

Children's crusade a calculated risk for civil rights

COMMENTARY

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THE REV. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a deep affinity for the Old Testament prophet Isaiah,

who foretold of the day when a child would lead the wolf, leopard, and lion without fear and there would be peace on earth and goodwill towards all creatures.

Only King's vision was realized after he enlisted African-American students to join his 1963 campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Ala.

At the time, the decision to expose children to violence was harshly criticized by both blacks and whites. But 50 years later, the so-called "Children's Crusade" is considered by historians to be a pivotal event of the modern civil rights movement.

Birmingham was a racial powder keg in the early 1960s. Forty percent black, the city was rigidly segregated along racial and class lines. Only 10 percent of the African-American residents were registered to vote. Blacks were restricted to manual labor in Birmingham's steel mills earning less than half the salary of whites. And public and commercial facilities were legally segregated.

Since the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was outlawed in the state of Alabama, blacks had little recourse. If they attempted to protest, they were met with violent retribution by white supremacists or the Birmingham Police Department. In fact, Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, once a member of the Ku Klux Klan, looked the other way as no less than fifty unsolved racially motivated bombings took place between 1945 and 1962.



Parker High Sschool student Walter Gadsen is attacked by police dogs in Birmingham, Ala., on May 3, 1963.

King believed that a campaign in Birmingham would "surely be the toughest fight of the civil rights movement." But if his Southern Christian Leadership Conference was successful, "it could break the back of segregation across the South."

The Birmingham campaign began on April 3, 1962 when the SCLC launched a boycott

to pressure white business leaders to hire people of all races and end segregation in public facilities, restaurants, and stores. When white businesses resisted, the SCLC initiated a series of sit-ins and marches intended to provoke mass arrests.

By April 12, between four to five hundred men and women including King himself, were incarcerated for defying a court injunction ordering an end to the demonstrations. With adult protesters in short supply and interest in the campaign waning, King, in a risky move, directed the SCLC to recruit local students to continue the non-violent demonstration.

"Don't worry about your children," King told the parents of the young volunteers after his release from jail. "They are going to be alright. Don't hold them back if they want to go to jail, for they are not only doing a job for themselves, but for all of America and for all of mankind."

On May 2, more than a thousand black students — some as young as six — skipped classes to participate in a march. As they approached police lines, hundreds were arrested and carried off to jail in paddy wagons and school buses. Initially, Connor instructed the police not to harm the young protesters in order to reduce public sympathy for them. But he lost patience the following day when hundreds more gathered for another march. Connor immediately ordered the police and fire departments to use force to halt the demonstration.

Images of children being blasted by high-pressure fire hoses, clubbed by police officers, and attacked by K-9s

appeared on television and in newspapers, triggering outrage across the nation.

Throughout the attacks the children remained non-violent, underscoring the brutality of the local police. The horrific scene forced President John F. Kennedy to send Justice Department officials down to Birmingham to put an end to the violence.

By May 6, no fewer than 2,500 demonstrators — adults and children — swamped the Birmingham jail. Four days later, the campaign ended when the city promised to desegregate downtown stores and release all protestors from jail if the SCLC agreed to end the demonstrations.

The Children's Crusade of May 2-3, 1963 not only forced desegregation in Birmingham, but inspired the March on Washington and paved the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting racial discrimination in hiring practices and public services in the United States. Dr. King and the children of Birmingham had taken a calculated risk and won.

THE TIMES LEADER

MONDAY, APRIL 29, 2013