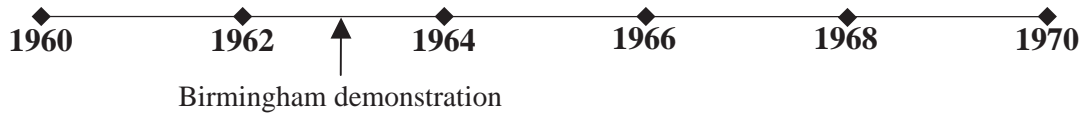


LESSON 7: CIVIL RIGHTS

Student Handout 1: Problem— Birmingham, 1963



PROBLEM 1: SHOULD AFRICAN AMERICANS DEMONSTRATE?

It is January 1963. You are Martin Luther King, Jr., a key leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a civil rights group. The civil rights movement had a disappointing year in 1962. For example, in Albany, Georgia, African Americans held numerous demonstrations but failed to make much progress. The general lack of success has caused newspapers and television stations to lose interest in civil rights protests. You and other SCLC leaders have decided to draw up plans for a major protest to desegregate businesses in Birmingham, Alabama, a city you have described as “by far the worst big city in race relations in the United States.” The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth has asked you and the SCLC to join him and



Martin Luther King, Jr.

his organization (the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights) to organize demonstrations in Birmingham.

The protests are well planned and have a limited, realistic goal: to desegregate downtown businesses. Protest leaders have organized the demonstrations into phases: (a) draw in the media by staging small-scale sit-ins and bringing in well-known demonstrators; (b) organize an economic boycott of downtown businesses; and (c) overwhelm the jails with arrests of African Americans from Birmingham and outside the city.

Reverend Shuttleworth's work on behalf of civil rights has made him the target of violence: he has suffered beatings by segregationist mobs, his wife was stabbed in the leg when a group of Klansmen attacked them, and his home was bombed. There have been 18 unsolved bombings of African Americans in the city, earning it the nickname of "Bombingham." The city's police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor, allows whites to beat African Americans while the police do nothing. Segregation dominates the city, with African Americans and whites separated in most businesses. Last year, the city closed 68 parks, 38 playgrounds, six swimming pools, and four golf courses, rather than integrate them. On average, African Americans earn \$3000 per year—less than half of what whites make.

The Birmingham city government is in upheaval right now. A dispute has arisen over the mayoral election between Bull Connor and his more moderate opponent, Albert Boutwell. There will be a special run-off election in March. In the meantime, Bull Connor is still police chief.

You must decide whether to go ahead with the civil rights protests in Birmingham. Here are arguments for and against the protests:

For the protests:

1. About 200 protesters have received training in nonviolent resistance and have signed pledge cards not to become violent during the demonstrations. These trainees have committed themselves to the Birmingham protests.
2. It will cost the city more to jail the protesters than it will for the SCLC to bail them out of jail after they have stayed there for a few days. The SCLC is a large organization that has the funds to outspend the city. By leaving protesters in jail a few days, the SCLC can clog the jails.
3. Many Birmingham businesses (especially steel companies) are based in the North, so they might be vulnerable to pressure regarding civil rights. If they are seen as supporting segregation in the South, people in the North (where the companies' headquarters are located) may not like it and choose not to do business with them.
4. A boycott by African Americans has the potential to seriously affect white-owned businesses in Birmingham. Last year, such a boycott forced white businesses to integrate lunch counters, drinking fountains, and restrooms. Some white businesses also began to take down their "Colored Only" signs.
5. President Kennedy has made several favorable decisions regarding African Americans. It's not clear just how much he supports the civil rights movement,

- but at least he listens to African Americans. Two years ago, Kennedy sent federal marshals to Birmingham to report on segregation in the city and to possibly protect protesters. This move brought unfavorable local and national press coverage to the city regarding its segregation policies. The coverage, in turn, caused a decline in business activity (some customers didn't want to shop where there was obvious segregation, while others feared violence), hurting the city's economy.
6. The city government itself is changing, which reflects the willingness of many whites to end—or at least reduce—segregation. The white-run city government is divided at this point between factions that support and oppose segregation.

Against the protests:

1. If the SCLC loses this protest (after failing to win any major concessions from the city government in Albany, Georgia), it will severely cripple the civil rights movement. More radical elements of the civil rights movement, who favor using violence and/or encourage separation from whites rather than integration, may take control of the movement.
2. The danger exists that African American demonstrators may ultimately commit violent acts, especially if the protests drag on for months without any dramatic success. It's not clear that the SCLC has the ability to maintain control over such a large group of protesters.
3. African American ministers from Birmingham may oppose radical actions in their city, such as demonstrations. These ministers don't want to see people injured or killed, and they may resent outside agitators coming to their city to stir up trouble. They especially dislike Reverend Shuttlesworth, whom they call a dictator. However, Reverend Shuttlesworth says that he can handle the preachers.
4. Large steel companies and other large businesses in Birmingham will not agree to end segregation. They benefit too much from it because it allows them to prevent unionization and keep wages low by playing off white workers against African American workers.
5. Police chief Bull Connor has repeatedly ordered the police to use violence to repress any sort of dissent (including that by labor unions in Birmingham), so he will likely have the police react with force against any civil rights demonstrations.
6. White-run newspapers (especially the *Birmingham News*) will do everything they can to destroy the image of the SCLC. As a result, the protests will not get fair coverage by the local press.
7. The Alabama state government opposes integration. The new governor, George Wallace, said in his inaugural address this month, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!"