



Module 1, Unit 2, Lesson Plan 2

The Birmingham Campaign (Grades 6-12)

Learning Targets/Objectives:

- Identify setbacks, challenges, and successes of King’s nonviolent movement in the South.
- Compare and contrast Dr. King’s Albany Movement and Project C in Birmingham, Alabama.
- Discuss the cause and effect of Project C, especially as it relates to the Children’s March and the role of television in influencing public opinion about the freedom struggle.
- Compose a thesis statement using “Statement by Alabama Clergymen” and Dr. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Success Criteria:

- Identify how Dr. King crafted a thesis as a response to the Alabama Clergymen
- Compose a thesis statement that takes a position on King’s successes or failures in the early 1960s

Anchor Text:

- Carpenter, C.C.J. et al. “Statement by Alabama Clergymen.” Retrieved from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/sites/mlk/files/lesson-activities/clergybirmingham1963.pdf>
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Retrieved from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/sites/mlk/files/letterfrombirmingham_wcw_0.pdf

Supplemental Resources:

- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Albany Movement, November 17, 1961. Retrieved from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/albany-movement>
- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Birmingham Campaign, April 3, 1963 to May 10, 1963. Retrieved from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/birmingham-campaign>

Lesson Content Overview:

Birmingham, also known as “Bombingham” during the civil rights era, was called by many Black leaders the “worst big city in the U.S.A.” Black residents of the city called their community “Dynamite

Hill,” as the city had been led by three city commissioners leading up to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s arrival there in 1963 – Eugene “Bull” Connor, J.T. “Jabbo” Wagoner, and Art Haines. There were 18 unsolved bombings in Black neighborhoods from 1957 to 1962. In 1963, Birmingham became a focus for the civil rights movement as the SCLC launched Project “C” (Confrontation). “Our goal in Birmingham was larger than ending segregation in one Southern city,” said SNCC chairman John Lewis. “It was our hope that our efforts in Birmingham would dramatize the fight and determination of African American citizens in the Southern states and that we would force the Kennedy administration to draft and push through Congress a comprehensive Civil Rights Act – outlawing segregation and racial discrimination in public accommodations, employment and education.”

The campaign’s strategy was to put economic pressure on Birmingham merchants. Acting accordingly, organizers scheduled the protests to begin around the Easter season – the second biggest shopping period of the year. However, a mayoral election was to be held in Birmingham on March 5. All of the leading candidates were segregationists; however, candidate “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s Commission on Public Safety, was considered much more militant than the other candidates. Since the civil rights organizers did not want to alienate potential sympathetic or moderate white voters or to be used as a political tool to drive white voters to cast ballots for Connor, they postponed the boycott until two weeks after the election. Project C began on April 3, 1963.

The campaign began with a series of mass meetings and direct actions. King spoke on the philosophy of nonviolence and its methods. At the end of the meetings, he extended an appeal to volunteers to serve in the nonviolent resistance occurring in Birmingham. The SCLC’s actions began with lunch counter sit-ins, marches on City Hall, and a boycott of downtown merchants.

On April 10, the city government obtained a court injunction directing an end to all protests. King and members of the SCLC decided that the time had come to counter the city’s legal maneuvering with action – to test an unjust law. After two days of heavy debate, activists decided to disobey the court order. King declared, “We cannot in all good conscience obey such an injunction which is an unjust, undemocratic and unconstitutional misuse of the legal process.”

On Good Friday, April 13, King, along with Revs. Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth, led several hundred protesters toward Birmingham’s main business district and city hall. “Bull” Connor led the arresting officers, who stood in the middle of the street shouting directions. Dressed in blue jeans and gray shirts, King, along with more than 50 other freedom marchers, was arrested in defiance of the state writ, or injunction, banning all forms of racial demonstration. Authorities kept him in solitary confinement and refused him the right to see a lawyer. While in prison, Black protesters continued the project by leading voter registration drives and sitting in on city lunch counters. More were arrested, including King’s brother, A.D. King. Only the intervention of President John F. Kennedy secured King and Abernathy’s release on April 20 as long as the SCLC paid a \$300 bond. It was while he was in prison that King penned the now famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” on April 16, 1963. King wrote, “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.” Upon his release, King said the protests would continue. “I am sure it will continue as long as we have the people who are aroused and conscious of our problems.”¹

One of the greatest events occurring during the Civil Rights Movement was the Children’s Crusade. SCLC organized hundreds of youth in the Birmingham area to participate in the crusade for equality and justice. On May 2, 700 Black children marched from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church through town.

¹ Martin Luther King quoted in *Oakland Tribune*. “Rev. Martin Luther King Freed From Alabama Jail.” April 21, 1963, 20.

It is important to note that during this time, Blacks in the United States were unprotected citizens as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were not yet in place. Thus, the inclusion of youth was viewed as risky by those attacking the movement, yet it was a brilliant move on the part of the civil rights leaders and staff members who recognized the power of their untapped resources. King writes the following in his memoir:

SCLC staff members James Bevel, Andy Young, Bernard Lee, and Dorothy Cotton began visiting colleges and high schools in the area. They invited students to attend after-school meetings at churches. The word spread fast, and the response from Birmingham 's youngsters exceeded our fondest dreams. By the fifties and by the hundreds, these youngsters attended mass meetings and training sessions. They listened eagerly as we talked of bringing freedom to Birmingham, not in some distant time, but right now. We taught them the philosophy of nonviolence. We challenged them to bring their exuberance, their youthful creativity, into the disciplined dedication to the movement. We found them eager to belong, hungry for participation in a significant social effort. Looking back, it is clear that the introduction of Birmingham 's children into the campaign was one of the wisest moves we made. It brought a new impact to the crusade, and the impetus that we needed to win the struggle.

After police wagons were filled, authorities used school buses to cart the children to jail. When 2500 more young protesters marched the next day, the police turned fire hoses and police dogs on them. "Bull" Connor defended his decision to use force as "more humane than bullets."² Such images captured the international press. The passion of the youth, coupled with the advent of television, which captured young children attacked with fire hoses and dogs by the Birmingham police, gave the movement both a national and international platform.

The world saw pictures of black children knocked down by a force of water so powerful that it tore the bark off nearby trees. Now under international pressure and the growing threat of a riot, Birmingham's officials returned to the bargaining table more willing to deal with the SCLC. "Creative tension" was another method used to cause the oppressor to respond to a situation that he might otherwise ignore or disregard.

On Friday, May 10, an agreement between the Senior Citizens Council and the SCLC leadership was announced. It contained promises to desegregate public accommodations, a committee to ensure nondiscriminatory hiring practices in Birmingham, cooperation in releasing jailed protesters, and public communications between Black and white leaders to prevent further demonstrations. As a result of the Birmingham protest, the SCLC won a desegregation settlement. More importantly, the protest laid the early groundwork for the nation's 1964 Civil Rights Act. After its Birmingham triumph, the SCLC organized other desegregation campaigns in Savannah, Georgia and St. Augustine, Florida, and played a pivotal role in the 1963 March on Washington.

Instructional Sequence:

Opener:

After reading "Statement by Alabama Clergymen" (April 12, 1963), students will respond to the following prompt:

² Eugene "Bull" Connor quoted in *Stockton Evening and Sunday Record*. "Great Civil Rights Strides in Birmingham Since 1963. April 5, 1967. 20.

- Utilizing prior knowledge of the civil rights movement, how would you respond to the “Statement by Alabama Clergymen,” especially the following line: “. . . we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.”

Class Discussion:

The teacher will facilitate discussion about the class opener and then give students a short context lecture about King’s efforts to undo the Jim Crow system between 1961 and 1963. The teacher should discuss the Albany Movement’s failure and the Birmingham campaign’s success. Discussion questions should include:

- What was the Birmingham Campaign and what year did it start? What was the goal of the Birmingham Campaign? What was the strategy of the campaign? To what extent did the campaign accomplish its goals?
- Who was Police Commissioner during the time of the Birmingham Campaign?
- How risky was the strategy of using children to desegregate Birmingham?

Small Group Collaboration:

Working in small groups of three or four, students will read short summaries of King’s [Albany Movement](#) and [Project Confrontation](#), produced by The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. As they read, they should complete a Venn diagram showing the similarities and differences between the two efforts.

Individual Work:

Students will conduct a close reading analysis of an excerpt from King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that evaluates context and subtext.

Class Discussion:

The teacher will discuss student analyses and should emphasize that King’s letter was a response to the “Statement of Alabama Clergymen.” The teacher should suggest that the best thesis statements are written in response to a view held by another individual.

- **SEL Connection:** What sacrifices would you make for a cause you believe in?

Formative Assessment:

- Thesis Development: Have students write their one thesis statement about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s abilities to lead the civil rights movement. Have students respond to the following question:
 - “Did Martin Luther King, Jr. cross a line by allowing children to risk imprisonment during the Birmingham campaign?”

Adaptations for Student Needs

IEP:

- Sizes of student groups range
- Students team up with a peer partner, while others would prefer to work individually.

- There is a variety of small-group work
- Chunking information
- Visual cues and wait time
- Visual supports (maps, images, PowerPoint slides, handouts)
- Assessments will be modified, and students given extra time

ELD

- Modified/simplified reading material
- Content-related lists/handouts of key terms
- Text is supported by visuals and connected to real-life experiences