American History Name:

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*Letter from Birmingham Jail*

Two major civil rights campaigns during 1962 and 1963 would illustrate both the limits and the possibilities of nonviolent resistance. African Americans in the segregated city of Albany, Georgia, had traditionally engaged in as much political activism as was possible in the Jim Crow South. In 1961, SNCC volunteers arrived to beef up an ongoing voter registration effort. They established a voter-registration center that served as a home base for a campaign of sit-ins, boycotts, and other protests. In November 1961, a number of local black organizations formed the Albany Movement, under the leadership of William G. Anderson, a young osteopath. The protests accelerated, and by mid-December more than 500 demonstrators had been jailed. Anderson had met both Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleague, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, pastor at Montgomery’s First Baptist Church and King’s chief lieutenant at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He decided to invite King’s help, both to maintain the Albany Movement’s momentum and to secure national publicity for its cause.

Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett provided a formidable opponent for King and the other activists. Pritchett realized that news media coverage of segregationist violence against dignified, nonviolent civil rights activists already had turned many Americans against Jim Crow. Prichett worked tirelessly to deprive the Albany Movement of a similar “media moment.” Albany police officers were warned against employing any kind of violence against protestors, especially if the press was nearby. While earlier protestors had successfully “filled the jails,” Pritchett scattered them in jails throughout the surrounding counties.

Pritchett also understood that King was the media star and that national press coverage would ebb if there was no King “angle to pursue.” King returned several times and was arrested and convicted for breach of peace. When the court offered King and Abernathy their choice of jail time or a fine, they chose jail, the option certain to attract press coverage. But they found that an “anonymous benefactor”—a segregationist recruited by Pritchett—had paid their fine.

When the media moment finally came, it was not the one King had hoped for. By July 24, 1962, many of Albany’s African Americans had grown frustrated at the lack of progress. That evening, a crowd of 2,000 blacks armed with bricks, bottles, and rocks attacked a group of Albany policemen, and Georgia highway patrolmen. One trooper lost two teeth. But Laurie Pritchett’s well-schooled officers did not retaliate, and the chief was quick to seize the initiative: “Did you see them nonviolent rocks?” he asked.

King moved swiftly to limit the damage. He cancelled a planned mass demonstration and declared a day of penance. But a federal injunction against further demonstrations in Albany added to the difficulties: up till then, the civil rights cause had the law on its side. Further action in Albany would allow segregationists to portray King and his followers as lawbreakers.

King understood that his presence in Albany would no longer help the wider movement. SNCC, NAACP, CORE, and other local activists continued the fight in Albany and would eventually secure real gains for African Americans. For King, Albany became a learning experience; he learned that it was important to fight one issue at a time and focus on specific goals rather than a general desegregation of all society.

If Albany Police Chief Pritchett possessed the political savvy and emotional detachment to fight nonviolence with nonviolence, his Birmingham, Alabama, counterpart, Bull Connor did not. King and the other movement leaders rightly anticipated that Connor would prove a perfect foil. Connor did not represent the views of all white Birmingham residents; a recent municipal (city) election had produced gains for pro-civil rights reform candidates. But Connor did control the police, and the “greeting” that the Freedom Riders had experienced in Birmingham illustrated what activists might expect to find there.

On April 3, 1963, activists launched a round of lunch counter sit-ins. A march on Birmingham’s City Hall followed on the 6th. The city’s African Americans began to boycott downtown businesses, a tactic King deemed “amazingly effective.” A number of shops swiftly removed their whites-only signs, only to be threatened by Bull Connor with the loss of their business licenses.

On April 10, Connor followed Pritchett’s example, obtaining a county court injunction barring King and 134 other leaders from engaging in boycotts, sit-ins, picketing, and other protest activities. Any violation of the injunction would be contempt of court, punishable by more substantial jail time than a mere break of peace. King decided he would violate the injunction.

On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King led a protest march toward downtown Birmingham. On the fifth block, King and about 60 others, including a white clergyman who joined the protest, were arrested.

As King languished in his jail cell, he produced one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of American thought. A number of local white clergymen, themselves friendly to King’s long-term objectives, disagreed with his short-term tactics. They published a public statement calling the King-led demonstrations “unwise and untimely,” and they opposed King’s civil disobedience.

King’s reply was the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Lacking writing paper, he scribbled in the margins of a newspaper page. King’s handwritten words wrapped around the pest control ads and garden club news. Yet those margins held a powerful condemnation of inaction in the face of injustice, and they displayed an extraordinary faith that in American the cause of freedom necessarily would prevail.

King answered the white pastors’ charges with timeless, universal truth. Accused of being an outsider provoking tension in Birmingham, King replied that, in the fact of oppression, there were no outsiders. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” As for the tension: “There is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.” For those who do not themselves suffer from the disease of segregation, King added, no direct action ever seems well-timed. No man, he continued, can “set the timetable for another man’s freedom.”

Acknowledging that he and his followers had indeed violated the county court injunction, King cited Saint Augustine’s distinction between just and unjust laws. He asserted that one who breaks an unjust law in order to arouse the consciousness of his community “is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law,” provided he acts, “openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.”

From that cell, King believed that in the United States, freedom would ultimately prevail. “I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle…We will reach the goal of freedom…because the goal of America is freedom…Our destiny is tied up with American’s destiny…the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands…One day, the South will recognize its real heroes.”