

THE BIRMINGHAM CAMPAIGN: A TURNING POINT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE USA

In 1963, Birmingham, Alabama, USA was “the most segregated city in the South” with strictly enforced separation of black people and white people in public spaces. The Civil Rights Movement had lost some momentum and was in need of a victory, so Fred Shuttlesworth’s local Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights invited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to collaborate in “The Birmingham Campaign” or “Project C.” The “C” stood for confrontation: sustained, nonviolent action to demand desegregation and equal employment opportunities for black residents of Birmingham.



Source: AP

The first month saw marches, lunch counter sit-ins, “kneel-ins” at white churches, nightly rallies, and boycotts of downtown businesses. However, the campaign was slow to gain momentum. Police were deliberately low key in their arrests so the actions generated little media attention. There were also major divisions within the community. Only 10% of black ministers supported the campaign, others actively opposed it, and eight influential white ministers publicly condemned the confrontational tactics. With a lack of widespread involvement, the campaign was fizzling.



Source: The New York Times

This changed with the “Children’s Crusade” when youth began to march by the thousands. Over the course of a week, more than 3,400 young people were arrested. With the jails overflowing, Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor ordered the police to use dogs and fire hoses, and shocking images of young people being attacked spread around the world. Suddenly, the floundering local campaign was a national crisis, and power shifted to the protesters.

White businesses were weakening under the impact of the boycott and negative publicity. At the urging of a federal government mediator, Dr. King suspended the protests and was prepared to accept a very limited settlement, while Fred Shuttlesworth strongly disagreed, insisting on more concrete results. A compromise was reached of nominal gains, including several immediate steps toward desegregation and a biracial committee to monitor progress of the agreement. Project C and the Children’s Crusade marked a turning point for the American Civil Rights Movement, leading to the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 that legislated access to public accommodations and equal employment opportunities for minorities.

ISSUE

Segregation was the norm across the Southern United States. In Birmingham, black people were forced to be separate from white people in public spaces, including parks, swimming pools, hotels, taxis, elevators, drinking fountains, restaurants, etc., with black residents also facing extreme violence and lack of employment opportunities.

WHO

- Local black community leaders and residents, particularly from the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights
- Outside civil rights leaders from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Ralph Abernathy

WHERE

Birmingham, Alabama, United States

GOALS

- Desegregate public facilities, for example, public toilets, water fountains, lunch counters, parks
- Hire black store clerks in white-owned businesses (there were none)
- Establish fair hiring practices in city departments (there were no black police or fire-fighters)
- Form a biracial committee to work toward desegregating schools
- Test out a nonviolent mass protest template that could be used in other cities in the South

STRATEGY

Initially: a campaign of sit-ins, marches, and boycotts designed to pressure white business leaders into demanding that the city overturn segregation.

Later on: use of tactics to generate tension for the sake of media coverage, spreading news of the conflict internationally. As participation numbers dwindled, the movement debated the strategy of including young people in the marches. Some people strongly disagreed, but thousands of energized and trained youth decided to join, providing a major turning point.



Source: odinsblog

NEGOTIATIONS

Within days of young people being brutally attacked by police dogs and fire hoses, the national outcry prompted President John F. Kennedy to send a senior official to mediate between black leaders and the white business community. The mediator urged black leaders to agree to the white business owners' demand to halt demonstrations during negotiations and accept a settlement with very few gains, negotiating the rest of their demands afterwards. Dr. King agreed, but Reverend Shuttlesworth, absent because he was hospitalized, strongly objected. Shuttlesworth believed the process would squander the power the campaign had built. He also felt that Dr. King, who wasn't from Birmingham, shouldn't be making decisions for Birmingham residents, highlighting a tension between locals and outside activists that had existed throughout the campaign. Shuttlesworth's intervention into the negotiation process succeeded in making the final agreement stronger.

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The campaign was highly planned, changing strategy as needed and implementing what the two major organizations involved had learned from the successes and failures of recent civil rights campaigns. Tens of thousands of people were poised to take action, with training and a pledge of nonviolence a priority for anyone who would be participating.

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed around the injustice of segregation, specifically the rights of black residents to access public accommodations and equal employment opportunities.



Source: civilrightsteaching.org

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Leaders:

- Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) activists, including Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, who had already been working to desegregate public spaces in Birmingham
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference activists, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Ralph Abernathy, invited by Rev. Shuttlesworth
- James Bevel, Dorothy Cotton, and Diane Nash, three movement leaders helping organize students

Participants:

- Black residents of Birmingham not previously affiliated with ACMHR

Allies:

- Local, national, and international sympathizers

TARGET

The Birmingham Campaign had multiple goals and multiple related targets. These included:

- Local white business leaders
- City government officials

Many campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement also aimed to build pressure on the federal government to pass civil rights legislation, and the target for this was President John F. Kennedy.



OPPONENT(S)

Local white business leaders; local government officials; Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor who ordered dog and fire hose attacks on protesters; members of the Birmingham Police and Fire Departments; white segregationists and Ku Klux Klan members (vigilante white supremacists); white moderate ministers and conservative black ministers opposed to the confrontational approach (Note: only 10% of the city's hundreds of black ministers joined the campaign).

TACTICS

Lunch counter sit-ins; kneel-ins at white churches; library sit-ins; nightly mass rallies; singing and prayer; boycott of white businesses; mass marches. When police violence escalated, there was an opportunity to gain international media coverage that could affect the movement as a whole and the organizers shifted tactics to create strategic tension. Actions



were dispersed in different areas of the city, but the marches concentrated people in one area and so had a very high risk of injury and arrest.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

Challenges from opponents included a black leadership widely and publicly opposed to the campaign's approach and locally influential white ministers who released a statement condemning the protests, methods, and involvement by "outsiders" (leading to

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous response "Letter From Birmingham Jail").

Early on, city officials secured a temporary court ban on marches, picketing, and parades. As a result, protesters were imprisoned for weeks.

The police at first responded with restraint, but later escalated. They attacked the "Children's March" with dogs and fire hoses, brutalizing many. The next day, thousands of young people marched right up to the firefighters and police, singing and some kneeling. Bull Connor screamed for the hoses, but they did not turn them on, many overcome by this powerful display of nonviolence in action.

White supremacists responded to the negotiated agreement with bombs at the motel where Dr. King had stayed, at his brother's home, and at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young girls.

MEDIA & MESSAGING

More than 200 regional and national reporters came to Birmingham. Photographs and TV images of young black people being attacked by dogs and fire hoses had a huge impact on the power and reach of the protests. The images opened many people's eyes for the first time to the brutality of the segregation system. Leaders saw the media attention as an important factor for their success and deliberately shifted their focus from just pressuring local white business leaders toward actions that would also provoke media coverage.



OUTCOMES

The removal of "Whites Only" and "Blacks Only" signs in restrooms and on drinking fountains; a plan to desegregate lunch counters; an ongoing "program of upgrading Negro employment;" the formation of a biracial committee to monitor the progress of the agreement; and the release of jailed protesters on bond. However, desegregation took place slowly over the next year, with violent attacks from angry white supremacists, including the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that killed four young girls.

The Birmingham Campaign also sparked national demonstrations, riots, and international pressure. President Kennedy had previously been reluctant to call for national change, but the campaign ultimately forced him to propose reforms that Congress eventually passed as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While this legislation achieved movement goals of gaining access to public places and employment opportunities, it did not ultimately challenge class structure and systemic racism that have left a need for justice that reverberates today.

Worth Remembering



Source: jfklibrary.org

"The events in Birmingham...have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them."

President John F. Kennedy

"I assure you if you come to Birmingham, this movement will not only gain prestige but it will really shake the country."

Fred Shuttlesworth (right) said to
Martin Luther King Jr. (left)



Source: thebostoncalendar.com

Shuttlesworth was entirely right. Images of police brutality from Birmingham indeed shook the nation and the campaign is widely considered a turning point for the Civil Rights Movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act to follow.