

The Bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church

Four girls ages 11-14 are killed. The news shocks the nation.

It is September. In Birmingham, Alabama, the school year is just beginning, and the city is facing a federal court order to admit the first five Negro students enrolling in its public schools. The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, wants to close the schools, saying he fears violence will erupt if the students enter. Birmingham's new mayor, Albert Boutwell, wants the schools to stay open, but he doesn't want troops ordered by either the governor or the president to interfere. He talks with both Wallace and Burke Marshall of the US Department of Justice to keep this from happening. Meanwhile, a lawyer named Albert Shores, who is black and has worked on many civil rights issues, takes the children's case to a federal court. On September 4, a bomb explodes at his home. Rioters take to the streets that night, and Wallace persuades the mayor to close the schools the next day.

When the schools reopen on September 9, Wallace sends the Alabama National Guard to block the Negro students from entering. Meanwhile, in Huntsville, six-year-old Sonnie Hereford integrates the first public school in the state. The next day, President Kennedy issues a proclamation stating that all interference with the students being able to enter the schools "cease and desist." He also seizes control of the Guard through an executive order, and commands the troops to leave. Most of the white students leave along with them. Over the next week, protests for and against integration spring up around Birmingham. In the city's West End, white teenagers protest for and against integration, and some are attacked by opposing groups. Governor Wallace flies to Baltimore where he announces that he will run for president in the 1964 Maryland primary.

At the end of the week, on Sunday, September 15, as people gather to worship, a bomb rocks the 16th Street Baptist Church where only months before, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth had led workshops on nonviolence.

In a city nicknamed "Bombingham" with neighborhoods like "Dynamite Hill," this is only the latest attack on black residents by segregationists. But this one is different. Four young girls are dead: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair. Later that same day, two more black teenagers are shot and killed. King, now in Birmingham, requests an urgent meeting with Kennedy. By the next morning, the shocking news has reached most Americans. The president issues a statement expressing "deep outrage."

Kennedy meets with King and other civil rights leaders on September 19 and with Birmingham's white business leaders and representatives of the mayor's office on September 23. Something must be done about Birmingham before control is lost completely. In a statement to the press following the meetings, Kennedy outlines his plan

to send two personal representatives, Kenneth Royall and Earl Blaik, to investigate and mediate disagreements between the Negro and white citizens of Birmingham.

Three of the bombers, all members of the Ku Klux Klan, are convicted of the murders decades later.

December 18, 1962: Reverend J. L. Ware, of Trinity Baptist Church, sends a telegram to President Kennedy. Four days ago, Bethel Baptist was bombed again – the third time in six years. Both churches have black congregations. Reverend Ware warns that if the president does not act soon, “God only knows what shameful holocaust may result.” **Church Bombings are Nothing New (Telegram)**

January 17, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Lee White replies to the Reverend J. L. Ware. He explains that the Department of Justice and the FBI are helping local authorities track down the Bethel Baptist Church bombers of December 14, 1962. **It Is Being Investigated (Letter)**

September 4, 1963: Mrs. Norman Barrington is a teacher in Auburn, Alabama. She sends President Kennedy a newspaper article about Governor Wallace’s use of armed guards to force integrated schools to close. She asks the president to do something. **What is Best for Alabama (Letter)**

September 5, 1963: Arthur Shores lives here. Last night, a bomb blew out every window in his house and injured his wife. Shores is a lawyer. He has been helping black children and young adults enroll in white schools since the early 1950s, and he is involved in a case in Birmingham right now to allow five Negro students to enter all-white schools. This is the second time his home has been bombed. **Up on Dynamite Hill (Photograph)**

September 5, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth send a telegram to President Kennedy. Riots erupted last night after Arthur Shores’ home was bombed, and at least one person was killed. King and Shuttlesworth promise to continue advocating nonviolence, but they’re getting worried. **Violence and Lawlessness (Telegram)**

September 9, 1963: On the radio, President Kennedy says that even though the people of Alabama are “willing to face the difficult transition” of integrating their schools, their governor refuses to allow it. The president states that the “governor knows that the US government is obligated to carry out the orders of the US court.” **The President’s Statement (Statement)**

September 10, 1963: The State of Alabama has been ordered to allow five black children into three public schools, but the governor has sent the Alabama National Guard to bar the doors. The president commands everyone involved to “cease and desist.” That includes the Guard. **Proclamation 3554 (Proclamation)**

September 10, 1963: Governor Wallace ignores Proclamation 3554, which commands him to remove the National Guard troops he has summoned to block children from entering Birmingham schools. President Kennedy issues an executive order. It empowers him to seize control of the National Guard. He dismisses the troops, sending them back to their bases. **Executive Order 11118 (Executive Order)**

September 12, 1963: Fred Shuttlesworth sends a telegram to President Kennedy. Even with the Proclamation and Executive Order, racial violence surrounding the enrollment of black students in Birmingham public schools seems to be escalating. **Keep These Children Safe (Telegram)**

September 12, 1963: In the opening remarks of his press conference, the president describes progress in school desegregation across the South. Following the president's opening remarks, on school desegregation, a reporter asks if a "milestone" has been reached. **School Progress Report (Video)**

September 15, 1963: On a pleasant 70-degree morning, churchgoers make their way up the front steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church, a vital part of Birmingham's black community for almost 100 years. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the building, under another set of stairs, someone has placed twelve sticks of dynamite. **16th Street Baptist Church (Photograph)**

September 15, 1963: Today is Youth Sunday at 16th Street Baptist Church. Four young girls will lead the congregation in prayer. Right now they are in the basement bathroom getting ready. But there is also a bomb under the stairs. **Four Young Girls (Photograph)**

September 16, 1963: On behalf of the Detroit, Michigan Urban League, Francis A. Kornegay urges the Commander in Chief to take control of Birmingham. **To Kennedy from Francis A. Kornegay (Letter)**

September 15, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. is now in Birmingham. A church was bombed this morning. Four children are dead. And now two black teenagers have been shot, one of them killed. King sends a telegram to the president. **Use Your Power (Telegram)**

September 16, 1963: Roy Wilkins of the NAACP sends a telegram the White House at 12:45 a.m. He accuses the State of Alabama of murder, and asks the president to "tell us now" if a strong civil rights bill is on the way. If it is not, Wilkins is prepared to take action. **Tell Us Now (Telegram)**

September 16, 1963: Yesterday's bombing shook the nation. In St. Louis, Missouri, Don Hesse draws a political cartoon depicting the event, asking an important question. He signed copy to the president. The cartoon will run in the *Globe Democrat* tomorrow. **No Color Line Up There (Political Cartoon)**

September 16, 1963: On behalf of the president, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger delivers an official statement about the “cruel killing of innocent children.” He does not mention the bombers, but calls on every citizen to take action. **Who is to Blame? (Statement)**

September 16, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. sends a telegram to President Kennedy. Along with several black leaders from Birmingham, he asks for an “immediate conference.” **Meet With Us? (Telegram)**

September 17, 1963: Phyllis Rodwell is a student at Junior High School 43 in New York, New York. She is saddened by “this terrible thing” that happened in Alabama. Perhaps the president can do something about it **To Kennedy from Phyllis Rodwell (Letter)**

September 17, 1963: Along with his classmates at Junior High School 43 in New York, New York, James DeShane writes to President Kennedy. He is very clear about what he thinks the president should do. **To Kennedy from James DeShane (Letter)**

September 17, 1963: The students of Junior High School 43 in New York, New York, have written to the president. James Jones is “concerned” about Alabama. He has a “small suggestion” for President Kennedy. **To Kennedy from James Jones (Letter)**

September 18, 1963: Lee White responds to Martin Luther King Jr.’s request. The president will meet with him and leaders of Birmingham’s black community tomorrow at 5:00 p.m. **Confirming King’s Meeting (Telegram)**

September 19, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. begins the meeting. He has come to the White House with civil rights Leaders and leaders of Birmingham’s black community. He describes the situation in Birmingham and makes three suggestions. He asks the president to do something before “the worst race rioting we’ve ever seen” breaks out. Reverend Ware describes in detail what life in the city is like for black people. The president responds to the concerns of the black leaders of Birmingham, and he describes his next steps. **The President Meets with Black Leaders (Audio)**

September 19, 1963: In his official statement to the press, President Kennedy lays out a plan to get Birmingham, Alabama past an event he calls “tragic.” It will take listening to local leaders, both black and white; working with citizens through his on-the-ground representatives; and bringing the bombers to justice. **Rebuilding Birmingham (Statement)**

September 19, 1963: Reverend C. Herbert Oliver is the secretary of Birmingham’s Inter-Citizens Committee, which has been documenting cases of police brutality for more than three years. He sends the president a list. **One Attack Among Many (Telegram)**

September 21, 1963: Minister Lovett feels his city of Birmingham – its image, and its white citizens – are suffering. He believes he has the answer. He writes to the president and tells him what it is. **To Kennedy from Wallace W. Lovett (Letter)**

September 21, 1963: Neil Sivert, a resident of Birmingham, Alabama, writes to the president in confidence. He hopes President Kennedy can “prevail on the Negroes.” He thinks they may be standing in the way of their own progress. **To Kennedy from Neil Sivert (Letter)**

September 23, 1963: “What can you do to ease the situation?” the president asks repeatedly. At the White House, leaders of Birmingham’s white community, including staff from the mayor’s office, explain why any action would be difficult. It would be easier, they agree, if the president could help remove certain “outside agitating influences.” **The President Meets with White Leaders (Audio)**

September 23, 1963: President Kennedy has now met with three leadership groups about the situation in Birmingham. In an official statement, he briefly describes what he has learned and what he will do next. **The President’s Meetings (Statement)**

October 4, 1963: Reverend C. Herbert Oliver sent a telegram on September 19 to the president on behalf of the Inter-Citizens Committee. He has also been cooperating with the president’s representatives in Birmingham. He would like a response. **Please Reply (Letter)**

October 21, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. is the problem. That’s what Denson N. Franklin believes. He writes to his senator, John Sparkman, Democrat of Alabama, to ask him to speak with the president. Maybe President Kennedy can “keep King out of Birmingham for awhile.” **To Senator Sparkman from Denson N. Franklin (Letter)**

November 6, 1963: On behalf of the president, Lee White responds to Reverend C. Herbert Oliver. He explains what the Kennedy administration is doing about the circumstances the reverend has described. **Message Received (Letter)**