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The Albany Movement and the Limits of Nonviolent Protest in Albany, Georgia, 1961-1962

By Brendan Kevin Nelligan

Senior Thesis

Providence College

Fall 2009

## Lessons of Albany: Civil Rights Protest in Albany, Georgia 1961-62

Brendan K. Nelligan  
Providence College Senior History Thesis  
Fall 2009

“Broken by it, I, too, may be; bow to it I never will. The probability that we may fall in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just; it shall not deter me.”

Abraham Lincoln, 1839

“Life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of the river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of its summers and the piercing chill of its winters. And if one will hold on, he will discover that God walks with him, and that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963

The Albany Movement refers to the Civil Rights protest that occurred in Albany, Georgia from November of 1961 until approximately August of 1962. It remains one of the least studied areas of the American Civil Rights movement, despite the presence of high profile leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Wyatt T. Walker, and James Forman. Wedged between the traditionally studied Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and the later violence in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, the Albany Movement has been all but ignored by most historians. This omission is unfortunate, as careful study and analysis of the events in Albany reveal important concepts that defy popular conceptions of the Civil Rights movement. Examining the Albany Movement provides vital background to understanding not only the events in Birmingham a year later, but the Civil Rights movement as a whole.

This thesis argues that the failure of the Albany Movement to force desegregation and gain concessions from the white establishment resulted from the use of a deeply flawed nonviolent protest model that required vast public dedication. The absence of this dedication led directly to the defeat of the Albany Movement in 1962. Further, the paper demonstrates that King and the SCLC implemented the same defective strategy in Birmingham a year later, very nearly leading to the failure of what Americans commonly see as a victory for the Civil Rights movement. Failing to study and truly understand the events in Albany deprives us of a true and accurate picture of the American Civil Rights movement.

I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Murphy, Ph.D. and Dr. Patrick Breen, Ph.D. for directing the project. Their advice and assistance at all stages of the project's development were invaluable in the creation and completion of the thesis. This thesis was made possible through their continued guidance. Additionally, I would like to thank the members of Dr. Breen's HIS 481 class "America During the MLK Era" for their assistance and feedback of this project in its earliest stages.



The atmosphere inside Albany, Georgia's Shiloh Baptist Church was electric. The sound of civil rights hymns pounded against the stone walls, reverberating through the hot summer air. Over a thousand black Albany residents stood packed shoulder to shoulder in the small pews of the church. Gathered to support the ongoing civil rights movement in Albany, they lent their voices to the protest against the deeply ingrained culture of racism and segregation in Albany. "It looks like the movement is going to break wide open down here," reporter Pat Watters stated.<sup>1</sup> Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Ralph Abernathy spoke to the feverish crowd, eliciting roars of support from those assembled. Offers to march on city hall the following day seemingly leapt from the congregation. "The sound of music, the fervor in all that packed crowd of people in the church were like nothing I had ever known," Watters recorded.<sup>2</sup> Yet scarcely six months later, Watters returned to Shiloh Baptist, only to find a very different environment. The scene he encountered was nothing like the one he had left. Scarcely thirty people were gathered in the church, listening to an elderly woman coaxing them into a march on City Hall. Despite the fervor and intensity of the summer mass meetings, protest in Albany had slowed to a mere trickle, evidenced by the pitiful scene in Shiloh Baptist.

The campaign to defeat segregation in Albany, Georgia in 1961 and 1962, known

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflection on the Southern Civil Rights Movement*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 146.

<sup>2</sup> Watters, 13.

as the Albany Movement, ended in failure for both Martin Luther King, Jr. and the black community of Albany. Widespread protest activity and opposition to segregation resulted in no tangible changes to daily segregation in the lives of Albany blacks. Both King's and the Albany Movement's inability to properly understand the dynamics of a mass movement not only led to failure in Albany, but also had serious repercussions in later campaigns. The inability of Movement leaders to understand the difference between community support and community dedication to action, along with the stubborn use of ineffective methods, resulted in a defeat for civil rights protestors in Albany. Civil Rights leaders failure to comprehend the fine line between passive support and action oriented dedication consigned the Albany Movement to failure. Mistaking vocal support and attendance at mass meetings for the requisite community resolve, Movement leaders drastically miscalculated Albany's willingness to sustain a protracted mass movement based upon mass arrests.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this lack of clear success, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would apply the same deficient model for mass movement protest one year later in Birmingham, Alabama. King and the SCLC's misinterpretation of the failure in Albany brought the supposedly "successful" campaign in Birmingham to the brink of disaster in May of 1963. The failure of the Albany Movement and the subsequent misinterpretation and reapplication of its deficient model of protest in Birmingham reveal the severe limitations of nonviolent direct action protest as practiced by King and the SCLC.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important here to note the between "support" and "dedication." By "support", this author means positive attitudes toward Movement goals, inclining people towards involvement. "Dedication" is taken to mean extremely high levels of support, manifesting itself in the resolve to undergo significant personal sacrifice in order to achieve Movement goals. These words are not interchangeable and represent two different concepts throughout this work.

Branded by W.E.B. Dubois as the place where “the cornerstone of the Cotton Kingdom was laid,” Albany, Georgia was in many ways representative of many small cities that stretched across the Deep South. Located in southwest Georgia, Albany contained approximately 57,000 residents, with African-Americans composing around half of the city’s population.<sup>4</sup> The legacy of slavery permeated the area, as “Albany had been a slave trading center in a region dotted with plantations.”<sup>5</sup> Deeply entrenched racial inequality and segregation created an environment where “Albany Negroes see and hear Albany whites on television, but are not seen or heard themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Segregation and discrimination were daily facts of life, something most Albany blacks did little to express opposition to.

On the surface, Albany race relations appeared to be better than those of comparable Southern cities. Segregation was firmly established and was “held intact by almost everyone in it, including major people in the black community.”<sup>7</sup> Historian Adam Fairclough characterized Albany’s feelings towards contact between races, stating “Albany enjoyed good race relations. Black’s could register and vote; the police were better disciplined and less brutal; the Klan was weak.”<sup>8</sup> However, closer examination reveals that Albany was just as violent as other, better known areas, such as southern

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<sup>4</sup> Hedrick Smith. “Segregation Stronghold,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1962, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen B. Oates, “The Albany Movement; A Chapter in the Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.” *The Journal of South Georgia History*, 16 (2004) 52.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Zinn, Correspondence to the Office of the Executive Director, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 195-1970, Part 2: Records of the Executive Director and Treasurer, Trinity College.

<sup>7</sup> Dick Cluster, “The Borning Struggle: The Civil Rights Movement,” *Radical America*, 12 (Nov.-Dec. 1978): 15.

<sup>8</sup>Adam Fairlough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 86.

Mississippi, which Ralph Abernathy would characterize as the worst area for race relations in America.<sup>9</sup> Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett admitted that rampant Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party activity existed in the area surrounding Albany.<sup>10</sup> Wryly commenting on the violence of southwest Georgia, a young man asked “Why is Hollywood still producing Westerns instead of Southern?”<sup>11</sup> Comparing it to his own hometown of Thomasville, Georgia, Andrew Young attested that “Albany was one of the reasons black folk in Thomasville hadn’t complained too much- they had only to Albany to consider their own status bearable.”<sup>12</sup> Contrary to popular depiction, it is clear that Albany did not represent an anomaly in regards to the violence of the Deep South. If anything, it represented a stellar example of violent repression, as Birmingham and Selma would later become.

Cordell Reagon and Charles Sherrod descended into this environment in October of 1961. Neither man was from Georgia, hailing from Nashville, Tennessee and Petersburg, Virginia, respectively. Both were Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretaries, dispatched to begin voter registration and civil rights work in the area. They began their work in surrounding counties, attempting to register the large number of African-Americans living there, as well as bolster community support. However, the two found the nearby areas of “Terrible” Terrell and

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Rev. Ralph Abernathy, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 6, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 7, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Zinn *The Southern Mystique* (South End Press, 2002), 147.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Young, *And Easy Burden: The CRM and the Transformation of America*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers), 166.



“Bad” Baker counties too hostile for voter registration work, resulting in a move back to Albany in late October.<sup>13</sup> Hoping to capitalize on the resentment of segregation and “a lot of brutality from police going on,” the two began tapping into the community.<sup>14</sup> Sherrod explained their strategy: “We would go into a town and find out where the children hung out, the high school kids, the college kids. And find out what was happening...what was the main issue in the various communities. ...After observing that, [we would] move the young people toward that, and deal with it.”<sup>15</sup> The presence of Albany State College encouraged the SNCC activists who believed that the student population would help form a solid base for their activities.

Luckily for SNCC, Sherrod and Reagon found a number of students receptive to their message at the College. Many of these students had been previously involved in the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council. The SNCC secretaries began holding meetings to teach nonviolent principles to young students and to encourage voter registration. From the beginning, the two made clear their desire to build a movement with its “strength...in the people.”<sup>16</sup> As in many communities across the South, voter registration proved difficult. The registrar had a habit of taking lunch breaks for days at a time, and upon returning, enjoyed quizzing African-American applicants on complex sections of the Constitution. At times, his

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<sup>13</sup>John A. Ricks III, “‘De Lawd’ Descends and Is Crucified; Martin Luther King, Jr. in Albany, Georgia.” *The Journal of Southwest Georgia History*, 2 (1984) 3; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960’s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 56.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on December 20, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, December 20, 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, December 20, 1985.

questions strayed from the material. Rev. Horace C. Boyd remembers being asked to name how many bubbles were on a bar of soap.<sup>17</sup> Through conscious effort, the white establishment sought to keep African-Americans disenfranchised and politically impotent. Despite this, civil rights activities found initial support among some local students.

In contrast to their reception among the young, the arrival of the SNCC activists elicited a far chillier response from the black adult community. Sherrod attributed the less than welcoming environment to rampant fear. People “didn’t want to be connected to us in any way.”<sup>18</sup> Revealing the attitude many African-American adults held, Dr. William G. Anderson, a local osteopath, stated the SNCC secretaries “infiltrated the community.”<sup>19</sup> Anderson further stated, “In a small rural town like Albany, Georgia, we just weren’t accustomed to outsiders coming in,” and going so far as to call the young men “agitators.”<sup>20</sup> Sherrod and Reagon did little to assuage the worry of the African-American community, openly declaring their intention to turn the town on its head.<sup>21</sup> The local chapter of the NAACP “regarded the coming of SNCC with horror,” viewing Sherrod’s and Reagon’s actions as a challenge to their more conservative, legal-based

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<sup>17</sup> Kevin Sack. “A Time to Reap for Foot Soldiers of Civil Rights,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2008, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Cluster, 14; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 7, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; William G. Anderson, “Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement,” *The Journal of Southwest Georgia History*, 9 (Fall 1994), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Howard Zinn. *The Southern Mystique* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 125.

methods of civil rights protest and local control.<sup>22</sup> NAACP leader Thomas Chatmon's apparently unfounded assertion that Sherrod and Reagon were communists led to other member of the community to express their discomfort with having the two SNCC workers in Albany. Wild claims of communist sympathies and suicidal demonstration tactics suggest that many adult members of the community felt uncomfortable with SNCC's presence in Albany.<sup>23</sup> Far from garnering a broad base of community support, the SNCC secretaries were alienating key members of the black community due to their openly disruptive tactics.

Despite opposition from adults, student support for Sherrod and Reagon grew slowly. As this support spread, the SNCC secretaries began planning the first direct challenge to segregation in Albany. Both men agreed to test the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling banning segregation in interstate bus terminals, which was to go into effect November 1, 1961.<sup>24</sup> Along with the approval of the Youth Council, the test plan called for Sherrod and Reagon to test the facilities as interstates travelers arriving by bus with simultaneous integration of waiting rooms by Albany students.<sup>25</sup> When the SNCC pair arrived, however, they saw only a small group of Albany policemen, headed by Chief Pritchett. The pair was confused over the lack of student support. The absence of student protestors resulted from a Youth Council decision to postpone the test without

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<sup>22</sup> Fairclough, 87.

<sup>23</sup> James Forman. *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 255-256; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 526. For the best account of the problems within the NAACP Youth Council, see Branch, 525-527.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. December 20, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> Branch, 527.

informing Sherrod or Reagon. As a result, the SNCC secretaries quietly slipped out of the terminal.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving the station, Sherrod and Reagon found the Albany community in a state of chaos. “Paranoia was loose among the Negroes,” Taylor Branch states, “who had warned of beatings and even massacres at the station.”<sup>27</sup> The fear of openly defying the status quo of segregation motivated inaction in the community, even among supposed student supporters. Sherrod and Reagon eventually prodded nine students back to the Trailways bus station, but only with intense cajoling. Arriving at the station, the nine students attempted to seat themselves in the white waiting room. Almost immediately, Chief Pritchett ordered the students to disperse. Obeying, the students retreated back to town to confer with Sherrod and Reagon. Though extremely minor by later standards of protest, the students’ attempt to desegregate the station led to widespread black interest in protest activities, even among adults who had previously shunned the methods of the SNCC secretaries. The SNCC workers’ organizing had elicited fear and panic, but the students’ action led to black community support that was otherwise absent. In order to challenge the city from a legal standpoint, the NAACP and other Albany adults agreed to support a test arrest at the station.

Realizing the need to organize the community, the leaders of SNCC, the NAACP, and other groups met on November 17, 1961, to form what became known as the Albany

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<sup>26</sup> Ralph Abernathy. *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 203-204.

<sup>27</sup> Branch, 527.

Movement.<sup>28</sup> The Movement selected William G. Anderson, a local doctor, to head the Movement as its president, recommended by C.B. King, a well-respected black lawyer. C.B. King may have been motivated by the fact that Anderson “was a relative newcomer and had not had the opportunity to make a lot of enemies around town.”<sup>29</sup> Anderson’s initial opposition to SNCC’s activities were conveniently forgotten, a fact that revealed the lack of concrete community support. For Sherrod, it represented the fulfillment of his early goals. “we were trying to promote a movement. We were not trying to do a project.”<sup>30</sup>

The “spontaneous” nature of the Movement was clear to all. Importantly, however, this support was neither independently generated nor generally supported. Many of the adults who now lent their vocal support opposed protest activities only days before. Even the head of the Movement, Dr. Anderson, expressed discomfort with the early work of SNCC in Albany. Despite nominally claiming to be a community movement, the Albany Movement did not represent a significant upswell of independent community support. Rather, in response to the outside pressure of SNCC and their actions in Albany, community members were beginning to demonstrate interest. Describing the formation of the Albany Movement, Anderson stated “the catalyst was of course the SNCC students coming in” revealing that the community had little interest

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<sup>28</sup> Pat Watters. *Down To Now: Reflections on the Civil Rights Movement* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 156. Other groups included the Criterion Club, the Negro Voter’s League, the Ministerial Alliance, and the Federation of Women’s Clubs.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, 7. Perhaps significantly as well, Anderson was known as a “man of conservative persuasion.” Forman, 255.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. December 20, 1985.

independent of SNCC's actions.<sup>31</sup>

Up to this point, protest in Albany remained limited to actions by students trained and counseled by Sherrod and Reagon. The small scale protest that resulted at the Trailways terminal on November 1 and the ensuing student enthusiasm made many blacks feel obligated to support their own children by joining in on protest activities. "The kids were going to do it anyway," local parent and later activist Irene Wright stated, "they were holding their own mass meetings and making plans...we didn't want them to have to do it alone."<sup>32</sup> While many black adults favored the legal action and negotiation promulgated by the NAACP to direct positive action, they nevertheless supported SNCC protest because of their children's involvement in it. As a result, a committee was formed and "petitioned the City Council to set into place some mechanism...of desegregating the City of Albany," as well as preparing for more positive action, such as demonstrations and arrests.<sup>33</sup> The support of the parents was important, but there existed a great divide between support and dedication. More reluctant members of the community now supported the Movement. The question now would be whether that support would translate into action.

Three days after the founding of the Albany Movement, five students from Albany State College attempted to integrate the Trailways bus terminal at Sherrod's urging. Chief Pritchett arrested the protestors, though not before attempting to convince

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> Fairclough, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Chalfen, "Rev. Samuel B. Wells and Black Protest in Albany, 1945-1965." 43.

the protesters to leave.<sup>34</sup> The arrests sparked further interest in the black community. For the first time, Albany's black community stood behind actions catalyzed by the SNCC secretaries. Leaders organized a well-attended mass meeting at Mount Zion Church three days later. The atmosphere was electric. Sherrod described the scene: "Tears filled the eyes of hard, grown men who had seen with their own eyes merciless atrocities committed...when we rose to sing 'We Shall Overcome,' nobody could imagine what kept the church on four corners."<sup>35</sup> Over five hundred people paraded to protest the conviction of the five students, all summarily expelled from the College because of their arrests. The police took no action against the protestors, and Albany blacks had demonstrated their support for the student protestors without consequence or repercussion.<sup>36</sup>

The jailing, and indeed mass jailing, of protestors was certainly on the mind of Movement leaders at this early stage of protest.<sup>37</sup> Even more conservative members bought into SNCC's idea of "filling the jails," hoping to use it to build community support and force concessions from the city. This transition to a "jail, no bail" strategy would be a defining decision. Sherrod explained:

The key to this situation, as far as promoting the general campaign, was that they intended to stay in jail...it gives us emotionalism to work harder, it gives the people concern to

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* December 20, 1985; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976. Interview B-00027. Southern Oral History Program Collection; Branch, 530.

<sup>35</sup> Zinn, *SNCC*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Branch, 535. The Albany mayor gave the Movement permission to march, a fact that had not been cleared with Chief Pritchett, who at this early juncture had not yet fully enacted his later plan of nonviolent enforcement.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. November 7, 1985.

come to meetings, so when there's an arrest, the first thing we do is call a meeting, that same day that there's an arrest. And then we get a large group of people who come to hear about the arrest....When people come out of jail, they'll tell about the arrest. So everything is reinforced. And it goes wider and wider and wider.<sup>38</sup>

This strategy was clearly at work early on in the Movement. Black support was widespread for the students, and enthusiasm ran high. Accustomed to petitions and long, drawn out legal cases, the community experienced widespread spontaneous interest in protest activities. Yet as broad as interest and support was among the community, it still remained unclear how far Albany blacks would go in order to force concessions against the white establishment. The model of mass arrests propounded by Sherrod necessitated substantial numbers of people willing to go to jail, something that in turn required the community to move from passive support to widespread dedication.

Less direct methods were at work early on in the Movement, however. Movement leaders drafted a new petition calling for the formation of a biracial committee to examine race relations and desegregation policies. Black leaders submitted the petition to the City Council for consideration, but met with little success. Headed by Mayor Asa Kelley, the City Council had a notable history of ignoring any and every complaint brought before it by the black community.<sup>39</sup> Prior to the Albany Movement, most of these complaints centered around maintenance of public works in African-American communities, such as unpaved streets and sidewalks. The pattern of ignoring black

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* December 20, 1985.

<sup>39</sup> Howard Zinn, *Albany: A Study in National Responsibility* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1962), 14, 17.



community issues continued, as Anderson's initial audience with the City Council ended in him being told that the council "determined that there is no common ground for discussion, and did not deem it appropriate to have it as an agenda item."<sup>40</sup> The next day, the local newspaper, the *Albany Herald*, answered for the white establishment even more emphatically. The paper characterized Anderson as a hothead, and decried any attempt to change the status quo in Albany, going so far as to list Anderson's address and telephone number for any "interested" party, which would be used by whites to threaten and bother Anderson throughout his time as president of the Albany Movement.<sup>41</sup>

With the community now energized, recently arrived SNCC field secretary Charles Jones met with Sherrod and Reagon to discuss their next move. The challenge faced now by the organizers was how best to maintain the assault upon Albany's segregation without alienating more cautious and conservative members of the movement, who still favored petitioning the city council. Should SNCC push too hard, they feared being branded as agitators. Community support was not yet so strong as to permit the SNCC members to call for demonstrations that required mass arrests and filling the jail. On the other hand, the men did worry that if they did not push hard enough, the Movement would lose enthusiasm rapidly. Sherrod, Reagon, and Jones decided to appeal for outside support. The fact that the SNCC secretaries had to tread lightly in regards to community action reveals how precarious and fickle support for the Movement was. The secretaries realized that all the support of the last few weeks could

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.; Forman, 249, see also Trezzvant W. Anderson, "The Truth About Albany, GA., Mess," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 30, 1961, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Branch, 530. The "interested parties" included local Klansmen and other hard line segregationists.

be undone quickly, should they misstep.

The SNCC workers settled on the solution of asking James Forman, executive director of SNCC, to organize a Freedom Ride to Albany in an attempt to raise and maintain community support. Forman agreed, and enlisted eight others to join him in integrating Albany's interstate terminal. By using the Freedom Riders, Sherrod, Reagon, and Jones hoped to avoid charges of provocation, while maintaining the enthusiasm for protest in the Albany community. This ignored the obvious. The use of Forman and his Freedom Riders would label the riders themselves as troublemakers, as none had any significant links with Albany prior to their ride.<sup>42</sup> This would give greater credence to Pritchett's constant complaints of "outside agitation."<sup>43</sup>

On December 10, 1961, nine Freedom Riders from Atlanta arrived at the Albany Trailways bus terminal and were met by a crowd of approximately three hundred black onlookers and a squad of Albany policemen. Chief Pritchett arrested the riders without incident, telling the press that white Albany would "not stand for these troublemakers coming into our city for the sole purpose of disturbing the peace and quiet in the city of Albany," framing the city's opposition in domestic rather than racial rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> The arrests resulted in the desired galvanization of the black community. The following day, mass meetings filled Shiloh Baptist and Mount Zion Churches. With the continuation of support, movement leaders, specifically the SNCC secretaries, began implementing their ultimate strategy of filling the jail in order to force the city into negotiations.

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<sup>42</sup> Forman, 252-253; Branch, 532, 535.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Claude Sitton. "Negroes' Unrest Grows In Georgia," *New York Times*, December 16, 1961, p. 7.

Leaders called for volunteers to march on city hall the following morning. Privately, Sherrod recognized the importance of getting people into jail and keeping them there, and evidence suggests that he told his closest supporters of this fact.<sup>45</sup> This “jail, no bail” strategy, however, was evidently not shared with the masses assembled in Shiloh and Mount Zion, or even with other members of the movement. Anderson, while fully expecting to be arrested himself, stated “we had no provisions for these people going to jail because we did not anticipate mass arrests.”<sup>46</sup> While Anderson acknowledged the strategy of filling the jails, he also was not prepared for mass arrests. It is likely Anderson believed that few arrests would be necessary in order to completely swamp the jail facilities, and that the arrest of the movement leaders and a few others would compromise the Albany police department’s ability to make arrests.<sup>47</sup> It is unclear how many of those preparing to march were aware that they might be arrested. The last time the black community marched to city hall, the police arrested no one, and it is possible that many assumed that the same would be true.

This is significant because for African Americans living in Albany, and in southwest Georgia in general, arrest and jail represented personal endangerment.<sup>48</sup> Anderson communicated the public opinion of jailing, stating “You have to understand that going to jail was probably one of the most feared things in rural Georgia. There were

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<sup>45</sup>Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Branch, 535.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Glenn Eskew. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 43.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Branch, 536.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950’s to 1980’s*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 102.

many blacks who were arrested in small towns in Georgia never to be heard from again...going to jail was no small thing.”<sup>49</sup> Horrible conditions in local jails were well known to many, and it is important that many who agreed to march initially may have done so without preparation for extended stays in jail, which placed strain upon people economically, families especially.<sup>50</sup> A mass jailing strategy necessitated more than mere support from the community; it required absolute dedication. The strategy could not be successful without widespread positive effort by members of the community. Up to this point, very little absolute support had been shown, with most positive action resulting from SNCC’s direct influence. Yet, the Movement was poised to test the resolve of the community through a baptism of fire, namely by sending hundreds of supporters to prison.

The following day, over four hundred people marched to city hall in downtown Albany, protesting the arrest of the Freedom Riders. The city gave the marchers permission to circle the block twice, and when the marchers refused to stop after the allotted distance, Pritchett ordered the protestors arrested.<sup>51</sup> Herding the protestors into the alley between police headquarters, Pritchett arrested 267 protestors, including Sherrod and Reagon, and many of their young supporters.<sup>52</sup> The Movement continued to hold meetings in Shiloh and Mount Zion, sending two hundred and two protestors to jail the following day. In response to these marches, Pritchett informed the press that “We can’t

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985.

<sup>50</sup> Young, 168.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976.

<sup>52</sup> “Albany, GA Jails 267 Negro Youths,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1961, p. 1; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985.

tolerate the NAACP or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or any other ‘nigger’ organization to take over this town with mass demonstrations.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite almost five hundred arrests since the Freedom Ride, the Albany jail was not full. This presented problem for the “jail, no bail” strategy of the Movement. Pritchett had not been forced to turn away those whom he had arrested and therefore would not soon be forced into concessions. Pritchett, who had been warned of the possibility of mass marches, had devised a plan to ensure that his jail would never be full. Pritchett planned to use jails in the surrounding counties to house Albany prisoners should their number threaten to swamp his facilities. As he stated, “plans had been made where we had the capability of 10,000 prisoners, and never put one in our city jail.”<sup>54</sup> As Pritchett himself attested, the protestors “were to be shipped out to surrounding cities in a circle...we had fifteen miles, twenty five miles, forty five miles, on up to about seventy miles that we could ship prisoners to.”<sup>55</sup> Pritchett had seen to it that Albany would not be required to pay for the prisoners to be housed in other jails, as local law enforcement had agreed to absorb the cost so as to protect the segregationist cause. Pritchett did insist that his own men police the jails themselves, however, in order to maintain control over Albany prisoners.<sup>56</sup> This maneuver dealt the Movement a significant setback, as no one conceived of Pritchett’s ability to increase his jail capacity this drastically.

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<sup>53</sup> “202 More Negroes Seized in Georgia,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1961, p. 47. Pritchett challenges this statement, saying he was misquoted by reporters. He maintains he never used the word “nigger” in reference to the NAACP and SNCC, and blames the *Atlanta Daily Constitution* with misquoting him. However, he is quoted as such in the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, both papers Pritchett held to be “down the middle” in their reporting. See Reston Interview.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.

For many of those arrested the realization that they were going to jail not in their hometown of Albany but rather in outlying areas such as “Bad” Baker County struck terror into their hearts. Prison conditions were harsh, with jail cells packed to many times their intended capacity. One woman described her cell in the Camilla jail designed to accommodate twenty prisoners being packed with over eighty-eight women.<sup>57</sup> Andrew Young, describing Albany jail conditions as “harrowing,” described jailors refusing to heat the jail in the winter, and raising the heat and closing the windows on hot days.<sup>58</sup> James Forman reported that many of those jailed spent most of their time “wondering when they would get out of jail,” suggesting that the expectation of staying in jail was not one most people were aware of. Some voiced their astonishment when they were arrested. One young woman stated “I didn’t expect to go to jail for kneeling and praying at city hall.”<sup>59</sup> The misery of sitting in jail cells far from home sapped the resolve of many of those who initially agreed to march and risk arrest. Along with the fact that many of those arrested did not expect to be, the mass jailing of Albany blacks presented the Movement with an enormous strategic problem. The infeasibility of filling the Albany jail meant that the basic strategy proposed by SNCC and supported by the Movement could not be successful. While admirable, the suffering of Albany residents in jail accomplished little and represented an exercise in futility. This lack of concrete result would have a profound effect on the consciousness of the Albany African-American community.

Facing miserable conditions, many asked the Movement to bail them out of jail,

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<sup>57</sup> Zinn, *The Southern Mystique*, 163.

<sup>58</sup> Young, 169.

<sup>59</sup> Zinn, *The Southern Mystique*, 164.

as the \$100 (later \$200) cash bond was far beyond the reach of most blacks living in Albany. But the Albany Movement lacked the money to bail out all of those who requested it. There was no significant treasury, owing to the spontaneous nature of its foundation. The inability of many blacks to post bail meant that they could not go to work, which resulted in many black emerging from jail only to learn that they were no longer employed. This put enormous strain on those arrested. As the SCLC report on Albany concluded, “Those who have gone to jail in Albany will tell you that you never quite realize what sacrifice might mean until you are directly involved.”<sup>60</sup> The Movement’s call for utter self sacrifice from people who had been apathetic at best a mere two weeks prior to their arrest seems to have been a naïve request at best. Further, the troubles that those arrested had gone through, including job loss and terrible jail conditions, meant nothing so long as the jail remained unfilled.

The Movement needed a way to keep up the assault upon the City Council, and at the same time ensure that such action would be more effective than the initial round of mass arrests. Instead of looking for other ways to effectively protest the segregationist policies of Albany that did not rely upon extremely high levels of community resolve, the Movement leaders paradoxically opted to continue their “jail, no bail” strategy. Older members of the Movement decided that another spark would be needed in order to prompt others to join their fellow citizens in jail. Anderson proposed they ask his friend Martin Luther King, Jr. to come and aid the Movement. The Movement leaders not in jail agreed to this course of action, with the notable exception of Forman who, ironically, felt

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<sup>60</sup> “Albany Report to the Executive Director” Part 2.

that inviting King would destroy the local character of the Movement.<sup>61</sup> Anderson called King, who agreed to come and give a speech on December 15.<sup>62</sup>

Although at the time Anderson claimed to be calling upon King to raise community support, in later years, he would admit to requesting his presence based upon the experience King and the SCLC would bring in conducting a mass movement. By the third day of marches and arrests, the Movement leadership realized that they had neither the resources nor the experience necessary to conduct a campaign of Albany's magnitude. "We were not prepared for the arrest of hundreds of people" Anderson stated. "It did not take long for us to come to the realization that we needed some professional help."<sup>63</sup> In the words of Wyatt T. Walker, the executive director of SCLC at the time, "SNCC was in over its head,"<sup>64</sup> something that Sherrod later grudgingly conceded. In Sherrod's words, "We didn't know what we were doing. We'd never done it before. Nobody had ever gotten that many people to go to jail."<sup>65</sup> But like SNCC and the Albany Movement, the SCLC would have to come up with a strategy on the fly, as no organization in the country had any type of practical experience in conducting a mass

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<sup>61</sup> Forman, 255.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. November 7, 1985.

<sup>63</sup> William G. Anderson, "Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement," *The Journal of Southwest Georgia History*, 9 (Fall 1994), 8.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Wyatt T. Walker, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 11, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, December 20, 1985.



arrest campaign.<sup>66</sup>

Other benefits of having King come to Albany also influenced the Movement's decision. By inviting King, by then a prominent national figure, the Albany Movement ensured that national and global attention would be riveted on them. Additionally, leaders hoped that King's presence would increase the pressure on the City Council to accept some of the policies presented by the Movement. There was little hope of the Council accepting any reforms, as the Movement's inability to fill the jails gave them little leverage at the bargaining table.<sup>67</sup> Further, Anderson was under considerable strain, as his prominent place as head of the Movement had led to many death threats against him and his family and Anderson no doubt thought King would draw attention off of him.<sup>68</sup> But the most serious problems facing the Movement, the lack of bail money and the inability to fill the jails, would not be solved by inviting yet another outside influence into Albany.

Accompanied by his close friend Ralph Abernathy, King arrived in Albany prepared to deliver a speech to the local population, "without even an overnight bag or a toothbrush."<sup>69</sup> The news of King's arrival packed Shiloh and Mount Zion; even people from surrounding towns traveled to Albany to hear the famous preacher speak. King delivered his speech to an enthusiastic audience, emphasizing the strengthening of community resolve. King urged those gathered to "keep moving," opining that they

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<sup>66</sup> King and others had expounded theories and models for running a campaign based upon nonviolent arrest. But up to this point, no campaign had ever attempted to apply the model to a concrete situation.

<sup>67</sup> Claude Sitton, "Negro Unrest Grows in Georgia," *New York Times*, December 14, 1961, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson, 7-9; Ricks "De Lawd," 5.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.

would overcome segregation “with the power of our capacity to endure.”<sup>70</sup> After Dr. King spoke, Dr. Anderson took the pulpit and informed the congregation that King would remain in Albany and would lead a march on city hall the next morning. Although not planning on marching in Albany, King claimed he was moved by the spirit he felt in the Albany population. “I cannot rest, I cannot stand idly by, while these people are suffering for us so that we can obtain a better social order.”<sup>71</sup> This ran counter to SCLC executive Andrew Young’s assessment, who noted that “Martin had no intention of going to jail in Albany.”<sup>72</sup>

The ambiguity of King’s decision to remain in Albany remains a defining aspect of the Movement. It certainly did result in maintaining support in the community, as the attendance of mass meetings attests.<sup>73</sup> However, this support was merely vocal and did not represent intensely committed dedication on the part of Albany citizens. It remained unclear how many of these supporters would agree to jail stays and agree to wholly dedicate themselves to ending segregation. Additionally, this incident would also bolster King’s reputation as a “fireman” who aided local protests as they sprang up around the country.<sup>74</sup> But unlike a true firefighter, King entered a blaze he neither understood nor was prepared for. He had only a cursory knowledge of the protests in Albany, knowing little more than he had read in the popular press. He was not only hopelessly ignorant of

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<sup>70</sup> Branch, 546.

<sup>71</sup> Anderson, 11. King would later claim he made the decision to stay, but the truth is that Anderson told the crowd that King was staying, forcing King’s hand. Anderson admits to having deceived King, but expresses no regret over his action “because he brought a new dimension to the Albany Movement that we had not had before.”

<sup>72</sup> Raines, 425.

<sup>73</sup> See Watters 200-211 for accounts of mass meetings before and after King’s arrival in Albany.

<sup>74</sup> Hampton, 105.

the logistics of the Movement, but also the extent to which the community would dedicate themselves to his taxing protest methods. The fact that the SCLC was equally unprepared makes King's decision to stay in Albany at the very least a short-sighted one. As deficient as his knowledge of Albany was, the forces arrayed against King and the SCLC in the Albany police department would also prove a significant stumbling block to victory in Albany.

At City Hall, King's arrival prompted an immediate response, and Pritchett began enacting plans he had prepared prior to King's arrival. Somewhat of an anomaly among prominent Southern lawmen due to his lack of blatant racist rhetoric, Pritchett began studying King's tactics during the Montgomery bus boycott, going so far as to read King's book on the subject. Searching for a method that would best allow him to enforce Albany's segregation laws and prevent any concessions, Pritchett devised a strategy remarkably similar to that of King's doctrine of nonviolence. Pritchett planned to prevent any assault on Albany's laws by increasing the city's "sheer capacity to absorb their capacity to suffer."<sup>75</sup> This strategy of segregation defense would transform the struggle for equality into a test of will between black protestors and the white establishment. Although not explicitly attempting to frame the struggle as such, Pritchett's strategy placed the decision for black victory or defeat in Albany squarely at the feet of Movement leaders. Thus, the burden of victory would be on King and the Movement. The determining factor in Albany would be the Movement's ability to get people into jail and keep them there long enough to pressure on the City Council into negotiations. This subtle aspect of Pritchett's plan would have immediate repercussions for the Movement,

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<sup>75</sup> David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 125.

even though the real result of his policies would not be discovered by Civil Rights leaders until years later.

Pritchett's plan of non-confrontational enforcement of segregation, along with his capacity to jail huge numbers of black protestors, threw a challenge at the Movement's leaders. In order to break segregation using a strategy of mass incarcerations, the Movement would have to send many times more protestors to prison. The economic consequences of being imprisoned as well as the wretched conditions of Albany jails meant that enormous numbers of intensely dedicated Albany blacks would have to accept long term jail stays in order for the Movement's strategy to be successful. But even at its peak in the previous days, only around one thousand persons had volunteered for jail, and many of them demanded to be bailed out immediately due to the conditions in the jails. This number represented a mere tenth of Pritchett's stated jail capacity of ten thousand.<sup>76</sup> Anything short of absolute dedication on the part of the Albany community would render mass march protest futile.

To prevent any violent incidents, Pritchett began educating his men to avoid any actions that could be conceived of as brutal. He deactivated the city's K-9 unit, and would not allow police dogs to be used. He even went so far as to subject his own policemen to the nonviolent training of SNCC, conducting workshops where policemen were spit upon and struck and taught not to retaliate.<sup>77</sup> This denied the Movement another avenue of victory, meaning that as long as the Movement decided to fight the uphill battle of "jail, no bail," the resolve they would be able to generate in the community would be

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* November 7, 1985; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976.

the sole determining factor in Albany. This placed an enormous burden on the Movement. Blatant violence represented a significant possible rallying point for Movement leaders, who could use outbreaks of police brutality to increase dedication as well as the number of jail volunteers in the community. Additionally, mass movement theorists, such as King, believed that significant levels of violence would prompt federal intervention, through the use of federal marshals or national guardsmen. By ensuring that violence would not break out in Albany, Pritchett forced the Movement to rely solely upon its strategy of filling the jail.

Historians have long focused upon Pritchett's methods as the reason for the Albany Movement's failure.<sup>78</sup> David Lewis, in a chapter fittingly entitled "Albany, Georgia- Nonviolence in Black and White" attests that "Pritchett and his men did conduct themselves on the whole with ostentatious restraint and civility."<sup>79</sup> James Colaiaco supports this claim in his broader work on the use of nonviolent tactics by stating that Albany's inability to provoke violent police response led to its failure.<sup>80</sup> Authors cite Pritchett's ability to avoid violent confrontation as a main factor in the defeat at Albany.

Pritchett's actions certainly played a role, but the inability of the Movement to bring sufficient pressure against segregation represented the root cause of Pritchett's

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<sup>78</sup>Branch, 524-632; Michael Chalfen, "'The Way Out Many Lead In': The Albany Movement Beyond Martin Luther King." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (Fall 1995): 560-598; James A. Colaiaco, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Paradox of Nonviolent Direct Action." *Phylon* 47 (1<sup>st</sup> Qrt., 1986) 16-28; Fairclough, 85-109; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986), 173-230; David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 140-170; Stephen B. Oates, "The Albany Movement; A Chapter in the Life of Martin Luther King, Jr." *The Journal of South Georgia History* 16 (2004); Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 147-164.

<sup>79</sup> Lewis, 150.

<sup>80</sup> Colaiaco, 21.

success, and thus the failure of the Movement as a whole. In Albany, Pritchett's role was a defensive one and did not actively prevent actions by the community. The true problem lay with the continued use of the seriously flawed "jail, no bail" strategy. Movement leader's failure to understand that the Albany community was unprepared to dedicate themselves to the incredible sacrifice necessary to break segregation caused Pritchett's methods to be successful, and in turn, rendered the Movement impotent. The African-American population of Albany was at least double Pritchett's stated 10,000 inmate jail capacity, but the Albany Movement was unable to mobilize sufficient numbers of the population in order to bring real pressure against Pritchett and the white establishment.<sup>81</sup>

On December 16, 1961, Albany policemen arrested King, Abernathy, Anderson, and 265 Albany residents without incident for parading without a permit in front of city hall. Refusing bail, King vowed to remain in jail until the city made concessions to the Movement's requests for limited desegregation.<sup>82</sup> However, three days after making this promise, King reneged, as Anderson began suffering severe anxiety attacks, perhaps brought on by his own admitted fear of jail. He absolutely refused bail by himself, and as a result, King accepted bail on December 18.<sup>83</sup>

The environment in Albany had changed drastically in the three short days King had spent in prison. Negotiations between the City Council and the Albany Movement had continued. However, at this early juncture of SCLC involvement, no SCLC members were included in these discussions. Tensions between the SCLC and SNCC were to

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, interviewed by James Reston, April 23, 1976.

<sup>82</sup> Claude Sitton, "Dr. King among 265 Negroes Seized in March on Albany, GA. City Hall," *New York Times*, December 17, 1961, p. 17.

<sup>83</sup> "Dr. King is Freed," *New York Times*, December 19, 1961, p. 1.

blame for some of this, as Wyatt T. Walker's arrival in Albany particularly bothered the SNCC workers. Sherrod and Reagon especially resented Walker's domineering attitude and insistence on dictatorial control of Movement activities.<sup>84</sup> Prior to King's release, negotiators reached a verbal settlement with the movement. The Council was adamant that the "settlement," be a verbal one, as to avoid later proof of any concessions.<sup>85</sup> The city agreed to desegregate the Trailways bus terminal, which was already mandated by law, "consider" forming a biracial committee on race relations, and agreed to release those arrested in the protests following the Freedom Ride on signature bonds.<sup>86</sup> In return, Movement negotiators agreed to temporarily stop demonstrating. The result of the agreement definitely benefitted the city, as they gave no tangible concessions to the Movement, while halting the protest.<sup>87</sup>

Hearing of the settlement for the first time, King claimed to have accepted bond to avoid standing in the way of meaningful negotiations. Seemingly endorsing the worthless settlement, King's name became synonymous with it despite the fact he had been uninvolved in its creation.<sup>88</sup> His departure from Albany the following day strengthened his claim of wishing to remain a non-factor in continued discussions between the Council and the Movement. Independent of community opinion, King's actions seem logical, especially given the fact that he had not been aware of the true

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Wyatt T. Walker, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, October 11, 1985; Young, 177.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.

<sup>86</sup> "Dr. King is Freed," *New York Times*, December 19, 1961, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985; Branch, 552-556.

<sup>88</sup> "Dr. King is Freed," *New York Times*, December 19, 1961, p. 1.

nature of the settlement. However, King and the SCLC's lack of understanding regarding community opinion and expectations meant his actions had a much more negative effect on the Movement than either would have thought.

Albany blacks met the settlement with a mixture of anger and disappointment. Worked into a frenzy by King and other leaders, black citizens faced a settlement that failed to reward them for their days in rural Georgian jails. For those who had gone to jail and lost their jobs, the settlement was unacceptable. As Howard Zinn, reporting on Albany for the Southern Regional Council, concluded "many of those jailed for protesting viewed the settlement as 'pitifully small payment for weeks of protest, for centuries of waiting.'"<sup>89</sup> Few in the community would forget that they had lost their jobs and endured terrible conditions in jail only to be granted petty concessions. This loss of interest and moral severely compromised the Movement's ability to increase support. Even among the leadership, there was little optimism. As an anonymous leader within the Albany Movement remarked, "It's nothing to shout to the rafters about."<sup>90</sup> Few would forget that they had marched to prison with a man who had now bailed out and left town, leaving them in prison with no semblance of progress.

The disappointment of suffering in jail for no tangible purpose cannot be overestimated. The Movement's inability to understand the shortcomings of the "jail, no bail" strategy severely compromised their ability to maintain the resolve necessary to make such a strategy effective. People enduring the hardship of jail expected concrete results for their sacrifice, as evidenced by the negative opinion of the settlement among the community. This fundamental oversight by Movement leaders is not entirely

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<sup>89</sup> Zinn, *SNCC*, 131.

<sup>90</sup> Forman, 259.



blameworthy; no campaign like Albany had ever been attempted in the history of the country. But the lack of lessons learned from the early experiences in Albany is puzzling, revealing both King and the Movement's failure to understand the risk-reward dynamic sustaining a mass movement.

The transition to economic boycotts and selective buying campaigns in the period between King's release in December and his trial in February demonstrate that black Albany retained interest in fighting segregation, as long as that support did not necessitate arrest. Perhaps the most successful aspect of economic protest revolved around the boycott of the city bus system. Busing was provided by a private company, and blacks comprised an overwhelming majority of those that patronized the service. The boycott hit the bus company hard, with the owners openly admitting that they needed help.<sup>91</sup> They met with members of the city council who, using their influence among wealthy businessmen in town, were able to subsidize the company in order to keep it afloat, to the tune of \$3,000 a day.<sup>92</sup> By doing this, the Albany white community signaled that it was willing to pay the price to maintain segregation in Albany.

When Anderson and other leaders brought concerns over transportation desegregation to the City Council, Mayor Kelley brushed aside the requests, asked for ten days to consider it, and then adjourned the meeting.<sup>93</sup> While personally in favor of at least considering some conciliatory reforms, Kelley found no support among other

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<sup>91</sup> Claude Sitton "Negroes Boycott Albany, GA., Buses," *New York Times*, January 28, 1962, p. 65.

<sup>92</sup> "Albany Business Men Seek Parley in Demonstrations," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 9, 1962, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> Claude Sitton "Negroes Boycott Albany, GA., Buses," *New York Times*, January 28, 1962, p. 65.

members of the City council, who uniformly opposed any altering of segregation laws, knowing that as long as they refused to yield, the Movement was virtually powerless to stop them. Despite his own personally moderate opinion, Kelley did not allow any semblance of division to reach the press or the black community, realizing that any sign of division would weaken the segregationist cause.<sup>94</sup>

Continued boycotting of the bus system paid off in early February, when the bus company was forced to shut down. Black participation rates, estimated to be over ninety percent, made the boycott quite effective. But the effect of this shutdown was worse for the black community than it was for the white. Wyatt T. Walker stated: “the bus company went bankrupt, and the black people who made up seventy percent of its ridership were inconvenienced and the Albany Movement had no semblance of victory.”<sup>95</sup> Unlike in Montgomery, Albany leaders had no plans to deal with the logistical difficulties arising from lack of transportation for the community.<sup>96</sup> The protest had hurt the white community, but not to the point of forcing concessions. The wealthy members of the community who sat on the City Council and held economic power were unaffected as a whole as a result of the boycott. Again, blacks were sacrificing without any tangible result.<sup>97</sup>

The boycott against white businesses also proved effective, although not as

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<sup>94</sup> Garrow, 191.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Wyatt T. Walker, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, October 11, 1985.

<sup>96</sup> The bus boycott directed by Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 included extensive organization that ensured participants would still be able to get to work, through large-scale carpooling. Albany had no plans to address this problem and participants were largely forced to rely on taxis run by black drivers. Claude Sitton “Negroes Boycott Albany, GA., Buses,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1962, 65.

<sup>97</sup> Hampton et al., 151.

successful as the bus boycott. Some white businessmen lost over fifty percent of their business as a result of these selective buying campaigns. At city council meetings held over the next few weeks, local merchants responded to the economic pressure by urging members of the city council to accept token reforms, such as integrating the bus system, hoping that if these demands were met, the boycott would cease. Unlike the busing crisis, the vocal support of the merchants for race reform represented positive pressure against the City Council. However, desegregation could not happen without a city council vote to change segregation laws, something the council refused to do. In order to bolster support for their decision, council members framed the vote as a defense of the city's law-making ability. "This is a struggle to decide who makes the policy in this city," said council member C.B. Pritchett.<sup>98</sup> Criticism from local white merchants continued, but in the end many of the merchants accepted the losses. Pritchett recounts being told by a group of merchants that "we're losing money, but we know what this is. And we're going to stand back; we're not going to put any pressure. Just go ahead."<sup>99</sup> "This" was a war over segregation and the status quo in Albany. Even though they were hurting economically, the portion of the white community most adversely affected by civil rights protest held the interests of segregation over their own economic success, revealing the solidarity the white community had in fighting segregation. Although the black community participated and supported in large numbers, far larger than had been involved in marches, economic protest would have little tangible effect upon the overall Albany Movement.

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<sup>98</sup> Garrow, 191-193; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985; Councilman C.B. Pritchett and Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett were not related.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, conducted by James Reston, April 23, 1976. See also Claude Sitton "Negroes Boycott Albany, GA., Buses," *New York Times*, January 28, 1962, p. 65; "Albany Business Men Seek Parley in Demonstrations," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 9, 1962, p. 2; Garrow 192-194.

King returned to Albany on February 27, 1962, to stand trial for his arrest in December. The trial was a quick one, and despite the predetermined outcome, Judge A.N. Durden announced that he would issue a decision within the next six months. Meanwhile, King left Albany to resume his duties with the SCLC. In Albany, boycotts and sporadic arrests continued. The Albany Movement kept trying to talk and bargain with the city council and the police department with little success. The white establishment had little reason to consider any of the Movement's proposals, as the boycott threat had already proved surmountable, and it appeared that the community was not eager to resume mass marches any time soon. Sporadic arrests did continue, but these were largely the result of so-called "test" arrests of protestors attempting to integrate public facilities.<sup>100</sup>

Durden set King's sentencing for July 10, 1962. Local leaders began fomenting interest among the community, scheduling mass meetings in Shiloh and Mount Zion in the days leading up to the decision. King and Abernathy were given the option of 45 days in prison and labor, or a \$178 fine. Both men elected to serve the time, which brought a renewal of support for the Movement. Bill Hansen, a SNCC staff member, described the effect King's incarceration had upon the community: "As much as we may disagree with MLK about the way him [sic] and SCLC do things, one has to admit that he can cause more hell to be raised by being in jail in one night than anyone else could if they bombed city hall."<sup>101</sup>

However, this enthusiasm did not translate well into community action. Despite

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<sup>100</sup> For example, in early April, 26 people, including four teenagers, were arrested in a sit in at a local drug store, but marches did not occur. See "26 Negroes at Sit-In Arrested in Georgia," *New York Times*, April 7, 1962, p. 12.

<sup>101</sup> Ricks, "De Lawd" 173.

pleading and exhortation from Sherrod and Reagon, only 32 out of over five hundred people assembled in the churches volunteered to march the next day.<sup>102</sup> While attendance at mass meetings remained high, increasingly smaller numbers volunteered for jail. Support was high, but the dedication necessary to send hundreds of people to jail remained absent. The memory of long stays in dirty, crowded jail cells weighed heavily on the local population, who now realized that the strategy of mass marches would only be successful if they agreed to extended stays in jail, something that very few people were willing to do. Yet the Movement continued to press the strategy of mass marches despite the fact that anything less than total involvement of the black community rendered any arrests meaningless.

The inability of the Movement to translate support into dedicated action led to increased frustration in the community. This frustration boiled over on the night of July 11, with over two hundred Albany blacks rioting outside a mass meeting held in Shiloh Baptist.<sup>103</sup> Seeking an outlet for their anger, the mob settled on Albany policemen monitoring the situation, hurling rocks and debris at the assembled officers. Only the quick thinking of Pritchett saved the situation from escalating any further. The incident revealed that the Movement strategy of nonviolence, despite widespread education, was not being universally abided by. The community was evidently agitated by the arrests of King and other demonstrators, but rejected the nonviolent solution of volunteering for jail time. Waters reported SNCC Freedom Rider Bill Hansen's assessment of the community

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<sup>102</sup> Claude Sitton, "Protest in Georgia," *New York Times*, July 12, 1962, p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Claude Sitton, "Protest in Georgia," *New York Times*, July 12, 1962, p. 18.

that “Most people don’t believe in nonviolence.”<sup>104</sup> This inability to command local support for nonviolence severely compromised the Movement’s ability to attack segregation.

But the fact that hundreds had initially bought into the idea of nonviolence during the early arrests in December reveals that nonviolence was not an anathema in Albany. Rather, it had grown increasingly unpopular. The Movement’s inability to produce results with nonviolent direct action caused increasing numbers of Albany citizens to become disillusioned with the strategy, as evidenced by the riot of July 11. Support for equal rights remained high, but since the Movement had not yet provided Albany residents with a useful strategy, residents turned to other methods, ones that Movement leaders did not endorse. The violence hurt the Movement’s public image, as the media frenzy that erupted in Albany reported the small riot to the world.

Although Pritchett had maintained control due to his swift action, the white establishment realized that having King imprisoned in Albany represented a source of strength for the Movement. The city was putting tremendous resources into maintaining segregation, keeping the police force on duty for weeks at a time.<sup>105</sup> The outbreak of mob violence against police the night before had reinforced the siege mentality in the minds of the city council. Mayor Kelley and his close allies in the business community knew that if King remained in jail for the duration of his sentence, it would make Albany a national arena for civil rights, something they could not allow.<sup>106</sup> As a result, the city council

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<sup>104</sup> Watters, 175.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, conducted by James Reston, April 23, 1976; Raines 362-362.

<sup>106</sup> Garrow, 204-205.

arranged for B.C. Gardner, a black partner in Mayor Kelley's law firm, to pay King and Abernathy's fines anonymously. Although Pritchett expressed no knowledge of the event at the time, he later admitted that a coalition of city councilmen and blacks had come up with the scheme to get King out of jail.<sup>107</sup>

On July 12, a "well dressed Negro gentleman" arrived at the Albany city jail, paid the \$175 fines for King and Abernathy and left. King recalled being told to dress in civilian clothes and being led to Pritchett's office, who informed them that they were free to go. When King protested that he had no desire to do so, Pritchett replied "God knows, Reverend, I don't want you in my jail."<sup>108</sup> King declared his displeasure at being released from jail, but did not immediately seek re-arrest. To the community, King had again promised to stay in jail, only to emerge after a short time. Some people still remained in prisons in Albany, Camilla, Americus, and other surrounding towns, unable to afford bail or the ability to post security bond. The reaction among the black community was overwhelmingly negative. Pritchett himself noted that King suffered a great loss of respect in the black community as a result of his inability to stay in jail. Although his release was beyond his control, King had again said one thing and done another. Andrew Young reveals that "the talk going through all the Negro community was that Martin Luther King was going 'chicken'."<sup>109</sup>

King's unwilling release from jail is one of many reasons often cited by historians

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<sup>107</sup> Raines, 361-362. Reservations over protest activities, especially among the African American elite community, were not uncommon in cities that experienced mass movement protest, likely the result of actions like Gardener's.

<sup>108</sup> Claude Sitton "Dr. King is Freed Against His Will," *New York Times*, July 13, 1962, p. 10; Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. by Clayborn Carson (New York: Warner Books Inc., 1998).

<sup>109</sup> Raines, 361.

in the analysis of the failure of the Albany Movement. Some historians have argued that King's actions in Albany resulted in its failure.<sup>110</sup> That "King's participation in the Albany Movement seems to have been an unfortunate decision which delayed desegregation in that city for several years" is a sentiment repeated by many authors in their treatment of the Albany Movement.<sup>111</sup> Adam Fairclough, in his history of the SCLC, admits that mistakes made by King, Wyatt Walker, and the SCLC did lead to the Movement's failure.<sup>112</sup> This school of thought holds that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, arrival in Albany on December 15, 1961 did not serve to help the Movement, but rather hindered its pursuit of racial equality. Many authors who propound this view point to King's relative inexperience and lack of acquaintance with the issues involved in running a successful mass movement.

King, by virtue of his leadership role, certainly shares in the blame for the lack of success in Albany. However, his actions cannot bear the full brunt of criticism. The defective strategy of mass marches preceded King's arrival. Additionally, his negative image among the community was largely due to circumstances beyond his control. He was not privy to the backdoor negotiations between Movement leaders and the City Council during his initial incarceration, and his release from jail a second time was beyond his control. Thus, to pin majority blame on King using these events as evidence is not entirely a fair assessment of what occurred in Albany. King's failure to understand the community dynamics at play behind the movement was an oversight shared by all Movement leaders, not just King. While his actions certainly had an effect upon the

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<sup>110</sup> Ricks, "Martin Luther King's Mistakes," 169-176.

<sup>111</sup> John Ricks " 'De Lawd,'" 14.

<sup>112</sup> Fairclough, 107.



eventual outcome, they do not represent the sole reason for failure.

King's release from jail did reduce the tension in the community, just as the council had hoped. Pritchett, acting as the council's public relations director, met with King and Movement leaders on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of July, discussing the possibility of a settlement. As a result of these negotiations, King told the press that they were close to a settlement, adding that the only point of controversy concerned the charges of those arrested in the original protests in December. In reality, however, Pritchett had no real negotiating power; any settlement would have to be approved by the city council, something that was certainly not going to happen.<sup>113</sup> He merely represented a foil, intended to keep up the appearance of real attempts at reconciliation. This was evident to all involved, as Abernathy and Anderson would later admit they knew Pritchett was not a reliable representative of white establishment, even at the time.<sup>114</sup>

For King, the situation was becoming critical. He had been warned by Abernathy and Walker that returning to Albany might prove to be a mistake. The community as a whole was displaying very little initiative. What little positive action that occurred resulted from prodding from Movement leaders. Mass dedication, in the form of jail volunteers and marchers, remained absent. All attempts to puncture the fortress of segregation, fortified by the stalling tactics of the City Council, failed. The Movement had reached a critical juncture. It had zero leverage with which to bargain. But the importance of Albany to the national movement was not lost to those in Albany. Charles

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<sup>113</sup> Claude Sitton, "Dr. King's Release Reduces Tensions," *New York Times*, July 14, 1962, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985; Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985. Interview with Rev. Ralph Abernathy, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 6, 1985.

Jones elucidated the point, stating “What happens in Albany and the symbol that Dr. King stands for will determine the outcome of the segregation fight.”<sup>115</sup> King himself admitted that Albany “has become a symbol of segregation’s last stand.”<sup>116</sup>

In response to his position, King threatened on July 15 to resume mass marches and mass arrests if the city did not meet the movement’s minimum demands of dropping the charges against the original December marchers. Unless the week produced significant progress, King threatened to resume the direct action protests that had characterized the initial December protests.<sup>117</sup> Mayor Kelley fired back harshly, reflecting the critical juncture the fight for segregation had reached. Labeling demonstrators as “law violators,” Kelley summarily refused to negotiate with the Movement.<sup>118</sup> This time, the city meant it. All negotiations, including Pritchett’s *faux* attempts at bargaining, were halted. The rhetoric used by the city marked a change from earlier promises to “consider” and “look over” settlements. The city was openly calling King and the Movements hand, leaving them only one choice. The city realized that whatever ensued would prove a “decisive test” for King and the Movement.<sup>119</sup> King responded that he saw no choice but to commence direct action protest.

The decision to resume mass marches was the logical progression for Movement leaders. Mass arrests were the only strategy the King and other leaders had with which to

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<sup>115</sup> “Mayor of Albany, GA., Accuses U.S. Aide of Fomenting Unrest,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1962, p. 28.

<sup>116</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Why It’s Albany,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 18, 1962, 33.

<sup>117</sup> Claude Sitton “Dr. King Threatens New Drive For Negro Rights in Albany, GA.,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> “Georgia Mayor Rejects Parley With Negroes,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1962, p. 16.

<sup>119</sup> Claude Sitton, “Profile of Albany, GA.,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1962, p. 117.

threaten the City Council. However, this threat was a virtually meaningless one. Charles Sherrod characterized the concept behind mass marches, stating “we just pushed: pressure, pressure, pressure.”<sup>120</sup> But without extensive willingness to go to jail for extended periods, mass marches would accomplish little. The ignorance among leaders as to how to produce this pressure is striking, with Sherrod admitting “sometimes we don’t know who controls this [pressure].”<sup>121</sup> The inability to attract substantial numbers of people to volunteer for jail time in the previous months makes King’s decision to resume marches even more curious. Using King’s own fireman metaphor, mass arrests would be akin to fighting a forest fire with a bucket of water. Pritchett’s jails cared little for the righteousness of the Movements cause and the courage of protestors.

Protests began the next day, with attempted integration of public facilities and sit-ins occurring at downtown drugstores. In response to this, Mayor Kelley began to strengthen his position, requesting an injunction barring King, Abernathy, Anderson, and other prominent Movement leaders from marching. Kelley had city attorneys file the petition with Federal District Judge J. Robert Elliot. King and other leaders were unaware of the court proceedings, and instead planned for a march on city hall the next day, Saturday, July 21. Returning to Albany on the night of July 20, King addressed a mass meeting, declaring his intent to march on city hall and face arrest again if need be. The city was told to expect three to five hundred demonstrators the next day, a number based on information supplied to Pritchett by newsmen and informants he had among the black

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<sup>120</sup> Hampton et al, 104.

<sup>121</sup> Hampton et al, 104.

community.<sup>122</sup>

The following morning, Judge Elliot handed down his injunction against the Movement. Naming prominent leaders, the order barred those named from marching or engaging in protest activity in Albany. Elliot based his decision on the grounds that the marches represented a challenge to white citizen's rights under the Fourteenth Amendment, a dubious legal basis. The injunction put King in a difficult position. He had long advocated for using the federal courts to promote integration and establish equality. It was his view that the federal government represented the best route towards equality, a view shared by many other national civil rights leaders. In particular, the NAACP touted this strategy of achieving racial integration, as the federal courts had provided the movement with many of its significant victories. If King marched in defiance of the injunction, he feared alienating the support he had within the Kennedy administration. However, failure to march would lead to a loss of community support, something the Albany Movement could not afford.<sup>123</sup>

After intense consideration, King decided to obey the injunction and seek a reversal in a higher court. It is possible that King's decision to honor the injunction demonstrated his hope that through the federal courts, the Movement could salvage some semblance of victory from Albany. This would take time, however, and SCLC attorney William Kunstler began working on an appeal. King's decision not to march was met

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<sup>122</sup> Claude Sitton "Negroes Rally Today in Georgia," *New York Times*, July 21, 1962, p. 11; Interview with Laurie Pritchett, conducted by James Reston., April 23, 1976. Pritchett had paid black informants who attended mass meetings in black churches. The estimate provided to the city by informants was an extremely rough one. It was likely based solely upon attendance estimates at mass meetings, which did not necessarily reflect the number of persons who actually were prepared to march and risk arrest.

<sup>123</sup> Garrow 206-208; William Kunstler *Deep In My Heart* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1966), 102; Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, December 20, 1985.

with outrage with the members of SNCC, who held little confidence in the government's ability to do anything beneficial to the movement.<sup>124</sup> SNCC was furious with King's decision, and let him know it. Sherrod, Reagon, and other young SNCC workers verbally castigated King for his decision, accusing him of supplanting their local movement, making it a nationalized struggle for his personal gain. For his part, King told the SNCC secretaries he would wait for the order to be overturned by a higher court. Later, Sherrod would state he was never angry at King, only annoyed in the way that King's methods upset his ability to organize.<sup>125</sup> The SNCC staffer realized that King had *de facto* control, as it was obvious that Anderson received all of his direction from King. Wyatt T. Walker expressed his annoyance with SNCC's constant attempts to undermine King's power in the Movement.<sup>126</sup> King made clear his intention to wait for the injunction to be overturned in a higher court.

King's decision did not stop local preacher Samuel B. Wells from taking the initiative. Standing in the pulpit of Shiloh Church, Wells called on the assembled congregation of over seven hundred citizens, informing the congregation that it was his intention to lead a march right then. "I see Dr. King's name, and I see Dr. Anderson's name, and I see Charles Sherrod, and I see this, but I don't see Samuel Wells, and I don't see Mrs. Sue Samples, and I don't see Mrs. Rufus Grant, now where are those names."

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<sup>124</sup> Ricks "Martin Luther King's Mistakes" 173. Friction between Movement leaders is sometimes cited as the cause of Albany's failure. Like Pritchett's tactics, and King's failings, divisions certainly contributed to failure, but the lack of community resolve overshadowed this aspect of the Movement.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)* December 20, 1985.

<sup>126</sup> Garrow 207; Interview with Wyatt T. Walker, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, October 11, 1985.

<sup>127</sup> Wells led over one hundred and sixty persons to city hall, all of whom were arrested. Denouncing the arrests and the assault upon the marcher's constitutional rights, King stayed at home, along with other Movement leaders. The decision of Albany blacks to march independently seems to suggest that some degree of community resolve was present, even at this point. This is certainly true. However, it represented far too little too late. The courage of those who marched was admirable, but the hard reality was that it represented a useless enterprise.

July 25, 1961 marked the resumption of protest in Albany, as William Kunstler and Movement attorneys convinced appellate Judge Elbert P. Tuttle, Elliot's direct superior, to overturn the injunction.<sup>128</sup> King and the Movement announced plans to march the next day, calling on the black community to join them. Earlier that same day, however, the first instance of outstanding police brutality had incensed the community. Marion King, the wife of Albany Movement leader C.B. King, had visited a Camilla jail along with a friend, whose daughter was imprisoned there. Standing outside the jail fence trying to speak to those in the jail cell, a local sheriff ordered her to back away from the fence. When she did not comply fast enough, the sheriff and his deputy pushed her back, slapping and kicking her to the ground.<sup>129</sup>

That evening, as King spoke to a crowd in Shiloh, a young Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) worker, Marvin Rich, began to exhort young blacks to march on city

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, December 20, 1985; Claude Sitton "Negroes Defy Ban, March in Georgia," *New York Times*, July 22, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>128</sup> John H. Britton "Injunction In Albany Is Voided By Judge Tuttle; Negotiations Meet Urged," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 25, 1962. p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> Watters, 18.

hall that very night to protest the beating. Tensions were extremely high, as news of the beating carried a force the injunction overruling did not. Taylor Branch explains the difference between the injunction overruling and the Marion King beating lucidly, stating “one story was about distant lawyers arguing over complicated things, while the other was about the brazen public beating of a very special woman in Albany.”<sup>130</sup> The anger of the community was impossible to quell, and as police attempted to arrest the marchers as they crossed Ogelthorpe Avenue, onlookers turned violent and began throwing bricks and rocks at police. The absence of Movement leaders, who were occupied holding mass meetings, meant they could not control the crowd. A policeman was injured, his jaw broken on a rock thrown by a black man. As the meeting in Shiloh let out, leaders attempted to stop the riot, but the damage had already been done.<sup>131</sup> The violence again revealed the frustration in the community with nonviolent protest. Anger and opposition to segregation was widespread, but support for the Movement’s method of attacking it was not.

Just how much damage became clear the next day, as headlines linked the rioting of the protestors to the overturning of the injunction. Claude Sitton’s front page article in the *New York Times* the next day began “The police dispersed a crowd of 2,000 angry Negroes tonight after a Federal court ban against mass demonstrations had been suspended,” creating the impression that the injunction had prevented a riot.<sup>132</sup> Pritchett rhetorically asked newsmen if they had seen the “nonviolent rocks” thrown by

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<sup>130</sup> Branch, 616-617.

<sup>131</sup> Garrow, 208-209; Claude Sitton “Albany, GA., Police Break Up Protests By 2,000 Negroes,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>132</sup> Sitton “Albany, GA., Police Break Up Protests By 2,000 Negroes,” July 25, 1962, p. 1.

demonstrators.<sup>133</sup> The outbreak of violence further deteriorated the position of the Movement, who now risked being labeled the offending parties, even though many of those rioting were not part of the actual Movement. Instead of capitalizing on the legal victory as a victory over the city council, the Movement was forced into reconciliatory measures, King calling off protests the following day in a “day of penance” for the violence of the previous night.<sup>134</sup> Instead of proving a weapon for the movement, the overturning of the injunction became a liability that King was forced to deal with. The riot further overshadowed the beating of Marion King, which might have been used as propaganda against the Albany police department.

Following the “day of penance,” King toured the local pool halls and bars, speaking of the need for nonviolence in the black community as a whole. He planned for marches two days later, and tried to enlist volunteers at a mass meeting held that night in Shiloh. He was only able to convince twenty six volunteers to march with him to city hall the following day. After asking to speak with the city council and being refused, the marchers kneeled and were arrested.<sup>135</sup> This did not create the upswell of potential marchers the Movement had hope for, as only thirty seven volunteered for jail the following day.<sup>136</sup> The black community clearly did not support the strategy of marches. Even though there were popular forms of protest, like the boycott of the city bus system,

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<sup>133</sup> Claude Sitton “Dr. King Sets a Day of Penance After Violence in Albany, GA” *New York Times* July 26, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup> Claude Sitton “Dr. King Sets a Day of Penance After Violence in Albany, GA.” *New York Times* July 26, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> Claude Sitton “Dr. King Is Jailed Again at Georgia Rally” *New York Times* July 28, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> Claude Sitton “Negro Lawyer Is Beaten, 37 Arrested in Albany, GA.” *New York Times* July 29, 1962, p. 1. Revealingly, in his effort to hold Campbell accountable, C.B. King turned to the only person in Albany he knew would consider his claim seriously. He stumbled into Pritchett’s office, who expressed his regret and displeasure over Campbell’s actions.



these strategies were unsuccessful in producing any results. Instead, economic protest mainly inconvenienced blacks. In the days following King's arrest, fewer and fewer people attended the mass meetings, with marches virtually halting. The city council sensed that the other side was close to surrender, and brought contempt charges against King, alleging that the demonstrations that defied the injunctions implicated him. Silence to requests for talks continued.<sup>137</sup>

In the absence of positive action, and with King occupied, the Movement began to shift towards voter registration, an aspect of the Movement that had been pushed into the background. The city announced its support for a "redress for grievances" through "the ballot box."<sup>138</sup> The support of the city is explained by the fact that voter registration for blacks was next to impossible, especially for openly integrationist blacks. This meant that even a seemingly significant concession meant little to the Movement, while giving the illusion of good faith on behalf of the city. Anderson announced that "At the present time the trend is to de-emphasize at least mass demonstrations and to emphasize voter registration and legal action."<sup>139</sup>

The move away from mass marches reflected the realization among those in the movements that those strategies would not be effective in combating segregation in Albany. It also demonstrated that the Movement was preparing for extended civil rights work, after King inevitably left Albany.<sup>140</sup> Of particular concern was influencing the next

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<sup>137</sup> Garrow, 210-211; Hendrick Smith "Dr. King Set Back In U.S. Court Test," *New York Times*, July 31, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>138</sup> Hendrick Smith "Negroes Seeking Albany, GA., Vote" *New York Times*, August 5, 1962, p. 56.

<sup>139</sup> Hendrick Smith "Negroes Seeking Albany, GA., Vote" *New York Times*, August 5, 1962, p. 56.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Charles Sherrod, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, December 20, 1985.

city council election, where the seats of C.B. Pritchett and fellow arch-segregationist L.W. Mott were to be contested. Abernathy characterized Anderson as “through,” and realized that the failure of the black community to “keep up the pressure” on the city rendered any marching impotent. “Rather than beat his head against a stone wall, he simply withdrew from battle, announcing that henceforth the Albany Movement would devote itself to the registration of black voters.”<sup>141</sup>

Virtually no protest occurred in the week leading up to King’s trial, set for August 10. On the trial date, King, Anderson, Abernathy, and Slater King were convicted of creating a disturbance. The white establishment took no chances, and all were fined \$200 and given suspended jail sentences, meaning King could not use his punishment to garner outside support for the Movement. In response, the two planned marches were cancelled. King announced that he would be leaving Albany “to give the City Commission a chance to open ‘good faith’ negotiations with local Negro leaders,” a decision that was lauded in both the white and black community.<sup>142</sup> Kelley responded to King’s call for serious negotiations, stating that the court decision in no way changed the city’s policies toward protestors, as they were arrested on charges of creating a disturbance rather than segregation statutes. He also dispelled the rumor that the city had already reached a negotiated settlement, and stated that he was “not aware” of any attempts at such a meeting.<sup>143</sup> Kelley further expressed his pleasure at King’s decision to leave town and

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<sup>141</sup> Abernathy, 224.

<sup>142</sup> Hedrick Smith “Dr. King Set Free After Conviction,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> Smith “Dr. King Set Free After Conviction,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1962, p. 1.

“leave local problems to local citizens which is where they belong.”<sup>144</sup>

King’s departure from Albany marked the end of the “classic” Albany Movement.<sup>145</sup> Never again would direct action protest be seen in Albany on the scale of the protests from December of 1961 to August of 1962. While a coalition of white preachers was arrested on a prayer march at the end of August, and then again in January 1964, the direct action phase of the Albany Movement was over.<sup>146</sup> The city would continue its policies of enforcing segregation. Even though black voters were allowed to register to vote in greater numbers, they gained no real victories in the short-term. The city kept up their solid defense of segregation, barring Anderson’s attempts to send his children to a white school.<sup>147</sup> Even the repeal of segregation ordinances in March of 1963 did not represent a victory of the Movement, who recognized that the repeal actually hurt the movement, because it merely removed the possibility of legal challenges based upon the legality of segregation ordinances. Arrests to enforce segregation continued, city councilmen openly admitting that the repeal would “strengthen rather than weaken the existing social pattern of segregation.”<sup>148</sup>

The judgments of Albany were far from positive. Many Civil Rights leaders dismissed it as a total failure. “Albany was successful only if the objective was to go to

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<sup>144</sup> Smith “Dr. King Set Free After Conviction,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> Chalfen, “‘The Way Out Many Lead In’: The Albany Movement Beyond Martin Luther King.”: 561. The “classic” Albany Movement refers to the period between the Movement’s inception and King’s departure in August of 1962.

<sup>146</sup> Claude Sitton “Albany, GA., Jails 76 In Prayer Vigil,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1962, p. 14; “Pascifist to Test Police in Georgia,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1964, p. 44.

<sup>147</sup> “Albany, GA., Bars Negro Students,” *New York Times*, September 5, 1962, p. 23.

<sup>148</sup> Claude Sitton “Negro Victory Fades in Georgia,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1963, p. 7.

jail,” a disgruntled NAACP member stated.<sup>149</sup> Louis Lomax, in his book *The Negro Revolt*, was especially caustic in his criticism of the Albany Movement, branding the entire enterprise as a fiasco.<sup>150</sup> For Abernathy, the Albany Movement certainly did not represent a victory; he noted that “had the people in Albany been as unified as the people in Montgomery, we would have forced the city government into some productive negotiations.”<sup>151</sup> However, those who were a part of the Albany Movement expressed their belief that the Movement had brought about a change of attitude in the black community, raising awareness for reform, even if it did not result in actual tangible gain. King saw a “partial victory” in this regard, a sentiment that was echoed by a local Albanian who stated “This movement made me demand a semblance of first class citizenship.”<sup>152</sup>

This change in attitude was certainly important, but it did not change the fact that the Movement had failed to achieve any of its goals. Albany was still solidly united in defense of segregation and the Movement had been unable to wring a single concession from the city in regards to segregation or civil rights. The failure to do this was a direct result of the inability of the Movement to garner significant local dedication in the black community. The restraint and nonviolence practiced by Pritchett was certainly significant, as well as the divisions among different groups within the Albany Movement. But the real reason for Albany’s failure lay in the lack of significant numbers of local

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<sup>149</sup> Lewis, 169.

<sup>150</sup> Lewis Lomax *The Negro Revolt*. (New York: Signet Books, 1963), 107-110.

<sup>151</sup> Abernathy, 224.

<sup>152</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. ed. by Clayborne Carson. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Warner Books Inc., 1998), 168-169; Watters, 217; Hampton et al, 154.

supporter who would agree to actively mobilize for the Movement.

The cohesiveness of the white community also contributed to the inability of the Movement to attain any concessions regarding segregation. As civil rights historian David Chappell writes “such cohesiveness had never before been witnessed, and was never again to be witnessed in any southern white community during the years of the Civil Rights movement.”<sup>153</sup> The community stood fully behind the actions of the City Council. Assessing the white mood following King’s arrest, reporter Hedrick Smith described the editorials in local papers as berating the civil rights protestors while heaping praise on the city council and Chief Pritchett for their “firm” stance on segregation.<sup>154</sup> The united front arrayed against the Movement was certainly formidable, and greatly compromised their ability to provide any semblance of progress to jailed protestors.<sup>155</sup> But neither was the Movement able to understand the serious flaws present in their strategy of mass marches, namely their inability to keep the community dedicated to the strategy of mass arrests.

After being turned back at Albany, the SCLC and Wyatt Walker in particular, began preparing for their next large-scale assault on segregation. Particularly, the SCLC sought a community in which to implement its mass movement strategy. Various communities in the South had long-running campaigns emphasizing voter registration

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<sup>153</sup> Chappell, *Inside Agitators*, 123.

<sup>154</sup> Hendrick Smith “Segregation Stronghold” *New York Times*, August 16, 1962, p.18.

<sup>155</sup> Both David Chappell’s *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement*, and Jason Sokol’s *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* analyze Albany from this perspective. These authors focus upon the actions and responses of the white community to the Albany Movement. Chappell, and to a lesser extent Sokol, argue that the responses of the white community to integration in Albany are what truly make Albany significant, especially the ability of those white communities to maintain a united front against integrationist forces.

and test case arrests, just as Albany had. In Birmingham, Alabama, protest activity was conducted under the direction of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), an organization formed by Shuttlesworth many years prior. Under the iron control of Shuttlesworth, the ACMHR had emphasized voting registration and other non-direct forms of protest. In the end, the SCLC would select to conduct its next campaign against segregation in Birmingham based upon Shuttlesworth's politicking and Birmingham's entrenched reputation of segregation.

To analyze Albany and consider their next move, SCLC leaders convened in Dorchester, South Carolina, in mid January of 1963.<sup>156</sup> Shuttlesworth had convinced King and others that Birmingham could be the big win that the SCLC sought coming off of the Albany debacle. Analyzing the lack of success on Albany, many SCLC staffers believed that the largest mistake had been to focus the energies on the movement on separate objectives simultaneously.<sup>157</sup> King himself would write "one of the principal mistakes we made...was to scatter our efforts too widely."<sup>158</sup> Mass jailing, voter registration, court cases, and boycotts all occurring at the same time had diluted the strength of the Movement, in the opinion of the SCLC.<sup>159</sup> Others took away different, more perplexing lessons. Wyatt Walker believed Albany demonstrated the value of

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<sup>156</sup> Few records of this Conference remain. The Dorchester file in the Papers of the SCLC Collection omits virtually all of the transcripts from the meetings. The meetings took place over two sessions, and there is no primary record of the first session. Additionally, specific details of the original analysis of Albany and recommendations for later protest are also absent from both the King Papers, and the SCLC files. See Eskew, 276.

<sup>157</sup> Abernathy, 243; Branch, 687-690, Interview with Dr. William Anderson, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.

<sup>158</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*. (New York: Harper & Rowe Publishers, 1964), 48.

<sup>159</sup> Branch, 689-90, Eskew, 212, Abernathy, 230-236.

nonviolent mass action, as well as showing that a community would coalesce around a nonviolent strategy.<sup>160</sup> Despite the fact that the events in Albany clearly demonstrated that these claims were erroneous, Walker stood by his assessment, while agreeing that the true mistake in Albany had been to protest against segregation too generally.

This conclusion is a curious one. While protest had been widespread, there is no evidence that various forms of protest were mutually exclusive. If anything, jailing aided economic boycotts, as it physically denied white businesses and service providers of a potential source of revenue. Further, this analysis of Albany wholly ignores the principal problem the SCLC and the Albany Movement had in raising volunteers for jail. Also unaddressed was the utter uselessness of mass arrests in the face of a prepared white establishment. While some in the SCLC credited Pritchett's nonviolence as contributing to defeat, members afforded little attention to Pritchett's incarceration tactics. The inability of the Movement to raise sufficient protestors willing to be arrested had been the true problem with the Albany Movement, a fact completely overlooked by the SCLC at Dorchester.

To remedy this, Wyatt T. Walker drew up a plan of action for the SCLC's next community project. Using Albany as a proving ground, Walker proposed a four stage "Project C."<sup>161</sup> Based upon the lessons Walker and the SCLC drew from Albany, the plan reflected the SCLC's wholesale misinterpretation of the Movement events. Standing for "Project Confrontation," the plan outlined a campaign that would first start with sit-ins to

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<sup>160</sup>Eskew, 208. There is little doubt that Walker genuinely believed in his assessment, which can only be explained by his famously large ego.

<sup>161</sup> The plan was originally named "Project X." It is unclear at what point it changed to Project C. By the onset of protest in Birmingham, the plan was referred to as Project C. For simplicity, this work uses the latter name, as the two plans are absolutely identical.

draw attention, which would then proceed to boycotts of businesses and public transportation. Third, mass marches would be held with the intent of filling the jails and forcing the city into negotiations. Lastly, outside groups, such as Freedom Riders could be called upon to bring in support. All of this action aimed at provoking an incident or a confrontation that forced the town or city government into negotiation and compromise with the movement. This confrontation, Walker believed, would force the city government into negotiations.<sup>162</sup>

The concept of Albany as a proving ground for later SCLC methods has dominated Civil Rights movement historiography.<sup>163</sup> In fact, Albany often appears only in this regard, as the precursor to the successful campaign in Birmingham. Historians have focused upon the implicit lessons King would draw from Birmingham, such as the importance of the media, or the improvement of mass march logistics.<sup>164</sup> All of these historians, as well as most of the public, regard Birmingham as an unqualified success in light of Albany. But all these interpretations of Albany in relation to Birmingham ignore the fact that the SCLC entered Birmingham with virtually the same strategy they had attempted to use in Albany, without recognizing the severe limitations of that plan. As much as Civil Rights leaders argued that Project C represented a marked change from

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<sup>162</sup> Branch, 691; Interview with Wyatt T. Walker, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, October 11, 1985.

<sup>163</sup> Branch, 691-692; John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* Seventh Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994); David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998); James Harris, *The Long Freedom Road: The Civil Rights Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967); George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Hodder Arnold, 2006); Peter B. Lewis, *The Civil Rights Movement*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). Glenn Eskew, in his study of Birmingham, breaks this mold, tacitly recognizing that the SCLC learned little from the events in Albany, although not addressing this issue explicitly.

<sup>164</sup> Halberstam, 435; Franklin, 501-503.



Albany, the fact remains that the plan did not reflect a correct assessment of Albany. Instead, Project C represented a preplanned campaign mirroring the defective Albany model.

The Project C blueprint ignored the true lessons of Albany in multiple ways. Despite the experience in Albany, Walker's plan necessitated filling the jail, something that had previously failed miserably. His plan required keeping around a thousand people in jail at least 5-6 days, seemingly ignorant to the fact that this had proved nearly impossible in Albany. His plan absolutely required not just mass community support, but an incredible amount of community sacrifice. This was despite the fact that Albany had clearly demonstrated such sacrifice could not be expected in great quantities. Even worse, Walker admitted that he had still not devised a strategy to counter the financial problem of bail bonds, stating this problem was "becoming insurmountable."<sup>165</sup> This meant that even in the event of thousands of arrests, no method for getting prisoners out had been conceived of.<sup>166</sup> This represented an incredible oversight. If mass marches did not force the target city to capitulate very early on, hundreds, if not thousands of blacks would languish in jail indefinitely, just as in Albany. Walker's plan, and SCLC's approval, revealed that the organization did not understand the dynamics at play in mass movement protest.

Walker's plan for provoking a confrontation did represent somewhat of a new strategy of mass movement protest.<sup>167</sup> But because Project C utilized the Albany model

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<sup>165</sup> Eskew, 206-208.

<sup>166</sup> Eskew, 208.

<sup>167</sup> Cognizant of the increasing role of the media in Civil Rights coverage, Walker hoped to spark a violent event that might force federal intervention.

of mass arrests, any confrontation would be dependent upon the SCLC's ability to convince large numbers of blacks to go to jail. Without mass community resolve, it would be extremely difficult to force the hand of the white establishment, as the early Birmingham campaign would demonstrate. Had Walker truly looked critically at Albany, he would have seen that confrontation did not guarantee success. The Albany Movement had been able to challenge the city economically with its boycott of businesses and the bus system. But because the pressure against the city from the marches had not been strong, the confrontation meant very little. Also, Pritchett's nonviolence had shown that steps could be taken to ensure police violence would remain low, if not nonexistent. The fact that Walker did not account for the possibility of Pritchett's strategy being repeated in Birmingham exhibits another glaring oversight.<sup>168</sup>

In Birmingham, the SCLC encountered an environment quite different from Albany. Resistance to civil rights protest included frequent bombings and frequent cases of police brutality, including murder. Albany authorities lacked the notoriety of Birmingham's police department under the administration of Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor. Connor aggressively and physically kept segregation in place with blatant disrespect for the civil liberties of Birmingham blacks. Additionally, Birmingham contained a much more developed industrial core than Albany. This industry was overseen by a group of businessmen known as the "Big Mules," wealthy men with an entrenched economic interest in Birmingham's growth.<sup>169</sup> There was also turmoil in the Birmingham city government, as voters had voted to end the

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<sup>168</sup> Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 308; Eskew, 213.

<sup>169</sup> Eskew, 165-168, 200-202,

current form of city government and move to a mayor-council city model. Connor and other members of his administration had sued for the right to finish their terms at city hall, but because the case was pending, Birmingham's municipal authority remained divided.

As King and the SCLC descended on Birmingham, "Bull" Connor asked Chief Pritchett for advice on how best to combat the mass marches of the SCLC. Pritchett personally met with Connor, recommending that Connor take the same steps Pritchett had taken in Albany, such as deactivating the dog squad, developing a policy of restraint, keeping the local Klan under control, and keeping King under police protection at all times. Denouncing these strategies, Connor refused to waste his officer's time protecting King, saying "I don't give a damn if they blow him up."<sup>170</sup> Connor boasted to Pritchett that he would defeat King without Pritchett's tactics, grandstanding his opinions in front of one of the most widely respected lawman in the South. Pritchett's successful strategy went unrealized in Birmingham. Police brutality was continuous throughout the Birmingham protest, with crowd control tactics bordering on the barbaric.

Protests in Birmingham began with sit-ins on April 3, 1963, along with boycotts and selective buying campaigns. Long term, the boycott was successful, with many merchants complaining to the Big Mules and the city commission. Some actually took down "whites only" signs and allowed integration before Connor threatened them with exorbitant building code violations.<sup>171</sup> Effective though the boycott was, it lacked the support of the black elite. Wealthy blacks largely opposed the rabble rousing of

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<sup>170</sup> Interview with Laurie Pritchett, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, November 7, 1985.

<sup>171</sup> Eskew, 204.

Shuttlesworth, whom they regarded as a troublemaking revolutionary, despite his popularity among the poorer populations. Also, even at its earliest stage, the SCLC had implemented the first two steps simultaneously, in violation of Project C. If the lesson of Albany had been too much breadth in protest activities as King and the SCLC believed, they were already repeating their past mistakes. But the true failure of Albany, the inability to raise and maintain community resolve, seemed to be repeated in Birmingham. By speeding the pace of Project C, the SCLC seemed ignorant of the need to build community support and dedication.<sup>172</sup>

Even worse, the SCLC began marches only three days after the onset of sit-ins. Marches represented the third step of Project C. Connor, heeding Pritchett's advice for the one and only time, obtained an injunction against the protesters followed the now-familiar pattern of segregation defense. King, cognizant that his refusal to disobey the injunction in Albany had hurt the movement, disregarded the injunction and marched with fifty others to jail in Birmingham.<sup>173</sup> His now infamous "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" resulted, responding to criticism from other preachers that his methods were "untimely." King's decision to march in violation of the injunction did demonstrate that he had learned something from the Albany experience.

But King's decision to go to jail so early on demonstrated that he still did not understand the vital importance of community dynamics, which had been a major stumbling block in Albany. Despite the many people who joined him in prison, they represented virtually all of those in Birmingham who were willing to march. After King's arrest, only insignificant numbers of people volunteered for arrest. Rather than gradually

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<sup>172</sup> McWhorter, 306, 307, 326.

<sup>173</sup> Eskew, 240-241.

building community support towards the ultimate goal of sending large numbers of Birmingham blacks to jail, King and the Birmingham leadership ignored the importance of raising community dedication, as opposed to mere tacit approval.

Not only was the “jail, no bail” strategy failing, but Walker’s confrontation theory was proving woefully inadequate as well. Despite photographs of police dog’s attacking local blacks appearing across the nation, Birmingham leaders seemed unconcerned. The SCLC assumed that King’s presence would generate massive, wide spread support. This was not the case, and even if it had been, the timetable of Birmingham protest was accelerated so fast that it would have precluded any new support from developing. King and Shuttlesworth could not convince any more Birmingham residents to go to jail. They had run into the same problem as in Albany; they simply could not fill the jail. In fact, he SCLC had been much more successful in Albany, sending close to a thousand protestors to jail in the first week of demonstration, compared to less than three hundred in Birmingham, despite the fact that Birmingham had a much larger black population. Protest in Birmingham stood on the edge of collapse, with negotiations getting nowhere and support flagging.<sup>174</sup>

In the week’s following King’s arrest, the atmosphere in Birmingham resembled that in Albany in the waning days of mass marches. The inability of King and Shuttlesworth to rally volunteers for jail meant they had no basis with which to pressure the white establishment. Their decision to jump directly into mass marches, just as in Albany, had raised the exact same problems that had plagued the Albany Movement. Mass movement attendance was high, but this vocal support did not aid the SCLC in

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<sup>174</sup> Eskew 255; McWhorter, 356-357.

filling the jail.<sup>175</sup> The failure to consider prior experience shatters any claim of Albany as a “proving ground” for Birmingham, as the same mistakes were clearly repeated. Wyatt Walker, the author of Project C, displayed a stunning incomprehension of the true lessons of the Albany experience. But more broadly, the SCLC’s inability to cope with the deficiencies of mass movement protest very nearly led to defeat in Birmingham. Just how close the Birmingham campaign had been to failure is often ignored in light of the final outcome. In the end, it would not be the actions of King and the SCLC that resulted in Birmingham’s ultimate victory.

Responding to the plan of James Bevel, the fiery organizer of the Nashville sit-ins, the SCLC and ACMHR, reluctantly agreed to use children in the marches the following day, calling on local students to gather to march on city hall the following morning.<sup>176</sup> King and Shuttlesworth had many reservations over using young persons, but their inability to send significant numbers of adults to jail left them with little choice. By using children, the Birmingham campaign leadership hoped to somehow fill the jail and break Connor’s government. Many were critical of King’s decision; Malcolm X stated “Real men don’t put their children on the firing line.”<sup>177</sup> Regardless of the morality of marching children, the move accomplished what should have been obvious in light of Albany. Massive numbers of people going to jail would be the only way for the “jail, no bail” strategy to work.

The following day, May 2, over a thousand children marched out the doors of

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<sup>175</sup> Eskew, 226.

<sup>176</sup> For the best account of Bevel’s influence on the Birmingham protests, see McWhorter, 351-390.

<sup>177</sup> Hampton, 165. This could also be read as a criticism of the adult community, but evidently Malcolm X directed it at King.

Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, with 959 being arrested. The next day, over a thousand more assembled and marched downtown. Caught unaware with his jail full, Connor watched in disbelief as the crowd made its way downtown.<sup>178</sup> Realizing he could never arrest all the marchers, Connor ordered his officers and firemen, who had been called in for crowd control, to repel the marchers with fire hoses and K-9 units.<sup>179</sup> Nonviolent protestors fell to the pavement from the pressure of the hoses, with police dogs biting others. Onlookers retaliated, hurling debris at policemen which led to greater violence. Marches over the next few days saw the same violence erupt as civil order began to unravel in Birmingham.

In response to the outbreak of unrest in Birmingham, Justice Department officials entered Birmingham to facilitate negotiations between SCLC and ACMHR leaders and the Birmingham city government. Negotiating with the recently elected mayor, Albert Boutwell, both sides agreed to measures that would decrease tensions in Birmingham, such as partial integration and the formation of biracial committees.<sup>180</sup> King and the SCLC declared a victory, and it was. It was not a total victory, as the settlement did not grant everything the ACMHR had asked for, but it did represent a victory against segregation. While problems would continue in Birmingham following the settlement, such as a virtual war in the streets between the Klan and Birmingham blacks, segregation in Birmingham had been dealt a significant defeat, a prospect that had seemed nearly

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<sup>178</sup> Choosing to ignore Pritchett's plan for shipping prisoners out to surrounding county jails resulted in Connor's predicament. He had a much larger jail than Albany, but could not accommodate the number of marchers after the first day of the children's marches. Additionally, Connors attempt to commandeer a local sports field as a temporary jail was denied by the city government due to a track meet at the site, perhaps indicating that the Birmingham city government was much less interested in maintaining racial order than Connor was. See Eskew, 260-269.

<sup>179</sup> Eskew, 267.

<sup>180</sup> Eskew, 279.

impossible only two weeks earlier.

The reasons for King and Walker's utter oversight prior to the children's march will never be definitively known, as after Birmingham reached a settlement with the marchers, Project C and mass march protests seemed validated, all errors being interpreted through the lens of ultimate victory. It is likely that in examining Albany, SCLC leaders looked too specifically at what had gone wrong instead of looking deeper for the true causes of those problems. In both Albany and Birmingham, the overly optimistic expectations of leaders in regards to jail volunteers and hard line community support led to enormous problems in filling the jails. At its core, King's strategy of "jail, no bail" was not an ignorant one. But the strategy was mismanaged by not taking the human element into account. Although King would write that "Negroes are human, not superhuman...the miracle of nonviolence lies in the degree to which people will sacrifice under its inspiration," he and the SCLC overestimated the degree of sacrifice blacks were willing to make.<sup>181</sup> This was compounded by the lack of immediate tangible gains, such as in Albany.

Connor's violent response also presented a drastic change from the Albany experience as well. But it had been a direct result of protesters to march in large enough numbers to force the white establishment into action. To say that Connor's violence caused victory is not entirely inaccurate, as the ensuing chaos did prompt a federal response in Birmingham. His violence, however, had been a result of massive numbers of community members willing to face arrest and imprisonment. Absent this upswell of community resolve, Connor's violence would have been totally unnecessary. Regardless,

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<sup>181</sup> King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 36.



the fact that brutal crowd control tactics had elicited no response less than a month earlier reveals that Connor's violence was not the primary reason for Birmingham's success.

The near failure of Birmingham, along with the Albany Movement, demonstrated the fundamental importance of the dynamics of community support in civil rights protest. Failure to raise large numbers of volunteers for jail, while at the same time using a strategy predicated on doing just that, led to the defeat of the Albany Movement. Civil Rights leaders in both Albany and Birmingham did not understand that large numbers of supporters did not necessarily mean large numbers of persons willing to be thrown in jail. The continued use of this strategy, even after it was revealed to be impotent in the face of large jail capacities and united white establishments, represented a hardheadedness that further compromised the Movement's ability to raise large numbers of volunteers for jail time. The repetition of the same tactics in Birmingham reinforced the uselessness of mass marches and arrests without large numbers of persons willing to go to jail. Luckily for Birmingham and the Civil Rights movement as a whole, James Bevel's advocacy of the children's march saved Birmingham from near disaster. The children's ability to fill the jail led to eventual victory in Birmingham, with the desegregation of various public facilities. It was the sheer number of the children arrested, and not the violence of Connor's policemen, that ultimately led to a victory in Birmingham. Birmingham vindicated the mass movement model of protest, despite the failure of leaders to understand the dynamic within the movement itself.

This thesis does not relegate the successes of Birmingham and the Civil Rights movement to mere luck. However, it does present these events as far from inevitable. It defies the popular conception of the Civil Rights movement as a "natural progression of

American values.” Instead, it reveals the incredible obstacles faced by Civil Rights leaders in their quest for freedom. The myriad challenges faced included not only internal problems such as misinterpretation and failure of analysis, but also the unification of whites against the movement. As inexplicable as the repetition of Albany’s mistakes were, one must recognize the vigorous defense of segregation in both Albany and Birmingham. The methods of Pritchett and Connor, while quite different, both sought to defend segregation at all costs. And thus, both share in the guilt and injustice of an American history of segregation.

But just as we cannot ignore the faults of whites in maintaining segregation, neither can we ignore the shortcomings and miscalculations of blacks in the Civil Rights movement. King’s status as a national hero does not allow one to ignore the very real self-inflicted failures that he and other Civil Rights leaders encountered. These shortcomings are vital to our understanding of the movement as a whole, as they demonstrate just how supreme an accomplishment the overall success of the movement was. Far from belittling King and others, this hard look at history makes their triumphs more admirable and more impressive in light of the incredible obstacles they overcame.

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