

Eyes on the Prize

America's Civil
Rights Years,
1954-1965



Juan Williams

With the Eyes on the
Prize Production Team

**Introduction by
Julian Bond**

A Robert Lavelle Book



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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

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

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.

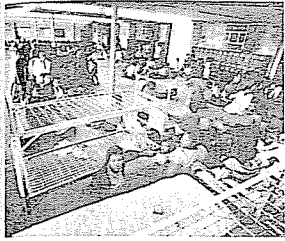
"There were pictures throughout the nation, throughout the world," recalls Burke Marshall, then head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "It was a matter of great concern to the president, because it was a hopeless situation in terms of any lawful resolution." The federal government worried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



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



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