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THE EMMETT TILL GENERATION:
THE BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S CRUSADE AND THE RENEWED CIVIL
RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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“Emmett’s naked body, its head battered and with a bullet hole through, had been weighted with a cotton gin pulley and thrown in the Tallahatchie River,” sparking nationwide fear for African Americans.¹ The murder of a fourteen-year-old boy named Emmett Till struck fear into the hearts of African Americans around the country, a fear that they had never known. Till was accused of making inappropriate comments to a white woman in Mississippi and was murdered for it. Blacks across the South felt the vulnerability that came with Till’s murder; even a child could be killed in the name of keeping African Americans in their “place.”

After Till’s death, there was a new spark in the Civil Rights Movement, a campaign against inequality between races. Adults often tried to shield their children from the movement, but the children understood the racism and segregation they faced every day and wanted a change. Regardless of what the adults tried to do, children saw something had to be done if a boy around their age could be killed for merely what he said. After Till’s death, children’s involvement in the movement increased despite the concerns of parents. Without these children, the movement would not be the same. The children, influenced by Till’s death and everyday racism, joined the Birmingham, Alabama campaign and saved the dying movement there in 1963. There were “thousands of southern blacks who were young and involved in the civil rights movement...but with a few exceptions, they aren’t famous.”² Often overlooked, these children propelled the Civil Rights Movement around the nation, which ultimately led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Emmett Till’s death inspired a generation of children to spark a fading movement through the use of the media as a weapon.

¹ Marty Richardson, “Charge Two with Lynch Death of 14-Year-Old,” in *Reporting Civil Rights: Part One, American Journalism 1941-1963* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2003), 211.

² Ellen Levine, *Freedom’s Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (New York: Penguin Group, 1993), viii.

Within the Mississippi Delta, more than five thousand lynchings had occurred since 1882, with the majority never being officially reported. It was common for blacks to go missing and never return; when this happened, people assumed the worst.³ In 1955, the murder of Emmett Till shed light on approved killings within Mississippi. Till had traveled to Mississippi from Chicago to spend time with his relatives. Since Till was from Chicago, he did not understand the social conventions of white-black relationships put in place by southern society. When he left Chicago, Till's mother told him to be careful with how he acts because "Chicago was more than five hundred miles and at least a hundred years away from Mississippi."⁴ His mother gave him a lesson in southern etiquette by telling him to move out of the way of white people, always say "sir" and "ma'am," and even bow to a white person if need be.⁵

There are many contradicting stories of what happened to Till next. Till was allegedly showing pictures of his white girlfriend to his cousins outside of a store in Money, when they dared him to talk to the white woman in the store. Either he asked for a date and touched her, said "bye, baby," or he whistled at her as he left the store.⁶ When Till left the store, one of his cousins warned him to get out of Money and Mississippi, but the boys just thought it was funny and returned home.⁷ A few days later, a group of men came to the house early in the morning asking for "the boy that did the talking."⁸ They forcefully took Till from the house, leaving the family too scared to call the police.

³ Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s to the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 2.

⁴ Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 34.

⁵ Juan Williams and Julian Bond, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 41.

⁶ Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 122.

⁷ Hampton, Fayer, and Flynn, *Voices of Freedom*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Till's body was found several days later floating in the Tallahatchie River; "the discovery of the body set off a storm of protest, anger, and sympathy" that sparked the protest movement.⁹ Till's "face was disfigured beyond recognition. His swollen tongue hung out of his mouth...his left eye was missing...A large, gaping bullet hole pierced his temple."¹⁰ The body was so mangled and destroyed that Till's relatives could only identify him by the ring he wore. The two men responsible had beat him, shot him, and tied a cotton gin fan around his neck to be dumped into the river where no one could find him.¹¹ Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, demanded the body be sent back, as is, to Chicago so she could see what they did to him. Her response to seeing his body for the first time was that, "it didn't look like anything that we could dream, imagine in a funny book or any place else."¹² She decided on an open casket funeral to "let the world see what [she had] seen."¹³ She allowed photographs of his corpse to be printed in newspapers and magazines across the nation.¹⁴ Till-Mobley wanted the picture to be seen because she believed that if she had not done anything, it would have been another murder gone unnoticed.¹⁵

One of Till-Mobley's goals, through publicizing Till's pictures, was to instill the passion to fight oppression into generations to come. She saw her son's death as a political urgency, a way to snap all Americans out of their denial of the African American struggle. She believed the nation had been averting their eyes from the atrocities African Americans had been facing for far

⁹ Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 49.

¹⁰ Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 101.

¹¹ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 43-4.

¹² Anderson, *Emmett Till*, 55.

¹³ Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 139.

¹⁴ Anderson, *Emmett Till*, 49.

¹⁵ Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 199.

too long and action needed to be taken.¹⁶ The pictures had a powerful influence on everyone, but Till-Mobley believes they had the most impact on children, specifically children who were Till's age when he died. Anne Moody, a child around Till's age living in Mississippi at the time, was fearful after she heard of Till's death stating, "before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me – the fear of being killed just because I was black."¹⁷ For African American children around the country, Till's death instilled a new fear they had never considered; his death showed "that even a child was not safe from racism, bigotry, and death."¹⁸ It inspired "many black children of his generation to fight the discrimination surrounding them" because his death would sit in their minds forever.¹⁹

Mary King, a child of the movement, admitted her first real confrontation with racial injustice came with Till's murder, which was the same for most of her generation. People, including Muhammad Ali, could not get Till's case out of their mind; they did not stop thinking about Till until they came up with a way to do something about Till's death. Many others imagined that the torture Till endured before death was going to happen to them. Cleveland Sellers, a child at the time of Till's death, tried to put himself into Till's mind when the men killed him. This terrifying event affected him more than anything else in his life.²⁰ Moody, at fifteen, could not understand what would justify Till's killing and struggled with understanding his death. It was then that she started hating people, especially those who did not place any responsibility on the murderers, but instead the victim.²¹ Another affected child, Joyce Ladner, was around the age of Till when he died; the incident left her concerned about the safety of her

¹⁶ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 105.

¹⁷ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Random House, 1978), 132.

¹⁸ Hampton, Fayer, and Flynn, *Voices of Freedom*, 6.

¹⁹ Wilma King, *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 164.

²⁰ Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 96-7.

²¹ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 136.

brother, father, and herself, fearing death from only speaking. Although she was fearful, she saw Till's death as the start to the activism of black children, when they were old enough, within the movement.²²

Most children finally understood the fear and anger of being black once Till died. Reflecting on her life, Ladner never understood why parents were overly protective of their sons until Till's death. This made her feel vulnerable and brought fear and anger about these injustices into her life. Henry Hampton, the producer of the civil rights documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, started his documentary with Till's murder because it was how the Civil Rights Movement started in his opinion. Till's death showed Hampton that his parents could not always protect him, leaving him completely vulnerable to the whims of Southern society.²³ Till's death "ignited the inspiration for many black children of his generation to fight the discrimination surrounding them in the 1960s," giving this generation the name, the "Emmett Till Generation."²⁴

Till's vicious murder accelerated the slow tempo of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and later in the 1960s. Till "has been called a martyr and the catalyst that started the civil rights movement," even encouraging people that were not committed to the movement to action.²⁵ The movement had already started by that point, but Till's murder pushed people like no other civil rights event had before, not even *Brown v. Board of Education*.²⁶ Till's death also strengthened the black community across the nation because they realized that whatever happened to one black person affected them all. Till's death was powerful because it "took racism out of the textbooks...and showed it to the world in its true dimensions."²⁷ Till's death

²² King, *African American Childhoods*, 164.

²³Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Anderson, *Emmett Till*, 355.

²⁶ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 44.

²⁷ Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*, 46.

sparked the inactive movement, but it also enlivened the era of protests and demonstrations to come.²⁸

Till-Mobley's decision to show the whole world her son's body was a standout moment in history that forever shaped the Civil Rights Movement. Not only did it make people afraid and vulnerable to the Jim Crow laws pressuring them into submission, but it also brought real anger to the black community that had not been present for some time. The photo of Till's body changed the movement in the south like no other, mainly through the influence of children.²⁹ Children were now seeing the extent of what racism did to a child, just like them, and they wanted that to change. In a few years, the "Emmett Till Generation" would have the chance to take a stand for their rights through protests and demonstrations.³⁰ People would criticize them, saying they were too young, but they knew what they were fighting for and they would die for it if they had to.

Before any children could involve themselves with the movement, they needed to get passed their parents. Parents overprotected their children so much so that it was impossible to even talk about anything involving the movement. Black children were seen as having a "place" within their families and the greater community, meaning the adults were in charge no matter what. They were meant to remain in this place and be kept there by strict parents who would steer them in the right direction. Essentially, they were meant to be seen not heard and would have to stay away from any subject that was part of the "grown folks' business."³¹ One topic that was not off

²⁸ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 44.

²⁹ Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*, 145.

³⁰ King, *African American Childhoods*, 164.

³¹ Rufus Burrow and Michael G. Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People, and the Movement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), xv.

limits was explaining the laws of segregation and the proper behavior for them as black children.³²

Parents would want to shield their children from the realities of oppression because the parents could not protect the children from them, but parents also wanted to prepare their children for the experience of being African American within their society. This included preparing them for bias and discrimination, hence why parents would caution their children on the ways of segregation at an early age.³³ These parents “employed a wide range of tactics and strategies...to shield their children from the bitter truths of Jim Crow life,” including avoiding certain topics.³⁴ One topic that was off limits to black children was freedom, which was barely talked about or an “adult only” discussion. Everyone in the black community knew they were not free, but no one could talk about their freedom without someone getting angry. Adults were too fearful of Southern society to even discuss the possibility of their freedom. Children became so frustrated that their parents were not doing anything about their freedom that children began to defy their parents and become a part of the movement.³⁵

African American parents and children had suffered through racism and segregation for so long that it was normal for them and hard to oppose. Racism had become a daily reality for African Americans, through the norms and laws of segregation.³⁶ Segregation allowed African Americans to be controlled economically, politically, and personally by the “superior” white

³² William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstand, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 4-5.

³³ Hariette Pipes McAdoo and Sinead N. Younge, “Black Families,” *Handbook of African American Psychology*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 108.

³⁴ Chafe, Gavins, and Korstand, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow*, 270.

³⁵ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 139.

³⁶ Helen A. Neville and Alex L. Pieterse, “Racism, White Supremacy, and Resistance: Contextualizing Black American Experiences,” *Handbook of African American Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 159.

race.³⁷ Evidence of this comes from segregation of schools, water fountains, train stations, movie theaters, hospitals, cemeteries, and more.³⁸ White supremacy was also evident from the threat of physical violence to blacks, like lynchings, rape, and killings of African Americans of all ages.³⁹ This function of segregation in everyday life played an important role in influencing children to become a part of the movement.

Children were influenced by their experiences when it came to how and when they got involved within the movement. Arnetta Streeter, an African American child in Birmingham, had gone to Catholic private school all her life with white nuns and white students. When going into the fourth grade, she convinced her parents to allow her to go to public school, resulting in her attending a black elementary school for the first time. She noticed immediately that the classes were more crowded and less equipped than her private Catholic school.⁴⁰ Audrey Faye Hendricks, another child of the movement, learned about the deep rooted racism within Birmingham from the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), the main civil rights group in Birmingham, meeting at her house.⁴¹ Within these meetings she learned that segregation in Birmingham was the law; the Racial Segregation Ordinances had been adopted in 1944 establishing segregation as a legal way of life in Birmingham. As a result of these ordinances, Birmingham officials' way of treating blacks was "as if they might contaminate white people with an infectious disease."⁴² Another child of the movement, James W. Stewart,

³⁷ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 1.

³⁸ Levine, *Freedom's Children*, 3.

³⁹ King, *African American Childhoods*, 137.

⁴⁰ Cynthia Levinson, *We've Got A Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March* (Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers, 2015), 29-30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

learned in his junior year of high school to “look around [him] and to see some of the things that were incorrect in Birmingham,” at the time, like the Jim Crow laws.⁴³

All these experiences as children shaped the way they viewed their rights and fought against oppression. Mostly, these children were angry and disappointed that their parents had let oppression thrive throughout the South. The children did not understand that parents were scared of fighting oppression because they had responsibilities and children to worry about, but the children were not afraid.⁴⁴ They were ready for the dangerous task of fighting for their freedom; more importantly they were not going to endure what their parents had. Evidence of this comes from Mrs. Parham speaking to a judge about her son’s involvement in the demonstrations saying, “And I know this, Judge – these younger people are not going to take what we took” and they will fight for change.⁴⁵ The children saw racism for what it was, wrong, and were not afraid to fight against it.⁴⁶ They also understood the consequences of fighting racism; they knew they could be hurt or die, but they also understood the importance of what it would mean for future generations.⁴⁷

With children being influenced by everyday segregation, parental denial, and Till’s death, they became involved in the movement. Children were becoming warriors for civil rights and would soon lead “the way in many of the civil rights campaigns, and who energized the movement at strategic moments.”⁴⁸ People would argue that children should not be involved in the movement, but Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would argue “that black children get hurt every single day by the cruel discriminatory practices of racist whites,” so if they get hurt it should be

⁴³ Cynthia Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 26.

⁴⁴ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 119.

⁴⁵ Relman Morin, “Court Reveals Birmingham Story,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 9, 1963. <http://bplonline.cdmhost.com/digital/collection/BPLSB02/id/658> (accessed April 26, 2017).

⁴⁶ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, xviii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xvi.

while fighting for their rights.⁴⁹ At times, children could lead the movement like no adult could and it would not be until a day in Birmingham, Alabama, that anyone would realize how influential children could be within the movement.

Before the movement moved to Birmingham, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other civil rights groups had been in Albany, Georgia, fighting segregation. Their goal in Albany had been to end all forms of racial domination through demonstrations and jailings.⁵⁰ Opposing the civil rights groups in Albany was the Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett. His method for dealing with demonstrations was to quickly arrest people, in large quantities, to avoid violence. With Pritchett's methods of avoiding real conflict, the campaign could not fill the jails or bring the press to Albany to shed light on their struggle. The civil rights leaders ended up with five hundred people in jail with minimal resources to get them out; the campaign was at an impasse.⁵¹ When King came to Albany the media came to Albany because they followed King wherever he went. King went to jail, determined to stay there until the city was desegregated. To avoid any more conflict and keep the press from highlighting the Albany struggle, the white power structure in Albany created a truce. The terms were to return all bond money to the civil rights leaders, release all jailed protesters, postpone their trials indefinitely, desegregate the buses, and establish a biracial committee to work on desegregation. This truce was presented to the civil rights leaders and upon agreeing to the terms, they abandoned the movement in Albany even though the white power structure did not keep the terms of the truce.⁵² Due to the failure of the Albany movement, the press criticized the effectiveness of nonviolent protest. Since Albany was

⁴⁹ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 115.

⁵⁰ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 241.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 246.

“widely regarded as a fiasco” and “King’s biggest and most public defeat,” wherever the movement went next would have to be done right on a large scale.⁵³

The next major campaign would move to Birmingham, Alabama, “the most racially divided and violent city in America.”⁵⁴ In 1956, the state of Alabama had outlawed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was the leading force for civil rights in the state at the time. This action triggered a new civil rights campaign within Birmingham headed by the ACMHR.⁵⁵ Founder of the ACMHR and leader of the civil rights force in Birmingham was Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. He had done everything in his power to advance the black people’s struggle, such as preaching for equal justice, leading demonstrations, and trying to integrate schools with his own daughters.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Shuttlesworth could not win the fight against segregation. He had “been hammering away for seven years with no impact,” leading to his plea to SCLC to have the next major campaign in Birmingham.⁵⁷

By 1960, Birmingham was Alabama’s largest city with 300,000 people, forty percent of them African American.⁵⁸ At the time, Birmingham was the symbol of segregation, with stricter racial policies than most southern cities.⁵⁹ The city shut down most public facilities instead of integrating them. Since World War II, so many race crimes, mainly bombings, had occurred that the city was nicknamed “Bombingham.”⁶⁰ The most severe problem in Birmingham was the city commission, which was made up of three segregationist commissioners set on keeping African

⁵³ David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 432.

⁵⁴ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 3.

⁵⁵ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 68-9.

⁵⁶ Hampton, Fayer, and Flynn, *Voices of Freedom*, 124.

⁵⁷ Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 307.

⁵⁸ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 181.

⁵⁹ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 97.

⁶⁰ Hampton, Fayer, and Flynn, *Voices of Freedom*, 124.

Americans oppressed.⁶¹ After an investigation in the early 1960s, the Birmingham Bar Association had concluded that the city commission had created a dictatorship that needed to be changed immediately. A special election was set up to elect a mayor and city council to replace the city commission.⁶² This set the stage for the new campaign King and SCLC were bringing to Birmingham.

King and SCLC's goal in Birmingham was to fight the three-part system of domination by whites: business and industrial elites, political elites, and the general white population.⁶³ After Albany, the leaders learned the only way nonviolence could succeed was with segregationist violence.⁶⁴ The civil rights leaders chose Birmingham because they knew they could provoke the Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, to violence. SCLC knew that Connor "could be counted on in stupidity and natural viciousness to play into their hands" and portray the role of the villain.⁶⁵ During Shuttlesworth's earlier work, he observed how easy it was for the segregationist forces in Birmingham to respond violently to any demonstrations.⁶⁶ This is the drama they needed to create a successful campaign and keep the movement alive.

In 1962, SCLC looked into Shuttlesworth's request to come to Birmingham and began planning their nonviolent direct action campaign.⁶⁷ It was Wyatt Tee Walker, a board member of SCLC, who came up with their plan, which they called Project C for confrontation.⁶⁸ This plan consisted of massive demonstrations leading to mass arrests. When formulating his plan, Walker's theory was that a strong nonviolent movement would attract the media's attention

⁶¹ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 181.

⁶² McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 284-5.

⁶³ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 257.

⁶⁴ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 120.

⁶⁵ Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 266.

⁶⁶ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and The Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 304.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002, originally published 1964), 38.

⁶⁸ Levinson, *We've Got A Job*, 47.

when it faced the violent segregationist forces in Birmingham. It would then encourage national sympathy for the African American struggle and the everyday problem of segregation.⁶⁹ The goal was to desegregate stores, create job opportunities for blacks, and create a biracial civic task force.⁷⁰

Project C occurred in three phases, starting April 3, 1963. Phase One was an economic boycott involving sit-ins and picketing of downtown businesses. This tactic was used to ease the people into the demonstrations and did not gain much attention after three days of demonstrations. Therefore, the campaign moved onto Phase Two: mass marches on City Hall with volunteer demonstrators.⁷¹ On April 6, Shuttlesworth led a small march to City Hall to pray and all the demonstrators were arrested.⁷² The next day, A.D. King, Dr. King's brother, led a prayer march through the streets, resulting in more arrests.⁷³ By April 10, the campaign lacked volunteers to go to jail and the jails were nowhere near full. Mass meetings were used to try to recruit more demonstrators with Dr. King speaking to the community most nights, but "no matter how long or passionately King exhorted the crowds to volunteer; he could not persuade them to risk their lives."⁷⁴ Another blow came when an Alabama circuit court judge issued an injunction banning 133 leaders from taking part or encouraging picketing, sit-ins, and other demonstrations. This injunction included King, Shuttlesworth, and Ralph Abernathy, King's right-hand man.⁷⁵ Despite this ordinance, King announced that they would lead a march on April 10, resulting in the arrest of the fifty activists, including King, who marched towards City Hall.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Hampton, Fayer, and Flynn, *Voices of Freedom*, 125.

⁷⁰ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 308.

⁷¹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 260.

⁷² McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 327.

⁷³ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 184.

⁷⁴ Levinson, *We've Got A Job*, 66.

⁷⁵ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 184.

⁷⁶ Levinson, *We've Got A Job*, 58.

From April 3 through 11, police arrested a total of 143 protesters, a much smaller number than the 300 people who were arrested during the first day of demonstrations in Albany. People were afraid to put their livelihoods on the line for the cause they believed in.⁷⁷ The protesters, who were in jail, could not make bail because the campaigners had run out of funds and were pressured to call off the demonstrations and leave Birmingham.⁷⁸ With King in jail, the movement had reached a standstill; this is where James Bevel stepped in. By the end of April, King had made bail and called on Bevel, a veteran of the Nashville Student Movement, to help the campaign in Birmingham. During an emergency meeting on April 29, the leaders discussed that “without hordes of volunteers to flood the jails and attract the press, the campaign to desegregate Birmingham would evaporate.”⁷⁹ Bevel gave them their answer in the form of Phase Three of Project C: fill the jails with schoolchildren.⁸⁰

When it came to the use of children, Bevel was an expert. He had been a part of the Nashville Student Movement, worked with child demonstrators in Jackson, Mississippi, and understood children on a level that none of the other campaign leaders did.⁸¹ Bevel argued for the use of children by stating that they experienced racism everyday and should be given the opportunity to fight against it. They had spent “their entire lives struggling against racism in some form or another,” it had affected and poisoned them, so they should get the chance to fight for their freedom.⁸² Bevel argued that black parents shielded their children for too long and he wanted “to stop the age-old custom in black homes of trying to shield black children from something for which there was, finally, no shield.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Levinson, *We've Got A Job*, 52-3.

⁷⁸ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 184.

⁷⁹ Levinson, *We've Got A Job*, 66.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸¹ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 6.

⁸² Halberstam, *The Children*, 439.

⁸³ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 110.

He saw the advantages of using children to fill the jails, his thinking was that “a boy in high school, he can get the same effect in terms of being in jail...as his father, yet, there is no economic threat on the family because the father is still on the job.”⁸⁴ Bevel also knew that these children were not as afraid to demonstrate as adults. They were willing to risk their lives and disobey their parents to fight for their freedom.⁸⁵ Children in the movement served two purposes: more troops to fill the jails and more youth participation, the brutal treatment that followed would generate a media frenzy.⁸⁶ The other leaders were against Bevel’s idea and wanted nothing to do with it, but by the end of April, Shuttlesworth, Abernathy, and King left Bevel in charge while they all left Birmingham for the weekend. Bevel distributed leaflets at the black high schools in Birmingham announcing a meeting at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the main meeting place for the campaign.⁸⁷

Bevel’s Phase Three launched on May 2, called D-Day, which would consist of children marching downtown in masses.⁸⁸ Bevel started appealing to football players, beauty queens, and youth church leaders knowing they were the most popular students in the high schools. They spread the word about mass meetings and demonstrations. He wanted to bring all the students together to create a community, which was nonexistent among the adults, to fight against injustice.⁸⁹ Bevel also used youth culture to appeal to them, he told the youth of Birmingham to listen to the radio for a signal of when to leave school and meet at Sixteenth Street Baptist to start demonstrating. So on the morning of May 2, popular DJ Shelley Stewart told the black youth of Birmingham about “a party at the park. Bring your toothbrushes because lunch will be

⁸⁴ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 62.

⁸⁵ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 108.

⁸⁶ King, *African American Childhoods*, 167.

⁸⁷ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 364.

⁸⁸ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 68-9.

⁸⁹ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 360-1.

served,” meaning the march was happening that day and they should plan to spend the night in jail.⁹⁰ Students left the schools in hordes to get to the church, with one witness stating, “you could see the students coming from every direction from high schools and some elementary schools to go to take part in the demonstrations.”⁹¹

Around a thousand demonstrators showed up to the church, where police, spectators, and reporters were waiting outside for the action. The demonstrators ranged from six to eighteen and as one group left the church and was arrested another followed, per Bevel’s instructions.⁹² The number of students shocked Connor and the police assembled outside the church. They were herding the students into paddy wagons, but ran out of room and had to switch to school buses to transport all the students to jail.⁹³ By the end of the day, 959 children were arrested and taken to Birmingham jails, the “greatest single-day total yet in a mass arrest in Southern anti-segregation conflicts.”⁹⁴ Most were being taken to the Juvenile Court’s detention center, which had a capacity of ninety-six but over 400 were being booked there that day.⁹⁵ These children filled the prisons and the temporary outdoor prison that needed to be set up on the fairgrounds to accommodate the mass arrests.⁹⁶ The leaders response was that if hundreds were in jail than their movement must mean something to the people and more would follow them.⁹⁷ At a mass

⁹⁰ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 71.

⁹¹ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 123.

⁹² Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 74-5.

⁹³ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 190.

⁹⁴ Raymond R. Coffey, “Waiting in the Rain at the Birmingham Jail,” in *Reporting Civil Rights: Part One, American Journalism 1941-1963* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2003), 801.

⁹⁵ “600 Arrested in Demonstrations,” *Birmingham Post Herald*, May 3, 1963.
<http://bplonline.cdmhost.com/cdm/ref/collection/BPLSB02/id/658> (accessed April 26, 2017).

⁹⁶ Halberstam, *The Children*, 441.

⁹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Abernathy, “Statement by MLK on Jailings,” The King Center, 1963.
<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/statement-mlk-jailings> (accessed May 20, 2017).

meeting that night, King responded with a speech stating, “I have been inspired and moved today...If they think today is the end of this, they will be badly mistaken.”⁹⁸

Following D-Day, organizers held another student demonstration, called Double D-Day, because they saw the success of one day of student demonstrations and the potential of more demonstrations. At the start of May 3, almost two thousand students skipped school to take part in the demonstrations.⁹⁹ They waited in Sixteenth Street Baptist for the demonstrations to start while the police outside were planning their strategy. This strategy was to make as few arrests as possible, since the jails were full, and to bring in the fire department with their high-pressure hoses to scare the demonstrators.¹⁰⁰ Hoses and police dogs were turned on the demonstrators as soon as they left the church.¹⁰¹ These hoses were one hundred pounds of pressure per square inch and the firemen would attach two hoses into one nozzle, called a monitor gun, to cause more damage. The water hit with enough force to rip bark off of trees, it knocked people down, slammed them into curbs and over parked cars. The scene was described as a warzone.¹⁰²

One African American witness was watching from a storefront while he was on the phone with the Attorney General when he saw the firemen turn “the fire hoses on a black girl. They’re rolling that little girl right down the middle of the street” and told the Attorney General he had to go and do something for his people.¹⁰³ Another witness described seeing the water hit the demonstrators as they were “cowering, first with hands over their heads, then on their knees or clinging together with their arms around each other, they tried to hold their ground.”¹⁰⁴ The force was so strong a young man’s shirt was ripped from his body; others were hit so hard they were

⁹⁸ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 77.

⁹⁹ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 368.

¹⁰⁰ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 81-2.

¹⁰¹ Don McKee, “Dogs Water Used to Halt Negro March,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 4, 1963. <http://bplonline.cdmhost.com/digital/collection/BPLSB02/id/658> (accessed April 26, 2017).

¹⁰² Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 190.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ McKee, “Dogs Water Used...”

thrown over the hood of a parked car.¹⁰⁵ After several minutes of the firemen spraying the demonstrators, Connor called in the K-9 unit when the hoses began to fail. The dogs were attacking the protesters as the police officers holding them encouraged it.¹⁰⁶ When asked about the use of dogs after the fact, the police commented that the use of dogs was an accepted practice for riot work and because the protesters outnumbered the police it was considered necessary.¹⁰⁷ The demonstrations ended two hours after they began, but the effect of the day's activities would be felt nationwide.

The Children's Crusade, the name *Newsweek* gave the third phase of Project C, ended on May 10 with negotiations being reached between white business leaders and civil rights leaders.¹⁰⁸ The four terms reached were the desegregation of lunch counters, bathrooms, fitting rooms, and water fountains in stores, hiring blacks on a nondiscriminatory basis, dropping charges on demonstrators, and creating a biracial committee to work on desegregation in other aspects.¹⁰⁹ These were minor victories in comparison to what else came with the Birmingham victory. The rest of the African American community was now behind King because of the brutality they witnessed against their children.¹¹⁰ The images captured on Double D-Day dominated the evening news around the country with the brutality shown outraging the general public. The nation was watching in horror at the atrocities they could now witness all the way in Birmingham, Alabama.¹¹¹ The movement now had national attention, becoming "the top priority of the nation and the government."¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Levinson, *We've Got A Job*, 84-5.

¹⁰⁷ Relman Morin, "Officers Explain Dog Use in Riots," *Birmingham News*, May 10, 1963. <http://bplonline.cdmhost.com/digital/collection/BPLSB02/id/658> (accessed April 26, 2017).

¹⁰⁸ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 114.

¹⁰⁹ King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 91-2.

¹¹⁰ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 190.

¹¹¹ Levine, *Freedom's Children*, 77.

¹¹² Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 267.

Bevel became a hero among the civil rights leaders for his idea to use the students because it was now “clear that the introduction of Birmingham’s children into the campaign was one of the wisest moves [they] made.”¹¹³ Birmingham succeeded in showing the world the violence experienced in the South against black men, women, and children. After May 3, violence was prevalent on the television screens in American households across the nation.¹¹⁴ This violence created sympathy for the children shown in newspapers, magazines, and on news programs. This sympathy sparked involvement in the African American community that had never been seen before.¹¹⁵ The children had “put their fears aside, and led the way,” for adults to become involved in the movement, especially those that had never been involved to begin with.¹¹⁶ The sympathy for children also swayed public opinion. The Children’s Crusade put a spotlight on racism for the entire nation, even for those that never acknowledged it before.¹¹⁷ Publishing pictures and televising the violence the children faced exposed racism for what it was, unfair and affecting everyone. The children involved did not even understand the impact of what they were doing stating, “we thought it was fun. We didn’t know it was going to be history, or progress.”¹¹⁸

The violence that was shown in pictures of the Children’s Crusade in newspapers, magazines, and on television completely reshaped the movement. In the 1960s, the power of media was increasing around the nation, amplifying the issues people faced everyday. The media was shifting “from the use of words to define events to the coming of images to define them,” which showed the brutality and honesty of a situation more than words.¹¹⁹ Starting in 1961, protests around the country provided action and film for television broadcasts that would report

¹¹³ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 86.

¹¹⁴ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 762.

¹¹⁵ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 89.

¹¹⁶ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, xxxii.

¹¹⁷ Levinson, *We’ve Got A Job*, 142.

¹¹⁸ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 378.

¹¹⁹ Halberstam, *The Children*, 433.

on the events in fifteen-minute blocks.¹²⁰ These broadcasts gave “ordinary Americans a chance to understand the cruelty of racial injustice in their own country” and develop their own opinions about the events.¹²¹ The images were forceful sources of information that showed the seriousness of the race issue in the South that millions of people around the nation had been ignoring or denying.¹²² The media began to influence how Americans saw and thought about race, which greatly influenced and transformed the Civil Rights Movement.¹²³

The most influential source of media on southern segregationist violence was *Life* magazine. Throughout the 1960s, *Life* published explicit images of racial violence proving itself as the nation’s most important media outlet. In regards to the movement, publicity was the most important strategy for civil rights leaders because it “highlighted the growing intensity, brutality, and exigency of the struggle for racial equality.”¹²⁴ The day after Double D-Day, pictures of the attacks on the children were published in *Life* and other magazines and newspapers across the nation. *Life* dedicated eleven pages to the Birmingham campaign, which more than half of American adults read.¹²⁵ *The New York Times*’ front page featured pictures of the attacks and with scores of other newspapers reporting the events; journalists in other parts of the South abandoned other stories to head to Birmingham.¹²⁶

One photographer, Charles Moore, captured the most iconic photo of the Children’s Crusade (see Appendix). In the photo, a young girl and two young boys are cowering against a building as they are being sprayed with blasts of water. This photo was used on front pages of newspapers and magazines across the nation and “when people...saw the photo, they were stunned by the

¹²⁰ Halberstam, *The Children*, 388.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²² Berger, *For All the World to See*, 116.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹²⁵ Shelley Tougas, *Birmingham 1963: How a Photography Rallied Civil Rights Support* (North Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, 2011), 33.

¹²⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 764.

harsh treatment” the children were experiencing.¹²⁷ He captured other photos as well by getting as close to the action as he could, he wanted his images to be felt through the detail and violence they showed.¹²⁸ He knew that a photo, if captured right, could make people angry, motivate them to action, and inspire them to fight for change.¹²⁹ Moore created the most memorable images of the Civil Rights Movement, but he was not the only one. Moore, along with other journalists reporting on the Birmingham campaign played an influential role in impacting the American people.¹³⁰

Newspapers, magazines, and television programs around the nation were highlighting the Birmingham campaign to the point where “the press had drawn the whole world’s attention to Birmingham” and no one could ignore the problem anymore.¹³¹ People viewing the media on the Birmingham events were deeply disturbed by the children’s treatment, especially by the age of the protesters.¹³² It shook the American peoples’ opinions about what was really going on in the South and those who had not paid attention to southern segregation now could not ignore it.¹³³ The images turned all Americans into witnesses of the hate and prejudice experienced in the South.¹³⁴ The media also explained the civil rights cause to the general public in a simple way that anyone could understand. The news had only fifteen minutes each for national and local news and through the images captured of the marches there was enough coverage “to fill all the

¹²⁷ Tougas, *Birmingham 1963*, 10.

¹²⁸ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 316-7.

¹²⁹ Tougas, *Birmingham 1963*, 20.

¹³⁰ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 315.

¹³¹ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 191.

¹³² Tougas, *Birmingham 1963*, 35.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

newscasts of all the television stations in the United States.”¹³⁵ This made the Birmingham campaign television’s first recurring news story.¹³⁶

The most important impact of the media coverage was the shock Americans experienced as a result of the graphic images. The American people could now witness for themselves the brutality and lack of morality experienced by African Americans in the South. The race issue was brought into their homes and shifted the sentiment of those that were previously uncommitted to the cause.¹³⁷ More importantly, it shifted the opinion of white northerners by showing them the bigotry of segregationists and the determination of African Americans to fight against oppression.¹³⁸ The children they saw in newspapers and on their television screens now inspired people that had ignored the issue. The civil rights issue was no longer a distant situation that had nothing to do with regular American people; it was an issue that affected everyone.¹³⁹ According to NBC correspondent Richard Valeriani, “television helped accelerate the progress of a movement whose time had come.”¹⁴⁰

The movement had the publicity and drama it needed, “so the world could bear witness,” and revive the campaign.¹⁴¹ White northerners were horrified by the treatment of the children, but they were not the only Americans influenced by the Children’s Crusade. Thousands of African American adults who had not taken part in the movement were influenced by the children to join the demonstrations.¹⁴² These adults saw their children fighting and putting their lives on the line for all African Americans, which the adults had not had the courage to do for themselves. The

¹³⁵ Hampton, Henry. *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1985*. Documentary. Blackside, 1993. <http://salve.kanopystreaming.com/video/no-easy-walk>.

¹³⁶ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 130.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 133-5.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴⁰ Williams and Bond, *Eyes on the Prize*, 270.

¹⁴¹ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 268.

¹⁴² Berger, *For All the World to See*, 122.

adults were also angry that children could be treated in this way and that anger turned them to activism. The images were really what garnered this response because “speeches from leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. touched the nation’s head,” but “the image of a terrified young girl tore at its soul” and made people angry.¹⁴³ These images sparked a renewed revolution when it came to civil rights and it provoked thousands of people into action.¹⁴⁴

Like years before with Till’s photos, photos of the children in Birmingham inspired men, women, and children of all races to fight against segregation and racism. These photos, by invoking great emotion from the American people, played a role in altering the racial attitudes of all Americans.¹⁴⁵ Maurice Berger, a cultural historian who has done research on civil rights photographer Charles Moore states, “like the horrific photos of Emmett Till that had jolted African-Americans into action eight years earlier, TV news coverage of the demonstrations in Birmingham...became a catalyst for all Americans.”¹⁴⁶ Berger goes on to discuss that Till’s postmortem photos inspired this generation of children that took part in the Children’s Crusade and the images of violence against these children completely changed racial attitudes across the United States.¹⁴⁷ Inspiring change in racial attitudes and getting people involved were not the only results of the Children’s Crusade. As Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff discuss in their book on journalism during the Civil Rights Movement, “with constant pressure from the civil rights movement and constant coverage by the press, change came.”¹⁴⁸

Immediately after the photos were seen across the country and around the world Congress and the president began discussing legislation that would finally give African Americans equal

¹⁴³ Tougas, *Birmingham 1963*, 54.

¹⁴⁴ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 109.

¹⁴⁵ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 116.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁴⁸ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 406.

rights. The images in newspapers and on television embarrassed the federal government, especially President John F. Kennedy, because they were not only being featured in the U.S. but around the world as well.¹⁴⁹ President Kennedy also feared more conflict would erupt because of the graphic images being featured in the media around the country, resulting in him putting pressure on Congress for civil rights legislation starting with a speech on national television.¹⁵⁰ Because of the pressure put on them by the president and their own opinions of the Birmingham campaign, Congress realized “the country couldn’t solve the conflict over civil rights one city at a time. The United States needed a national solution.”¹⁵¹ So the Birmingham campaign, especially the Children’s Crusade, was how the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was won, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin.¹⁵²

There are two main reasons the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed; the powerful photographs captured by journalists like Moore and the use of television to show the violence. Moore’s photographs of the movement, especially his photo of the three teenagers, have been highlighted as an important factor prompting new legislation (see Appendix). His photo of the three teenagers was even included in *Life* magazine’s one hundred photographs that changed the world.¹⁵³ U.S. Senator Jacob Javits, a political figure in the 1960s, credits the quick passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to Moore’s photos.¹⁵⁴ The other reason, use of television, has also been credited to the passing of this civil rights legislation. NBC correspondent Bill Monroe, a journalist in the 1960s, believed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “wouldn’t have happened without TV.”¹⁵⁵ Another figure at the time, Ralph McGill editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, believed the

¹⁴⁹ Burrow and Long, *A Child Shall Lead Them*, 133.

¹⁵⁰ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 135.

¹⁵¹ Tougas, *Birmingham 1963*, 48.

¹⁵² Watters, *Down to Now*, 58.

¹⁵³ Tougas, *Birmingham 1963*, 52-4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁵⁵ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 136.

images broadcasted on television were forceful enough to push the civil rights legislation through Congress.¹⁵⁶ American historian and journalist, David Halberstam, found in his research that “historians have long argued that the SCLC’s... ‘children’s crusade’ ...[was] decisive in forcing the Kennedy Administration to act in favor of greater civil rights” through both the pictures captured and the violent broadcasting that was published.¹⁵⁷ This legislation reshaped southern politics and ultimately led to the dissolution of segregated society protected by the law.¹⁵⁸

The murder of Till created fear and vulnerability for African Americans everywhere, proving even a child was not safe from the violence of racism. Adults tried to shield their children from the Civil Rights Movement, but the children defied them, showing no fear, to make their own change. After Till’s death, African American children in the South, despite the dangers, were inspired to join the movement, especially in Birmingham. These children, along with help from the media, revived the otherwise dying movement and brought national attention to the racial issues within the segregated South. Segregation and racial violence were no longer a southern problem; it was everyone’s problem. Regarding the influence of Till’s photos compared to the influence of the Birmingham photos, Berger states:

If the postmortem shots of Emmett Till inspired a generation of black activism, another group of pictures, of an incident eight years later, would play a similar...role in altering the racial attitudes of all Americans, black and white: the photograph and television footage that documented the May 1963 civil rights demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama.¹⁵⁹

Photos and television were the most important aspects of change when it came to the Civil Rights Movement and the two factors influencing these were violence and children. The children of the Children’s Crusade are often overlooked, but they inspired thousands of people around the

¹⁵⁶ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 136.

¹⁵⁷ Halberstam, *The Children*, 550.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Berger, *For All the World to See*, 116.

nation to become involved in the movement and fight for change in the South. The images and television film that inspired these people ultimately led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, landmark civil rights legislation. Without the children of the Children's Crusade inspired by Till or the national media in the times of the Civil Rights Movement, the movement would not have been as effective or made a lasting influence today.

Appendix



Source: Moore, Charles.

1963. http://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2010/03/charles_moore.html.

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