



SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

TEACHER RESOURCE

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE OF THE BIRMINGHAM CIVIL RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

At the close of 1962, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Martin Luther King Jr. looked back on what for them was a dispiriting year with no resounding successes to propel the movement forward in the new year.

The Albany Campaign

First, the campaign for desegregation in Albany, Georgia, had been a failure. The SCLC had staked much of its leadership position in the civil rights movement on the Albany Campaign, where civil rights demonstrators were outmaneuvered by the city's sheriff, Laurie Pritchett. The sheriff had prevented violent attacks by whites that would have brought demonstrators national attention and sympathy, moved arrestees to nearby towns, and, when King arrived hoping to use his jailing as a rallying point for civil rights forces, forced King's release. Moreover, antagonisms had arisen between local leaders and the SCLC.

The Integration of Ole Miss

Second, one of the most dramatic civil rights events of 1962, the desegregation of the University of Mississippi by the enrollment of James Meredith, was a struggle between the state—especially its governor, Ross Barnett—and the Kennedy administration, leaving civil rights organizations in general and the SCLC in particular, out of the picture. In the end, Meredith was enrolled in Ole Miss, but at the cost of much violence, including two lives lost, numerous U.S. Marshals wounded, and an invasion of federal troops.

The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement

Third, November 1962 saw the world come within a hairsbreadth of nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis turned the nation's and the Kennedy administration's attention to the international sphere and away from home and the plight of black Americans, especially those in the South. Historian Taylor Branch remarks that by the end of the year, "King had heard enough glowing talk about Mississippi's gridiron traditions—and read enough of the political dickering between Mississippi and the Administration—to sink into profound depression." Civil rights was no longer the topic of the day in American politics. What could possibly resurrect the civil rights movement's fortunes?

It was in this context in the final weeks of 1962 that King and his SCLC associates began to plan the next state of the civil rights struggle—a campaign in Birmingham, to be conducted with Birmingham civil rights leaders. But what would come of it—would King’s and the SCLC’s leadership be considered ineffective as it was in the aftermath of the Albany Campaign, or an irrelevance as it was at Ole Miss, and would the civil rights movement be left fractured and demoralized? Much was riding on the outcome of the new campaign.

The Birmingham Campaign of April–May 1963

The Birmingham Campaign of April–May 1963 had been preceded by more than seven years of petitions and lawsuits to end racial segregation in the city after the formation of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) in August 1956. This period was also punctuated by a number of beatings and bombings by segregationist forces.

The 1963 campaign featured an alliance SCLC and ACMHR, led by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. The campaign’s blueprint was drawn up in detail by SCLC’s Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, who named it “Project C (confrontation).” Using direct action tactics, the campaign sought to end racial segregation in public facilities such as schools, lunch counters, restrooms, parks, and drinking fountains. It also sought an end to employment discrimination in the city’s businesses. Confrontation with white authorities was aimed at gaining federal government attention through media coverage of the violent reaction expected from the authorities, especially from the city’s notorious police chief, Eugene “Bull” Connor.

The Campaign Opens

The Birmingham Campaign was launched on April 3, “B (Birmingham) Day,” at the opening of the Easter buying season, the second largest of the year. African Americans boycotted downtown stores, demanding racial equality in hiring. Small groups sought desegregation of whites-only lunch counters by conducting sit-ins. Twenty people were arrested. When these tactics failed to get results, campaign organizers launched a series of marches and sit-ins aimed at closing the downtown area to business. Realizing that many demonstrators would be arrested, they intended to fill the city’s jails (as had not been accomplished in Albany) and, as King put it, “create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.”

Widespread civil disobedience followed. Demonstrators sat in at whites-only lunch counters, libraries, and churches. At the county building, marchers demanded that blacks be registered to vote. Hundreds were arrested. On April 10, Connor obtained a state court injunction against the campaign's direct action tactics. On Good Friday, April 12, a mass meeting rejected the injunction and voted to march on city hall. King was arrested, remaining in jail for nearly nine days (also in contrast to Albany) to focus national attention on the situation and to write his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

A Crisis Point Is Reached: The Setting for the Children's Crusade

Many blacks, however, could not risk the economic loss that arrest would bring, especially after the city quadrupled bail, making immediate release impossible. Moreover, black opinion was split over the campaign's tactics. When volunteers for arrest ran low, a crucial point in the campaign was reached. Either a means would be found to keep the crisis at a boiling point and break the city's capacity to jail arrestees, or the campaign would simply fizzle out.

This critical do-or-die situation forms the dramatic backdrop for the demonstrations that were soon to be dubbed the Children's Crusade by the national press.

Thus, in early May a controversial plan, unleashed on what was called "D Day," called for schoolchildren to defy the ban on direct action. On May 2, one thousand children, who had been briefly trained to deal with police tactics, assembled in churches. The Reverend James Bevel, who organized the children's marches with fellow SCLC coordinator Wyatt Tee Walker and others, summed up their purpose at the Mass Meeting at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, saying: "So let's all meet at the 16th Street Church [on] Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings and go from there to freedom." Just after noon on May 2, hundreds of young people poured onto the streets crying, "We're going to walk, walk, walk...to freedom, freedom, freedom!" Some six hundred children were jailed.

The next day (dubbed "Double-D Day"), since jails were nearly full, Bull Connor decided to end the marches forcibly, rather than arrest violators. It was a fateful decision. As television cameras rolled, Connor bellowed, "Let 'em have it!" and fire hoses, followed by dogs, were turned on marchers. Daily scenes followed in national and international media of police clubbing black children and firemen hitting them with jets of water powerful enough to strip the bark off of trees at one hundred feet. Shocking photographs that accompanied the nightly television footage

helped stir the nation's conscience and provoked critical comment around the world. And despite his efforts to disperse the marchers with brute force, Connor was compelled to continue mass arrests. Leaders later referred to the campaign at this point as "a fire that water could not put out."

The organizers' strategy paid off as the federal government became directly involved and public awareness of racial injustice and unconscionable police behavior in Birmingham became widespread. As the marches continued, more than one thousand students were arrested. On Sunday, May 5, adults conducting kneel-ins in white churches were arrested. In the evening, when police ordered a halt to a spontaneous march to the Birmingham Jail, participants knelt in prayer and a clergyman cried out, "Turn on the water, loose the dogs! We ain't goin' back! Forgive them, O Lord!" But when firemen aimed their hoses, nothing happened. After nearby fire hydrants remained pressureless, many were convinced a miracle had occurred.

As marches continued the following week, business leaders were weakening under the pressure of publicity but still resisted direct negotiation with the leaders of the campaign. Two Justice Department representatives sent by the Kennedy administration mediated between the two sides. Leaders of businesses demanded a temporary delay of marches and other demonstrations as a show of good will before agreeing to a settlement. On May 8, black and white moderates reached agreement, but few specifics were agreed to.

When King called for a twenty-four-hour moratorium, Shuttlesworth was infuriated that ACMHR had not been consulted. Shuttlesworth, hospitalized by injuries suffered by a fire hosing, checked himself out and angrily demanded of King that a more substantive agreement be reached before any moratorium was agreed to. Negotiations continued until May 10, when an accord was announced at a press conference given by King, Shuttlesworth (who left early feeling ill, collapsing in the crowd), and Abernathy. The accord called for desegregation of changing rooms, lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains; more jobs for blacks; release on bond of jailed protestors; and a meeting a biracial committee to ensure the agreement's implementation—all staggered over ninety days, beginning May 13.

On Saturday night, May 11, segregationists responded with a series of bombings, including the home of King's brother and the motel where King, now gone from the city, had stayed. On Sunday, blacks rioted in protest. The next day, President Kennedy sent three thousand federal

troops to restore order, countering state police sent by Alabama's segregationist governor, George C. Wallace. Four months later, a bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church killed four black girls and maimed a fifth. King called the slain children "the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity."

After the Birmingham Campaign, neither the civil rights movement nor the South was ever the same. Although results in Birmingham itself were slow in coming, the campaign succeeded in focusing national attention on the injustice of racial segregation and discrimination in the South and on the need for fundamental change. In August, King gave his acclaimed "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Landmark national civil rights legislation—the Civil Rights Act of 1964—soon followed, and the nonviolent leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC was widely recognized and greatly strengthened. A new American Revolution had passed the point of no return.