

LESSON 7: CIVIL RIGHTS

Student Handout 4: Outcomes— Birmingham, 1963

As described in Problem 2, Dr. King did go ahead with the protests, but they didn't go well. The leaders of the civil rights movement in Birmingham then met to decide what to do. Dr. King and the SCLC decided to move forward with all of the options listed in Handout 2 except #1 (arm African Americans) and #5 (suspend the demonstrations and negotiate). Having preachers arrested (#2) didn't make much difference. However, Dr. King's arrest (#3) made a huge difference. It revived the demonstrations by encouraging more people to march and get arrested themselves, it brought in more celebrity help (#8), and it raised a great deal of money (#9). While in jail, Dr. King wrote a letter to the editor in response to criticisms made by other ministers (#7). The ministers, along with the press, had claimed that it was a bad time to demonstrate in Birmingham, and they argued that African Americans should give the new city leaders a chance to make changes before continuing the demonstrations (the demonstrations had started the day after the new city leaders took over). Dr. King's letter explained why African Americans could not wait. His "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is one of the greatest documents in U.S. history, according to most historians.

Nevertheless, Dr. King's arrest and letter did not bring about the turning point in the protests. This occurred when children, ages six to 18, joined the marches (#6). It was a difficult decision to have them march, because the injunction not only made the children subject to arrest, but also made the protest leaders subject to arrest for contributing to the delinquency of minors. Civil rights leaders took the risk partly out of desperation, based on little more than the hope that events would go their way. It turned out that they did. Children provided a flood of marchers that overwhelmed the jails. Without places to put the arrestees it became difficult for police to make enough arrests to control the crowds. Police Chief Bull Connor tried to control the demonstrators by using fire hoses and police dogs, but the sight of police officers using these on young children (as well as adults, as shown in the photograph) garnered a great deal of sympathy for the protesters.



Police dogs attack a civil rights marcher
New York Public Library

Photographs and television coverage of police intimidating African American children influenced people around the United States and the world to sympathize with the

demonstrators. That sympathy brought in more money for bail as well as more celebrities, such as Ella Baker, Dick Gregory, and Joan Baez, to support the cause.

According to many historians, Bull Connor's actions helped the civil rights demonstrations achieve success. Connor wanted to stop the crowd from marching, especially to city hall. If he hadn't tried to stop them, there would have been no major publicity.

Press coverage also made the U.S. look bad in the eyes of people around the world, which posed a major problem for President Kennedy's foreign policy. American leaders had argued that communism was evil because it denied its citizens many rights. Photographs of policemen with attack dogs arresting children made the U.S. look hypocritical. Soviet newspapers even reprinted the photographs. President Kennedy was concerned about America's image; Alabama Governor George Wallace took a different view. He said that since foreigners accepted aid from the United States (about 25% of which came from Southern tax dollars) they had no right to criticize Southern policies in regard to African Americans. He added, "In the first place, the average man in Africa or Asia doesn't know where he is, much less where Alabama is."

The protests, rejuvenated by the inclusion of children in the marches, led to two key turning points in the civil rights movement. First, one of the marches led to a confrontation in which African Americans knelt and prayed in the road in the face of fire hoses. The Birmingham fire fighters refused to turn on their hoses, defying the orders of Bull Connor. The marchers then rose to their feet and walked calmly through the ranks of firefighters and police. Such bravery influenced many people to change their views on civil rights. Second, in a later demonstration in the downtown business section, white businessmen saw children demonstrating and decided it was time to settle. They quickly agreed to the demands of the African American leaders. Bull Connor said he wouldn't abide by the agreement, but the new mayor agreed to do so.

Meanwhile, appeals by African American leaders to President Kennedy (option #4) proved effective. A representative from the president's office helped bring about a favorable conclusion of the crisis for the demonstrators. The protests in Birmingham turned out to be a great success for the civil rights movement.

The SCLC stuck to its commitment to nonviolent confrontation and chose not to advocate violence (option #1). However, people on both sides of the civil rights movement later committed acts of violence.

The success in Birmingham had numerous consequences, some intended and some unintended:



Civil rights march, September 1963

- The events in Birmingham sparked the so-called “Negro revolution of 1963.” The U.S. government counted more than 750 demonstrations in 186 cities in the ten weeks following the Birmingham victory. The triumph at Birmingham injected new life into the civil rights movement.
- Media coverage of the demonstrations and police reactions showed white Americans what it was like for African Americans to live in the South.
- President Kennedy submitted a civil rights bill to end segregation in public places, which eventually became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It cut off federal aid to any state that discriminated against African Americans or any racial group.
- Donations to the SCLC and other civil rights groups increased, strengthening these groups financially.
- Unfortunately, violence followed the Birmingham victory. A bomb blew up Dr. King’s motel room at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham. No one was there at the time, so no injuries resulted. A few months after the demonstrations, a bomb killed four African-American girls in Sunday school. Other acts of violence not directly connected to the Birmingham demonstrations soon followed, including the assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, who was shot and killed in the driveway of his Mississippi home soon after the victory in Birmingham.
- The bombing of the Gaston Motel and a bombing directed at Dr. King’s brother led to violence and riots by African Americans in Birmingham.
- Within two years, some African Americans rejected the nonviolent approach as ineffective. New voices such as Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X advocated a more militant method for African Americans to attain rights. These individuals rejected integration and blatantly criticized whites in America, leading to a new movement known as “Black Power.”
- “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” was printed in a number of journals at the time and has been reprinted in many history books since, providing inspiration for many people over the ensuing decades.
- Birmingham stores were desegregated, and storeowners hired more African Americans to work at those stores. A special committee composed of both African Americans and whites was set up to promote local racial cooperation.



Bomb damage at the Gaston Motel