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TO DIE
BEFORE YOU
CAN BEGIN
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**TEN WEEKS
IN BIRMINGHAM
THAT CHANGED AMERICA**

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That Changed America*

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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)



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PROLOGUE

A decade ago, when my three kids were toddlers, I started obsessing over a photograph. It was taken in the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. The picture showed a German shepherd closing his snarled jaws around the midsection of a Black teenaged boy. The dog was leashed and held by a white police officer, but there was slack in the line, as if the cop were unable or, more likely, unwilling to stop the attack. In every viewing, my eyes settled on the boy. He was somehow tranquil. Despite the ferocity of the assault, his body was relaxed and erect. His arms remained at his side. He was not fighting the dog or protecting himself. It was as if he were *giving* himself to the German shepherd—and to posterity. As if he had a premonition that his almost casual bravery would be studied long after this day, even by a thirtysomething white man in the suburbs of Connecticut fifty years later.

The photo was taken on May 3, 1963, otherwise known as Double D-Day by Martin Luther King Jr. and his fellow civil rights activists, the culmination of weeks of protests in Birmingham. The photo was so stark and unrelenting that it ran across three columns of the front page of the following day's *New York Times*. When he saw it there, President Kennedy said the image made him "sick."

I studied it more closely. In the background, distressed Black men and women distanced themselves from the snarling dog, their backs turned, seemingly about to run. Some people, curious, craned their necks to see how bad the boy was about to get it. Even the cop holding the leash grimaced. Everyone seemed on the verge of panic except the boy, a fifteen-year-old named Walter Gadsden. What gave Gadsden this serenity? This courage? Answering these questions was suddenly pertinent fifty years after the fact because of the circumstances of my life.

I grew up on a farm in Iowa and, after college and a move to Dallas, fell in love with Sonya Castex, a Black woman from inner-city Houston. We married in

2007 and by 2013, the time of my obsession with the Gadsden photo, Sonya and I had three kids in diapers: our daughter, Harper, and our twin boys, Marshall and Walker. When the kids were old enough to understand themselves, there was no question that they would identify as Black. “Because America will see them as Black,” Sonya said, a sentiment echoed by her mother, Connie, who, with time, moved into our home in Connecticut as well. This was the reason I returned day after day to the photo from Birmingham in 1963. The Black family was my family. The Black experience was intertwined with my own. Even though I’m not Black, my life was bound forever, thankfully, with Black lives. It was my job to understand my children’s heritage as a way to understand what might lie in store for their future.

There was something appalling about the Gadsden photo, much as Jack Kennedy said. There was also something magnetic about it. In its luridness you saw the whole story of America. The violence and terror that white people visited upon Blacks. The dignity with which Black people responded. How this photo could have been taken in the Jim Crow South in 1913 and nothing about it would be different. How this photo in 2013 marked lasting progress, because Sonya and I personified King’s famous dream. And yet dreams are not fairy tales and talking about this photo and then comparing it to the other images that filled our screens—of Trayvon Martin’s murder; of Chicago cops killing Laquan McDonald—led my mother-in-law, Connie, one night to turn from the television and, with memories of a childhood in that Jim Crow South, to say to Sonya and me: “Same old shit.”

There was something damning and hopeful and, because of that contradiction, something eternal about the Gadsden photo.

For years I studied it.

★ ★ ★

Then, in 2020, another image preoccupied me and the rest of America: Officer Derek Chauvin suffocating George Floyd.

For Sonya and Connie and me, the murder felt personal. George had grown up in Houston, in Third Ward. Sonya had spent her weekday afternoons at her grandma’s, in the adjacent and equally hard-up Fifth Ward. George was Sonya’s age, forty-six, and he’d gone to Yates High. Sonya’s cousins had gone to Yates. Her cousin Derrick knew George back then, watched him as a tight end on the Yates football team that made the state championship game.

In part because of the overlap between Sonya's history and George's, we didn't shield our kids from the coverage of his death like we had the others, all the unarmed Black men whom police had killed and whose murders had also been recorded by security footage or cellphones.

No, with George Floyd, we sat on the couch and watched him die on CNN.

"That could have been Derrick," Sonya said as we saw officer Chauvin absentmindedly, almost playfully, grind his knee into the back of George's neck.

We looked at each other and couldn't say what we both thought.

That could be one of our boys.

The twins were nine by then, and Harper ten, old enough to see the outline of the story that lay just beyond the images on TV, the truth that would define their lives: This was the Black experience as well. We allowed them to watch George die, and the boys in particular had questions about it. *Why did those cops do that?* And when Sonya and I explained, they asked: *Are all cops racist?* And when we explained that: *How many people are like those bad cops?* Every answer only led to harder questions: *Will people not like me?* And the hardest one: *Am I inferior?*

We could see it, the perceptions the boys were forming, the steps leading down to self-hatred. We tried to stave it off: "We love you boys, and you can do whatever, go wherever you want in this life."

"We'll just have to be careful?" Walker asked.

I hesitated, and Sonya did, too, because George had been careful. Unarmed, handcuffed, he'd begged Officer Chauvin to listen to him. Breonna Taylor had been careful. She was asleep in her bedroom, behind a locked door, when Louisville cops barged in and shot her eight times for a crime she did not commit. Ahmaud Arbery had been careful. He'd gone for a run in a coastal Georgia town and three white men in a pickup truck killed him where he ran. No amount of vigilance has ever kept children like ours safe. In our hesitation responding to Walker's question, the boys' faces hardened.

It was another reason George Floyd's murder felt personal: The twins lost their innocence that day.

They eventually lost more than that. Two months later, Jacob Blake walked away from cops in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and those cops shot him seven times in the back while Blake's three children screamed from his car.

Our kids saw that footage, too.

“Why do they keep trying to *kill us*?” Walker yelled, running from the room in tears with Marshall following him. It was a tough time, the latter half of 2020. The fear our kids felt hardened eventually into a cynicism, which wizened and callused them to a certain extent, even protected them, but also enclosed them in a prison of their own rage. We saw it. We *heard* it. How everything about their country was awful and bloody and how they would move away from here just as soon as they could. The footage on the news they saw, the images *they* studied, portrayed a pessimism about America that approached hopelessness.

★ ★ ★

I thought of the Gadsden photo again, and all it contained, all that was eternal and perhaps even transcendent about it. A plan formed in my mind, and when I shared it with Sonya she said I had to do it—*we* had to do it. It would be a family project of sorts, a means of inspiring our children and ourselves, a chronicle of our answers to troubling questions.

The truth was I had done much more than study the iconic Gadsden photo. In the intervening years I had read books about it and the broader protests of the 1960s. Now, I contacted archives and learned that newly recorded interviews and oral histories showed even more than these books did: ten weeks in 1963 that not only defined the civil rights movement but shaped the next sixty years of America. Ten weeks in Birmingham that, because of all they set in motion, still shaped *my* life every day, and my wife’s and children’s, too.

So much of the American experience in the twenty-first century was birthed in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963.

I had to write about it. I had to show that the despair Martin Luther King Jr. and his deputies felt was not dissimilar from my children’s. How King responded to that despair could uplift Harper and Marshall and Walker now.

I would write this book for them. I would write this book for anyone who was ever blinkered by cynicism, crippled into tweeting bitchfests of inaction, sneering at the idea that America had ever stood for anything good and could again. Because reading the oral histories and declassified FBI memos and transcripts from the Kennedy White House, one thing became clear: Those guys in the movement had hope long after they should have.

Then they acted on their optimism. That was the other thing. They acted on it until they shaped America to their liking. Pulled it into the multicolored reality of King’s dream. This was something else I hoped my kids would understand

from that spring in Birmingham: how the only way to lead a life was to claim it for yourself, unshackle your aspirations not only from oppression but also from the bounds of victimhood.

The book I had in mind went far beyond the grainy images of fire-hosed protesters that my kids saw in school when their history classes studied Birmingham in 1963. My book would not be a history at all but a *story*.

A story that, first off, focused only on those pivotal weeks in Birmingham, which no book, to the best of my knowledge, had done before. This story would feature King, of course, but he would share equal billing with his deputies, the ones who shaped Birmingham and the next sixty years of America but who are largely forgotten to that nation now: the brilliant and even immoral Wyatt Walker, the executive director of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference; the righteous and frightening James Bevel, the SCLC's director of direct action; and Fred Shuttlesworth, the Birmingham pastor whose fearlessness remains unlike any American's I've encountered.

There would be others in this story. Jack and Bobby Kennedy, governing a resistant nation. Harry Belafonte, far more an activist than an actor. Bull Connor, a villain so terrifying that no national organization dared to stage a civil rights protest in Birmingham until King, desperate, thought he had to. The story would show, above all, what it felt like to live through those ten weeks from every character's vantage point, each chapter rooted in the perspective of a protagonist or an antagonist, because to see Birmingham through these leaders' eyes was to see ourselves today, too. In that way, the book would mirror the ultimate aim of King and those deputies: empathy for the other, a message as relevant to 1963 as 2023.

The more time I spent researching Birmingham, the more I realized it was the most dramatic of all American stories. Overmatched heroes who fought not just brutal men but an evil system, and who turned to a plan of action in Birmingham that other men of faith saw as sinful. It was effective, though. It accomplished what Abraham Lincoln had not been able to a hundred years earlier. It forged our lives to this very moment.

It was quite a story indeed. Harper, Marshall, and Walker: I hope you are guided in your own lives by it.

This book is for you.

Part I
GENESIS

A POINT THAT EVERYONE SHOULD CONSIDER CAREFULLY

They met in secret. They met outside the presence of the executive board and without even Martin Luther King Sr.'s knowledge. This was how King's own son, Martin Luther King Jr., wanted it. Only a few people, the absolutely necessary ones, were to be invited to the two-day retreat outside Savannah where the most dangerous idea of the civil rights movement would be discussed.

It's unclear how many showed. The number is somewhere between eleven and fifteen. Accounts vary due in part to the secrecy of the conference and the egos of those in the movement. The attendees were Southern Baptists, and Christians, like anyone else—and maybe more than anyone else—want to be among the chosen few, especially when posterity asks, *Were you there?* What we do know is that the majority of those anointed arrived in Savannah that January morning in 1963 by jet or train, coming from all over the country, and headed now, by various cars, through a piney coastal Georgia until they reached a clearing some thirty miles south, the Dorchester Academy, in Midway. The academy spread across 105 quiet and shaded acres, manicured and expansive, and on the estate rose eight simple buildings, the mark of the academy's history and its ongoing ambition. It began in 1871 as a one-room schoolhouse for freed slaves. It expanded to a larger school and then added a dormitory for all the Black people who ached to read. The academy built a credit union on the grounds in the 1930s to help Blacks buy homes and open businesses. By the 1960s Martin Luther King Jr.'s organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), used the estate to train hundreds of volunteers in King's preferred form of civil disobedience, the nonviolent protest.

The majority of secret-meeting attendees on that clear but cool January morning had been to Dorchester before. They parked their cars and walked to

the white-pillared brick dormitory without a newcomer's sense of reverence. They had too much on their minds for awe. A grimness followed them and even matched their conservative suits. It lined their faces. They sensed what they were going to discuss.

They settled in one of the dormitory's meeting rooms, where the humidity in the summer had cracked and peeled the paint off the beige walls, and huddled near one another in seats that faced the front of the room. King directed the proceedings, but the one who stood before them now was Wyatt Walker, the SCLC's executive director. A tall northerner with a thin mustache and even thinner build—he looked at thirty-four like a malnourished, radicalized grad student—Walker commanded the room with his piercing gaze and flair for the dramatic. “The Madison Avenue streak in me,” he later said. From behind his big black-rimmed glasses he took in those assembled around him and told them they were about to embark on a campaign unlike any other.

“I call it Project X,” Walker said. Because X marked the spot of confrontation.

And *confrontation* because there had not been enough of it.

★ ★ ★

Walker discussed what he and so many of those present had just endured: the SCLC's sustained civil rights campaign in Albany, Georgia, the year prior, in 1962. It had failed completely. It had failed for numerous reasons, Walker said, but one of them was that the nonviolence the SCLC favored and had learned from Gandhi's success in India—assembling marchers and having them sit at the seat of white power, and then not move—needed to be met by violent white authority to work. When white authority in India or the American South used violence against peaceful protesters, their brutality called into question not only the acts of violence but also the authority figures' rule of law. To question unfair rules was the first step, Gandhi and King found, to changing them. In Albany, Georgia, though, the bigoted but clever police chief, Laurie Pritchett, had read up on King and then Gandhi and realized he could deter these Black leaders by accommodating them. He told his force to put away their billy clubs. He told his force to arrest the marchers with unctuous care, especially when the bulbs of any news camera popped—cameras that hoped for a bloody spectacle, had even been promised one by King and Walker, but instead got images of Pritchett removing his hat and bowing his head, as if in prayer himself, before gently handcuffing

the kneeling Black pastors at his feet. The news media grew restless and then hostile at how long the Albany campaign continued, off and on for eight months. When King and the SCLC lost the support of local protesters, they left town, humiliated.

Albany was “a devastating loss of face” for the movement, the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote. Perhaps “the most stunning defeat” of King’s career.

There had been many.

Failure followed the SCLC everywhere now. Walker and King knew it, and so did the rest of the SCLC’s leadership huddled in that beige room. The movement’s biggest success, the Montgomery bus boycott, had also been its first, and that was seven years ago. But thanks to the intransigence of the Alabama government and the fear of the Klan, Montgomery’s bus lines in 1963 were as segregated as they’d been in 1933. “Most Negroes,” one journalist noted, “have returned to the old custom of riding in the back of the bus.” The younger Black organizations, like the zealous Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led by John Lewis, sensed the middle-aged King’s ineffectiveness and mocked him these days almost as ruthlessly as the southern press did. In Albany, a campaign initially staged by SNCC but usurped by King, SNCC and other organizers took to calling King “De Lawd”: the one who knew what was best for you. The mocking phrase played off King’s pomposity in dress and speech and sneered at who his sermons attracted: older crowds who would *amen* alongside King from the pews but wouldn’t take action on the streets. De Lawd didn’t give people agency. De Lawd preached because De Lawd refused to lead people away from the pulpit. “You are a phony,” one SNCC organizer telegraphed King.

The cynicism and infighting between the organizations of the civil rights movement reflected a broader frustration nearly all Black people in America felt. Nothing had improved. *Brown v. Board of Education* had become law in 1954, and yet in the nine intervening years virtually every school in the South remained segregated. Blacks everywhere earned 45 percent less than whites. In the South only 28 percent were registered to vote—and this after a giant registration drive by the Democratic Party in 1960. Even liberal President Kennedy had cooled on King and the civil rights movement. King wanted a second Emancipation Proclamation, a document that would update what Lincoln had written in 1863 and at last liberate Black people from Jim Crow. Kennedy had seemed enthused about the idea when King met with him at the White

House in 1962. Kennedy had even asked King to write a draft of the document. King hoped that the president would deliver the speech on January 1, 1963, on the hundredth anniversary of the original Emancipation Proclamation. But after Kennedy received the draft prepared by King and the SCLC, the president and his administration stalled, returning the SCLC's urgent messages days or weeks later. The hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation came and went, with segregation the law of the South and oppression felt everywhere else, too, and nary a word from Jack Kennedy about any of it.

So if America was going to change, Wyatt Walker said to the privileged few at Dorchester that January day, America had to be shocked into changing.

This was the point of Project X.

We need to go to Birmingham, Walker said.

* * *

Birmingham? Those assembled shifted uncomfortably in their seats. This was the bad news they'd feared. The people in that beige room had heard the joke about Birmingham:

One morning a Black man in Chicago wakes up and tells his wife that Jesus has come to him in his dream.

"Really?" she says.

"Yeah," the man says. "Jesus told me to go to Birmingham."

She's horrified. "Did Jesus say he'd go with you?"

"No," the man responds. "Jesus said he'd go as far as Memphis."

Birmingham, Alabama, was not so much a city in 1963 as a site of domestic terror. It was known, sometimes gleefully, and by public officials, as "Bombingham." More than fifty residences and Black-owned businesses had been bombed since the end of World War II. Bombings were so frequent in one Black neighborhood that it was now called Dynamite Hill. These bombings went unsolved for the same reason cops routinely exercised their "rights" to shoot any Black "suspects" who turned their backs and fled. The force was overseen by Eugene "Bull" Connor, a virulent racist and public safety commissioner with barely cloaked ties to the Ku Klux Klan. The point of Bull's Birmingham—and make no mistake, Bull ran Birmingham—was fear. The police raped Black women. The Klan castrated Black men. The cops and klavern tapped the phones and, no doubt, bombed the houses of anyone who tried to improve the lives of the oppressed. Not long after President Kennedy's inauguration, CBS's Edward

R. Murrow reported from Birmingham. The city had the reputation as the most segregated, most racist, most violent place in America. Murrow came to agree. Just before he left town, he told his producer he hadn't seen anything like it since Nazi Germany.

That was Birmingham. And the city's violence, its hatred, was also its appeal. Walker told the crowd at Dorchester that the SCLC needed to go to the very site of white terror and anger every terrible person there. In order for its nonviolence to work, the SCLC needed to subject itself to the full wrath of Birmingham, in the hope that white people outside the city might at last see, through the SCLC's suffering, the plight of all Blacks in America. The SCLC needed, Walker said—and you can almost see him pacing the room at this point, part preacher, part professor, and all stringbean showman, those black-rimmed glasses accentuating his gauntness and erudition like some mystic from the Georgia pines—the SCLC needed to go to Birmingham to turn the city into a metaphor of the Black experience.

How to do that? How to show white America and the Kennedy brothers who governed it what it meant to be Black in America?

You have to escalate the situation, Walker said.

“Project X will have four stages,” he said, and here Walker handed out a blueprint among the assembled, eight typed pages that revealed his organizational prowess as executive director of King's SCLC. The first stage, Walker said, involved mass meetings at night whose purpose would be to draw recruits to the sit-ins the SCLC would carry out by day. These sit-ins would be at the lunch counters of segregated restaurants in Birmingham and infuriate Bull Connor.

The second stage would call for a boycott of Birmingham's downtown business district. Black people spent about \$4 million a week downtown. They accounted for roughly 25 percent of the money spent in the city. The profit margins of those stores were small enough, Walker said, that if Black people didn't spend there, white businesses couldn't survive there.

The third stage would escalate from a boycott of downtown merchants to a mass protest of Birmingham itself, its segregation and racism. White people, Bull Connor especially, would be irate by this third stage, and the sea of Blacks protesting throughout the city would lead to mass arrests. Mass arrests would fill the jails. Filling the jails would further escalate the situation because the optics of crammed cells were the optics of success. They would inspire more people to

join the movement, Walker said. And when the SCLC kept marching in spite of the mass arrests, Bull Connor would be confronted with a choice: allow these Black people to protest in his city, which would humiliate him, or suppress these Black people and turn his terrible vengeance on them, which would give the waiting press corps all the gory copy they needed.

Walker thought Connor would choose the latter. This would lead to the fourth stage of Project X.

Seeing grotesque images on the nightly news and in the pages of newspapers and newsweeklies would cause a furor across the nation and a not insubstantial number of people to descend on Birmingham itself, to protest alongside the SCLC and its brave volunteers. These justice-seeking tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, would march the streets and boycott the stores, Blacks and whites alike, and together they all would force Bull Connor and Birmingham City Hall—without options, without jail cells to put the marchers in or excuses to hide behind—to broker a fairer and more equitable future for Birmingham. Together they all would help the people of Birmingham in ways no one had before. Together they all would end segregation in the most racist of American cities.

And by ending segregation there—by X marking the spot—together they all would show they could end segregation anywhere.

That, Walker said, was why they had to go to Birmingham.

★ ★ ★

King loved it. Positioned among the dozen or so at Dorchester, King thought Project X showed why Walker had “one of the keenest minds” in the movement. Project X escalated tension as it expanded its ambition. The plan was not unlike Walker himself. In the three years he’d been SCLC’s executive director, Walker had made many staffers cry from his punctilious demands, but he had also transformed the SCLC from a fallow nonprofit with tax problems into a respected organization. King heard all the time from the ever-growing body of staffers how bossy and unbearable Walker was. Walker *was* bossy and unbearable. That ever-growing body also proved his worth. Walker breathed life into King’s organization, gave it strength. The fastidious accounts he kept reflected the dream Walker and King shared, and had always shared, since they’d met more than a decade earlier as grad students at an inter-seminary conference, both of them presidents of their respective seminary classes. They

had planned to use their education to serve God and Blacks in the segregated South. When King in 1960 asked Walker to quit his pastorship in Virginia and join the SCLC, King knew he was getting more than a bookkeeper. King was getting a publicist, one who'd been born in Massachusetts and understood the northern press—could even mimic the nasal northern cynicism with which the reporters at national outlets talked. In Walker, King was also getting a hard-ass, a Bobby Kennedy to King's Jack, a man who by his own admission would "alter my morality for the sake of getting a job done." Above all, King was getting an optimist in Wyatt Walker, someone who, like King, saw beyond the gray and bleak present into a southern future that no longer noticed color. Project X, moments after the presentation, was already vintage Walker: a grand vision, a precise and even ruthless means of achieving it, and the potential for a lasting and epoch-defining victory.

There was little discussion of it. That was the shocking thing. It seemed ingenious, and it was all there, on those eight meticulous pages. The pages forced the assembled into contemplation and perhaps cowed them into silence, but Walker's plan was so thorough, so epic in its implications, that many at Dorchester simply wanted to believe in it.

The group that day altered nothing of Walker's blueprint.

★ ★ ★

James Bevel was perhaps the lone person who saw that as a problem. As the talks proceeded and then exhausted themselves, as the assembled prayed about Walker's plan and then discussed it again, Bevel kept wondering why no senior executive of the SCLC—not Stanley Levison, the most liberal member of the secret caucus; not Andrew Young, the most conservative; not Dorothy Cotton, the lone woman; not Fred Shuttlesworth, the lone Birminghamian; not Ralph Abernathy, King's best friend; and not King himself—would state what seemed obvious to Bevel: that Walker's arrogance had infected his plan and corroded the SCLC.

Bevel was one of the youngest at Dorchester, a twentysomething who had the kind of reputation that took other men a lifetime to achieve. In 1960 Bevel had co-lead massive sit-ins alongside SNCC at Nashville lunch counters. During one sit-in, the merchant had fled his store but locked the doors behind him, trapping the Black protesters inside and then gassing the place, literally fumigating it with insect repellent while the protesters gagged and choked on the

poison. Just as people passed out, Nashville firefighters arrived, breaking windows and saving lives.

Bevel responded by continuing the protests.

That kind of militant fearlessness inspired John Lewis and the rest of SNCC. Bevel was a touch older than the college students of SNCC but as righteously committed to justice, and his alliance with Lewis eventually attracted Martin Luther King Jr. King saw in Bevel the revolutionary his own organization needed, and recruited him to the more middle-aged SCLC. If Bevel heard cries of betrayal from his SNCC friends, he ignored them. Bevel was his own man. A young preacher who wore overalls instead of pastoral robes because country bibs bore no airs in his native Mississippi. A student of God who placed a yarmulke on his shaved head each day because Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel inspired him. Their strength summoned his own. Bevel had a strange power: to be young and of this fraught moment in the 1960s and yet wizened and even, somehow, ancient. He pushed for a new dawn that many Black people were uncomfortable with while using the language of the Torah to do it: "Thus saith the Lord," said James Bevel. He was twenty-seven but seemed as if he'd always existed. Many in the movement called him "The Prophet."

By that January day at Dorchester in 1963, he carried a somewhat redundant title within the SCLC: the director of direct action. It meant Bevel was the operations man, the one who took the vision and manifested it. Looking at Birmingham through an operational lens, Bevel saw the classic flaws of the modern SCLC.

Walker's Birmingham plan assumed too much, he said. It assumed Black people in a city run by fear would subject themselves to the worst impulses of the white authority that oppressed them simply because Martin Luther King Jr. asked them to at nightly mass meetings. It assumed hundreds if not thousands of people would be inspired rather than frightened by a few jailed Black brethren, and would rush to be thrown into similar dank cells for the movement. It assumed, mostly, what the SCLC assumed in Albany and had always assumed: that a hierarchical top-down strategy would inspire people from the bottom up. This was the fault of King and staid vestigial thinking from the 1950s, Bevel said, but it was mostly the fault of Wyatt Walker. The executive director who loved his title. The one whose arrogance coursed through the organization until every staffer lost his own humility. The one whose grand plan in Birmingham patronized the very people it meant to serve.

Bevel snickered at the blueprint in his hands. He couldn't believe that *Wyatt Walker* really believed that Birminghamians had no notion of a less-suffocating life until Walker scrawled his X on their city. Did Walker think they hadn't fought to integrate? One year before, in 1962, the courts had at last ruled Blacks could stroll across the same parks and golf courses as whites in Birmingham. How had Bull Connor responded? He'd shut down all city parks. He'd shut down all municipal golf courses. That was Birmingham, Bevel said, the unrelenting totality of its suppression: Even if they kept to themselves, Blacks and whites could not share the same square mile of public space. And—what?—Wyatt Walker was going to change Bull's thinking by force, when a U.S. district court hadn't by decree? Or richer still: Wyatt Walker was going to change Black people's thinking by dint of a four-stage plan that escalated tension? Poor Black people of the Deep South, not unlike the sort Bevel had known in his hometown, Itta Bena, Mississippi: rustic, conservative, and proud of whatever they'd clawed from the white devil? And here came light-skinned Wyatt Walker with his graduate degree and club ties telling these Black Birminghamians, *No no! You've been fighting the wrong way; I know better.* And they were supposed to follow that man? That man who, even when he dressed down, as he did at Dorchester, ironed a crease into his blue jeans? That man whose own well-off preacher daddy had read every day in Hebrew and Greek while so many Black adults in Birmingham had parents who could not read at all?

That man?

That man, Bevel said to those assembled at Dorchester, was more a “boss” than a “brother.” Bevel thought a campaign like the sort Walker proposed could not succeed by even the greatest feats of organizational ingenuity. The ingenuity showcased the plan's sanctimony. Too assured of its own infallibility. Too reliant on “getting hired hands to get something done,” Bevel said.

Bevel thought you could not order a liberation on eight typed pages. Birmingham would only succeed organically, through a commitment from the community itself. To get that, Bevel felt, you had to understand that community, be of it, move with it. You had to relate to people, adjust to their needs, live among them if necessary, and only when they saw you giving everything *you* had to break the chains of oppression would they consider doing the same for themselves.

That was how Bevel lived. That was how he worked. He thought the best way for Birmingham to succeed would be when he and not Walker were in

charge.



It's unclear if he said that last part aloud to the group or privately to King. In any case, the force of Bevel's argument highlighted the egos King had to manage. These men of faith who humbled themselves before God could still stand quite tall before each other. King had a way in encounters like this of letting each man say his piece, so even though there's no official record of what Bevel said to King—just later recollections—it's fair to assume King let Bevel say all of it. King had a tendency to hear his deputies out. He had a tendency to remain composed. These traits did not come naturally. Leading the SCLC had been as demanding an education for Martin Luther King Jr. as obtaining his PhD in the 1950s. Walker's and Bevel's competing views reinforced one of King's core findings. He had learned, he later wrote, "that we all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction." This was true of all his deputies in the SCLC, men and women who through gritted teeth had bettered themselves, received an education, or gained a dignity that so few southern Blacks could obtain. King's breakthrough as their leader—it was something he had to display at Dorchester, whether guiding public discussions or private meetings—was to take this capital-*I* individualism and never shame it or shout it down but *redirect* it toward the instinct all men and women of faith shared: love.

A love of God and, because of it, a love of the most oppressed of God's people. That's whom they were working for, he reminded his staff at Dorchester. They were to lift up the masses to the SCLC's heights. As King later wrote in a sermon that was as much a record of his managerial techniques as his faith: "I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity." This idea of striving toward an excellence in love influenced how the SCLC acted in the world, and how its staffers acted among themselves. When was it best to assert one's views in a meeting and when was it best to listen?

It was the genius of King's managerial style. Many members of his executive team were too bullheaded to be led, so King taught them how to govern themselves. And *that* education, a very particular self-education, the deputies obtaining something like self-actualization, endeared the men and women of the SCLC to King all the more. It was how someone as egotistical as Wyatt Walker could call King "Mr. Leader" during the sessions at Dorchester. It was how

someone as righteous as James Bevel could defer to King and not storm out of Dorchester when King said publicly that he liked Walker's plan.

But King also understood Bevel's points. The SCLC could not patronize Birminghamians. It could not assume their cooperation. Within the last few months, King had delivered a sermon to his own congregation at Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta about the need to work *with* the underprivileged instead of sweeping in to do work *for* them. In that "with" was an ethos, a whole world. "The true neighbor is the man who will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others," King had preached. That was what Bevel wanted in Birmingham and how King promised he would lead there.

Even though it's unknown how much King and Bevel discussed Walker at Dorchester, we do know a couple of things. We know King liked Walker as executive director because it brought him peace. "Whenever I give Wyatt an assignment," King once told Walker's wife, Theresa, "I never have to think about it a second time. I know it will be done." He'd asked Walker a week earlier to devise a plan for Birmingham for the Dorchester conference. Walker, as always, had delivered.

We also know King's trust in Walker did not diminish his faith in others. James Bevel fascinated and even frightened King. The originality of Bevel's presence, the clarity of his thinking, the strength of his convictions: No one had these qualities in the abundance that James Bevel did. His persona meant he lived in absolutes. King knew that if they got to Birmingham and confronted the totality of evil there, the time would come when the whole of the movement, even Wyatt Walker, would need to rely on James Bevel.

The time would come when Bevel would lead them.

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The Dorchester conference lasted two days. Its secret sessions convinced the attendees to commit to their boldest public action yet. The SCLC would attempt to integrate a city when a U.S. district court hadn't been able to integrate its parks, when the U.S. Supreme Court hadn't been able to integrate its schools. Toward the end of the conference the attendees gave their closing thoughts. The Jewish lawyer Stanley Levison, the secret caucus's lone white man, said massive and well-run unions had failed to organize in Birmingham, too. Bull Connor had broken them up. In fact, every liberal movement or court order had failed in Bull's Birmingham and every single one of them had more strength than the

SCLC did. King's organization was weak, thanks to Albany. It was nearly broke, thanks to Albany. Birmingham, then, wasn't just bold but quixotic. "A campaign in Birmingham would surely be the toughest fight in our civil rights careers," King later wrote.

But Wyatt Walker was right. Win there and you could win anywhere. Break segregation in Birmingham and you "break the back of segregation all over the nation," King wrote. "A victory there might well set forces in motion to change the entire course of the drive for freedom and justice."

So they would proceed.

When the others at Dorchester had delivered their closing thoughts, King looked at each of the faces around him. He drew out the moment. King had, as Wordsworth would say, a faith that stared through death. His home had been bombed; on another occasion, its window had been blasted by shotgun shells. At a public reading in New York, a woman had stabbed King in the chest and the blade had missed his heart by a literal hair's breadth. He and his family received ongoing death threats by phone and mail and still King refused to travel with a security detail or carry a gun. Some of his aides said it was as if he believed the nonviolent lifestyle to which he was committed provided its own defense, God bestowing a supernatural shield on King.

But not even God could protect the SCLC in Birmingham.

"I want to make a point that I think everyone here should consider very carefully," King said at last to those around him at Dorchester. "I have to tell you that, in my judgment, some of the people sitting here today will not come back alive from this campaign."