The Birmingham Campaign, 1963
For years, Birmingham, Alabama was considered “the South’s toughest city.”

- Rigidly segregated, commonly referred to as “Bombingham” due to the frequency of bombings (there had been 18 unsolved bombings in black neighborhoods over a six-year span)
- With a population of 350,000, Birmingham was also Alabama’s largest city and home to a large black population (40%)
  - In spite of the large black population, blacks were 3 times less likely than whites to hold high-school diplomas
  - Only 1 in 6 black employees was a skilled or trained worker (as opposed to ¾ of whites)
  - The median annual income for blacks was $3,000, less than half of what whites earned.
- Police repeatedly broke up black political meetings, and since 1956, the NAACP had been kept out of Alabama.
- In 1962 alone, the city closed 68 parks, 38 playgrounds, 6 swimming pools, and 4 golf courses to avoid complying with a federal court order to desegregate public facilities.
– Birm. was also a KKK stronghold & Martin Luther King, Jr. described it as America’s worst city for racism.
– Singer Nat King Cole had been beaten by a white audience while on stage during a 1956 Birmingham performance.
– In recent years, the KKK:
  • Had pressured the city to ban a book from book stores as it contained pictures of black and white rabbits.
  • Wanted black music banned on radio stations.
  • On Labor Day, 1957, a carload of drunk white KKK members had grabbed a black man off a street corner, taken him to a country shack, and castrated him.
– SCLC member and trusted advisor to MLK, the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth had his home bombed to ruins (there were no arrests) and in 1957, he was chain-whipped on a public street by a white mob at Phillips High School when he took his children there to try to enroll them in the white school. His wife was stabbed during the same incident with white cops present. There were no convictions for these attacks.
– City businessmen actually believed that racism held back the city but their voices were usually quiet.
George Wallace

- A new voice of white Southern resistance had arisen in January 1963 when George Wallace became governor.
  - Served 4 terms as Alabama’s governor
- Ran 4 times for the Presidency (3 times as a Democrat, once as an Independent) and was later coined “the most influential loser” in the 20th century U.S. politics by his biographers.
- A 1972 assassination attempt left him paralyzed; he used a wheelchair for the rest of his life.
- Most known for his pro-segregationist stance.
Wallace physically stopped the desegregation of the University of Alabama by black students Vivian Malone and James Hood in June 1963 by personally standing in front the doors. After being confronted by federal marshals, the Deputy Attorney General, and the Alabama National Guard, he stood aside.

Wallace again attempted to stop four black students from enrolling in four separate elementary schools in September 1963. After intervention by a federal court in Birmingham, the four children were allowed to enter on September 9, becoming the first to integrate a primary or secondary school in Alabama.

Wallace disapproved vehemently of the desegregation of the state of Alabama and wanted desperately for his state to remain segregated. In his own words: "The President wants us to surrender this state to Martin Luther King and his group of pro-Communists who have instituted these demonstrations."
Eugene “Bull” Connor

- Birmingham’s police commissioner was a man named "Bull" Connor - a staunch segregationist.
  - When the Freedom Riders had driven through Birmingham and were attacked, there were no police to assist them as Connor had given them the day off as it was Mother’s Day.
  - Connor had a notoriously bad temper and saw protests as a threat to his ‘rule’ in Birmingham.

PBS.org
Civil rights leaders chose Birmingham as the site of "Project C" (for Confrontation) not only for its racism, but because activists anticipated that any civil rights campaign in Bull Connor’s city would provoke trouble and gain the movement much needed national outcry.

Hoped the Birmingham campaign and Connor’s response would get the civil rights movement back on track after the problems it had experienced in Albany, GA.

- Activist had failed to achieve their goals in Albany due to its lack of a clear-cut focus and failure to arouse an aggressive response from the police.
- Hoped serious trouble in Birmingham would lead to federal intervention.
“We wanted confrontation, non-violent confrontation, to see if it would work on a massive scale. Not just for Birmingham – for the nation. We were trying to launch a systematic, wholehearted battle against segregation which would set the pace for the nation.”

– Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth
Preparations for Project C

• Jan. 1963, SCLC held a 3-day retreat where they carved out a plan of attack on segregation in Birmingham.
  – Believed failure in Albany stemmed from complete lack of strategy. Vowed Birmingham would be different.

• King began a national tour to prepare for Birmingham offensive. Delivered 28 speeches in 16 cities, asked for volunteers and donations everywhere he went.
  – At one private gather in Hollywood, King had collected nearly $75,000 in bail money for the anticipated arrests.
• SCLC studied the city’s laws and regulations to learn what constituted grounds for arrest.

• Knowing that they planned to use the 16th Street Baptist Church as their headquarters, they timed how long it would take a young person, a middle-aged person, and an older person to walk to the downtown stores being targeted for protests. They then picked the best routes, counted the stools, tables and chairs in the targeted stores.

• Business-owners got word of the planned demonstrations and fearing a loss of business during the busy Easter season, asked federal officials to request MLK cancel the protests.
3 phases to Project C

- **Phase I**: economic boycott (AA comprised 40% of the consumer population in Birmingham. Planned boycott accompanied by small sit-ins and picketing downtown stores)
- **Phase II**: mass marches on city hall
- **Phase III**: explosion on D-Day with waves of demonstrators (young and old) defying injunctions and filling up the jails
- All phases were accompanied by negotiation with white business leaders (non-violent action was always accompanied by readiness to sit down and negotiate.)
• Just before Easter 1963, King and SCLC launched boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins aimed at desegregating downtown businesses. (Challenged discriminatory hiring practices and segregated public facilities.)

• On April 6, police arrested 45 protesters marching from 16th Street Baptist Church to city hall. The next day, Palm Sunday, more people were arrested. In addition, two police dogs attacked nineteen-year-old protester Leroy Allen as a large crowd looked on. In response to the protests, Judge W.A. Jenkins, Jr., issued an order preventing 133 of the city's civil rights leaders, including King, his friend and fellow SCLC leader Ralph Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth from organizing demonstrations.
• Protests violated a court order banning further demonstrations.
  – (Some African American businessmen and white ministers urged King to leave Birmingham, but he chose to stay.)
  – King was subsequently arrested for defying the injunction. In jail he was placed in solitary confinement and refused the right to see his lawyer. Eight days later, King posted bail.
“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

• Following King’s arrest, members of the local white clergy took out a full-page ad in the *Birmingham News*, calling King a troublemaker. They claimed the campaign was an ill-timed threat to law and order.

• From his jail cell, King responded to the ministers’ letter by writing in the margins of the newspaper and on scraps of toilet paper. This response came to be known as the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

• “For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant “never”… But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity;… when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”… 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 an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”
“Children’s Campaign”

- After his release, King decided to allow children to participate in the campaign.
- While many adults were reluctant to march – afraid of going to jail at the cost of their jobs – children were less worried. Additionally, many hoped the sight of young people being hauled off to jail would test the conscience of Birmingham authorities and the nation.
  - “Most adults have bills to pay – house notes, rents, car notes, utility bills, 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.”
May 2, 1963

• Activists launched D-Day of Project C when hundreds of young demonstrators marched from the 16th Street Baptist Church. As they marched with the adults, police arrested 959 (ages 6-18) of the children. Police brought in school busses to take protestors to jail.
"My third grade cousin went to jail with the fifth graders."

"... with liberty and justice for all."

York in The Louisville Times

Le Pelley in The Christian Science Monitor
Liederman in The Long Island Daily Press

"Women and children first."
May 3, 1963

- More demonstrations planned - protestors gathered in front of the 16th St. Baptist Church before marching to the downtown area.
- Bull Connor ordered in canine units & ordered police to turn high pressure water hoses, able to tear the bark from trees, on the demonstrators as they gathered in the park outside the church. Pledged to fill the jails.
Media coverage of the attacks on demonstrators made both national and international news. Even the Soviet papers mocked the U.S. “Is this the way you practice democracy?”
May 4, 1963

The following day, Connor instructed his officers to wait until demonstrators marched into the downtown business area before again turning the hoses on protestors. Scenes of children being thrown against brick walls by fire hoses horrified the white business community and the nation.
• Police also brought out trained police dogs that attacked the arms and legs of marchers.
• When protestors fell to the ground, policemen beat them with clubs and hauled them off to jail.

• In total, Connor and his men arrested 2,500 people, including 2,000 children.
Media response

- Television cameras recorded the scenes of violence for nationwide viewing.
  - Even those who were not previously sympathetic to the civil rights movement were revolted.
  - One reporter commented, “A newspaper or television picture of a snarling police dog set upon a human being is recorded in the permanent photo-electric file of every human brain.”
• Amid daily confrontations, arrests, and jailing of protesters, Birmingham's white businessmen quietly negotiated with Black leaders.

• Thirty-eight days after the start of the boycott and sit-ins, an agreement was reached between the business community and the protestors to integrate lunch counters and provide jobs to African Americans. But the confrontation was not over.
In response, Gov. George Wallace said the deal was not made by the legitimate leaders of Birmingham, and the KKK bombed King's hotel. Though King has already left town, a crowd gathered, and were beaten by state police with clubs and rifles. A riot followed, and black protests spread to other cities, showing that the non-violent approach had limits.
Did Birmingham improve?

- Stores were desegregated; opportunities for African Americans in jobs ‘improved’ (though from what to what?) and a biracial committee was set up to improve Birmingham’s troubled community.
Victory?

- The SCLC had gauged Connor correctly. The scenes of Bull Connor’s police dogs attacking children & youths pushed Kennedy into greater action - civil rights legislation shortly followed.

- The media had once again shown America what life was like for African-Americans in the South.

- Extra money poured into the SCLC’s coffers as a result of this event.
Federal Response

- The images & news reports of police officers and firemen assaulting blacks created conflict in the minds of many Americans.

  – In the middle of the Cold War and rising conflict in Vietnam (both waged in the name of freedom & democracy), the legally sanctioned violence against blacks threatened to expose America’s war rhetoric as hypocritical and self-serving.
• By June 1963, the violence against African-Americans forced JFK to publically respond to the civil rights crisis.

• For the first time, a president declared that “race has no place in American life or law” and called for strong action to address its damaging and lasting effects.
March on Washington
On the heels of victory in Birmingham and in Washington...
16th Street Baptist Church Bombing

- In Birmingham, on September 15, 1963, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a site of movement rallies, was rocked by a bomb. Four black girls attending Bible class were killed & fourteen others were injured.