

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #6

By the early 1960s, with legal precedents in their favor and nonviolent protests awakening the nation, civil rights leaders believed the time had come for a serious civil rights bill. The challenge was getting one through a reluctant Congress. The road to such a bill began when Martin Luther King, Jr., called for demonstrations in “the most segregated city in the United States” – Birmingham, Alabama. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) needed a concrete victory in Birmingham to validate their strategy of nonviolent protest.

In May, 1963 thousands of black marchers tried to picket Birmingham’s department stores. In response to the daily rallies and peaceful protests, authorities cracked down, arresting hundreds. Eugene “Bull” Connor, the city’s public safety commissioner, ordered the city’s police troops to meet the marchers with violent force: snarling dogs; electric cattle prods; tear gas; and high-pressure fire hoses. In this matter Connor served as the perfect foil for King’s tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Television cameras for national news programs captured scenes of these protests, led by King, as well as the white retaliation against them in “the Battle of Birmingham.” These news broadcasts had a major impact on President John F. Kennedy and millions of Americans who watched the confrontations on national television.

The courage and resolve that King and many other protestors displayed in carrying out their program of non-violent coercion proved instrumental in mobilizing national support for their objectives of racial integration. Outraged by the brutality in Birmingham, embarrassed by King’s imprisonment for leading this nonviolent march, and strongly influenced by his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, President Kennedy finally decided that it was time to act. Enforcement of existing statutes was not enough. New legislation was needed to deal with the race question. On June 11, 1963, after newly elected Alabama governor George Wallace barred two black students from the state university, Kennedy denounced racism on national television and promised a new civil rights bill. He told the nation that racial discrimination had no place in American life or law. He then endorsed an ambitious civil rights bill intended to end discrimination in public facilities, to desegregate the public schools, and to protect black voters. But the bill was quickly blocked in Congress by Southern Democrats.