quiet. If the black community was afraid of disturbing the normalcy of centuries of segregation, they would remain quiet. But several factors, World War II, television, and the deep, seething resentment within the black community were aspiring to overturn the prevailing social order, and the time was ripe for change.

In early October of 1961, Reagon and Sherrod moved into Albany and set up office in a small, rundown building two blocks from the Mt. Zion Baptist Church and the Shiloh Baptist Church, in a section of town known as Harlem.⁸ Their initial task was to register voters. Albany consisted of a large black population that had swelled to 40 percent by

⁷ WEB DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: A.C. McClurge and Co., 1903), 143.

⁸ Fred Powledge, Free at Last (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1991), 341.

1962, but its influence in the community was greatly lacking. Terrell was a county with about 11,500 people, and about 60 percent of those were black people, yet only 52 black citizens were registered to vote⁹, a staggering indication of the powerful intimidation that had been ingrained within the Black community.

SCLC believed that much of the respect and influence in the black community fell to the local ministers, and if they could recruit and mobilize these men, much of the community would follow their example. SNCC, however, had a decidedly different strategy. Their aim was to recruit as many young people as possible. Their thinking was that if they managed to engage the young people, the older citizens would become involved to protect their children and maintain the respect their children had for them.¹⁰

On the first day of November 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued a regulation outlawing segregation in interstate transport terminals. Within a short time, Sherrod and Reagon had convinced college students from Albany State College to sit-in at White bus

⁹ John Ansboro, The Making of a Mind (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 82.

¹⁰ Aldon Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 240.

terminals and as SNCC hoped, the entire community solidified around the efforts of their children. This raised the ire of the NAACP, because the students recruited by SNCC largely belonged to the NAACP Youth Council of Albany. The more austere organization was worried both about its reputation and a concern that SNCC, a relatively untested organization, would end up getting the children sent to jail, and the NAACP would end up footing the bill to have them freed. However, the energy of the movement was capturing the imagination of the people in Albany. In an effort to avoid internecine warfare among the civil rights organizations, on November 17, 1961, the Ministerial Alliance, the Federation of Women's Clubs, the Negro Voters League, the Criterion Club, the NAACP as well as SNCC decided to come together under an inclusive name: the Albany Movement.¹¹ Dr. William Anderson, a respected medical doctor who had not lived in the community long enough to make enemies and had precious little experience in organized civil rights work, was elected president of the Albany Movement.¹²

The Albany Movement was unique in many ways. Most

¹¹ David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the SCLC (New York: Morrow and Co, 1986), 176.

¹² Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 241.

importantly, the goals of the movement differed drastically from the previous movements. Instead of concentrating on a single goal, it was decided that this movement would end all forms of racial discrimination in Albany, Georgia. Demonstrations would be held against segregated buses, libraries, bowling alleys, restaurants, swimming pools, and other facilities.¹³ Somehow, through all of this, the SNCC recruiters had conveyed to the people that it was no longer disgraceful to go to jail if it was for a noble and just cause. Slowly, the timidity of the black community was dissolving, and they began to fight for their convictions, even if it meant they were going to jail for them. Never before would such a large number of people have gone to jail in Albany. It would appear that some sort of boiling point was imminent.¹⁴

A few weeks after the initial confrontation in the terminal, on November 22, five Albany State students went to eat inside the Trailways station to test the ICC ruling. Unfortunately for the students, they were the first in the Albany Movement to confront the city's sheriff, Laurie Prichett. Commenting on the eventual arrests, Prichett

¹³ Morris, 241.

¹⁴ Ibid., 242.

pointed out that the five students were cited for failing to obey the orders of a law enforcement officer, a city ordinance, and that the incident had nothing to do with interstate commerce.¹⁵ This was not a foreseen development. Prichett was not the stereotypical southern sheriff. He was 35, an Elk, Shriner, Rotarian, and a Mason. He did not use the word "nigger" in public as did many of his contemporaries, and he refrained from using tobacco in public or engaging in any other stereotypical activity that would characterize him as an ignorant southerner. He was primarily interested in doing his job fairly and enforcing the laws of Albany and the State of Georgia.¹⁶ These traits would later serve him well as the national press focused on the showdown in Albany months later.

Prichett had done his homework. He read nonviolent theory and practice, especially those tactics used by SNCC and SCLC. He knew that King's brand of nonviolence was derived from the protest philosophies of Gandhi and Thoreau,¹⁷ and he was aware of the fact that Sherrod and

¹⁵ Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 167

¹⁶ Powledge, 353.

¹⁷ Peake, 91.

Reason were circulating certain ideas of Thoreau among the people. Thoreau said that the only place for a just and principled man was jail, and if one person would stand against the wrongs of the establishment, then the entire regime was doomed to fail, inevitably.¹⁸

As the champion of liberation for the people of India, Gandhi, in combination with Thoreau and others, provided a basic philosophical framework for Dr. King to infuse his own ideas to combat Jim Crow in the south. King agreed with Gandhi that the result of an effort did not justify the action taken to achieve that result.¹⁹ Later, in his "Letter From Birmingham Jail", King argued that Sheriff Prichett had used nonviolent tactics to maintain an immoral injustice, and that such action was worse than the naked hatred of Bull Connor.

By this time, King had nearly perfected his implementation of passive resistance. He demanded that all protest be completely peaceful and that his activists conduct themselves in a loving manner with integrity. As a result, when Sheriff Prichett began to counteract

¹⁸ Henry David Thoreau. Civil Disobedience (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 56.

¹⁹ Peake, 16.

nonviolence with nonviolence, the movement was not at all certain how to respond.

Prichett was well prepared. He knew how Dr. King thought and made a few simple realizations. By studying the thought and method of such men as Thoreau, Gandhi, King, and Tolstoy, Prichett realized that nonviolence was most effective when there was violence for it to play off of. This was especially true in the Civil Rights Movement, which used this confrontational strategy especially well for television, where the brutality was on display for all to see. Prichett saw that he could render nonviolence useless by combating it forcefully, with nonviolence. And so, when those five students were arrested on November 25, 1961, Prichett was there personally and took them into custody politely and without malice.²⁰ Almost immediately, SNCC saw that they were in for a different kind of campaign and were not sure how to respond.

Sheriff Prichett had sensed the growing hostility between the White and Black communities and in response he had retrained his police force accordingly. He visited places that had already felt the impact of the movement, like Little Rock, and had asked questions in light of his

²⁰ Peake, 90.

own understanding of passive resistance. According to a 1962 issue of *US News and World Report*, Prichett, "held daily classes in how to handle demonstrators without force or violence. He hammered home the idea that physical contact should be avoided, no police dogs used, no tear gas fired or nightsticks swung-except in extreme cases."²¹

Prichett's main intention was keeping the peace. Any sign of disturbance was very alarming to him, and it seemed that all other considerations became secondary if the calm of the community was in jeopardy. But as James Forman noted, "Peace and quiet meant maintaining segregation and oppression."²² On a few occasions Prichett dealt firmly with whites who threatened trouble. During the campaign a group of Ku Klux Klan members checked into an Albany hotel for unspecified reasons. He brought the men into his office and expressed concern over any violence that might break out. Prichett threatened to arrest them if they acted unwisely or even visited certain parts of town, especially Harlem.²³

After the arrest of the five students, the SNCC workers' next move was to organize a large protest

²¹ "Now it's Passive Resistance by Whites-The Albany, GA Plan" US News and World Report 3 September 1962, 46.

²² Forman, 253.

²³ "Keep Walking" Newsweek. 13 August 1962, 18.

demonstration among a group of high school students, as well as holding several nonviolence workshops.²⁴ All of the forces were in place and the attack on Jim Crow in Albany was about to begin in earnest. On November 25, the Albany Movement held its first mass meeting, singing spirituals and listening to testimonials from the five students who had been arrested. More importantly, the anger over the arrests had mended the rift between the NAACP and SNCC.

On November 27, the five students were tried, and a mass rally was held on the sidewalk outside the courthouse. The south was stunned. After generations of apathy, Albany's blacks engaged in a massive nonviolent protest that rocked the community, disrupting civil order for almost a year. This was perhaps the largest community protest since the bus boycott in Montgomery about five years earlier. Consequently, the intensity and ostensible unity in the Movement brought much national attention, from front-page headlines, to a future Nobel Peace Prize for King, to concern and action from the White House.

As the protesters continued to demonstrate in bus stations and lunch counters, Prichett continued to make arrests and effectively obstructed the activists' movements.

²⁴ Hanes Walton Jr., The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1971), 128.

On December 10, ten Freedom Riders rode into Albany from Atlanta via-integrated train. As they disembarked and attempted to integrate the train station, eight of them were arrested for trespassing.²⁵ After matter-of-factly arresting SCLC Youth Director Bernard Lee and SNCC militant James Forman, two of the eight activists involved, Prichett commented, "We will not stand for these troublemakers coming into our city for the sole purpose of disturbing the peace and quiet of the city of Albany."²⁶ As the demonstrations and massive arrests continued without tangible result, a sort of paranoia descended upon Albany. However, the arrests of the Freedom Riders did bring the national press to Albany to monitor the situation. The next day, Forman, just released from jail, led a march of 267 Black students to the train station. All of them were arrested and, true to SNCC's avowed tactics, refused bail.²⁷ Two days later, Slater King, Vice-President of the Albany Movement, led 200 protesters to city hall. Predictably, all 200 were soon on their way to jail, arrested for parading without a permit.²⁸

²⁵ Williams, Eyes on the Prize, 167.

²⁶ Morris, 242.

²⁷ Williams, 168.

²⁸ Ibid., 168.

Jails brimmed with activists. Many citizens were afraid of being caught up in all of the disturbances and the streets were virtually empty. Commerce in the town was in dire straits as a result. Dr. Anderson observed that, "Albany was literally paralyzed for about a month. Nobody went into the town to shop, black or white. They never knew when another mass demonstration was going to break out, and no one knew if there was going to be a shooting war."²⁹ Hundreds of blacks were stuck in jail, some in terribly overcrowded conditions. In a single cell designed for six inmates, fifty-four girls were left to arrange themselves as best they could.³⁰ No one was happy with the state of affairs. The White community was incensed at the Black community because they were disturbing the serenity of the long-quiet town. However, the Black community drew on their own strength under the movement's leadership.

Consequently, in mid-December, the city agreed to hold an unofficial conference with the Albany Movement to see if they could make some sort of "arrangement", but the two groups reached an impasse. The leaders of the Movement had very little leverage, and they were left without a

²⁹ Stephen Oates, Let The Trumpet Sound. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 182.

³⁰ Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound. 183.

resolution in the face of intransigent Albany officials. Dr. Anderson feared that the activists would quickly grow discouraged, and the Albany Movement would be dissolved if something was not done to reinvigorate the people.³¹

Anderson believed that SNCC had provided what was needed, a stimulus, but once the movement got going it did not have the resources for such a massive undertaking.³²

And so, despite the pleas of some of the SNCC workers, Dr. Anderson placed a phone call to Atlanta and asked former classmate Martin Luther King to come to Albany. James Forman was particularly against this, remarking that, "...it was important to keep the Albany Movement a people's movement...and the presence of Dr. King would detract from this focus."³³ SNCC believed that because the media had already converged on the events in Albany, the attention King would bring would be obtrusive and unnecessary. They thought that the strength of the people would carry them through and did not need a "messiah" figure to assume control.

Until now, King had been watching the events unfold from SCLC headquarters in Atlanta. The campaign, however,

³¹ Morris, 243.

³² Ibid., 244.

was failing because of the difficulty in unifying a movement with so many leaders.³⁴ King had no intention of getting permanently involved at Albany (he did not even bring a toothbrush), but he agreed to come and make an appearance. He had always commented on filling the jails of the South, and this seemed like an appropriate time for him to get involved. However, there was discontent among the rank and file that after all of their hard work and sacrifice, King would show up and pull off a "miracle." According to one Black citizen, "Mr. King is not quite the Moses to lead us out of our troubles."³⁵ Dissenting opinions from certain segments of the Black community only further complicated an already precarious situation, and conflicts deepened as the Albany Movement seemed headed for a collapse.

King, however, came through and managed to give one of his best speeches at the Shiloh Baptist Church upon his arrival. His words from that message are well known and would be repeated countless times. "We shall overcome. Don't stop now. Keep moving. Don't get weary children. We will wear them down by our capacity to suffer."³⁶ But his words

³³ Forman, 255.

³⁴ Peake, 91.

³⁵ "Now it's Passive Resistance" US News and World Report. 3 September 1962, 46

³⁶ Bishop, 251.

came to no effect until later, for the Albany campaign was doomed to fall short.

Despite all of the obstacles faced by King, SNCC, and SCLC and the integration activists having to contend with in the austere racism of the white community and the latent law enforcement of tactics of Chief Prichett, they had yet to contend with their most malicious foe: James Grey, of the *Albany Herald*. Albany was a place that did not concern itself with the outside world, and, as a result, was a place that was highly conducive for someone of white supremacist thought like Grey. His favorite journalistic "technique" was to fashion stories that depicted blacks as a highly ignorant and inferior people.

Grey never attempted to be impartial in his journalistic approach. Belittling, demeaning, or undermining the goals of the activists, Grey constantly manipulated the people of Albany and reinforced the community mores with his own racist thoughts.³⁷ According to *Newsweek*, "Grey has fulfilled the traditional role of editor-as-community-leader by simply giving his readers what they want—a viewpoint

³⁷ Ibid., 246.

insulated against the fires of social change, stubbornly conservative, rigidly segregationist.”³⁸

Grey gave himself away as he attempted to relay the arrest of Dr. King and others in September of 1962: “Crowd Cheers as Cops Clap Clerical Crowd in Calaboose.” In the accompanying article, Grey claimed, “The racial problem in Albany has been overemphasized. It’s not a real story.”³⁹

The brazen and offensive journalism produced by Grey probably would not have been such a disturbance if it was not consumed and confirmed by the white community. One man was quoted as saying, “The *Herald* reflects the attitudes in Albany. If the Paper says a chicken dips snuff, you can lift up it’s [sic] right wing and find a box there.”⁴⁰

Dr. King seeing the urgency of the situation, decided to stay, declaring, “We will plague this community with all of our determination...I will be in Albany until next January if these problems aren’t solved.”⁴¹ A few days later on December 16, King was jailed with 250 other protesters and promised to spend Christmas in jail unless the movement’s

³⁸ “Not a Real Story” Newsweek 10 September 1962, 64.

³⁹ James Grey, “Crowd Cheers...” Albany Herald 4 September 1962, 1.

⁴⁰ “Not a Real Story” Newsweek 1962, 66.

⁴¹ “Fire and Frustration” Newsweek, 26 August 1962, 54.

demands were met. However, the city took away this strategy by concocting a strange technicality that allowed his release and foiled his plans, deflating any momentum that his imprisonment might have established.⁴² Albany refused to blatantly confront the campaigners with any degree of finality unless they exhibited some degree of rowdy behavior that posed a threat to the townspeople. Because the philosophy of the protesters was similar, a stalemate was inevitable.⁴³

So King continued the demonstrations into the spring, until he and several other of the leaders, and two hundred protesters, were tried and convicted for the December march, and once again, they promised to stay in jail until the situation was resolved.⁴⁴ But once again, Prichett outwitted them. He forced them out of jail, saying, "An unidentified, well-dressed black man had paid their bail."⁴⁵ King had once said that Laurie Prichett was the finest police chief he had met in the south, and it seems that a sense of mutual respect had developed between the two men. However, King

⁴² Peake, 92.

⁴³ Robert Weisbrot, Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement, (New York: Plume, 1991), 66.

⁴⁴ Peake, 93.

⁴⁵ Bishop, 254.

realized that Prichett was not genuinely concerned with justice, and he felt hurt and betrayed.

King agreed to leave jail upon the condition that the city officials would return all of the bond money, release all of the jailed protesters on their own recognizance, postpone the trials of the protesters indefinitely, desegregate the busses immediately, and finally, establish a permanent biracial committee to work out the details of desegregating the city.⁴⁶ Within days, it became clear that the city would uphold none of these promises, and King felt that he had not kept his own promise and should have stayed in jail.

The final nonviolent showdown came on the night of July 24, after nearly six months of inactivity during negotiations between the city and the Albany Movement. That night, nearly 3,000 blacks gathered in the street and began marching towards the center of town. One hundred sixty officers met the wave of protesters, and true to form, Prichett asked King if the marchers had a demonstration permit. Dr. King said no, and the mass arrests began to incur yet again. However, on that night, out of months of frustration, some of the marchers began to throw rocks and

⁴⁶ Morris, 246.

other objects at the police.⁴⁷ "But not one of my men ever lifted his nightstick from his belt," Prichett reported with pride, even joking about the "nonviolent rocks". "We broke the backs of the lawbreakers that night. The black's nonviolent movement became violent, and when that happened, the Negroes lost a lot of sympathizers—here and in other places."⁴⁸ And it was true, the tide had turned and the hope for victory in Albany was lost. King was arrested yet again, and was released August 10, upon intervention from the Justice Department.

King returned to Atlanta, intending to rest and allow the local leadership to continue negotiations with the city. However, even after he departed, city leaders refused to meet with officials from the Albany Movement. The city fathers claimed that they wanted, "a new and responsible voice for the colored citizens of Albany."⁴⁹ On August 15, King returned to Albany, and local leaders finally got to meet with the mayor. No agreement could be reached, and all the Movement leaders could do was hold a press conference. A few days later, King left Albany. But while he was gone, Dr.

⁴⁷ Peake, 97.

⁴⁸ "Now it's Passive Resistance" US News and World Report 1962, 46.

⁴⁹ Williams, 175.

Anderson called a halt to all activity in the Albany area. The situation was now resolved in favor of racial injustice. King was disgusted over the way the last demonstration had gone, so much so that he gave serious consideration to quitting the movement.⁵⁰

After King departed, 75 northern protesters came to Albany Labor Day weekend to show support for the Albany Movement. Prichett gave the new arrivals no better treatment than King received, arresting all of them, while admonishing them, "Go back to your homes. Clear your own cities of sin and lawlessness."⁵¹

The meetings in Albany continued for another six years. In that respect SNCC could claim a partial victory. Albany was an important lesson in how to organize a community during sustained protest efforts. SNCC would have great success applying the lessons learned in Albany in Mississippi during Freedom Summer two years later.

After some rest and a reflection on the lessons learned in Albany, King resumed his work. Looking back at the campaign, he remarked that the purposes of the campaign

⁵⁰ Peake, 98.

⁵¹ Williams, 175.

had been. "so vague that we got nothing and people were left depressed and in despair."⁵²

The shortcomings of the Albany Movement were readily apparent. The dissension between SNCC and the SCLC robbed the movement of its cohesion and the unity of the people. Communication between the two organizations became better in the years ahead to avoid this issue, although differences would always be there between the two organizations. Many in SNCC thought also that King's conservatism was to blame, that is, he was only willing to go so far in his measures and goals. Moreover, there was a lingering resentment in SNCC of the publicity King could generate just by arriving in a town and calling a press conference. In moments of derision, SNCC staffers referred to King as "de lawd" because he seemed to be the sole figure in the movement who was listened to and given any media exposure.⁵³

Little preparation had gone into Albany, a problem that would be rectified in the later struggles, especially in Birmingham and Selma. The goals in Albany were not always clear, and it was never certain what concrete demands were

⁵² Ibid., 178.

⁵³ Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's, (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 23.

behind the protests. In the future, the movement always knew to demand specific concessions. This served a twofold purpose. One, it kept the issues surrounding the campaign from being confused. Also, if the campaign went to the federal courts with a petition, one overriding issue, such as desegregation of public facilities or voting rights, the chances of victory were much improved.

Another contributing factor to the failure of Albany was the lack of intervention from the Kennedy Administration. While Kennedy was sympathetic towards the movement, at this time there was no real incentive for the administration to get involved. The public was not yet outraged over segregation. Thanks to Laurie Prichett, King could not have the drama that made news and allowed for the power of television to graphically demonstrate the evils of racism.

The final blow to the Albany campaign came with the failure to act out nonviolence fully. Typically violence on the part of the white southerners was the catalyst for success. Sympathies were obtained and indifference exploded when officials used violence to try and control the black community. When these images were focused on television every night, the entire nation took an interest in the

movement. However, when racist whites were able to derive sympathy in the wake of black violence, the Movement lost a lot of credibility. SCLC took pains to see that that would never happen again.

Although Albany was considered a failure, many important lessons for later campaigns were learned. From then on, the SCLC targeted only places where adversity and violence would work for them. Also, focusing on a specific agenda would be important. In Albany, the Movement was probably asking for too much, and so the goals of the protesters were somewhat muddled and confusing. This was also rectified in later campaigns.

Albany pointed the way, and King made the journey. He led his people, through nonviolence, to a new level of life and human dignity. King had learned his lessons, and SCLC, in the spirit of Horatio Alger decided to go west, to Alabama. King was confident that the city of Birmingham was ripe for a campaign, and as 1962 drew to a close, the SCLC began to prepare for what would be the most vivid, memorable, and important campaign of the entire Civil Rights Movement: Birmingham.

CHAPTER 3

CONFRONTATION IN THE STREETS

In the wake of the failure at Albany, SCLC decided that it needed another campaign to build back the momentum the Movement had built before 1962. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth wanted the next campaign to be Birmingham. He recalled later, "Dr. Kings's image was slightly on the wane because he had not projected a victory in Albany. I said, I assure you, if you come to Birmingham, this movement can not only gain prestige, it can really shake the country."¹ During this time, Birmingham was a city marked by severe racism. As King noted later, it was a city that seemed to have forgotten the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, as well as the *Brown* decision.² Blacks were discriminated against in public facilities such as restaurants, hotels, and restrooms, and

¹ Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 179.

² Martin Luther King, Why We Can't Wait (New York: Penguin Group, 1964), 47.

also in areas such as voting rights and employment opportunities.³

Another lesson learned from Albany was the importance of the media. Television coverage of the early 1960s began to focus on racial demonstrations.

For a nation that had grown used to de facto segregation in all aspects of society, television transcended boundaries and brought the modern Civil Rights Movement directly into the nation's living rooms. Because of television coverage, nonviolent demonstrators, picket lines, brutal police response, heckling bigots, and other factors exposed the nation to the necessity and intensity of the movement.

When SCLC delegates met in Birmingham in September 1962 for their annual convention, entitled, "Human Rights: The Continuing Struggle," speakers emphasized the necessity and the meaning of nonviolence. Guest speaker Jackie Robinson, who carried an immense amount of respect within the Black community as the first black man to play Major League Baseball, among other dignitaries, urged Blacks outside the South to become aware of the disgraceful living conditions

³ King, Why We Can't Wait, 48.

and try to rectify them by supporting the movement.⁴ SCLC Executive Director Wyatt T. Walker reported to the convention that he spent his first full year on the job laying out the long- range plan for SCLC, and he noted the role of the new citizenship programs in those plans. Walker felt that efforts in this direction would soon meet with success.⁵

Although a big believer in voter registration and training, the temperamental Walker was not a gradualist, and he knew that SCLC needed a crisis to regain momentum and reach a new plateau after the debacle at Albany. At that same convention, he and other SCLC leaders were already beginning to lay the groundwork to make Birmingham the major campaign for 1963.

Indeed, locals had already been fearful that the SCLC convention would bring demonstrations to the city in the previous year, 1962. Since January, the city businesses had been hurt by a selective boycott engineered by students at

⁴ Thomas Peake, Keeping the Dream Alive (New York: PeterLang Publishing, 1987), 113.

⁵ Wyatt Tee Walker. "Report to the SCLC Annual Convention." Sept. 1962, 1-9.

Miles College, but no ground had been gained till it was announced that SCLC was gathering for its annual convention. While Fred Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR had won victories there before, they would always later lose the ground they thought that they had gained. With the pressure of SCLC coming in for the convention, Shuttlesworth's organization gained some concessions, but typically these were lost when the convention was over.⁶

A few days after the convention, news came out of neighboring Mississippi that a court order had been issued to allow James Meredith to enroll at the University of Mississippi at Oxford. King, watching the way Mississippi governor Ross Barnett protested, wondered if George Wallace, recently nominated candidate for governor of Alabama, might win the office and enforce a similar program.

Actually, the SCLC was not prepared to begin a campaign in Birmingham at that time. Albany was still going on, and they needed more time and a lot more planning. So King set his sights on the pre-Easter buying season in early 1963 as his target date. King was also hopeful that if he waited, the Kennedy Administration could act boldly and eliminate

⁶ King, Why We Can't Wait. 47.

the need for confrontation. At this point, King was still hopeful that he could force the administration to issue a "Second Emancipation Proclamation," because 1963 was the centennial of the first.⁷ Of course, King knew that political barriers blocked the president from taking so bold an action, and he was unaware of the looming Cuban missile crisis and its aftermath in October 1962 that was crowding the rest of Kennedy's program to the side. The uncertainty of federal action made the need for intense preparation for Birmingham all the more crucial.

As an industrial hub and at the time the most important city in the south, Birmingham was replete with possibilities. However, the city's strict tradition of segregation, epitomized by police commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, would not make the task easy. When later asked why King chose Birmingham then, he answered that, "... Birmingham represented the hard core, recalcitrant, segregationist South... with the ugly image created by the Bull Connor philosophy of race relations..."⁸ Connor showed open hostility towards Blacks in their struggle for civil rights and

⁷ Ibid., 6-11.

towards any attempt made by the federal government to aid in that cause.⁹ It was this attitude that SCLC was hoping to exploit. So, the effort in the city was a deliberately engineered crisis intended to revitalize the movement after the disastrous Albany campaign of 1962 and strike a blow in the main citadel of segregation.

King's mention of the image of Bull Connor indicated that he was also thinking of changing tactics against the Kennedy Administration. If he could sway public opinion with a dramatic campaign, he could force Kennedy to move more deliberately on the Civil Rights front. This policy came to the forefront as events unfolded, but it is clear that when King went to Birmingham he was looking to provide SCLC the clout to not only make changes in that city, but to influence national policy. If the Birmingham campaign worked, much would obviously be accomplished. However, if it failed, then it would at least bring the issue of segregation before the court of world opinion and force the federal government to act.¹⁰ While some scholars saw this as

⁸ Martin Luther King, SCLC Newsletter, July 1963, 1-4.

⁹ King, Why We Can't Wait, 49.

¹⁰ Stephen Oates, Let The Trumpet Sound. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 211-212.

a shift in King's thought or policy, it really was not. King had written as early as 1958, "...the mass movement repudiates violence while moving resolutely to its goal, its opponents are revealed as the instigators and practitioners of violence if it occurs. Then public support is magnetically attracted to the advocates of nonviolence."¹¹ To facilitate publicity, each day of the campaign was to begin with a press briefing to explain what SCLC was doing and why. Andrew Young, one of King's top lieutenants in SCLC who had previous experience working in television, had impressed upon King the need to compress the message into sixty seconds for television. Young figured the networks would allow for two to three minutes for a civil rights story on the evening news, and they needed desperately to make good use of that time.¹² As Young recalled, "That sixty seconds was what we were demonstrating for-that sixty second message to the world."¹³

By May of 1962, at a SCLC board meeting, an idea was

¹¹ King. Why We Can't Wait, 88-89.

¹² Andrew Young, An Easy Burden: the Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America (New York: Harper Collins: 1996), 207.

¹³ Young, An Easy Burden, 208.

developed to build a campaign in Birmingham. Word of these preparations leaked into the press, resulting in a major change in attitude by the merchants in Birmingham.¹⁴ They realized that something must be done to avoid massive protest, and for a short time, it appeared that Birmingham could heal itself without the need for protest. However, by September 1962, by the time the annual SCLC convention concluded, the situation had reverted to the old ways. Movement leaders realized that a massive protest effort would be needed.¹⁵

Meanwhile secret preparations continued. In December 1962, King and his staff and circle of trusted comrades discussed questions of exact timing, focus, and various logistical matters. The entire project was coded to insure communication and security. The project itself, "project C" was soon finalized. Chillingly, King felt that not all of the participants would survive the campaign.¹⁶

If the focus in Albany had been too imprecise, then the goals in Birmingham would have to be more focused. It was

¹⁴ King, Why We Can't Wait, 52.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

decided that the downtown merchants would be most influential in dropping segregation if they stood to lose black business. Boycotting would be the strongest initial weapon. So a boycott of downtown stores for the Easter shopping season was the first step. These would begin in early March, and six weeks would give ample time to effect some changes and hopefully force the city to negotiate. While this was happening, King would be fund raising from other civil rights groups and SCLC affiliates.¹⁷

King moved into his headquarters at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham in January 1963. Much of his initial time was spent persuading the local black upper class to get behind him. Conservative by nature, the upper class was miffed that they were not consulted on what they saw as an invasion of their city. Garnering support of the Black elite was a formidable task.

Working class Blacks also had to be persuaded. Blacks in Birmingham had been lashed down under the brutal forces of segregation and poverty for so long that it would be difficult to motivate them to engage in demonstrative

¹⁶ Peake, 112.

¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

action. SCLC brought in seasoned activists like C.T. Vivian, Andrew Young, James Lawson, Bernard Lee, and James Bevel to hold workshops and try and stir up interest. Meanwhile, Dorothy Cotton led the effort to mobilize demonstrators, provide timetables, lists of participants, and overall guidance.¹⁸ Momentum was lost before the campaign even began. Birmingham had changed from a city commission system to a mayor-council government in 1962, and a special mayoral election was slated for March 5, 1963. Because they did not want to inadvertently help Bull Connor win the office of mayor, demonstrations were pushed back until after the election. Undoubtedly, Connor could harm blacks in Birmingham more from the mayor's office than as police commissioner, thus everything was postponed for two weeks.¹⁹ Once again however, the timetable was interrupted when no candidate won a majority, and a runoff election was scheduled April 3. In that election, Albert Boutwell defeated Bull Connor.²⁰

¹⁸ King, Why We Can't Wait, 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Peake, 116.

While King did prefer Boutwell to Connor, he turned down a proposal from the new mayor to postpone demonstrations to allow the new city government to show good faith by bringing in some needed changes. Although segregation was deeply entrenched in Birmingham, Connor's style of outlandish and brutish behavior was not looked upon favorably in powerful circles in the city. To further muddy the waters, the existing regime, headed by Connor and incumbent mayor Arthur Hanes, said they would continue to serve until their terms expired in 1965. While they were expected to lose their court case, it would be at least April 15 before the situation was resolved. SCLC decided to proceed on April 3.²¹

On April 3, King laid out SCLC's six-point plan for the city. The list was hardly radical: desegregate lunch counters and other public facilities, fair hiring practices by stores and the city, all charges against demonstrators dropped, desegregation of public recreational facilities, and to form a biracial commission to study further

integration.²² These demands did not seem unreasonable, even in Birmingham, but unless the campaign evoked enough reaction to have any political clout, the city probably would not change. That same day, the first wave of protests came in the form of sit-ins at lunch counters, the end result being the arrest of all the protesters.²³ SCLC had held the first mass meeting two nights before on April 4. King asked for protest volunteers and told those who volunteered to not bring weapons to any demonstration, and he outlined nonviolent resistance to impart the importance of not instigating pitched battle with the police.²⁴ Sessions were soon developed to train the volunteers to accept the abuse that would come. They were trained, "to resist without bitterness; to be cursed and not reply; to be beaten and not hit back."²⁵

Connor seemed to have taken notes from his colleague in Albany, Laurie Prichett, and was handling the demonstrators

²¹ Ibid., 117.

²² SCLC, "Statement of Birmingham Campaign Aims." April 4, 1963; New York Times, 16.

²³ King, Why We Can't Wait, 60.

²⁴ Ibid., 61-62.

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

gently, and even when 42 were arrested during a march to city hall on April 6, they were treated with, "amazing politeness."²⁶ Easter was only a few days off and the possibility of economic pressure was almost nil, and there had not been any massive participation by the Black population. SCLC tried to hold nightly rallies to raise emotions and find new demonstrators, and these continued even after the campaign picked up momentum. However, rallies were not enough. By the end of the first week in Birmingham, SCLC had nothing at all to show for its meticulous preparation. Having spurned the new mayor's good faith gesture, and lost out on the holiday boycott, they were now seen as outside agitators, and a number of local black leaders seemed to agree.²⁷ To add to the headaches, weapons had been found among some of the demonstrators, and they needed to be reminded of the basic principles of nonviolence.

Nonetheless, the campaign began to slowly but surely pick up speed. The crowds did grow at the rallies and by

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ Peake, 118.

the second week, beginning April 10th, the jails began to become even more crowded. On that same day, State Judge William A. Jenkins signed a court order banning further demonstrations. In the order, the judge prohibited 133 people specifically from protesting, with King at the top of the list.²⁸ This was a difficult decision for King. To obey the court order would be to surrender, but to go to jail, especially when SCLC was out of funds to provide bail on Easter weekend was a torturous predicament. Especially galling was at the mass meeting the next night, only 50 people signed pledge cards to go to jail with King.²⁹

All of this pressure caused the Birmingham campaign to come to an abrupt halt. The city government's injunction against further protesting said the movement was ordered to, "cease activities until (their) right to demonstrate has been argued in court."³⁰ The decision was made to disregard the court order, because, as King told the press, "the courts of Alabama had misused the judicial process in order

²⁸ Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 727.

²⁹ Ibid., 728.

³⁰ King, Why We Can't Wait, 71.

to perpetuate injustice and segregation."³¹ After King concluded his press conference, he decided that he would prove his point by going to jail on Good Friday and hopefully regain the lost momentum.

On the day before Good Friday, about two dozen of the campaign leaders met at the Gaston Motel to weigh their options. After deliberating for a long time, most especially over the issues of raising bail money with their most able fund raiser behind bars and missing Easter Sunday at their respective churches, King retired to his room and changed into work clothes, reemerged, and announced that he was going to defy the injunction. For the planned protest the next day, the usually punctual Wyatt T. Walker tried a new strategy. He had noticed that the accounts of the marches in the press invariably lumped black observers with the demonstrators, and so for the big march on Good Friday, he waited to allow the crowd to build. The results of playing on the anticipation of the King-Connor showdown came to fruition the next day in *The New York Times* when it was reported that, "more than a thousand shouting, singing

³¹ Ibid., 71.

negroes had joined the demonstration."³² King and Abernathy were leading the march, and when they crossed from Seventeenth Street onto Fifth Avenue, a police motorcycle stopped them.³³ The two leaders knelt down to pray, and Connor gave the arrest order, and about four dozen were taken to jail.³⁴

An extremely busy Wyatt T. Walker sent a telegram to President Kennedy. He told the President:

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Ralph B Abernathy are presently confined to the Birmingham city jail. Both were arrested...in violation of the constitutional guarantees of the first and fourteenth amendments...We submit that these two distinguished Americans are political prisoners and not criminals. We ask that you use your high office to persuade the city officials of Birmingham to afford at least a modicum of human treatment.³⁵

King would remain in solitary confinement for a day. King could not call his wife or visit lawyers during this time. Coretta Scott King did call the President, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy called her back, assuring

³² Ibid., 730.

³³ "Connor and King," Newsweek, 22 April 1963, 28.

³⁴ Ibid., 33

³⁵ Wyatt T. Walker, "Telegram to President Kennedy," <http://www.jfklibrary.org/images/cr_doc32.jpeg>

her that King would be fine. The President called and assured Coretta that he was looking into the matter.³⁶

King was isolated and depressed in the jail, but the next day, one of his New York attorneys Clarence Jones arrived to inform King that Harry Belafonte had raised \$50,000 in bail money.³⁷ King was overjoyed but was less so at an item that appeared in that day's *Birmingham News*, which carried an "Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense" signed by eight prominent white Christian and Jewish clergy. It criticized the timing of the campaign and raised the old southern refrain of 'outside agitators' ruining good race relations. Taking his attention away from the more pressing problems at hand, King, using newspaper edges and a pen smuggled into his cell, composed a reply.³⁸ All of King's beliefs and philosophy were about to be crystallized into one single piece of writing. In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" King denied that he was an outsider. All communities, he argued, are interrelated. "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in

³⁶ King, Why We Can't Wait, 74-75

³⁷ Ibid., 75.

Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in a inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."³⁹ King went on to answer criticism of the demonstrations, wondering why they had so much concern for the manifestations of discontent, but not the causes. He went through the four stages of nonviolence, as well as Thomas Aquinas' theory on just and unjust law. Basically what this theory holds that just because a law was passed does not mean that the law is always just. Civil disobedience, therefore, was right because it was in protest of an unjust law.⁴⁰ King ended his letter with an admonition to the white clergy to keep their churches relevant and respond to the challenges of justice. The destiny of his people, he claimed, was, "tied up with America's destiny."⁴¹ The letter did not spring quickly to acclaim. Not a single mention of it appeared the press for about a month. So, while it may seem that King saved his

³⁸ Peake, 121.

³⁹ Martin Luther King, "Letter From Birmingham Jail." A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 290.

⁴⁰ King, A Testament of Hope, 292.

⁴¹ Ibid., 298.

campaign with his pen, the reverse is actually true. The movement caught fire and saved the Letter from oblivion.⁴² And on April 20th after eight days in jail, King was released.

Quickly, the SCLC staff convened to plan more demonstrations with a new strategy. Youth had been less involved in this campaign than in others, and some of the leadership pushed to have young people, high school students and younger, included in marches planned for early May. King, while harboring misgivings about using children, felt that they had never known freedom, but did know segregation. The use of children had a dramatic effect on the whole campaign, and, as a result, the whole nation. James Bevel and the other youth recruiters had amassed a nonviolent army of about 6,000 young people ready to march.⁴³

On May 2, "D-Day", the most intense portion of the campaign was launched. The children emerged from the 16th Street Baptist Church and marched into downtown Birmingham. When they met Connor and his men, they all were arrested. It was reported that, "they scampered almost merrily into the

⁴² Branch, 744.

paddy wagons.”⁴⁴ On that first day of demonstrations, Walker announced that of the 958 children to sign pledge cards to go to jail, 600 were in custody. At the mass meetings that evening, emotions reached a fevered pitch, and 300 more people announced themselves ready to go to jail.⁴⁵

It was during the “D-Day” demonstrations that one of the more infamous and shocking displays in the history of the United States occurred, and it may be this week that changed the course of history. The next day, to help control the demonstrators, Bull Connor had fire hoses and German Shepherd dogs to try and intimidate the crowd. When the threat of intimidation failed to work, he ordered the hoses to spray on the marchers.⁴⁶ With the hoses literally knocking people down and then forcing them back, Connor lost any moral ground that he had and, therefore, lost the war for public opinion. This also caused all dissent about the need for the campaign itself to evaporate. Hard on the heels of absorbing the fact that over one thousand Black children

⁴³ Peake, 124.

⁴⁴ “Dogs, Kids and Clubs,” Time, 10 May 1963, 19.

⁴⁵ Branch, 758.

⁴⁶ “Birmingham, USA: Look at Them Run,” Newsweek, 13 May 1963, 28.

had marched to jail in the previous two days, now the nation was treated to images of fire hoses and dogs being used to stop a people merely asking for the same rights that most of America took for granted. As the dogs were let loose on the marchers, Connor told his men, "Look at them run...I want them to see the dogs work. Look at those niggers run."⁴⁷

As for the K-9 units, an AP photographer caught the image of a dog with its mouth around a young black boy's abdomen, while on his face is dead calm and he seems to be leaning into the attacking dog. The boy, Walter Gadsden, was not trained in nonviolence and did not intend to be in the demonstration, his reaction crystallized for the nation who was right and who was wrong in the matter of Birmingham.⁴⁸

For many bystanders, this was all too much. Soon, hundreds of Blacks not trained in nonviolence began to fight back. The fire hoses were used again, and more Blacks joined the melee. Finally James Bevel offered a deal to the police. He would try and disperse the Blacks if they would stop

⁴⁷ "Dogs, Kids, and Clubs," 19.

⁴⁸ Branch, 761.

their brutal crowd control tactics. Bevel's gamble worked and the near riot was over.⁴⁹

In Washington, President Kennedy watched the events unfold on television with deep interest. On May 4th, he dispatched Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to the city to try and find resolution. His job was not to propose solutions, but to represent the President in any and all negotiations.⁵⁰ King interpreted this as evidence that the political pressure he wanted to exert in Washington was beginning to pay off. Marshall succeeded, and soon meetings were being held between the city and SCLC. These meetings would lead to the negotiations that would bring about the end of the campaign.

However, before negotiations could be completed, more violence erupted. Groups of Blacks, not officially part of the Movement, attacked Connor and his men with bottles and rocks. Connor responded with high-pressure fire hoses mounted on tripods like machine guns.⁵¹ The police at this time requested state troops to intervene.

⁴⁹ "Birmingham USA," 28.

⁵⁰ King, Why We Can't Wait, 103.

On May 7, during a break in the negotiations, white businessmen leaving the meeting encountered several thousand Blacks protesting outside. By this time, "the jails were so full that police could only arrest a handful."⁵²

Demonstrations continued until May 9th, when 2,000 people were in jail and the downtown business district was thronged with a seemingly endless mass of protesters. It was at this point that the state of Alabama realized that it was at a breaking point. Jails were full, budgets for the year had already been spent, street officers were stressed to the point of cracking, ever present news cameras were only adding to that stress, and a divided city leadership, so something obviously needed to be done.⁵³

On May 8, President Kennedy held a press conference. In his opening remarks, the President discussed the situation in Alabama and told the assembled reporters that he would try and use all the power at his disposal to protect the citizens of America and uphold the law. He went on to say:

We can hope that tensions will ease and that this case history..will remind every state, every community and

⁵¹ Ibid., 104.

⁵² Ibid., 104.

⁵³ Branch, 783.

every citizen how urgent it is that all bars to equal opportunity...be removed as quickly as possible.⁵⁴

Thanks to around-the-clock negotiations between May 7-9, a compromise settlement had been reached. With Connor's forces bolstered by 250 state troops, and with 800 more in reserve, it looked as though major bloodshed had been narrowly averted.⁵⁵

King saw the agreement as a positive one. He titled the final chapter of his book *Why We Can't Wait* "Black and White Together" and it reflected his optimism of that agreement. In that book, King says that, "Birmingham may well offer twentieth century America an example of progressive racial relations, for all mankind a dawn of a new day, a promise for all men, a day of opportunity and a new sense of freedom for all America."⁵⁶

The agreement called for the integration of lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains within

⁵⁴ John F. Kennedy, The Kennedy Presidential Press Conferences (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1978), 496.

⁵⁵ Peake, 126.

⁵⁶ King, Why We Can't Wait, 121.

ninety days. There was also a call to end racial discrimination in hiring practices, and the biracial commission that King called for would be established. Also, all of the protesters in jail would be freed, either on bail or released on their own recognizance.⁵⁷

If the Birmingham agreement is measured by substance and viability, King was mistaken in its effectiveness. The settlement had little standing because it was made privately, with almost no involvement from the city. Also, the announcement had hardly been made when violence erupted in the city. Governor George Wallace and the city government both rejected the agreement.⁵⁸

On May 10th two explosives were thrown from a car, damaged the Gaston Motel where King was staying. One bomb exploded by the registration desk, and the other destroyed a trailer nearby.⁵⁹ The home of A.D. King, Martin's brother, was also firebombed. The house sustained partial damage, but no one was hurt in either incident.⁶⁰ However, in response,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 105-6.

⁵⁸ "Explosion in Alabama," Newsweek, 20 May 1963, 25.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

a black mob was formed with thousands of Blacks not trained in nonviolence. After the bombings, these people filled the streets and started hurling rocks at the police.⁶¹ To restore order, the police brought in the K-9 units, which incited the crowd further. The dogs were taken away, and the police tried peaceful negotiation. As this was going on, several fires broke out. Thirty-five state troopers were brought in armed with guns and billy clubs. They waded into the mob, and by 4:30 A.M. the crowd had been dispersed.⁶²

In retaliation for these outbursts, on May 20 outgoing Mayor Hanes expelled 1,000 black students from the city schools for participating in the riots.⁶³ With help from the NAACP Legal Defense fund, the decision was overturned.

The situation was deteriorating so badly that President Kennedy ordered federal troops be sent to Alabama. Governor Wallace decried Kennedy's action, and announced that he planned to file a motion in federal court to have the troops removed. Kennedy responded that under the law it was the President's duty to suppress any action in any state that

⁶¹ Ibid., 25.

⁶² Ibid., 26.

could potentially harm the citizens of that state.⁶⁴ Kennedy had the troops stationed in Anniston and in Montgomery, and let Wallace know that they could be dispatched into Birmingham if need be. This calmed the more violent protests.

On May 18th, President Kennedy spoke at Vanderbilt University in Nashville in support of the rights of Black Americans. And a few weeks later on June 11, Kennedy, in a nationally televised address, made clear how he felt about the Civil Rights Movement:

We preach freedom around the world and we mean it. And we cherish our freedom here at home. But are we to say to the world-and much more importantly-to each other, that this is the land of the free...except for Negroes; that we have no second class citizens...except for Negroes; that we have no class or caste system no ghettos, no master race... except with respect to Negroes? Now the time has come for the nation to fulfill its promise. The events of Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.⁶⁵

While some criticized Kennedy for not delivering this speech earlier, that was ignoring the fact that SCLC's

⁶³ Peake, 128.

⁶⁴ "US Troops in Alabama," US News and World Report, 27 May 1963, 41.

⁶⁵ John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights, The White House, June 11, 1963," <<http://www.cs.umb.edu/jfklibrary/j061163.htm>>

Birmingham campaign had, in Schlesinger's words, "...given him the nation's ear."⁶⁶

Eight days later, Kennedy sent his long-promised Civil Rights Bill to Congress, marking the beginning of the epic battle that would end with the passing of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In the face of the Kennedy Administration finally sending a comprehensive Civil Rights Bill to the floor of Congress, the Birmingham campaign was a success. King wanted to use the stage of Birmingham to set a fire under the conscience of the nation, and in that he succeeded. King successfully used the philosophy of nonviolence to bring public exposure of injustice, and then used the prevailing firestorm of public criticism of his opponent to tear down one more bastion of integration.

To keep up the pressure, civil rights leaders were preparing for the March on Washington to attempt to bring their own pressure on Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill. In covering the March on Washington for CBS News, an obviously sympathetic Roger Mudd lamented on the air that

⁶⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, (Greenwich, CT:

the votes just were not there and the bill would not pass.⁶⁷

As for the march itself, all of the major civil rights organizations participated, and on August 28, 1963, over 250,000 people descended on Washington D.C.⁶⁸

At the Lincoln Memorial, several speeches were given. The two that were most notable were the ones by John Lewis and Martin Luther King. In his speech, Lewis attacked the Administration for a lack of action on civil rights and promised violence if steps were not taken. This further demonstrated the rift between SCLC and SNCC, as Lewis was chairman of the students. King's speech of course galvanized the world, and is perhaps one of the best orations in history, the "I Have a Dream" speech.

In September, the tensions in Birmingham had still not entirely dissipated. Schools were finally desegregated, but violence still seemed to be looming. During the first week of school there were no incidents. Then came the weekend. On Sunday morning, September 15, a bomb exploded inside the

Fawcett Crest, 1965). 881.

⁶⁷ Gary Paul Gates, Airtime: The Inside Story of CBS News, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 246.

⁶⁸ "250,000 Make History in Huge Washington March," SCLC Newsletter, September 1963, 1.

16th Street Baptist Church.⁶⁹ The explosion was very powerful, as, "...great chunks of stone shot through parked cars. The blast shattered the windshield of a passing car and knocked the driver unconscious."⁷⁰ When church members were clearing the debris, they stumbled across the bodies of four young girls. The four had been in the bathroom when the bomb exploded, and they were killed almost instantly.⁷¹ When the police arrived, they were immediately confronted by an angry mob who began to pelt them with rocks. The police fired over the heads of the crowd. Some youths were throwing stones at passing cars, and when ordered to stop, one of them, Johnny Robinson, began to run. He was shot and killed.⁷² Across town, two white youths killed a Black teenager, and violence continued to erupt throughout the night. By the time Sunday came to a conclusion, six people were dead, scores were injured, and there was rampant destruction across the city.

⁶⁹ "Birmingham: My God, You're Not Even Safe in Church," Newsweek, 30 September 1963, 20.

⁷⁰ "Sunday School Bombing," Time, 27 September 1963, 17.

⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

⁷² Ibid., 17.

Mayor Boutwell asked Governor Wallace for help, and Wallace dispatched Col. Al Lingo and a company of the Alabama National Guard into the city. Tensions cooled by the end of the year, however, and there were no major incidents of violence.

That may be due to that infamous November day when Kennedy was killed in Dallas. Suddenly the whole nation was thrown into a state of disbelief.

Suddenly, in the wake of Kennedy's death, the votes were there in Congress for President Lyndon Johnson to pass a Civil Rights Bill, and by March of 1964 the nation tuned in to see once again CBS correspondent Roger Mudd. The civil rights bill had passed the House and was in the Senate. Southern opponents were preparing for a filibuster, and CBS decided that Roger Mudd would provide saturation coverage of the move, guaranteeing that the story would be on television every night as long as the filibuster lasted.⁷³ The debate began in late March and lasted until the middle of June. Mudd averaged five television pieces per day, and by the time the bill was passed, he had done 867 stories on it.⁷⁴

⁷³ Gates, 247.

Birmingham became the model on how to conduct a civil rights campaign. While the local objectives were not completed, it was this campaign that applied the necessary pressure on the Administration to pass the Civil Rights Act in 1964.⁷⁵ So, as the Movement headed into 1964 and Mississippi Freedom Summer, King took a much needed break and began to plan for the next campaign: voting rights.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 248.

⁷⁵ 377 U.S.(1964).

CHAPTER 4

AIN'T GONNA LET NO ONE TURN ME ROUND

After a hectic schedule of travel for most of 1964, King and SCLC decided to focus on voting rights, and the city of Selma, Alabama, offered a good chance for success. In 1960, the Dallas County Voting League was established to register Black votes, but by 1964 only three percent of the Black population were registered voters, while White registration exceeded one hundred percent, a figure achieved by registering the deceased.¹ In 1963, SNCC had implemented a project in Selma but was largely unsuccessful in their voting registration attempts, such as a 1964 voting rights march that resulted in widespread arrests of the demonstrators. After several years of government litigation and the best efforts of SNCC, only 353 or 2.1 percent of eligible black voters in Dallas County were registered.² At that rate, King noted, "...it would take 103 years to register the adult Negroes."³ In response, State Judge James Hare

¹ Andrew Young, An Easy Burden: the Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America (New York: Harper Collins: 1996), 337.

² Stephen Lawson, Black Ballots (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 1976), 308.

³ Martin Luther King, "Civil Rights No.1-The Right to Vote,"

issued a sweeping injunction prohibiting discussion of racial issues at any gathering of three or more people.⁴ One civil rights worker described the situation saying, "Selma is in a state of siege. Everywhere you look you see state policemen brandishing clubs and cattle prods."⁵

In determining what to focus on after Birmingham and the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, SCLC concluded that because focusing on public accommodations had won the Civil Rights Act, then focusing on voting rights might help the movement ratify similar legislation. While Selma did not meet many of SCLC's requirements because it was isolated and small, King nevertheless was impressed with the level of dedication of the citizens there. Andrew Young said that, "more people were committed to the movement before Martin's arrival than after months of organizing and two weeks of demonstrations in Birmingham."⁶

In trying to decide how to best proceed in moving forward on the voting rights issue, SCLC board member C.T. Vivian reminded campaign organizers that, "We must have a

New York Times Magazine, March 14, 1965, 21.

⁴ David Garrow, Protest at Selma (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press 1978), 34.

⁵ SNCC, "Special Report: Selma, Alabama," September 26, 1963, VEP Files, SRC.

⁶ Young, 338.

rallying point around which we can stir the whole nation.”⁷ SCLC found the answer in Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark. Clark was a die-hard segregationist in the Bull Connor mold and was anticipated to react in a similar hostile manner to direct action protests, resulting in the beatings and jailings that would lead to the eventual success of the campaign.⁸ In fact, Clark was so integral to the plan that one staffer joked that he should be put on the payroll.⁹

King and the rest of the SCLC staff arrived in Selma on January 2, 1965. In his first act upon arrival, King gave his “Give Us the Ballot” speech before a filled congregation at Brown Chapel. The packed audience was an indication that the people of Selma were ready for confrontation. As King concluded his speech, he noted that Selma was, “a symbol of bitter resistance to the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South.”¹⁰

By Tuesday January 12, SNCC and SCLC were working feverishly to train and coordinate the volunteers to work the voting wards and attempt to register voters. Two nights

⁷ David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the SCLC (New York: Morrow and Co, 1986), 358.

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr. “Behind the Selma March.” Saturday Review. V.68 no. 14 4/3/65 pp. 16-17.

⁹ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 381.

later, once again at Brown Chapel, King was drowned out by cheering as he pledged to, "be coming back again, and again, and again until..."¹¹ He declared that the planned campaign called for registration drives in ten surrounding counties, and on the next Monday three things were going to happen. There would be a march through Selma to the courthouse, along with sending volunteers to apply for Whites-only jobs. Teams would also be sent out to try and desegregate hotels and restaurants under the civil rights law.¹² King declared that Monday would be Freedom Day. Over the weekend Andrew Young met with police chief Wilson Baker. Baker was the chief of police for the city of Selma, while the more dangerous Clark controlled the county. Baker assured Young that on Monday the law would be enforced professionally.¹³ That Monday, January 18, the first skirmish occurred. King led a group of about three hundred out of Brown Chapel to the courthouse. About a block from the church the march was stopped by Baker, where the marchers were given notice about the pedestrian traffic laws and warned that unless the marchers dissolved into groups of five or fewer at intervals

¹⁰ Young, 342.

¹¹ Taylor Branch, Pillar of Fire (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 559.

¹² Branch, Pillar of Fire, 560.

of ten feet they would be arrested. The marchers complied, and in this fashion continued to march to the courthouse, where they were confronted by Sheriff Clark. He escorted the marchers into the courthouse, past the registrar's office, and herded them back onto the street.¹⁴ The integration of public accommodations went well, as workers attempted to desegregate restaurants, hotels, and other public establishments, there was no incident with local law enforcement. The SCLC feared that with no violence to cover, journalists would begin to leave and the movement's ability to place pressure on Washington would be greatly reduced. Something dramatic needed to happen or the movement would more than likely lose momentum.

Sheriff Clark had been quiet up to this point, but he could only be restrained for so long. During the march on January 19, he reacted. In an attempt to break up a SNCC-SCLC march to the county courthouse, he ordered the crowd to disperse. When the crowd failed to do so, Clark grabbed a Black woman, Amelia Boynton, shoved her and placed her under arrest. About sixty people witnessed the incident and refused to leave, and Clark had them arrested as well.¹⁵

¹³ Garrow, Protest at Selma, 42.

¹⁴ Charles Fager, Selma, 1965 (New York: Beacon Press. 1985). 26-29.

¹⁵ Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights

Unfortunately for him, a photograph of the incident appeared the next day in the pages of both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, showing Clark with his billy club raised over her head.¹⁶ More confrontations occurred in late January. On January 20, three groups of would-be voters were arrested by Clark for obstructing the sidewalk, and two days later, more than one hundred school teachers were arrested protesting Boynton's arrest.¹⁷

On February 2, King led 250 marchers to the courthouse to protest the slowness of black voter registration, and upon arrival all of them were arrested by Public Safety Commissioner Wilson Baker. Baker personally arrested King to avoid the possible violence if the job was left to Clark. Upon hearing of King's arrest, over five hundred children marched to the courthouse and were also arrested.¹⁸ Along with King, there were nearly eight hundred people in jail. Having the most recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in jail attracted media attention from all around the world and dramatically raised Selma into the consciousness of the

Years 1954-1965. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 259.

¹⁶ New York Times January 20, 1965, 18 and Washington Post January 20, 1965, 10.

¹⁷ Williams, Eyes on the Prize, 259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 260.

larger world.¹⁹ In addition, SCLC organized a group of fifteen concerned Congressmen, led by John Conyers and Charles Diggs from Detroit, to come to Selma to see what was happening. Accompanying the group was Assistant Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who confided to Andrew Young that the administration felt that it would not be possible to pass a voting rights bill at that time.²⁰

While King was in jail, the fiery Black Muslim leader Malcolm X arrived in Selma on February 3, appearing at the invitation of SNCC. Malcolm X, who would be killed in New York eighteen days later, gave a passionate speech in which he advocated meeting violence with violence, saying, "...the white people should thank Dr. King for holding people in check, for there are others who do not believe in these [nonviolent] measures."²¹ However, in a private conversation with Coretta Scott King, Malcolm X assured her that he was trying to help the movement by showing America that if King's way was not accepted, his was the alternative.²²

¹⁹ Thomas Peake, Keeping the Dream Alive (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987), 164-165.

²⁰ Young, 350.

²¹ Williams, 262.

²² Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement, (New York: Bantam, 1991), 221-222.

That same day, President Johnson commented on Selma publicly for the first time. In his speech, the President said, "The loss of that [voting] right to a single citizen undermines the freedom of every citizen...I intend to see that that right is secured for every citizen."²³

The Movement was also somewhat anxious due to a new decree from U.S. District Judge Daniel Thomas. Thomas ruled that the Alabama literacy test for voting eligibility be suspended, ordered Selma to take at least one hundred applicants per registration day, and guaranteed that all applications received by June 1 would be processed before July.²⁴ King was skeptical but exhorted Young to continue marching to keep up the pressure.

On February 5, King was released from jail. That day, his "Letter From a Selma Jail" appeared in the *New York Times*, where King wryly noted that there were more Blacks in jail in Selma than there were on the voter rolls.²⁵ The very next day, in Washington, Press Secretary George Reedy disclosed the Johnson Administration's intent to "strongly recommend" voting rights legislation before the end of the

²³ *New York Times*, February 5, 1965, 1, 14.

²⁴ Fager, *Selma, 1965*, 58.

²⁵ Williams, 265.

year.²⁶ On February 9, King flew to Washington to lobby further for a voting rights bill. During his visit, the Johnson Administration took great pains to assure King that the bill was beginning to move. King believed both Vice-President Hubert Humphrey and Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, but he felt that the events in Alabama were unfolding too quickly, and the bill was moving too slowly.²⁷

King was right. In a rally at the courthouse in Selma on February 15, C.T. Vivian, who was leading the march, began comparing Sheriff Clark to Hitler, and while continuing to taunt him was suddenly struck in the face. Film of the incident made for what one commentator called, "vivid television."²⁸ Clark, while not recalling if he had in fact struck Vivian or not, later noted, "I lost my temper."²⁹ One SCLC staffer told the press that every time the movement in Selma seemed to be dying out, Sheriff Clark would come to the rescue.

Vivian was invited to speak in the nearby town of Marion on February 18 about his confrontation with Clark. The meeting ended with a nighttime march, a dangerous

²⁶ New York Times, February 7, 1965, 1.

²⁷ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 384.

²⁸ Ibid., 391.

activity. The area was almost completely surrounded by police and angry white civilians. As the attack commenced, the streetlights went out. An eighty-two year old man, Cager Lee, had been severely beaten and was bleeding. His grandson, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Vietnam veteran, rushed him to a café, and was trying to protect Lee and his mother. A policeman entered and a scuffle broke out. In the melee, Jackson's mother was hit, and Jackson was hit in the face with a nightstick and shot in the stomach.³⁰ Several other people were injured, including an NBC correspondent. This latest incident brought renewed national coverage into the campaign but seemed to take an emotional toll on the movement. To add to the sorrow, three days later Malcolm X was assassinated in New York.

On Tuesday, February 23 in Washington, thirty-nine Republican leaders criticized the Johnson Administration for lacking focus on the civil rights issue. Jimmie Lee Jackson died that Friday, and unbeknownst to the Movement leaders, this was the catalyst for the climax of the Selma campaign.

That Sunday, two days after the death of Jackson, SCLC'S James Bevel suggested in a sermon that the campaign should be brought to Governor Wallace. He proposed a march

²⁹ Williams, 265.

from Marion, the site of the shooting, to Montgomery. On Wednesday March 3, King delivered the eulogy for Jimmie Lee Jackson at Brown Chapel in Selma. In the course of his remarks, King promised the slain Jackson, "We will bring a voting bill into being on the streets of Selma."³¹

Meanwhile Governor Wallace began to attempt to stop any march by any means necessary. At a press conference, he announced that the state would prohibit the march, as it would tie up traffic on Route 80, and he put the highway patrol on alert.³²

However, at this point the rift between SNCC and SCLC that started in Albany began to surface again. SNCC officials were not convinced that the march would be of any value. They feared both people being hurt and SCLC staging the march and then leaving town with nothing accomplished but more publicity for King. However, John Lewis and three other members of the Board of Directors elected to march as individuals. SNCC preferred to intensify the campaign around Selma, but the SCLC decided that the value of campaigning in the small town had been exhausted and decided something more dramatic was needed to focus attention on voting rights. It

³⁰ Ibid., 266.

³¹ New York Times, March 2, 1965, 1.

³² Peake, 166.

was reasoned that the whole Alabama project had begun as a plan to get rid of George Wallace, so it seemed to make sense to take the campaign to Montgomery and put the spotlight on the Governor.

Early on Sunday March 7, the day of the march, King called Andrew Young and instructed him to postpone the march until Monday.³³ King was tied up in Atlanta with other obligations and was uncomfortable not being there in case something went wrong. However, when Young arrived in Selma to relay the order, there were already about 500 people waiting to depart. Young decided that the massed police he had seen on the way into Selma would stop the march, and there would then be time to really do it later without SCLC losing any of the momentum.³⁴ Young called King in Atlanta and appraised him of the situation. King reluctantly agreed to let the march take place but insisted that of his top four people in Selma, only two needed to go. King wanted at least two men from the leadership to stay behind in case anything went wrong.³⁵ So, the 500 marchers met and left for the fifty-five mile trek to Montgomery. The marchers, led by SCLC lieutenant Hosea Williams and John Lewis of

³³ Young, 354.

³⁴ Ibid., 355.

³⁵ Ibid., 355.

SNCC, began to walk down Highway 80. As the marchers reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were met by Alabama law enforcement personnel who were blocking the way. The marchers were ordered to disperse by Major John Cloud, head of the state police. He gave them three minutes, and after one and a half minutes, the marchers were advanced upon by the police. They were pushed back with tear gas, night sticks, men on horseback, and sheer brute force. The day became known as "Bloody Sunday," the single most brutal day of repression in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Television cameras were on hand to record the event, and ABC News cut into the Sunday Night Movie, which ironically was about anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, *Judgement at Nuremberg*, to show the viewers the carnage in Alabama.³⁶ When the day was over, John Lewis suffered a fractured skull, seventeen other demonstrators were hospitalized for injuries, and another forty marchers were treated for their injuries and then released.³⁷ In the wake of the violence and his split skull, John Lewis said, "I don't see how President Johnson

³⁶ Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1994), 79.

³⁷ Hampton and Fayer, 229.

can send troops to Vietnam...and can't send troops to Selma, Alabama."³⁸

This was almost too much for the country to bear. In Congress, Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale declared that the latest act of violence made passing of the voting rights act imperative. In Montgomery, an angry Governor Wallace viciously criticized Clark in private for letting the situation spiral to such extremes,³⁹ but, to the public, Wallace downplayed what happened, saying that the incident, "should make it evident to the Negro people ...that King and other leaders who ask them to break the law are always absent from the violence as he was today."⁴⁰

King would not back down. SCLC planned another march for the following Tuesday, but that morning in federal court, Judge Frank Johnson prohibited the day's march until a Thursday hearing on a motion made by SCLC to forbid Governor Wallace from interfering with the planned march. To make matters worse, SCLC and SNCC were at odds over tactics. This time, SNCC was all for the march, and King was well aware of the antagonism to the presence of SCLC in what had

³⁸ New Republic, CLII, March 20, 1965, 5.

³⁹ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, Pp. 400.

⁴⁰ Williams, 273.

begun as a SNCC campaign. So, blocked by a federal court order, as well as a public exhortation by the President of the United States urging delaying of the march King had to make a decision. Despite all that was arrayed against the idea of the march, King decided to proceed anyway. People from all over the country had come to Selma in a show of support, and SCLC could not waver, nor could they risk a public disagreement with SNCC.

So, on March 9, King and about 900 marchers set off again. Soon, the march grew to about 1,500. However, the enthusiasm generated by the march, the cries of, "ain't gonna let no one turn me round!"⁴¹ were soon extinguished. As the marchers once again reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were once again ordered to stop by Major Cloud. In response, King knelt and asked Ralph Abernathy to lead the crowd in prayer. When Abernathy concluded, King rose and began to walk back into Selma.⁴² Activists were livid. They felt that something was wrong, and SNCC accused King of making a secret agreement with the federal government. King defended his action by saying he was planning to proceed with the march, but that when he learned that police violence was once again imminent the march would stop,

⁴¹ Peake, 167-168.

⁴² Williams, 274.

"having made our point, revealing the continued presence of violence...hoping, finally that the national administration in Washington would feel and respond."⁴³

However, in the court hearing Thursday, King was forced to reveal that by a tacit agreement made that fateful morning, King had agreed to stop the march and go back to Selma. This would allow for no violence and room for further dialogue.

However, violence did occur in the aftermath of the aborted march. Three Unitarian ministers were beaten, one of them, James Reeb, fatally, and the Ku Klux Klan were blamed. Unlike the earlier death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, Reeb's death made national headlines and once again inspired a national outrage. This irony was not lost to those on the movement. Stokely Carmichael pointed out, "...what you want is the nation to be upset when anybody is killed...it's almost for this to be recognized, a white person must be killed. What does that say?"⁴⁴

In the wake of the death of Reeb, President Johnson was eager to act. With the spectacle of segregationist violence in the forefront of national attention, the President felt confident he could pass the voting rights bill and finish

⁴³ Ibid., 274.

the "second reconstruction." That Saturday Governor Wallace flew to Washington to confer with President Johnson. After a nonproductive meeting, during which Wallace tried to say that it was the demonstrators that were the real problem in Alabama, Johnson became angry. Wallace, however, did give Johnson the excuse he needed to intervene by claiming the state of Alabama did not have the resources to protect the marchers. That was all Johnson needed, so he charmed the Alabama Governor for a few minutes and then he escorted Wallace out. Wallace said later, "If I hadn't left when I did, he'd have had me coming out *for* civil rights."⁴⁵ The President then went to the Rose Garden, where he delivered his first press conference since "Bloody Sunday." In his remarks, he commented that, "...the nation had witnessed a very deep and painful challenge to the unending search for American freedom," and went on to say that those events, "highlighted a deep and very unjust flaw in American democracy."⁴⁶ As he concluded, the now riled up President went to the office of Attorney General Katzenbach and told him to, "...write the god-damndest toughest voting rights act

⁴⁴ Hampton and Fayer, 234-235.

⁴⁵ Kenneth O'Reilly, Nixon's Piano: Presidential and Racial Politics From Washington to Clinton, (New York: Free Press), 1995, 253.

that you can think of."⁴⁷

The following Monday President Johnson addressed a special joint session of Congress. It was the first time in 19 years a president had specifically addressed Congress on a domestic issue. On national television, to an audience of seventy million, Johnson stated his beliefs in some stirring words. After placing Selma alongside Lexington and Concord and Appomattox as turning points in "man's unending search for freedom," Johnson went on:

What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of the American Negro to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.⁴⁸

It was a stirring display of rhetoric and, along with the outrage over Selma, almost assured that the voting rights legislation would pass. David Lewis wrote that, "No President had ever spoken so feelingly of the overdue rights of the American Black or more unequivocally...than Lyndon Johnson."⁴⁹

Two days later on the 16th, Judge Frank Johnson heard arguments for the long delayed Selma to Montgomery march.

⁴⁶ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 407.

⁴⁷ O'Reilly, Nixon's Piano, 253.

⁴⁸ Peake, 169.

⁴⁹ David Lewis, King: A Biography (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois

During the hearing, SCLC tried to make it clear that they were expanding every effort to prepare an orderly and nonviolent march to the capital. Two days later, Judge Johnson authorized the long-awaited Selma to Montgomery march and explicitly ordered Governor Wallace not to interfere. He allowed SCLC as many marchers as they wished on the four lane portions of Highway 80 but limited them to 300 marchers on the portions of the highway that were two lane. Later on that same day, Johnson finally sent his voting rights bill to Congress.

The march began on March 21, and Wallace was completely powerless to stop it. SCLC planned for a five-day time schedule and set up campsites and logistical support to accommodate the expected numbers. That day, in the glare of the national spotlight, 3,500 people departed from Brown's Chapel. Leaders from every major civil rights organization were present along with celebrities such as Ralph Bunche and Harry Belafonte. Along the route, Alabama National Guardsman were posted to ensure the safety of the people, and as the first day was over, many people departed back for Selma, including Dr. King, who had several speaking engagements that he simply had to make.⁵⁰ As the march went through its

Press. 1978), 284-285.

⁵⁰ Young, 364-365.

second, third, and fourth day, the numbers dwindled until the 300 remained as ordered by Judge Johnson. 30,000 people participated and reached Montgomery that Thursday. In a stirring speech on the steps of the state capitol building broadcast live on the three national television networks, King proclaimed that they had made it, and were there to demonstrate, "...that here we are, standing before the forces of power in Alabama saying, 'We ain't gonna let nobody turn us 'round.'"⁵¹

The march seemed to end on a high note, but that night, a woman, Viola Liuzzo, was carpooling people back to Selma and was shot through the head and killed by a carload of Klansmen. Within hours, the FBI discovered that one of its informants had been in the car, and by eight A.M. the next morning the case had been solved.⁵² The next day on television, President Johnson announced that the four men in the car had been arrested, and the case was solved, as well as issuing a condemnation of the Ku Klux Klan, whom Johnson characterized as a threat to the peace of every community they operated in.⁵³

⁵¹ Peake, 170.

⁵² O'Reilly, 254.

⁵³ Williams, 284-285.

Support for the voting rights bill increased in the wake of the violence. The only issue that delayed speedy passage was a debate over whether the ban on the use of the poll tax was unconstitutional. So, the Justice Department filed lawsuits in the four states where the poll tax was still used, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia.⁵⁴ Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia told one of his aides, "You know, you can't stop this bill. We can't deny the Negro a basic constitutional right to vote."⁵⁵

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed the Senate two months after the march on May 26 by a vote of seventy-seven to nineteen, and the House passed it after five weeks of debate on July 9.⁵⁶ Johnson signed it into law on August 6 in a ceremony in the President's Room off the Capitol Rotunda, in the same room where Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation one hundred four years earlier.⁵⁷

In the summer following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, 9,000 Blacks in Dallas County had gained the ability to vote. Sheriff Jim Clark was voted out of office.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 285.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 285.

⁵⁶ 437 U.S. (1965).

"In truth," wrote King biographer Stephen Oates, "...the Selma Campaign was the Movement's finest hour, was King's finest hour."⁵⁸ In many respects this statement is true. The Selma Campaign applied the public pressure that President Johnson needed to force the voting rights legislation through Congress, and it affirmed the basic ideals of nonviolent direct action to apply pressure for social change. The Selma campaign, much like Birmingham, was not a total success locally. Problems there were not resolved by the campaign, but once again, like Birmingham, the campaign did much to facilitate national movement.

⁵⁷ Williams, 286.

⁵⁸ Stephen Oates, Let The Trumpet Sound, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 365

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Author Hunter S. Thompson once wrote, "A prime intention of any left/radical demonstration is to provoke the minions of the establishment (the police) to violence, and thus expose the brutality and hypocrisy of an establishment that claims to stand for peace and democracy."¹ While Thompson was writing in regard to the riots at the Democratic National Convention in 1968, his observation on the purpose of demonstrating is correct.

For the Civil Rights Movement the revolution was televised. Beginning with the Little Rock Crisis in 1957, almost all of the key moments of the civil rights movement in the late fifties and early sixties were caught by television cameras. By broadcasting what happened, these images, some orchestrated, such as the March on Washington, and some, like "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, totally spontaneous, changed the perception that the United States had of itself.

Even in the South the difference was felt. In 1955 only twenty percent of those polled were in favor of school

¹ Hunter S. Thompson, Fear and Loathing in America, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 219.

desegregation, but in 1964 62 percent of Southerners favored the civil rights bill as long as it was implemented gradually.² This was a staggering change of heart, especially to come about in just over a decade.

In Albany, the Civil Rights Movement suffered defeat thanks to the tactics of Sheriff Laurie Prichett. However, it was this failure that led to the later more successful campaigns in Birmingham and Selma. The Albany campaign showed King what was necessary to bring national attention to the segregated South. He needed headlines that demonstrated the cruelty and injustice of segregation. While Albany in and of itself was not a victory for the movement, it did provide the education that led to the success in Birmingham.

The Birmingham campaign was the most important campaign of the modern Civil Rights Movement. While the concessions made by the city were small, it was this campaign that led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.³ Bull Connor lost all control over the city as well as any credibility he had when the national media caught the images and events of the "D-Day" demonstrations. With the nation finally understanding what the South was perpetuating with

² [Http://www.gallup.com/poll/pollsthiscentury/events.asp](http://www.gallup.com/poll/pollsthiscentury/events.asp)

segregation, the system of depriving people their rights very quickly eroded.

In Selma, Jim Clark endured a similar fate to that Bull Connor had. With the debacle at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma was a lost campaign for the remnants of segregation. Once again, the images of American citizens being beaten while simply protesting for the rights that had already been granted in the Constitution shocked the nation. This outrage was enough to allow President Johnson to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁴

In the early 1960s all of the key elements for success in achieving equality for Black Americans came together. With national media, dynamic leadership, a mass following, and allies within the federal government all playing key roles, Black Americans came closer to the promise of living in a nation, "where all men are created equal."

³ 377 U.S. (1964).

⁴ 437 U.S. (1965).

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