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By **ADAM FAIRCLOUGH**

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change

THE ALABAMA CITIES of Birmingham and Selma have given their names to the most effective campaigns of nonviolent protest in recent history. The Birmingham demonstrations paved the way for the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which swept away segregation in public accommodations. The Selma protests of 1965 engendered the Voting Rights Act, a measure that cut away the political basis of white supremacy by ending the disfranchisement of blacks. Together, this legislation amounted to a "Second Reconstruction" of the South, restoring to black Southerners rights that had been formally granted after the Civil War but stripped away after the Compromise of 1877.

Understanding of this historical breakthrough, however, is far from perfect. It is beyond doubt that the man who led the Birmingham and Selma protests, Martin Luther King, Jr., made a mighty contribution. But more needs to be known about the dynamics of social change in the 1960s and about the political world in which King and his followers operated. King's biography, much of it hagiographic in character, has tended to simplify these dynamics and neglect the wider political context. There has been inadequate appreciation, too, of the hard-headed calculation that entered into King's strategy, the political sophistication of his advisers, and the importance of his organizational base, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).[1] Nevertheless, some historians and political scientists have begun to analyze critically the campaigns of nonviolent direct action undertaken by King and SCLC. Implicitly or explicitly, their work has cast doubt on many commonly held assumptions about the civil rights movement and raised important questions. Why, if most whites disapproved of it so strongly, could nonviolent

[1] The major studies of King are William Robert Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Life, Martyrdom, and Meaning for the World* (New York, 1968); David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1969); Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1969); Jim Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1971); David J. Garrow, *The F.B.I. and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1981); Stephen B. Oates, *Let The Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1982). Miller, King, and Oates are generally uncritical; Lewis and Garrow are critical but objective; Bishop is overtly hostile.

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protest succeed in generating political support for the civil rights movement? Was nonviolent direct action a means of persuasion, or did it depend for its effectiveness upon pressure and coercion? To what extent, if any, did King seek deliberately to provoke violence by whites? How much support did King's tactics command among blacks? Did he create a truly "mass" movement, or were his victories achieved in spite of limited backing? This essay explores the evolution, execution, and political impact of King's methods in an attempt to explain the dynamics of nonviolent direct action.[2]

In the most systematic study of King's techniques to date, political scientist David J. Garrow argued that the evolution of King's strategy fell into two phases. During the first, from his emergence as a leader in 1956 to the Albany protests of 1961-62, King conceived of direct action as a means of persuading Southern whites of the moral injustice of segregation and discrimination. When the Albany campaign failed, however, King abandoned this approach as unrealistic and, according to Garrow, adopted a strategy of "nonviolent coercion." Instead of trying to convince their adversaries of the rightness of their goals, King and SCLC sought to pressure the federal government into curbing white supremacists through legislation. Implemented with great success in Birmingham and Selma, this new strategy mobilized Northern public opinion behind the civil rights movement through dramatic confrontations that publicized segregationist violence. Since it invited violent opposition, this strategy, Garrow believes, "bordered on nonviolent provocation."[3]

Garrow is not alone in detecting a distinct shift from persuasion to coercion in the way King conducted nonviolent direct action, with the coercive elements very much to the fore by the time of the 1963 Birmingham campaign. Elliott M. Zashin earlier had advanced a similar argument in his study, *Civil Disobedience and Democracy* (1972). Their experience in the deep South, Zashin contended, convinced most black activists that nonviolent protest had virtually no effect on white racists: its only value lay in its utility as a pressure tactic. By 1964, few entertained the notion that direct action could change the values of the adversary. King, Zashin believed, came to a similar conclusion and although, for reasons of diplomacy, he downplayed the coercive nature of his tactics, SCLC's leader "clearly . . . recognized the pressure involved in direct action." As he admitted in his celebrated "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," nonviolent protest sought to "create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue."[4]

[2] Studies of King's campaigns, or larger studies which throw light on them, include Paul D. Bolster, "Civil Rights Movements in Twentieth-Century Georgia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1972); Robert W. Hartley, "A Long, Hot Summer: The St. Augustine Racial Disorders of 1964" (M.A. thesis, Stetson University, 1972); Alan F. Westin and Barry Mahoney, *The Trial of Martin Luther King* (New York, 1974); Robert C. Corley, "The Quest for Racial Harmony: Race Relations in Birmingham, Alabama, 1947-63" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1979); David J. Garrow, *Protest At Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, 1978); J. Mills Thornton III, "Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956," *Alabama Review*, July, 1980, pp. 163-235.

[3] Garrow, *Protest At Selma*, pp. 2-4, 220-27.

[4] Elliott M. Zashin, *Civil Disobedience and Democracy* (London, 1972), pp. 160-78; King, "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," reprinted in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), p. 79.

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Before examining this argument, it is necessary to recognize that the historical analysis of King's thought presents a number of problems. First, King never expounded his theory of nonviolence in a systematic way, nor did he record a detailed account of his tactics. In addition, many of his books, articles and speeches were partly or wholly "ghosted," and it is not always easy to determine exactly what King did write. Third, it must be borne in mind that King's writings and speeches were public statements designed to persuade and convince, and many of them were tailored to white audiences. Finally, King did not live in an intellectual vacuum: he had a wide circle of friends, colleagues and advisers with whom he debated tactics and strategy. His thinking was never fixed and rigid. Indeed, it would be astonishing if King's perception of the world remained static in view of the turbulent era in which he lived. Without doubt, he became more hard-headed and politically astute as a result of age and experience. In "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," for example, he expressed profound disappointment that the civil rights movement had failed to attract more support from white Southerners. There is no reason to suppose that this disillusionment was insincere.[5]

It is doubtful, however, that King's strategy underwent a basic shift in emphasis of the kind posited by Zashin and Garrow. There is little evidence that King ever believed that nonviolent protest functioned solely, or even mainly, as a form of moral persuasion. Quite the contrary; in his earliest public writings he equated nonviolence with struggle and resistance organized through a militant mass movement. Philosophically and in practice, he explicitly rejected the notion that oppressed groups could overcome their subjection through ethical appeals and rational argument; they also needed an effective form of pressure. The assertion that King failed to appreciate the necessity for "black power" is simply erroneous. "A mass movement exercising nonviolence," he wrote in 1957, "is an object lesson in power under discipline." Having recently led a successful year-long economic boycott supported by 50,000 black people, he surely knew what he was talking about. A *New York Times* profile in March, 1956 noted that King stressed the Hegelian concept of "struggle as a law of growth," and that he regarded the bus boycott "as just one aspect of a world-wide revolt of oppressed peoples."[6]

The intentions of the people who created SCLC underline this point. Bayard Rustin, Stanley Levison and Ella Baker were seasoned political activists who moved in the circles of the New York Left. Steeped in Marxist and socialist ideas, they regarded nonviolent direct action in political, not moral, terms. "The basic conception of SCLC," said Baker, "was that it would capitalize on what was developed in Montgomery in terms of mass action."[7] In Levison's words, the subject was "to reproduce that pattern of mass action,

[5] Ibid., pp. 84-93. King was especially critical of white clergymen and self-styled "moderates." It is worth noting, however, that he had expressed similar criticisms as far back as 1957, in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom* (London, 1958), pp. 183-201.

[6] Ibid., pp. 96, 220-27; *The New York Times*, March 21, 1956. Perhaps the most potent intellectual influence on King was that of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who time and again stressed that oppressed groups would get nowhere if they eschewed power and pressure and relied solely on moral persuasion. See *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (London, 1942), pp. 242-52.

[7] Robert Terrell, "Discarding the Dream," *Evergreen Review*, May, 1970, p. 72.

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underscore mass, in other cities and communities."[8] It is unlikely that King viewed SCLC in any other way.

To emphasize King's political realism is not to deny his underlying idealism. For him, nonviolence was an ethical imperative, and his commitment to it was absolute and consistent. Moreover, he did sometimes imply that nonviolent protest worked partly through persuasion, by "awakening a sense of moral shame in the opponent." Nonviolent resisters, he explained, touched the hearts and consciences of their adversaries, converting oppressors into friends.[9] But the significance of such statements should not be exaggerated. He admitted that "when the underprivileged demand freedom, the privileged first react with bitterness and resistance;" nonviolence could not change the "heart" of the oppressor until the social structure that perpetuated injustice and false ideology had been destroyed.[10] His verbal characterizations of nonviolence must also be read in context. In sermons, for example, he frequently likened nonviolence to a kind of supranatural power — a "Soul Force" that could defeat physical force.[11] Of course, such descriptions were not meant to be taken literally: King was simplifying complex ideas and communicating them in a way that black Southerners — poorly educated, politically inexperienced, but imbued with a deep religious sensibility — could grasp easily. King's belief that some adversaries might still be touched by the suffering and goodwill of nonviolent resisters was genuine, althouth in Bayard Rustin's opinion it "was often very confusing — and frustrating — to his followers."[12] But this belief was marginal to his strategy of protest. When King spoke of "converting" oppressors, he was thinking of a long-term historical process rather than an immediate personal response.

There was, therefore, an underlying continuity in King's conception of nonviolent direct action. It envisaged a mass movement opposed to white supremacy and which operated primarily through direct pressure. It assumed that racism was a Southern anachronism and that a growing majority of whites sympathized with the goal of integration and equality. It regarded the federal government as a potential ally, and it believed that the nonviolent protesters attracted support if their opponents responded with violence. The notion of a pre-1963 "persuasive" strategy aimed at winning over Southern whites and a post-1963 "coercive" strategy designed to provoke federal intervention is misleading. King consistently followed the two-pronged strategy of exerting pressure on Southern whites and seeking to involve the federal government.

Federal involvement comprised a crucial element in SCLC's strategy as early as 1961, when King called upon President Kennedy to issue a "Second

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[8] Stanley Levison, interview by John Mosby, February 14, 1970, p. 17, Ralph H. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Springarn Library, Howard University. Collection hereafter cited as HU.

[9] King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 96.

[10] Ibid., pp. 208-09.

[11] See, for example, King's last speech, "I've Been To the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968," reprinted in Flip Schulke, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Documentary* (New York, 1976). A recording is available from SCLC, but this edited version omits key portions of the speech.

[12] Westin and Mahoney, op. cit., p. 62.

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Emancipation Proclamation" — an Executive Order banning segregation and discrimination.[13] King was not alone, of course, in appreciating the importance of federal action: with the election of a Democratic President whose platform included a strong civil-rights plank, black leaders sensed a golden opportunity to mobilize federal support for their goals. They knew that political considerations made Kennedy reluctant to meddle in the South's "local" affairs. But the daring Freedom Rides of May-August 1961 demonstrated that nonviolent protest could spur the government to action, even against its will, by creating a crisis of law and order to which it had to respond.

SCLC's protests in Albany, Georgia, represented King's first major effort to implement the two-pronged strategy outlined above. On the one hand he exerted pressure on local whites, through demonstrations, sit-ins and economic boycotts, to negotiate over the demands of blacks. On the other hand, by creating a serious local crisis and generating public concern, he tried to induce the federal government to intervene in some way. That he failed on both counts does not mean that the strategy was unsound or that it differed in essentials from the one successfully pursued in Birmingham. King failed in Albany for tactical reasons, notably inadequate planning and poor choice of target, rather than over-reliance on "nonviolent persuasion."[14] The significance of Birmingham is not that King finally discovered the necessity for pressure, but that he at last discovered how to make that pressure effective.

If the strategy was clear, the tactics had to be developed and refined through trial and error and the experience of others. From the founding of SCLC in 1957 to the Birmingham campaign of 1963, King was speculating, experimenting and learning, attempting to adapt a theory both to political realities and to the practical considerations that constrained black Southerners.

King learned two vital tactical lessons during these years. The first was that he would have to make do with limited numbers. SCLC's architects had anticipated that the Montgomery bus boycott would spark a wave of similar protests throughout the South. For a variety of reasons, however, this did not happen.[15] Many blacks were skeptical of boycotts. More radical tactics like sit-ins and demonstrations evoked still deeper misgivings: they set back orderly progress; they alienated white moderates and provoked a "backlash;" they were wasteful and ineffective.[16] Jail often spelt economic disaster, and individuals thought twice about volunteering for arrest if their families might

[13] *The New York Times,* June 6, 1961; "An Appeal to the Honorable John F. Kennedy . . . for an Executive Order Prohibiting Segregation in the United States," May 17, 1962, SCLC Papers, Box 27, folder 5, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, Atlanta. Collection hereafter cited as SCLC.

[14] The importance that King attached to pressure is clear from his stated intention to "turn Albany upside down" through nonviolent protest. The demonstrations had little impact, but the boycott of downtown stores badly hurt the city's white merchants, as their letters to Chief Pritchett testified. (A file of these letters can be found in the City of Albany archives.) Note also the comment by reporter Joseph H. Baird in the *Christian Science Monitor* of August 7, 1962, that "some Negro leaders in both Albany and Atlanta [believe] that if the demonstrations are carried far enough the federal government will intervene on behalf of the protesters." King, we know, appealed directly to Robert Kennedy for some such intervention.

[15] Levison, op. cit., pp. 13-4; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest," in *Along the Color Line* (Urbana, 1976), pp. 368-70. Only Tallahassee, Florida, experienced a sustained bus boycott comparable to the one in Montgomery. Led by the Reverend C. K. Steele, it petered out inconclusively during 1957.

[16] See, for example, the criticisms against King by the black newspaper *Birmingham World* during the protests of 1963. The strength of opposition of blacks to King's methods is frequently underestimated.

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suffer as a consequence. True, the sit-in movement of 1960 showed that students and young people, free from the economic burdens and family responsibilities that constrained their elders, would willingly act as "foot soldiers" in direct action campaigns.[17] The sit-ins also demonstrated how direct action itself tended to promote unity and support among blacks, rendering the conservatism of older leaders less troublesome. Even so, the number of "foot soldiers" was limited; the concept, much in vogue in 1960-64, of a "nonviolent army" that would steamroll the opposition through sheer weight of numbers turned out to be unrealistic.[18] Albany taught King that no more than 5 percent of a given black population could be persuaded to volunteer for jail. He learned to frame his tactics accordingly.[19]

The second tactical lesson was that, to quote Bayard Rustin, "protest becomes an effective tactic to the degree that it elicits brutality and oppression from the power structure."[20] The government's conduct during the Freedom Rides — intervening in Alabama, where Klan mobs had been permitted to run amok, but adopting a "hands-off" policy towards Mississippi, where the police had kept order and carried out "peaceful" arrests — sent a coded but clear message to Southern segregationists; federal intervention could be avoided if the authorities kept violence in check.[21] Albany's Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett, applied this lesson with intelligence and skill, outmaneuvering the protesters. First, he trained his men to arrest demonstrators courteously and without unnecessary force. "For a period of four to five months," he reported to the city commission, "members of the Albany Police Department was *[sic]* indoctrinated to this plan of nonviolence. . . . At each roll call [they] were lectured and shown films on how to conduct themselves." Second, anticipating a "jail-in," Pritchett secured ample prison space in the surrounding counties. Finally, to protect the City's legal flank he charged demonstrators with such offences as breach of the peace and unlawful assembly rather than with violation of the segregation laws.[22] His plan worked to perfection: blacks went to jail by the thousands — King himself went three times — but the City adamantly refused to negotiate and the federal government did virtually nothing.

However much King and SCLC deplored Pritchett's self-serving definition of "nonviolence," they had to accept that victory had eluded them. Clearly, SCLC needed to be much more careful in its choice of target. In Birmingham,

[17] C. K. Steele, interview by Jackson L. Ice, January 26, 1978, p. 26, Special Collections, Strozier Library, Florida State University; James Orange, "With the People," *Southern Exposure*, Spring, 1981, pp. 110-12.

[18] Vincent Harding, "So Much History, So Much Future: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Second Coming of America," in M. V. Namorato, ed., *Have We Overcome? Race Relations Since Brown* (Jackson, 1979), pp. 60-1.

[19] King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), pp. 44-5. We can infer these tactical lessons from King's conduct of the Birmingham and Selma campaigns. They included the need to escalate nonviolent protests gradually, with an attempt to "fill the jails" coming at the climax rather than the start of the campaign, and the importance of recruiting students, children, and outside volunteers to offset the paucity of adult demonstrators.

[20] Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (New York, 1976), p. 24.

[21] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (London, 1978), p. 299. Robert Kennedy secured a promise from Senator James Eastland of Mississippi that the demonstrators would not be beaten up when they arrived in Jackson.

[22] Laurie Pritchett, "Summary Report," n.d., City of Albany records; Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Restored: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York, 1978), pp. 398-99.

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King elected to confront an adversary with a clear record of brutality, gambling on a violent response which, publicized by a violence-fixated press, would galvanize public opinion and jolt the federal government into action.[23] In 1951 the reporter Carl Rowan had described Birmingham as "the world's most race-conscious city . . . a city of gross tensions, a city where the color line is drawn in every conceivable place [and where] Eugene "Bull" Connor, white-supremacist police commissioner, sees that no man, white or black, crosses the line."[24] Connor was still police commissioner in 1963, and SCLC calculated that this man, notorious for his Klan connections and violence toward blacks, would react to nonviolent protests in a manner very different from Pritchett's. It disclaimed any intent to "provoke" violence. Nevertheless, as local black leader Fred Shuttlesworth put it, "the idea of facing 'Bull' Connor was the thing."[25] Acting as predicted by SCLC, Connor's response to the protests of early May — the mass arrest of children, the use of fire-hoses and police-dogs — was publicized the world over.

But did the protests really achieve anything? The desegregation agreement which King won with the help of federal mediators has often been denigrated. One of the most widely read texts on black history describes it as "token concessions that were later not carried out."[26] At the time, Southern whites argued that orderly change was already on the way; the protests merely hindered that process. It is surely no coincidence, however, that the first small steps in the direction of desegregation occurred precisely when King's campaign climaxed. Few blacks believed that the city's businessmen would have accepted desegregation but for the double pressure of the demonstrations and the economic boycott of downtown stores. Conservative blacks like A. G. Gaston, who had initially opposed direct action, changed their minds when thay saw that the white merchants were bending: "The demonstrations gave us a wedge we never had before to use at the bargaining table."[27] Narrow as it was, the agreement of May 10, 1963, represented the city's first substantive break with its white supremacist past. In the most thorough available study of the negotiations, historian Robert Corley concluded that "the end of segregation was dramatically hastened because King and his demonstrators threatened chaos in a city whose leaders were now desperate for order."[28]

What of its impact on federal policy: did Birmingham produce the Civil Rights Act, as King and Shuttlesworth liked to claim? Garrow thinks not, pointing to the gap between SCLC's protests and the introduction of the Bill, as well as the long delay in its becoming law. He suggests that the lack of a clear goal in Birmingham, plus the black rioting of early May, might explain

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[23] The importance of violence and disorder in journalists' selection of stories is analyzed in Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York, 1979). King's failure to acknowledge publicly the importance of press coverage to his strategy, Garrow suggests, stemmed from his desire to avoid charges that he was "manipulating" the media. See *Protest At Selma*, pp. 226.

[24] Carl T. Rowan, *South Of Freedom* (New York, 1952), p. 156. Connor's official position was Commissioner of Public Safety; it included control of the fire service.

[25] Raines, op. cit., p. 167.

[26] August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York, 1970), p. 268.

[27] Washington *Post*, May 12, 1963. Gaston, Birmingham's wealthiest black citizen, helped to negotiate the pact.

[28] Corley, op. cit., p. 288.

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why there was "no widespread national outcry, no vocal reaction by the nation's clergy, and no immediate move by the administration to propose salutary legislation." Birmingham, he concludes, was far less successful than SCLC's later campaign in Selma.[29]

Comparisons between Birmingham and Selma, however, must be treated with caution. It is true, as Garrow notes, that Birmingham produced a relatively muted response from Congress; Selma prompted nearly two hundred sympathetic speeches, Birmingham a mere seventeen.[30] But a simple statistical comparison is misleading for the political context in 1963 was very different from that of 1965. Congressmen were far more wary about speaking out on civil rights in 1963. Most regarded it as a sure "vote-loser," and Northern Democrats were anxious to avoid a damaging intra-party dispute that would redound to the benefit of the Republican party. But in 1965, with the Republicans routed in the elections of the previous year, Northern Democrats felt politically less inhibited. In addition, by 1965 the nation had become more accustomed to the idea that the government should combat racial discrimination; far fewer people still maintained that the South's racial problems could be solved through local, voluntary action. Finally, by 1965 the civil rights movement enjoyed greater legitimacy and respectability. To compare the Congressional response to Birmingham with the reaction to Selma two years later is to compare like with unlike.[31]

The impact of Birmingham should not be judged by its effect on Congress: the initiative for the Civil Rights Bill came from the Executive, not the Legislative branch. And by all accounts, SCLC's protests were pivotal in persuading the Kennedy administration to abandon its executive-action strategy in favor of legislation. Robert Kennedy was the driving force behind the Bill. For two years he had tried to deal with each racial crisis on an ad hoc basis. However, Birmingham convinced him that crises would recur, with increasing frequency and magnitude, unless the government adopted a more radical approach. According to Edwin Guthman, who served under Attorney General Kennedy, the violence in Birmingham "convinced the President and Bob that stronger federal civil rights laws were needed."[32]

Did the rioting in Birmingham detract from the effectiveness of SCLC's campaign? SCLC did everything possible to minimize the likelihood of counter-violence by blacks. But King and his advisers realized that the Kennedy administration was not simply responding to the moral outrage evoked by Connor's tactics; it was far more perturbed by the threat of chaos and

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[29] Garrow, *Protest At Selma,* pp. 135-49.
[30] Ibid., p. 145.
[31] August Meier, "On the Role of Martin Luther King," reprinted as "The Conservative Militant," in C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile* (New York, 1970), p. 150.
[32] Edwin Guthman, *We Band of Brothers: A Memoir of Robert Kennedy* (New York, 1971), p. 213. According to Guthman, Robert Kennedy began drafting the Bill on May 17, just a week after the Birmingham desegregation pact. Brauer (see n. 34) notes that President Kennedy mentioned the possibility of legislation as early as May 7. It seems clear that King, accepting Kennedy's argument that Congress would be unlikely to pass civil rights legislation before the 1964 election, hoped for a political response from the President rather than the Congress. Still thinking in terms of an Executive Order, or "Second Emancipation Proclamation," he was surprised but pleased by Kennedy's decision to press for legislation.

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bloodshed. Birmingham raised the specter of retaliation by blacks and the prospect of a violent revolt by them, leading to uncontrollable racial warfare, began to haunt John and Robert Kennedy. Much as he deplored violence by his followers, King consciously exploited this anxiety for the sake of furthering his goals. In "Letter From Birmingham City Jail" he buttressed his appeal for support by whites by warning that without major concessions "millions of Negroes will . . . seek solace in black-nationalist ideologies — a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare." Thus did he redefine nonviolence as an alternative to, or defense against, violence by blacks.[33] This argument reached its target: the Civil Rights Bill was in large measure designed to get blacks off the streets, to obviate the threat of violence, and to strengthen the influence of "responsible" black leaders.[34]

In Birmingham, King broke the political logjam and delivered a hammer-blow against white supremacy. Mass movements did not come made-to-order, however; their success hinged upon sound planning, intelligent leadership, and a fortuitious situation. King had the advantage in Birmingham of a strong local base created by Fred Shuttlesworth, meticulous planning by Wyatt Walker, and a civic elite that was amenable to change. His next campaign, in St. Augustine, Florida (March-July 1964), went awry because the local movement was weak, the planning poor, and opposition by whites intransigent. Largely ineffective, the St. Augustine protests also suffered from lack of clarity in goals; because of this confusion, SCLC's tactics tended to cancel out each other.[35] It is easy to see why King targeted St. Augustine. Heavily dependent on the tourist industry, the city's economy could be seriously damaged by demonstrations. Second, SCLC's chances of engineering a dramatic confrontation were excellent: Northern Florida was Ku Klux Klan country. A branch had been organized in the St. Augustine area in the summer of 1936, and it had close ties with the city and county police.[36] From King's point of view, the Klan presence made St. Augustine doubly attractive. Demonstrations would flush the Klan into the open, thus compelling the state authorities or, failing these, the federal government to suppress it. The nature of SCLS's strategy was evident from its use of the night march. Adopted at the instance of Hosea Williams, who had pioneered this tactic in Savannah, the night march invited attack. The resulting Klan violence showed the police in their true colors, exposing the inadequacy of local law enforcement.[37]

By publicizing the Klan menace King did succeed, with help from U.S. District Judge Bryan Simpson, in making Governor Farris Bryant crack down

[33] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 87; Harding, op. cit., pp. 56-7.

[34] Schlesinger, op. cit., p. 348; Theodore C. Sorenson, *Kennedy* (London, 1965), pp. 547-49; Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), pp. 241-50. The press usually portrayed demonstrations, no matter how peaceful and orderly, as a threat to social order (often placing them in the category of "racial violence"). See Gans, op. cit., p. 53; Pat Watters, *Down To Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1971), pp. 78-110. Birmingham also had a tremendous impact upon the civil rights movement as a whole, prompting a surge of direct action of unprecedented scale.

[35] SCLC's expansion after the Birmingham campaign, plus the departure of Wyatt Walker from the staff in early 1964, led to internal confusion which showed up in the poor organization and planning of the St. Augustine protests.

[36] Hartley, op. cit., pp. 54-8, 92-3.

[37] C. T. Vivian, interview by Noel S. Browne, pp. 45-8, HU.

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on white troublemakers. The strategy of forcing the Klan out of the woodwork, however, hampered the achievement of desegregation, SCLC's publicly stated goal. Moreover, in light of the imminent passage of the Civil Rights Bill, SCLC's demonstrations against segregated motels and restaurants seemed pointless. King reasoned that when white accepted desegregation under legal compulsion they could avoid making any admission that blacks were not treated fairly. "This is morally wrong," he insisted. "We want them to admit that segregation is evil and take it upon themselves to rid this city of it."[38] Yet it made little difference in practice if they abandoned segregation under the pressure of direct action rather than the compulsion of the law, and in any event, the Civil Rights Act, backed up by legal action from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, desegregated St. Augustine's public accommodations.

In the Selma campaign (January-April 1965), everything went right. The local movement, built up by The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was solidly entrenched. The strategy of the protests had been carefully thought out by James Bevel. SCLC's preparatory staff work was thorough. Above all, the campaign had a single clear, attainable goal — federal voting rights legislation — to which both the target and the tactics were directly relevant. With justice, Selma has been singled out as the most effective application of nonviolent direct action in the history of the civil rights movement.

The notes which he penned in Selma jail give a fascinating insight into King's tactics. In detailed written instructions to Andrew Young, SCLC's executive director, King orchestrated the protests from his cell with masterly finesse. Perhaps the most telling lines were those chiding Young for cancelling a demonstration in response to a favorable court decision. "Please don't be too soft," he wrote his lieutenant. "We have the offensive. It was a mistake not to march today. In a crisis we must have a sense of drama. . . . We may accept the restraining order as a partial victory, but we can't stop."[39] Not until SCLC triggered the violent confrontation of March 7 — "Bloody Sunday" — did King feel his goal securely within reach.

The efficacy of King's tactics at Selma flowed from the fact that, to quote Zashin, "people were shocked by the segregationists' violence, not because the self-suffering of the demonstrators was saliently impressive." Garrow came to the same conclusion, adding that the non-controversial nature of SCLC's goal, the right to vote, and the complete absence of violence by blacks both helped to make the campaign a success.[40]

The fact that SCLC designed its tactics to elicit violence might appear callous and irresponsible. Yet the assertion that SCLC deliberately "provoked" violence by whites has to be qualified. If their nonviolent efforts to secure basic Constitutional rights met with violence from racist whites,

[38] Paul Good, *The Trouble I've Seen: White Journalist/Black Movement* (Washington, D.C., 1975), p. 100.
[39] King to Andrew Young, handwritten notes from Selma jail, February 2-4, 1965, King Papers, King Center, Atlanta.
[40] Zashin, op. cit., p. 181; Garrow, pp. 154-9.

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King argued, then law, logic and morality required society to punish the perpetrators of violence, not condemn its victims. It might seem paradoxical that King invited racist violence but denied in any sense provoking it. But he could also argue that violence was intrinsic to white supremacy and that nonviolent protesters merely brought that violence to the public's attention. In some notes he prepared for a press conference, he anticipated the question "Does your movement depend on violence?" by writing, "When you give witness to an evil you do not cause that evil but you oppose it so it can be cured." The violence of March 7, he added, "brought into every home the terror and brutality that Negroes face every day."[41]

Nevertheless, SCLC's tactics exposed King to the charge that he manipulated local blacks, offering his followers as targets for the aggression of whites. Although undeniably manipulative, nobody, could justifiably accuse SCLC of disguising to its followers the dangers they faced. "There can be no remission of sin without the shedding of blood," wrote King.[42] SCLC's claim to leadership rested on the fact that its staff shared the same risks as the rank-and-file demonstrators. Thus King came under the sharpest criticism when he seemed to be avoiding the perils that he asked his followers to brave.[43]

By staging its protests in carefully contrived, highly publicized situations, SCLC tried to evoke violence by whites while keeping casualties to a minimum. The news media played a crucial, if unwitting, role in this strategy. "The presence of reporters," wrote Paul Good, "not only publicized their cause but also acted as a deterrent in places where officials feared bad publicity."[44] Television crews and photographers had an especially inhibiting effect; as Bayard Rustin put it, "Businessmen and chambers of commerce across the South dreaded the cameras."[45] Even in Birmingham, and to some extent in Selma as well, extensive press coverage caused law enforcement officials to proceed with caution. As another of King's advisers, Stanley Levison, pointed out, "the fact that the demonstrations focused public attention from all over the country . . . restrained even the most vicious elements from moving out too freely."[46] When the police did resort to violence, they usually stopped short of lethal force; in all of SCLC's demonstrations in the South, only two deaths resulted from police attacks.[47] SCLC realized morever, that the news value of racist violence depended as much on the ability of the press to report it as on the gravity of the violence itself. Snarling German Shepherds, gushing fire-hoses, and club-wielding state troopers could have a greater impact on the public consciousness than murders and bombings if reporters and film

[41] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 85; handwritten notes, n.d. [March 1965], King Papers.
[42] Ibid. The "socio-drama" is described briefly in *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 62-3.
[43] For example, when he failed to travel on a "Freedom Ride" in 1961, and when he absented himself from the attempted march from Selma to Montgomery on March 7, 1965 ("Bloody Sunday").
[44] Good, op. cit., p. 53.
[45] Rustin, op. cit., p. 45.
[46] Levison, op. cit., p. 19.
[47] The victims were Jimmie Lee Jackson, shot while state troopers broke up a night march in Marion, Alabama, during the Selma campaign; and Larry Payne, shot as police dispersed a march led by King in Memphis, Tennessee, on March 28, 1968.

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crews were present at the scene.[48] Nonviolent protest, wrote King, "dramatized the essential meaning of the conflict and in magnified strokes made clear who was the evildoer and who was the undeserving victim."[49] SCLC tried to evoke dramatic violence rather than deadly violence, and King, as August Meier pointed out in 1965, constantly retreated "from situations that might result in the deaths of his followers."[50]

Despite his enormous popularity and prestige, King learned never to take support of blacks for granted. Leadership and tactics, not numbers, were the key ingredients in King's successes. In the teeming cities of the North, one-twentieth of the black population amounted to a small army. The potential for nonviolent direct action seemed immense. If the team that had organized Selma were turned loose on Chicago, Andrew Young speculated, SCLC would have numbers enough — perhaps 100,000 — to bring the city to a standstill. The sheer power of numbers in the North was "awesome," he thought. "I tremble to think what might happen if it is not organized and disciplined in the interests of positive social change."[51] Even as Young spoke, a devastating riot was unfolding in Los Angeles, which, after five days of violence, left thirty-one blacks and three whites dead. On the heels of the Watts riot King, previously so cautious about leaving the South, insisted that SCLC move North and move fast; "The present mood dictates that we cannot wait."[52] Thus it was with a mixture of self-confidence and pessimistic urgency that SCLC embarked on its first Northern campaign.

The anticipated numbers, however, failed to materialize. Chicago had a black population of a million, but it stayed on the sidelines. Barely 50,000 people attended the biggest mass rally: King's demonstrations attracted, at most, twenty-five hundred, at least half of whom were white. King, it has been argued, was out of tune with the mood, culture, and problems of the Northern ghetto. The product of a cocooned middle-class environment, he was not attuned to the cynicism and defeatism that so often prevailed among the black urban poor. His bourgeois emphasis on thrift and self-help obscured him to the realities of their plight; his goal of integration (expressed in Chicago by the demand for "open housing") was marginal, at best, to their immediate concerns.[53] There is a scintilla of truth in this argument. Yet there were many sound reasons for attacking housing segregation, the most visible and far-reaching expression of white racism. Exposure to the Chicago slums, moreover, soon brought home to King the poverty and degradation of the

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[48] It is noteworthy that the Marion attack, which caused Jackson's death, received far less publicity, and had considerably less impact, than the attack in Selma on March 7. The explanation is that the latter was captured on film.

[49] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 39-40.

[50] Meier, op. cit., p. 146; Zashin, op. cit., p. 181.

[51] Andrew Young, "An Experiment in Power," speech to SCLC convention, August 11, 1965, pp. 8-9, SCLC, 28,14.

[52] Minutes of executive staff committee meeting, August 26-28, 1965, pp. 3-6, SCLC, 46,8.

[53] See, for example, Terrell, op. cit., pp. 37-38. This argument pervades John A. Williams, *The King God Didn't Save* (New York, 1970).

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urban ghetto, rapidly disabusing him of his more simplistic assumptions about the efficacy of "bootstrap" economics.[54]

The fact remained, nevertheless, that only a tiny minority acted on King's message. By 1966, in fact, King was becoming increasingly isolated as an advocate of nonviolent direct action. The concept of independent action by blacks in opposition to the white majority — a concept popularized by SNCC's slogan, "Black Power" — was fast gaining ground among intellectuals and activists. But the opposite strategy of seeking political change in coalition with whites was also winning converts. Articulated most persuasively by Bayard Rustin, the coalition strategy envisaged little role for nonviolent direct action on the grounds that economic problems simply were not susceptible to marches and demonstrations. Indeed, Rustin argued that in the post-Watts era, with rioting and repression feeding off each other, direct action had become counter-productive, alienating whites and "breeding despair and impotence" among blacks. Reflecting on SCLC's decline from the perspective of the mid-1970s, Rustin concluded that King persisted in the tactics of protest long after their usefulness had been exhausted.[55]

The disturbed political climate of the late 1960s made doubtful the success of any strategy of blacks. King assessed "Black Power" as a confused, impractical doctrine, and he deplored its connotations of violence and separatism.[56] Yet Rustin's coalitionism struck him as only slightly less unrealistic. In practice, it boiled down to giving blanket support to the Johnson administration — a line rendered both morally repugnant and politically futile by Johnson's growing obsession with the war in Vietnam. The defeat of the 1966 Civil Rights Bill and the Republican gains in the November elections signalled the disintegration of the informal, bi-partisan "coalition of conscience" which had sustained the civil rights movement in 1963-65. King accurately sensed that it would be impossible — and, in light of the conservatism and hawkishness of most trade unions, undesirable — to resurrect it. Yet he could offer no alternative strategy with any conviction. Indeed, political trends plus his own experiences in Chicago persuaded him that he had badly underestimated the force of white racism. Blacks were not confronting a regional minority but a national majority. It was a shattering conclusion and it drove him to despair.[57]

During the last two years of his life, King was torn between his old faith in the capacity of liberal democracy for enlightened reform, and a Marxian view

[54] King's belief in the virtues of thrift and self-improvement was deep and genuine. It stemmed in large part from the enormous admiration he felt for his father, who, he believed, had achieved middle-class status through individual effort. As he wrote in the revealing graduate essay, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," his father had managed to support and educate his children because he "knows the art of saving and budgeting" and "has always had sense enough not to live beyond his means." In describing his childhood environment, King contradicted the unflattering white stereotype of the black ghetto: "I insist that this was a wholesome community. . . . Crime was at a minimum . . . and most of our neighbors were deeply religious." Many of King's public statements (and those of his SCLC colleagues) expressed pride in these middle-class virtues, as well as distaste for the lifestyles of lower-class, non-churchgoing blacks. As late as 1964, King still advocated thrift and self-help as the primary need, after desegregation, of the black masses. After Chicago, however, he went out of his way to refute the notion that self-help could replace the need for massive government assistance to the poor.

[55] Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics," *Commentary*, February 1965, pp. 25-31; *Strategies for Freedom*, pp. 41-2.

[56] King's fullest discussion of "Black Power" appears in *Where Do We Go From Here?* (New York, 1967), pp. 24-64.

[57] See, for example, ibid., pp. 69-88; "Frogmore speech," November 14, 1966, pp. 2-6, SCLC, 28, 26; "Speech to voter registration rally, Louisville," August 2, 1967, pp. 11-12, King Papers; Coretta King, op. cit., p. 298.

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of the state as an engine of capitalist exploitation. That he became more radical is certain; the need for a thoroughgoing redistribution of wealth and power was a consistent theme of his public and private statements.[58] Occasionally, in his darkest moments, he feared that America was drifting irreversibly toward facsism. Yet King could never forget that the federal government had been his ally. He wanted to believe the current reactionary trend was a passing phase, the irrational spin-off of rioting and war. Although shaken by Chicago and alienated from the President, he convinced himself that public opinion was malleable and the government still susceptible to the right kind of pressure. Nonviolent protest could still work, he insisted to his somewhat skeptical staff. "If it hasn't worked in the North, it just hasn't been tried enough."[59]

King's last project, the "Poor People's Campaign," is sometimes described as revolutionary. To some it recalled the "nonviolent army" idea of the early 1960s.[60] King himself spoke of "class struggle" and threatened massive civil disobedience on a scale that could bring Washington to a grinding halt.[61] Behind the radical rhetoric, however, the strategy and tactics of the campaign closely resembled the pattern of Birmingham and Selma. Although he spoke of creating a new radical coalition, the groups King looked to for support were, by and large, the same that had comprised the "coalition of conscience" in the earlier period. He envisaged a "Selma-like movement" which, if "powerful enough, dramatic enough, and morally appealing enough," would mobilize "the churches, labor, liberals, intellectuals," as well as the new breed of "Black Power" militants and "New Left" white radicals.[62] Far from raising a "nonviolent army," King planned to bring only three thousand demonstrators to Washington — about the number who had gone to jail in Birmingham and Selma. "We aren't going to close down the Pentagon," he told SCLC's board of directors. "Anybody talking about closing down the Pentagon is just talking foolishness. We can't close down Capitol Hill."[63] The

[58] In a speech to SCLC on August 10, 1966, for example, King cited the sociologist C. Wright Mills and spoke of an irresponsible "power elite" dominated by "the giants of vested interest." On King's increasing radicalism in 1966-68, see Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King,* pp. 213-15; and this writer's "Was Martin Luther King A Marxist?," *History Workshop Journal,* Spring, 1983, pp. 117-25.

[59] King, "Why We Must Go to Washington," speech to SCLC staff, January 15, 1968, pp. 19-20, King Papers. I wish to thank Dr. John Harper for his help in formulating this argument.

[60] Garrow, *loc. cit.;* Harding, op. cit., pp. 69-72; Jack H. O'Dell, "Climbin' Jacob's Ladder," *Freedomways,* Winter, 1969, pp. 9-10. The term *revolutionary* was so overused in the 1960s that its meaning is still devalued. King believed in peaceful reform, not revolution.

[61] King, *Where Do We Go From Here?,* p. 128; *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York, 1968), p. 15.

[62] King, "Showdown for Nonviolence," *Look,* April 16, 1968, pp. 23-5.

[63] King, "Speech to Ministers Leadership Training Program," February 23, 1968, pp. 11-12. On the tactics of the campaign, see also King, *Trumpet of Conscience,* pp. 60-1; James McGraw, "An Interview with Andrew J. Young," *Christianity and Crisis,* January 22, 1968, pp. 324-30; Jose Yglesias, "Dr. King's March On Washington, Part II," *The New York Times Magazine,* March 31, 1968, reprinted in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Protest in the Sixties* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 267-76. King's plan called for the 3,000 volunteers to build a shantytown near the Capitol and to seek help — "sitting-in," if necessary — from hospitals, government agencies and so on.

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aim was not to "coerce" the federal government, but to generate a sympathetic response from the people of the nation. King's demands were moderate, he believed, and he wanted to promote consensus, not conflict.[64]

Had he lived, King might well have achieved at least a partial success. The political situation in 1968 was volatile and fluid; the election of Richard Nixon, and the years of "benign neglect," was not a foregone conclusion. Perhaps King would have cancelled or postponed the Poor People's Campaign, reasoning that a Hubert Humphrey or Robert Kennedy presidency would give him more room for maneuver.[65] In terms of influence and accomplishment, King outstripped all other black leaders and would-be leaders.[66] His capacity to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances would surely have been tested to the limit, but a healthy and astute pragmatism had always been part of his outlook. "I am still searching myself," he told his staff. "I don't have all the answers, and I certainly have no claim to omniscience."[67] There was no magic formula for social change; the dynamics of direct action could only be discovered in struggle, in resistance, even in defeat.

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[64] See, for example, King, press conference, December 4, 1967; "See You in Washington," speech to SCLC staff, January 17, 1968, p. 7; "In Search of a Sense of Direction," speech to SCLC board, February 7, 1968, p. 8, all in King Papers; *Trumpet of Conscience*, p. 62; Washington *Afro-American*, February 10, 1968.
[65] Lewis, op. cit., *King*, pp. 384-5.
[66] Opinion polls consistently rated King as the most popular black leader by far in the eyes of other blacks. See, for example, William Brink and Louis Harris, *Black and White: A Study of U.S. Racial Attitudes Today* (New York, 1967), pp. 246-57.
[67] King, "Frogmore speech," p. 1.

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