

## Supplemental Materials

### Sample Reading and Assignment

#### Assignment:

In this week's reading, historian David Cortwright provides a description of a crucial strategic planning meeting called by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Dorchester, Georgia.

The excerpt begins on the next page. After you complete the short reading, write down your answers to these questions *from the perspective of Dr. King*:

1. What was the situation as the meeting began?
2. What did he think would happen (Scenario) if the same tactics from Albany were used in Birmingham? Why?
3. King proposed a new strategy for Birmingham. How did the new approach alter
  - a. the targets
  - b. the message for these targets
  - c. the desired path forward
  - d. the tactics
4. Had King altered his Theory of Change? If so, how?

## Chapter 7

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# Learning Lessons

### A Tale of Two Cities

They were two of the most segregated cities of the Old South: Albany in southwest Georgia, Birmingham in northern Alabama, both bastions of white racial hatred. They also witnessed two of the most important resistance struggles of the civil rights era. The campaigns had many similarities. Thousands marched in protest. Jails filled to overflowing. White-owned businesses were idled by effective boycotts. For weeks, even months, demonstrations and mass meetings occurred almost daily. Nonviolent discipline was maintained throughout. Yet the results were very different. The Albany movement failed to achieve any significant desegregation of local facilities, despite months of bitter struggle. The movement in Birmingham scored a historic victory, forcing the desegregation of downtown stores and exerting influence through the Kennedy administration that transformed the national debate on race.

Two cities, two campaigns. One a disappointing failure, the other an inspiring triumph. Why the contrasting outcomes? The difference was not in the commitment or depth of sacrifice of

the activists involved. In both cities dedicated heroism was the norm among thousands. Rather, the difference lay in the strategic choices made by movement leaders. The lesson of Albany and Birmingham is that strategy matters, that decisions made about goals, leadership, tactics, and operational planning are crucial to the success of nonviolent action.

The Albany movement began in the fall of 1961 when twenty-two-year-old Charles Sherrod and eighteen-year-old Cordell Reagon arrived in town to mount a frontal assault on the imposing edifice of local segregation. The two young organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had few contacts in Albany and were initially viewed with suspicion by some of the city's established black leaders. Sherrod and Reagon quickly gained the confidence of young people, however, and began challenging segregation in local transportation facilities.<sup>1</sup> When students were arrested for attempting to desegregate the bus terminal in early December, local residents responded with mass meetings and protest marches, leading to hundreds of arrests. Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to speak at a mass rally, and he, too, was arrested after joining a protest march.

The initial demonstrations prompted negotiations between the Albany movement and white officials, resulting in a settlement just before Christmas that proved highly controversial. Marches and protests were halted. Hundreds of demonstrators were released from jail, although charges were not dropped and each person had to pay bail. City officials promised a future dialogue to address the movement's demands. Nothing was put in writing, however, and the mayor and local police chief denied that any concessions had been made. In fact, nothing changed in Albany, and local segregation laws remained as rigid as ever. Local and national press rightly portrayed the result as a "devastating loss of face" for King and the civil rights movement.<sup>2</sup> The demonstrations and marches were resumed a few weeks later, and they continued into the summer of 1962. Hundreds of additional arrests occurred, and boycott activity continued, but the local authorities successfully parried the protests and refused to yield. After so much sacrifice and effort, the Albany movement ended in failure.

The defeat in Albany prompted intense soul-searching by King and his lieutenants, who gathered in Dorchester, Georgia, in January 1963 to draw lessons from the experience. The stakes

were extremely high. King and his colleagues desperately needed a victory to reenergize the movement and build momentum for national civil rights legislation. King already had his sights on Birmingham as the next major battleground, but before launching a new campaign, he needed to understand and overcome the failure in Albany.

The first problem, King believed, was the lack of focused objectives. The Albany movement tried to do too much. The goals were too numerous and diffuse. It would have been better, he argued, to attack segregated lunch counters or buses rather than all forms of segregation.<sup>3</sup> By concentrating on a specific, focused objective the movement would have increased its chances of success. The gains thus won would have given people a lift in morale and thereby motivated them to continue the struggle to achieve additional goals.

The next lesson was the need to prioritize the boycott of downtown stores. Albany would have been a greater success, King believed, if the movement had targeted the city's business leaders rather than elected officials. Blacks had little political power, due to restrictions on their voting rights, but they had substantial economic leverage through their patronage of downtown stores. Boycott efforts in Albany were effective but too limited. The protest marches should have focused on the downtown stores rather than city hall.<sup>4</sup> "You've got to center in the area where you have power," King argued.<sup>5</sup> Exerting pressure on the economic power structure would have applied pressure on the political power structure as well, since the two were closely linked.

Third was the lack of organizational unity. Tensions between the student activists of SNCC and the more established leaders of the local NAACP hampered the movement. When King and the SCLC were called in to help, this development further complicated the picture. SCLC became involved, without planning or strategic forethought, only after King was arrested. Public attention centered on King rather than the lesser-known student activists who initiated the campaign. The organizational problems in Albany were exacerbated by the outsider status of the SNCC organizers. Activists are most effective when they have contacts and credibility within the community they are attempting to organize.<sup>6</sup>

Last was the opposition's coolness under fire. Albany police chief Laurie Pritchett restrained his officers throughout the

months of demonstrations, protests, and arrests. He carefully avoided violent confrontations with the protesters. Pritchett had read King's *Stride toward Freedom* and knew that excessive police harshness would play into the hands of the movement.<sup>7</sup> Pritchett also frustrated the movement's attempts to "fill the jails." When the Albany jail quickly reached its capacity in the early days of the movement, Pritchett transported inmates to jails in surrounding communities. The Albany movement never had the opportunity for the kind of dramatic confrontation that could turn the political tide in its favor.

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tention. As a result, he and the SCLC sometimes got credit — and financial contributions — for accomplishments the students felt belonged to SNCC. The leaders of SNCC saw themselves as the new vanguard, the shock troops of the movement. Ironically, southern lawmakers attributed the surge in protests by the upstart young to Martin Luther King.

### *"Project C"*

Unlike other SCLC demonstrations, the one planned at a meeting in Dorchester, Georgia, in January 1963 was cloaked in secrecy. Its code name, "Project C," stood for confrontation. In the code names assigned SCLC leaders, King was "JFK," the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy "Dean Rusk," key local leader the Reverend Fred C. Shuttlesworth "Mac" (for Robert McNamara), and SCLC executive director Wyatt Tee Walker "RFK."<sup>42</sup> The target was Birmingham, Alabama, considered by many the most segregated big city in the South. The goal was to jar the Kennedy administration into introducing civil rights legislation outlawing segregation and to force the administration to protect civil rights workers from the Ku Klux Klan and racist local and state officials. For King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the stakes were high. Seven years had passed since the Montgomery bus boycott; since then, King and the SCLC had led no successful action. The organization had a skeleton staff and was plagued by constant money problems. King's reputation rested far more on his oratorical power on the speakers' circuit than on concrete accomplishments since Montgomery. Younger leaders viewed him as a fading hero of the 1950s. His two-year effort to mount a major campaign against segregation in Albany, Georgia, had recently ended in failure. For the third consecutive year, President Kennedy had refused to announce major civil rights proposals in his State of the Union speech, and again he had ignored King's pleas to bypass Congress and strike down segregation in the South by executive order — a second Emancipation Proclamation. Instead, Kennedy had offered only a quiet, unpublicized reception for black luminaries at the White House, an event so devoid of substance that King and other activists boycotted it. For King and his lieutenants, Birmingham was a make-or-break effort. If successful, it would dramatize the evils of segregation so forcefully that the government would be compelled to act. If it failed, King felt, he would be out of business as a civil rights leader.<sup>43</sup>

The Montgomery bus boycott in 1955–56 had proved that nonviolent demonstrations could win public sympathy and generate political sup-

port. King's most ambitious effort to repeat that success had been mounted in Albany, the principal town in southwest Georgia, where the SCLC and other groups demonstrated against segregation, employment discrimination, and efforts to prevent blacks from voting. But there he had been outmaneuvered by a shrewd opponent. Instead of allowing the heavy-handed law enforcement tactics and uncontrolled violence by white mobs that were revealed on national television during the bus boycott, the student sit-ins, and the Freedom Rides, Laurie Pritchett, the police chief in Albany, had smothered the King effort with restraint. Pritchett had made arrests without violence — and usually outside the range of television cameras. He had played to the news media with reasonable talk and a polite manner. Without dramatic scenes to photograph, the national media had left Albany, declaring that King had failed.

In planning Project C, King had vowed not to repeat the mistakes of Albany. He would not again target local officials, who were able to ignore demonstrators' demands because blacks could not register to vote against them. Instead King would target Birmingham's white business establishment, which could be hurt if the large black population boycotted its stores. Timing would be important. Project C's sit-ins and economic boycott were aimed at disrupting the lucrative Easter shopping season. Birmingham also offered the right villain. In hulking Eugene "Bull" Connor, the Birmingham police commissioner, King knew that he would be confronting a hotheaded bully who craved the spotlight and believed that violence stirred support from his white working-class followers as well as his secret big-business backers.

King realized that he was playing with fire. "If [violence] comes," he declared grimly, "we will surface it for all to see." To stage a passion play that would stir the nation by Easter Sunday, he would have to provoke a major confrontation. Yet he trembled at the possible consequences. Making final plans with his closest aides, King warned them: "I have to tell you, in my judgment, some of us sitting here today will not come back alive from this campaign. I want you to think about it."<sup>44</sup>

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 The Birmingham campaign would be initiated and led by King and the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a fiery activist who led the SCLC's local affiliate, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Unlike in the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and the Albany protests, King would not be entering a fray started by others. The NAACP, CORE, and SNEC all were weak in Birmingham, so squabbling among the rival organizations might be avoided. But despite meticulous planning, as Project C got under way a potentially ruinous fact became apparent: except for the courageous Shuttlesworth, whose home had been dynamited by the Ku Klux