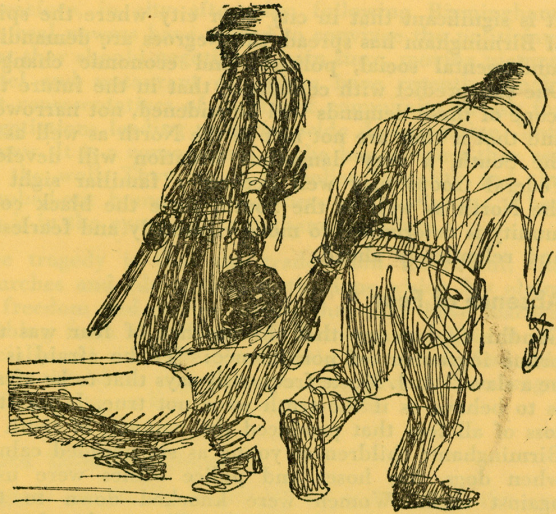


THE MEANING OF BIRMINGHAM

BAYARD RUSTIN



SINCE THE SIGNING of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the struggle for justice by Afro-Americans has been carried out by many dedicated individuals and militant organizations. Their ultimate aim, sometimes stated, often not, has always been total freedom. Many forms of strategy and tactics have been used. Many partial victories have been won. Yet the gradual and token "progress" that many white liberals pointed to with pride served only to anger the black man and further frustrate him. That frustration has now given way to an open and publicly declared war on segregation and racial discrimination throughout the nation. The aim is simple. It is directed at all white Americans—the President of the United States, his brother, Robert, the trade-union movement, the power élite, and every living white soul the Negro meets. The war cry is "unconditional surrender—end all Jim Crow now." Not next week, not tomorrow—but now.

This is not to say that many have not felt this way for decades. The slave revolts, the occasional resorts to violence in recent times, the costly fifty-year struggle that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has carried on in the courts, the thousands arrested throughout the South since the Montgomery bus boycott—all reveal an historic impatience and a thirst for freedom. What is new springs from the white resistance in Birmingham, with its fire hoses, its dogs, its blatant disregard for black men as people, and from the Afro-American's response to such treatment in "the year of our Lord" 1963.

For the black people of this nation, Birmingham became the moment of truth. The struggle from now on will be fought in a different context. Therefore, to understand the mood, tactics and totality of the black people's relentless war on Jim Crow, we must grasp fully what is taking place in this Southern industrial city.

For the first time, every black man, woman and child, regardless of station, has been brought into the struggle. Unlike the period of the Montgomery boycott, when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had to be organized to stimulate similar action elsewhere, the response to Birmingham has been immediate and spontaneous. City after city has come into the fight, from Jackson, Mississippi, to Chesterton, Maryland. The militancy has spread to Philadelphia, where the "city fathers" and the trade-union movement have been forced to make reluctant concessions. It has reached the old and established freedom organizations. For example, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., who only a year ago, from a platform in Jackson, Mississippi, criticized the direct-action methods of the Freedom Riders, was arrested recently for leading a picket line in that very city, after hundreds of N.A.A.C.P. members had been arrested in a direct-action struggle.

Before Birmingham, the great struggles had been waged for specific, limited goals. The Freedom Rides sought to establish the right to eat while traveling; the sit-ins sought to win the right to eat in local restaurants; the Meredith case centered on a single Negro's right to enter a state university. The Montgomery boycott, although it involved fifty thousand people in a year-long sacrificial struggle, was limited to attaining the right to ride the city buses with dignity and respect. The black people now reject token, limited or gradual approaches.

The package deal is the new demand. The black community is not prepared to engage in a series of costly battles—first for jobs, then decent housing, then integrated schools, etc., etc. The fact that there is a power élite which makes the decisions is now clearly understood. The Negro has learned that, through economic and mass pressures, this élite can be made to submit step by step. Now he demands unconditional surrender.

It is significant that in city after city where the spirit of Birmingham has spread, the Negroes are demanding fundamental social, political and economic changes. One can predict with confidence that in the future the scope of these demands will be widened, not narrowed, and that if they are not met in the North as well as in the South, a very dangerous situation will develop. Federal troops may well become a familiar sight in the North as well as the South, since the black community is determined to move vigorously and fearlessly and relentlessly ahead.

Absence of Fear

Gandhi used to say that the absence of fear was the prime ingredient of nonviolence: "To be afraid is to be a slave." A. J. Muste frequently says that to be afraid is to behave as if the truth were not true. It was the loss of all fear that produced the moment of truth in Birmingham: children as young as six paraded calmly when dogs, fire hoses and police billies were used against them. Women were knocked down to the ground and beaten mercilessly. Thousands of teenagers stood by at churches throughout the whole county, waiting their turn to face the clubs of Bull Connor's police, who are known to be among the most brutal in the nation. Property was bombed. Day after day the brutality and arrests went on. And always, in the churches, hundreds of well-disciplined children eagerly awaited their turns.

While these youngsters, unlike Meredith, had the advantage of operating in groups, and while Meredith's ordeal must have been the most difficult borne by any freedom fighter short of death—the children of Birmingham, like no other person or group, inspired and shamed all Afro-Americans, and pulled them into a united struggle.

E. Franklin Frazier wrote in the past of the Negro bourgeoisie. He told of the efforts of the Negro upper classes to ape white people, of the exploitation of Negroes by wealthy members of their own race and of the absence of identity among Negroes. But had Frazier been alive to see Birmingham he would have discovered that the black community was welded into a classless revolt. A. G. Gaston, the Negro millionaire who with some ministers and other upper-class elements had publicly stated that the time was not ripe for such a broad protest, finally accommodated himself, as did the others, to the mass pressure from below and joined the struggle. Gaston owns much property, including a funeral parlor and the motel that eventually became the headquarters for the Birmingham campaign. The bombing of his motel was one cause of the outbreak of rioting on the part of elements that had not come into the nonviolent struggle.

On the basis of the behavior of the black business community in the cities where protests have emerged since Birmingham, one can confidently predict that future struggles will find the Negro bourgeoisie playing a major role in social change and nonviolence. They know that unless they join in the struggle they will

lose the business of their fellow Negroes, who are in no mood to tolerate Uncle Tom-ism.

Black people have waited a hundred years for the government to help them win their rights. President after President has made commitments before election and failed to use the executive power he possesses after election. Congress today, dominated by Southern Democrats, cannot pass any meaningful civil-rights legislation. The Supreme Court, from 1954 to 1963, took a gradualist approach, thereby putting its stamp of approval on "with all deliberate speed," which spells tokenism.

So the black people have looked elsewhere for allies, hoping to discover some major power group within American society which would join them not only in the struggle for Negro rights, but also in the struggle for a more democratic America. The trade-union movement and the churches have issued radical pronouncements but in fact have done precious little and on occasion have even blocked progress. Thus the black population has concluded that the future lies in casting not just a ballot, what Thoreau called "a piece of paper merely," but the *total* vote—the human person against injustice.

This is not to say that black people are not deeply appreciative of those few independent radicals, liberals and church people who have offered time, money and even their lives. They have nothing but admiration for people like Jim Peck, who was brutally beaten in Mississippi and Alabama during the Freedom Rides, Barbara Deming, who was arrested in Birmingham, Eric Weinberger, who fasted for a month in Alabama jails, and William Moore, the slain postman. One can be thankful that the number of such *individuals* is increasing. However, social change of such magnitude requires that major power groups in our society participate as meaningful allies.

The Body Against Injustice

The use of the "black body" against injustice is necessary as a means of creating social disruption and dislocation precisely because the accepted democratic channels have been denied the Negro.

In practice, it works like this: having urged the social institutions to desegregate to no avail, having pleaded for justice to no avail, the black people see that the white community would rather yield to the threats of the segregationist (in the name of law and order) than change the social system. And so Negroes conclude that they must upset the social equilibrium more drastically than the opposition can. They place their bodies against an unjust law by sitting in a restaurant, or a library, playing in a park or swimming in a pool. The segregationists, frequently joined by the police, attack. Arrest and brutality follow. But the black people keep coming, wave after wave. The jails fill. The black population boycotts the stores. Businessmen begin to lose money.

At this point the white community splits into two groups. On one side are the political and law-enforcement agencies, supported by the arch-segregationists, who fearfully resort to indiscriminate violence as a

stop-gap measure. Then the more enlightened section of the community, including many business leaders, begin to act for the first time. They sense not only the rightness of the Negroes' demands but their inevitability. They realize that police violence may bring both a violent response from unorganized elements of the black population and increased economic reprisals. Thus the business community, previously having sided with the forces of reaction, at first quietly and then openly sue for discussion and negotiation with the Negro community, an approach they had earlier dismissed when it was proposed by Negro leaders.

This method of massive nonviolence has many dangers. The greatest threat is that violence, which has been smoldering beneath the surface for generations, will inevitably manifest itself. But the creative genius of people in action is the only safeguard in this period and it can be trusted to bring about, ultimately, a better community, precisely because the tactic of mass action is accompanied by nonviolent resistance. The protesters pledge themselves to refrain from violence in word and deed, thereby confining whatever inevitable violence there may be in the situation to an irreducible minimum.

The genius of this method and philosophy lies in its ability to destroy an old unjust institution and simultaneously create a new one. For finally the white community is forced to choose between closing down the schools, restaurants, parks, buses, etc., and integrating them. Faced for the first time with a choice that can impose discomfort, inconvenience and economic turmoil on the white community—that community discovers that it would prefer integrated institutions to no public institutions at all.

It is therefore clear that we can now expect, following Birmingham, a more sympathetic ear from the power structure, in both the North and the South.

Financial Tenderness of Segregation

Loss of money to retail stores throughout the country, the reluctance of many industries to move to Little Rock during the school integration struggle, the fear of capitalists to invest in Mississippi and Alabama now, and the disrupting of the economy in Birmingham have caused big businesses, including steel, to take a second look at the "Negro problem."

The nation gives Robert Kennedy credit for the fact that the real rulers of Birmingham sat down with representatives of the black revolution. But knowledgeable people realize that it was the withdrawal of black purchasing power in a city which is almost half black, and the militant, unconditional surrender policies of the nonviolent struggle that turned the tide.

Again, Birmingham is a turning point in that all significant elements of the power structure have now acknowledged that the white community must recognize the true nature of the black revolution and its economic consequences.

Therefore, in city after city, following Birmingham, the real powers have moved to convince the politicians that they should negotiate. Chain store, moving picture, hotel and restaurant executives have recently sought out representatives of the black community to ask for negotiations leading to nation-wide desegregation. This is new. It is a consequence of the handwriting they see on the wall. They see it in police brutality and the bombed-out homes and business establishments. They see it in the eyes of Birmingham's children.

The tragedy is that the trade-union movement, the churches and educational institutions which lay claim to freedom and justice, reveal that they have learned nothing from the Battle of Birmingham. This is especially sad since the great battle lies ahead. And this battle the black population is now prepared to wage. This is going to be the battle for jobs.

Black Unemployment

Negroes are finally beginning to realize that the age of automation and industrialization presents them with peculiar problems. There is less and less of a market where the unskilled can sell his labor. Inadequate, segregated schools increase the problem. The negative attitude of the trade unions compounds it further. The Cold War economy, geared to armaments production (perhaps the most automated of all industries) is throwing millions out of work, but the minority groups are being hit hardest. For every white person unemployed, there are close to three Negroes without jobs.

In general, the unemployed, whether white or black, are not yet prepared to take radical action to demand jobs now. However, unemployed black people are prepared to move in conjunction with the rest of the black community and its many white supporters, within the context of the broad civil-rights upheaval. Since their most immediate ends are economic, their banner will be "Dignity of work with equal pay and equal opportunity." This agitation on the part of Negroes for jobs is bound to stimulate unemployed white workers to increased militancy. There will be sit-downs and other dislocating tactics. Nonviolent resistance will have to be directed against local and federal governments, the labor unions, against the A.F.L.-C.I.O. hierarchy and any construction plant or industry that refuses to grant jobs. Such mass disturbances will probably soon take place in the major industrial centers of the country and it is likely that they will be more vigorous in the North than they have been in the South. And they will have incalculable effects on the economic structure.

The great lesson of Birmingham is at once dangerous and creative; black people have moved to that level where they cannot be contained. They are not prepared to wait for courts, elections, votes, government officials, or even Negro leaders. As James Baldwin said in an interview published in the *New York Times* for June 3rd: "No man can claim to speak for the Negro people today. There is no one with whom the power structure can negotiate a deal that will bind Negro people. There

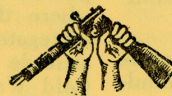
is, therefore, no possibility of a bargain." The black people *themselves* are united and determined to destroy all unjust laws and discriminatory practices, and they want total freedom, including equal economic opportunity and the right to marry whom they damned well please. They know that at a time when the Kennedy brothers were fighting hard to maintain an aura of leadership and control of the civil-rights movement, the children of Birmingham, using methods of non-violent resistance, restored the leadership to the black community. This was, as reported in the June 6th issue

of *Jet*, a "terrible licking" for the federal government. If *kids* can revitalize the civil rights movement in Birmingham, the least we can do is to act like men and women and fight now to provide them with a decent future.

The mood is one of anger and confidence of total victory. The victories to date have given added prestige to the method of nonviolent resistance. One can only hope that the white community will realize that the black community means what it says: *freedom now*.

Bayard Rustin is Executive Secretary of the War Resisters League, and former secretary to Martin Luther King.

The War Resisters League, founded in 1923, believes that economic and racial tensions, cultural and political decay, produce hostilities between men and between nations, which result in violence and war.



We therefore advocate nonviolent methods for the creative solution of all human conflict. If you want to learn more about the basic philosophy and program of the War Resisters League, please return this form to:

War Resisters League,
Room 1025, 5 Beekman Street
New York 38, N.Y.

- ☐ *Without further obligation on my part, please send me more information about the League's activities.*
- ☐ *Please send me additional copies of "The Meaning of Birmingham." (Single copies free; 25 copies \$1; 100 copies, \$3.)*

Name

Address

City Zone State

Reprinted from the June 1963 LIBERATION (5 Beekman Street, New York 38, N.Y. \$3 a year; sample copies 25c).

printed by Libertarian Press
a workers community shop
Glen Gardner, N. J.