

Historical Background to “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

As an outgrowth of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, civil rights protest movements emerged in numerous cities throughout the South in the 50s and 60s. The campaign in Birmingham, the largest industrial city in the South, generated national publicity and federal action due to the particularly violent response of segregationists.

In the spring of 1963, King and SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference—an organization founded by King to co-ordinate nonviolent protests in the South) lead mass demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, where local white police officials were known for their violent opposition to integration. Clashes between unarmed black demonstrators and police armed with dogs and fire hoses generated newspaper headlines throughout the world.

President Kennedy responded to the Birmingham protests by submitting broad civil rights legislation to Congress, which led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibited “discrimination based on ‘race, color, religion, or national origin’ in public establishments (hotels, motels, trailer parks, restaurants, gas stations, bars, taverns, and places of entertainment).”

Subsequent mass demonstrations culminated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on 28 August 1963, in which more than 250,000 protesters gathered in Washington D.C. It was on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that King delivered his famous “I Have A Dream” speech.

The Birmingham campaign began with a series of mass meetings and direct actions. King spoke on the philosophy of nonviolence and its methods, and at the end of the meetings, extended an appeal to volunteers to serve in the nonviolent resistance. SCLC actions began with lunch counter sit-ins, marches on City Hall, and a boycott of downtown merchants. With the number of volunteers increasing daily, actions soon expanded to knee-ins at churches, sit-ins at the library, and a march on the county building to mark the opening of a voter registration drive.

The campaign’s strategy was to put economic pressure on Birmingham’s merchants, so organizers scheduled the protests to begin around the Easter season—the second biggest shopping period of the year. However, a mayoral election was to be held in Birmingham on 5 March. All the leading candidates were segregationists, but candidate Eugene “Bull” Connor, also Birmingham’s Commissioner of Public Safety, was considered much more militant. Because SCLC did not want to be used as a political tool to drive white voters to Connor, they postponed the campaign until two weeks after the election. The close election resulted in a runoff on 2 April 1963, in which Albert Boutwell defeated Connor.

On 10 April, the city government obtained a court injunction directing an end to all protests. King and SCLC decided that the time had come to counter the city’s legal maneuvering with action, and after two days of heavy debate, they decided to disobey the

court order. King declared “We cannot in all good conscience obey such an injunction which is an unjust, undemocratic and unconstitutional misuse of the legal process.”

Their plans to submit to arrests were threatened, however, by insufficient funds to cover bail expenses. SCLC had used up all of the money they had available for cash bonds and had an ongoing responsibility to their demonstrators already arrested and jailed. Fifty more demonstrators were already scheduled to go in with Ralph Abernathy and King, and SCLC could not guarantee their eventual release. King contemplated whether he should go to jail given the lack of funds, because his services as a fundraiser were so desperately needed. But he worried that his failure to submit to arrests would undermine the credibility of the movement, criticism he had faced during the Albany Movement. After some thought, King concluded that he had to be willing to go to jail in Birmingham. “Friends,” King said, “I’ve made my decision. I have to make a faith act. I don’t know what will happen or what the outcome will be. I don’t know where the money will come from.”

On 12 April, King was arrested in Birmingham after violating the state circuit court injunction against protests. He was kept in solitary confinement and was allowed minimal direct contact. It was at this time that King penned his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” on the margins of the *Birmingham News*.