Why We Can't Wait

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of the most iconic and influential leaders in the American civil rights movement. Born in Atlanta to a middle-class family and raised near Atlanta's "Black Wall Street," King's father and grandfather before him were Baptist preachers. Even though King was part of a comfortable and tight-knit community, he grew up amid the injustices of segregation. Before entering Morehouse College as an undergraduate, King spent time in the North, where he was first exposed to integrated churches and restaurants. Returning home to complete his studies in the South, King graduated from college in 1948 and entered the ministry. He attended a seminary in Pennsylvania and completed his doctorate at Boston University. In Boston, King met and married Coretta Scott, and the two of them returned to Scott's native Alabama to start a family. In 1955, King—a pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery—was chosen to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Having studied nonviolent resistance during his time in the seminary, King led his fellow Alabamians in acts of civil disobedience that eventually led to the desegregation of the city's bus system. Following the success of the boycotts, King became a renowned and respected civil rights leader. As a result of the sit-ins he organized in Atlanta and Birmingham, he was arrested multiple times. Still, King always preached nonviolence to those who looked to him as an example of how to fight racism. Following his release from the Birmingham jail and—later—his historic "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his direct influence on the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King continued to lead nonviolent demonstrations, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery—but as progress stalled, radical factions of the civil rights and Black Power movements began to doubt the use of nonviolence. King himself admitted to mounting frustrations with going to jail repeatedly and "living every day under the threat of death." In 1968, on a trip to Memphis, Tennessee, King was assassinated on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Why We Can't Wait provides an account of the campaign for desegregation and racial equality that took place in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. To contextualize the movement, Dr. King notes several important historical events, including the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the Supreme Court decision to outlaw school segregation in 1954, and the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and '56. First, he calls attention to the fact that, although the Emancipation Proclamation—which technically freed all enslaved Black people in the country—was signed in 1863, Black Americans still didn't enjoy real freedom 100 years later, largely because Jim Crow laws in the South had enforced segregation and ensured the continuation of systemic racism and discrimination. Next, Dr. King points to the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling on segregation as an example of yet another seemingly monumental act that, in reality, failed to bring about true change, since the Supreme Court *also* passed the Pupil Placement Law, which gave states the power to decide who could attend which schools based on "subjective" concerns—essentially guaranteeing that southern states could easily maintain school segregation. Lastly, Dr. King references the bus boycott that took place in Montgomery, Alabama after Rosa Parks courageously refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus. As one of the leaders who helped organize the ensuing boycott, Dr. King sees the campaign in Montgomery as a precursor to the direct-action campaign that took place six years later in Birmingham— in other words, it provided an important opportunity for civil rights leaders to hone tactics of nonviolent protest and demonstration that would ultimately become invaluable to the civil rights movement as a whole.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because it provides insight into the harmful effects of racism and the Black community's fight for true freedom in the United States, *Why We Can't Wait* has a lot in common with James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Both books were published in the early 1960s and address what it's like to experience racism. They also explore how the country should proceed in its struggle for equality. In addition, Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech is also relevant to any discussion of *Why We Can't Wait*, especially since the speech touches on the same themes of unity and hopefulness that the book sets forth (he also delivered the speech in the summer of 1963, which is the period *Why We Can't Wait* focuses on). Furthermore, novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Richard Wright's *Native Son* are also important works that deal with the Black American experience in the mid-20th century. For another perspective on the push for racial equality, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* details a more militant and uncompromising approach to the country's problem with racism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Why We Can't Wait
- **When Written:** The early 1960s

- **When Published:** 1964
- **Literary Period:** 20th-century Black American Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Social Commentary
- **Setting:** Birmingham, Alabama in the summer of 1963
- **Climax:** Overwhelmed by the scale and persistence of the direct-action campaign for desegregation, Birmingham's white business leaders agree to negotiate with Dr. King and other activists in the civil rights movement.
- **Antagonist:** Racism and white complacency

EXTRA CREDIT

Letter From Birmingham Jail. The idea for *Why We Can't Wait* emerged from "Letter From Birmingham Jail," which Dr. King wrote in a cell in Birmingham after being arrested for civil disobedience in 1963. The open letter was so widely disseminated that it attracted the attention of the publishing world, at which point Dr. King was asked to write an entire book based on the idea of not waiting any longer for freedom.

PLOT SUMMARY

Martin Luther King, Jr., reviews the events leading up to the demonstrations for racial equality in 1963. Although it had been 100 years since Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation (which technically granted freedom to Black people living in slavery), racial equality *still* wasn't a reality in the United States. In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, but very few southern states had actually obeyed the ruling—largely because the Supreme Court *also* allowed states to implement the Pupil Placement Law, which gave states the power to determine where students went to school based on things like the student's "family background." As a result, most southern states maintained the status quo of segregation.

Dr. King suggests that living under racist policies for so long pushed Black Americans toward revolution in the summer of 1963. There was a sense of urgency during this period, even if many white people argued that Black people should show patience and simply wait for freedom to come their way. Dr. King challenges the idea that equality ever comes about on its own, refuting the notion that the social revolution in 1963 was sudden or unexpected. Rather, Black Americans had been waiting for freedom and equality for 100 years, and by the early 1960s, it had become quite clear that waiting for justice was no longer an option.

To address inequality, Dr. King and his fellow activists devoted themselves to the practice of nonviolent direct action—a method of peacefully protesting injustice without resorting to physical force or aggression. Nonviolence, Dr. King believes, is an extremely powerful tool. He also strongly believes that it enriches and "ennobles" the people who use it because it allows them to fight for their rights while maintaining their morality and dignity. As a Christian minister, Dr. King cares deeply about such matters.

One reason nonviolent direct action was so effective in 1963 is that it confounded violent police officers. Law enforcement officials had grown accustomed to their ability to frighten Black people with the threat of violence and imprisonment, but nonviolent direct action encouraged demonstrators to actively *seek out* such treatment as a way of challenging their oppressors. Because it was so obvious that the demonstrators weren't behaving violently, any kind of police brutality became especially glaring, attracting attention to the cause and revealing to the nation just how badly the police treated Black people. Plus, by willingly going to jail, demonstrators took away law enforcement's ability to intimidate them with threats of imprisonment.

Dr. King was one of the leading organizers of the movement in Birmingham, Alabama, which was where the struggle for racial equality was centered in 1963. Having recently failed to bring about true change in a campaign in Albany, Georgia, he set his sights on Birmingham because a fellow organizer, Fred Shuttlesworth, had been struggling for racial equality in the city. Birmingham was the perfect place to center the movement, since it was under the influence of a racist Commissioner of Public Safety named Eugene "Bull" Connor. Bull Connor was a staunch segregationist, and Birmingham's white power structures were arranged to keep Black people in a state of constant oppression and danger. In the six years leading up to 1963, for instance, there were 17 bombings of Black houses and churches, all of them unresolved. As president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr. King came to Birmingham to assist Shuttlesworth and his work with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACHR), which was affiliated with the SCLC.

Working together, the SCLC and the ACHR planned a direct-action campaign in Birmingham for the weeks leading up to Easter. The campaign included a boycott of the businesses downtown, since Black shoppers accounted for a large percentage of those stores' profits. However, Dr. King and the others had to delay because of a mayoral election taking place on April 2nd—an election between three segregationists, including Bull Connor. Not wanting the candidates to use the civil rights movement to their own political advantage, Dr. King and the others decided to wait. Their decision stalled the momentum of the movement, especially when there was no clear winner in the election, causing a run-off election between Bull Connor and the segregationist Albert Boutwell, who eventually won. However, Bull Connor refused to leave office, challenging the city government's right to remove him until later in the year. As a result, the direct-action campaign still had to contend with Connor and his racist ways.

Having delayed as long as possible, the movement began.

Because they hadn't wanted news of the campaign to be used for political purposes, Dr. King and the others had been forced to keep their plans secret. They were criticized widely for this decision, as many Black community leaders felt excluded and blindsided by the sudden demonstrations. Knowing that unity is one of the most important aspects of any successful movement, Dr. King met with a broad "cross section" of community members, eventually rallying enough support to continue the movement as a united front.

Although the demonstrations started small, things were going well. Surprisingly, the police hadn't yet resorted to violent tactics while arresting the peaceful demonstrators. But then the city government obtained an injunction ordering the movement to halt all demonstrations until it argued its case in court. Dr. King knew this might happen, since court orders were common ways of halting progress when it came to the civil rights movement. Although he and his fellow organizers didn't want to break the law, they decided to continue demonstrating, acting on the belief that breaking an unjust law is not only permissible, but *moral*, too.

Dr. King and his fellow leader, Ralph Abernathy, planned to be the first ones to practice civil disobedience and go to jail. But then they learned that the person in the movement who had been paying bail for jailed protestors wouldn't be able to continue doing so. They were thus faced with a hard choice: they could refrain from going to jail even though they'd encouraged so many others to do exactly that, or they could go to jail and risk the possibility of staying there for a very, very long time. Despite the risk, Dr. King decided to go to jail, and Abernathy accompanied him.

In a Birmingham jail, Dr. King composed a letter to eight white clergymen who had publicly criticized him and the rest of the movement. The clergymen had suggested that the campaign was "untimely" and believed that the demonstrators were inciting dangerous disorder. But Dr. King reminded these men that Black Americans had been waiting hundreds of years for freedom, which must be "demanded by the oppressed"—it will never just come about on its own. He also chastised the clergymen for failing to recognize that, as religious leaders, they had a moral responsibility to stand by a movement of equality and justice.

When Dr. King got bailed out of jail—with funds raised by the famous singer Harry Belafonte, an ardent supporter of the civil rights movement—he set to work mobilizing Birmingham's Black youth, realizing that their enthusiasm would add power to the movement. Nonviolent demonstrations were extremely successful during this time, as Bull Connor's police force started using violent tactics that attracted the entire nation's attention, especially as the media publicized the police's aggressive treatment of Black children and teenagers.

Finally, the powerful white leaders of Birmingham met one day to talk about the possibility of negotiating with Dr. King and the other civil rights leaders. At first, they remained unwilling to make any concessions. But then they took a lunch break and walked outside to find the streets packed with demonstrators practicing nonviolent direct action. Realizing that the movement wasn't going to let up anytime soon, they decided to negotiate. After meeting with Dr. King and his allies, the white leaders of Birmingham agreed to desegregate the city and work toward racial equality. To add to this victory, Bull Connor lost his lawsuit and was pushed out of office.

But Dr. King notes that, although the outcome in Birmingham was a great victory for the civil rights movement, things didn't change overnight. Not long after the successful negotiations, white supremacists bombed the house of Dr. King's brother on the same night that they bombed the Gaston Motel, where Dr. King himself had been staying. Luckily, Dr. King was in Atlanta that night, and his brother survived the bombing at his house. Dr. King suspected that white supremacists were trying to provoke Black activists, hoping that they would break the pact they made with the white city leaders by resuming demonstrations. The movement, however, refused to take the bait, even when white supremacists bombed a Black church in September of 1963, killing four young girls attending Sunday School.

At the time of writing *Why We Can't Wait* in 1964, Dr. King reports that there's a "lull" in Birmingham. He notes that the future of Birmingham is largely up to the city itself: the white leaders must decide whether or not they're going to stand up for civil rights and make good on their promise to push for equality. Even if they don't decide to keep their word, though, freedom and justice will still come—either Birmingham (and the rest of the country) will willingly work toward racial equality, or activists will force it upon the city through nonviolent direct action, ultimately benefitting all Americans because equality will inevitably enrich the entire nation.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) – The author of *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a prominent leader of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s. A Baptist minister from Georgia, he believed in the power of nonviolence and helped popularize the use of nonviolent direct action as a means of addressing racism and inequality. He outlines the many benefits of nonviolent direct action in *Why We Can't Wait*, explaining how he and other civil rights leaders used it in a large-scale campaign for desegregation and racial equality in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Although he was adamant that Black Americans couldn't wait any longer for true freedom, he was willing to negotiate with powerful white community leaders—as long as they negotiated in good faith. While other

movements (like the Nation of Islam) advocated for a total withdrawal of Black Americans from white culture, Dr. King wanted to work toward a unified nation. Part of his hopefulness surrounding the possibility of achieving harmony between the races was rooted in his overall outlook on life. As a minister who believed in the value of love and fellowship, he maintained a strong sense of faith and optimism about humankind's ability to come together. He is perhaps best remembered for his "I Have a Dream Speech" at the March on Washington, which brought almost 250,000 people to the nation's capital in a call for racial equality. He was assassinated in 1968.

Fred Shuttlesworth – Fred Shuttlesworth was an important leader of the civil rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. As a Christian minister and the leader of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, Shuttlesworth worked alongside Dr. King to mount the campaign for desegregation and racial equality that took place in Birmingham in 1963. Shuttlesworth had been challenging segregation in Birmingham since 1956, working against the city's racist Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor, and even staging a large boycott of white businesses in 1962—a precursor to the work he would do with Dr. King the following year.

Ralph Abernathy – Ralph Abernathy was an activist and leader in the civil rights movement. He worked closely with Dr. King on multiple campaigns for racial equality. A fellow Christian minister and member of the SCLC, he worked alongside Dr. King toward change in the 1950s and '60s. In 1963, he was heavily involved in the Birmingham campaign for desegregation. He and Dr. King were the first ones to practice civil disobedience after a court order demanding that the movement stop all demonstrations.

Eugene "Bull" Connor (Bull Connor) – Bull Connor was the Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham, Alabama from 1957 to 1963. A racist who fought to uphold segregation, he used aggressive tactics to intimidate Black protestors working with Dr. King and the movement for racial equality. Dr. King and his fellow organizers saw Bull Connor as a major obstacle in the push for desegregation, but they managed to weaponize Connor's own aggressive tactics against him by using nonviolent direct action. For instance, when Connor ordered his men to sic dogs on peaceful protestors or spray them with pressure hoses, the aggressive nature of his orders attracted attention from the national media, spotlighting the police's unjust treatment of nonviolent Black citizens. In 1963, Connor ran for mayor but lost to Albert Boutwell, yet another segregationist. After refusing to leave his post after the election, Connor was eventually ordered out of office.

Abraham Lincoln – Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States. Dr. King points to him as one of the few presidents in American history who took significant measures to advocate for Black Americans, since he passed the Emancipation Proclamation, which granted legal freedom to enslaved Black people. Although President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Dr. King points out that the next 100 years were full of racism and discrimination for Black Americans, meaning that, by 1963, the need for true freedom was 100 years in the making.

John F. Kennedy – John F. Kennedy was the 35th president of the United States. Dr. King refers to President Kennedy multiple times throughout *Why We Can't Wait*, viewing him as a promising young president whose impact on the civil rights movement was notable, though Dr. King believes that Kennedy would have gone on to play a much more influential role in the struggle for racial equality if he hadn't been assassinated in November of 1963.

Albert Boutwell – Albert Boutwell was the mayor of Birmingham, Alabama from 1963 to 1967. Like Bull Connor—his opponent in the mayoral race—he was a segregationist, though he was a little less aggressive and adamant about the issue. Still, Dr. King worries in *Why We Can't Wait* that Boutwell's administration won't bring any kind of change to Birmingham, which is why he and his fellow organizers decided not to postpone the direct-action campaign in favor of giving Boutwell a chance.

Harry Belafonte – Harry Belafonte is a Jamaican-American singer and activist. Known as the "King of Calypso," he was an adamant supporter of the campaign for desegregation in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. He helped Dr. King and the other organizers raise funds so that the movement could bail protestors out of jail after they got arrested. He also put Dr. King in touch with many influential people in New York City, thus helping spread news of the movement to important figures in the North.

A. D. King – A. D. King was one of Dr. King's brothers. A fellow Christian minister, he was involved in the 1963 campaign for racial equality. When the movement achieved success by convincing Birmingham's white leaders to negotiate, white supremacists bombed A. D. King's home. Thankfully, he survived the bombing, though he died only six years later of a suspected heart attack.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Tom King – Tom King was a segregationist who ran in the 1963 mayoral race in Birmingham, Alabama. He lost to both Bull Connor and Albert Boutwell, who went on to challenge each other in a run-off election.

TERMS

The Emancipation Proclamation – The Emancipation Proclamation was an executive order signed by **President Abraham Lincoln** in 1863. It granted freedom to all enslaved Black people.

Nonviolent Direct Action – Nonviolent direct action is a form of activism that uses nonviolence tactics to assert power and apply pressure in an effort to bring about change.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) – The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is an activist organization that advocates for civil rights. **Dr. King** was president of the SCLC from 1957 until his assassination in 1968, serving as the organization's first leader.

The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACHR) – The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights is an activist organization based in Birmingham, Alabama. Like the SCLC—which was its parent organization in the early 1960s—it advocates for civil rights. The organization was led by **Fred Shuttlesworth** during the Birmingham campaign. Although **Dr. King** refers to the group as the "ACHR," it is more commonly referred to as the ACMHR.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is a civil-rights organization founded in 1909 by some of the U.S.'s most influential Black Americans.

Tokenism – Tokenism refers to any act that supposedly uplifts a minority group but, in reality, just amounts to a symbolic and largely meaningless gesture toward true equality.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HISTORY, PROGRESS, AND CHANGE

In *Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King, Jr., examines the historical forces that drove the civil rights movement in 1963. In particular, he focuses on the 100 years between 1863 and 1963, a period in which Black Americans technically gained freedom from slavery but still faced racist limitations in essentially every area of life. Because of Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation in the South, Black southerners were cut off from the resources necessary for attaining success. Dr. King notes that even in 1963—a full century after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation—the average Black child in the South was "deprived of normal education and normal social and economic opportunities." As a result, it was nearly impossible for young Black people to find good jobs. Worse, even if their education *had* prepared them for the workforce, they wouldn't have been able to find decent positions because rewarding, stable jobs were only open to white people. By outlining this unfortunate fact, Dr. King highlights the cycles of racism and disenfranchisement that historically made it difficult for Black Americans to succeed in the 100 years after 1863. In doing so, he shows that the strong push for desegregation and racial equality in 1963 wasn't sudden or random—it didn't just come out of nowhere, as some white people thought. Rather, the yearning for true freedom in the Black community was more than 100 years in the making, which is why the need for real change was so pressing and urgent during the pivotal year of 1963.

To understand the sense of urgency that defined the civil rights movement in 1963, Dr. King argues, it's necessary to understand the history of racism and oppression in the United States. In the South, Jim Crow laws ensured the legal continuation of racism. These laws enforced segregation long after the Emancipation Proclamation had declared that the government should do nothing to "repress" Black Americans. Even after slavery, then, Black people were forced to wait for true equality. Because freedom was so long in the making, Dr. King argues that the majority of white Americans came to see Black Americans as people who could "quietly endure, silently suffer and patiently wait." In other words, a sense of complacency overtook the United States, as white people failed to understand that half-freedom isn't really freedom at all—or, in Dr. King's words, "it is no more possible to be half free than it is to be half alive."

Because many white people overlooked the country's ongoing, systemic oppression of Black people, they also tended to invest too much importance in small, isolated steps toward equality. Dr. King explains that this tendency is called "tokenism," which refers to the act of making symbolic gestures to address racial inequality. For example, because a select few Black Americans gained small amounts of success, many white people felt as if society had achieved true equality—even though the success of just a few Black people did little to help the rest of the Black population. Similarly, although the 1954 Supreme Court decision to outlaw school segregation seemed like a monumental step, it didn't actually bring about much change. In reality, the ruling only affected roughly nine percent of Black students in the South, largely because the Supreme Court *also* passed the Pupil Placement Law, which allowed states to determine which schools students attended based on "subjective" matters, making it easy for racist whites to maintain school segregation. As a result of continued segregation, Black students didn't have access to the kind of education that would prepare them for success in the workforce. This problem made it even harder for Black people to get good, well-paid jobs (not to mention the fact that there weren't any good jobs available to Black Americans in the first place). However, many white people ignored this pattern of oppression. Instead of thinking about ways to legitimately address inequality, the white population simply applauded itself

for passing the 1954 ruling on segregation—a tokenized step toward equality that just delayed true progress.

Because so many white Americans failed to see (or *care*) that Black people were still living under extreme oppression, they were taken aback by the explosive call for change that occurred in 1963. And yet, the campaign for racial justice wasn't *explosive* at all, Dr. King points out. Because white America had convinced itself that Black people were content to "patiently wait" for equality, when demonstrations broke out in Birmingham, white people thought the Black population had suddenly lost its patience. But Dr. King argues that Black Americans never truly *had* patience when it came to racial justice—they were just "forced" into a "posture of silent waiting." History supports this point, considering that, 100 years after Abraham Lincoln declared it illegal for the government to "repress" Black Americans, Black people were *still* unable to fully participate in most aspects of daily life. Indeed, Black people living in Birmingham in 1963 couldn't even sit down at a segregated lunch counter without putting themselves in danger. By underscoring that this kind of discrimination was still taking place 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Dr. King shows how ridiculous it was for white people to dismiss the civil rights movement as "untimely" or unjustified. Spotlighting that the campaign for racial justice was rooted in a *long* history of oppression, Dr. King emphasizes that the call for equality in 1963 was not only justified and well-deserved, but deeply urgent and inevitable, too.

UNITY, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, AND LEADERSHIP

In his account of what made the movement for racial equality successful in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasizes the importance of unity. Because Black southerners living in Birmingham faced so many obstacles in their push for freedom, it was crucial that they present a united front. In other words, Dr. King believes that the Black community couldn't afford to have any internal division, since they already faced so many divisive challenges in society as a whole. The success of the movement therefore depended upon the organizers' ability to bring together a "cross section of the community." Then, once they managed to build a broad coalition of community members, Dr. King and other leaders trained participants in the art of nonviolent direct action—a method of protest or demonstration that relies on peaceful tactics. Without the use of violence or physical force, Dr. King and his associates had to devise strategic ways of getting through to the powerful white segregationists who controlled Birmingham. For example, they decided to boycott white-owned businesses that financially depended on Black shoppers. To do so, leadership had to forge strong connections throughout the Black community so that nobody frequented the businesses. By detailing the calculated decisions that he and other prominent figures made in 1963, Dr. King illustrates that it's possible to lead successful revolutions without the use of violence—especially if leaders mobilize their community as a unified and cohesive force.

For Dr. King, who adamantly believes in the power of love and fellowship, it would be futile to fight racism without first practicing unity and kindness *within* the Black community. It makes sense that Dr. King wouldn't want to challenge the divisive system of segregation with a similarly divided group. By uniting the Black community, then, Dr. King practiced what he preached. But doing so wasn't particularly easy. Although everyone in the Black community was opposed to racism and segregation, not everyone agreed on the best way to address such matters. According to Dr. King, "unity has never meant uniformity," meaning that people can—and often *do*—have differing opinions about how to reach a common goal. Despite the difficulty of organizing a large community to support the same "tactical" approach, Dr. King made a concerted effort to speak to the influential Black leaders of Birmingham, knowing that successful revolutionary forces must be united. In these conversations, he addressed concerns about the timing of the movement, since many influential Black people felt that the demonstrations were taking place at an inopportune time. Others were upset because they felt that Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were outsiders who hadn't included them in the planning of the campaign. In addition to answering these concerns, Dr. King convinced skeptics to join the movement by emphasizing that, above all, injustice affected everyone in the Black community, so they might as well come together to challenge it. After all, the "bell of man's inhumanity to man does not toll for any one man," but for everyone.

Achieving unity within the civil rights movement also enabled Dr. King and his fellow leaders to draw upon a vast number of participants who were willing to put themselves on the line for freedom. The sheer size of the movement was critical to its success, especially since it relied on nonviolent direct action. In order to work, this tactic needed many demonstrators who were committed not only to nonviolence but also to practicing civil disobedience and going to jail. Dr. King stresses how effective it was for hordes of demonstrators to baffle police officers by peacefully making themselves vulnerable to violence and arrest. If only a small handful of activists had been willing to put themselves at risk, it would have been more difficult for the movement to make an impact. More than just practicing what he preached, then, Dr. King's efforts to unify the civil rights movement were strategically necessary, proving that it's possible to make a serious impact on society simply by coming together and committing to nonviolent direct action.

At the same time, even the most unified, non-hierarchal movements often need decisive individual leaders. As a

community organizer devoted to creating a united movement, Dr. King faced the burden of responsibility that came with his leadership role. He and his fellow organizer Ralph Abernathy planned to be the first ones to go to jail after the court ordered the movement to stop all demonstrations. But the night before going through with their plan, they learned that the movement might not have enough money to bail them out, meaning that they could languish in jail for a very long time. Dr. King thus faced a tricky dilemma: if he went to jail, his absence might deflate the movement, but if he *didn't* go to jail, it would seem like he was unwilling to do the very thing he'd encouraged everyone else to do. As Dr. King sat with his closest associates and thought about what he should do, he felt "alone" and unsure. He notes that "there comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man surrounded by friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself," suggesting that sometimes it's necessary for individual leaders to make difficult decisions all on their own. Dr. King was well aware that everyone was looking to him to make a decision, so he declared that he would go to jail. More than anything, this decision was a grand show of solidarity with the people he had encouraged to put themselves on the line, ultimately suggesting that effective leaders should stand with their fellow community members at all costs.

RELIGION, MORALITY, AND HOPE

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s approach to racial equality in *Why We Can't Wait* is rooted in his religious and moral beliefs. As a Christian minister, he thinks about racial inequality as a problem that the Christian church has an obligation to address. Because the Christian gospel preaches the value of kindness, love, and brotherhood, Dr. King sees it as an ideal basis for navigating issues of oppression and inequality. In fact, it is most likely because of his strong religious beliefs that he was able to maintain an unflappable sense of moral conviction. When the Birmingham government filed an injunction ordering the movement to stop demonstrating until their case was argued in court, Dr. King decided to break the law—a difficult decision, given that a major point of the campaign was to convince people to *follow* the law (by adhering to the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling on segregation). Faced with this conundrum, Dr. King called on his strong moral compass, which told him that breaking an unjust law is not only permissible, but a moral *responsibility*. He explains his thinking in a letter to **white clergymen** about the church's duty to support equality; the simple fact that he expresses these ideas in a letter about the church suggests that his moral beliefs are directly tied to his religious beliefs. To that end, the connection between religion and morality is most likely why Dr. King was able to maintain such a strong sense of hope in the face of violence and oppression. It becomes clear, then, that religion—or at least a strong moral code—often motivates and emotionally sustains people by helping them stick to their convictions.

Dr. King's religious beliefs gave him the strength to face adversity because they allowed him to squarely face the ugliness of the world without completely losing heart. His entire approach to activism was rooted in his Christian values, as he believed that the United States is a place where compassion and "Christian forgiveness" have been "written into the minds and hearts of good men." The idea of "Christian forgiveness" has to do with empathy and the ability to show kindness, but it also implies that there are wrongs that need to be forgiven in the first place. In other words, U.S. history is full of some serious moral failures—like, for instance, the entire institution of slavery. But Dr. King thinks it's within the nation's ability to move on from such ugliness, believing that inherently religious values like love, kindness, and forgiveness are even more deeply rooted than the country's racist and tragic history. He's therefore able to view things like racial equality as inevitable, even if it seems like a distant reality. To put it another way, his religious and moral values make it easier for him to embody hope. And yet, his belief in the nation's Christian values doesn't mean that he overlooks the roiling hatred and bigotry that plagues the nation—instead, he views these values as resources that can be used to actively resist unjust laws. He acknowledges the country's problems and chooses to believe they aren't what define the United States. Rather, he thinks the nation is great precisely because it's well-positioned to *challenge* such hatred and division.

To that end, Dr. King believes there's a moral responsibility to resist injustice at all costs, especially for Christians. When he went to jail for practicing civil disobedience, eight white clergymen criticized him and the direct-action campaign in Birmingham. Dr. King defended himself by writing a letter in which he points out that there's a huge moral difference between breaking a just law and breaking an *unjust* law. To break a just law is to act immorally, since it's obviously indefensible to disobey any rule rooted in fairness. Conversely, it's actually *moral* to break an unjust law. A law is unjust if it "degrades human personality"—in other words, if a law has a negative impact on a population's ability to move through life, it's unjust. To obey such a law therefore means reinforcing something that is actively harmful, so it would be wrong to unquestioningly follow it. Accordingly, Dr. King suggests that his decision to practice civil disobedience is not just permissible, but also something of a moral imperative—something he was compelled to do out of a sense of honor and integrity. Instead of admonishing him and the civil rights movement for creating disorder, then, the white clergymen (who presumably had the same religious devotion to justice as Dr. King himself) should have felt a moral responsibility to stand up against oppression.

Furthermore, Dr. King's religious beliefs don't just reinforce his

moral outlook—they also give him faith that true change will someday come. His ability to work so tirelessly toward equality is directly related to his overall faith in the goodness of humankind. For instance, when white supremacists bombed his brother's house, Dr. King spoke to his brother on the phone, and even though the circumstances were emotionally strenuous and discouraging, there was a moment of hope and optimism when a group started singing the gospel song "**We Shall Overcome**" in the background of the call. Despite his sorrow in this moment, Dr. King felt uplifted by hearing the song, which has spiritual overtones and is said to have developed from a church hymn. Instead of despairing, then, Dr. King was reminded of the power of responding to hate "with hope and with faith," therefore illustrating how helpful it can be for leaders to have a strong sense of faith—a sense of faith that can, in many cases, help people remain resilient and hopeful.

COMPLACENCY, IGNORANCE, AND THE STATUS QUO

Why We Can't Wait highlights how challenging it was for civil rights leaders to combat the nation's complacency surrounding racial inequality in the 1950s and '60s. Dr. King makes it clear that the country's white population was quite unmotivated to pursue change, instead feeling content with the idea of maintaining the status quo, which meant preserving a strict and unjust racial hierarchy. As Black Americans suffered as a result of racism and segregation, many white people refused to think critically about the situation. For example, Dr. King notes that many segregationists in the South used to claim that Black people were perfectly "satisfied." They would justify this opinion by saying that they had spoken to their Black employees (for instance, a personal chef or a maid) and asked them to voice their opinions. Inevitably, the Black employees said whatever the segregationist wanted to hear, but that was only because voicing their real opinions might get them fired or even put them in danger. Although it should have been obvious that Black employees wouldn't answer such questions honestly, Dr. King's anecdote illustrates just how ignorant and self-serving many white people were when it came to thinking about inequality. To address the apathy surrounding the issue, then, Dr. King and his allies turned to nonviolent direct action, which "dramatize[d] the issue" by highlighting the police's aggressive tactics against peaceful Black citizens—something that finally captured the nation's attention and, in doing so, paved the path toward desegregation. By showing how necessary it was to "dramatize the issue," Dr. King implies that shaking the nation out of complacency was one of the most important steps in the entire civil rights movement.

Dr. King maintains that white complacency was perhaps the biggest obstacle to achieving racial justice and equality. The idea that Black people ought to somehow make do with their circumstances was pervasive among white people in the early 1960s, making it clear just how out of touch white Americans were with the struggles Black people faced. Instead of putting themselves in the shoes of Black Americans, most white people prioritized the smooth functioning of society and the preservation of "order" above all else. The open letter that eight **white clergymen** penned in opposition to the Birmingham protests is a perfect illustration of the white population's failure to empathize with the civil rights movement. Dr. King responded with his own letter, in which he criticizes the white clergymen for their inability—or unwillingness—to recognize the hatred and danger that Black people have to deal with on a daily basis. It is exactly this kind of complacency and ignorance, he suggests, that has preserved segregation and racism for so long. In fact, he even argues that "moderate" white people (who are neither civil rights activists nor staunch segregationists) pose more of a threat to racial equality than extremist hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan, since they tacitly endorse racist practices while acting guiltless and reasonable, making it that much harder to challenge unjust policies.

The most dangerous thing about such complacency or apathy is that it keeps people from striving toward change. For example, most white people didn't feel an urgent impetus to achieve equality because they weren't personally affected by racism. Instead, many white people advocated for "gradualism," which is the idea that society itself will slowly become more egalitarian and just over time. But "gradualism," Dr. King argues, simply would not work. By 1963, Black Americans had been living under oppressive circumstances for so many years (entire centuries!) that it was unacceptable to consider having to wait any longer for justice. And yet, what made the complacency surrounding racial justice so difficult to combat was that it was deeply entrenched in the white community—so entrenched, in fact, that many white people somehow deluded themselves into thinking that Black people were actually *happy* with their current circumstances. Such beliefs were based on unreliable anecdotes in which racist white people manipulated their own positions of power to get Black people to tell them exactly what they wanted to hear: namely, that segregation was a perfectly agreeable arrangement and that change wasn't necessary. However, Dr. King emphasizes that the very same Black people who felt obligated to say such things also took part in demonstrations against segregation. Segregationists were thus going out of their way to reinforce an obviously untenable belief system. In a way, then, white complacency wasn't necessarily the result of ignorance, but an *intentional* attempt to dodge reality in the hopes of preserving a worldview with glaring moral flaws.

Because white Americans were so tied to complacent ideas surrounding racial inequality, it was necessary to shock the country out of its apathetic ways. To do so, Dr. King and his fellow organizers used nonviolent direct action as a way of

spotlighting just how cruel and aggressive police officers were when dealing with peaceful protestors. Images of vicious dogs biting innocent children and police officers using pressure hoses on nonviolent demonstrators went out in newspapers across the country, making it much harder for white people to convince themselves that Black Americans were happy with the way things were. By attracting attention to the sheer violence and hatred aimed at nonviolent Black people, the movement forced white America to reckon with its own willful complacency, challenging anyone with a conscience to abandon indefensible views supporting segregation. In doing so, the leaders of the civil rights movement demonstrated Dr. King's idea that freedom "must be demanded by the oppressed" because it's "never voluntarily given by the oppressor"—if Dr. King and other activists hadn't "demanded" freedom by forcing white Americans out of their complacent viewpoints, there's no telling how long segregation would have lasted in the United States.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FREEDOM SONGS

The freedom songs that Dr. King and his fellow activists sang during the Birmingham campaign symbolized both the sense of hope and the resiliency that the civil rights movement adopted in its push for racial equality. Throughout *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. King says several times that these songs helped him and others in the movement remain hopeful in the face of extreme adversity. For instance, when white supremacists bombed his brother's home, Dr. King spoke to him on the phone and, though the atmosphere was obviously stressful and frightening, he heard people singing "We Shall Overcome" in the background of the phone call. Hearing the song, Dr. King took heart in the fact that, "in a moment of such tragedy," Black Americans were still able to act "with hope and with faith." Freedom songs were particularly well-aligned with Dr. King's values because many of them originated from church hymns and other spiritual songs, thus tapping into Dr. King's Christian worldview and his tendency to call on his religious faith in times of hardship. What's more, freedom songs were historically sung by enslaved Black Americans while they worked in the fields. In the same way that these songs gave enslaved people a small sliver of hopefulness, then, they uplifted Black activists in the 1950s and 1960s, thus representing the power and importance of such hopefulness in moments of great hardship.

THE WHITE CLERGYMEN

The eight white clergymen who publicly criticized Dr. King and the Birmingham campaign represent the ignorance and complacency that the civil rights movement had to face from the white community in the 1950s and 1960s. Although these clergymen were religious leaders who supposedly possessed strong moral compasses and cared about diminishing human suffering, they condemned the civil rights movement and its push for equality. In his response to their criticism, Dr. King points out their hypocrisy and expresses disappointment that they didn't stand with the civil rights movement and support its attempts to fight injustice. In particular, their complaint that the Birmingham campaign was poorly timed is indicative of just how unmotivated and naïve many white people were at the time—even though Black Americans had been suffering and waiting for freedom for hundreds of years, white people like the clergymen tried to argue that Black people should continue to wait patiently for change to come. The fact that such a callous and unempathetic viewpoint came from a group of religious leaders underscores the extent to which white Americans resisted any kind of progress toward racial equality; if even people who were supposed to believe in things like justice and compassion couldn't see the urgent need for change, then it's clear that the civil rights movement had quite a lot of work to do in order to get through to the rest of the white population.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *Why We Can't Wait* published in 2000.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"If you had sneezed during all those hours of waiting," Dr. Maynard said, "your aorta would have been punctured and you would have drowned in your own blood."

In the summer of 1963 the knife of violence was just that close to the nation's aorta. Hundreds of cities might now be mourning countless dead but for the operation of certain forces which gave political surgeons an opportunity to cut boldly and safely to remove the deadly peril.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

To illustrate the pressing urgency of the push for racial equality, Dr. King compares the need for freedom to a story from his personal life. Not long ago, he explains, he was at a book signing when he suddenly felt something sharp in his chest: a woman had stabbed him with a letter opener. After being rushed to the hospital, he had to wait a long time before the doctors operated. He later learned that the delay was due to the fact that the sharp tip of the letter opener was pressing against his heart, so his entire chest had to be opened so the blade could be carefully removed. If he had sneezed just once, the tip would have pierced his heart.

The same was true in 1963: American society was so divided and full of tension that even the smallest occurrence could have caused it to erupt into violence. By drawing this analogy, Dr. King emphasizes not just the urgency of the matter but also the point that history easily could have gone differently. American society was lucky, he implies, that the civil rights movement used nonviolent direct action to address racism and inequality. If the movement hadn't modeled peace, it's likely that the nation would have descended into violent chaos.

> There was another factor in the slow pace of progress, a factor of which few are aware and even fewer understand. It is an unadvertised fact that soon after the 1954 decision the Supreme Court retreated from its own position by giving approval to the Pupil Placement Law. This law permitted the states themselves to determine where school children might be placed by virtue of family background, special ability and other subjective criteria.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

To fully understand the struggle for civil rights that took place in 1963, Dr. King thinks it's necessary to look back at the historical events driving the campaign. In particular, he considers the Supreme Court's ruling in 1954 to desegregate schools. Although the ruling was seen as a groundbreaking development, Dr. King points out that many people fail to acknowledge—or perhaps don't even *know*—that the Supreme Court quickly "retreated from its own position" by passing a law that effectively diminished any progress toward segregation. The Pupil Placement Law enabled states to decide where students should go to school. The fact that this decision was based on "subjective criteria" meant that the white officials in charge could easily come up with arbitrary reasons to send white children to one school and Black children to another, thus preserving school segregation without technically breaking the law. When Dr. King says that "few are aware" that this was the case, he hints at the complacency and ignorance that often keep society from achieving true progress. After all, the majority of American society didn't even *acknowledge* the regressive nature of the Pupil Placement Law, making it that much harder to actually address the problem of school segregation.

> While the Negro is not so selfish as to stand isolated in concern for his own dilemma, ignoring the ebb and flow of events around the world, there is a certain bitter irony in the picture of his country championing freedom in foreign lands and failing to ensure that freedom to twenty million of its own.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King considers the fact that the United States is adamant about protecting freedom and liberty around the world while failing to treat its own Black citizens like free people. Historically speaking, the United States' foreign policy has often tried to keep other countries from falling under authoritarian rule, and many U.S. presidents have pitted themselves against communism on the premise that it's a dangerous and exploitative approach to governing. To that end, American politicians were especially against communism in the 1950s and 1960s, going out of their way to stop its global spread—all based on the idea that communism was antithetical to things like freedom and liberty. As such, Dr. King finds it ironic that there's so much racist oppression in the United States itself. Even as the country "champion[s] freedom in foreign lands," it ignores the fact that "twenty million of its own" citizens—namely, its Black citizens—don't even *have* full freedom in the first place.

> The pen of the Great Emancipator had moved the Negro into the sunlight of physical freedom, but actual conditions had left him behind in the shadow of political, psychological, social, economic and intellectual bondage. In the South, discrimination faced the Negro in its obvious and glaring forms. In the North, it confronted him in hidden and subtle disguise.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Even though Abraham Lincoln declared all enslaved Black Americans free when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the country continued—and, in many ways, continues still—to suffer from racism and systemic oppression. Dr. King acknowledges that the Emancipation Proclamation made an impact by bringing to light the true and ugly nature of racism, but it didn't necessarily improve the "actual conditions" of living in the United States as a Black person. Even though it technically became illegal for white oppressors to enslave Black Americans, the "shadow" of oppression continued to haunt Black people in seemingly every aspect of life: "political, psychological, social, economic and intellectual" realms of everyday existence were mired in racism, even when such oppression appeared in "subtle disguise." By outlining the fact that even something as monumental as the Emancipation Proclamation couldn't eradicate oppression in the United States, Dr. King spotlights the long-lasting effects of the country's racist history.

> The average Negro is born into want and deprivation. His struggle to escape his circumstances is hindered by color discrimination. He is deprived of normal education and normal social and economic opportunities. When he seeks opportunity, he is told, in effect, to lift himself by his own bootstraps, advice which does not take into account the fact that he is barefoot.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King points out that, because of the country's terrible history of racism and oppression, it was especially difficult for Black Americans to attain success in the 1950s and 1960s. For one, many Black Americans were born into "want and deprivation," which is to say that they experienced extreme poverty at a very young age and essentially knew nothing else for the rest of their lives. To make matters worse, segregation and Jim Crow laws still kept Black Americans from entering many professions, making it that much harder for Black people living in poverty to achieve financial stability (to say nothing of actual success). And yet, many people in the United States cling to the fantasy that hard work and determination always lead to prosperity and good fortune—the problem, though, is that this kind of upward mobility only tends to work when a person has something to start with. For most Black Americans living in poverty, then, the American dream of working hard and becoming successful is practically unattainable, which is why Dr. King says that it's impossible for a man to "lift himself by his own bootstraps" if he doesn't even *have* boots in the first place.

> Nonviolent direct action did not originate in America, but it found its natural home in this land, where refusal to cooperate with injustice was an ancient and honorable tradition and where Christian forgiveness was written into the minds and hearts of good men.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King meditates on the value of nonviolent direct action, noting that it was especially well-suited for the American civil rights movement. According to him, practicing various forms of nonviolent protest aligns with the very same core values that lie at the heart of the United States, where a "refusal to cooperate with injustice" is not only permissible, but actually seen as "honorable." His point here hints at the fact that some of the country's most celebrated historical events involved courageous groups of revolutionaries who refused to simply accept tyranny or oppression. In fact, the United States in its current form wouldn't exist if people living in the original colonies didn't stand up against the British crown. Moreover, though, Dr. King implies a connection between this kind of bravery and a sense of

morality—a sense of morality that is directly tied to certain Christian values. In particular, he thinks that "Christian forgiveness"—a form of patient empathy and the ability meet adversity with kindness—has been "written into the minds and hearts of good men" in the United States. As such, he has confidence in the civil rights movement's ability to rise above hatred and oppression through the use of nonviolent direct action, which is a virtuous (and, thus, a Christian) way of addressing racism. In other words, Dr. King is devoted to nonviolence both because he thinks it aligns with the United States' founding principles *and* because it aligns with his own religious worldview.

Chapter 2 Quotes

It is important to understand, first of all, that the Revolution is not indicative of a sudden loss of patience within the Negro. The Negro had never really been patient in the pure sense of the word. The posture of silent waiting was forced upon him psychologically because he was shackled physically.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King responds to a misguided argument that he often encountered while advocating for racial equality—namely, the idea that Black people suddenly lost "patience" and started an unreasonable and unexpected push for change. The problem with this argument, Dr. King explains, is that Black people were never "patient" when it came to receiving the freedom and liberty that they always deserved as human beings. Setting aside the obvious fact that nobody should have to wait "patiently" for such fundamental human rights, Dr. King argues that the only reason Black people might have *seemed* content to wait for change was because they were "forced" to act this way—after all, it was physically dangerous for Black Americans to stand up for their rights in the racist environment of the United States. Therefore, Black people assumed a "posture of silent waiting" that didn't actually reflect the burning desire to live a life of freedom.

White people in the South may never fully know the extent to which Negroes defended themselves and protected their jobs—and, in many cases, their lives—by perfecting an air of ignorance and agreement. In days gone by, no cook would have dared to tell her employer what he ought to know. She had to tell him what he wanted to hear. She knew that the penalty for speaking the truth could be loss of her job.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

By outlining that Black Americans have often had to assure their racist employers that they're content with segregation, Dr. King illustrates just how complacent and ignorant many white people were in the 1950s and 1960s when it came to the issue of racial equality. Many segregationists, he explains, claimed that Black people were perfectly happy with the way things were, but these claims were based on unobjective, biased conversations, since the segregationists would often ask their Black employees to share their thoughts on the matter. Although it should have been obvious that their employees wouldn't feel comfortable being honest with them, the segregationists overlooked the power imbalance in these conversations and took what their employees said at face value. In doing so, these segregationists merely made themselves feel good about their racist ideas, demonstrating the kind of willful ignorance that encouraged so many white people to avoid addressing just how immoral their beliefs really were.

When, for decades, you have been able to make a man compromise his manhood by threatening him with a cruel and unjust punishment, and when suddenly he turns upon you and says: "Punish me. I do not deserve it. But because I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong," you hardly know what to do. You feel defeated and secretly ashamed. You know that this man is as good a man as you are; that from some mysterious source he has found the courage and the conviction to meet physical force with soul force.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King elaborates on why nonviolent direct action was so effective in the civil rights movement, noting that it used law enforcement's aggressive tactics against them. Instead of turning away from the threat of violence or imprisonment, Black Americans in the civil rights movement knowingly accepted that they might get injured or thrown in jail. As a result, police officers no longer knew what to do. What's more, these nonviolent tactics shone a spotlight on racial injustice, inviting the entire nation to finally take note of the fact that Black Americans had to deal with aggressive and violent police officers even when they had done nothing wrong. Nonviolence, after all, comes with a certain sense of innocence, so the image of an enraged police officer beating or aggressively arresting a peaceful Black person really underlined the injustice that lay just beneath the surface of everyday life in the United States. Lastly, Dr. King indicates that practicing nonviolence was a courageous, honorable thing to do—yet another thing that most likely stood out to white Americans who perhaps hadn't previously considered how frightening it would be for Black Americans to take a stand against racism.

❝ A judge here and a judge there; an executive behind a polished desk in a carpeted office; a high government administrator with a toehold on a cabinet post; one student in a Mississippi university lofted there by an army; three Negro children admitted to the whole high-school system of a major city—all these were tokens used to obscure the persisting reality of segregation and discrimination.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22-23

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King considers the effects of tokenism, which is—at least in this case—the act of making purely symbolic, largely meaningless gestures toward equality. Just because some Black Americans were able to gain success, Dr. King argues, doesn't mean that society as a whole had made any sort of legitimate progress when it came to addressing the racism at its core. Still, some white people pointed to Black people who had attained prestige or success, claiming that their prosperity proved that the United States was no longer a truly racist place. However, the success that this small portion of the Black population managed to attain was a rare exception to the overall rule. In general, most Black Americans were born into poverty and *stayed* poor for the entirety of their lives, since there were so few opportunities for Black people to pursue a good education or get a good job. Instead of advancing the push for racial equality, then, these token examples actually made it *harder* for the civil rights movement to bring about change. They instilled a sense of self-congratulatory complacency in the white population because many white Americans praised the country's supposed progress without acknowledging that most Black Americans still lived in highly oppressive conditions.

❝ Those who argue in favor of tokenism point out that we must begin somewhere; that it is unwise to spurn any breakthrough, no matter how limited. This position has a certain validity, and the Negro freedom movement has more often than not attained broad victories which had small beginnings. There is a critical distinction, however, between a modest start and tokenism. The tokenism Negroes condemn is recognizable because it is an end in itself. Its purpose is not to begin a process, but instead to end the process of protest and pressure. It is a hypocritical gesture, not a constructive first step.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

It's true that any kind of success within the Black community seemed—at first—like a step in the right direction. Compared to the hundreds of years of slavery and blatant, outright oppression, the fact that there were some Black judges or successful Black college students felt to many like a clear indication that the country was well on its way to addressing racism and discrimination. And yet, Dr. King critiques this viewpoint by revealing the dangerous ways in which tokenism actually held the country back from making legitimate progress. Some Black people had managed to attain success by the 1950s and 1960s, but Dr. King makes it quite clear that this success wasn't the first step toward equality—rather, it was an "end in itself." Rather

than creating a sustainable model that would ensure racial equality in the United States, these isolated flashes of Black success did little more than hide the fact that the vast majority of the Black population had no real path out of oppression. Tokenism, in other words, created an excuse for complacent white Americans to avoid taking real action to combat racism, and it made it that much easier for white society to act as if Black activists were behaving impatiently when they pushed for true equality.

If he is still saying, "Not enough," it is because he does not feel that he should be expected to be grateful for the halting and inadequate attempts of his society to catch up with the basic rights he ought to have inherited automatically centuries ago, by virtue of his membership in the human family and his American birthright.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Addressing the (ridiculous) complaint that the push for racial equality was too demanding or unreasonable, Dr. King notes that Black people shouldn't have had to feel like they were "expected to be grateful" for basic human rights. When Black Americans argued that the country's steps toward equality weren't "enough," that's because *nothing* would be enough until all races had the same rights. To underscore this point, Dr. King points out that Black people should have "automatically" "inherited" the rights they asked for during the civil rights movement. After all, it's not as if American citizens are expected to *earn* freedom for themselves—the country has always promoted the idea of "liberty and justice for all," so it's deeply unreasonable to argue that Black Americans were being too demanding when they campaigned for freedom in the 1950s and 1960s. And yet, that's exactly how many racist white people responded to the campaign for racial justice, inconsiderately acting like they would be doing Black people a favor by granting them the fundamental rights that were, in reality, their "American birthright."

Perhaps even more vital in the Negro's resistance to violence was the force of his deeply rooted spiritual beliefs. In Montgomery after a courageous woman, Rosa Parks, had refused to move to the back of the bus, and so began the revolt that led to the boycott of 1955-56, the Negro's developing campaign against that city's racial injustice was based in the churches of the community. Throughout the South, for some years prior to Montgomery, the Negro church had emerged with increasing impact in the civil-rights struggle. Negro ministers, with a growing awareness that the true witness of a Christian life is the projection of a social gospel, had accepted leadership in the fight for racial justice [...].

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

The link between Dr. King's approach to activism and his religious worldview emerges in this section, as he explains that the civil rights movement was firmly "rooted" in "spiritual beliefs." Part of the church's involvement was somewhat logistical, since the church community was already a unified group, meaning that it provided a cohesive collective that was easy to mobilize. During the bus boycott in Montgomery, for example, the "developing campaign against that city's racial injustice was based in the churches of the community." As a result, Dr. King and the other organizers were able to mount a large-scale boycott of the bus lines, calling on Black churchgoers to stop riding the buses. On a deeper level, though, Dr. King emphasizes the idea that Christian values perfectly aligned with the fight for equality, indicating that his own activism was partially driven by his vocation as a Christian minister. Values having to do with love, kindness, and a general sense of right and wrong clearly inspired the movement's use of nonviolence and the resiliency that people like Dr. King showed.

The eye-for-an-eye philosophy, the impulse to defend oneself when attacked, has always been held as the highest measure of American manhood. We are a nation that worships the frontier tradition, and our heroes are those who champion justice through violent retaliation against injustice. It is not simple to adopt the credo that moral force has as much strength and virtue as the capacity to return a physical blow; or that to refrain from hitting back requires more will and bravery than the automatic reflexes of defense.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King considers the use of nonviolent direct action in the context of the United States, a country that celebrates violence, aggression, and extreme displays of force. The fact that Dr. King mentions the country's "eye-for-an-eye philosophy" hints at his religious worldview, since the "eye-for-an-eye philosophy" itself comes from the Bible. As Jesus Christ counsels in the New Testament, it's better to turn the other cheek than to take an eye for an eye. In keeping with this, Dr. King believes in the power of peaceful resistance to inequality. Instead of using violent retribution, he thinks that nonviolence and kindness are the best ways to challenge injustice. Because many Americans value force and might, though, Dr. King's peaceful approach is somewhat out of the ordinary, which is why he says that it's not so "simple to adopt" the idea that "moral force has as much strength and virtue as" physical force.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Certainly Birmingham had its decent white citizens who privately deplored the maltreatment of Negroes. But they remained publicly silent. It was a silence born of fear—fear of social, political and economic reprisals. The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

One of the biggest challenges for the civil rights movement wasn't just the outright racism many Americans exhibited but the subtle, complacent, and entrenched bigotry that existed throughout the country. There was a prevailing sense of complacency among white Americans, many of whom didn't see themselves as racist but certainly had a number of racist viewpoints or—at the very least—were content to go along with problematic ideas that preserved the country's racist status quo. This unwillingness to challenge the status quo is what Dr. King means when he says that many "decent white citizens" "remained publicly silent." Even white people who "deplored" racism failed to speak up, and though they themselves didn't mistreat Black people, their failure to do what was right made them complicit in the country's overall oppression of Black people. According to Dr. King, such moral complacency was just as damaging to the civil rights movement as the outright displays of racism.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang—the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. [...] We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that "We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday."

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the Birmingham campaign, Dr. King and his fellow activists drew strength from "freedom songs," which were songs that emerged from both the church and from slavery. In this passage, Dr. King suggests that the songs were the "soul of the movement," emphasizing just how important it was for the direct-action campaign to have a sense of faith and unity. Given that these songs were often spiritual in nature, the fact that they propelled the civil rights movement underscores the role religion played in the push for racial justice. Although the demands of the movement were wide-reaching and secular, people like Dr. King were driven by a sense of spirituality, which gave them faith and hope while facing extreme adversity. In that sense, freedom songs like "We Shall Overcome" helped solidify the feeling of hope that propped up the civil rights movement, giving leaders and participants alike a form of spiritual strength that offset the hatred and anger they faced in the

streets.

> The amazing aftermath of Birmingham, the sweeping Negro Revolution, revealed to people all over the land that there are no outsiders in all these fifty states of America. When a police dog buried his fangs in the ankle of a small child in Birmingham, he buried his fangs in the ankle of every American. The bell of man's inhumanity to man does not toll for any one man. It tolls for you, for me, for all of us.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

In response to a critique that characterized Dr. King as an "outsider" who came into Birmingham and created chaos, Dr. King argues that no Americans can be "outsiders" in their own country. His implication here is that the civil rights movement helped unify the entire nation and, in doing so, forced most people to embrace a certain kind of fellowship. Therefore, it would be impossible for any American to go to a different state and exist as an "outsider." To that end, the reason the civil rights movement was able to create this sense of unity was that it emphasized the fact that inequality doesn't just negatively impact Black Americans—rather, "man's inhumanity to man" has a negative effect on *all* of humankind, meaning that even outright oppressors put themselves at a disadvantage when they degrade other human beings. The underlying logic to this idea is that racism was a stain on the country's moral core (and that immorality inherently hinders a person's ability to lead a good or rewarding life). By addressing inequality and working toward harmony, then, the civil rights movement helped the entire nation, turning it into a more unified and moral place.

> I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt, with two dozen others in the room. There comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man surrounded by loyal friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself. I was alone in that crowded room.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Why We Can't Wait is about the historic campaign for racial justice that took place in the early 1960s, so it makes sense that certain parts of the book—like this passage—focus on what it was actually like to lead the movement. Dr. King has already emphasized that the civil rights movement was very communal, making it clear that he wasn't the only leader who helped organize the campaign. However, a certain amount of responsibility still fell on him as the movement's most prominent leader. On the night before he planned to practice civil disobedience and go to jail in Birmingham, he and the other organizers learned that there was no longer enough money to bail him out, since one of the movement's main funders had to stop sending money. Dr. King was thus faced with a difficult decision: he could either go to jail and risk leaving the movement without one of its most important leaders, or he could play it safe and, in doing so, fail to do the very thing he had encouraged others to do. As he sat and thought about what to do, he felt alone—despite the fact that there were "two dozen others in the room" with him. As such, it becomes clear that, though communal responsibility is key to social movements, leadership inevitably comes along with certain responsibilities that fall to just one person.

Chapter 5 Quotes

> You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In a letter addressed to eight white clergymen who openly

critiqued the civil rights movement, Dr. King responds to their belief that the movement should try to negotiate with influential white leaders instead of staging boycotts and demonstrations. Dr. King agrees that negotiation would be a great way to make progress—if, that is, it was a realistic thing to pursue. Unfortunately, though, the white leaders of Birmingham already showed that they can't be trusted to uphold their end of any agreement, since they previously agreed to desegregate stores but then went back to their old ways shortly thereafter. Consequently, the civil rights movement resorted to nonviolent direct action, which would "dramatize the issue" in a way that made it impossible to ignore. In other words, nonviolent direct action was so striking that it inevitably attracted the attention of white people who had previously been complacent or ignorant when it came to racial equality. After staging large-scale demonstrations and boycotts and practicing civil disobedience, the campaign in Birmingham managed to shine a spotlight on the cruel injustice that Black Americans had to face on a daily basis, thus making it easier to actually address the issue.

> We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well-timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

The eight white clergymen who criticized the civil rights movement claimed that it came at a bad time, urging organizers like Dr. King to be patient instead of pushing for their demands all at once. In response, though, Dr. King writes that showing this kind of patience doesn't actually work—it doesn't lead to true change, since "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor." For real progress to be made, activists like Dr. King and his fellow organizers have to apply real pressure to the people in power, working tirelessly to create situations that force those powerbrokers to give up their oppressive ways. As a result, powerful white people (like the clergymen themselves) will probably *never* feel like a campaign advocating for change is "well-timed"; they won't just wake up one day and decide to challenge themselves by striving for equality. By outlining the need for direct action, then, Dr. King dispels the idea that the leaders of the civil rights movement were impatient—rather, they were just doing what was necessary to bring about real change.

> One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Writing from jail to the eight white clergymen who openly criticized the civil rights movement, Dr. King defends his reasons for breaking the law. He recognizes that his choice to practice civil disobedience was somewhat fraught, since one of the Birmingham campaign's goals was to convince southern states to *follow* the law by honoring the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling to ban school segregation. But there's a profound difference, he believes, between breaking a "just" law and breaking an "unjust" law. Although it's clearly immoral to break a law that is "just" (which is to say a law that is reasonable and generally good for society), Dr. King upholds that it's *not* immoral to break an "unjust" law. In fact, he believes that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." He, for one, went to jail because he disobeyed a court order to stop protesting for racial equality. But this court order was in and of itself immoral, since it was nothing more than an attempt to preserve the country's racist status quo. And because Dr. King recognized this immorality, he had a moral duty to challenge it.

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice [...].

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In his letter from Birmingham jail to eight white clergymen, Dr. King expresses his disappointment and exasperation with white "moderates" who failed to take a stand against racial injustice. To underline just how destructive this complacency was to the civil rights movement, he suggests that white moderates were almost more of a threat to the prospect of racial equality than extremist white supremacy groups like the White Citizens' Councils or the Ku Klux Klan—two extremely dangerous organizations that used a number of frightening tactics to oppress Black Americans and block any progress made by Black activists. Given that these two organizations posed such a threat to the civil rights movement, Dr. King's point about white moderates is somewhat shocking, ultimately calling attention to just how damaging white silence has been in the struggle for equality. More specifically, Dr. King lampoons white moderates for being content with the mere "absence of tension" instead of actually striving for the "presence of justice"—an idea that speaks directly to the selfish complacency and apathy that drove many white people to turn their backs on the civil rights movement simply because they, as white people, didn't feel as if the issue affected them.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the star of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society. From the sixteenth century forward, blood flowed in battles over racial supremacy. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade.

[...]

It was upon this massive base of racism that the prejudice toward the nonwhite was readily built, and found rapid growth.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146-147

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. King contextualizes the mistreatment of Black Americans by looking to the country's history of genocidal racism. Not only did the United States actively kill and terrorize the Native American population—it also valorized that horrifying and "tragic experience," framing it as a "noble crusade" to colonize new land and establish a new country. The entire nation was thus built on unspeakable violence, and that violence was the direct result of rampant racism. Unfortunately, then, it's depressingly unsurprising that racism was still such a huge problem in the United States when Dr. King was writing *Why We Can't Wait* in 1964 (indeed, it's *still* alive today). Because the country was established through the use of racist violence, bigotry and hatred "found rapid growth" within the nation. By addressing this unsettling history, Dr. King implies that there's quite a lot of work to do when it comes to achieving racial equality, since the roots of racism are deeply wrought throughout American society.

For the first time millions listened to the informed and thoughtful words of Negro spokesmen, from all walks of life. The stereotype of the Negro suffered a heavy blow. This was evident in some of the comment, which reflected surprise at the dignity, the organization and even the wearing apparel and friendly spirit of the participants.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King)

(speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

In his description of the March on Washington—which took place in August of 1963 and brought nearly 250,000 people together in a huge call for racial equality—Dr. King points out that it was the first time that the majority of the United States actually paid close attention to Black Americans. In doing so, many white people realized that the negative stereotypes they had of Black Americans were inaccurate and disparaging. What helped dispel such ideas was the fact that many Black people—including Dr. King himself—gave long, impassioned speeches that were "informed and thoughtful." Whereas many ignorant white people had seen Black civil-rights activists as brash, impatient, and even unruly, now they saw them for who they actually were: dignified human beings requesting a simple thing—equality. The fact that white people (or white media outlets) later expressed "surprise" at trivial things like the way Black people at the March dressed is a further illustration of just how uninformed and racist the majority of the nation was when it came to having any understanding whatsoever of the country's Black citizens.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ We can, of course, try to temporize, negotiate small, inadequate changes and prolong the timetable of freedom in the hope that the narcotics of delay will dull the pain of progress. We can try, but we shall certainly fail. The shape of the world will not permit us the luxury of gradualism and procrastination. Not only is it immoral, it will not work. It will not work because Negroes know they have the right to be free. It will not work because Negroes have discovered, in nonviolent direct action, an irresistible force to propel what has been for so long an immovable object. It will not work because it retards the progress not only of the Negro, but of the nation as a whole.

Related Characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Dr. King) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In the final section of *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. King directly addresses the question in the book's title, making it clear that the nation can't "wait" for racial equality because equality is an "irresistible force" that has already begun to move. "Gradualism," or the idea of moving in small increments toward racial justice, simply won't work—there's too much at stake, and Black Americans have discovered the power of nonviolent direct action to bring about change, so delaying that change is no longer an option for complacent white people. What's more, his assertion that Black people *know* they "have the right to be free" highlights the moral underpinnings of the civil rights movement: Black Americans know in their hearts that racial equality is morally good and that racist oppression is bad, and *because* they're sure of this, they won't stop working toward equality until it has become a reality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther King, Jr., describes a young Black boy sitting in front of a run-down apartment in Harlem. It's 1963, and the boy's building smells of garbage. Few of the adults in his life have jobs, and many of them have developed substance-abuse issues. Dr. King also describes a young Black girl sitting before a dilapidated house in Birmingham. Like the boy, she has to fend for herself—her mother died in a car accident, and though she could have been saved, it took too long to get her to the all-Black hospital. Although the young boy and girl are separated by many miles, they both wonder the same thing: why is life so miserable for Black people in the United States?

Dr. King opens Why We Can't Wait *by underlining the fact that segregation isn't a harmless policy. Rather, it has a direct impact on human lives, as made evident by the story about the Black girl's mother who died because she couldn't simply go to the white hospital. By beginning with a spotlight on these two Black children, Dr. King invites readers to consider the real-life impact of racist policies.*

The history books taught in school don't acknowledge that Black people played a huge role in establishing the success of the United States. The first soldier to die in the American Revolution, for instance, was a freed Black man. Although American schools don't teach this history, the young boy and girl living in poverty know that Black people played an important role in the founding of the country. They also know that, although Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation 100 years ago, true racial equality has yet to come.

The lack of a comprehensive and accurate historical education in American school systems is a product of racism, as curricula fail to recognize that Black Americans were integral to the nation's overall success. Instead of talking about the debt that the country owes to its Black citizens (many of whom were enslaved), history books focus on white figures who brought about change. Historical education veers away from recognizing the contributions of Black Americans because doing so would mean reckoning with an ugly past—a past many white Americans are all too eager to forget. Dr. King calls attention to this willful ignorance as a way of highlighting the nation's overall complacency when it comes to acknowledging its flaws and working toward change.

Although the rest of the country prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the young Black children are painfully aware that the nation is still mired in racism and hatred. The Supreme Court ruled that segregation is illegal, but white supremacists have interfered throughout the South, ensuring that society has remained largely separated by race. Still, though, the two young Black children stand in unison—despite the great distance between them—and take a hopeful step forward, ready to advocate for themselves and for their community members. Despite the extreme prejudice they face, they remain undeterred. *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. King notes, is a story about their courage and its power to change the entire nation.

Even as it lays out the many obstacles and hardships facing the Black community, the book's opening is tinged with a sense of hope, as Dr. King suggests that the young Black children are ready to do whatever it takes to achieve racial equality. His focus on children is especially important, since they represent the future of the nation. What's more, it will later become clear that young people played an instrumental role in the civil rights movement.

CHAPTER 1: THE NEGRO REVOLUTION—WHY 1963?

Many Americans entered the summer of 1963 with the expectation that it would be a peaceful, prosperous season. Soon enough, though, the country entered a tumultuous period of upheaval that Dr. King considers the third revolution in the United States, dubbing it "the Negro Revolution."

Dr. King refers to the American Revolution and the Civil War in this section. The American Revolution took place between 1775 and 1781, a period in which the original American colonies won independence from the British crown, officially establishing the United States. The American Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865, as northern states in the Union fought against southern states in the Confederacy, eventually abolishing slavery and dissolving the Confederacy. By couching the civil rights movement in the historical context of these fights for freedom, Dr. King frames the campaign for racial equality as a moral and pivotal fight in the nation's overall path toward justice.

Like the French Revolution in 1789, the 1963 push for racial equality largely took place in the streets, as most of the country's cities became embroiled in a struggle against segregation. White people in the United States had come to see Black people as subservient and submissive, resigned to the many laws and social customs that prohibited them from enjoying the same liberties as white citizens. In reality, though, the Black community had been slowly building up the strength and will to stand up against racism—and in 1963, 300 years of oppression finally brought themselves to bear on the country.

Dr. King underscores the fact that the civil rights movement was a grassroots effort that played out in a very tangible way—it wasn't some abstract call for equality. Rather, it was a pressing, urgent effort led by the Black community itself. Despite the sense of urgency in the Black community, though, the vast majority of white Americans showed complacency, assuming that the current system wasn't so bad and believing that Black Americans should simply wait for change. In fact, the country's ignorance was one of the civil rights movement's biggest stumbling blocks.

Several years ago, Dr. King was in Harlem signing books when he felt a sharp pain in his chest. Looking up, he realized he'd been stabbed by a woman brandishing a letter opener. Upon reaching the hospital, he languished in pain for several hours before going into surgery. Later, the chief surgeon told him why he'd had to wait so long: the sharp tip of the letter opener had been touching his heart, so it was necessary to open his entire chest. If he had sneezed just once, the blade would have pierced his heart and flooded his chest with blood. In the summer of 1963, Dr. King writes, the United States faced the same kind of urgency.

Dr. King's analogy emphasizes the nation's pressing need for racial equality in 1963. By suggesting this kind of urgency, he implies that a failure to address racism and inequality could easily lead to chaos and even violence. He isn't threatening white America by suggesting that the civil rights movement will mount a violent campaign against segregationists—rather, he simply implies that there's so much turmoil bubbling under the surface of daily life in the United States that society could easily erupt into unrest if the nation doesn't address its racism and division.

If it weren't for the social revolution that took place in 1963, Dr. King believes that the nation would have descended into horrible violence. Because Black Americans have suffered for so long, though, Dr. King turns his attention to an important question: of all times, why did the revolution come about in 1963?

Although some complacent white people saw the civil rights movement as a disruption of society, Dr. King makes it clear that the opposite was true: the revolution that took place in 1963 actually helped the nation avoid violence. The implication here is that sometimes it's necessary to address difficult matters head-on, even if this means disturbing the status quo—a status quo that, in this case, would have led to violence and turmoil.

It has taken the United States an incredibly long time to achieve desegregation. Even though the Supreme Court determined in 1954 that it was illegal to segregate schools based on race, only 9 percent of Black students in the South had started attending integrated schools by 1963. To put this into perspective, such a pace would mean that total integration in the South wouldn't happen until 2054.

Dr. King dispels the idea that the call for desegregation in 1963 was sudden or unexpected. The United States had been working toward racial equality in some areas of life, but the nation's efforts barely brought about any change at all, as evidenced by the ineffectiveness of the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling. It thus became necessary for the civil rights movement to advocate for faster, more meaningful progress.

White southerners strongly renounced the Supreme Court's decision to integrate schools. Racists went out of their way to make integration all but impossible, using all kinds of tactics to counteract the Supreme Court's legal intentions. What's more, the Supreme Court passed the Pupil Placement Law shortly after its 1954 decision to integrate. The Pupil Placement Law dictated that states were allowed to determine the placement of students based on "subjective criteria." Although the Supreme Court didn't fully take back its own decision, then, it ensured that school segregation would continue even though it was technically illegal.

The Supreme Court essentially took a big step forward and then immediately took a step backward. Although it became illegal in 1954 to segregate schools, the Pupil Placement Law enabled segregationist state leaders to decide where students went to school, and because this decision was based on "subjective criteria," these leaders didn't have to justify their methods of placement. Consequently, officials could easily group Black students together in one school and white students in another, thereby establishing an informal kind of segregation.

One of the reasons that the Black community organized a revolution in 1963 is that Black people were severely disappointed that the desegregation law of 1954 hadn't led to any sense of true progress. Furthermore, Black Americans were unhappy with their political representatives, as even progressive candidates who ran their campaigns on the promise of racial justice backed away from such ideas once they took office. President Kennedy, for example, was in the White House for two years before he acted on his pledge to address housing discrimination—and the bill he signed to address this discrimination wasn't as helpful as it could have been.

Dr. King clarifies yet another reason that the Black community took it upon itself to strive toward change: simply put, it became clear that nobody else would help Black Americans achieve racial equality. The Supreme Court's ineffectiveness proved that the nation's power structures were unlikely to bring about real progress, as did President Kennedy's first two years in office. Although the Supreme Court and Kennedy did take steps to address the issue of racial inequality, these steps were more symbolic than anything else.

As the Black community stood up against various injustices in the years leading up to 1963, white officials often urged organizers like Dr. King to stop protesting. Instead of marching in the streets, white officials said, the Black community ought to focus on registering Black Americans to vote. Dr. King recognizes the importance of voting, but he was weary at the time of focusing on just one issue.

The advice (if it can even be called *advice) that white officials imparted to Dr. King in the early 1960s failed to grasp the urgent need for racial equality in the United States. Instead of helping Dr. King and other activists mount successful campaigns for justice, white leaders perpetuated the complacent idea that Black Americans should wait patiently for change—even though such change would clearly never come about on its own.*

Dr. King also notes that any discussion of racial equality should take the bigger picture of international politics into account—after all, the United States has long developed foreign policy based on the idea of preserving freedom at all costs. But as the country fought for freedom abroad, it denied its own Black citizens that very same liberty. Meanwhile, Black Americans watched as African and Asian nations won their freedom from colonization in the aftermath of World War II. By 1963, then, Black Americans were ready for true freedom in their own country.

Dr. King's point about foreign policy spotlights the nation's hypocrisy. For a country that supposedly upholds the idea of "liberty and justice for all," the United States had a remarkable amount of inequality and discrimination. The fact that the country often intervened in foreign affairs to promote freedom is especially significant, drawing attention to the glaring disconnect between the United States' values and its actual practices at home. And though Dr. King doesn't get into the extremely complicated fallout that often took place once countries liberated themselves from colonial rule, his point emphasizes just how frustrating it would have been to watch the rest of the world strive toward freedom while the United States—the supposed champion of liberty—refused to grant full freedom to its own Black citizens.

The 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation was an exciting event, but it also gave Black Americans an occasion to reflect on how little had changed since Abraham Lincoln tried to establish racial equality. Although Lincoln freed Black people from the horrors of slavery, daily living conditions remained bleak and strenuous. By 1963, the majority of Black Americans faced extreme poverty and no clear path to success, especially since the lack of adequate education in most Black communities made it that much harder for Black people to acquire skills that would help them find good jobs.

The Emancipation Proclamation was an important historical landmark, but it didn't grant Black Americans a substantial, genuine kind of freedom. Although it declared all enslaved Black people free, the fact remained that racism was still deeply embedded in the United States, ultimately curtailing Black Americans' liberty. Dr. King calls attention to the long-lasting effects of racism as a way of highlighting the cycles of discrimination that have historically made it difficult for Black people to succeed in the United States. In turn, he illustrates the need for comprehensive legal measures that would not only get rid of segregation, but also make up for the disadvantages that Black people have faced in the 100 years following the Emancipation Proclamation.

One of the defining elements of the push for racial equality in 1963 was the focus on nonviolent direct action. Dr. King sees this nonviolence as something that aligns with Christian values—values that are, in his estimation, at the heart of the entire nation. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 proved that nonviolent direct action is an effective tool for addressing injustice. By 1963, then, the Black community was ready to use a nonviolent approach on a large scale. According to Dr. King, nonviolence is a "powerful and just weapon" that "ennobles" whoever uses it. It is the "sword that heals."

It's helpful to remember that Dr. King was a Christian minister, meaning that his approach to activism was partially informed by his religious worldview. In particular, this worldview promoted the value of love, fellowship, and peace. Instead of challenging racism through violence and anger, then, he drew upon his faith in humankind's ability to show love and compassion for one another. Nonviolent direct action was therefore a perfect way to challenge injustice without actually doing anything immoral, which is why Dr. King believes that it's an honorable method that "ennobles" the people who use it. By peacefully and levelheadedly refusing to cooperate with an unjust system (which is what Rosa Parks did in Montgomery, Alabama, when she declined to give up her seat on a segregated bus), activists were able to stand up to their oppressors while maintaining a sense of morality.

CHAPTER 2: THE SWORD THAT HEALS

The revolution in 1963 didn't take place because Black people suddenly lost patience with the rest of the country. After all, Dr. King argues that Black people were never patient in the first place. Although many white Americans view Black Americans as willing to wait for true freedom, Dr. King notes that the "posture of silent waiting" has actually been "forced" on the Black community. During slavery, there were horrifying consequences for those who stood up for themselves. Then, after the Civil War, the country developed new ways to suppress Black people, as Jim Crow laws and lynchings threatened those who tried to exercise their freedom. Many white Southerners think Black people are quite happy, Dr. King points out, but only because Black people know it's dangerous to express discontent in racist environments.

There is a vast gap, Dr. King argues, between the assumptions white people make about Black people and what it's actually *like to be Black in the United States. It's all too easy for white Americans to tell themselves that Black Americans are "patient" and content to wait for change, but this perspective fails to take into account the fact that Black Americans have good reason to keep their true feelings secret. They have, after all, been forced into a "posture of silent waiting," since speaking out against racism is a dangerous thing to do in a country that contains so much hatred and white supremacy. Historically, Black Americans who have challenged racism have been at risk of violent retaliation, so it makes sense that Black people were hesitant to voice their true opinions on the issue of segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. What' s more, ignoring this dynamic was yet another form of white complacency, as white Americans simply told themselves what they wanted to hear about how Black people view segregation.*

Police officers have historically gotten away with extremely violent behavior toward Black people. Dr. King notes that such brutality is why Black people have often refrained from standing up for themselves, fearing violence and imprisonment. In fact, the threat of imprisonment has long prevented Black people from pursuing freedom. But nonviolent direct action changed this: by willingly accepting—and even *hoping* for—imprisonment, Black protestors mystified police officers, who were suddenly unsure of what to do.

Dr. King argues that nonviolent direct action challenged law enforcement's fearmongering tactics. Instead of allowing police brutality and aggression to intimidate them, demonstrators in the civil rights movement embraced *the idea of getting beaten or going to jail, thus stripping police officers of their power to intimidate. In fact, making sure peaceful demonstrators went to jail was a key part of the movement's strategy, since it called attention to the unfair treatment of peaceful Black Americans. Nonviolence therefore subverted the power dynamics between Black protestors and white authorities.*

Dr. King believes in the power of nonviolent direct action because it neutralizes the threats that have historically kept Black people from standing up against racism. American society has long used the threat of "cruel and unjust punishment" to oppress Black Americans. But when Black people willingly and *publicly* accept that punishment—even though they've done nothing wrong—it strips racist authorities of their power. It also highlights racist injustice, since such harsh treatment calls attention to extreme power imbalances.

Again, Dr. King underscores the importance of nonviolent direct action by explaining its usefulness as a strategy that subverts the power imbalance between Black Americans and white police forces. Because police officers were so used to treating Black people with violence and aggression, they were at a loss when demonstrators started seeking out this exact kind of treatment and using it to their advantage—a good illustration of how ill-equipped authorities were when it came to treating Black Americans with fairness and compassion.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, American society avoided striving for true racial equality by resorting to tokenism: the practice of making isolated, symbolic steps toward equality without addressing inequality on a broader scale. The Supreme Court's 1954 decision to make school segregation illegal was a good example of tokenism, since it was little more than a gesture; school segregation became illegal, but things remained almost entirely the same because nobody enforced the law.

Tokenism increased the sense of complacency among white Americans when it came to issues of racial inequality. Because the Supreme Court had made a ruling that seemed *significant, many white people felt as if the country had done enough and didn't need to keep striving toward equality. And yet, the Pupil Placement law ensured that school segregation was still very much in effect, even if segregation was technically illegal. Although white lawmakers had made a move toward change, then, it amounted to little more than a symbolic gesture that—in some ways—stalled the nation's progress.*

In keeping with the country's tokenism, some Black Americans managed to find success in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the vast majority of the Black community still lived in poverty. What's more, most Black Americans had no real path to success or financial stability—except, of course, for a lucky few. Although the country hadn't achieved true equality, then, white leaders were able to point to a small percentage of Black people and claim that the nation as a whole was making progress.

Again, Dr. King explains the dangers of tokenism, which uplifts small instances of equality but fails to bring about true change. The fact that some Black Americans became successful in the 1950s and 1960s was, in some ways, a measure of how far the country had come, since it was much harder for Black people to attain financial or professional success in the 19th century. And yet, these isolated examples of Black success weren't accurate representations of the rest of the Black American population, which still lived in poverty and dealt with racist limitations. Therefore, tokenism simply masked the country's deeper problems.

Some people argue that tokenism is a good first step toward equality. Their reasoning is that it's necessary for society to start *somewhere*, so uplifting a select few people is a step in the right direction. But Dr. King disagrees. Tokenism isn't a good place to start because it's not actually a step toward *anything*—it's just an "end in itself," providing white people with an excuse to stop pursuing true equality.

Dr. King continues to outline the harmful effects of tokenism. Although some people think that tokenism is the first step toward real progress, Dr. King explains that the opposite is true: tokenism actually interferes *with progress. It does so by creating a false sense of equality and thus taking away what little motivation white people have to work toward legitimate change.*

Writing this book in 1964, Dr. King acknowledges that there has been quite a bit of progress in the last year. But the progress that has been made isn't enough, and it's ridiculous to expect that Black people should be satisfied or thankful that society has come this far. After all, Black people still can't fully enjoy the rights they deserve simply by virtue of the fact that they're human beings living in a country that supposedly stands for liberty and justice for all.

Many white people in the early 1960s thought American society had made admirable steps toward equality. Worse, many believed that Black Americans should be grateful for these steps, failing to recognize two things: first, that little had truly changed and, second, that Black Americans shouldn't have to be thankful for gradual progress toward the freedom that rightfully belonged to them all along.

Dr. King reviews the various approaches that prominent Black leaders have taken in the past to address racism and inequality. After Reconstruction, Booker T. Washington urged his fellow Black Americans to make peace with their current station in life, telling them to enjoy the few freedoms available to them at the time—an approach that many found pessimistic.

The Reconstruction Era began after the Civil War in 1865 and lasted until 1877. During this period, formerly enslaved Black people were technically granted the same rights as white Americans. However, American society—especially in the South—was still quite racist and was, as a result, slow to actually grant Black Americans the full extent of the freedom promised by the Emancipation Proclamation. In the face of Jim Crow laws and widespread lynchings, the prominent Black leader Booker T. Washington urged Black people to excel in business and industrial labor instead of directly resisting segregation. His idea was that Black Americans should succeed in the areas that were open to them at the time—a sentiment Dr. King finds defeatist.

Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, on the other hand, argued around the beginning of the 20th century that a small, elite portion of the Black population should prosper and, in doing so, elevate the rest of the Black community. Although such an idea stands in contrast to Booker T. Washington's somewhat defeatist attitude, Dr. King sees it as unhelpful because it excludes the vast majority of Black Americans.

The activist and public intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois disagreed with Booker T. Washington's belief that Black Americans should focus on obtaining industrial and vocational educations. Instead, Du Bois argued, Black Americans ought to pursue higher education. He believed that a "talented tenth" of the Black population should form an intellectual elite and lead other Black people to success. But Dr. King sees this idea as too elitist and narrow—in order to build a successful revolution capable of bringing about change, he believes that Black people must unite and work together.

Then, in the years after World War I, Marcus Garvey explicitly renounced the idea of accepting any sense of Black "inferiority." Instead, he urged Black Americans to take pride in their race by returning to Africa. His idea struck a chord with many Black Americans because it emphasized that Black people have every reason to be proud of their race and cultural heritage. However, Dr. King notes that such an outlook was flawed because the idea of Black people migrating to Africa after 350 years of life in the "New World" didn't feel like real progress.

Marcus Garvey's ideas about Black pride addressed the ridiculous notion that Black Americans were somehow less deserving of liberty and justice than their fellow white citizens. But Dr. King has a problem with the idea of Black people returning to their ancestral land of Africa because he believes doing so wouldn't actually solve any problems—rather, it would just involve running away from American racism. Rather than retreating from the country's problems, Dr. King wants to confront them head-on.

After Marcus Garvey's movement faded, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took center stage in the struggle for racial equality. The organization's main tactic was to use the legal system to fight oppression—a tactic that Dr. King says was quite successful. For instance, the NAACP fought in court to ensure that Black Americans could vote in national elections. Dr. King recognizes the importance of such a victory, but he also notes that the country has frequently failed to actually *act* on important legal decisions, causing many Black Americans to slowly lose faith in the efficacy of challenging oppression in the courts. What should have been enormous victories have become small token steps toward equality.

Dr. King believes in the power of using the legal system to fight for racial equality, but he also recognizes that there's a profound difference between a court ruling and what actually happens in the streets. After all, the Supreme Court—the highest, most powerful court in the entire country—outlawed school segregation, but even this ruling didn't successfully bring about desegregation. Accordingly, Dr. King implies that it's necessary to supplement the legal approach with more immediate, on-the-ground steps toward equality.

By the mid-1950s, the NAACP's legal activism no longer seemed effective enough to bring about true equality. According to Dr. King, any successful social movement needs to develop methods that are appropriate for the "circumstances of the period." Without a clear way forward in the 1950s, some people advocated for violence, noting that such tactics led to meaningful change during the American Civil War or even during the Roman Empire. But Dr. King points out that Black Americans were in a different position in the 1950s because they didn't stand to gain from violence. Although there were certainly many Black Americans willing to fight for their freedom, the prospects of victory were so slim that violent rebellion seemed futile.

Again, Dr. King devotes himself to nonviolent direct action. For him, responding to racism with violence or aggression would be useless because the powers of oppression are so strong in the United States. His viewpoint stands in contrast to some more militant movements like the Nation of Islam, which advocated for an adamant rejection of white culture and its oppressive ways. There are other reasons that Dr. King believes in nonviolence (reasons having to do with his religious and moral worldviews), but in this section he simply frames the question of whether or not to use violence as a purely tactical *question: because using physical force would be futile and ineffective, it's not worth pursuing a violent approach.*

More effective than violence, Dr. King argues, was Rosa Parks's bravery when she peacefully refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in 1955—an event that led to the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 and 1956. The boycotts were rooted in the church community, and Dr. King believes that the church ultimately became an integral part of the civil rights movement, especially in the advocacy of nonviolence. Black people, he says, refused to act out of violence because they knew that it was futile and—moreover—immoral.

Whereas Dr. King previously rejected violent rebellion because he thought it was futile, now he adds that violence is immoral. He thus introduces his strong moral compass, which is directly tied to his religious worldview. As a minister, he strongly believes in the value of peace and fellowship, so it makes sense that he advocates for nonviolent direct action, which he believes is not only effective but also morally justifiable.

Some Black Americans in the mid-20th century advocated for segregation, though from a different angle. Dr. King calls this movement the "Black Muslim" movement, noting that its adherents wanted to establish a Black community within the United States. The people involved in this movement were willing to resort to violence if that's what it took to establish their own community. However, Dr. King notes that the strength and promise of nonviolent activism in 1963 turned many Black Americans away from the extremism of the "Black Muslim" movement.

When Dr. King talks about the "Black Muslim" movement, he's referring to the Nation of Islam—a Black nationalist movement that was especially popular in the 1950s and 1960s, attracting followers with bold ideas that stood in contrast to Dr. King's message of peace and unity. Unlike Dr. King's nonviolent philosophy, the Nation of Islam didn't condemn the use of physical force, and though this drew the attention of many Black Americans, Dr. King argues that the nonviolent demonstrations in 1963 were so effective that they ultimately showed many followers of the Nation of Islam that it truly was *possible to bring about change through peaceful means.*

Dr. King explains that some people urged Black Americans to unite with poor white people in the South. The underlying logic to this idea was that impoverished white southerners experience the same disadvantages as Black Americans. Although it's true that poor white people in the South certainly face many hardships and setbacks, Dr. King emphasizes that these challenges aren't the same ones that Black people face. Poor white people still have a *chance* to improve their circumstances, whereas Black people are at a disadvantage simply because of their race.

Dr. King makes an important distinction by highlighting the difference between the lack of opportunity and outright discrimination. Although impoverished white people certainly found it hard to succeed in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s (and, for that matter, even in contemporary times), there were still opportunities open to them. Black Americans, on the other hand, were completely cut off from professional opportunities that would lead to success and financial stability.

Faced with many challenges, Dr. King says that Black Americans found hope in nonviolent direct action. There was even a rich history of nonviolent activism to draw upon, since similarly peaceful protests and boycotts were successful in standing up against the oppressive British monarchy when the United States was nothing more than a collection of colonies striving for independence. By practicing nonviolent protest in highly publicized contexts, Black Americans were able to draw attention to how terribly white officials treated them. Although the United States often values aggression, it also responds well to grand displays of morality. Consequently, the civil rights movement was able to turn "hatred into constructive energy." Black Americans could thus fight for their own freedom while also helping free white oppressors from sin.

Dr. King lays out the moral foundation of nonviolent direct action, which he points out is not a new concept. To the contrary, there have been many peaceful protests throughout the nation's history, suggesting that this method of activism is directly in line with the values that people hold dear in the United States. What's more, he hints at the fact that oppression and discrimination are morally wrong. By using nonviolence to fight off such hateful practices, then, he believes the Black community is actually helping their fellow citizens avoid immoral behavior. In other words, fighting racism doesn't just benefit Black Americans—it benefits everyone *in the United States.*

Dr. King thinks of the Birmingham movement in 1963 as a nonviolent "army." One benefit of a nonviolent army is that anyone can participate in it. Whereas normal armies can only accept adult members, nonviolent ones can welcome anyone into their ranks. In fact, some of the most important participants in the 1963 movement were children and teenagers. To that end, the nonviolent army in Birmingham was made up of a diverse collective. Prestigious, successful community members worked alongside average citizens of every age.

Part of the success of the civil rights movement in 1963 was its sense of inclusivity and unity. Dr. King and his fellow organizers didn't have to turn anyone away from the movement, as long as participants agreed with their nonviolent values. In this way, the Birmingham movement harnessed the power of cohesion and unity, which were perfect antidotes to the country's hatred and division.

Nonviolence was effective because powerful white officials didn't know how to respond. When they used violence against peaceful protestors, the country saw the kind of injustice Black people faced in the United States. Surprisingly, though, very few people in the Birmingham nonviolent army were injured during 1963. Dr. King believes this was partially because police officers knew the nation was watching, but also because hundreds of Black protestors and marchers courageously peered back at their oppressors, looking them in the eye and, in doing so, making it much harder for the officers to treat them with such ruthless cruelty.

The effectiveness of nonviolent direct action had to do with the spotlight it shone on injustice. No matter what a person believed about segregation, it became much harder to justify racist ideas after watching an aggressive police officer mercilessly beat a peaceful Black citizen. At the same time, even the police officers themselves seemed to refrain—in many cases, at least—from using violence, thereby illustrating how much harder it was for them to resort to cruelty when demonstrators forced them to acknowledge their humanity.

Dr. King considers why it took so long for Black Americans to embrace nonviolent direct action. One reason is that not everyone agreed about the best tactic to address oppression. Some viewed nonviolence as a mere stand-in for other solutions, but Dr. King maintains that nonviolent direct action isn't a "substitute" for other methods. For instance, it's still necessary to pursue victories in court—but legal action should happen in conjunction with nonviolent activism.

Again, Dr. King considers the importance of unity when it comes to community organizing. Although nonviolent direct action was a proven method capable of bringing about change, many people in the civil rights movement resisted it at first. This resistance to the movement's approach was a stumbling block because it led to division within the ranks of the protestors. One critique was that nonviolence wasn't a good stand-in for other approaches—but Dr. King and his fellow organizers never claimed it was a good "substitute" in the first place. Dr. King championed nonviolent direct action, but that doesn't mean he wanted to exclusively focus the movement on a single tactic. Rather, it was just one angle of approach.

In fact, nonviolent direct action goes quite well with the legal approach. After all, part of practicing nonviolent direct action means willingly going to jail—but filling up jail cells is only a smart tactic if there's a way to then get those activists *out* of jail. In 1963, the Birmingham nonviolent army used legal tactics to ensure that participants weren't wrongfully held in jail.

Again, Dr. King clarifies that his approach to activism isn't narrowly focused on just one method. Although he believes strongly in the power of nonviolent direct action, he sees it as one of several tools available to community organizers. Nonviolent direct action drew attention to the movement by filling the Birmingham jails with peaceful protestors. But the movement's tactical thinking couldn't stop there. Once protestors had been jailed, the movement needed to use its legal apparatus to ensure their release. And all the while, it was necessary for the civil rights movement to continue challenging unjust laws in the courts, essentially launching a comprehensive, multidimensional attack on racism and segregation.

Birmingham was the perfect place to stage a new push for desegregation. It was the biggest southern industrial city, and it had a history of extreme racism and segregation. Nonviolent direct action, Dr. King notes, was the perfect tactic to use in such a city. Although similar techniques had failed to bring about sweeping change in a campaign for equality in Albany, Georgia the previous year, Dr. King maintains that enough people had accepted the nonviolent method by 1963 to render it successful in a divided and oppressive community like the one in Birmingham that summer.

The campaign for desegregation and racial equality in Albany, Georgia, didn't necessarily achieve everything it set out to achieve, but that doesn't mean it wasn't still an important part of the overall civil rights movement. After all, bringing about change takes time, largely because organizers have to learn the most effective ways to challenge injustice. For Dr. King, then, Albany was a chance to hone his skills as a leader of a nonviolent direct-action campaign—an invaluable lesson that laid the groundwork for the Birmingham movement.


CHAPTER 3: BULL CONNOR'S BIRMINGHAM

A full century after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Birmingham was a deeply racist and segregated place. It was almost as if the Supreme Court had never ruled segregation illegal in 1954. Life for Black people in Birmingham was infused with racism, as hospitals, housing developments, public parks, stores, and churches remained segregated. Worse, all of the city's Black institutions were significantly inferior to the white institutions, since the city neglected the upkeep of resources for its Black citizens. It was also impossible for Black workers to find good jobs, and those who *did* find employment received terrible wages and had no chance of getting promoted. Voting was also all but impossible for Black people, as white officials went out of their way to make it difficult for them to cast their ballots.

To further explain why Birmingham was an ideal place to center the civil rights movement in 1963, Dr. King lists the many injustices of living in the city at the time. All of these injustices are defined by a severe lack of resources and support for Black people from the city government, making it glaringly clear that Black people living in Birmingham were at an extreme disadvantage and had to endure much harder lives than the city's white people.

The Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham was a racist man named Eugene "Bull" Connor. He made a point of doing whatever he could to preserve desegregation and oppress Black citizens. There were also many white racists in Birmingham who beat and even murdered Black people without consequences. Between 1957 and 1963, there were 17 bombings of Black homes and churches, and none of these cases were ever solved by the police department or anyone else in the government. Fear was a big part of Bull Connor's Birmingham. And although there were presumably some white people in Birmingham who disagreed with the city's racist ways, they remained silent.

Based on Dr. King's description of Birmingham in the early 1960s, it's clear that it was a deeply racist and violent city. Bull Connor's influence ensured that segregation and discrimination continued unchecked, making it that much harder for anyone to bring about change. In other words, racism was the status quo, and Bull Connor did everything he could to maintain that status quo. To make matters worse, even white people who didn't necessarily support segregation had sunk into complacency and apathy, unwilling to help the city's Black residents challenge such widespread oppression.

After the Montgomery bus boycott, many organized movements for racial justice began in cities throughout the South. One of these was the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACHR), which was led by Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham. Shuttlesworth's goal was to address inequality in Birmingham and to put an end to Bull Connor's racist reign over the city. The ACHR was part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), whose president was Dr. King. The ACHR made great strides, winning a court case to desegregate public-recreation buildings. In response to this victory, though, Birmingham simply closed the facilities.

What happened with the ACHR's legal battle to desegregate public facilities is a good example of how committed the city of Birmingham was to maintaining the status quo of racism and discrimination. Rather than obeying the courts and desegregating public-recreation buildings, the city decided to deprive all of its citizens—including white people—of these facilities. In turn, the city sent a spiteful message to the Black community and activists like Fred Shuttlesworth, making it abundantly clear that racists would do everything in their power to ensure the continuation of racism and discrimination in Birmingham.

Dr. King and the SCLC decided in 1962 to help Fred Shuttlesworth and the ACHR. Shuttlesworth had staged an effective boycott of white-owned Birmingham businesses and managed to drive down profits by 40%. As a result of efforts like this one, though, Shuttlesworth was in constant danger, as racists bombed both his church and his home. In light of Shuttlesworth's success and the great challenges he faced, the SCLC decided to unite with the ACHR to stage a large campaign against segregation in Birmingham.

The fact that Shuttlesworth's life was in danger simply because he was trying to bring about racial equality is a good indicator of just how resistant the white people in Birmingham were to change. Believing in the power of unity, then, Dr. King and the SCLC came to the aid of Shuttlesworth and the ACHR, joining forces and, in doing so, forming a strong coalition capable of taking on hatred and aggression.

The business owners of Birmingham became concerned about how boycotts and demonstrations would impact their businesses. They were particularly nervous about a convention that the SCLC planned to hold in conjunction with the ACHR in Birmingham, so they met with the ACHR to strike a compromise. They agreed to take down segregationist signs in their stores and also promised to back the ACHR in a lawsuit to desegregate lunch counters. In turn, the ACHR called off the boycotts. But shortly after the convention, the business owners went back to their old ways, so the leaders of the ACHR and the SCLC decided to come together to organize a large direct-action campaign in Birmingham.

The reaction that the ACHR and SCLC originally received from white business owners was perhaps the first sign that a nonviolent direct-action campaign for racial equality might actually work. It was clear, after all, that the business owners were worried about what a boycott would do to their profits. Of course, the business owners didn't uphold their end of the deal, suggesting that achieving racial equality wouldn't be quite so easy. Still, though, the mere fact that they responded in the first place suggests that the ACHR and SCLC had hit a nerve.

Planning the direct-action campaign in Birmingham, Dr. King and other leaders held a three-day retreat at a training center in Savannah, Georgia. During this time, they looked to their failed attempt in Albany, Georgia. One of the reasons they didn't succeed in Albany was that they tried to do too many things all at once. Rather than taking such a broad approach, Dr. King and the others decided to focus on boycotting the white businesses in Birmingham, knowing that Black people in the city had significant "buying power." Accordingly, they decided to target stores with segregated lunch counters.

Again, Dr. King suggests that even failed campaigns for equality weren't completely unsuccessful—rather, the movement in Albany provided Dr. King and other leaders with precious knowledge about the most effective ways to bring about change. In particular, civil rights leaders learned that it was best to focus on several key issues. This idea makes sense, since narrowing the campaign's concerns makes it that much easier to communicate the movement's message to the public—a complacent, apathetic public that might not pay attention if there were too many issues and demands at stake.

After the three-day retreat, Dr. King and his associates went to Birmingham to make plans. They stayed in Room 30 of the Gaston Motel, which was to become their headquarters in the coming months. Dr. King traveled with his executive assistant, Wyatt Walker, and friend Ralph Abernathy. Together with other leaders, they tried to decide when would be the best time to stage the direct-action campaign. Because the time around Easter is one of the biggest shopping periods, they decided to focus on the six weeks leading up to the holiday.

Although Dr. King is the most famous person associated with the civil rights movement, there were many key players in the push for racial equality and desegregation. Wyatt Walker, Ralph Abernathy, and Fred Shuttlesworth were among these important figures, working alongside Dr. King to help guide the movement. It's good to remember, then, that Dr. King wasn't acting on his own—rather, he belonged to a cohesive group of organizers, thus demonstrating the kind of unity that the movement wanted to inspire in the world at large.

However, Dr. King and his associates soon remembered there was a local election taking place on March 5th. The top candidates were Bull Connor, Albert Boutwell, and Tom King. All of them were segregationists, and because Dr. King and the others didn't want the direct-action campaign to be used as political fodder, they decided it would be best to delay until two weeks after the election.

Many strategic decisions went into the planning of the Birmingham movement. Because the activists faced so much adversity in the city, they knew they had to be calculated and tactical about how they launched the campaign for racial justice. Therefore, they thought very carefully about when to start demonstrating and boycotting, knowing that their efforts would be demonized in the media if local politicians caught wind of the movement during the election cycle.

By the beginning of March, Dr. King's associates had recruited 250 volunteers to take part in demonstrations. But then the election complicated things because there was no clear winner, meaning that there would be a run-off election between Bull Connor and Albert Boutwell in early April. Once again, Dr. King and the others were forced to delay, losing contact with many of their volunteers.

Dr. King and his fellow organizers were undoubtedly eager to launch the campaign for racial justice and desegregation, but it would have been unwise to do so during the run-off election between Bull Connor and Albert Boutwell. Both candidates were segregationists, so they surely would have used the civil rights movement as fodder on the campaign trail, telling voters that unruly activists would upend the status quo if the other candidate won the election. They would, in other words, instill fear in the white community.

In the meantime, Dr. King went to New York City with Shuttlesworth. They knew they would need support once the direct-action campaign began in Birmingham, so they held a meeting in the apartment of the singer Harry Belafonte, who was an ardent supporter of the SCLC. He gathered 75 people to hear Dr. King and Shuttlesworth talk about the movement and its plans. When Shuttlesworth said, "You have to be prepared to die before you can begin to live," everyone in the room was profoundly moved. The meeting generated a lot of support, as Harry Belafonte and the others pledged money to help bail protestors out of jail.

Although Dr. King and the other organizers had to delay the direct-action campaign, that didn't mean they couldn't still work on strengthening the movement. In fact, their efforts to drum up support from people like Harry Belafonte and his friends was crucial, since it helped them ensure there would be enough money to bail demonstrators out of jail when the time came. Once again, then, Dr. King put his faith in the power of a strong, cohesive community and its ability to challenge injustice.

In addition to the meeting at Harry Belafonte's apartment, the movement received support from multiple organizations. The NAACP even raised $75,000. Dr. King returned to Birmingham on April 2nd and started reconnecting with the 250 volunteers from the month before. He and his associates managed to reach 65 of them, and the direct-action campaign began the very next day.

One problem with delaying the campaign was that Dr. King and the other leaders lost touch with the many volunteers they had reached out to in March of 1963. It was wise for them to avoid launching the campaign during the run-off mayoral election, but this delay unfortunately fractured the community they had built up, making it harder to begin the push for racial justice with a large, united group of demonstrators.

CHAPTER 4: NEW DAY IN BIRMINGHAM

Albert Boutwell won the run-off election. Although the press heralded his victory as a "new day" in Birmingham, Dr. King recognized that Boutwell—a segregationist—wouldn't bring meaningful change to the city; in fact, he was one of the main authors of the Pupil Placement Law that essentially negated the 1954 Supreme Court ruling to outlaw school segregation.

The media response to Boutwell's victory highlights the unfounded optimism many white people had when it came to achieving progress. Whereas white people saw small shifts in power as proof of imminent change, many Black Americans like Dr. King understood that simply putting a new segregationist in office wouldn't do much to change the status quo of racism and white complacency in Birmingham.

Even though he lost the mayoral election, Bull Connor maintained that he couldn't actually be removed from his position as Commissioner of Public Safety until 1965. He planned to take this issue to court. Even if he lost, he would remain in power until April 15th—the day after Easter.

Because of Bull Connor's stubborn refusal to leave office, Dr. King and the rest of the civil rights movement were forced to deal with a deeply racist Commissioner of Public Safety—yet another hurdle to face in the movement for racial equality, which already had to contend with quite a bit of adversity.

The direct-action campaign started small. Dr. King didn't want to run out of steam, hoping the campaign would increase in intensity as it went along. As such, demonstrators came together in small groups and staged sit-ins at segregated stores. They politely refused to leave and were subsequently arrested. As the campaign began, Dr. King and his associates held nightly meetings with the Black community. Leaders like Ralph Abernathy and Wyatt Walker spoke at these meetings, as did Dr. King. The gatherings were an important part of the movement, as they helped the campaign's organizers connect with the community and rouse its spirit. The attendees often sang freedom songs during the meetings, and these songs helped solidify a sense of hope and resilience in the movement.

The importance of unity is clear in Dr. King's description of the direct-action campaign's early days. Although the demonstrations started small, the movement itself was busy strategically cultivating a strong and cohesive community of activists. By speaking to Black participants on a nightly basis, Dr. King and his fellow leaders drew people together and motivated them to keep striving toward racial equality, ultimately building the foundation of a movement capable of endurance and determination.

Dr. King, Shuttlesworth, and Abernathy made it very clear to volunteers that they were only welcome in the movement if they believed in nonviolence. They convinced many to give up their weapons, insisting that such things would be useless and harmful during the demonstrations. What's more, Dr. King and the others didn't necessarily let *anyone* who wanted to protest join the ranks of the demonstrators—there were rigid rules and "tests." Still, though, there were other jobs to be done, so anyone who couldn't demonstrate was put to work running errands, making phone calls, or completing other important tasks.

Dr. King once again emphasizes his commitment to nonviolence, refusing to send anyone incapable of remaining peaceful to the front lines of the direct-action campaign. However, he still recognized the value of cohesion within the movement, which is why he and the other leaders never completely turned anyone away, either. Everyone had a place in the movement, thus ensuring that the push for racial justice was strong and comprehensive on all fronts.

Not everyone in the Black community supported the direct-action campaign. Some Black people were hesitant to stand up to oppression, having convinced themselves that things in Birmingham weren't so bad after all. Dr. King recognizes this mentality as an unfortunately common one across the nation, as Black people allowed themselves to be "brainwashed" by their oppressors. As a result, the movement didn't have the kind of unity required to make it an overwhelming success at the beginning. Another obstacle was that the national press was against the movement. There were articles condemning the effort and suggesting that the campaign was poorly timed. Dr. King found this assertion ridiculous—Black Americans, after all, had already been waiting 100 years for true freedom.

Although the civil rights movement was remarkably united, it's still the case that many Black Americans were hesitant to participate in the Birmingham campaign, at least in the beginning. By mentioning this hesitancy, Dr. King sheds light on one of the difficulties of community organizing, implying that some people make peace with oppression as a defense mechanism of sorts—by telling themselves that things weren't so bad in Birmingham, some of the city's Black citizens had given themselves a way to downplay the pain of racism and segregation. This technique, however, obviously didn't address the problem, which is why Dr. King wanted to mobilize Black Americans to confront their oppressors.

Some influential Black leaders in Birmingham wanted to give Boutwell's administration the chance to bring about change, hoping he would be more just than Bull Connor. What's more, some leaders were offended that Dr. King and his associates hadn't consulted with them before beginning the campaign, failing to recognize that it was necessary to keep the plan a secret so that it wouldn't be used as political fodder during the election.

Dr. King and his fellow organizers didn't just face adversity from the white community, but also faced internal division in the Black community. Given that Dr. King places so much importance on unity when it comes to activism, it's clear that he must have been quite eager to address this division in an effort to ensure that the movement presented a united front against racism.

Unity is an important part of any direct-action campaign, Dr. King argues. Therefore, he and his associates made a point of visiting multiple groups throughout Birmingham, hoping to connect with a "cross section" of leaders and citizens. Dr. King explained why the plans for the campaign had been secretive, and he addressed the concern that he was an "outsider" by pointing out that the SCLC was the parent organization of the ACHR, meaning that it wasn't *really* an outside influence. Plus, he argued, Black people aren't outsiders in *any* American town if what they're trying to do is bring about equality and justice. Through these conversations, Dr. King convinced skeptics and helped establish a sense of unity that strengthened the cause.

Once more, Dr. King emphasizes the importance of unity when it comes to standing up against injustice. To convince Black people who had felt excluded from the planning of the Birmingham campaign, he levelheadedly explained that the movement had to remain a secret during the election—otherwise, it would have been demonized on the campaign trail. Similarly, he refuted the idea that he was an "outsider" by shedding light on the direct connection between the ACHR—an organization local to Alabama—and the SCLC. By hosting these conversations, Dr. King acted on his belief in unity, going out of his way to create a cohesive community capable of challenging the broader division in society at large.

The first days of the campaign in Birmingham went as planned: the demonstrators remained peaceful and unified, even when facing police officers who carted them off to jail. Meanwhile, the boycott of downtown stores was going quite well. One surprise in the first week, however, was that the police were relatively restrained in their use of force. Dr. King suspects that Bull Connor had recognized that responding violently would look bad (though he also notes that this nonviolence wouldn't last long).

The fact that the Birmingham police force didn't immediately resort to violence was, in general, a good thing. In another sense, though, this lack of aggression also made it harder for the direct-action campaign to spotlight the police's terrible treatment of Black citizens. It's not that the authorities were actually peaceful on a regular basis, but that they seemed to understand—in a certain sense, at least—that all eyes were on them. However, they were unable to sustain their nonviolent tactics for very long, clearly indicating that they weren't accustomed to treating Black people with peace and fairness.

Bull Connor also held back from violence because he had another trick up his sleeve: the Birmingham government filed a court injunction ordering the protestors to stop until their "right to demonstrate had been argued in court." The injunction posed a significant hurdle, since it would take a long time for the legal battle to play out—it could even take two to three years to settle the issue, and the Alabama courts were especially notorious for delaying decisions on such matters. It was quite common for powerful white authorities to use injunctions to squash nonviolent demonstrations for equality.

The use of legal injunctions to stall civil rights campaigns demonstrates the extent to which racism was embedded in the power structures of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Dr. King and the other organizers didn't just have to contend with the racism of store owners and other white citizens, but also had to face systemic racism. Dr. King previously mentioned that nonviolent direct action wasn't the only tactic that should be used in the fight for racial equality—at this point in the book, it becomes clear why this is the case: because it was also necessary to fight injustice in the courts.

Dr. King and his associates had talked from the very beginning about the possible need to use civil disobedience. Although they wanted to avoid breaking the law, they were left with few other options. As such, they decided to ignore the court order to halt the demonstrations—a move that caught Birmingham officials by surprise. When Dr. King alerted the press that the campaign would continue in spite of the court order, he emphasized that the movement wasn't "advocating lawlessness." Instead, he said, it was simply clear that courts were abusing their power.

Civil disobedience refers to a form of protest that involves refusing to obey certain laws. Dr. King and the other organizers of the Birmingham campaign decided to actively disobey the court order because the injunction would have completely ruined the entire movement. Because the injunction was such an obvious attempt to thwart a movement rooted in justice and equality, Dr. King was able to ignore it and still maintain a sense of morality.

Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy planned to be the first ones to practice civil disobedience. The plan was for them to go to jail (for the first time during the movement) on Good Friday. Fifty other demonstrators would do the same. However, the day before, the movement's leaders learned that the person providing funds to bail demonstrators out of jail wouldn't be able to continue doing so. Dr. King and Abernathy debated with their associates late into the night, trying to decide if it would be wise for them to get arrested without knowing if they'd be bailed out. It was quite possible that, if they went to jail, it could be for a very, very long time.

The sudden lack of financial support for the direct-action campaign shows how important it is for movements to build large networks of people willing to contribute to the cause. Without bail money, Dr. King and Abernathy's decision to go to jail became a much harder one to make, since the consequences of practicing civil disobedience could be quite severe—after all, the Alabama legal system was certainly not to be trusted when it came to giving prominent Black leaders fair treatment.

On the one hand, Dr. King felt a responsibility to all those who had already sacrificed themselves by going to jail. On the other hand, he felt obligated to stay out of jail to help ensure that the other 300 people currently *in* jail would get bailed out. At one point in their deliberations, somebody addressed Dr. King directly and said that he couldn't possibly go to jail, since if he did, all would be "lost." Dr. King sat silently and thought, and as he did so, he felt as if he was plunged into the heaviest silence of his life. He was surrounded by friends, but he felt alone. But then he thought about the Black community—in Birmingham, in Alabama, in the entire country—and he announced that he would be going to jail.

Dr. King's tough decision illustrates the challenges that prominent leaders often face when spearheading a movement. Although he was surrounded by close allies, he couldn't escape the burden of responsibility that fell to him—no matter what he did, the movement might be at risk. If he didn't go to jail, he risked losing the faith of the many people who saw him as the movement's driving force. But if he did go to jail, it might be harder for the movement to secure funds to bail out the many protestors who had followed his advice and gotten arrested. The fact that he chose to go to jail suggests that he prioritized solidarity above all else, wanting to stand in unity with his fellow protestors who had already gone to jail.

Dr. King asked Abernathy to join him, and Abernathy didn't hesitate. The next day, they marched from Zion Hill church to downtown Birmingham, flanked on all sides by Black demonstrators singing **freedom songs**.

Dr. King and Abernathy's courage and conviction shines through in this moment, as they set aside their personal wellbeing in the name of racial justice. There's a celebratory atmosphere at play here, as demonstrators sang freedom songs that symbolize the undaunted, noble fight for equality.

In jail, Dr. King and Abernathy were separated. Dr. King was put into solitary confinement, where he stayed for more than 24 hours. In the darkness of imprisonment, he wondered how things were progressing with the movement and felt unsure about what would happen. The jailers didn't beat him, but his time in isolation was torturous in and of itself. His wife, Coretta, had just given birth to their fourth child. Not only had he left them in Atlanta, but now Coretta couldn't even contact him while he was in jail. Worried about his safety, she contacted President Kennedy, who told her he would ensure that all was well. Shortly thereafter, Dr. King was permitted to call Coretta.

It makes sense that solitary confinement was especially torturous for Dr. King, considering that he was cut off from the movement to which he had devoted himself so thoroughly. In fact, his isolation in jail stood in direct opposition to the unity he'd helped build throughout the Black community in Birmingham. Unable to communicate with anyone else, he had no idea what was going on with the push for racial equality—something that deeply distressed him.

On Easter Sunday, Dr. King learned that Harry Belafonte had raised $50,000 for bail. Dr. King was overwhelmed with gratitude, feeling as if he hadn't truly been alone when he was in solitary confinement: "God's companionship does not stop at the door of a jail cell," he notes. And with the news of Belafonte's kindness, he felt a great surge of hope.

Yet again, the importance of strong support networks becomes quite clear, as Dr. King manages to get released from jail because of the effort he and his colleagues put into drumming up support before the direct-action campaign even began. Dr. King views the compassion and unity of his supporters in a religious light, drawing on his vocation as a minister and implying that unity and "companionship" are divine things that are stronger than any divisive force.

CHAPTER 5: LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL

In a letter addressed to eight **white clergymen** who condemned his activism in Birmingham, Dr. King notes that he rarely responds to criticism but that, because he respects these clergymen, he's willing to respond to their statement. He begins by explaining why, exactly, he has come to Birmingham in the first place, since the clergymen criticized him for being an "outsider." He is, he says, the president of the SCLC, which has ties with organizations throughout the South—including in Birmingham. As such, Dr. King and his associates were invited to come to Birmingham by local activists.

"Letter from Birmingham Jail" was published as a response to a group of white clergymen who criticized Dr. King and the Birmingham movement. The letter itself was widely disseminated at the time, as Dr. King articulated his ideas very clearly while spending time in jail for civil disobedience. In a way, the letter was a perfect opportunity to call attention to the fact that he was peaceful, thoughtful, and religious, thus subverting any public narrative that framed him and his fellow activists as dangerous, unlawful people.

On a broader level, Dr. King has come to Birmingham because the city is full of "injustice." He sees it as one of his duties to respond to injustice wherever he finds it, comparing his work to that of early Christians who traveled far and wide to spread the Christian gospel. Furthermore, Dr. King believes strongly in the "interrelatedness of all communities," meaning that what happens in Birmingham will have an impact on his own community in Atlanta.

Dr. King ties his activism to his religious beliefs, which give him a sense of purpose—specifically, his religious values encourage him to fight injustice in any circumstance, regardless of whether that's in his hometown or in a nearby city like Birmingham. What's more, he emphasizes his belief in the importance of unity, noting that the struggle for civil rights won't just affect the city of Birmingham, but will have lasting consequences for the entire Black community.

Dr. King points out that the **white clergymen** condemn the Birmingham demonstrations without condemning the conditions that made such measures necessary in the first place. While he agrees that it's too bad the city is engulfed in turmoil, he argues that the *real* shame is that the city's racism has left the Black community with no choice but to protest and demonstrate against inequality.

By spotlighting the underlying causes that have led to the civil rights movement, Dr. King challenges the complacent idea that Black Americans are the ones bringing unrest to American society. Rather, they are simply responding to the turmoil that white America has placed on them. The people involved in the campaign for racial equality therefore aren't the unreasonable instigators that many people in the white community would like to think they are.

There is no denying that Birmingham is full of racism and inequality. Dr. King mentions the city's segregation, its police brutality against Black people, its unjust legal proceedings, and the many unsolved bombings of Black homes and churches—all clear illustrations of why nonviolent direct action is necessary in Birmingham.

Dr. King reviews the miserable conditions under which Black Americans have been forced to live in Birmingham. The fact that so much violence has been directed at the Black community more than justifies the campaign for racial equality. What's more, it's especially remarkable that the campaign is centered around nonviolence, considering that racists certainly haven't shown the same humanity and compassion in their behavior toward Black people.

Certain leaders of the Black community in Birmingham have already tried to negotiate with influential white business figures. Unfortunately, though, the white business owners didn't hold up their end of the deal. Although they promised to remove racist signs and work toward desegregation, they quickly went back to their racist ways. It therefore became quite clear that the Black community needed to take action through nonviolent direct action.

"Letter from Birmingham Jail" was written and first published before the rest of Why We Can't Wait*—in fact, the letter itself was what led Dr. King to write the book in the first place. As such, Dr. King rehashes some of the points he has already made in the book. In this case, he gives the white clergymen a brief overview of why, exactly, the civil rights movement centered in Birmingham in 1963, explaining that it became abundantly clear that the city's white power structures wouldn't work toward racial equality without receiving some kind of push.*

Dr. King assures the **white clergymen** that he and his associates took painstaking measures to ensure that the participants in åtheir movement would remain peaceful. Although the clergymen might think that negotiation would be a better way to fight segregation than direct action, Dr. King clarifies that the goal of the demonstrations has been to force the situation to a crisis, at which point negotiation will finally be possible. Until that point, though, negotiation is useless because the white people in power have shown themselves to be uninterested in making meaningful changes to society.

The point of nonviolent direct action isn't to disrupt society simply for the sake of causing a disruption—it's to outwardly challenge the complacency and ignorance that has historically kept white people from actually addressing racial inequality. Negotiating, after all, is only possible if both sides are willing to participate. Unfortunately, the white leaders of Birmingham had shown themselves unwilling to make any progress at all when it came to achieving equality, so it was necessary for the civil rights movement to push society toward change.

Some of Dr. King's critics have suggested that the movement has come at a bad time. They think that Dr. King and his associates should have waited to see what the incoming city government would do to address racism in Birmingham. But Dr. King knows that Boutwell has the same segregationist ideas as the previous administration, so waiting for him to act would be futile. What's more, civil rights leaders know from experience that oppressors never willingly give freedom to the oppressed—rather, the oppressed have to demand it. To wait for white authorities to act, then, would be to wait forever.

Once again, Dr. King explains why simply waiting for change to come on its own would have been pointless and ineffective. Racial equality won't simply come along on its own because powerful oppressors are unlikely to ever willingly stop their exploitative, discriminatory behavior. As such, it falls to activists to push society toward change.

Dr. King is very conscious of the fact that the movement decided to break the law by practicing civil disobedience. He does not take this matter lightly, especially since critics might wonder how he and his associates argue for obeying some laws—like the 1954 Supreme Court decision to outlaw school segregation—while breaking others. There is, however, a difference between just and unjust laws. Dr. King argues that breaking a just law is immoral, whereas breaking an unjust law is a "moral responsibility."

Dr. King is fiercely committed to living virtuously. For him, breaking the law is no small matter, especially because doing so might make the leaders of the Birmingham campaign look like hypocrites. And yet, he makes a distinction between laws that are just and laws that are unjust, arguing that it's permissible to break laws that are immoral. In fact, people (and especially ministers devoted to upholding Christian values) have a "moral responsibility" to break immoral laws—an idea that subtly criticizes the white clergymen for failing to do what's right by supporting the civil rights movement in Birmingham.

Dr. King considers how, exactly, it's possible to deem a law unjust. Any law, he says, that "uplifts human personality" is moral and just—any law that "degrades human personality" is immoral and unjust. Given that segregation is based on forcing Black Americans into a false position of "inferiority," it is clearly unjust. Segregation laws are also unjust because Black Americans haven't been fairly included in the democratic process—and yet, they're forced to obey these laws, which "degrade" their freedom.

Because Dr. King has determined that it's permissible—and even a "moral responsibility"—to break unjust laws, he has to formulate a theory that clearly determines what, exactly, counts as an unjust law. Accordingly, he focuses on the idea of degradation, suggesting that it's unjust for any law to actively deplete a person's ability to live and prosper. Because segregation keeps Black people from thriving, it is clearly unjust and, as such, ought to be overturned or—at the very least—resisted.

Dr. King has some criticisms of his own to voice. He condemns white moderates for their passive acceptance of racial inequality. In a way, these white moderates pose more of a threat to Black Americans than racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, since their complacency enables racist laws to live on for years on end. White moderates are dedicated to order instead of justice. Dr. King and his fellow activists, on the other hand, are willing to disrupt order as a way of exposing injustice.

Dr. King directly addresses the problem of complacency among white Americans when he says that moderate whites pose more of a threat to Black Americans than hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Although complacent white people aren't necessarily as violent or outright menacing as members of the Ku Klux Klan, their apathy and willful ignorance when it comes to racial inequality makes it extremely hard for the Black community to bring about change.

Dr. King also takes issue with the **white clergymen**'s suggestion that his methods are "extreme." In reality, the SCLC falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, between those who have become complacent and those who have joined the Black nationalist movements that practice "bitterness and hatred." The wait for freedom has been so long that, if Black people are kept from practicing nonviolent direct action, Dr. King is sure they will join the ranks of more extreme causes.

When he talks about activists who practice "bitterness and hatred," Dr. King refers to movements—like the Nation of Islam—that advocate for more militant measures in the struggle for Black empowerment. By bringing up these more "extreme" movements, Dr. King not only contextualizes the SCLC's approach, but also subtly warns complacent white Americans that it's not in their best interest to squash the nonviolent movement for equality—if peaceful organizations like the SCLC don't succeed, he implies, more forceful organizations will eventually bring themselves to bear on American society.

Dr. King is disappointed in white Christians—especially ministers. He mistakenly thought they would—as Christians—understand and support the cause. He thought they would preach the gospel of racial equality alongside him. And though there have been some white ministers who have done this, there haven't been nearly enough.

For Dr. King, Christianity provides people with a very clear moral compass, so it's inexcusable that white ministers have failed to stand up against the injustice of racism. He believes that the fight against inequality perfectly aligns with Christian values. Consequently, white ministers should recognize their religious duty to stand up against oppression.

Dr. King reminds the **white clergymen** of a time when the church acted as an agent of change. He doesn't see the contemporary church in this light—instead, he calls the present-day church an "archdefender of the status quo." If the Christian church continues to stand idly by in the face of injustice, he warns, it will lose followers and fail to attract young people, many of whom have expressed extreme disappointment to Dr. King when he talks to them about the matter.

If white ministers fail to recognize their religious duty to support the civil rights movement, Dr. King argues that there's yet another reason they should commit themselves to the cause: namely, because failing to do so will turn young people away from the Christian church. The implication here is that times are changing and that young people are actively concerned about the issue of racial equality. If the Christian church doesn't support these values, then, Dr. King warns that it will lose its overall influence in society.

Although Dr. King hopes that the Christian church will rise to the occasion by supporting the movement in Birmingham, he has confidence that the movement will succeed on its own. The activists in Birmingham will win freedom because freedom itself is written into the very heart of the United States—it is the "sacred heritage" of the nation and the "eternal will of God."

The civil rights movement, Dr. King suggests, will triumph regardless of whether or not white Christians support the cause. The fact that Dr. King is so sure that equality will win out in the end hints at his overall sense of hopefulness—a form of emotional resilience that most likely comes from his religious faith, which gives him strength in times of hardship. Because he thinks of equality as a Christian value, he believes it will someday become a reality, illustrating what it looks like to have an unwavering sense of faith.

Before closing, Dr. King notes that white leaders have celebrated the Birmingham police for maintaining order and "preventing violence." There are two reasons why this idea is misguided. First of all, Dr. King argues that the **white clergymen** clearly must not have seen the violent and aggressive tactics that the police use against peaceful Black activists, including physical abuse and the refusal of food for detainees in the city jail. Second of all, even if it *were* true that the police have behaved nonviolently, the fact would remain that they're working to preserve racist and violent laws. No matter what they do to uphold these laws, then, their behavior isn't praiseworthy.

Dr. King shows how naïve it is to think that the Birmingham police force has behaved in a way that deserves praise. By noting the ways in which the officers have mistreated Black protestors, he makes it quite clear that only someone who isn't really paying attention to the situation could possibly think the officers have been nonviolent and just. It is exactly this kind of willful ignorance that has made it so hard for Black people to call attention to the way American society treats them. Instead of actually analyzing a given situation, white people are all too eager to look the other way when it comes to violence and injustice against Black people.

Instead of praising the Birmingham police force, Dr. King wishes the **white clergymen** had praised the Black activists for their courage and restraint in the face of injustice. Someday, these protestors will be the real heroes—not the police officers working to oppress them.

Congratulating the racist white power structures in Birmingham is, Dr. King suggests, a very backward and irrational thing to do. Instead of uplifting the people who actively enforce racist policies, the white clergymen should recognize the courage it takes for Black demonstrators to remain peaceful and levelheaded while facing such terrifying adversity.

Dr. King acknowledges that he has penned a very long letter, but he adds that he is, after all, sitting in jail with nothing else to do but consider the conditions that led to his arrest. He then expresses a desire to meet the **white clergymen** who criticized him and his fellow activists. He doesn't want to talk to them as an activist or organizer, but simply as a fellow clergyman. Hoping for a future of equality and togetherness, he signs the letter, "Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr."

Despite his disagreement with the white clergymen, Dr. King wants to meet with them. As a fellow religious person, he feels connected to the clergymen, even if they're in disagreement with him when it comes to racial justice. Talking and coming together, he implies, is the only way to find a way forward.

CHAPTER 6: BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER

After eight days in jail, Dr. King and Abernathy were released on bail. They accepted bail so that Dr. King could reconnect with the SCLC and plan how to handle future legal proceedings. What's more, Dr. King came out of jail with a new idea to mobilize Birmingham's Black youth. It wasn't hard to act on this idea—children and teenagers were eager to contribute to the cause, and though the media skewered the movement for using children as props, their involvement was genuine. Indeed, there was no doubt that the children who joined the movement understood what was on the line.

The robust youth involvement was one of the defining elements of the Birmingham movement. Encouraging young people to join the campaign for racial justice allowed Dr. King and the other organizers to extend the movement and create an even broader "cross section" of people, thus contributing to Dr. King's idea that uniting many different people is the best way to bring about change.

One of the major advantages of including young people in the movement was that it made it possible to "fill up the jails." Dr. King and his fellow leaders decided that May 2nd would be a "'D' Day" of sorts—a day on which young people would go to jail in astounding numbers. Because the young Black activists were still in school, the plan required them to stage walkouts, and though some principals tried to stop them from leaving, it was no use: there was no stopping the determined young people from fighting for their freedom.

Dr. King has already suggested that nonviolent direct action is effective because it calls attention to the unjust way Black people are treated in the United States. Involving students in an act of civil disobedience further spotlights this injustice, since it's shocking to see a peaceful teenager being hauled off to jail. In turn, the movement made it that much harder for white Americans to remain complacent in the face of such glaring discrimination.


As the jails filled to capacity, Bull Connor gave up his nonviolent tactics. By May 4th, the national media displayed pictures of police officers beating Black women and children in the streets, releasing vicious dogs on children, and opening powerful hoses on peaceful demonstrators. These pictures shone a spotlight on the injustice playing out in the South, infuriating onlookers who had previously ignored the matter.

The Birmingham movement challenged white America to finally confront the racism and violence that had long been roiling beneath the surface of everyday life. For Black Americans, police brutality was nothing new. But for white Americans who had willfully overlooked such things, it suddenly became nearly impossible to ignore what was happening in the South, where vicious dogs were attacking children and powerful hoses were plowing through peaceful protestors.


Things were finally starting to go well. The boycott of downtown businesses had led to a significant drop in sales. Perhaps more surprisingly, Birmingham's white population didn't take up arms against the movement. They didn't support it, either, but they didn't use violence to stop it, and Dr. King believes that this sense of "neutrality" helped the movement gain momentum and success.

The white community's "neutrality" in Birmingham opened up space for the civil rights movement to finally make progress. At the same time, it was still the case that the majority of white Americans weren't actively fighting for racial justice—they simply remained neutral and, in that way, perpetuated the complacency that had long allowed racism to endure.


Furthermore, the organizers had disobeyed a court injunction and had more or less gotten away with it. To be cited for "criminal contempt" in Alabama required a person to serve five days in jail. To be cited for "civil contempt," though, meant staying in jail for a very long time—unless, that is, the person renounced their ways, in which case they were free to go. Although most of the demonstrators were cited for criminal contempt, Dr. King and his fellow leaders were cited for civil contempt. But it soon became clear to city officials that the organizers would rather go to jail for the rest of their lives than give up their cause. Afraid the leaders would become martyrs, the officials changed the charges and cited them for criminal contempt instead.

The Birmingham officials were clearly intimidated by Dr. King's unyielding determination to stand by his beliefs. And they were right: it's clear that he would have rather stayed in jail than turn his back on the civil rights movement. After all, he thoroughly believed in what he was doing, viewing the act of standing up to injustice not just as something that was worthwhile, but as a legitimate "moral responsibility."

Dr. King and his associates wanted to have an open dialogue with the leaders of Birmingham. They had four demands: that stores and public spaces should be desegregated, that Black people should be given equal employment opportunities, that the demonstrators should have all criminal charges related to the movement expunged, and that the city should establish a "biracial committee to work out a timetable for desegregation in other areas of Birmingham life." Although the influential figures of Birmingham were stubborn and hesitant to negotiate, they eventually met with Dr. King and his associates, largely because the Kennedy administration sent officials to help ease tensions in the area.

The movement's demands might not seem all that monumental in contemporary times, since they mostly entail a basic level of racial equality. However, in 1963, these forms of equality still felt groundbreaking, since the nation—and especially the South—had been so racist and segregated for the 100 years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Even as negotiations began, violence erupted in the streets. Bull Connor used increasingly aggressive tactics, and some Black citizens who weren't part of the movement retaliated by throwing things at the police officers. When officers opened a pressure hose on demonstrators, Shuttlesworth was flung against a building and escorted in an ambulance to the hospital. After hearing the news, Bull Connor said, "I wish he'd been carried away in a hearse."

Although the movement had begun to get through to complacent white Americans, it's clear that there was still a lot of work to do. After all, authorities in Birmingham were still using violent tactics against peaceful Black protestors. Bull Connor's cruel comment about Shuttlesworth perfectly illustrates the extent to which hatred and cruelty remained embedded in the upper ranks of the city's government.

Around this time, the white businessmen and leaders of Birmingham walked outside during a break in a meeting about the movement's demands. They suddenly laid eyes on an extraordinarily large and peaceful demonstration that took up multiple blocks. The jails were completely full, and the demonstrators in the streets were peacefully singing freedom songs. Struck by the realization that the movement was strong and unstoppable, the white leaders of Birmingham went back inside and finally agreed to negotiate.

The sheer size and resiliency of the direct-action campaign was enough to shock Birmingham's powerful white leaders into a willingness to negotiate. It was quite clear that the movement wasn't going to fizzle out anytime soon, so the city's prominent business owners were obviously worried that their stores would suffer an ongoing impact if they didn't agree to desegregate.

Dr. King and other leaders of the movement met with the influential white figures of Birmingham. After several hours of conversation, they agreed to call a truce. Finally, it seemed that the white powerbrokers of Birmingham were willing to make real changes. By May 10th, there was an official agreement in which the powerful white people of Birmingham agreed to uphold all four of the movement's demands, including the desegregation of stores and public spaces, an increase in equal employment opportunities for Black workers, the release of anyone jailed during the demonstrations, and an open line of communication between the Black and white communities to ensure the continuation of desegregation (and to "prevent the necessity of further demonstrations and protests").

By strategically using nonviolent tactics, the movement managed to motivate otherwise complacent white people and push them to take steps toward desegregation. Given that the white powerbrokers of Birmingham had gone back on their promises before, though, it remained to be seen whether or not this truce would last.

The day after the pact was announced, white supremacists lashed out by bombing the home of Dr. King's brother, A. D. King. They also bombed the Gaston Motel, not knowing that Dr. King was in Atlanta for the night. These bombs were strategically timed to go off just after midnight, which was when the bars in the Black part of Birmingham closed. The idea was to incite a riot and, in doing so, immediately unsettle the pact. Sure enough, fighting broke out, fires were started, and people threw rocks at police officers. The state police—who had been called in several days earlier—responded by going on a merciless rampage, even going so far as to beat Wyatt Walker's wife and then, on his way home from visiting her in the hospital, Wyatt himself.

Just because the white powerbrokers of Birmingham agreed to negotiate with the civil rights organizers doesn't mean the rest of the white population was ready to embrace the idea of racial equality. In particular, aggressive white supremacists were eager to do whatever they could to undermine the progress that had been made between the Black and white communities. By bombing A. D. King's house and the Gaston Motel, these hateful white supremacists made it clear that there was a lot of work left to do in terms of achieving true harmony.

In Atlanta, Dr. King received a call from his brother, who told him about the bombings in Birmingham. And though the atmosphere was full of fear, Dr. King could hear people in the movement singing **"We Shall Overcome"** in the background of the call. He will never forget, he says, what it felt like to hear that hopeful song in a moment of such hardship and sorrow.

The freedom songs that Dr. King mentions in Why We Can't Wait *are—for him, at least—full of an uplifting kind of hope. Although white supremacists had shown their desire to kill him and anyone close to him, he was buoyed by hearing the faint strains of "We Shall Overcome," a song that embodies the resiliency and sense of promise that the civil rights movement set forth.*

There were other threats to the pact in Birmingham. Certain segregationists managed to get the Board of Education to suspend or expel any Black students who had participated in demonstrations. Although some people in the movement wanted to respond by resuming demonstrations, Dr. King urged them to refrain. Instead, they took the matter up in court with the help of the NAACP. The court not only reversed the decision but also reprimanded the Board of Education. And the next day, Bull Connor was finally pushed out of office by the Alabama Supreme Court.

Although Dr. King believes in standing up to injustice, he advocated for patience after the Board of Education sought to unsettle the pact. His decision, it seems, was based on the idea that nonviolent direct action is only helpful in certain circumstances. In this case, he was correct: it was more effective to challenge the Board of Education's ruling in the courts, illustrating that an important part of leading any movement is knowing what strategies to use and when to use them.

At the time of writing *Why We Can't Wait* in 1964, Dr. King says that there's still work to be done in Birmingham. There are still many people fighting to preserve segregation. But he feels as if the writing is on the wall: segregation "lies on its deathbed." The only question, Dr. King believes, is how "costly" the funeral will be.

The metaphor Dr. King uses here not only suggests that segregationist policies will inevitably topple, but also puts the impetus on white society to address inequality. If white Americans fail to do anything to achieve racial equality, segregation will still eventually be defeated. Dr. King thus implies that, instead of trying to preserve outdated and unjust practices, white people should work alongside Black Americans to achieve a better future.

CHAPTER 7: THE SUMMER OF OUR DISCONTENT

Until the summer of 1963, Dr. King argues, Black Americans had so little support in American society that there was a prevailing sense of helplessness. He tells an anecdote about the first person to be executed with poison gas in the United States. The prisoner was a Black man, and there was a microphone in the room recording his last words, which were: "Save me, Joe Louis." Joe Louis was a famous heavyweight boxing champion. Dr. King suggests that he was the only person the prisoner could think to call out for, simply because Louis was the only prominent, potentially powerful Black person in the entire nation.

The story Dr. King tells about the first person to be executed by poison gas illustrates just how unsupported many Black people felt before 1963. Without many powerful figures to look toward, Black Americans had very few people to advocate for them—something that Dr. King implies is no longer the case because of the civil rights movement.

By 1963, though, it was no longer the case that Black Americans had nobody to look to. The sense of helplessness gave way to a sense of "confidence" through nonviolent direct action. The demonstrators in Birmingham didn't wait for freedom and equality—they took it for themselves. With so much change, Dr. King notes, Black Americans left behind the "psychology of servitude," which is a necessary step toward true freedom.

The civil rights movement, Dr. King implies, gave many Black Americans a sense of agency and control over their own lives. Instead of simply going along with the status quo, many Black Americans were empowered by the campaign to stand up against injustice, thus escaping the "psychology of servitude" that had long made it difficult to reject racism and discrimination.

Although it would be nice if Dr. King could say that the victory in Birmingham led to lasting peace and equality, that's not the case. After the success of the negotiations in the summer of 1963, a group of white supremacists bombed a Black church in September, killing four young girls who were attending Sunday school. On the same day, police killed yet another child, and white supremacists murdered a Black boy riding his bike in the streets. Dr. King notes that these events are clearly awful, but not as awful as the white community's failure to respond to them. Very few white leaders spoke out against these atrocities, making the summer's efforts toward racial equality seem somewhat insignificant and meaningless.

Once again, a sense of apathy and complacency defined the white community's response to horrific and racist events. The fact that the summer's negotiations didn't fully address this kind of complacency suggests that the civil rights movement had yet to fundamentally change the way white society thought about racism. The Birmingham campaign achieved a legal victory by pushing the city toward desegregation, but there was still a much bigger battle to fight: namely, the act of getting white Americans to think compassionately about the horrors of racism—something that has unfortunately continued to be a problem in the many decades following the civil rights movement.

There's no doubt that the movement achieved great success in Birmingham, even if—at the time of writing *Why We Can't Wait* in 1964—there's a "lull." Dr. King wanted to stage more demonstrations in the wake of the church bombing in September of 1963, but his fellow leaders convinced him otherwise. Because Dr. King believes that the movement's biggest asset is its sense of unity, he relented. As it stands in 1964, the powerful white figures in Birmingham have the opportunity to stick to their original promise by working toward true desegregation and equality. Even if it decides not to pursue these things, though, Dr. King is confident that the movement will succeed. Birmingham will achieve racial equality one way or another, either willingly or through new direct-action efforts.

Once again, Dr. King shows his strong sense of hope. He has faith that the civil rights movement will succeed, even if it's clear that white Americans are still complacent when it comes to bringing about true change. His unwavering faith in the movement is most likely a product of his religious outlook on life: because he believes in the power of goodness to triumph over evil, he has no doubt that racial equality will win in the end—the only question is how long that will take and how much more pain American society will have to bear before reaching true justice.

Any successful movement both attracts new people to its ranks *and* motivates enemies or detractors. Dr. King notes that the revolution in Birmingham was no exception. Despite its many enemies, the revolution spread far beyond Birmingham, as people from every major city in the United States flocked to the movement. Police officers didn't know what to do with the surge of demonstrators, especially since the new activists included ministers and other successful, reputable members of society. It was therefore even more egregiously and obviously unjust when police officers responded to peaceful protest with violence and aggression.

Dr. King rehashes his previous ideas about unity and the efficacy of nonviolent direct action. Because the civil rights movement in 1963 included such a broad coalition of Black Americans, some of the Black community's most respectable figures joined the ranks of demonstrators and practiced nonviolence. In doing so, they made it harder for white people to ignore the police's aggressive tactics, which felt especially glaring when wielded against reputable figures like peaceful Christian ministers (to take just one example of a respectable community member).

The social revolution in 1963 also put new pressure on white moderates. Before the movement, they championed tokenism as a way of supposedly promoting racial equality. But the demonstrations in 1963 showed white moderates that tokenism wasn't nearly enough—the movement didn't push for a select few people to rise to the top, it pushed for *all* Black Americans to have fair opportunities. Moreover, demonstrators across the country made it clear that they would no longer stand for mere tokenism and other escapist ways of avoiding the problem of racism in the United States.

As Dr. King has already explained, tokenism has historically enabled complacent white Americans to take merely symbolic steps toward racial equality without actually doing anything to genuinely achieve that equality. After the Birmingham movement, however, white moderates saw that such methods of avoiding the issue would no longer stand. In other words, the direct-action campaign forced white America to finally confront its own complacency.

Dr. King points out that, although many people view the movement as something that has burdened the nation, the truth is that Black activists are actually helping the country as a whole. The entire nation was built upon the horrific genocide of the Native American population—a terrible and immoral blunder. By pushing the country toward racial equality, then, Black activists force the nation to finally confront the atrociously "racist ideology" that has long tarnished its legacy. The fight for racial equality, Dr. King argues, is a fight that will improve the nation as a whole.

Dr. King sees the push for equality as something that extends beyond the Black community. By reminding readers that the entire United States was founded on the horrific treatment of Native Americans, he emphasizes the country's desperate need to address its ugly history. And though the horrible genocide of the Native American population has already taken place, it's not too late to—at the very least—stop using the same "racist ideology" that led to such genocidal behavior in the first place.

After the significant events that took place in the summer of 1963, civil rights leaders felt that there should be some sort of "climax." Consequently, they organized the March on Washington, which brought almost 250,000 people to the nation's capital in a grand push for racial equality. Some Black leaders were skeptical of the idea, fearing that any outbreak of violence would set the movement back. But others—like Dr. King—had faith in the Black community to gather peacefully and make an honorable stand for freedom.

The March on Washington was one of the biggest events in the civil rights movement, attracting attention from across the nation. It was yet another nonviolent way of highlighting the urgent need for racial equality, meaning that it emerged from the very same kind of strategic thinking that drove the Birmingham campaign.

One testament to the headway the Black community made in 1963 was the fact that major media outlets gave fair and supportive coverage to the March on Washington. Normally, Dr. King notes, the media misrepresented Black people and demonized their efforts to bring about racial equality. Now, though, the media responded favorably to the March on Washington, allowing millions of white Americans to finally view Black citizens in a positive light—something that challenged the negative stereotypes surrounding Black Americans.

The positive media coverage that the March on Washington received was significant because it was one of the first times that the civil rights movement wasn't skewered in a public forum. Considering that the major news outlets were predominantly white organizations run by powerful white figures, it's especially notable that the march received favorable coverage—a good sign of the change that was taking place in society as a whole.

CHAPTER 8: THE DAYS TO COME

Dr. King considers American society's troubling tendency to remain indifferent in the face of "human suffering." During slavery, formerly enslaved people could purchase their family members' freedom if they had enough money. As a result, many formerly enslaved Black people asked white people for help: "Help me buy my mother," they might ask. Dr. King says that many non-enslavers found it difficult to refuse such a request. He also notes that such questions forced white people who previously overlooked the horrors of slavery to reckon with the utter inhumanity of the practice. Looking back on this history from 1964, Dr. King suggests that ignoring the problematic nature of segregation was similar to ignoring the horrors of slavery.

Again, Dr. King scrutinizes the dangers of white complacency, arguing that an unfortunate number of white Americans find it all too easy to overlook otherwise glaring forms of inhumanity and injustice. As soon as these white people are forced to actually consider what it would be like to endure such injustice, though, they tend to change their minds and pay more attention to the problem. As such, Dr. King wants to shine a spotlight on the racism that is still very much alive in the United States.

Some white people criticize the desegregation effort by asking what more Black Americans will want if society grants them their current demands. In response, Dr. King reasons that society doesn't have the right to "bargain" with Black people over rights to which they are automatically entitled as American citizens. And when white people suggest that Black Americans shouldn't demand freedom all at once because it will eventually come about on its own, Dr. King upholds that "gradualism and moderation" are inadequate solutions. Partial freedom, he says, doesn't count as freedom at all.

It's ridiculous, Dr. King implies, for white people to act as if they're doing a kind, beneficent thing by finally giving Black Americans the freedom and liberty to which they've always *been entitled. As Americans—and, more to the point, as human beings—Black people shouldn't have to "bargain" for rights that anyone and everyone should already have. Dr. King thus challenges the patronizing and racist idea that Black Americans are asking for too much by demanding equal rights.*

Delaying full freedom won't work because all Black Americans understand that it's their right to be free. "Gradualism" is therefore not only unjust, but also doomed to fail. What's more, delaying racial equality will slow down not just the Black community's progress, but also the progress of the entire country. The only way to proceed, Dr. King suggests, is by recognizing that Black Americans face a number of complicated challenges because of the country's long history of oppression and discrimination. Only by acknowledging these challenges will society manage to foster an environment in which equality can flourish.

An important part of Dr. King's argument is that equality isn't just something that will benefit Black Americans—it's also something that will improve the entire country. For instance, because segregation keeps skillful Black workers from filling certain jobs, the workforce (and the economy as a whole) is at a disadvantage. What's more, racism is immoral, so Dr. King upholds that eradicating it would benefit the United States by turning it into a just and moral country.

Dr. King argues that the government should provide Black Americans with financial assistance as a way of leveling society's playing field. Because Black Americans have been actively discriminated against for hundreds of years, it's ridiculous to think that they will suddenly have the resources to "compete on a just and equal basis." If a man running in a footrace took off from the starting line 300 years after his opponent, it would obviously be impossible for him to catch up. The same is true, Dr. King contends, for Black Americans trying to support themselves in a society that has historically oppressed and excluded them.

Dr. King illustrates the fact that the United States has historically hindered Black Americans' ability to achieve success. His analogy to the footrace helps illustrate just how much of a disadvantage Black Americans still face in the United States. Whereas white people have always had resources available to help them succeed, Black Americans have been actively held back. Because of this long history of oppression, even if racism magically disappeared all at once, Black people would still *be at a disadvantage compared to white people.*

Without tangible forms of support, the freedoms that come along with desegregation will mean very little to Black Americans. For instance, Black Americans won't benefit from the ability to live in an integrated neighborhood if they can't afford to live in such communities in the first place. Or, to put it another way, to give someone who doesn't know how to walk a pair of shoes is a "cruel jest."

By suggesting that the government provide Black Americans with various forms of support, Dr. King makes a case for reparations, or a kind of compensation intended to make up for previous injustices. Without these measures, Dr. King argues that true freedom will mean very little to Black Americans because they won't be able to do *anything with that freedom.*

Dr. King goes on to acknowledge the important influence that the president of the United States has on civil rights issues. If President Kennedy hadn't been assassinated, Dr. King believes he would have grown into an even stronger ally for racial justice. As it stands, his assassination showed the nation that "hate is a contagion" and that nobody in a society besieged by such hatred is safe. Black Americans, for their part, are all too familiar with the tragedy brought about by political assassinations, as many prominent Black leaders have been targeted and killed by white supremacists. When President Kennedy was assassinated, though, it was perhaps the first time that the nation grieved an act of hatred *together*.

President Kennedy's assassination sparked a sense of collective grief and mourning. Dr. King points out that this grief was directly tied to an act of hatred, which is why he feels it was so similar to the kind of violence that the Black community faces on a daily basis in the United States. In other words, Kennedy's assassination forced a sense of unity in a moment of grief, and Dr. King points this out because it proves that the rest of the country is capable of recognizing the terrible injustice of hateful, violent acts—and should, therefore, recognize that the same kind of violence plagues the Black community.

Many of Dr. King's associates urged him to publicly endorse President Kennedy when he first ran for office. He refrained, however, because he wasn't sure that Kennedy would fight for Black Americans with as much vigor as they would hope. Most presidents, after all, had failed to address racism in the country. For this reason, Dr. King says, Black Americans historically stayed away from politics, especially since there were never many candidates who would act on matters of racial justice anyway. Because Black Americans kept away from politics, though, they were unable to assert their influence. By 1964, however, the civil rights movement made it possible—through nonviolent direct action—for Black people to become more politically active.

Black Americans had good reason to stay away from politics in the 1950s and early 1960s, considering that very few politicians were willing to genuinely push for racial equality. But Dr. King notes that staying out of politics also disenfranchised the Black community by ensuring that Black Americans would be unrepresented in the government. With the onset of the civil rights movement, though, it became increasingly possible for Black people to influence their representatives, largely because nonviolent direct action gave the community a way of wielding power and using it to its political advantage.

Now that Black Americans have gained more political power, Dr. King is optimistic about how they might wield it. In fact, President Kennedy owed his victory in South Carolina to the Black vote, indicating that the Black community can tangibly impact the outcome of a given political race. Plus, politicians bear such matters in mind, not wanting to alienate groups that have such a strong sway over election results. In turn, if the Black community acts strategically, it would be possible to leverage its influence as a way of making sure its voice is heard.

In terms of the best way to fight injustice, Dr. King has already committed himself to the use of nonviolent direct action. However, he has also made it clear that he doesn't think just one approach is good enough when it comes to addressing racial inequality. For instance, he also believes in the efficacy of fighting injustice in the courts. And now he adds yet another approach, advocating for the use of voting power to assert influence over politicians. Combining all three of these approaches would give the civil rights movement a comprehensive way of combatting hatred and division.

Dr. King reiterates that the civil rights movement isn't just an effort to uplift Black people—it's an effort to uplift the entire nation. In the same way that it's sometimes necessary for a doctor to open a wound to address an infection, the nation must confront the inequality festering at its core. If the civil rights movement manages to address this issue, then it will have managed to improve the nation's overall unity. And nonviolent direct action, Dr. King argues, is the way to achieve this unity. After all, he believes that everyone in the world—regardless of their differences—must learn to "live together in peace."

Why We Can't Wait *ends with Dr. King reiterating his belief in nonviolence and its ability to bring about meaningful change—change that the nation desperately needs. He also underscores the idea that equality would benefit the whole country, implying that anything that helps the nation become a more moral and just place is something that will greatly improve the United States as a whole.*

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