CONSULTING EDITOR

ERIC FONER

Hill and Wang
New York
The Noonday Press

THE STRUGGLE FOR BLACK EQUALITY

1954–1992

REVISED EDITION

HARVARD SITKOFF

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Published in Canada by
HarperCollins*CanadaLtd*
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Fritz Metsch

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Sitkoff, Harvard.
The struggle for black equality 1954–1992 / Harvard Sitkoff ;
consulting editor, Eric Foner.
p. cm.—(American century series.)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Afro-Americans—Civil rights. 2. United States—Race
relations. 3. Civil rights movements—United States—History—20th
century. I. Foner, Eric. II. Title. III. Series.
E185.615.S572 1993 323'.196073—dc20 92-20244 CIP

Sixteenth printing 1993

For
Alexandra, Adam, Erica,
and Charles

E
185.615
.S572
1993

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FIVE

We Shall Overcome

I don't know how many of you would be able to write a history book. But you are certainly making history, and you are experiencing history. And you will make it possible for the historians of the future to write a marvelous chapter. Never in the history of this nation have so many people been arrested for the cause of freedom and human dignity.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King's determination to provoke a confrontation in Birmingham in 1963 resulted in a massive wave of nonviolent action—"the Negro Revolution." Birmingham decisively changed both the nature of the struggle for racial justice and white attitudes toward civil rights. After more than twenty thousand blacks were jailed in hundreds of demonstrations, King's action eventuated the passage of the most comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in American history.

The decision to launch a campaign to end segregation in Birmingham had been reached in a three-day strategy session conducted by the SCLC at its retreat near Savannah at the end of 1962. The motives were both personal and political, practical as well as

philosophical. Albany weighed heavily on King and his aides. Malcolm X had said "the civil rights struggle in America reached its lowest point" in Albany, and many in the movement agreed. Albany brought into the open doubts about King's leadership and disillusionment with the established techniques of protest. The head of the SCLC wanted desperately to prove that nonviolence could still work, that "you can struggle without hating, you can fight without violence." King also believed it imperative to demonstrate his own courage and effectiveness, to dispel rumors that he was a reluctant and losing crusader. His reputation and SCLC's importance necessitated a daring, dramatic effort, especially since 1963 would be the year of the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

King realized the need for some decisive achievement to rekindle the morale and momentum of the freedom struggle. Social movements require victories for sustenance, and civil-rights gains had not kept pace with the rising expectations of blacks. Despair mounted in 1962, and King feared that if the movement faltered, blacks would turn to leaders like Malcolm X, who mocked nonviolence and had nothing but scorn for "integration"—a word, Malcolm said, "invented by a northern liberal." Gaining converts, and far more sympathizers, Malcolm dismissed the aspirations of civil-rights leaders as fantasy and condemned their conciliatory style as debasing. "Our *enemy* is the *white man*," he insisted as he preached black nationalism, stressing that blacks must take control of their own livelihoods and culture "*by any means necessary*." Proudly, Malcolm accepted the label of extremist. "The black race here in North America is in extremely bad condition. You show me a black man who isn't an extremist and I'll show you one who needs psychiatric attention!"

Worried that blacks would flock to extremists like Malcolm X if he did not succeed, King decided that the time had come to force Kennedy's hand. The President's policy of trying to show concern for blacks while at the same time avoiding action to inflame the white South, said King, had brought the movement nothing but

delay and tokenism. By 1963, thirty-four African nations had freed themselves from colonial bondage, but more than two thousand school districts remained segregated in the South. Only 8 percent of the black children in the South attended class with whites. At this rate of progress, civil-rights leaders moaned, it would be the year 2054 before school desegregation became a reality, and it would be the year 2094 before blacks secured equality in job training and employment. Kennedy would have to be pushed, and pushed hard. "We've got to have a crisis to bargain with," King's right-hand man Wyatt Tee Walker explained at the SCLC retreat. "To take a moderate approach hoping to get white help doesn't help. They nail you to the cross, and it saps the enthusiasm of the followers. You've got to have a crisis."

Birmingham appeared to answer King's diverse needs. The Reverend Fred Lee Shuttlesworth, the fearless head of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, an SCLC affiliate, had just invited King to conduct nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, the most segregated big city in America. No other undertaking would be more audacious. Absolute segregation was the rule—in schools, restaurants, rest rooms, drinking fountains, and department-store fitting rooms. Municipal officials closed down the city parks and playgrounds rather than desegregate them. Birmingham abandoned its professional baseball team rather than allow it to play desegregated clubs in the International League. It even banned a textbook because it had black and white rabbits in it. Although over 40 percent of the population was African-American, fewer than ten thousand of the 80,000 registered voters were black. White racism permeated the city; and it was reinforced daily, wrote a reporter in *The New York Times*, "by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the knife, the mob, the police and many branches of the state's apparatus." To crack this solid racist wall would be a mighty achievement.

Birmingham was more than unyielding on segregation. It had the reputation of a dangerous city. Blacks dubbed it "Bombingham" for the eighteen racial bombings and more than fifty cross-burning

incidents that occurred between 1957 and 1963. Leading the vanguard of the brutal, last-ditch defenders of segregation was Eugene T. "Bull" Connor, who vowed: "We're not going to have white folks and nigras segregatin' together in this man's town." The jowly, thickset police commissioner prided himself on being as vigilant as he was cruel in "keeping the niggers in their place." The SCLC could count on Connor to respond viciously to any effort to alter the city's racial order; they believed this could create the crisis that would force the President to act. "We *presumed* that Bull would do something to help us," recalled Wyatt Walker. Connor's unwitting assistance to them would thus enable SCLC to "turn Bull into a steer." King decided to aid Shuttlesworth, but to avoid having their nonviolent campaign used as a political football, they postponed the demonstrations until after the April 2 mayoralty runoff election. In the meantime, King and his associates prepared a top-secret plan which they called "Project C"—for *Confrontation.*

King and his task force arrived in Birmingham the day after the election. They promptly issued a manifesto calling for an immediate end to racist employment practices and Jim Crow public accommodations, and for the rapid formation of a biracial committee to plan for further desegregation. "We're tired of waiting," Shuttlesworth told a packed church meeting that evening. "We've been waiting for 340 years for our rights. We want action. We want it now." As the congregation responded with spirited renditions of "Woke Up This Mornin' with My Mind Stayed on Freedom" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," King rose to vow that he would lead an economic boycott and demonstrations against the downtown merchants until "Pharaoh lets God's people go."

The first stage of Project C began the next morning. Small groups of protesters staged sit-ins at the segregated downtown lunch counters. The anticipated arrests followed. King continued this tactic for several days, patiently piquing the concern of the Kennedy Administration and the interest of the national news media while arousing the black community.

On April 6 the second stage of Project C began with a march of

fifty African-Americans, led by Shuttlesworth, on City Hall. Connor arrested them all. The next day, Palm Sunday, Connor similarly intercepted and jailed a column of blacks marching on City Hall headed by Martin Luther King's brother, the Reverend A. D. King. Day after day the public marches and arrests continued, in the full glare of newspaper photographers and television cameras. King had counted on these incidents and the economic boycott accompanying them to activate larger numbers of Birmingham blacks, to focus national attention on the issue of civil rights, and to discomfort the city's economic elite. He had calculated right. On April 10, city officials secured an injunction barring racial demonstrations. They thought it would stop the SCLC campaign in its tracks, dampening the fervor of the black community. But King announced that he saw it as his duty to violate this immoral injunction and that he would do so on Good Friday, April 12. Accompanied by Abernathy and Al Hibbler, the popular blind blues singer, King led some fifty hymn-singing volunteers on yet another trek toward City Hall. Chanting "Freedom has come to Birmingham!" nearly a thousand blacks lined their route. An infuriated Connor, escorted by a squad of snarling, snapping police dogs, ordered their arrest.

While in jail, King composed an essay justifying the strategy of the black freedom struggle. Ostensibly written to the eight Birmingham clergymen who had condemned the SCLC campaign as "unwise and untimely," King addressed his reply to the many whites and blacks who apparently shared his goals but questioned his tactics, especially those who urged the movement to be patient, moderate, and law-abiding. Begun in the margins of newspapers and continued on bits of scrap paper smuggled to him by a prison trusty, King worked for four days on his nineteen-page "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Soon after, several national periodicals published it in its entirety and reprints were distributed across the nation. Widely quoted, the epistle proved to be a potent weapon in the propaganda battle to legitimate the direct-action movement. By depicting the protesters, rather than the forces of "law and order," as the defenders of the Judeo-Christian heritage and the

Constitution, King quieted some influential critics of civil disobedience.

King's letter began with a refutation of the charge of "outside agitator," arguing that as a Christian and an American he had the duty to combat injustice wherever it existed. Then King explained how the white leadership of Birmingham left blacks no alternative but to demonstrate at this time. He detailed the broken promises and refusal to negotiate by the white elite, juxtaposing them against his portrayal of the dismal, brutal plight of black Birmingham. Something had to be done to break the crust of apathy and indifference that enabled white America to ignore such injustice; something had to be done to create a crisis so the city could no longer evade a solution. To those who asked blacks "to wait," King retorted that "wait" generally meant "never." He had never "yet engaged in a direct action movement that was 'well timed,' " King observed, "according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation."

> I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see that vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for

a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" men and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

King next turned to a philosophical vindication of civil disobedience. Because segregation laws injured the soul and degraded the human personality, he defined them as unjust, and then contended that one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. He reminded his fellow ministers that the laws of Hitler had been "legal," and further emphasized the undemocratic nature of the segregation ordinances by indicating that blacks had been excluded from the political process which enacted these state and local laws. To those still unwilling to accept the justness of nonviolent civil disobedience, King underlined the alternative: "Millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare." Disappointed with the moderates who cared more about law and order than about justice, King hoped they would someday recognize the nation's true heroes.

They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose, facing jeering and hostile mobs and

the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: 'My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.' They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thus carrying our whole nation back to great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

That day had certainly not yet arrived in Birmingham. As the disinherited children of God continued to try to march to City Hall, Connor's police acted with less and less restraint. The movement responded to police violence with larger demonstrations. And Birmingham blacks reacted by tightening the economic boycott which pinched the merchants more and more. As the racial tension mounted, events outside of Birmingham heightened the sense of impending crisis.

On April 21, William L. Moore, a white Baltimore mail carrier and CORE member, set off from Chattanooga on his "freedom walk." Wearing a sandwich-board sign proclaiming "Equal Rights for All—Mississippi or Bust," Moore intended to hike to Jackson and personally deliver a letter to Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett protesting Southern segregation. On the afternoon of April 23, he walked through Gadsden, Alabama. That evening he was found

murdered on a lonely road ten miles outside the city. Moore had been shot in the neck and head.

The killing of Moore embittered the movement. As officials throughout the nation bemoaned the outrageous crime, Diane Nash Bevel led a group of eight Birmingham blacks to Gadsden to complete Moore's pilgrimage. All were jailed. Then an interracial group of CORE and SNCC staffers left Chattanooga on May 1 to take up the freedom walk. Nearly a hundred cars filled with bottle- and rock-throwing whites followed them across the Alabama state line, shouting "Kill them!" "Throw them niggers in the river!" Alabama highway patrolmen immediately arrested the freedom walkers, repeatedly shocking them with electric cattle prods. The CORE–SNCC contingent refused to accept bail and spent a month in prison. Two weeks later, a third attempt to resume Moore's freedom walk, organized by CORE, resulted in the arrest of another six blacks and five whites. By this time King had been released from jail and had launched the third stage of his confrontation with Birmingham's establishment.

D Day, May 2, an astonished national audience, generated by the sit-ins, protest marches, police brutality, and the slaying of William Moore, watched over a thousand black children, some only six years old, march out of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to demonstrate and be arrested. Before the cameras, the young blacks sang freedom songs, chanted freedom slogans to the hundreds of cheering adult spectators, and knelt to pray as the police corralled them. They offered no resistance to Connor's stupefied forces, clapping, dancing, laughing, and skipping to the patrol wagons waiting to take them to jail. "Black and glad," determined yet not somber, the children stunned the nation.

Criticism of King for his "children's crusade" came from every quarter. Moderates anguished about the safety of the children. Conservatives denounced the tactic as cynical and exploitative. Radicals demeaned it as unmanly. "Real men," objected Malcolm X, "don't put their children on the firing line." King retorted that, by demonstrating, the children gained a "sense of their own stake in freedom and justice," as well as a heightened pride in their race and belief in their capacity to influence their future.

In fact, King had accepted Bevel's plan to use Birmingham's black children as demonstrators because most adults had been reluctant to march and the campaign would have soon fizzled out. Bevel had also asserted that the news photographs of young girls and boys being hauled off to jail would dramatically stir the nation's conscience. The needs of victory were all that mattered; and the rules of the game had changed. Another thousand black children of Birmingham packed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that evening to shout their approval of King and his promise: "Today was D Day. Tomorrow will be Double-D Day."

The *New York Times* account of the May 3 demonstrations began: "There was an ugly overtone to the events today that was not present yesterday." No one would accuse the reporter of overstatement. An enraged "Bull" Connor, watching a thousand more students gather in the church to receive their demonstration assignments, abandoned all restraint. He ordered his forces to bar the exits from the church, trapping inside about half the young protesters, and then had his men charge into those who escaped and had gathered in Kelly Ingram Park. The police, swinging nightsticks indiscriminately, beat demonstrators and onlookers. Attack dogs set loose sank their fangs into three fleeing children. Horrified at this mistreatment of their young, adults in the park hurled bricks and bottles at the policemen. "Let 'em have it," Connor commanded the firemen with the high-pressure hoses. With a sound like gunfire, streams of blistering water roared from the nozzles, blasting blacks against buildings and sweeping kids down slippery streets. The hundreds of pounds of pressure ripped the bark off trees; it also tore the clothes off young people's backs, cut through their skins, and jerked their limbs weightlessly. Those jailed that Friday brought the number of children arrested in two days to nearly thirteen hundred.

King had his confrontation, and more. On Saturday, an additional two hundred students were arrested, and several thousand

adult blacks skirmished with the police, pelting them with rocks. Again, graphic illustrations of clubbings, police dogs, and fire hoses appeared on the front pages of newspapers and on television sets throughout the country. The appalling pictures of snarling dogs lunging viciously at youthful marchers, of bands of policemen ganging up to beat children and women, of high-pressure hoses knocking the very young and the very old off their feet, brought a surge of anger and determination across black America and aroused the conscience, or guilt, of millions of previously indifferent whites. King suddenly had massive support. Kennedy now had to act.

The pictures of violence in Birmingham made him "sick," the President admitted to a delegation from the Americans for Democratic Action that Saturday. Yet he doubted aloud that he had a constitutional mandate to act. He termed impossible the liberals' suggestion that he intervene immediately and forcefully in Birmingham, but acknowledged: "I am not asking for patience. I can well understand why the Negroes of Birmingham are tired of being asked to be patient." Privately, the President knew that the time had come to act. He had to resolve the conflict with the least possible political damage to himself. He shared the sense of national outrage at Southern white atrocities yet shrank from the prospect of using federal force to impose a new racial order. Kennedy simply wanted the quickest possible restoration of civil peace. Secretly he ordered Justice Department mediators to Birmingham to persuade the contending groups to negotiate a settlement. Concurrently, key Administration officials began an intensive campaign to pressure Birmingham's most influential businessmen, especially those connected with U.S. Steel, to accept a compromise agreement.

Until this moment in the crisis, the Senior Citizens' Committee, covertly organized by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce to deal with desegregation problems, would not even talk with King and his associates. They were the so-called white moderates of the South—the gentlemen who said "nigra" rather than "nigger"—supposedly too busy making money to hate, yet for a month they had avoided even a hint of willingness to end the disorder and

violence. Now, suddenly, they were ready to talk. They had felt the heat from Washington. They feared the city was on the verge of a major bloodletting. And they had reckoned the toll of the black boycott: sales in April had dropped more than a third in the downtown stores. So Birmingham's economic elite started to negotiate in earnest on May 4, even agreeing to hold all-night sessions. They talked and listened but would not accede. The SCLC would not back down. Deadlock. King ordered the demonstrations to continue.

The most massive black protest to date began early Monday, May 6, and police violence intensified accordingly. A flyer distributed near Negro schools urged all students: "Fight for freedom first, then go to school. Join the thousands in jail who are making their witness for freedom. Come to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church now . . . and we'll soon be free. It's up to you to free our teachers, our parents, yourself and our country." In some schools, attendance dropped nearly 90 percent.

Dick Gregory, the well-known black comedian, led the first group of demonstrators out of the church. Police hurried them into the waiting paddy wagons as the students sang: "I ain't scared of your jail / cause I want my freedom / want my freedom / want my freedom now." Then another group left the church singing "I ain't scared of your dogs cause. . . ." They, too, were quickly herded off to jail. Out spilled another group singing "I ain't scared of your hoses cause . . ." and another singing "I ain't scared of no Bull . . ." and then another, and another. For an hour, wave after wave of twenty to fifty black students, chanting for freedom, defiantly offered themselves up for arrest. The huge crowd in the park roared their approval for each contingent leaving the church. Some sang a new ditty: "It isn't nice to go to jail / There are nicer ways to do it / But the nice ways always fail."

The audacity of the students, the contempt of the blacks, stirred Connor's fear and loathing. After more than a thousand demonstrators had been seized, he turned his police on the crowd in the park. Shoving and kicking, the men in blue vented their fury. As

the television cameras rolled and the photographers focused their lenses, snapping police dogs once again leaped at the throats of taunting children, fire hoses bowled over rock-throwing blacks, and Connor's minions clubbed onlookers.

A shocked nation demanded federal action to end the conflict. Kennedy's mediators pressed King to yield on his demands for immediate desegregation and an end to discrimination in employment. They warned him of the folly of prolonging the crisis in the expectation of intervention by federal troops. Separately, the Justice Department officials urged the city's business establishment to make real concessions, not merely promises of future action. They threatened the white elite with the probable consequences of federal action and the economic effects of a bloodbath in Birmingham. Neither negotiating team would budge. The talks resumed, and so did the confrontation.

Tuesday, May 7, the conflict peaked. A larger number of students than ever before, and far less submissive, appeared on the streets. Rather than march from the church and court arrest, some two thousand young blacks suddenly converged on the downtown area at noon. Most staged sit-ins. Others picketed the major stores. Some held pray-ins on the sidewalks. Several thousand adult spectators then spontaneously joined a raucous black parade through the business section. Over and over they shouted "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" "We're marching for freedom!" Others chanted "The police can't stop us now. Even 'Bull' Connor can't stop us now."

Connor certainly tried. Adding an armored police tank to his arsenal, he ordered his men to drive the protesters back into the black ghetto. Brutally, they did so, penning nearly four thousand in Ingram Park. Connor commanded that the high-pressure hoses be turned on the trapped blacks. The water shot from the nozzles whacked the bark off trees. It tore bricks loose from the walls. The crowd screamed. Rocks flew. SCLC aides circulating in the crowd pleaded for nonviolence. Few could even hear them over the crashing of the huge hoses; and not many who could hear wanted to listen. Soon after Shuttlesworth entered the park to try to calm his

followers, a blast of water slammed the minister against the side of a building. On hearing that an injured Shuttlesworth had just been placed in an ambulance, Connor laughed. "I waited a week to see Shuttlesworth get hit with a hose. I'm sorry I missed it. I wish they'd carried him away in a hearse." Not until the crowd had been thoroughly pacified and dispersed did the dogs cease biting, the clubs stop crashing bones, and the hoses end knocking blacks down and washing them along the sidewalks. A reporter who watched in despair mumbled "God bless America."

That afternoon, as the downtown demonstrations erupted, a secret emergency meeting of the Senior Citizens' Committee resolved to end the disorder that had caused Birmingham to become an international byword for unrestrained police brutality. With the din of freedom chants in their ears, the business leaders directed their negotiators to come to terms with the SCLC. A three-hour bargaining session brought the two sides close to agreement. Differences remained, but the premonition of unchecked violence affected both negotiating teams. Following three more days of talk, they reached agreement.

The SCLC had won its demands for the "desegregation of lunch counters, rest rooms, fitting rooms and drinking fountains"; for the "upgrading and hiring of Negroes on a nondiscriminatory basis throughout the industrial community of Birmingham"; and for the formation of a biracial committee. It accepted, however, a timetable of planned stages, relenting on its insistence that these changes take effect immediately. The SCLC, moreover, acceded to the release of arrested demonstrators on bond, giving up its demand for the outright dismissal of all charges against them. Although this was a compromise that pleased neither black nor white hardliners, King claimed with pride "the most magnificent victory for justice we've ever seen in the Deep South."

Before returning to Atlanta, King pleaded for reconciliation and brotherhood in Birmingham, but too many in that steel town, black and white, wanted neither. That Saturday, Connor and other leading local and state officials broadcast their denunciations of the

biracial accord. They assaulted the Senior Citizens' Committee and the Kennedy brothers as well as King and the SCLC. At nightfall, over a thousand robed Ku Klux Klansmen met to hear further diatribes against the agreement. Shortly after the rally ended, two dynamite bombs rocked the home of A. D. King, strewing glass and timber in every direction. Sullen neighbors milled about, vowing vengeance. The Police and Fire Department officials inspecting the rubble were jostled and threatened. As the crowd grew, so did calls for retribution.

Minutes later, another bomb exploded, blasting a gaping hole in the Gaston Motel, the SCLC's headquarters in Birmingham. Thirsting for vengeance, the black underclass of Alabama's steel town streamed out of the bars and pool halls in the ghetto. They pelted the arriving police and firemen with stones and bottles. They stabbed one officer and assaulted several others. When some of King's aides urged them to stop throwing rocks and go home, the mob responded, "Tell it to 'Bull' Connor. This is what nonviolence gets you."

As police reinforcements swarmed into the area, additional blacks joined the rampaging mob. Many were parents of arrested children who had just heard tales of brutality and mistreatment in the prison. Martin Luther King, Jr., to the contrary, they would not love their enemy. Others had been so ground down by racist oppression that they wanted only to kill "whitey." They had never accepted King's talk of nonviolence, and this night they felt emboldened to display their hatred. Pandemonium reigned for several hours. Sporadic battles between the mob and the police flared. A white cabdriver, lost in the ghetto, was attacked by blacks, his car overturned and set on fire. Two grocery stores owned by whites were put to the torch. Soon an entire block was ablaze. "Let the whole fucking city burn," Wyatt Tee Walker heard a young black scream. "I don't give a good goddamn—this'll show those white motherfuckers!" Some blacks, however, struggled throughout the night to prevent bloodshed. Their exertions managed to keep the surge of violence from becoming a flood. Still, over fifty had been injured and the Birmingham *News* estimated property damage at more than $40,000.

King hurried back from Atlanta the next day to calm black Birmingham and to see that the accord held. He and other SCLC officials made the rounds of black bars and pool halls, schools, and churches, preaching the necessity of avoiding any provocation that might jeopardize the agreement. King pleaded that blacks stay on the nonviolent road to freedom. "Don't stop," he urged. "Don't get weary. There is a great camp meeting coming." How long? He was asked; not long, he promised. "We *sh:'l* overcome." The familiar refrain reassured and comforted. The furor subsided. City officials and business leaders began to implement the desegregation pact on schedule. Order returned to Birmingham.

Further racial disorder, however, swept across much of the rest of the nation as a result of the impact of Birmingham on black America. The audacity of taking on "Bull" Connor's "Johannesburg" and vanquishing it, the unprecedented children's crusade and savage white response, the determination of all strata of black Birmingham to fight racial oppression by whatever means they chose, all combined to affect more African-Americans, more passionately, than any previous protest. The age of Negro submissiveness ended; the era of black struggle reached a new plateau.

Birmingham fully awakened blacks to a sense of their new power; it ignited a mighty confidence in the potency of mass social dislocation to overcome white intransigence. If such a bastion of segregation could be defeated then any other city or area could be brought to heel by an aroused black community. Birmingham also spurred self-pride, a spirit of black unity, a willingness to join the struggle. James Farmer termed this optimistic assertiveness "a spiritual emancipation" and journalists trumpeted the emergence of a "New Negro," dwelling endlessly on their loss of fear, their readiness to go to jail, and their urgent quest for Freedom Now! "The most important thing that happened," Wyatt Tee Walker later acknowledged, "was that people decided that they are not going to be afraid of white folks anymore. Dr. King's most lasting contribution is that he emancipated black people's psyche. We threw off

the slave mentality. Going to jail had been the whip which kept black folks in line. Now going to jail was transformed into a badge of honor."

In part, the bravery of Birmingham's black children inspired this commitment. The image of the young, first seen on television and then seared in memory, volunteering to face down Connor's bullies and dogs and hoses, goaded thousands more to demonstrate. The same images also shamed blacks into the struggle. If children could court jail so that all blacks could be free, how could their elders do less. Simultaneously, the pictures of violence against women and kids engendered new depths of anger and widespread bitterness. The catalysts of hatred and retaliation in part dissolved black apathy and helped spark a brushfire of "little Birminghams" across the country in mid-1963.

More significant than the numbers, the nature of the struggle changed after Birmingham. Nearly a decade after *Brown*, African-American parents no longer would wait patiently for their children to attend desegregated schools. The militant "never" of hard-core segregationists would be matched by their own militancy. En masse, they forsook gradualism for immediacy. Tokenism and, for some, even nonviolence, no longer sufficed. *Freedom Now* meant, at a minimum, sweeping basic changes without either delay or dilution. "The package deal is the new demand," wrote Bayard Rustin. Instead of accepting further protracted, piecemeal alterations in the racial system, blacks clamored now for "fundamental, social, political and economic change." The price of racial peace, they insisted, must be decent jobs and housing for blacks as well as the franchise, an end to police brutality as well as immediate desegregation of all schools and public accommodations. To underscore their determination, moreover, blacks demonstrated for these concerns in an exceedingly relentless manner.

Birmingham also induced the previously torpid, very poorest blacks to participate in the racial struggle. Their entry into the movement both reflected and accelerated the radicalization of strategies and goals. The unemployed and working poor had little interest in the symbolic and status gains that the college students, professionals, and religious Southern middle-class blacks, who had constituted the bulk of the movement prior to Birmingham, had centered their energies on. They had even less sympathy for, or knowledge of, the spirit of *Satyagraha*. King's talk of love left them cold. His request that they nobly accept suffering and jailing made them snicker. As the black struggle became more massive and encompassing, impatience multiplied, disobedience became barely civil, and nonviolence, at best, a mere stratagem.

In addition, both deliberately and inadvertently, all the major civil-rights organizations further radicalized the movement. All responded to the changes wrought by Birmingham with an increasing militancy. "There go my people," King often quoted Gandhi at this time. "I must catch them, for I am their leader." And as King hurried to capitalize on the new spirit and participants in the struggle, so did James Forman of SNCC, James Farmer of CORE, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and even Whitney Young, the executive director of the National Urban League since 1961. Far more outspoken than his predecessors, Young in 1963 constantly harped on the themes that civil rights are not negotiable, that the time for compromise or delay had passed, and that the nation owed blacks a "domestic Marshall Plan." "The only fair and realistic way of closing the gap and correcting historic abuses," Young insisted, "calls for a transitional period of intensified special effort of corrective measures in education, in training and employment, in housing and in health and welfare." Although never a direct-action organization, the Urban League in 1963 publicly defended that strategy and urged blacks to demonstrate and protest.

So did the NAACP. Wilkins, who had chided black demonstrators in Jackson in 1961, returned to that city two years later to be arrested for picketing a Woolworth store that refused to desegregate. At the NAACP annual convention in July, Wilkins demanded that the association "accelerate, accelerate, accelerate" the civil-rights attack. For the first time, the national office provided support for its local branches engaging in direct action, especially in the

Carolinas, Mississippi, and Philadelphia, where Cecil Moore, the branch president, led blockades of the job sites of lily-white construction unions and boasted: "My basic strength is those 300,000 lower-class guys who are ready to mob, rob, steal and kill."

CORE, however, took the lead in the North in 1963. It organized rent strikes and school boycotts, demonstrated against job bias and for compensatory employment, and focused public attention on police brutality in the ghetto. And as CORE involved more urban blacks in the struggle, its stridency escalated. Militancy begat militancy, spurring ever more radical demands and tactics. At the same time, responding to pressure from local blacks, CORE put forth a greater effort in the South, mounting voter-registration campaigns and demonstrations against segregation. To the extent that it could, CORE tried to harness the uncompromising impatience of its many new adherents; but, in the main, events were in the saddle: the followers were leading, the leaders following.

Competition *among* the civil-rights organizations added to the militancy injected into the movement by those most recently mobilized. All the groups in the fight against racism sought the money necessary to battle successfully. Each tried to gain influence in Washington and standing in a local community, as well as the approval of the masses and the active support of true-believers. And each group, believing its solution best, sought power to affect the outcome of events. Competition among organizations in the civil-rights movement had always existed. Prior to 1963, however, it had been muted. Despite tactical differences, their goals had remained close, and their combined weakness relative to the opposition had placed a premium on cooperation or, at a minimum, absence of open opposition.

Birmingham changed the rules of the competition, and the stakes. There was a lot more to compete for, and more reason to win. The pool of prospective dues-paying members, of bodies to be utilized in demonstrations, and of committed activists willing to work full-time in the movement increased spectacularly after Birmingham. So did the potential of white backing. The door swung open to the possibilities of immense financial contributions, alliances with business and political leaders, and public endorsements and assistance from the nation's major white religious, civic, and labor groups.

Variances between the groups, in style and substance, once easily glossed over, now began to appear insurmountable. CORE, SNCC, SCLC, and the NAACP each hungered for the lion's share of the resources they believed would enable them to set the terms of future agreements and legislation. Each tried to outdo the others, to be more successful in its campaigns, to be more devoted to the struggle. The NAACP and CORE demonstrated that in their competing efforts in a score of cities in the North and in the Carolinas; the same was true of the rivalry of SNCC and SCLC in Danville, Virginia, and in Gadsden and Selma, Alabama; and the contest for primacy in the civil-rights struggle in Mississippi among the NAACP, SNCC, and CORE generated still further momentum and militancy within the movement.

Impatience and demands escalated, moreover, because the civil-rights leadership recognized that the new mood in black America would not be long sustained. They feared that delay could dissipate the intense involvement generated by Birmingham. Worrying that anything smacking of "business as usual" might precipitate individual blacks' hasty withdrawal into the private struggle for a better life, the leaders pressed for "all, now!" The civil-rights organizations concertedly demanded as much as they could as quickly as possible.

Blacks responded with a siege of direct action. A far greater number of blacks participated in many more demonstrations against a broader array of discrimination than ever before, and with unprecedented verve. Describing the change, King wrote that with Birmingham the African-American quiet "lament became a shout and then a roar and for months no American, white or Negro, was insulated or unaware." Nearly eight hundred boycotts, marches, and sit-ins in some two hundred cities and towns across the South occurred in the three months after the Birmingham accord. By the end of 1963, more than 20,000 protesters had been arrested, and at least ten had been killed. Over 80,000 disfranchised African-

Americans cast ballots in a Mississippi freedom election to protest their being denied the vote. And thousands of Northern blacks demonstrated their solidarity with their Southern brothers and sisters, staging walk-outs against de facto school segregation, picketing against discrimination in employment, and conducting rent strikes against racism in housing. Indeed, vivid daily accounts of blacks demonstrating and being brutally attacked by police and white mobs became the number-one feature of the news media in mid-1963.

This onslaught of disruptive militancy forced the white South to retreat. Many Southern white leaders suddenly began bargaining for peace, fearing the loss of business profits and/or an all-out race war. White officials acceded to the desegregation of public accommodations in some fifty Southern and border cities in the five months from May to the end of September. Scores of localities established biracial commissions and hired their first black policemen. And demagogues who had vowed "Never" registered African-Americans to vote and enrolled blacks in previously all-white schools. More racial change came in these few months than had occurred in three-quarters of a century. But it did not come everywhere in the South; and even in those areas that did start to alter their racial system, numerous whites remained unreconciled to any black advance.

From southwest Georgia across the Black Belt to the Louisiana delta, white supremacists mobilized for a last-ditch stand. They viewed themselves as the defenders of an isolated outpost—abandoned by the rest of white America, outnumbered by blacks, and under attack by an alliance of the federal government and civil-rights agitators. Embattled and endangered, they grew desperate, anxious to go down fighting and wound the hated black movement in whatever ways they could. First they tried all manner of harassment and intimidation, especially economic coercion. When that failed to stop the civil-rights troops, they called on sheriffs and deputies, who arrested thousands of demonstrators in the Deep South during the summer and fall of 1963. In each citadel of white

racism, police brutally clubbed protesters, teargassed them, scarred their bodies with electric cattle prods, and turned biting dogs and high-powered hoses on the volunteers in the movement. Still, the demonstrations continued.

Fearful, frustrated, furious whites turned to terrorism and murder. Fiery crosses placed on the lawns of civil-rights spokesmen and carloads of whites night-riding ominously through the black part of town served as preludes to the burning and bombing of homes and businesses owned by integrationists, or the destruction of schools due to be desegregated. In Mississippi, the closed society, where cars owned by whites bore license-plate legends such as MOST LIED ABOUT STATE IN THE UNION, FEDERALLY OCCUPIED MISSISSIPPI, KENNEDY'S HUNGARY, whites put to the torch several NAACP leaders' homes and stores in Gulfport, demolished the cars of civil-rights workers in Biloxi, wounded five SNCC staffers by shotgun blasts in Canton, and shot and killed a young movement organizer in Tchula. In Greenwood, 1963 brought the destruction of the SNCC office, the gasoline bombing of at least a half dozen black businesses and homes, the shooting of as many voter-registration workers, and the machine-gunning of SNCC's Jimmy Travis. Not to be outdone, whites in Jackson burned a restaurant that agreed to hire blacks, ravaged the homes and churches of integrationists, and fired rifles at cars driven by civil-rights workers. Returning from a mass meeting to his home in the capital shortly after midnight on June 11, Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary in Mississippi, was murdered by a sniper lying in ambush. Evers had just vowed to fight to end "all forms of segregation in Jackson."

Three months later, after two dozen black youths in defiance of Governor George Wallace had desegregated several previously all-white schools in Birmingham, a bomb constructed from fifteen sticks of dynamite shattered the Sunday-morning peace of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the staging center of the spring protests. Dozens of children attending a Bible class were injured by the explosion. Four black girls, two of them fourteen, one eleven, and one ten, who had been changing into choir robes in the basement,

lay dead and buried under the debris. Later in the day, a sixteen-year-old black youth was shot in the back and killed by a policeman with a shotgun, and a black thirteen-year-old riding his bicycle was shot to death by some white boys.

The next day a visibly agitated white attorney, Chuck Morgan, addressed the all-white Young Men's Business Club. Responding to the question on their minds, *who* bombed the church, an angry Morgan exclaimed:

> The "who" is every little individual who talks about the "niggers" and spreads the seeds of his hate to his neighbor and his son. . . . The "who" is every governor who ever shouted for lawlessness and became a law violator. . . . Who is really guilty? Each of us. Each citizen who has not consciously attempted to bring about peaceful compliance . . . each citizen who has ever said, "They ought to kill that nigger." Every person in this community who has in any way contributed to the popularity of hatred is at least as guilty, or more so, as the demented fool who threw that bomb.

After Morgan finished, a member moved that the Business Club admit an African-American to membership. The motion died for lack of a second.

Revulsed by the South's racist violence, embarrassed by the proponents of white supremacy, white Northern opinion swung behind the call for a civil-rights law. Attracted by the religious and patriotic idealism of the movement, dozens of student associations, labor unions, and religious organizations provided financial and political backing. Hundreds of liberal groups went on record in resolutions of support for the movement. Polls and surveys in the summer of 1963 disclosed overwhelming majorities in favor of laws to guarantee blacks voting rights, job opportunities, good housing, and desegregated schools and public accommodations. For a season, at least, Birmingham had altered the minds and hearts of millions of white Americans.

Northern whites, like their Southern counterparts, responded from fright as much as from conscience. Birmingham revealed how easily black discontent could flare into rioting, and melees throughout the summer, especially in Cambridge, Maryland, in Jackson after the assassination of Evers, and in Birmingham again, highlighted the disposition of blacks to meet racist violence with retaliatory rampages. In the main, blacks in 1963 vented their accumulated hostility against whites with rhetoric, but the words were so brutally frank, so uncompromising, so filled with fury, that they constituted an act as foreboding to whites as an assault. What whites heard and read, mostly for the first time, chilled them.

The news media accentuated such fears, popularizing many of the most apocalyptic prophets of doom and destruction. They played up Robert F. Williams's 1962 tract, *Negroes with Guns*, which preached the necessity of armed force by blacks to gain their freedom. They stressed the growing impatience with nonviolence among the more aggressive CORE and SNCC field secretaries, and they sensationalized the terrorist fantasies of quasi-Maoist black revolutionaries.

Mostly, the media focused on the black threat vividly articulated by James Baldwin and Malcolm X. Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* forced into the consciousness of whites a new sense of African-American rancor. Emphasizing that blacks would turn to violence if their nonviolent demands were ignored, Baldwin admonished white America of the destruction to come if it did not quickly and completely change its oppressive racial ways. He delineated the African-American past of

> rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred and murder, hatred for white men so

deep that it often turned against him and his own and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible.

He evoked the bleakness blacks presently faced. "For the horrors of the American Negro's life," he wrote, "there has been almost no language." Neither religion nor reason has persuaded whites to treat blacks decently, so, not surprisingly, the appeal of the Black Muslims keeps growing. "There is *no* reason that black men should be expected to be more patient, more forbearing, more farseeing than whites; indeed, quite the contrary." Whites must expect retaliation, unless they change and accept the unconditional freedom of blacks. The price of white security, Baldwin summed up, "is the liberation of the blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind." Anything less, he warned in the words of a Negro spiritual: *"God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time!"*

The popularity of the Black Muslims' incitement of violent enmity, described by Baldwin, had first been impressed on white America by CBS's inflammatory documentary in 1959, *The Hate That Hate Produced.* The Nation of Islam was depicted as an army of black fanatics planning for the inevitable race war. Little or nothing most whites read and heard informed them of Muslim success in rehabilitating blacks whom others considered beyond reclamation, or of the Muslim gospel that blacks had to conquer their own shame and poverty by adhering to such traditional American virtues as hard work, honesty, self-discipline, mutual help, and self-respect. Rather, the media spotlighted Malcolm X's most extremist visions of separatism and violence; and Malcolm quickly learned that the more shocking his comments, the more white attention the Black Muslims received. He played to the media, conjuring fantasies of jet fleets piloted by blacks bombing all-white neighborhoods, and publicly thanking *his* God for answering black prayers on the occasion of a plane crash in France which killed 120 white Atlantans. Malcolm X appeared on television more than any other black spokesman in 1963, and few whites remained unaware of his

expressions of contempt for all things white, his appeal to blacks to fight racism "by any means necessary," and his insistence that the "day of nonviolent resistance is over."

What often frightened whites instilled a fighting pride in blacks. An apostle of defiance, Malcolm particularly gave voice to the anger and pain of young blacks in the ghetto. His hostility toward all whites—always referring to them as white devils—epitomized their feelings. They cheered when he preached "an eye for an eye," when he brought "whitey down front," and when he rejected the nonviolent civil-rights movement as no substitute for the revolution needed by blacks: "Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise. . . ." Such utterances expressed the rarely publicized longings of many of the dispossessed, as did Malcolm's affirmations of black pride and unity, of black self-reliance and separatism, of black self-assertion and self-defense. His proselytizing for black nationalism—for blacks to control, by any means necessary, their own lives and culture—struck yet deeper chords among African-Americans demanding faster and more fundamental changes in racial conditions and insisting on more forceful means to achieve these ends. To them, of all black leaders, only Malcolm seemed to understand the depth of the racial conflict; and only Malcolm appeared to view the black struggle for equality as a power struggle, not a moral one. To virtually all blacks, moreover, Malcolm X stood as an implacable symbol of resistance and a champion of liberation.

Malcolm X remained a reproach to all white hypocrites and compromising blacks. His extremism, together with the threats of violence and revolution epitomized by Robert F. Williams, provided a sharp cutting edge to the black struggle. They kept the pressure on civil-rights leaders to be bolder, more militant. Simultaneously, their radicalism made the movement's leadership and objectives appear responsible and moderate. And they scared some white leaders into accepting the civil-rights demands as the only effective way to avert potential disaster. The more Malcolm loomed as the alternative that whites would have to confront if CORE, SNCC, and

SCLC failed, the more white officials acceded to the stipulations posed by the established leadership of the campaign for racial equality.

The threat of black insurrection, and even of more Birminghams and the intensification of black economic boycotts, especially touched the national corporate community. Businessmen saw no profit in turbulence, and many concluded in mid-1963 that meeting the reasonable aims of the civil-rights movement was the best way to banish the specter of increasing racial disorder. Corporate leaders began to put pressure on local governments, where they had substantial plants and offices, to negotiate their differences with movement organizers. On June 19, 1963, nearly a hundred chairmen of corporations and foundations answered the call of the president of the Taconic Foundation to aid the civil-rights movement financially. Meeting at the Hotel Carlyle in Manhattan, they pledged over a million dollars to the five major civil-rights groups. These leaders of finance and industry perhaps assumed that by assisting the established black organizations to secure their goals they could prevent the emergence of radicalism. Whatever their intentions, these funds, and the sizable contributions from other whites and blacks, enabled the black struggle to expand, to reach more potential supporters, and to plan larger, more ambitious campaigns. The staffs of SCLC and SNCC nearly trebled; the number of CORE chapters jumped from sixty to over a hundred; and NAACP membership increased by a third, to more than half a million.

"The sound of the explosion in Birmingham," wrote King, "reached all the way to Washington." The profound consequences of the SCLC campaign forced the President's hand, altering his perception of what needed to be done and what could be done. In response to Birmingham and the rush of spring and summer events that followed, Kennedy traveled in fits and starts toward a commitment to civil rights, and an identification with the movement, that he had previously resisted. Although he never fully reached that destination, he moved nearer to it than any previous American President.

Kennedy began to act decisively on civil rights in the summer of 1963, in part because of his personal sense of morality, and in part because of his political calculations. He needed to satisfy the millions of Americans protesting federal inaction and calling for an end to disorder. The President also had to dampen the explosive potential of widespread racial violence and to maintain the confidence of the mass of blacks in government. Additionally, Kennedy considered it necessary to assist Farmer and King and Wilkins in securing their objectives lest the movement be taken over by extremists.

With the ebbing of Cold War tensions now allowing the President to focus on domestic issues, Kennedy demonstrated his resolve shortly after the Birmingham accord had been reached. On May 21, a federal district judge ordered the University of Alabama to admit two black students to its summer session. Governor George Wallace immediately threatened to defy the court order and to bar the entrance of any black who attempted to desegregate the university. Wallace had announced in his inaugural address: "I draw the line in the dust and toss down the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say, Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" and he now promised his white constituents: "I will not let you down." The nation braced for a repeat of the confrontation at Ole Miss. But Kennedy was determined to keep Tuscaloosa from becoming another Oxford. Unlike his behavior in the events leading to the crisis at the University of Mississippi, Kennedy in 1963 acted promptly and forcefully, leaving Wallace no doubt as to the President's resolve. The governor capitulated.

Several hours after the first black students at the University of Alabama had registered, just a couple of hours before the assassination of Medgar Evers, Kennedy spoke to the nation on the race issue in a televised address that most of his advisors had counseled him against. He had decided to assert his leadership on what he called "a moral issue . . . as old as the Scriptures and . . . as clear as the American Constitution." It ought to be possible, Kennedy intoned,

for American students of any color to attend any public institution without having to be backed up by troops. It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal.

The President reviewed with intense emotion the plight of the American Negro, and asked:

> If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public; if he cannot send his children to the best public school available; if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him; if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?
>
> Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay? One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice; they are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

Then Kennedy warned that "events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city," and the moral crisis "cannot be met by repressive police action" or "quieted by token moves or talk. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your state and local legislative body, and, above all, in all our daily lives."

A week later, saying that the time had come for a national commitment "to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law," Kennedy asked Congress to pass a civil-rights law that included provisions for desegregating public accommodations; granting authority to the Attorney General to initiate school-desegregation suits; establishing a Community Relations Service to prevent racial conflicts; improving the economic status of blacks; and empowering the government to withhold funds from federally supported programs and facilities in which discrimination occurred. Mississippi's Senator James Eastland termed the bill a "complete blueprint for a totalitarian state," but congressional liberals moved quickly to strengthen it further, adding provisions for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission and for federal registrars to enroll black voters.

On August 28, over two hundred thousand Americans, black and white, and from almost every state in the union, converged on the Capitol, chanting: "Pass that bill! Pass that bill! Pass that bill!" Joyously, harmoniously, they marched to signify their belief in equal rights. Gathered in unity before the Lincoln Memorial, the vast, exalted throng cheered the nation's religious and civil-rights leaders' concerted declarations of support for black freedom. They accepted with delight the approval offered by the scores of government officials and dignitaries crowded on the platform behind the speaker's stand. Afterward, the President stated publicly that he had been "impressed with the deep fervor and the quiet dignity" of the marchers, and he lauded the demonstration as one of which "this nation can properly be proud." It appeared to be the apogee of the civil-rights movement. But it had not been so conceived, the unanimity was deceptive, and many of those who participated in and praised the march had opposed it when first announced by seventy-four-year-old A. Philip Randolph, the civil-rights movement's elder statesman.

The legendary head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Randolph had long nurtured a hope for a march on Washington. He had previously broached the idea in 1941 to force President

Roosevelt to open defense jobs to blacks, and in 1948 to pressure President Truman to desegregate the armed services. In December 1962, he and Bayard Rustin began to plan a march for economic justice, centered on demands for a hike in the minimum wage and passage of fair-employment legislation. With little enthusiasm, CORE, SCLC, and SNCC approved Randolph's call for a mass pilgrimage to Washington to dramatize the black-unemployment crisis. The NAACP and NUL bowed out. The idea drifted until Birmingham. Then it picked up steam as Rustin oriented it toward civil rights, rather than economic legislation, and Randolph agreed to a renamed March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The President met with the civil-rights leadership on June 22 to dissuade them from encouraging blacks to march on Washington. "We want success in Congress, not just a big show at the Capitol," he stressed. "Some of these people are looking for an excuse to be against us; and I don't want to give any of them a chance to say 'Yes, I'm for the bill, but I am damned if I will vote for it at the point of a gun.'" There had been talk of encampments on the White House lawn and mass sit-ins in the legislative galleries. Kennedy warned that their only effect would be "to create an atmosphere of intimidation—and this may give some members of Congress an out." The NAACP and NUL concurred, fearing that a mass demonstration might erupt into violence, discredit the movement, and harm congressional prospects for a civil-rights bill.

Randolph, King, and Farmer stood fast. "The Negroes are already in the streets," Randolph informed the President. "It is very likely impossible to get them off. If they are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about nonviolence?" Sustaining the argument, King stated that it was not a choice of a demonstration or legislation. The march "could serve as a means through which people with legitimate discontents could channel their grievances under disciplined non-violent leadership. It could also serve as a means of dramatizing the issue and mobilizing support in parts of the country which don't know the problems at first hand." "We understand your political problem in getting the legislation through," Farmer added, "and we want to help in that as best we can." Then the head of CORE reinforced the contentions of King and Randolph. "We could be in a difficult if not untenable position if we called the street demonstrations off and then were defeated in the legislative battle. The result would be that frustration would grow into violence and would demand new leadership." The President seemed almost persuaded, but he held off approving the march until he felt secure in its content and logistics.

The march organizers turned their energies to alleviating the qualms of the President and the moderates in the civil-rights camp who still did not back the proposed demonstration in Washington. They blurred Randolph's original focus on economic demands, and shelved plans for a sit-in at the Capitol in favor of staging a mass rally to support Kennedy's legislation.

Instead of laying siege to Capitol Hill, they would parade peacefully from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. By July, Rustin had the active cooperation of the NAACP, NUL, and nearly two hundred religious, labor, and civic organizations. Endorsements poured in. At his July 17 press conference, Kennedy characterized the coming demonstration as being "in the great tradition" of peaceful assembly "for a redress of grievances." His aides worked closely with the march leaders on arrangements. A month later, the President even worried that the march might not be massive enough, that the promised one hundred thousand people might not materialize.

The turnout exceeded all expectations. Nearly a quarter of a million attended the March on Washington to petition for black rights, including at least seventy-five thousand whites. They took heart in their numbers. The day became a celebration. The assemblage clasped hands as Joan Baez intoned "We shall overcome," sang along with Peter, Paul, and Mary when they asked "How many times must a man look up before he can see the sky?" and

hushed to hear Bob Dylan sing a ballad about the death of Medgar Evers. They clapped and cried their accompaniment to Odetta's "If they ask you who you are, tell them you're a child of God" and Mahalia Jackson's renditions of "I been 'buked and I been scorned." Good-naturedly, they endured the heat and humidity and the seemingly endless introduction of notables and repetition of clichés by speaker after speaker. As the afternoon wore on, some grew listless, and chose to nap, to play with the many children brought by parents, and to wade in the Reflecting Pool between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. It did not matter. They had made their point by their presence and demeanor. Then Randolph introduced Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been, as Wilkins put it, "assigned the rousements."

"Five score years ago," King began to the sound of a thunderous ovation, "a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." The crowd grew quiet as King surveyed the century that had passed since that day, declaiming over and over "One hundred years later . . ." and finding that not much had changed. "So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition." He termed the promises of the Declaration of Independence "a sacred obligation" which had proved to be, for blacks, a bad check—"a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.' " But, King continued, as tens of thousands roared their agreement, "we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."

King's rich baritone melodiously praised the "veterans of creative suffering" and urged them to continue the struggle. "*Now* is the time to make real the promises of Democracy. *Now* is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. *Now* is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. *Now* is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood." He reminded the nation that there "will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship

rights," and in rising tones answered those who asked, "When will you be satisfied?"

> We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

He appealed to the multitude: "Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our modern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed."

"I still have a dream," King added extemporaneously. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream," a dream of racial justice and social harmony. Rhythmically blending Amos, Isaiah, and "My Country 'Tis of Thee," King's dream rolled over the crowd, becoming more utopian and yet believable as the audience's antiphonal response rose tumultuously.

> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.
>
> I have a dream that one day even the State of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by

the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its Governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification—one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

Spines tingled and eyes teared as King ended:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

In less than fifteen minutes, King had transformed an amiable effort at lobbying Congress into the high-water mark of the black freedom struggle. "That day," James Baldwin wrote, "for a moment, it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real, perhaps the beloved community would not forever remain that dream one dreamed in agony." King's dream had buoyed the spirit of African-Americans and touched the hearts of whites. Not all, to be sure. It changed neither votes in Congress nor the minds of those most opposed or indifferent to racial equality. Billboards in the South proclaimed: "Kennedy for King—Goldwater for President." But, for many, King's eloquence and vision offset the ugly images of black violence that the demonstrations had started to evoke, replacing them with an inspiring picture of the movement at its benevolent best. To the extent that any single public utterance could,

this speech made the black revolt acceptable to white America. King's dream capped the wave of direct action starting in Birmingham which in 1964 resulted in the passage of the civil-rights act.

Some blacks, however, felt betrayed by King and those responsible for the March on Washington. As most in the crowd cried and cheered when King perorated, one young black shouted furiously: "Fuck that dream, Martin. Now goddamit, NOW!" Others mocked "De Lawd." Malcolm X called the demonstration the "Farce on Washington." Ridiculing the March as "a circus, nothing but a picnic," Malcolm wondered: "Who ever heard of angry revolutionists swinging their bare feet together with their oppressor in lily-pad park pools, with gospels and guitars and 'I Have a Dream' speeches?" James Farmer spent the day in a Louisiana jail, refusing bail. Annoyed at the moderating influence of Kennedy and King, he stayed in his cell to make the point that he did not consider the March on Washington sufficiently militant. SNCC staffers were livid that John Lewis, their chairman, had been forced to soften his words in deference to the demand of some of the white speakers. Lewis had prepared a speech describing the civil-rights bill as too little, too late, denouncing both Republicans and Democrats as hypocrites, threatening the South with a Sherman-like "scorched earth" march through the heart of Dixie, and demanding of Kennedy: "I want to know—which side is the federal government on?" The civil-rights establishment forced Lewis to launder such remarks from his address, turning the demonstration for jobs and freedom into, according to James Forman, "a victory celebration for the Kennedy Administration." But the angry reactions to the March on Washington and King's leadership, largely hidden from view that serene August afternoon, forecast the divisions and differences that would one day wreck the movement.

Nevertheless, throughout 1963, the black struggle remained outwardly united. An end to segregation appeared at hand, although Congress dawdled. In November the sudden crack of a rifle in Dallas precipitated the overdue legislation. The assassination of the President immediately stirred sympathy for the attainment of the goals

Kennedy sought and an abhorrence of violent fringe politics, like those associated with the Klan and other extreme white supremacists. Many considered passage of the civil-rights bill the most fitting memorial to their slain leader.

The House of Representatives acted quickly after the 1964 session began. It considered the measure for eleven days and passed it overwhelmingly. The Senate took nearly three months to debate before voting 73 to 27 for the bill. On July 2, President Lyndon Johnson signed the act which prohibited discrimination in most places of public accommodation, authorized the government to withhold federal funds to public programs practicing discrimination, banned discrimination by employers and unions, created an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, established a Community Relations Service, and provided technical and financial aid to communities desegregating their schools. The movement barely had time to celebrate. It was in the midst of the Mississippi Freedom Summer and a mighty effort to secure the franchise for blacks, the final item on the established civil-rights agenda.

SIX

How Many Roads

> Until then I'd never heard of no mass meeting and I didn't know that a Negro could register and vote. Bob Moses, Reggie Robinson, Jim Bevel and James Forman were some of the SNCC workers who ran that meeting. When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine. Had it up as high as I could get it. I guess if I'd had any sense I'd a-been a little scared, but what was the point of being scared. The only thing they could do to me was to kill me and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember.
>
> FANNIE LOU HAMER

The struggle for black equality reached its crest and rapidly began to recede in the two years following the March on Washington. It swept aside the last vestiges of legal discrimination and segregation and ended black disenfranchisement. But, in the process, all the fissures in the movement became major cleavages. In part a victim of its own success, the movement created aspirations it could not fulfill and developed a new sense of racial pride that verged on being black racism. Many in the struggle for racial justice became disen-