



SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

## **HANDOUT 1**

### **THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE OF THE BIRMINGHAM CIVIL RIGHTS CAMPAIGN**

At the close of 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleagues looked back on what for them was a dispiriting year with no resounding successes to propel the civil rights movement forward in the new year.

#### **The Albany Campaign**

The campaign for desegregation in Albany, Georgia, had been a failure. Civil rights demonstrators were outmaneuvered by the city's sheriff, Laurie Pritchett, who had prevented violent attacks by whites that would have brought demonstrators national attention and sympathy. Pritchett had moved arrestees to nearby towns, and, when King arrived hoping to use his imprisonment as a rallying point for civil rights forces, forced King's release.

#### **The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement**

November 1962 saw the world come within a hairsbreadth of nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis turned the nation's and the Kennedy administration's attention to the international sphere and away from the plight of black Americans. Civil rights was no longer the topic of the day in American politics. Given these circumstances, what could possibly resurrect the movement's fortunes?

#### **The Birmingham Campaign of April–May 1963**

The Birmingham Campaign of April–May 1963 had been preceded by more than seven years of petitions and lawsuits to end racial segregation in the city. This period was also punctuated by a number of beatings and bombings by segregationist forces.

The Birmingham Campaign's blueprint was drawn up in detail by Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, who named it "Project C (confrontation)." Using direct action tactics, the campaign sought to end racial segregation in public facilities such as schools, lunch counters, restrooms, parks, and drinking fountains. It also sought an end to employment discrimination in the city's businesses.

Confrontation with white authorities was aimed at gaining federal government attention through media coverage of the violent reaction expected from the authorities, especially from the city's notorious police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor.

### **The Campaign Opens**

The Birmingham Campaign was launched on April 3, "B (Birmingham) Day," at the opening of the Easter buying season. African Americans boycotted downtown stores, demanding racial equality in hiring. Small groups sought desegregation of whites-only lunch counters by conducting sit-ins. Twenty people were arrested. When these tactics failed to get results, campaign organizers launched a series of marches and sit-ins aimed at closing the downtown area to business. Realizing that many demonstrators would be arrested, they intended to fill the city's jails (as had not been accomplished in Albany) and, as King put it, "create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."

Widespread civil disobedience followed. Demonstrators sat in at whites-only lunch counters, libraries, and churches. At the county building, marchers demanded that blacks be registered to vote. Hundreds were arrested. On April 10, Connor obtained a state court injunction against the campaign's direct action tactics. On Good Friday, April 12, a mass meeting rejected the injunction and voted to march on city hall. King was arrested, remaining in jail for nearly nine days (also in contrast to Albany) to focus national attention on the situation and to write his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

### **A Crisis Point Is Reached: The Setting for the Children's Crusade**

Many blacks, however, could not risk the economic loss that arrest would bring, especially after the city quadrupled bail, making immediate release impossible. Either a means would be found to keep the crisis at a boiling point and break the city's capacity to jail arrestees, or the campaign would simply fizzle out.

This critical do-or-die situation forms the dramatic backdrop for the demonstrations that were soon to be dubbed the Children's Crusade by the national press.

Thus, in early May a controversial plan, unleashed on what was called “D Day,” called for schoolchildren to defy the ban on direct action. On May 2, one thousand children, who had been briefly trained to deal with police tactics, assembled in churches. Just after noon, Rev. James Bevel sent hundreds of young people onto the streets crying, “We’re going to walk, walk, walk...to freedom, freedom, freedom!” Some six hundred children were jailed.

The next day, dubbed “Double-D Day,” Bull Connor decided to end the marches forcibly, rather than arrest violators, because the jails were nearly full. It was a fateful decision. As television cameras rolled, Connor bellowed, “Let ’em have it!” and fire hoses, followed by dogs, were turned on marchers. Daily scenes followed in national and international media of police clubbing black children and firemen hitting them with jets of water powerful enough to strip the bark off of trees at one hundred feet. Nightly television footage helped stir the nation’s conscience and provoked critical comment around the world. And despite his efforts to disperse the marchers with brute force, Connor was compelled to continue mass arrests. Leaders later referred to the campaign at this point as “a fire that water could not put out.”

The organizers’ strategy paid off as the federal government became directly involved and public awareness of racial injustice and unconscionable police behavior in Birmingham became widespread. As marches continued, more than one thousand students were arrested.

The following week, business leaders were weakening under the pressure of publicity but still resisted direct negotiation with the leaders of the campaign. Two Justice Department representatives sent by the Kennedy administration mediated between the two sides. Negotiations continued until May 10, when an accord was announced at a press conference given by King, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, and Reverend Ralph Abernathy. The accord called for desegregation of changing rooms, lunch counters, rest rooms, and drinking fountains; more jobs for blacks; release on bond of jailed protestors; and a meeting a biracial committee to ensure the agreement’s implementation—all staggered over ninety days, beginning May 13.

On Saturday night, May 11, segregationists responded with a series of bombings, including the home of King’s brother and the motel where King, now gone from the city, had stayed. On Sunday, blacks rioted in protest. The next day, Kennedy sent three thousand federal troops to restore order, countering state police sent by Alabama’s segregationist governor, George C. Wallace. Four months later, a bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church killed four black girls

and maimed a fifth. King called the slain children “the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.”

After the Birmingham Campaign, neither the civil rights movement nor the South was ever the same. Although results in Birmingham itself were slow in coming, the campaign succeeded in focusing national attention on the injustice of racial segregation and discrimination in the South and on the need for fundamental change. In August, King gave his acclaimed “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Landmark national civil rights legislation—the Civil Rights Act of 1964—soon followed, and the nonviolent leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and his organization were widely recognized and greatly strengthened. A new American Revolution had passed the point of no return.