

Abstracts of Papers Read at the 1995 G.A.H. Meeting

A New Strategy? Reevaluating the "Lessons of Albany"

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When telling the story of the civil rights struggle, historians often contrast the failure of the Albany Movement with the success of the Birmingham campaign by emphasizing the "lessons" the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) learned in southwest Georgia. The popular narrative suggests that after an unsuccessful year-long struggle to achieve the desegregation of municipal facilities, a defeated Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., left Albany in August 1962, reevaluated movement strategy over the winter and emerged victorious in Birmingham as the leader of the highly successful spring 1963 offensive against segregation described as "Project C." Movement leaders and scholars have thus concluded that had not the movement learned valuable "lessons" from Albany, Birmingham would have also ended in failure. Yet such an account of events is in many ways apocryphal, for the real "lessons of Albany" did not result in Birmingham's "Project C." Indeed, through a close examination of extant documents, a different interpretation emerges.

On the eve of demonstrations in April 1963, SCLC approached Birmingham with the understanding that it entered the city of the behalf of the local movement, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), with a limited strategy

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designed to pressure the economic power structure into accepting specific local objectives that included the desegregation of privately-owned stores and lunch counters, equal employment opportunities and the scheduling of biracial discussions. The "Lessons of Albany" had convinced SCLC to focus on the "business community" in Birmingham with limited direct action sit-ins to emphasize a black boycott of white owned businesses. The SCLC neither sought a violent confrontation with Police Commissioner T. Eugene "Bull" Connor in a bid to fill the jail nor expected the Kennedy Administration to act on its behalf. It simply organized for a victory over local segregation practices and an end to racial discrimination in local employment. Through moral persuasion, SCLC hoped to win from powerful whites in the private sector concessions on segregation in Birmingham. If successful, SCLC hoped to restore its viability as an organization and salvage King's damaged reputation. Unfortunately, for much of the Birmingham campaign, the strategy derived from the "Lessons of Albany" failed to work. While the boycott hurt white merchants, it did not pressure the "white power structure" into desegregating. The small turnout for the protests generated little interest or sympathetic coverage in the national media. After a month of demonstrations, the Birmingham campaign teetered on the brink of collapse. SCLC responded to its unsuccessful strategy by broadening its field of attack, waging protest marches on city hall and staging kneel-ins at area churches. Once Bull Connor unleashed the police dogs in mid-April, SCLC Executive Secretary, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker recognized the value of "nonviolent coercion." "Project X" became "Project C" as he provoked the violent suppression of nonviolent protesters for the sake of network television and international newspapers. With the advent of the children's crusade in early May 1963, SCLC strategy in Birmingham made one final shift, returning to the earlier Albany efforts to fill the jail. This time the movement achieved its goal. With his jail full of black youngsters, Bull Connor turned brutal. Negative coverage by the media persuaded the Kennedy

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Administration to intervene. Federal authorities negotiated a truce that ended the Birmingham protest without any federal commitment to the movement; yet national outrage over Birmingham ultimately forced President Kennedy to proposed legislation to end racial discrimination in public accommodations. Thus Birmingham resulted in the watershed Civil Rights Act of 1964. Therefore the real strategy derived from the "Lessons of Albany" failed to work in Birmingham, and it was only after "Project X" had become "Project C" with school children achieving the Albany goal of filling the jail, that the civil rights movement successfully forced the issue or race reform in the South.