Ill: Bull Connor's Birmingham

If you had visited Birmingham before the third of April in the one-hundredth-anniversary year of the Negro's emancipation, you might have come to a startling conclusion. You might have concluded that here was a city which had been trapped for decades in a Rip Van Winkle slumber; a city whose fathers had apparently never heard of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, the Bill of Rights, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, or the 1954 decision of the United States Supreme Court outlawing segregation in the public schools.

If your powers of imagination were great enough to enable you to place yourself in the position of a Negro baby born and brought up to physical maturity in Birmingham, you would have pictured your life in the following manner:

You would be born in a Jim-crow hospital to parents who probably lived in a ghetto. You would attend a jim-crow school. It is not really true that the city fathers had never heard of the Supreme Court' school-desegregation order. They had heard of it and, since its passage, had consistently expressed their defiance, typified by the prediction of one official that blood would run in the streets before desegregation would be permitted to come to Birmingham.

You would spend your childhood playing mainly in the streets because the "colored" parks were abysmally inadequate. When a federal court order banned park segregation, you would find that Birmingham closed down its parks and gave up its baseball team rather than integrate them.

Ifyou went shopping with your mother or father, you would trudge along as they purchased at every counter, except one, in the large or small stores. If you were hungry or thirsty you would have to forget about it until you got back to the Negro section of town, for in your city it was a violation of the law to serve food to Negroes at the same counter with whites.

If your family attended church, you would go to a Negro church. If you wanted to visit a church attended by white people, you would not be welcome. For although your white fellow citizens would insist that they were Christians, they practiced segregation as rigidly in the house of God as they did in the theater.

If you loved music and yearned to hear the Metropolitan Opera on its tour of the South, you could not enjoy this privilege. Nor could your white fellow music-lovers; for the Metropolitan had discontinued scheduling Birmingham on its national tours after it had adopted a policy of not performing before segregated audiences.

If you wanted to contribute to and be a part of the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, you would not be able to join a local branch. In the state of Alabama, segregationist authorities had been successful in enjoining the N.A.A.C.P. from performing its civil-rights work by declaring it a "foreign corporation" and rendering its activities illegal.

If you wanted a job in this city—one of the greatest iron- and steel-producing centers in the nation—you had better settle on doing menial work as a porter or laborer. If you were fortunate enough to get a job, you could expect that promotions to a better status or more pay would come, not to you, but to a white employee regardless of your comparative talents. On your job, you would eat in a separate place and use a water fountain and lavatory labeled "Colored" in conformity to citywide ordinances.

If you believed your history books and thought of America as a country whose governing officials—whether city, state or nation—are selected by the governed, you would be swiftly disillusioned when you tried to exercise your right to register and vote. You would be confronted with every conceivable obstacle to taking that most important walk a Negro American can take today—the walk to the ballot box. Of the 80,000 voters in Birmingham, prior to January 1963, only 10,000 were Negroes. Your race, constituting two-fifths of the city population, would make up one-eighth of its voting strength.

You would be living in a city where brutality directed against Negroes was an unquestioned and unchallenged reality. One of the city commissioners, a member of the body that ruled municipal affairs, would be Eugene "Bull" Connor, a racist who prided himself on knowing how to handle the Negro and keep him in his 'place." As Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor, entrenched for many years in a key position in the Birmingham power structure, displayed as much contempt for the rights of the Negro as he did defiance for the authority of the federal government.

You would have found a general atmosphere of violence and brutality in Birmingham. Local racists have intimidated, mobbed, and even killed Negroes with impunity. One of the more vivid and recent examples of the terror of Birmingham was the castration of a Negro man, whose mutilated body had then been abandoned on a lonely road. No Negro home was protected from bombings and burnings. From the year 1957 through January of 1963, while Birmingham was still claiming that its Negroes were "satisfied," seventeen unsolved bombings of Negro churches and homes of civil-rights leaders had occurred.

Negroes were not the only persons who suffered because of Bull Connor's rule. It was Birmingham's Safety Commissioner who, in 1961, arrested the manager of the local bus station when the latter sought to obey the law of the land by serving Negroes. Although a federal district judge condemned Connor in strong terms for this action and released the victim, the fact remained that in Birmingham, early in 1963, no places of public accommodation were integrated except the bus station, the train station and the airport.

In Bull Connor's Birmingham, you would be a resident of a city where a United States senator, visiting to deliver a speech, had been arrested because he walked through a door marked "Colored."

In Connor's Birmingham, the silent password was fear. It was a fear not only on the part of the black oppressed, but also in the hearts of the white oppressors. Guilt was a part of their fear. There was also the dread of change, that all too prevalent fear which hounds those whose attitudes have been hardened by the long winter of reaction. Many were apprehensive of social ostracism. Certainly Birmingham had its white moderates who disapproved of Bull Connor's tactics. Certainly Birmingham had its decent white citizens who privately deplored the maltreatment ofNegroes. But they remained publicly silent. It was a silence born offear—fear of social, political and economic reprisals. The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people.

In Birmingham, you would be living in a community where the white man' long-lived tyranny had cowed your people, led them to abandon hope, and developed in them a false sense of inferiority. You would be living in a city where the representatives of economic and political power refused to even discuss social justice with the leaders of your people.

You would be living in the largest city of a police state, presided over by a governor— George Wallace—whose inauguration vow had been a pledge of" segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" You would be living, in fact, in the most segregated city in America.

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There was one threat to the reign of white supremacy in Birmingham. As an outgrowth of the Montgomery bus boycott, protest movements had sprung up in numerous cities across the South. In Birmingham, one of the nation’s most courageous freedom fighters, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, had organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights— A.C.H.R.—in the spring of 1956. Shuttlesworth, a wiry, energetic and indomitable man, had set out to change Birmingham and to end for all time the terrorist, racist rule of Bull Connor.

When Shuttlesworth first formed his organization—which soon became one of the eightyfive affiliates of our Southern Christian Leadership Conference—Bull Connor doubtless regarded the group as just another bunch of troublesome "niggers." It soon became obvious even to Connor, however, that Shuttlesworth was in dead earnest. A.C.H.R. grew, month by month, to become the acknowledged basic mass movement of the Birmingham Negro. Weekly mass meetings were held at various churches. The meetings were packed. A.C.H.R. began working through the courts to compel the city to relax its segregation policies. A suit was instituted to open Birmingham's public-recreation facilities to all of its citizens. It was when the city lost this case that the authorities responded by closing down the parks, rather than permit Negro youngsters to share facilities maintained by the taxes of black and white alike.

Early in 1962, students at Miles College initiated a staggered series of boycotts against downtown white merchants. Shuttlesworth and his fellow leaders of A.C.H.R. joined with the students and helped them to mobilize many of Birmingham Negroes in a determined withdrawal of business from stores that displayed jim-crow signs, refused to hire Negroes in other than menial capacities, refused to promote the few Negroes in their employ, and would not serve colored people at their lunch counters. As a result of the campaign, business fell off as much as 40 percent at some downtown stores. Fred was leading a militant crusade, but Birmingham and Bull Connor fought, tooth and nail, to keep things as they were.

As the parent organization of A.C. H.R., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta had kept a close and admiring watch on Fred Shuttlesworth's uphill fight. We knew that he had paid the price in personal suffering for the battle he was waging. He had been jailed several times. His home and church had been badly damaged by bombs. Yet he had refused to back down. This courageous minister’s audacious public defiance of Bull Connor had become a source of inspiration and encouragement to Negroes throughout the South.

In the May 1962 board meeting of S.C.L.C. at Chattanooga, we decided to give serious consideration to joining Shuttlesworth and A.C.H.R. in a massive direct-action campaign to attack segregation in Birmingham. It happened that we had scheduled that city as the site of our forthcoming annual convention in September. Immediately after the board meeting, rumors began to circulate in Birmingham that S.C.LC. had definitely decided to support Fred's fight by mounting a prolonged campaign in that city at the time of the convention. These rumors gained so much impetus that stories supporting them appeared in the daily press. For the first time, Birmingham businessmen, who had pursued a policy of ignoring demands for integration, became concerned and concluded that they would have to do something drastic to forestall large-scale protest.

Several weeks before our convention was scheduled, the business community began negotiating with A. CH.R. Meeting with the white Senior Citizens Committee were Shuttlesworth; Dr. Lucius Pitts, president of Miles College; A. G. Gaston, wealthy businessman and owner of the Gaston Motel; Arthur Shores, an attorney with wide experience in civil-rights cases; the Reverend Edward Gardner, vice president of A.CH.R.; and insurance broker John Drew. After several talks, the group came to some basic agreements. As a first step, some of the merchants agreed to remove the Jim-crow signs from their stores, and several actually did so. The businessmen further agreed to join in a suit with A.C.H.R. to seek nullification of city ordinances forbidding integration at lunch counters. It appeared that a small crack had opened in Birmingham.

Although wary of the permanence of these promises, the Negro group decided to give the merchants a chance to demonstrate their good faith. Shuttlesworth called a press conference to announce that a moratorium had been declared on boycotts and demonstrations. However, to protect the position of A.C.H.R., he made it clear that his organization's parent body, SCLC, would be coming to Birmingham for its convention as planned, and informed the press that after the convention, S.C.L.C. would be asked to return to the Steel City to help launch an action campaign if the pledges of the business community were violated.

Bull Connor had been issuing ominous statements about our forthcoming meeting. When he realized that his threats were frightening no one, he began to try to intimidate the press by announcing that the press cards of any "outside reporters" would be taken away from them. It was clear that Connor felt the bastions of segregation could be most securely maintained in Birmingham if national exposure could be avoided.

The S.C.LC. convention took place in September 1962, as scheduled. Shortly thereafter,

Fred Shuttlesworth's fears were justified: The Jim-crow signs reappeared in the stores. The rumor was that Bull Connor had threatened some of the merchants with loss of their licenses if they did not restore the signs. It seemed obvious to Fred that the merchants had never intended to keep any of their promises; their token action had merely been calculated to stall off demonstrations while S.C.L.C. was in the city. During a series of lengthy telephone calls between Birmingham and Atlanta, we reached the conclusion that we had no alternative but to go through with our proposed combined-action campaign.

Along with Fred Shuttlesworth, we believed that while a campaign in Birmingham would surely be the toughest fight of our civil-rights careers, it could, if successful, break the back of segregation all over the nation. This city had been the chief symbol of racial intolerance. A victory there might well set forces in motion to change the entire course of the drive for freedom and justice. Because we were convinced of the significance of the job to be done in Birmingham, we decided that the most thorough planning and prayerful preparation must go into the effort. We began to prepare a top-secret file which we called "Project C" the "C" for Birmingham's Confrontation with the fight for justice and morality in race relations.

In preparation for our campaign, I called a three-day retreat and planning session with SCLC staff and board members at our training center near Savannah, Georgia. Here we sought to perfecta timetable and discuss every possible eventuality. In analyzing our campaign in Albany, Georgia, we decided that one of the principal mistakes we had made there was to scatter our efforts too widely. We had been so involved in attacking segregation in general that we had failed to direct our protest effectively to any one major facet. We concluded that in hard-core communities a more effective battle could be waged if it was concentrated against one aspect of the evil and intricate system of segregation. We decided, therefore, to center the Birmingham struggle on the business community, for we knew that the Negro population had sufficient buying power so that its withdrawal could make the difference between profit and loss for many businesses. Stores with lunch counters were our first target. There is a special humiliation for the Negro in having his money accepted at every department in a store except the lunch counter. Food is not only a necessity but a symbol, and our lunch counter campaign had not only a practical but a symbolic importance.

Two weeks after the retreat at our training center, I went to Birmingham with my able executive assistant, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, and my abiding friend and fellow campaigner from the days of Montgomery, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, S.C.L.C:s treasurer. There we began to meet with the board of A.C.H.R. to assist in preparing the Negro community for what would surely be a difficult, prolonged and dangerous campaign.

We met in the now famous Room 30 of the Gaston Motel, situated on Fifth Avenue North, in the Negro ghetto. This room, which housed Ralph and myself, and served as the headquarters for all of the strategy sessions in subsequent months, would later be the target of one of the bombs on the fateful and violent Saturday night of May I l, the eve of Mother’s Day.

The first major decision we faced was setting the date for the launching of "Project C." Since it was our aim to bring pressure to bear on the merchants, we felt that our campaign should be mounted around the Easter season—the second biggest shopping period of the year. Ifwe started the first week of March, we would have six weeks to mobilize the community before Easter, which fell on April 14. But at this point we were reminded that a mayoralty election was to be held in Birmingham on March 5.

The leading candidates were Albert Boutwell, Eugene "Bull" Connor and Tom King. All were segregationists, running on a platform to preserve the status quo. Yet both King and Boutwell were considered moderates in comparison to Connor. We were hopeful that Connor would be so thoroughly defeated that at least we would not have to deal with him. Since we did not want our campaign to be used as a political football, we decided to postpone it, planning to begin demonstrations two weeks after the election.

Meanwhile Wyatt Walker was detailed to return to Birmingham and begin work on the mechanics of the campaign. From then on, he visited Birmingham periodically, unannounced, organizing a transportation corps and laying the groundwork for an intensive boycott. He conferred with lawyers about the city code on picketing, demonstrations and so forth, gathered data on the probable bail-bond situation, and prepared for the injunction that was certain to

In addition to scheduling workshops on nonviolence and direct-action techniques for our recruits, Wyatt familiarized himself with downtown Birmingham, not only plotting the main streets and landmarks (target stores, city hall, post office, etc.), but meticulously surveying each store's eating facilities, and sketching the entrances and possible paths of ingress and egress. In fact, Walker detailed the number of stools, tables and chairs to determine how many demonstrators should go to each store. His survey of the downtown area also included suggested secondary targets in the event we were blocked from reaching our primary targets. By March l, the project was in high gear and the loose ends of organizational structure were being pulled together. Some 250 people had volunteered to participate in the initial demonstrations and had pledged to remain in jail at least five days.

At this point the results of the March 5 election intervened to pose a serious new problem. No candidate had won a clear victory. There would have to be a run-off vote, to be held the first week in April. We had hoped that if a run-off resulted, it would have been between Boutwell and King. As it turned out, the competing candidates were to be Boutwell and Connor.

Again we had to remap strategy. Had we moved in while Connor and Boutwell were electioneering, Connor would undoubtedly have capitalized on our presence by using it as an emotion-charged issue for his own political advantage, waging a vigorous campaign to persuade the white community that he, and he alone, could defend the city's official policies of segregation. We might actually have had the effect of helping Connor win. Reluctantly, we decided to postpone the demonstrations until the day after the run-off. We would have to move promptly if we were still to have time to affect Easter shopping.

We left Birmingham sadly, realizing that after this second delay the intensive groundwork we had done in the Negro community might not bring the effective results we sought. We were leaving some 250 volunteers who had been willing to join our ranks and to go to jail. Now we must ose contact with these recruits for several weeks. Yet we dared not remain. It was agreed that no member of the S.C.L.C. staff would return to Birmingham until after the run-off.

In the interim, I was busy on another preparatory measure. Realizing the difficulties that lay ahead, we felt it was vital to get the support of key people across the nation. We addressed confidential letters to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Regional Council, telling them of our plans and advising them that we might be calling on them for aid. We corresponded in the same vein with the seventy-five religious leaders of all faiths who had joined us in the Albany Movement.

In New York City, Harry Belafonte, an old friend and supporter of S.C.L.G agreed to call a meeting at his apartment. Approximately seventy-five New Yorkers were present. They a cross section of citizens, including newspapermen (who kept their promise not to publish stories about the meeting until the action was launched), clergymen, business and professional people, and unofficial representatives from the offices of Mayor Wagner and Governor Rockefeller.

Fred Shuttlesworth and I spoke of the problems then existing in Birmingham and those we anticipated. We explained why we had delayed taking action until after the run-off, and why we felt it necessary to proceed with our plans whether Connor or Boutwell was the eventual victor. Shuttlesworth, wearing the scars of earlier battles, brought a sense of the danger as well as the earnestness of our crusade into that peaceful New York living room. Although many of those present had worked with S.C.LC. in the past, there was a silence almost like the shock of a fresh discovery when Shuttlesworth said, "You have to be prepared to die before you can begin to live."

When we had finished, the most frequent question was: "What can we do to help?"

We answered that we were certain to need tremendous sums of money for bail bonds. We might need public meetings to organize more support. On the spot, Harry Belafonte organized a committee, and money was pledged the same night. For the next three weeks, Belafonte, who never does anything without being totally involved, gave unlimited hours to organizing people and money. Throughout the subsequent campaign, he talked with me or my aides two or three times a day. It would be hard to overestimate the role this sensitive artist played in the success of the Birmingham crusade.

Similar meetings were held with two of our strongest affiliates, the Western Christian Leadership Conference in Los Angeles, and the Virginia Christian Leadership Conference in Richmond. Both pledged and gave their unswerving support to the campaign. Later on, with the N.A.A.CP. and other local organizations, the Western Conference raised the largest

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amount of money—some has ever been raised in a single rally for SCLC Many of the men from these conferences would later join our ranks during the crisis.

With these contacts established, the time had come to return to Birmingham. The run-off election was April 2. We flew in the same night. By word of mouth, we set about trying to make contact with our 250 volunteers for an unadvertised meeting. About sixty-five came out. The following day, with this modest task force, we launched the direct-action campaign in Birmingham.