



Why We Can't Wait (King Legacy)

By Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



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Dr. King's best-selling account of the civil rights movement in Birmingham during the spring and summer of 1963

On April 16, 1963, as the violent events of the Birmingham campaign unfolded in the city's streets, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., composed a letter from his prison cell in response to local religious leaders' criticism of the campaign. The resulting piece of extraordinary protest writing, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," was widely circulated and published in numerous periodicals. After the conclusion of the campaign and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, King further developed the ideas introduced in the letter in *Why We Can't Wait*, which tells the story of African American activism in the spring and summer of 1963. During this time, Birmingham, Alabama, was perhaps the most racially segregated city in the United States, but the campaign launched by King, Fred Shuttlesworth, and others demonstrated to the world the power of nonviolent direct action.

Often applauded as King's most incisive and eloquent book, *Why We Can't Wait* recounts the Birmingham campaign in vivid detail, while underscoring why 1963 was such a crucial year for the civil rights movement. Disappointed by the slow pace of school desegregation and civil rights legislation, King observed that by 1963—during which the country celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation—Asia and Africa were "moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence but we still creep at a horse-and-buggy pace."

King examines the history of the civil rights struggle, noting tasks that future generations must accomplish to bring about full equality, and asserts that African Americans have already waited over three centuries for civil rights and that it is time to be proactive: "For years now, I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"

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Editorial Review

Review

“No child should graduate from high school without having read this book. In telling the story of the third American Revolution, it is as integral to American history as the Declaration of Independence.”—Jesse Jackson

About the Author

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), Nobel Peace Prize laureate and architect of the nonviolent civil rights movement, was among the twentieth century’s most influential figures. One of the greatest orators in U.S. history, King is the author of several books, including *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, *Why We Can't Wait*, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, and *The Trumpet of Conscience*. His speeches, sermons, and writings are inspirational and timeless. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

Dorothy Cotton was the education director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and worked closely with Dr. King on teaching nonviolence and citizenship education.

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I had planned to submit myself to imprisonment two or three days after our demonstrations began. It didn't take long after returning to Birmingham, however, to recognize the existence of a problem that made it unwise and impractical for me to go to jail before something had been done to solve it.

We had been forced to change our timetable twice. We had had to make a strategic retreat until after the run-off and had lost contact with the community for several weeks. We had returned now to a city whose political power structure was divided. We had returned to find that our own people were not united. There was tremendous resistance to our program from some of the Negro ministers, businessmen and professionals in the city. This opposition did not exist because these Negroes did not want to be free. It existed for several other reasons.

The Negro in Birmingham, like the Negro elsewhere in this nation, had been skillfully brainwashed to the point where he had accepted the white man's theory that he, as a Negro, was inferior. He wanted to believe that he was the equal of any man; but he didn't know where to begin or how to resist the influences that had conditioned him to take the line of least resistance and go along with the white man's views. He knew that there were exceptions to the white man's evaluation: a Ralph Bunche, a Jackie Robinson, a Marian Anderson. But to the Negro, in Birmingham and in the nation, the exception did not prove the rule.

Another consideration had also affected the thinking of some of the Negro leaders in Birmingham. This was the widespread feeling that our action was illtimed, and that we should have given the new Boutwell government a chance. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had been one of the first to voice this criticism. The *Washington Post*, which covered Birmingham from the first day of our demonstrations, had editorially attacked our “timing.” In fact, virtually all the coverage in the national press at first had been negative, picturing us as irresponsible hotheads who had plunged into a situation just when Birmingham was getting ready to change overnight into Paradise. The sudden emergence of our protest seemed to give the lie to this vision.

In Montgomery, during the bus boycott, and in the Albany, Georgia, campaign, we had had the advantage of a sympathetic and understanding national press from the outset. In Birmingham we did not. It is terribly

difficult to wage such a battle without the moral support of the national press to counteract the hostility of local editors. The words “bad timing” came to be ghosts haunting our every move in Birmingham. Yet people who used this argument were ignorant of the background of our planning. They did not know we had postponed our campaign twice. They did not know our reason for attacking in time to affect Easter shopping. Above all they did not realize that it was ridiculous to speak of timing when the clock of history showed that the Negro had already suffered one hundred years of delay.

Not only were many of the Negro leaders affected by the administration’s position, but they were themselves indulging in a false optimism about what would happen to Birmingham under the new government. The situation had been critical for so many years that, I suppose, these people felt that any change represented a giant step toward the good. Many truly believed that once the influence of Bull Connor had faded, everything was going to be all right.

Another reason for the opposition within the Negro community was resentment on the part of some groups and leaders because we had not kept them informed about the date we planned to begin or the strategy we would adopt. They felt that they were being pulled in on something they had no part in organizing. They did not realize that, because of the local political situation, we had been forced to keep our plans secret.

We were seeking to bring about a great social change which could only be achieved through unified effort. Yet our community was divided. Our goals could never be attained in such an atmosphere. It was decided that we would conduct a whirlwind campaign of meetings with organizations and leaders in the Negro community, to seek to mobilize every key person and group behind our movement.

Along with members of my staff, I began addressing numerous groups representing a cross section of our people in Birmingham. I spoke to 125 business and professional people at a call meeting in the Gaston Building. I talked to a gathering of two hundred ministers. I met with many smaller groups, during a hectic oneweek schedule. In most cases, the atmosphere when I entered was tense and chilly, and I was aware that there was a great deal of work to be done.

I went immediately to the point, explaining to the business and professional men why we had been forced to proceed without letting them know the date in advance. I dealt with the argument of timing. To the ministers I stressed the need for a social gospel to supplement the gospel of individual salvation. I suggested that only a “dry as dust” religion prompts a minister to extol the glories of heaven while ignoring the social conditions that cause men an earthly hell. I pleaded for the projection of strong, firm leadership by the Negro minister, pointing out that he is freer, more independent, than any other person in the community. I asked how the Negro would ever gain his freedom without the guidance, support and inspiration of his spiritual leaders.

I challenged those who had been persuaded that I was an “outsider.” I pointed out that Fred Shuttlesworth’s Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights was an affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and that the Shuttlesworth group had asked S.C.L.C. to come to Birmingham, and that as president of S.C.L.C., I had come in the interests of aiding an S.C.L.C. affiliate.

I expanded further on the weary and worn “outsider” charge, which we have faced in every community where we have gone to try to help. No Negro, in fact, no American, is an outsider when he goes to any community to aid the cause of freedom and justice. No Negro anywhere, regardless of his social standing, his financial status, his prestige and position, is an outsider so long as dignity and decency are denied to the humblest black child in Mississippi, Alabama or Georgia.

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.

Users Review

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