

## **The Civil Rights Movement Overview: Birmingham Campaign to March on Washington “Eyes on the Prize” Episode 4**

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) joined a local movement in Birmingham, Alabama, to coordinate a direct action campaign against the city’s segregation system. Their plan was to put pressure on Birmingham’s local merchants during the Easter season, the second biggest shopping season of the year.

The action began with lunch counter sit-ins, marches, and boycotts of downtown merchants. King preaches the philosophy of nonviolence, though some protests would turn violent. Hundreds were arrested, including Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 12th.

One of the most controversial actions of this campaign was called the Children’s Crusade. Over a thousand children left school and attempted to march into downtown Birmingham. They were blasted with high pressure fire hoses and attacked by police dogs. Many went to jail.

In early May, negotiators reached an agreement. The protesters would call off their protest. Restrooms, drinking fountains, and lunch counters would be desegregated. The protestors were released from jail.

People who supported segregation were unhappy with this agreement and set off a series of violent attacks. An explosive went off outside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 's hotel room, but he had already left. Four months later, the Ku Klux Klan set off a bomb outside the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young African American girls. When Dr. King spoke at their funeral, he said they were heroes in a “holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.” (King, “Eulogy for the Martyred Children” 18 September 1963)

In June of the same year, plans were coming together for a civil rights demonstration in Washington, DC. The full name of the march was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This would become the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of the United States.

In August, the city swelled with marchers. They came by car, bus, and train. Three student marchers walked and hitchhiked 700 miles to get there. In the end, over 250,000 people waved signs, sang, cheered, and listened to speakers addressing the civil rights challenges facing America.

The last speaker was Martin Luther King Jr. “I am happy to join you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation,” he began. The march was a success. It upheld the principles of nonviolent protest and the power of all races working together for change.