

Project C

Confronting Jim Crow in Birmingham, Alabama

Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, calls Birmingham, Alabama “the worst big city in race relations in the United States.” He writes this on December 17, 1962 in a telegram to President Kennedy after the bombing of Birmingham’s Bethel Church. Before that, when Bethel was Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth’s church, it had been bombed twice. These are just three in over fifty bombings in fifteen years, in a city that has segregation written in its laws and a police department, under the command of Eugene “Bull” Connor, which strictly enforces its codes.

A major demonstration in Birmingham could bring a much-needed victory for the civil rights movement. King works with Wyatt Tee Walker, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth and other SCLC leaders to devise a plan. They call it Project C - ‘c’ for confrontation. Starting on April 3, 1963, it will build in waves, first with sit-ins, then a boycott, and finally, non-violent protest marches on a daily basis, which are likely to provoke heavy-handed reactions from police, with mass arrests. The media will cover it, and everyone will see why black people are asking for justice in the South. By the time the plan is launched, Birmingham has become a city with no stable government. Albert Boutwell has just won the city’s mayoral election, but his opponent, Bull Connor, is challenging the results. Connor, an out-and-out segregationist with a short fuse, is still in charge of the police force.

At first, few people join Project C. Store managers shut down their lunch counters in response to the sit-ins, few activists are arrested, and the news media pay little attention. On April 6, Shuttlesworth leads the first march and is arrested with forty people – still too few for a major impact. On April 12, Good Friday, King and Abernathy are arrested along with fifty others and spend the next eight days behind bars. During this period, King reads criticism of Project C by local white clergy in a smuggled-in newspaper. In its margins he begins to pen a response. One day, it will become famously known as his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

While King is in jail, one of his young cohorts, James Bevel, begins to recruit and train youth to take part in non-violent marches. Word spreads, and soon students as young as six are ready to leave school and march in the streets. On May 2, they set forth on the first demonstration in what becomes known as the “Children’s March.” Police arrest over 600 young people, but 1,500 more are ready to take their place the next day. Bull Connor orders in police dogs and fire hoses. Images of people pummeled and drenched by high-pressure hoses, and snarling German shepherds tearing clothes off demonstrators highlight the evening news. With Birmingham’s jails overflowing, thousands more students join the demonstrations, sparking similar protests across the country. Before long, the story is making headlines around the world.

On May 5, Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, helps to get talks going between black and white community leaders in Birmingham. After several days of negotiations, a truce agreement is finally reached and announced to the press on May 10. In exchange for the civil rights groups ending the demonstrations, business leaders will take initial steps to integrate lunch counters, changing rooms, water fountains and restrooms at downtown stores, as well as open better job opportunities for blacks.

However, Alabama Governor George Wallace insists that no local or state officials have knowledge of “any so-called agreement.” On Saturday night, May 11, bombs explode at Martin Luther King Jr.’s headquarters at the Gaston Motel, and at the home of his brother, the Reverend A.D. King. Riots erupt and continue into the next morning.

On Sunday evening, in a radio and TV broadcast from the White House, President Kennedy announces that he’s sending Burke Marshall back to Birmingham to consult with local citizens, ordering Armed Forces units to bases in the vicinity, and taking preliminary measures to federalize the Alabama National Guard “should their services be required.” Governor Wallace is outraged and accuses the president of disregarding the sovereignty of the state of Alabama.

Despite the violence and continued opposition by white extremists, the shaky peace agreement holds and by mid-summer the city council will vote to repeal Birmingham’s segregation ordinances. Project C has succeeded and young people have made a difference.

April 13, 1963: King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy have been arrested in Birmingham. Ten days ago, a deputy sheriff handed them an injunction, banning any Negro protests. King and Abernathy led protests, anyway. Now they are being held in solitary confinement without the barest essentials. Wyatt Walker sends a telegram to the president for assistance. **Jailed on Good Friday (Telegram)**

April 16, 1963: With King in jail, Wyatt Walker writes to Burke Marshall at the Justice Department. He encloses a statement by King and other Project C leaders on why they felt it necessary to defy a state injunction against further demonstrations. Marshall drafts his reply in the margins; on the lower left are names of Birmingham’s big retail stores targeted by sit-ins. **Why Break the Law? (Statement)**

April 16, 1963: King reads that Birmingham’s clergy disapproves of Project C in a newspaper smuggled in by Clarence Jones, his friend, counsel, and speechwriter. In the paper’s margins, King begins to scribble a passionate response. Jones smuggles the document back out. Wyatt Walker and his secretary type it up, and mail it to clergy members and many others. In years to come, this letter becomes the most significant document of the civil rights movement. **Letter from Birmingham Jail (Letter)**

Undated: James Ridout sends a telegram to his congressman, Democrat George Huddleston. He is worried about what an “outside Negro element” might do in his home state of Alabama. He hopes the congressman will help **To Representative Huddleston from James Ridout (Telegram)**

May 3, 1963: Project C is now a month old. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy issues a statement. Certainly, Alabama is denying black people their rights, but there might be a better way and a better time to fix this problem. **Dangerous Business (Statement)**

May 3, 1963: Special fire hose guns have been made – monitor guns – which direct two hoses through one nozzle. Their force is enough to peel bark from trees, pin demonstrators against walls, and roll young children down streets. **An Inextinguishable Fire (Photograph)**

May 3, 1963: William Moore begins walking to Birmingham from Washington, DC on April 19. He wears a sign that reads, "Equal Rights for All Men." He is killed in Georgia. On May 3, Freedom Walkers attempt to finish Moore's journey. **Freedom Walkers (Photograph)**

May 3, 1963: The first demonstrator bitten is nineteen-year-old Leroy Allen. That was on April 6. Today's marchers know his story. Some of them flee when the K-9 units rush the crowd. Others stand fast. Officers sick their dogs upon them. **Attack Dogs (Photograph)**

May 4, 1963: Marlon Brando, Lena Horne, Mrs. Marshall Field, and other celebrities and people in the public eye tell the president they are disappointed in his "failure" and "betrayal." **We the Undersigned (Telegram)**

May 6, 1963: George Huddleston, Democrat, represents Alabama in Congress. He agrees with the concerns of a citizen of his state, James Ridout. Huddleston hopes O'Brien will tell the president. **To Lawrence O'Brien from Representative Huddleston (Letter)**

May 7, 1963: Here in America? A university official and local Democratic Party leader is shocked by news photos of police brutality in Alabama. He wants to hear a statement of outrage from the White House. **To Ralph Dungan from Bob van de Velde (Letter)**

May 8, 1963: President Kennedy tells reporters what he is doing about the situation in Birmingham. He has already sent Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall there to help black and white leaders reach some agreement. Reporters ask the president about the "techniques" used by either side in Birmingham. The president responds and comments about the impact of the Birmingham crisis. **The President Speaks (Video)**

May 8, 1963: Texas State Representative Goode believes the situation in Birmingham is a "horror," partly because those who've been arrested are being held for twelve months, at a fine of \$500. It seems Goode does not know yet that the city has increased the bail for King and Ralph Abernathy to the maximum \$2,500 each. **To Kennedy from Mary Ann Goode (Letter)**

May 9, 1963: Should the federal government send troops into an American city? This is the main question of discussion in a White House meeting today. The president meets with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Associate Attorney General Burke Marshall. The attorney general describes the scene in Birmingham and recommends three steps the president should take. The president will decide what to do next. **The Decider (Audio Recording and Notes)**

May 9, 1963: Congressman Huddleston, Democrat, has forwarded a letter from Alabama citizen James Ridout to the president's congressional liaison, Lawrence O'Brien. He receives a reply from Assistant Special Counsel Lee White. **To Representative Huddleston from Lee White (Letter)**

May 10, 1963: Bell has read King's letter from jail. He urges the president to speak out on civil rights as a moral issue. **To Kennedy from Colin Bell (Letter)**

May 10, 1963: The president of the American Jewish Congress agrees with the president: “Peace talks” in Birmingham are important. But Rabbi Prinz also believes more is needed soon. **To Kennedy From Rabbi Joachim Prinz (Letter)**

May 11, 1963: Emotions run high. Explosions have just rocked two locations: King’s headquarters, and the home of his brother. Angry crowds fill the streets. Wyatt Walker climbs atop a car and through a megaphone, he pleads for nonviolence. **Please, No Riots (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Last night, at 10:45 p.m., someone threw a bomb through a window of this home. Alfred Daniel (A.D.) King lives here, Martin Luther King’s younger brother. Quickly, A.D. gathered his wife and children to run, when another bomb exploded. Everyone is safe. A.D. is back today to survey the damage. **A.D. King (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Just after leaders from the black and white communities reach an agreement, two bombs explode. One goes off at King’s headquarters. The other is at his brother’s home. Birmingham’s Negro sections riot through the night. **Far From Over (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: On the other side of this wall is Room 30 of the Gaston Motel, where King has his Project C headquarters. Last night, a bomb tore a hole in this wall. Nothing is left of the trailers that stood outside. **Gaston Motel Bombing (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Buildings burn in the morning’s dark hours. Police and firefighters cannot reach them. Those who try are hit with rocks thrown by rioters. **Birmingham Ablaze (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Chief Police Inspector Bill Haley is going to the hospital. During the riots last night, he took a blow to the head. Someone threw a rock that caught him on the right side. **Bloodied Inspector (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: The riots seem to have ended. But just in case, special police forces patrol the streets with shotguns and helmets. **Ready for Trouble (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Order will return to Birmingham, even if it takes “1,000 or 10,000 law enforcement officers.” The governor criticizes the so-called “nonviolent” actions of King. He suspects communists are involved. **Governor Wallace is Outraged (Statement)**

May 12, 1963: Who is Birmingham’s mayor? Albert Boutwell won the election in an April 2 run-off, but his opponent, Bull Connor, is challenging the results. The State Supreme Court will decide after May 16. In the meantime, Boutwell makes a mayoral statement. **The Maybe-Mayor Wants Peace (Statement)**

May 12, 1963: Just before the bombings, Birmingham’s leaders, “both Negro and white citizens,” had reached an agreement. President Kennedy says he will place troops near Birmingham, but he hopes not to use them. The agreement should guide the city. **The President Asks for Understanding (Audio Recording and Transcript)**

May 12, 1963: At 8:56 p.m., Governor Wallace sends a telegram to President Kennedy. He asks what legal right the president has to send troops into a state that has not requested help. Also, he has already alerted the Alabama National Guard. **Wallace Challenges Kennedy (Telegram)**

May 13, 1963: Governor Wallace sends a telegram to the president. He believes the president has no right to send troops into Birmingham, and certainly not to protect an “alleged” agreement. **What Agreement? (Telegram)**

May 13, 1963: The president is about to meet with Alabama newspaper editors. His press secretary, Pierre Salinger has notes for him about the state of civil rights Alabama. **The State of Alabama (Memo)**

May 13, 1963: The president has not yet replied to Governor Wallace’s telegram from yesterday; so the Governor writes to him again. He promises everything is under control, despite the “abuses of rioting Negro mobs.” There is no need for federal troops. **Wallace is in Control (Telegram)**

May 13, 1963: In his response to Governor Wallace, President Kennedy says there are no troops in Birmingham, but that if he does need to send them, there is a “domestic violence” statute to legally back him up. **Kennedy May Use Force (Telegram)**

May 14, 1963: Even though President Kennedy has said there are no federal troops in Birmingham, Governor Wallace is sure there are. He asserts that “lawless Negro mobs” will see the troops as their protectors. **Wallace Accuses Kennedy (Telegram)**

c. May 15, 1963: Being white in Birmingham and in favor of integration is dangerous, but a group of prominent whites, called the Senior Citizens Committee, has been meeting with black leaders towards a peaceful agreement. They have remained quiet, but here, committee member Sidney Smyre steps forward. **This is the Agreement (Letter)**

May 17, 1963: L. H. Pitts is the president of Miles College, a black school in Birmingham since 1898. He thanks President Kennedy for the troops and the agreement, but he feels these efforts are only scratching the surface. **From One President to Another (Letter)**

May 17, 1963: The Project C leaders write to the white members of the Senior Citizens Committee. They are 100% committed to the agreement they have reached together, but they do have one question. **Are We on the Same Page? (Letter)**

May 17, 1963: The world is watching Birmingham. In a memo for the president, Donald Wilson, acting director of the US Information Agency, summarizes international opinions collected from global newspapers. **Global Headlines (Memo)**

May 17, 1963: The Governor, Senate, and House of Representatives of Alabama commend their policemen and state patrol for their performance in “facing and quelling the racist mob” in Birmingham with a “high order of discipline and training.” **Appreciation for Law Enforcement (Resolution)**

May 17, 1963: US Department of Justice official Joe Dolan calls from Birmingham. He reports that the city's school board has certain plans for the children who marched in the demonstrations. Also, there are rumors of more violence. **Joe Dolan on Line 1 (Telephone log)**

May 18, 1963: High above Alabama, President Kennedy and Governor Wallace talk about Birmingham, the need for progress, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s character. The two do not see eye to eye. **Follow-Up on Air Force One (Memo)**

May 20, 1963: Milton R. Durret is a member of the Alabama Wholesale Grocers Association. His organization represents "5,000 . . . large employers" who believe President Kennedy is helping Americans hate one another. The Democratic senator from Alabama should make the president aware. **To Senator Sparkman from Milton R. Durret (Letter)**

May 24, 1963: Alabama Senator Sparkman, Democrat, is "pleased to forward the letter" he has received from Milton R. Durret, an Alabama businessman who has a good deal of influence. **To Lawrence O'Brien from Senator Sparkman (Letter)**

May 27, 1963: Congressman Sparkman, Democrat of Alabama, has forwarded a letter from Milton R. Durret to the president's congressional liaison, Lawrence O'Brien. He receives a reply from Special Assistant Counsel Lee White, who assures Sparkman that the president is giving it attention. **To Senator Sparkman from Lee White (Letter)**

June 10, 1963: The State of Alabama has sent a copy of Joint Resolution 25 to the president. On his behalf, Lee White sends a simple reply. **In Response to Alabama (Letter)**

December 17, 1963: Kennedy is assassinated on November 22. His vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn into office the same day. President Johnson's administration is keeping an eye on Birmingham. Justice Department staff prepare a memo on the status of the agreement. **A New President's Concern (Memo)**