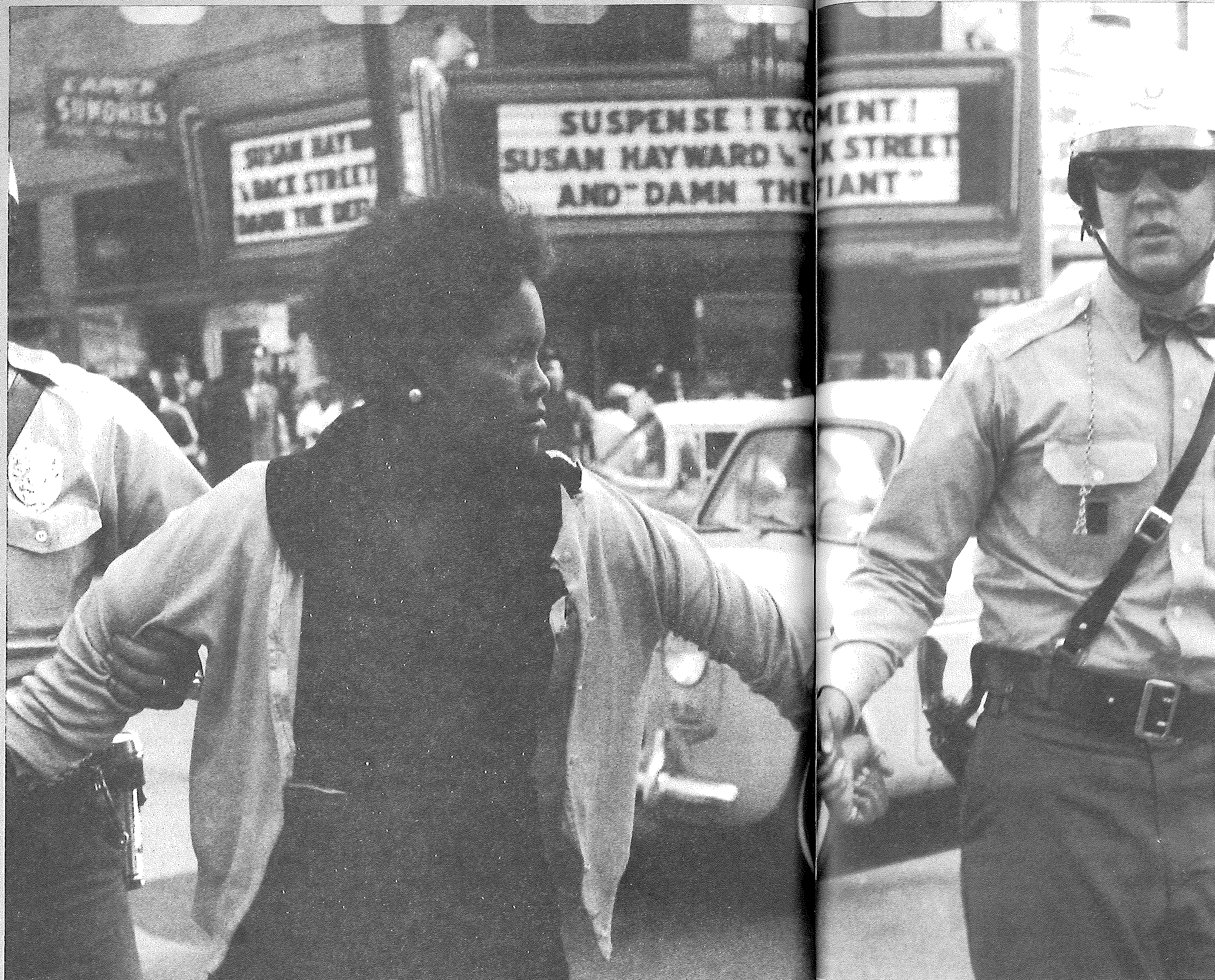

A black protester arrested in Birmingham.

Chapter Six

Freedom in the Air

The Lessons of Albany and Birmingham

"Charlie Jones looked at me and said, 'Bernice, sing a song.' And I started 'Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air.' By the time it got to where 'trouble' was supposed to be, I didn't see any trouble, so I put 'freedom' in there. That was the first time I had the awareness that these songs were mine and I could use them for what I needed."

Bernice Johnson Reagon
of the Freedom Singers

In the spring of 1961, there was little to indicate that the small southwest-Georgia city of Albany would become the setting for one of the next major acts in the civil rights drama. It was not a busy urban center, but a farming capital of 56,000 people, forty percent of them black. Peanuts, pecans, and corn had replaced the once-ubiquitous cotton on the farms surrounding the city.

The black neighborhoods, with their unpaved streets, were home to people who enjoyed some opportunities that their counterparts throughout the South did not. The farms offered plenty of work, as did the nightclubs and resorts that attracted swells from Atlanta and as far away as Tallahassee, Florida's capital. Blacks in Albany owned liquor stores, billiard parlors, taxi companies, and beauty shops, and their grown children attended Albany State College.

But Albany was no different from any other southern town in its entrenched segregationist practices. Despite the *Brown* decision, white schools did not admit black students. And despite the great number of blacks in Albany, few had been allowed to register to vote.

At all-black Albany State, students were beginning to resist this institutionalized bigotry. Many, such as Bernice Johnson, were members of the NAACP's Youth Council, and earlier that year they had staged a rally to protest the harassment of women students—white men sometimes sneaked into the dormitories or threw eggs at students on campus.

After the rally, members of the student government were suspended. This made the black college students more eager than ever to get involved with the civil rights movement. They had all heard about the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides. "We didn't belong to Albany, Georgia, as a people," recalls Bernice Johnson. "We belonged to black people. Nationally, black people were doing something, and we would say, 'When is it going to happen [here]?'"

In the summer of 1961, field representatives of the recently formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had arrived in Albany to help organize against segregation. Albany was one of their first attempts at mobilizing an entire community. But they had already encountered a fearful reception from rural blacks in surrounding counties, and had made little progress. Few blacks were willing to risk white reprisals by trying to register to vote, even if accompanied by a SNCC organizer.

SNCC differed from the more established Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in its approach to organizing a black community. Whereas the SCLC generally worked with such leaders as ministers, attorneys, teachers, and other black professionals, the student-run SNCC was a grassroots organization.

SNCC representatives talked with high school and college kids, visited churches, and met with the young and the old. They looked for natural leaders, not necessarily those with credentials, and tried to help people build a solidarity that would last long after SNCC had left town.

On November 1, 1961, a ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission went into effect that backed up the Supreme Court's 1960 decision prohibiting segregation in interstate bus and train stations. Twenty-two-year-old Charles Sherrod and his fellow SNCC worker Cordell Reagon decided to "test" the ruling at Albany's Trailways bus terminal. Along with a group of black students, they sat down in the whites-only waiting room and refused to leave. Within minutes the Albany police arrived, ordering them out. The students left without resistance, but they had made their point to local blacks: no one with dark skin yet had equal access to those facilities.

"We ran into all kinds of obstacles," Cordell Reagon recalls. "The NAACP was saying we were taking their members and other people were saying we were Communists . . . even Negroes were saying this."

Bernice Johnson didn't care that the two young men were from SNCC; she cared only that "they were for freedom." Johnson remembers that in early November she went to the NAACP district meeting in Atlanta as the secretary of the Albany NAACP Youth Council. At the meeting, she was warned that SNCC workers "'come in and get you stirred up and leave you in jail and the NAACP has to pay the bills.' I was real upset. I didn't know what was happening . . . The NAACP might have been a different group but it should have had the same [goals] from where I stood. I said, 'We're working for the same things, aren't we?' What an answer I got. The regional NAACP came down to a meeting of our chapter—Vernon Jordan, Ruby Hurley . . . and blasted SNCC. These people thought it was important enough to stop SNCC that they came down to Albany to tell us how SNCC would lead us wrong."

Charles Sherrod fanned the flames when he called a meeting of the NAACP Youth Council without the knowledge of Thomas Chatmon, the organization's adviser, and E. D. Hamilton, the Albany branch president. Hamilton had flatly told the SNCC students to get out of town. At the meeting, Sherrod denounced whites for keeping the bus terminal segregated in defiance of federal law, and told the youths that they needed new leadership.

The squabbling among the civil rights groups threatened to tear them apart. But on November 17 several local adult groups formed the Albany Movement, an umbrella organization that would attempt to coordinate the activists. The

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In the early 1960s, Charles Sherrod (far right) and Cordell Reagon (not pictured here) traveled the countryside around Albany, Georgia, encouraging black residents to register to vote.

Albany Movement included the Ministerial Alliance, the Negro Voters League, and the Criterion Club, a group of black professionals. The movement's leader, chosen because he did almost no business with whites and was therefore less subject to economic reprisal, was Dr. William Anderson, an osteopath and drug-store owner. Slater King was elected vice president.

Despite the new partnership, the Albany NAACP planned to recapture the initiative from SNCC. They hoped to have one of their members arrested in the illegally segregated bus terminal. The NAACP could then bail that person out and go to court asking that the federal government's desegregation ruling be enforced.

But Sherrod, Reagon, and Charles Jones, another SNCC worker, had other ideas. On November 22, both NAACP and SNCC people sat in at the Albany bus terminal and were arrested. The NAACP bailed out its representatives, but the SNCC protesters, two students from Albany State, chose to remain in jail. Although the arrests violated federal law, Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett declared that the protesters "were not arrested on a federal charge, they were arrested on a city ordinance of failing to obey the orders of a law enforcement officer . . . It had nothing to do with interstate commerce."

The arrest of the protesters galvanized Albany's blacks. Their shared indignation at the arrogance of the city's white officials mended the rift between SNCC and the NAACP, at least for the moment.

Three days later, the Albany Movement held its first mass meeting, in a church. The people sang "We Shall Overcome" and listened to speeches by the students who had been arrested in the bus station. On November 27 the five students went on trial, and movement members held a mass rally. Blacks kneeled on the sidewalk to pray for the students' release. Four hundred people signed a petition asking that the students, expelled from Albany State for their arrests, be allowed to return to school.

On December 10, ten Freedom Riders, five white and five black, rode into Albany on an integrated train from Atlanta. At Albany's Central Railway Terminal, the blacks walked into the white section and the whites entered the black section. Eight of them were arrested for trespassing.

The arrests brought the national press to town. At a crowded church rally the day after the incident, James Forman, one of the SNCC Freedom Riders, called for more protest marches. The next day 267 students from Albany's black high school and from Albany State marched on the train station. They were arrested

after they disregarded police orders to end the march. Most of them, true to the SNCC philosophy, refused to be bailed out of jail.

On Wednesday, December 13, Slater King, who had been elected vice president of the newly formed Albany Movement, led 200 protesters to city hall. At the courthouse steps they stopped to pray for the students' release. As SNCC had hoped, people were drawing on their own strengths, notably their passionate religious commitment, to rally under the civil rights banner. By the end of the march, Slater King and his 200 marchers were on their way to jail. Police Chief Laurie Pritchett arrested them for parading without a permit. "We can't tolerate the NAACP or the SNCC or any other nigger organization [taking] over this town with mass demonstrations," Pritchett said in a news conference.

By mid-December, Chief Pritchett and his officers had arrested more than 500 demonstrators. Albany's mayor, Asa Kelley, agreed to negotiate the possible integration of the bus and train stations as well as conditions for the release of the protesters now packing city jails.

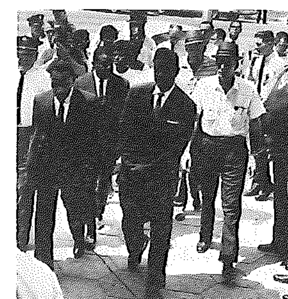
The Albany Movement had not anticipated so many arrests, especially of homemakers, cooks, maids, and laborers. Recognizing the need for outside help, movement president William Anderson decided to call an old college classmate in Atlanta—Martin Luther King, Jr. He asked the minister to come to Albany to speak at a movement rally.

That Friday night the Shiloh Baptist Church overflowed with people who had come to hear Rev. King. Loudspeakers were set up outside for those who couldn't get in. "I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom," they sang. "Martin Luther King says freedom—Let the white man say freedom."

"I can say nothing to you but to continue on in your determination to be free," King told them. He urged the audience not to be swayed by those who claimed that time, not activism, would bring integration. "Maybe you can't legislate morality," he said, "but you can regulate behavior." King entreated the crowd to embrace nonviolence: "They can put you in a dungeon and transform you to glory. If they try to kill you, develop a willingness to die . . . We will win with the power of your capacity to endure."

King had driven in from Atlanta with Ralph Abernathy and Wyatt T. Walker, executive director of the SCLC. The three men expected to make only one appearance, at the rally. But Anderson, in an emotional benediction after King's speech, announced a mass march on city hall the next day and then, before the tearful audience, asked King to lead it. King agreed.

The next afternoon, King and about 250 demonstrators were arrested at city hall. Ralph Abernathy and Dr. Anderson were among them. Chief of police Laurie Pritchett, sensing that any harm done to King would only fuel the anger of Albany's blacks, posted several officers and a detective with a submachine gun to guard the minister. Rather than being sent straight to jail, King, Abernathy, and Anderson were held in Pritchett's office until that night to ensure their safety. Pritchett's cautious handling of King that day was only the first of many countertactics the police chief would employ.


King, Abernathy, and Dr. W. C. Anderson being arrested by Police Chief Laurie Pritchett.

"I did research," the chief said later. "I found his method was nonviolence . . . to fill the jails, same as Gandhi in India. And once they filled the jails, we'd have no capacity to arrest and then we'd have to give in to his demands. I sat down and took a map. How many jails was in a fifteen-mile radius, how many was in a thirty-mile radius? And I contacted those authorities. They assured us that we could use their [jails]."

King vowed to stay in jail until the city agreed to desegregate. As the demonstrations continued, the Albany Movement watched Pritchett with the grudging admiration of a chicken farmer for a sly fox. The word for him, said the SCLC's Wyatt Walker, was "slick." Recalls Walker, "He did have enough intelligence to read Dr. King's book [on the Montgomery bus boycott] and he culled from that a way to avoid confrontation . . . by being nonbrutal [in handling the protest]."

After refusing bond, King told reporters he wanted thousands to come to Albany and join him in jail. Meanwhile, Wyatt Walker pledged to devote the SCLC's money and people to the cause. His offer rankled local black leaders. Marion Page, a retired postal worker and secretary of the Albany Movement, announced that "as of now we need no help."

Black journalist Louis Lomax quoted blacks in Albany as saying, "Dr. Walker can't come to Albany and take over," and "We can bake our own cake—all we need from the Atlanta boys is more flour and sugar." The internecine conflicts among black activists surfaced again. SNCC workers were angry that Walker and King, whom they derisively called "De Lawd" for what they considered his "royal" treatment by the press, would try to take over the movement they had been developing for many weeks. Lomax quoted one student as saying, "Why didn't Walker stay the hell in Atlanta, send us more money, let us have Martin to speak and walk with the marchers! If he had done that, we could have won. No. He had to come running into town . . . he's just found a new world to conquer."

Walker, however, saw himself and the SCLC staff as "firefighters" who had come to the rescue of the inexperienced Albany activists. "I'll try to say this as

charitably as I can," he said. "SNCC was in over its head. They wanted the international and national attention that Martin Luther King's presence would generate. But they did not want the input of his organization."

Whites in Albany heard about the divisions among the black leadership. The *Albany Herald*'s segregationist publisher James Gray ran an editorial saying that blacks and whites in Albany would have solved their problems if King had "not come in from the outside."

Police Chief Pritchett held a press conference to announce that "outside agitation by people with criminal records is largely responsible for the trouble here." He stressed that the Freedom Riders arrested in the terminal for violating the segregation laws had police records. He failed to mention that the arrests were for other nonviolent protests.

Although King had spoken of the "strange illusion [among whites] that [local] Negroes don't want to be free," he was now in jail and could not counter this latest offensive from segregationist leaders. In his absence, the movement failed to develop further strategy. Dr. Anderson, the Albany Movement's leader, had never before been directly involved in civil rights activism.

Playing to local blacks' desire to retain control of the movement, city officials offered a deal to Marion Page, the Albany Movement's secretary, that would provide for the demonstrators' release and for desegregation of the bus and train terminals. The authorities also said the local leaders could bring any further demands before a meeting of the city commissioners. In return, the Albany Movement had to promise to end its demonstrations. On December 18, Page, Anderson, and other Albany leaders agreed orally to the deal, and King, along with other protesters, was released from jail on property bonds offered by local residents. King, who had not been party to the negotiations, said he was leaving jail because he did "not want to stand in the way of peaceful negotiations." The civil rights leader then left Albany. But a few weeks later, as the city failed to integrate the terminals or meet with the blacks, King told reporters, "I'm sorry I was bailed out. I didn't understand at the time what was happening. We thought that the victory had been won. When we got out we discovered it was all a hoax."

Police Chief Pritchett was jubilant. "We met nonviolence with nonviolence and we are indeed proud of the outcome," he said. Newspapers around the country jumped on the story. New York's *Herald Tribune* called Albany "one of the most stunning defeats of King's career." King told reporters that, in the future, he would demand written agreements.

Despite this setback, the Albany activists were relentless as the new year began. On January 12, 1962, eighteen-year-old Ola Mae Quarterman sat down in the front section of an Albany bus. The white driver asked her if she knew that blacks were supposed to sit in the rear. "I paid my damn twenty cents and I can sit where I want to," she retorted. Quarterman was arrested and found guilty of using "vulgar language." The police and the prosecution carefully avoided any mention of the issue of segregated seating on Albany's buses. SNCC workers launched a bus boycott in support of Quarterman, and in three weeks the Montgomery-style strike had closed down the bus system. SNCC also sent students to the whites-only Carnegie Library, where they applied for library cards. The police escorted them out. Charles Sherrod was arrested for sitting in the white section of the Trailways bus terminal lunchroom. He was charged only with loitering; again the issue of segregation was not broached in court. "We don't allow people to go in there and just make it their home," said Chief Pritchett.

In February, Martin Luther King, Jr., returned to Albany to stand trial for his December arrest. He was found guilty of marching without a permit, but the judge, requesting a transcript of the trial, delayed sentencing until July.

Meanwhile, at the trial of the ten Freedom Riders who had come to Albany in December, SNCC's Sherrod tried to take a seat in the front of the courtroom. Before he could do so, a court guard knocked him down and dragged him to the back of the room—where blacks were supposed to sit. When white SNCC activists Bob Zellner, Tom and Casey Hayden, and Per Laursen accompanied Sherrod to the black section, guards dragged them all out of the courtroom. The judge, looking on, simply commented, "The officers are enforcing the rules of the court."

At the sentencing of King and Abernathy in July, the men were ordered to pay $78 in fines or serve forty-five days in jail. Both leaders chose jail. The national press returned; King told reporters he would be sent to a work gang. President Kennedy, alarmed by the news, asked the Justice Department for a report on Albany. Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general for civil rights, began talks with Pritchett and other Albany officials. He also spoke with Coretta Scott King, telling her the federal government was seeking her husband's release. SCLC staffers rushed back to Albany, and a mass rally was scheduled for the next night.

But just three days after the sentencing, King and Abernathy were released under peculiar circumstances. At the time, Chief Pritchett claimed that an unidentified black man had paid their fines. Pritchett has since admitted that he arranged for the payment to be made, but to this day, he refuses to divulge the full story.

"I know what happened," Pritchett said, "but frankly, you know, it was a matter of strategy. I knew that if he [King] stayed in jail, we'd continue to have problems. So, I talked to some people. I said, 'We've got to get him out and once we do I think he'll leave here . . . ' Yes, it was done at my request. And it sort of surprised Dr. King. This was the only time I've ever seen when [it] seemed he didn't know which way to go."

King called the move a "cunning tactic." At a rally that night, Abernathy said, "I've been thrown out of a lot of places in my day but I've never been thrown out of jail." He added, "I fought in France and in Germany for America. Now I wanted to fight on the streets of Albany for America. But, mysteriously, somebody paid the fine with hopes that they would get us out of jail. The chief broke my heart when he said that [we were going to leave town]. Of course, we are going to stay in Albany."

Local officials still refused to negotiate with black leaders. State and national politicians began to enter the arena. One of them, avid segregationist Marvin Griffin, promised during a campaign speech to put "Martin Luther King so far back in the jail you will have to pump air to him."

President Kennedy, in a nationally televised news conference, said, "I find it wholly inexplicable why the city of Albany will not sit down with the citizens of Albany, who may be Negroes, and attempt to secure for them, in a peaceful way, their rights. The U.S. government is involved in sitting down at Geneva with the Soviet Union. I can't understand why the . . . city council of Albany . . . can't do the same for American citizens."

Albany mayor Asa Kelley, who until now had favored offering concessions to blacks, said Kennedy had spoken "inappropriately" and could spark trouble by siding with the blacks. Kelley now refused to negotiate. Georgia senator Richard Russell declared, "The stamp of approval upon the constant violation of city laws from the highest source in our land is certain to encourage the importation of many other professionals and notoriety seekers and worsen an already bad situation."

The NAACP's chief Washington lobbyist, Clarence Mitchell, met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and proposed that the government begin backing up the president's words by withdrawing federal assistance from the Albany area, particularly from Turner Air Force Base. A group of 100 ministers asked that the president address the civil rights crisis on national television—that he issue a modern version of the Emancipation Proclamation, the document that freed the slaves in 1863.

As the situation in Albany became a national issue, King decided to take a more militant stance. After leaving jail he went to Atlanta, vowing to return in a week to lead "protests that will turn Albany upside down."

But before King could act, Federal District Judge J. Robert Elliott, a Kennedy appointee, issued a temporary restraining order to stop the demonstrations that had disrupted the city for eight months. King and other protest leaders were specifically ordered not to march. King, now back in Albany, said he would abide by the court order even though it took away the Albany Movement's strongest weapon—public protest. "The federal courts have given us our greatest victories, and I cannot in good conscience declare war on them," said King, talking to reporters in the yard of William Anderson's home. But the minister added, "We regret to say that recent events have revealed to us that there are some federal judges in the South who are engaged in a conspiracy with state and political leaders to maintain the evil system of segregation."

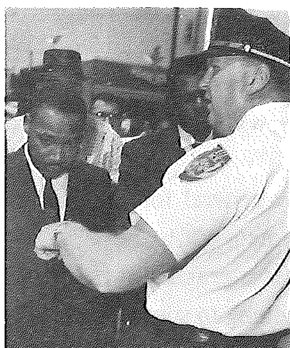
"I've been thrown out of a lot of places in my day but I've never been thrown out of jail."

"It is a fact," said Burke Marshall, assistant attorney general for civil rights, "that the federal judge in that district [Elliott] . . . turned out to be a terrible judge. He was a terrible mistake." John F. Kennedy was a pragmatic politician. Seeking to maintain southern ties, he made a point of listening to southern senators when making judicial appointments. Several such appointments on Kennedy's part generated controversy among civil rights workers.

Rev. Sam Wells, a long-time Albany activist, went to Shiloh Baptist Church the night after the court handed down its order and said he would march anyway. Wells waved the court document in the air, SNCC's Sherrod recalls, and said, "I see Dr. King's name. And I see Dr. Anderson's name. And I see Charles Sherrod . . . But I don't see Samuel Wells and I don't see Miss Sue Samples and I don't see Mrs. Rufus Grant. Now where are those names?" "And with that," Sherrod says, "he marched about [160] folks out of the church that night and went to jail."

Two days later, Mrs. Slater King, wife of the Albany Movement's vice president, took some food to arrested friends in the Camilla jail. The guards there ordered her away. "All you niggers away from the fence," barked one officer. Mrs. King, who was pregnant, was carrying one child in her arms and had two more walking along beside her. She did not move quickly enough for the guards, and a sheriff's deputy cursed at her. She told him to arrest her if he wanted to. The man knocked her down and kicked her until she lost consciousness. Mrs. King soon miscarried.

On July 24, four days after Judge Elliott issued the restraining order barring all demonstrations, Appeals Court Judge Elbert P. Tuttle, an Eisenhower appointee, set aside the order. The next day the black community, enraged at Mrs. King's beating, marched through the streets two-thousand strong. For the first time, protesters in Albany clashed violently with police. The demonstrators, many of them teenagers, threw bricks, rocks, and bottles at the police, who backed off without fighting back. Chief Pritchett, taking full advantage of the lapse by Martin Luther King's followers, asked reporters, "Did you see them nonviolent rocks?"



Police Chief Laurie Pritchett arresting King in Albany on July 27, 1962.

Pritchett's statement sparked a crisis among the demonstrators, who had always portrayed themselves as nonviolent warriors in the fight against segregation. King had been ready to exert still more pressure on the city commission, but he called it off, asking for a "Day of Penance" among blacks to atone for the violence. SNCC's Sherrod and other protesters, anxious to renew the Albany campaign, now criticized King. They maintained that nonviolence was a tactic, not the movement's goal—the goal was desegregation of public facilities. Halting the marches now could jeopardize the movement's progress. But King would not change his mind. With Sherrod and Abernathy he toured Albany's pool halls and bars, asking that there be no more violence. Two white detectives, sent by Pritchett for King's protection, came along. So did television crews.

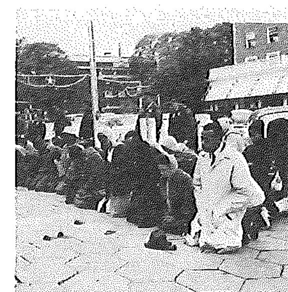
"I hate to hold up your pool game," King said at one stop. "I used to be a pool shark myself." Then, over the clicking of pool balls, he said, "We are in the midst of a great movement . . . We have had our demonstrations saying we will no longer accept segregation. One thing about this movement is that it is nonviolent. As you know there was some violence last night. Nothing could hurt our movement more. It's exactly what our opposition likes to see . . . we don't need guns—just the power of souls."

Ralph Abernathy told the poolroom crowd that King's words were not an appeal to "stop resisting the evil system of segregation. Nonviolence is the way for the strong, not the weak . . . those little guns that Negroes have for family protection are nothing to the arsenal the police have. But we have soul force. As they call for state troopers, we call God to send his heavenly angels . . . "

Two days later, King led a prayer meeting in front of city hall. He wanted to meet with the city commissioners, who had refused to discuss the blacks' demands. King and Abernathy waited outside with ten other people. Around 2 P.M., Abernathy kneeled on the ground and began to pray. "Can't you see you're causing a disturbance?" asked Chief Pritchett. Abernathy ignored him, praying even louder as reporters crowded around. Pritchett yanked the minister to his feet

and arrested him. By 4 P.M., however, another group of demonstrators was at city hall; eighteen students and SNCC workers knelt down to pray and they too were arrested.

One of the students, William Hansen, a white SNCC worker from Cincinnati, was placed in the whites-only section of the Dougherty Jail. A deputy sheriff told the other white prisoners, "This is one of those guys who came down here to straighten us out." A prisoner replied, "Well, I'll straighten *him* out." Hansen was beaten unconscious, his lip split open, his jaw broken.



Protesters in Albany not only sang and marched but also prayed. Typically, the police would arrest the protesters for being a "public nuisance."

Black lawyer C. B. King heard of the beating and went to the jail to check on Hansen. After waiting anxiously outside Sheriff Cull Campbell's office, King loudly insisted that every prisoner was entitled to medical treatment. Getting no response, he walked into the sheriff's office. Campbell stood and said, "Nigger, haven't I told you to wait out there?"

Rev. James C. Harris, who had accompanied King to the jail, recalls that the sheriff then "picked up a walking stick out of a basket . . . and hit Mr. King over the head, breaking the cane. Mr. King escaped the office, and I did as well." Later the *New York Times* reported that Sheriff Campbell admitted to the beating. "He didn't get out, so God-damn it, I put him out." Campbell told another newspaper reporter, "Yeah, I knocked the hell out of him, and I'll do it again. I let him know he's a damn nigger. I'm a white man, and he's a damn nigger."

Meanwhile, Chief Pritchett was seeking a permanent restraining order to stop further demonstrations. He told Judge Elliott that Martin Luther King's presence in Albany had "raised community tension to the kindling point." Mayor Kelley, in a press conference, said that he and the city commissioners were "anxious to discuss problems with local Negroes"—after King left town. He declared that he would "never negotiate with outside agitators whose avowed purpose was to create turmoil."

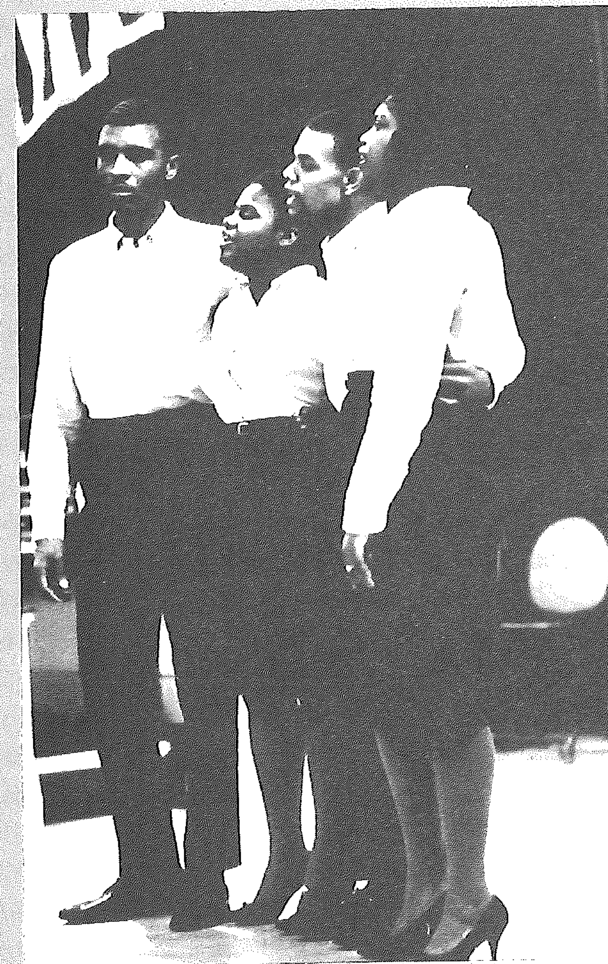
On August 4 the city commissioners boasted in a statement to reporters that "firm but fair law enforcement [had] broken the back of the Albany Movement." That movement had never been more than an invasion by a group of civil rights professionals, they added.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was freed on August 10 after two weeks in jail. He told reporters he would return to Atlanta to allow local blacks to negotiate with white officials. But even after he had left, city fathers refused to meet with the movement's local leaders. The segregationists claimed they wanted a "new and responsible voice for the colored citizens of Albany." On August 15, King returned to Albany, and local black leaders finally managed to meet with the mayor. They

Freedom Singing:

An Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon

The protests in Albany, Georgia lasted from 1961 to 1965. One of the things that kept people fighting all that time was music. Albany was a deeply spiritual community and its music transformed not only the singer, but the movement as well. In 1962, SNCC established the Freedom Singers, a chorus that traveled throughout the country providing inspiration and raising funds for the civil rights movement. Bernice Johnson was one of the original Freedom Singers.



The Freedom Singers. From left to right: Charles Neblett, Bernice Johnson, Cordell Reagon, Rutha Mae Harris.

My father is a minister and I grew up in a church. We didn't get a piano in that church until I was eleven, so my early music was *a cappella* and my first instruments were hands and feet. To this day, that's the only way I can deal comfortably with creating music. But church was not the only place that music occurred because the same thing happened at school, on the playground. I went to a seven-grade, one-room school house. At noontime, my teacher would come outside and teach us games and songs.

I ended up being arrested in the second wave of arrests in Albany. And when we got to jail, Slater King, who was already in jail, said, "Bernice, is that you?" And I said yes. And he said, "Sing a song."

The singing tradition in Albany was congregational. There were no soloists; there were song leaders. If Slater said, "Bernice, sing a song," he wasn't asking for a solo, he was asking me to plant a seed. The minute you start the song, the song is created by everybody there. There is really almost a musical explosion.

The mass meetings always started with these freedom songs. Most of the meeting was singing. Songs were the bed of everything, and I'd never seen or felt songs do that [before]. I'd had songs in college and high school and church, but in the movement, all the words sounded different. "This Little Light of Mine, I'm Going to Let it Shine," which I'd sung all my life, said something very different. We varied the verses: "All in the street, I'm going to let it shine, All in the jailhouse, I'm going to let it shine."

The voice I have now I got the first time I sang in a movement meeting, after I got out of jail. I did the song, "Over My Head I See Freedom in the Air," but I had never heard that voice before. I had never been that me before. And once I became that me, I have never let that me go . . . a transformation took place inside of the people. The singing was just the echo of that.

They could not stop our sound. They would have to kill us to stop us from singing. Sometimes the police would plead and say, "Please stop singing." And you would just know that your word was being heard, and you felt joy. There is a way in which those songs kept us from being touched by people who would want us not to be who we were becoming. There was a woman at Shiloh Baptist Church who would sing one song, "Come and Go With Me To That Land," for an hour. It was not a song anymore. People are clapping, the feet are going and you could hear her three blocks away. Your ears are not enough, your eyes are not enough, your body is not enough, and you can't block it. The only way you survive the singing is to open up and let go and be moved by it to another space.

won no concessions, however, and King's only recourse was to hold a news conference and rail against the stubborn segregationists. A few days later, King left Albany.

That Labor Day weekend, seventy-five protesters from the North, including ministers, laymen, and rabbis, drove to Albany to show their support for the activists. There they followed in King's footsteps, stopping to pray on the steps of city hall. Chief Pritchett treated them no better than he had King, sending them to jail. "You have come to aid and abet the violators of this city and country," he said. "If you come as violators, you will be treated as such. Go back to your homes. Clear your own cities of sin and lawlessness."

"The civil rights movement gave me the power to challenge any line that limits me."

The mass meetings in Albany continued for six more years. In that sense, SNCC could claim Albany as a victory. Albany also provided SNCC with valuable lessons on organizing a community, lessons they would use in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer.

For Bernice Johnson, who later married SNCC worker Cordell Reagon, the Albany Movement had meant personal growth. "I had grown up in a society where there were very clear lines," she says. "The civil rights movement gave me the power to challenge any line that limits me . . . [the] movement said that if something puts you down, you have to fight against it."

Dr. William Anderson, the Albany Movement's president, called it "an overwhelming success, in that there was a change in the attitude of the people involved. They had [decided] that they would never accept that segregated society as it was anymore. There was [also] a change in the attitude of the kids who saw their parents step into the forefront and lead the demonstrations. They were determined that they would never go through what their parents went through to get the recognition that they should have as citizens."

For many of Albany's citizens, the movement was a moral victory. But Albany's schools remained segregated. The city had closed its parks rather than integrate them. The library was integrated only after all the chairs were removed.

Even so, the SCLC learned many valuable lessons from Albany. The national press attention King's presence brought to the city did not resolve the confrontation. Garnering public support did not always mean that the federal government would step in to defend civil rights.

King's sense of his own leadership was wavering. He told reporters that the Albany Movement's purpose had been "so vague that we got nothing and the people were left depressed and in despair."

"When Martin left Albany he was very depressed," recalls Andrew Young, an SCLC staff member at that time. "He knew what had happened . . . It was a federal judge that called off that movement. [King] had a very emotional exchange with Burke Marshall [of the Justice Department] over that, because he felt as though the Kennedy administration had helped to undercut the possibility of continuing in Albany."

King later told the press, "One of the greatest problems we face with the FBI in the South is that the agents are white southerners who have been influenced by the mores of their community. To maintain their status, they have to be friendly with the local police and people who are promoting segregation. Every time I saw FBI men in Albany, they were with the local police force." This statement enraged FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who was already convinced that the civil rights movement was infiltrated by Communists. Later, it would be learned that Marion Page, the Albany Movement's secretary, had spoken with police chief Pritchett almost nightly and had been in regular contact with the FBI.

Black journalist Louis Lomax wrote of King, "[In] The next town he visits to inspire those who are ready to suffer for their rights, he will find people saying 'Remember Albany.'"

The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth wanted that town to be Birmingham. "Dr. King's image at this time was slightly on the wane because he had not projected [a victory in Albany]," recalls Shuttlesworth. "I said, 'I assure you, if you come to Birmingham, this movement can not only gain prestige, it can really shake the country.'" As head of a Birmingham-based group called the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, Shuttlesworth was the leader of black activists in that city. He convinced the SCLC to make Birmingham the target of its next offensive.

Birmingham was infamous for the Mother's Day, 1961, mob attack on the Freedom Riders, when police failed to intervene. Even local papers, usually supportive of Birmingham police commissioner Bull Connor, were outraged by that incident. One editorial asked, "Where were the police?" Trezzvant W. Anderson wrote in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a national black weekly, that black leaders condemned Birmingham as the "worst big city in the U.S.A." Between 1957 and 1963, eighteen unsolved bombings in black neighborhoods earned the city its nickname of "Bombingham." Bull Connor sent his men to break up black political meetings, and since 1956 the NAACP had been kept out of Alabama. In 1962 the city closed sixty-eight parks, thirty-eight playgrounds, six swimming pools

Birmingham, Alabama. As King described it, "Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States."

The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, spiritual leader of Birmingham's black community.

and four golf courses to avoid complying with a federal court order to desegregate public facilities.

Rev. Shuttlesworth's home had been bombed to ruins in 1956. "Were there any arrests?" asked columnist Anderson in his article. "You can bet your life there were not . . . The Reverend Mr. Shuttlesworth himself was chain whipped on a public street by a white mob at Phillips High School when he took his children there in 1957 to seek to enroll them [in the white school]. His wife was stabbed during the same incident with white cops present. Has anybody been convicted? No indeed."

With a population of 350,000, Birmingham was in 1960 Alabama's largest city. A steel town, it was one of the region's major business centers. Blacks accounted for forty percent of the city's population, but were three times less likely than white residents to hold a high-school diploma. Only one of every six black employees was a skilled or trained worker, as opposed to three-quarters of whites. The median annual income for blacks was $3,000, less than half of that for white people. Singer Nat King Cole had been beaten on stage during a 1956 Birmingham performance, and on Labor Day, 1957, a carload of drunken whites had grabbed a black man off a street corner, taken him to a country shack, and castrated him.

The ravaging of the Freedom Riders in May, 1961, and President Kennedy's decision to send in federal marshals had drawn unwelcome national publicity to Birmingham. Economic development had begun to lag as the city's reputation tarnished. A group of whites, headed by Chamber of Commerce president Sidney Smyer, proposed a change in the structure of the city government. Under the existing system, a tightknit group of three segregationist city commissioners ran Birmingham. One was Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor. Smyer's group wanted the city to switch to a mayor-council form of government, giving the new chief executive officer direct control over the police department and putting Bull Connor out of office.

On November 6, 1962, Birmingham voters approved the new form of government—a mayor and nine council members. The next step was a mayoral election. Connor, undaunted, declared his candidacy, as did Albert Boutwell, former lieutenant governor of Alabama and a moderate segregationist.

In January, 1963, the SCLC held a three-day retreat in Dorchester, Georgia. King, working with Ralph Abernathy, Wyatt Walker and Rev. Shuttlesworth, carved out a careful plan of attack on segregation in Birmingham. King believed that the failure in Albany had stemmed from a complete lack of strategy. The

civil rights leaders vowed that Birmingham would be different. They called their plan Project "C"—for "confrontation." It would be launched in March, 1963, with Birmingham's downtown businesses as its primary focus.

Two weeks after the retreat, King began a national tour in preparation for the Birmingham offensive. He delivered twenty-eight speeches in sixteen cities, telling his listeners, "As Birmingham goes, so goes the South." He asked for volunteers and donations everywhere he went, including a private party at the home of singer Harry Belafonte that was attended by seventy-five eastern liberals. After a similar gathering in Hollywood, King had collected nearly $75,000 in bail money for the anticipated arrests.

Walker and Shuttlesworth handled the preparations in Birmingham. They studied the city's laws and regulations to learn what constituted grounds for arrest. In Albany, the SCLC had not realized that they needed a parade permit to demonstrate.

"Since the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was going to be our headquarters," Walker said, "I had it timed as to how long it took a youngster to walk [from there to the stores targeted for the protest], how long it took an older person, how long it would take a middle-aged person. And I picked out the best routes. Under some subterfuge I visited all three of [the targeted] stores and counted the stools, the tables, the chairs, and [figured out] the best method for ingress and egress."

The year before, some Birmingham merchants had tried to integrate lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains and even hired some black clerks after a student-led boycott deprived them of about eighty percent of black patronage. A handful of businessmen agreed to remove their Colored Only signs. In response, Public Safety Commissioner Connor sent inspectors to cite the stores for building-code violations. The businesses returned their Colored Only signs. As summer emptied the schools and black students became unavailable, the boycott faded.

Now, a year later, news of the impending demonstrations leaked to Birmingham's business community. With the lucrative Easter shopping season approaching, merchants did not want another boycott. Vincent Townsend, editor of the *Birmingham News*, called Burke Marshall at the Justice Department. He asked Marshall to have a representative of the Kennedy administration call Martin Luther King and request that he cancel the Birmingham protests.

On April 2, Marshall called King and entreated him to leave Birmingham. Bull Connor had been defeated by the moderate white segregationist Albert Boutwell that very day in a special mayoral election (the first election produced no clear

victor). Marshall asked King to give the new mayor a chance to resolve black grievances. But King said no; much had happened since his exit from Albany.

Shortly after King left the city, the Ku Klux Klan had bombed four black churches outside Albany. In October, 1962, King had learned of the riots at Ole Miss as James Meredith enrolled as the university's first black student. Two people were killed and 375 injured. In January, 1963, King had listened to Alabama's new governor, George Wallace, give his inauguration speech and work the crowd into cheers as he cried, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!"

"Segregation now!

Segregation tomorrow!

Segregation forever!"

February had brought another setback: the Kennedy administration refused King's requests to issue a modern emancipation proclamation to outlaw segregation on the 100th anniversary of the original document's signing. The administration was preoccupied with the cold war. Just a few months before, the Cuban missile crisis had placed the nation in unprecedented danger; compared with that, the civil rights movement was simply a local disturbance. Kennedy did send a civil rights bill to Congress, but it languished in committee and was forgotten.

At a press conference, reporters aggressively questioned King about what he hoped to accomplish in Birmingham, given his difficulties in Albany. King snapped back, "The Negro has enough buying power in Birmingham to make the difference between profit and loss in any business. This was not true in Albany, Georgia."

Albert Boutwell had beaten Bull Connor by 8,000 votes in the mayoral election. The headline in the *Birmingham News* ran, "A New Day Dawns for Birmingham." But the SCLC was convinced that Boutwell was "just a dignified Bull Connor," as King put it. As a state senator, Boutwell had authored legislation thwarting the *Brown* decision. He may have been a moderate segregationist compared to Bull Connor, but in the eyes of the SCLC he was still a segregationist.

On the first day of the protests, hours after Boutwell's victory, twenty blacks were arrested for trespassing as they picketed a downtown store. Rev. Shuttlesworth had tried to get a city permit for the demonstration, but Bull Connor brashly told him, "You will get a permit in Birmingham to picket—I will picket you over to the city jail."

City merchants were not pleased. "I was upset with Dr. King," remembers David Vann, a white Birmingham lawyer representing the downtown stores, "because he wouldn't give us a chance to prove what we could do through the political processes. A year and a day after Connor had been reelected with the

largest vote in history, a majority of the people in this city voted to terminate his office. And when he ran for mayor, we rejected him."

Some members of the black community were also less than enthusiastic about the new protests. One of them was A. G. Gaston, a millionaire who, despite his misgivings, made his Gaston Motel available to the SCLC and provided financing as well.

After the election, Connor immediately went to court asking that he and the two other commissioners be allowed to complete the terms of office they had earlier been elected to serve, before the voters had decided to do away with the commission form of government. While waiting for the dispute to be settled, the citizens of Birmingham found themselves with two city governments. As David Vann remembers, "On Tuesdays, the [old] Commission met . . . and proceeded to govern the city, and when they finished, they would march out and [the] nine [new] Council members would march in, and they would proceed to adopt laws and spend money and conduct the affairs of the city." Municipal employees found their paychecks signed by both Boutwell and Connor.

During this governmental turmoil, the SCLC accelerated its demonstrations. On Saturday, April 6, Shuttlesworth led thirty protesters to city hall and the entire group was sent to jail. The next day, Palm Sunday, A. D. King, the younger brother of Martin Luther King, headed a prayer march through the downtown streets. Police using dogs and nightsticks clashed violently with the demonstrators.

Bull Connor, still in control of the police, sought a court injunction banning further picketing. On Wednesday, April 10, Alabama Circuit Court Judge W. A. Jenkins, Jr., issued an order naming 133 civil rights leaders whom he forbade to take part in or encourage any sit-ins, picketing, or other demonstrations. The list included King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth. In Albany, King's refusal to defy the court injunction and the subsequent lapse in the demonstrations had irrevocably hampered the movement's momentum. Furthermore, Project "C" called for King to subject himself to arrest in Birmingham on April 12, Good Friday. If the minister obeyed the court order, the movement would lose a carefully planned chance to attract the attention of television and newspapers.

On Friday morning, King met with his staff at the Gaston Motel. "We already had [many] people in jail," remembers Andrew Young, "but all the money was gone, and we couldn't get people out . . . the black business community and some of the clergy [were] pressuring us to call off the demonstrations and just get out of town. We didn't know what to do. [King] sat there in Room 30 in the

Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's commissioner of public safety.

Bull Connor ordered his police department to use police dogs to break up the demonstrations.

Gaston Motel and didn't say anything. He listened to people talking for about two hours.'

King then left the suite's living room and went into the bedroom. When he emerged, he told his staff, "Look, I don't know what to do. I just know that something has got to change in Birmingham. I don't know whether I can raise money to get people out of jail. I do know that I can go into jail with them."

As King turned to go, he looked toward Ralph Abernathy, his constant adviser and companion. According to Andrew Young, Rev. Abernathy said he didn't want to go to jail; he needed to be in his church pulpit on Easter Sunday. King turned to his best friend and said, "Ralph, you've always been with me, but I'm going [regardless]." Abernathy followed.

"Not knowing how it was going to work out, he walked out of the room and went down to the church and led a demonstration and went to jail," recalls Young. "That was, I think, the beginning of his true leadership."

A half mile into a march toward downtown Birmingham, King and Abernathy were arrested along with fifty other demonstrators. Media cameras were there to capture the symbolism as Martin Luther King was loaded into Bull Connor's windowless police van on that Good Friday.

King was placed in solitary confinement in Birmingham's jail. Demonstrators gathered on the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and sang in brave jubilation. Afterwards, some of them moved across the street to the city's Kelly Ingram Park. The police moved in, and brief fights broke out, but the protests ended peacefully. Later, a full-page ad taken out by members of the local white clergy appeared in the *Birmingham News*, calling King a troublemaker. From his cell, King responded to the ministers' letter by writing in the margins of the newspaper and on scraps of toilet paper.

"I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was well-timed in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation," he wrote in what was later published as the essay, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." "For years now, I have heard the word 'Wait.' It rings in the ears of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see with one of our distinguished jurists that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'" The letter went on to explain, to the clergy and to the world, why the fight against racism must not be delayed.

Coretta Scott King heard nothing from her jailed husband all weekend. Fearing for his safety, on Easter Sunday she sought advice from Wyatt Walker, executive

Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Written in April, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter from jail stands as one of the most important documents of nonviolent protest in the civil rights movement. King began the letter by writing notes in the margins of the *Birmingham News*, which printed an open letter from eight clergymen who attacked King's role in Birmingham. King's letter was first published as a pamphlet by the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker group. It was reprinted in dozens of periodicals and soon, with over a million copies in circulation, it became a classic of protest literature. Excerpts from the 6,500-word letter follow.

April 16, 1963
Birmingham, Alabama

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas . . . but since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

. . . You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiations. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

. . . One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hoped that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive

resistance . . . My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture, but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. . . Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well-timed" in view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps 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, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;

director of the SCLC. He suggested she call the president. On Monday, Kennedy returned her phone call.

"He said, 'I want you to know that we are doing everything we can, and Dr. King is safe,'" Mrs. King recalls, "and Martin said after that [phone call] the treatment changed markedly."

The demonstrations began to lose supporters as King's incarceration dragged on. Finally, on April 20, King and Abernathy accepted release on bond. They went straight to the Gaston Motel to plan the next phase of Project "C." James Bevel, a veteran of the student sit-ins in Nashville, had devised a strategy. He wanted to use Birmingham's black children as demonstrators. Bevel argued that while many adults might be reluctant to march—afraid of going to jail at the cost of their jobs—children would be less fearful. Also, he told King, the sight of

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 eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking, "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" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and 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 are 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. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience . . .

young children being hauled off to jail would dramatically stir the nation's conscience.

"Most adults have bills to pay—house notes, rents, car notes, utility bills," argued Bevel, "but the young people . . . are not hooked with all those responsibilities. A boy from high school has the same effect in terms of being in jail, in terms of putting pressure on the city, as his father, and yet there's no economic threat to the family, because the father is still on the job."

While King went to court on April 22 to be tried in connection with the Good Friday protest, SCLC workers Bevel, Andrew Young, Dorothy Cotton, and Bernard Lee recruited black schoolchildren from all over Birmingham. They asked the students to go to their local churches and see a film, *The Nashville Story*, about a student sit-in movement. King was found guilty of civil contempt but

remained free pending appeal. On Thursday, May 2, the children began their demonstrations in Birmingham. King addressed a gathering of them at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. They ranged in age from six to eighteen. He told the youngsters he was proud of them, that they were fighting for their parents and for the future of America. Groups of children began to march toward downtown.

Police moved in to arrest them, at first herding them into paddy wagons. For four hours they continued to march from the church, singing songs of freedom. As their numbers increased, Bull Connor brought in school buses to haul them away. By the end of the day, 959 children had been taken to Birmingham jails. From Washington, Robert Kennedy called King to argue that the children could be seriously hurt by Connor's police tactics.

The next day, more than a thousand children stayed out of school, gathering at the church to march. Bull Connor, hoping to abort the demonstrations before they began, brought out the city's police dogs. He also ordered firefighters to turn their hoses on the youngsters. With 100 pounds of pressure per square inch, the water hit with enough force to rip the bark off trees. Children were knocked down by the streams, slammed into curbs and over parked cars. Several demonstrators were attacked by dogs.

As Connor lashed the demonstrators with water, black businessman A. G. Gaston, from his office across the street, was on the phone with attorney David Vann. Gaston "was expressing a great deal of resentment about King coming in and messing up things just when we [through the city government] were getting a new start," Vann recalls. "And then he said to me, 'But Lawyer Vann, they've turned the fire hoses on a black girl. They're rolling that little girl right down the middle of the street. I can't talk to you no more.'"

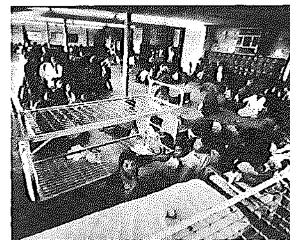
Vann would later say that it was then, when Connor's troopers attacked the children, that "in the twinkling of an eye the whole black community instantaneously consolidated . . . behind Dr. King."

Birmingham's blacks were raging with anger. At a demonstration the next day, some brandished guns and knives. James Bevel, fearing a riot that would be blamed on the movement, announced through a policeman's bullhorn, "Okay, get off the streets now. We're not going to have violence. If you're not going to respect policemen, you're not going to be in the movement." Tension mounted; the SCLC had created a protest it could not control.

The marches grew in size. By Monday, May 6, more than two thousand demonstrators had been jailed, some in Birmingham, others in a temporary prison

camp at the Alabama state fairgrounds. The next day, the confrontation moved into the downtown area, and Bull Connor once again summoned his firemen and ordered the hoses turned on. When the public safety commissioner was told that Rev. Shuttlesworth had been injured by the hurtling water and taken to the hospital by ambulance, he broke into a smile and said, "I'm sorry I missed it. I wish they'd carried him away in a hearse."

Across the nation people watched television pictures of children being blasted with water hoses and chased by police dogs. Newspapers and magazines at home and abroad were filled with reports and photographs. The news coverage shocked the American public. In Washington, the Kennedy administration also watched.



As demonstrators filled the jails, the city had to establish temporary prison camps.

"There were pictures throughout the nation, throughout the world," recalls Burke Marshall, then head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "It was a matter of great concern to the president, because it was a hopeless situation in terms of any lawful resolution." The federal government worried about America's image abroad.

But President Kennedy, according to Marshall, could exercise no executive power in Birmingham. "There was no legal remedy," Marshall said. "That was clear from the start. We discussed it with the president so he understood, but most of the country did not. You know, they wanted him to send in troops, do this and that . . . "

As Kennedy considered his options, the situation worsened. Alabama governor George Wallace sent in 500 state troopers. Television and newspaper reporters intensified their coverage. As King and the SCLC had hoped, the press had drawn the whole world's attention to Birmingham.

"It was a masterpiece [in] the use of media to explain a cause to the general public," says David Vann. "In those days, we had fifteen minutes of national news and fifteen minutes of local news, and in marching only one block they could get enough news film to fill all of the newscasts of all the television stations in the United States."

Governor Wallace did not share the president's concern over America's image. "It seems to me that other parts of the world ought to be concerned about what we are thinking of them instead of what they think of us," Wallace said. "After all, we're feeding most of them. And whenever they start rejecting twenty-five cents of each dollar of foreign-aid money that we send them, then I'll be concerned about their attitude toward us. But until they reject that twenty-five cents . . . that southerners pay for foreign aid to these countries, I will never be concerned

The Birmingham Fire Department turned their hoses on the young demonstrators. The force of the water tore bark off trees.

about their attitude. In the first place, the average man in Africa or Asia doesn't even know where he is, much less where Alabama is."

Kennedy, seeking a quick settlement, had sent Burke Marshall to Birmingham on May 4 to encourage negotiations between King and the city's business leaders. Marshall learned that most of Birmingham's white leaders were not speaking to blacks, and that the white business community was not speaking to Bull Connor and his police department. Some blacks would not talk to blacks whom they considered too radical, while others refused to speak to fellow blacks they thought of as "Uncle Toms." And except for lawyer David Vann, whites were not speaking to King. "Anything that Martin Luther King wanted was poison to them [whites]," said Marshall.

The federal aide asked King what concessions he wanted from the whites of Birmingham. Marshall recalls that King said he really was not sure now that the protests had escalated uncontrollably; the campaign's original goal, desegregation of downtown stores, now seemed too small an issue. Blacks wanted integration in every aspect of the city's life, King said. But at Marshall's insistence, King agreed that the bottom line remained the desegregation of lunch counters in downtown stores.

With the dispute over the new city government's legitimacy still pending in court, it was up to the private sector to work out a settlement. Marshall approached the city's leading business owners and presented King's demands. A mercantile group called the Senior Citizens Committee represented about seventy percent of Birmingham's businesses and employed about eighty percent of the city's workers.

The demonstrations were now reaching the proportions that James Bevel had worried about on Saturday. Fearing damage to downtown stores, the business leaders hastened the negotiations. After both sides declared a day of truce, clearing the streets, the merchants agreed to desegregate lunch counters and hire black workers in clerical and sales positions. Joseph Rauh, a lawyer for the United Auto Workers union and a long-time civil rights activist, arranged for the UAW and other labor unions to create a bail fund to secure the release of the 800 black people still in jail.

On Monday, May 10, at two separate news conferences, the accord was announced to the public. Bull Connor fumed. He demanded to know the names of the businessmen who had secretly negotiated the truce. Connor's fellow commissioners, still seeking to retain control of the city, joined him in condemning the deal as "capitulation by certain weak-kneed white people under threat of violence by the rabble-rousing Negro, King." On a local radio broadcast, Connor

urged whites to boycott the downtown stores that had agreed to integrate.

The night after the accord was announced, the Ku Klux Klan rallied outside the city. Robert Shelton, Grand Dragon of the white supremacist group, said, "We would like to state at this time that any concessions that Martin Luther King or any other group of Negro leaders in Birmingham have received are not worth the paper they're written on or the bag that's holding the water. No business people in Birmingham or any other city have the authority to attempt any type of negotiations when it deals with governmental affairs with municipalities. Martin Luther King's epitaph, in my opinion, can be written here in Birmingham."

After the Klan meeting, bombs exploded at the home of Martin Luther King's brother and at the Gaston Motel, where King had been staying. Crowds of blacks assembled at both sites. Over the objections of Jefferson County sheriff Mel Bailey, state troopers moved in, as did Connor's police. As rioting erupted, the lawmen pummeled blacks with clubs and rifles. Thirty-five blacks and five whites were injured. Seven stores were set ablaze. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, fearing that the violence might trigger rioting nationwide, convinced his brother to send in federal troops. The president dispatched soldiers to Fort McClellan, thirty miles outside of Birmingham, hoping that the threat of federal intervention would induce state and local authorities to restore the peace. Kennedy said he would not allow the agreement between the businessmen and the SCLC to be "sabotaged by a few extremists."

"This government," the president announced, "will do whatever must be done to preserve order, protect the lives of its citizens, and uphold the law of the land . . . those who labored so hard to achieve the peaceful, constructive settlement of last week can feel nothing but dismay at the efforts of those who would replace conciliation and good will with violence and hate."

Kennedy's tactic quieted the city. The conflict ended altogether when the Alabama Supreme Court recognized Mayor Albert Boutwell and the new council as the legitimate government of Birmingham. The new mayor honored the negotiated settlement.

Connor, however, had not finished his assault on the civil rights movement. When a federal court ordered the University of Alabama to admit black students, Connor joined forces with Governor George Wallace. The governor sent Connor to a meeting of the segregationist Citizens' Council in Tuscaloosa to ask them to stay away from the university. "Leave it alone," he entreated the white supremacists. "Those Kennedys up there in Washington, that little old Bobby-soxer and his brother the president, they'd give anything in the world if we had some

trouble here." The crowd cheered as Connor ended with, "If we don't have any trouble, we can beat 'em at their own game."

On June 11, Wallace literally stood in the doorway of a university building, blocking the entrance of James Hood and Vivian Malone, two black students trying to register. "It is important that the people of this state and nation understand," he intoned, "that this action is in violation of rights reserved for the state by the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the state of Alabama." With television cameras recording the confrontation, Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach asked Wallace if he intended to act on his defiance. When Wallace failed to reply, the marshals and lawyers accompanied the black students to their dormitories.

Newly elected Governor George Wallace blocking the entrance to the University of Alabama as a representative from the U.S. Justice Department, Nicholas Katzenbach, informs him of the federal government's intent to integrate the school.

Later that day, Alabama National Guard General Henry Graham, backed by federal marshals, asked the governor to step aside. Wallace left the campus, and the black students walked through the door, breaking the color barrier at the university.

That night President Kennedy spoke on national television. The civil rights issue dominated his agenda. "The fires of frustration and discord are busy in every city," the president said. "Redress is sought in the street, in demonstrations, parades and protests which create tensions and threaten violence. We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people.

"I am therefore asking the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theatres, retail stores and similar establishments. This seems to me to be an elementary right. Its denial is an arbitrary indignity that no American in 1963 should have to endure . . . "

Kennedy delivered a new civil rights bill to Congress on June 19. Stronger than the bill that had died in Congress at the beginning of the year, the new bill would outlaw segregation in all interstate public accommodations, allow the attorney general to initiate suits for school integration, and give the attorney general the important power to shut off funds to any federal programs in which discrimination occurred. It also contained a provision that helped ensure the right to vote by declaring that a person who had a sixth-grade education would be presumed to be literate.

King, the SCLC, CORE, the NAACP, SNCC, and other civil rights groups had no intention of allowing this bill to die in Congress. To demonstrate the strength of public demand for this legislation, they would march on Washington.