

Fixing Images: Civil Rights Photography and the Struggle Over Representation

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Abstract

"Fixing Images" argues that the iconic photographs of civil rights played a key role in limiting the racial reforms of the 1960s. The famous photographs of dogs and fire hoses turned against peaceful black marchers in Birmingham, or of tear gas and clubs wielded against voter-rights marchers in Selma are routinely credited with galvanizing the sympathy of liberal whites in the north for the plight of blacks in the south and of smoothing the way for civil rights legislation. What goes unsaid is how the photographs moved whites to accept legislative and social reforms by perpetuating a picture of white control. The article illustrates how white sympathy was contingent on images that consistently displayed blacks as the passive and hapless victims of active and violent whites. And it demonstrates how the iconic images of civil rights ultimately limited efforts to enact – or even imagine – reforms that threatened to upend the racial balance of power.

[1] Early in the winter of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. met quietly with a group of prominent civil rights activists to discuss prospects for a major civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham was then popularly known as the most racially segregated big city in the south – a community where by law and custom blacks were confined to separate and inferior jobs, schools, restaurants, theaters, recreational facilities and, most famously, public transportation systems. Called "Bombingham" by many in the movement, the city had witnessed more than two-dozen bombings directed against prominent black leaders and institutions since the close of World War II.¹ And yet, King and the activists who gathered with him were cheered by what they judged as the city's favorable conditions for a successful campaign.

[2] King knew that blacks did not wield sufficient political or economic power to end segregation and promote equal opportunity without the support of white allies; consequently, he worked hard to organize peaceful protests that would garner sympathetic press coverage for his cause and prick the consciences of liberal whites in the north.² Since most Americans lived in segregated communities, media coverage of black protest provided a rare opportunity for activists to make visible to a national white audience the day-to-day violence and indignities experienced by blacks. Not only did

¹ For the social and political context of Birmingham for blacks prior to the protests in the spring of 1963, see Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, New York 2001, 31-300.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*, New York 1964, 30.

activists have in Birmingham a strong supporter in Fred Shuttlesworth, a prominent local clergyman and most important black civil rights leader in the city, they had a perfect adversary in the Public Safety Commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, one of the most confrontational elected officials in the South. Connor's history of violence and appetite for media attention presented King with an opportunity to create visually arresting scenes that could crystallize the stakes of the struggle for whites.³

[3] The Birmingham campaign organized by King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began on April 3rd with a few dozen student-protestors initiating sit-ins at downtown department store lunch counters. In the days that followed, the protests grew with peaceful daily marches and a boycott of local merchants by black residents during the normally busy Easter shopping season.⁴ Connor's police responded by arresting black demonstrators for parading without a permit, disturbing the peace and loitering, but to the surprise of organizers, his officers refrained from the public displays of brutality against blacks for which the city was known. The northern reporters assigned to Birmingham filed a smattering of stories on the protests, but in the absence of graphically violent scenes, press coverage was modest. The quiet arrest of small groups of peaceful demonstrators each day failed to arouse the interest of many whites.

[4] Everything changed, however, at the start of May, when local black school children joined the ranks of protestors. On the afternoon of May 2nd, adult leaders took to the street with wave after wave of singing children, cheered on by hundreds of black adults who flanked their route. What was dubbed the "Children's Crusade" had begun. By the end of the day, 500 young marchers were carted off to jail, many still singing and waving their civil rights placards. Birmingham was now in the national news. During the next day, May 3rd, events in the city became of international interest. Connor was unable to make further arrests because his jails were overflowing, but remained unwilling to allow the protestors to march on city hall or pray in the streets. Frustrated that he had no place to put additional prisoners and determined to shut down all forms of black protest, Connor gave orders to disperse peaceful, unarmed protestors with German shepherd police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses. The spectacle recorded by newspaper, magazine and television photographers and cameramen – of women in their Sunday dresses knocked off their feet by high-pressure water jets and well-dressed men peacefully standing their ground while mauled by dogs – brought the movement precisely the publicity it desired. As a reporter for the *New York Herald* judged, the resulting photographs constituted the most "gripping" images of the civil rights struggle to date.⁵ While the protests would continue and grow for another week, the storm of publicity

³ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, New York 1986, 209, 225-28.

⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 237.

⁵ Robert J. Donovan, "Birmingham...U.S. Image Abroad," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 12, 1963, Section 2, 1.

generated by the inflammatory photographs and news stories detailing events of May 3rd brought reluctant business and city leaders to the negotiating table, and ultimately provided King with one of his most celebrated victories.



1 "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 23, 24. Reproduced from: Michael S. Durham, *Powerfull days. The civil rights photography of Charles Moore*, New York 1991, 94, 95

[5] On May 17, 1963, *Life* published thirteen photographs of the Birmingham campaign taken by the southern white photographer Charles Moore in an article titled, "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out" (fig. 1).⁶ The essay is a key document of the era, as many of the photographs reproduced in its pages quickly assumed status as iconic images of the civil rights struggle. Moore's stark photographs of Birmingham joined those photographs of white mobs harassing fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford as she integrated Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas in 1957; sit-ins at segregated department store lunch counters in Greensboro and Jackson, Mississippi or Nashville, Tennessee showing activists taunted and bloodied by youthful white mobs throughout the early 1960s;⁷ dazed and wounded Freedom Riders milling around their abandoned burning bus after segregationists firebombed it near Aniston, Alabama, in 1961; and, in time, peaceful marchers absorbing the blows of police batons at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965 (fig. 2a,b) as some of the civil rights struggle's most recognizable photographs.⁸

⁶ "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 26-36. The complete issue of *Life*, May 17, 1963 (54:20), is available online at: http://books.google.com/books?id=2kgEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (last accessed Oct. 8, 2010).

⁷ Cf. the photograph by Fred Blackwell of a sit-in at F.W. Woolworth's lunch counter, Jackson, Mississippi, May 28, 1963. The image is available online at: <http://www.spokesmanreview.com/news/live/body.asp?ID=library/civilrights/sitins/essay> (last accessed Oct. 8, 2010).



2a Martin Spider, Confrontation at the Pettus Bridge, Civil Rights Voting March in Selma, Alabama, March 7, 1965. Reproduced from: Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History*, New York 1996, 178, 179



2b Martin Spider, Troopers charging marchers at the Pettus Bridge, Civil Rights Voting March in Selma, Alabama, March 7, 1965. Reproduced after: Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History*, New York 1996, 179

[6] Observers in the 1960s and historians in the decades since have consistently credited news photographs of attack dogs and water hoses in Birmingham with wielding a unique power over white America. The images are lauded for generating white liberal sympathy in the north for the plight of black protestors in the south, for hardening northern resolve against the excesses of the racist Jim Crow system and providing President Kennedy and Congress the political cover to push long-stalled civil rights legislation.⁹ Many of Moore's photographs of police dogs, fire hoses, arrests and

⁸ With nearly nineteen million paid subscribers at a time when the U.S. population was just over 180 million, *Life* was the largest circulation news source and among the most influential mid-century periodicals. For circulation statistics for the era's most popular magazines, see "W.R. Simmons Study," *Chicago Daily News*, May 3, 1963, 36. For more on *Life* in the culture of 1960s America, see Erika Doss, ed. *Looking at Life Magazine*, Washington DC 2001. For a revealing scholarly discussion of mainstream magazine coverage of Birmingham, see Richard Lentz, *Symbols, The News Magazines, and Martin Luther King*, Baton Rouge 1990, 75-112.

⁹ The historian, Michael J. Klarman cites polls showing a dramatic rise in the percentage of Americans who deemed civil rights the "most pressing issue" facing America in the aftermath of the

demonstrations stand today as visual shorthand for the civil rights movement, and are consequently reproduced with little explanatory text. In the first blush of the conflict, when their meanings were still in flux, *Life* reproduced the photographs with copious descriptive copy.



3a "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 30.
Reproduced from: Michael S. Durham, *Powerfull days. The civil rights photography of Charles Moore*, New York 1991, 104



3b "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 30.
Reproduced from: Michael S. Durham, *Powerfull days. The civil rights photography of Charles Moore*, New York 1991, 105

[7] On a two-page spread (fig. 3a,b) that displays a sequence of three photographs illustrating a well-dressed black man mauled by a lunging police dog, *Life* explained that:

With vicious guard dogs the police attacked the marchers—and thus rewarded them with an extreme outrage that would win support all over the world for

photographs' publication. See Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality*, New York 2004, 436. For period observers' assessment of the photographs' power, see John Herbers, "Voting is Crux of Civil Rights Hopes," *New York Times*, February 14, 1965, E5; Eric Sevareid, *This is Eric Sevareid*, New York 1964, 89. The Georgia Congressman Charles Longstreet Weltner (1963-67) noted that "all the explanations and words in the world cannot erase the force and impact of those photographs." In: *Southerner*, Philadelphia 1966, 58. For the power attributed to the photographs by historians, see Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*, New York 1993, 204; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965*, New York, 1998, 77, xiii; Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, New York 2001, 25; Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History 1954-68*, New York 2000, 96; Michael Durham, *Powerful Days: The Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore*, Tuscaloosa 2002, 90; John Kaplan, "The *Life* Magazine Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore," in: *Journalism History* 25:4 (1999-2000), 126-39; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Berkeley 2003, 243.

Birmingham's Negroes. If the Negroes themselves had written the script, they could hardly have asked for greater help for their cause than [...] Connor freely gave. Ordering his men to let white spectators come near, he said: 'I want 'em to see the dogs work.'

[8] The caption concludes by noting that this "brutal" scene "is the attention-getting jack pot of the Negroes' provocation."¹⁰

[9] Note how the description juxtaposes the portrayals of whites who "fight" and "attack," with blacks who require "help" and are "brutalized." The text guides reader interpretations by suggesting a contrast between the described *activity* of brutal white policemen and the *inactivity* of peaceful black marchers. In the estimation of the magazine, white actions better served blacks than anything the activists themselves might have "scripted." That the article focuses on the subject of white agency is apparent even in its subtitle– "They Fight a Fire that Won't Go Out," which frames whites as the scene's active players, given their metaphoric battle against the black "fire" with their water hoses. Echoing the coverage in *Life*, mainstream media outlets routinely cast black Birmingham protestors as the hapless victims of violent whites. They reported on youths hit with firemen's hoses as "flattened," "sent sprawling," "spun [...] head over heels," "sitting passively," "swept along the gutter by a stream of water," "cut [...] down like tenpins," or "flung [...] into the air like sodden dolls," some with their clothing "ripped off."¹¹ A white Birmingham native recalled how Connor's fire hoses sent black "arms and

¹⁰ "Spectacle of Racial Turbulence," *Life*, 29-30. Disagreement exists over whether Connor uttered the famous "want 'em to see the dogs work" phrase. Given the importance to my argument of Connor's desire to make inactive black bodies visible to whites, some analysis of this disagreement is warranted. The historian Diane McWhorter notes in her study of the Birmingham struggle that the reporter, Dudley Morris of *Time*, whom she credits with being the first to cite the Public Safety Commissioner uttering the phrase, is purported by the *Life* stringer, Albert Persons, not to have heard the expression first hand. Nonetheless, the quote was reported widely, appearing in *Time*, *Life* and in the accounts of many major newspapers. See McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 393. It is important to make two points on this disagreement. First, Persons held strong views against the civil rights movement and may not be a reliable informant. In 1965, he authored a publication that sought to discredit the civil rights project and the liberal press. His thirty-three page booklet was distributed by the National States Rights Party, an anti-Semitic, anti-black and anti-civil rights political group. See Albert C. Persons, *The True Selma Story: Sex and Civil Rights*, Birmingham 1965. Second, whether the line was uttered or not, there is strong evidence that the sentiment was felt. Connor gave whites whom he perceived as sympathetic to the segregationist cause greater access to blacks engaged in the civil rights struggle. Dan Rather has recounted that he was initially refused a request to interview King in Birmingham by the local police in 1963, but was granted access when he appealed to Connor personally, flashing an expired identification card from the *Houston Chronicle* and laying on his thickest Texas accent. See Rather, *The Camera Never Blinks*, 92-3. Moore himself noted the greater access he was granted in Birmingham, due to the misimpression of officials that he still worked for a white Montgomery paper. Moore interview with Flip Schulke cited in Joel Eisinger, "Powerful Images: Charles Moore's Photographs of the Birmingham Demonstrations," in: *Exposure* 33:1/2 (2000), 35, which in turn draws the quote from Larry H. Spruill, *Southern Exposure, Photography and the Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1968*, Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook 1983, 263.

¹¹ "Halt New Ala. 'March'," *New York Mirror*, May 5, 1963, 2; "Dogs and Fire Hoses Turned on Negroes," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1963, 1, 4; "Birmingham, U.S.A." 'Look at Them Run,' *Newsweek*, May 1, 1963, 23; "Keeping Peace in Alabama – Police, Fire Hoses and Dogs," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 4, 1963, 1; Don McKee, "Dogs, Hoses Rout Negroes in Birmingham Bias Protest," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 4, 1963, 1; "Police Turn Hoses on Alabama Negroes," *New York World-Telegram*, May 3, 1963, 1; "Negro Leaders Order Halt to Birmingham Protests," *New York World-Telegram*, May 8, 1963, 1; "Birmingham: 'War,'" *New York Mirror*, May 5, 1963, 2; "Police

legs [...] jerking like those of puppets on a string [and] bodies cartwheeling across the grass like scraps of paper caught in the wind."¹² The consistent ascription of such traits to whites and blacks constitutes the single-most-important frame in white media accounts of civil rights.

[10] Note also the irony that the violent whites appearing in news accounts of Birmingham are ultimately cast as agents of progressive social change, despite their obvious desire to preserve the racial status quo. In contrast to the model enshrined in much nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imagery, wherein whites were the agents of social changes they *supported*, the photographs and articles chronicling Birmingham consistently depict southern whites as forceful actors who inadvertently enact changes they were determined to prevent. This too typified the northern white response to civil rights. In a meeting with civil rights leaders in the White House's Cabinet Room in June of 1963, President Kennedy remarked to the assembled group that Bull Connor "has done more for civil rights than almost anybody else."¹³ The journalist and historian David Halberstam, well known for his coverage of and sympathy for the black freedom struggle, claimed in 1967 that "in retrospect it was not so much Martin Luther King who made the movement go, it was Bull Connor; each time a bomb went off, a head smashed open, the contributions would mount at King's headquarters."¹⁴ Given the option of crediting the advancement of civil rights to southern blacks (with whose struggles northern whites were becoming increasingly sympathetic), or to southern whites (with whose violence these same northerners were losing patience), whites consistently chose the latter group.

[11] The manner in which white media outlets and politicians framed their observations of Birmingham typified the white view of civil rights. Consider again what the iconic photographs of the struggle depict: a demure Elizabeth Eckford under verbal assault by white school children; stoic sit-inners physically abused by white mobs; shell-shocked Freedom Riders in the aftermath of a violent segregationist attack; and well-dressed voter rights marchers tear-gassed and clubbed to the ground at the Pettus Bridge. Each of these iconic photographs depicts a distinctive act of protest and yet they all display a shared dynamic of white-black relations: in each photograph the restraint and

Battle Negroes 4 Hours," *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 1963, 1; "Fire Hoses Rip Off Negroes' Clothes in Dixie Violence," *New York Daily News*, May 4, 1963, 5.

¹² Paul Hemphill, *Leaving Birmingham: Notes of a Native Son*, New York 1993, 149. These descriptive patterns are often replicated in the accounts of late-twentieth- and twenty-first century historians. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning analysis of the civil rights struggle, the historian Taylor Branch wrote that the high-pressure hoses "made limbs jerk weightlessly and tumbled whole bodies like scraps of refuse in a high wind." In: *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, New York 1988, 759.

¹³ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 971.

¹⁴ David Halberstam, "The Second Coming of Martin Luther King," *Harper's Magazine*, August 1967; quoted in: Jon Meacham, ed. *Voices in Our Blood: America's Best on the Civil Rights Movement*, New York 2001, 374; also, see Laurie Pritchett's assessment that "Dr. King, through his efforts, was instrumental in passin' the Public Accommodations [Act] but the people that were most responsible was 'Bull' Connor and Sheriff Clark," quoted in: Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 366.

disengagement of black protestors are contrasted with the violent aggression of white attackers. It is my argument that the presence of such a passive/active binary served as a gatekeeper for policing the eligibility of images for inclusion in the canon of civil rights. With great consistency, those photographs that most effectively stirred the consciences of northern whites routinely cast blacks as the passive and hapless victims of active and violent whites.

[12] While historians of the events in Birmingham can readily point to photographs that display other roles for blacks and whites, such marginal images were much less frequently reproduced by northern white papers in the 1960s or, for that matter, included in present-day photographic histories of civil rights. It was not that photographs depicting "active" blacks did not exist, but that they held little allure for liberal whites. Immediately following the Moore photo-essay on Birmingham, the editors of *Life* included a one-page article, "Query for Southern Whites – What Now?" While Moore's essay contained not a single quote from a black protestor, *Life* saw fit to solicit the opinions of a cross-section of the city's whites on the challenges of and solutions for American race relations. At the bottom of the page of interviews the editors reproduced a final Moore photograph – a tightly cropped version of a much larger image that shows smiling young marchers as they taunt a white officer who simply observes the crowd.¹⁵ The photographic caption describes, "a jeering mob [that] taunts police." It is obviously different from the photographs of protestors battered with hoses and mauled by dogs, and it is significant that the photograph is known today only to historians. It was reproduced once by *Life*, before quickly dropping from view.¹⁶

[13] When it came to the visual representation of Birmingham, even the most radical whites in the early 1960s displayed a racial conservatism drawn directly from the mainstream press. Andy Warhol, in his iconoclastic battle against Abstract Expressionism, created narrative prints and paintings of Birmingham for his *Race Riot* series (fig. 4), illustrating police dogs on the attack. We know from a surviving two-page photographic spread that Warhol ripped from a magazine, and annotated with instructions to his studio assistants, that his source for the series was Moore's photographs from *Life*. Ignoring those published images that spoke unequivocally to whites of black agency, Warhol selected the photographs that most succinctly articulated a safe narrative of peaceful, victimized blacks. Because Warhol indiscriminately referred to the dog attack pictures from Birmingham as both his "Montgomery" and "Selma" pictures, it appears that the racial dynamic displayed was of greater interest to the artist than the specifics of the depicted campaign. For well-meaning whites – whether reporters, editors or artists –

¹⁵ Cf. "Query for Southern Whites – What Now?," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 36.

http://books.google.com/books?id=2kgEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (last accessed Oct. 8, 2010).

¹⁶ "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham," 36.

photographs that too obviously illustrated active blacks and inactive whites held scant allure.¹⁷



4 Andy Warhol, *Little white riot*, 1964, Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas, 76 x 84 cm. Reproduced from: *Andy Warhol. Death and Disasters*, exh.cat., Houston 1988, 97, fig. 29

[14] Along these lines, it is revealing to consider how black newspapers and magazines depicted the civil rights campaign in Birmingham. Judging by the photographic evidence, they documented a wholly different struggle. The day that the Children's Crusade became national front-page news, the influential black *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper published a series of photographs from Birmingham. While two of its photographs show dynamics that were typical of the mainstream press – protestors bitten by dogs and buffeted by water hoses – others illustrated black-white relations in ways rarely depicted

¹⁷ For a thoughtful analysis of Warhol's *Race Riot* series (1963), see Anne M. Wagner, "Warhol Paints History, or Race in America," in: *Representations* 55 (1996), 98-119. In the estimation of the editors of Warhol's catalogue raisonne, the artist's lack of concern for getting the name of the city right, "shows how Warhol grasped the fundamental subject of these images – Negroes, dogs, civil rights – without recalling its particular context, whether Birmingham, Selma, or Montgomery." In: Georg Frei and Neil Printz, *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonne: Paintings and Sculpture 1961-1963*, New York 2002, 421. Others artists who made use of white-on-black civil rights violence in their art include, Larry Rivers in *Black Revue* from his *Boston Massacre* series (1970) and Duane Hanson in his *Race Riot* (1968). Of particular interest is the painting and oil study created by Normal Rockwell, *Southern Justice (Murder in Mississippi)* from 1965. The work was commissioned to illustrate an article in *Look* on the Mississippi murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. In the painting, the white, but Jewish, Goodman lies prostrate and bleeding on the foreground; the white Schwerner stands erect in the center of the composition looking at unseen assailants off to our right as he grips a wounded black Chaney who has fallen to his knees. While the murderers are not pictured, the canvas replicates the formulaic depiction of whites common to civil rights imagery though its suggestion of white attackers and its picturing of Schwerner as a white protector. Once again, the active roles are scripted for whites. See Charles Morgan, Jr., "Southern Justice," *Look*, June 29, 1965, 72. For recent photographic surveys of civil rights that largely preserve this dynamic of power, see Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 96; Durham, *Powerful*; Bob Adelman and Charles Johnson, *Mine Eyes Have Seen: Bearing Witness to the Struggle for Civil Rights*, New York 2007; Julian Cox, *Road to Freedom: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1956-1968*, Atlanta 2008. For two that complicate the formula, see Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, New Haven 2010; Manning Marable, *Freedom: A Photographic History of the African American Struggle*, New York 2002.

in white stories on civil rights. One *Courier* photograph illustrated a black youth waving his sweater like a matador's cape – taunting a leashed dog who strains to reach the boy; a second shows a middle-aged man who attempts to stab one of Connor's dogs, after the dog attacked a child (fig. 5).

[15] Before the rise of the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers in the second half of the 1960s complicated how Americans understood depictions of black power, black publications consistently provided images and text that highlighted the agency of protestors. Articles in the black press focused on the physical opposition of blacks to arbitrary white power; they understood the exercise of black power as both a means to attain racial equality and as an end in its own right. In contrast, liberal whites imagined that pictures of "passive" blacks could best encourage white support for granting blacks greater social and political power.



5 Bill Hudson, Man with Knife Attempting to Stab Police Dog, Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963 (© AP/Wide World Photos and Bill Hudson, New York, New York)

[16] Even if one acknowledges that whites consistently saw in civil rights photographs depictions of inactive blacks and active whites, it may be tempting to explain this as a result of those tactics embraced by the leaders of the civil rights struggle. The evident passivity of black protestors perhaps should be seen as a consciously adopted tactic of activists. After all, black protestors were famous for "passive resistance" techniques, introduced to the movement by James Farmer, James Lawson, Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin and popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But it is important not to confuse the white investment in black passivity with the historical realities of the struggle. Bear in

mind that so-called passive resistance does not equate with inactivity, or with a lack of agency; depicting blacks as passive was routine long before the development of twentieth-century civil rights strategies; and white journalists (and later historians) presented black civil rights protestors as passive because that narrative most effectively engaged the interest of whites and met their psychological needs.¹⁸

[17] In *Life's* eulogy for Mahatma Gandhi after his assassination in 1948, the editors spoke admiringly of how Gandhi "took his own religious belief in nonviolence and from it fashioned the weapon of [...] organized pacifism." The editors celebrated the tremendous power inherent in nonviolent civil disobedience, instead of contrasting Asian inactivity with the activity of Europeans, or imagining Indian independence as a byproduct of the well-meaning British. So inspired were these editors with Gandhi's achievements that they asked readers to consider whether his "weapon" might "turn out to be the answer to the atomic bomb." Echoing such assessments, the eulogy in *Los Angeles Times* deemed him a "meek" man who nonetheless "wielded tremendous power," and that in the *Washington Post* noted how he turned the simple act of fasting into a "potent weapon."¹⁹ An article on American civil rights that appeared in *Life* a week after the publication of the Birmingham photographs, extended its military metaphor, noting that Gandhi "forged passive resistance into a weapon."²⁰

[18] It is intriguing, given the influence of Gandhi's philosophy on the civil rights movement, that the editors of *Life* could cast Gandhi and his supporters as powerful actors and King and his black followers as hapless victims. Civil rights organizers counted on the brutality of police chiefs and the hostility of governors to create newsworthy spectacles (much as Gandhi counted on the overwrought reactions of South African and colonial British officials), but the protests, and the political advances that came in their wake, were nonetheless the product of black action. It takes great self-control and power of will to calmly weather verbal and physical abuse while sitting quietly at a lunch counter or standing stoically before the onslaught of a police dog during an orderly protest in the street. A white reporter whose upbringing taught him to equate bravery with physical violence recalled how the activists changed his thinking after years of covering their protests. As he wrote, what "King and his followers and all of the SNCC and CORE kids

¹⁸ The active-inactive dynamic dominating the reports of the white northern media on civil rights is not an isolated and idiosyncratic relic of the 1960s; to a remarkable degree, it remains embedded in twenty-first-century culture. Writing in 2003, the historian David Chalmers claimed that, "the story of the 1960s was one of how Klan clubs, bombs, and bullets made a major unintended contribution to the civil rights revolution." In David Chalmers, *Backfire: How the Ku Klux Klan Helped the Civil Rights Movement*, New York 2003, 3. In much the same vein, the historian William Nunnolley gives Connor significant credit for pushing civil rights reform. See William A. Nunnolley, *Bull Connor*, Tuscaloosa 1991.

¹⁹ "Death as a Weapon," *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1948, A4; "Fast Potent Weapon for Gandhi," *Washington Post*, January 31, 1948, 8.

²⁰ "Gandhi: He Changed World History, Yet his Power Was Not of This World," *Life*, February 9, 1948, 32; "Beyond Rights the Issue of Human Dignity," *Life*, May 24, 1963, 4.

do, that is, keep nonviolently moving forward in the face of threats and beatings, and even death [...] took a lot more courage than fighting."²¹

[19] Black practitioners of nonviolent civil disobedience, to counter perceptions of their tactics as passive, linked it rhetorically to war. James Farmer, co-founder of the Committee on Racial Equality (CORE) and a pioneering figure in the modern civil rights movement, called the struggle a "war without violence," explaining that this was "not acquiescence, as most people at that time, when they heard of nonviolence, assumed it was."²² King too, throughout his career, stressed that nonviolent protest was active. Shunning the term "passive resistance," which appeared frequently in white press coverage of civil rights, King referred to his approach as "nonviolent direct action."²³ To his followers he explained, "Our weapons are protest and love," and "we are going to fight until we tear the heart out of Dixie." In another speech, he reassured his black audience that

we have a power, power that can't be found in Molotov cocktails, but we do have a power. Power that cannot be found in bullets and in guns, but we have a power. It is a power as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi.

[20] Speaking specifically of the protest marches in Birmingham, King noted to a *Newsweek* reporter that, "Non-violence has become a military tactical approach." Surely appreciating the white penchant for downplaying the agency of blacks, advocates of direct action used metaphors of armed conflict to describe their non-violent approach, and so remove the taint of passivity from black resistance.²⁴

[21] It would be easier to argue for scenes of black passivity in the white media of the 1960s as reflecting the choices of blacks, if these images did not hew so closely to nineteenth-century formulas. Exactly one hundred years before Moore and Hudson snapped their famous images, a white photographer produced a daguerreotype widely known as *The Scourged Back* (fig. 6). It shows a black man, viewed from behind, with dramatic whipping scars crisscrossing his back. The sitter was a freedman we know today only as Gordon, who escaped from the Mississippi plantation on which he was enslaved and met advancing Union troops at Baton Rouge in March 1862 during the U.S. Civil War. The original image, taken by the New Orleans photographic team of McPherson and Oliver, was turned into a popular abolitionist carte-de-visite by the Philadelphia firm of

²¹ Fleming, *Son of the Rough South*, 318.

²² James Farmer interviewed in Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 28. Farmer's phrase, "war without violence" was drawn from the title of a book by one of Gandhi's disciples, Krishnalal Shridharani, *War Without Violence*, New York 1939.

²³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 246. For a compelling argument on the essential activity of nonviolent direct action, see Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Boston 1973, 65-6.

²⁴ In interviews with print and television journalists, King went to great lengths to characterize the active, often martial nature of non-violence. In Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 32, 99; King quoted in: Flip Schulke, ed. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Documentary...Montgomery to Memphis*, New York 1976, 117; Karl Fleming, "I Like the Word Black," *Newsweek*, May 6, 1963, 28.

McAllister & Brothers and ultimately reproduced in a wood-block engraving in *Harper's Weekly* for that magazine's Independence Day issue in 1863.



6 McAllister & Brothers, *The Scourged Back*, carte-de-visite, 1863. Albumen silver carte-de-visite, 10 x 7 cm. Courtesy of the Library Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

[22] Photographers and abolitionists might have narrated any one of several powerful stories with the photograph: Gordon's harrowing escape from slavery, his resourcefulness in rubbing onions against his body to throw off pursuing bloodhounds, his brave exploits as a scout for Union troops, or his determination to serve in the Union army.²⁵ Had the photograph been conceived as a portrait, any one of these narratives might have been told. But, contravening conventions of portraiture, Gordon is stripped to the waist, presented without identifying background or props, with his poorly lit head in profile. With Gordon's scars foregrounded, and the image titled either *The Scourged Back* (for the abolitionist carte-de-visite), or "A Typical Negro" (for the woodblock print in *Harper's Weekly*), viewers were encouraged to equate the sitter's identity with his victimization. The three versions of this powerful image worked in conjunction with President Lincoln's Gettysburg address to shift views of the Civil War in the North from a conflict fought to preserve the Union to one that would ensure what the president famously called "a new

²⁵ "A Typical Negro," *Harper's Weekly*, July 4, 1863, 429-30. There is evidence that the photograph was eventually reproduced by anti-slavery societies in Great Britain as well. For an account of the production and circulation of the image, see Kathleen Collins, "The Scourged Back," in: *History of Photography* 9:1 (1985), 43-5. For more on the photographic firm of McPherson and Oliver, see Margaret Denton Smith and Mary Louise Tucker, *Photography in New Orleans: The Early Years, 1840-1865*, Baton Rouge 1982, 121-24.

birth of freedom."²⁶ *A Typical Negro*, a prototype of the photographs taken by northern periodicals in Birmingham, showed a black body damaged by brutal southern whites to galvanize the sentiments of northern liberals.

[23] The appeal of civil rights photographs to whites rested largely on their success in focusing white attention on acts of violence and away from historically rooted inequities in public accommodation, voting rights, housing policies and labor practices. Because viewers imagined that the meaning of the photographs resided in the captured scenes, photographs of policemen loosing attack dogs or of firemen playing their hoses scripted the "problem" of race as the depicted violence. This let whites who condemned or simply avoided racial violence off the hook. Photographs read in isolation illustrated racism as an interpersonal problem – evil white officials and mobs inflicting injury on innocent blacks – and this obscured the structural inequalities that benefited whites in the south and north. And in picturing "racists" as the most violent southern thugs, the photographs let northern whites imagine their own politics as progressive, or at least humane, never challenging them to examine their systems of belief. The absence of any meaningful social or historical context allowed whites to "feel" for blacks, untroubled by their own stake in a racially oppressive system. The images could then generate sympathetic reactions and incremental reforms for blacks without disturbing the underlying racial values that allowed social inequalities and even violence to continue.

[24] The need of northern whites to de-contextualize racial struggles to empathize with the plight of nonwhites is apparent in their reaction to civil rights protests in the north. A number of historians have documented how the dramatic victories King enjoyed in the south eluded him when he made his first forays into northern cities. In January 1966, two and a half years after Birmingham, King moved into an overpriced, dilapidated apartment in Chicago's west side slums to publicize a new initiative to win housing and economic reforms for the city's black residents. Working with the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, the SCLC organized a series of multiracial marches against the Chicago Real Estate Board, specific real estate agencies, and Mayor Richard J. Daley.²⁷

[25] In virtually every white neighborhood through which the protestors marched, they confronted large angry crowds of residents wielding rocks and bottles and shouting obscenities. Andrew Young, echoed the amazement of other civil rights marchers that summer at the unexpected fierceness of the counter-protests in Chicago. To a reporter, Young recalled a march through the south-side Chicago neighborhood of Marquette Park,

²⁶ The phrase is of course drawn from President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered November 19, 1863, four and a half months after *Harper's Weekly* published "A Typical Negro."

²⁷ William T. Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance*, New York 1997, 90-1; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 489-525. For more on King's "failure" in Chicago, see Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 90-1; Adam Fairclough, "Defeat in Chicago," in: *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 279-307. For an excellent account of the civil rights struggle in the north, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, New York 2008.

noting, "The violence in the South always came from a rabble element. But these were women and children and husbands and wives coming out of their homes [and] becoming a mob [...].It was far more frightening." King recalled of this same march, that he had "never seen as much hatred and hostility on the part of so many people."²⁸ While Chicago's white newspapers tended to interpret the violence of southern marches as an unacceptable consequence of white prejudice, they deemed similar disturbances in the north as the result of black incitement.

[26] Any comparison of white reactions to the Birmingham and Chicago protests must account for a racial context that changed significantly between 1963 and 1966. The rise of the "black power" movement, the increasing media attention devoted to the Nation of Islam, the separatist and increasingly militant turn of SNCC once Stokely Carmichael replaced John Lewis as chairman in 1966, and well-publicized racial disturbances in Rochester, Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Philadelphia in 1964 and Watts in 1965 left liberal whites feeling more apprehensive about acts of black protest. But even the recognition of three years of marked social change does not make the dissolution of support for King's agenda among liberal whites in the north less striking once King began protests in Midwestern and Northeastern cities. It is one thing to note the antipathy of many northern working-class whites to civil rights reform but quite another to acknowledge the number of progressive whites who lauded and encouraged the northern campaign at the start only to turn against it once black demonstrators took to the streets.

[27] The liberal Catholic Archbishop of Chicago, John Cody, had a letter read at the Soldier Field rally that kicked off the summer phase of King's Chicago campaign in July, pledging that "your struggles and your sufferings will be mine until the last vestige of discrimination and injustice is blotted out here in Chicago and throughout America." Just one month later, however, Cody was sufficiently concerned about the peaceful marches and violent counter-protests that, "with a heavy heart" he declared that the civil rights marchers had a "serious moral obligation" to halt. Robert Johnson, International Executive Board Member of the United Auto Workers, who five months earlier had declared that "the UAW is in this thing all the way," also asked King to reverse course as the turmoil in Chicago grew.²⁹ When white-on-black violence came north, liberals felt more anger and fear than sympathy. As long as the protests took place at a physical and psychological remove, northern media outlets could select photographs of protesting blacks that reinforced a "safe" dynamic of black-white relations. Once protests moved

²⁸ The comments of Young and King are quoted in: James R. Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement*, Cambridge 1993, 123. For additional recollections of movement participants on the surprising fierceness of the Chicago counter-protests, see the interviews in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, New York 1990, 300-319.

²⁹ Text of Cody's Soldier Field address quoted in: Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 146; Johnson's "all the way" quote cited in Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 299.

north, this tactic proved impractical since northern whites were then exposed to unmediated scenes of black agency in the streets. In Chicago, the up-close experience of black activism effectively prevented the emergence of northern white solidarity with blacks.

[28] To a remarkable degree, whites in the north and south responded similarly to black agency in their own region. At the conclusion of Moore's photographic essay in *Life*, the editors printed interviews on race relations with a cross-section of whites from Birmingham. Respondents with liberal and conservative views expressed conflicting prognoses on the south's racial tensions, yet were virtually unanimous in their view that recent black actions had exacerbated the problems. Birmingham's Reverend Wallace Lovett expressed the sentiments of many of the region's more open-minded whites: "The solution to the problems we face here will not come out of demonstrations of massive force, but out of sensible negotiations." In April 1963, a month before *Life* published its interviews, eight of Birmingham's most liberal white clergymen criticized King directly for the protests in their city. In their "Public Statement of Eight Alabama Clergymen," which first appeared in the *Birmingham News*, the religious leaders claimed that protest actions that "incite [...] hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems." And they urged the "Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations [...]. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, not in the street."³⁰ As if reading from the same script, whites in the north and south criticized peaceful demonstrators for the outbreak of violence as they counseled blacks to engage in quiet talk over action.

[29] The shared language of whites is noteworthy, but hardly astonishing. Readers are likely to see the failure of even progressive whites to act according to their professed beliefs as a normal if unfortunate response to the real-life complexities of their era. After all, it is easier to "know" intellectually which course of action is consistent with one's beliefs when events are safely distanced by geography or time; when a conflict is experienced up close – and the stakes are more personal – emotion trumps belief. For many of us, disappointment with the white reaction may be mitigated by our sense that liberal whites in the north espoused rhetoric of equal opportunity. If most whites in the 1960s could not act on their beliefs, they would appear to deserve credit for valuing a rhetoric that contained the seeds for a more just American society.

[30] The impulse to mark distinctions between progressive and reactionary whites is deeply engrained in the narratives of civil rights. During the 1960s, conservative whites saw in the divide a political gulf between those who supported state's rights and regional

³⁰ Bill Wise, "Query for Southern Whites—What Now?," *Life*, May 17, 1963, 35; Carpenter et al., "Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen," 233-34.

customs and those who advocated for federal intervention; progressive blacks found in such divisions reassuring proof that the conflict was not between blacks and whites but between those who believed in ideals of freedom and equality and those who did not; and, as I have suggested, both moderate and liberal whites took the rift as a sign marking their moral distance from whites who advocated or accepted violence. Given the many groups with a stake in highlighting ideological distinctions separating whites, period observers and historians have exaggerated the divisions, with few considering the social repercussions of the race-based values whites continued to share. I have no doubt that whites in the 1960s held a range of attitudes toward race; nevertheless, emphasis on the ideological divisions separating whites has dramatically flattened interpretations of the era's visual culture. As an interpretative counterbalance, it is essential to consider how the beliefs shared by so-called progressive and reactionary whites conditioned what civil rights images meant, rather than articulate again how the photographs mark the divide between "good" and "bad" whites.

[31] The distinctive meanings that liberal and conservative whites took from photographs of white-on-black violence were all based on a shared white understanding of what it meant to be black. Whether whites used civil rights photographs with the intent to liberate or repress blacks, in each case the desired social end relied on a sense of the immutable relation between black and white. We know from the photographic record and Moore's own accounts that he threw himself into the center of the conflict in Birmingham. Years after his work in Birmingham, Moore recounted to an interviewer his mind set as he documented the confrontations: "I didn't want to stand back and shoot [the events] with a long lens. I didn't have much equipment at the time, no lens longer than a 105 mm, but even a 105 would have kept me out of the action. No, I wanted to shoot it with a 35 mm or a 28 mm lens, to be where I could feel it, so I could sense it all around me. [...] I wanted to get a feeling of what it was like to be involved." Note how Moore's interest in getting his camera into "the action" to capture close-ups for his national white audience dovetails with "Bull" Connor's expressed desire to bring white spectators into the fray to "see the dogs work," as he famously put it. Driven by different agendas, the journalist and the commissioner sought to draw whites into scenes of brutalized, inactive blacks. The political distance between the two men should not obscure their shared desire to make a particular kind of black body visible for the edification of whites.³¹

[32] Some readers will understandably feel ill at ease with my linking a progressive journalist to a reactionary politician. And yet, the point is not that whites in 1960s

³¹ Moore quoted in: Durham, *Powerful Days*, 28. At least one present-day observer has characterized Moore practice as "shooting photographs from the point of view of the [white] oppressors and their evil." When we consider the photographer's positioning within a cluster of Birmingham firemen (fig. 1) who aim their fire hoses toward black protestors in the middle distance or his vantage from the Montgomery policemen's side of a booking counter as Martin Luther King, Jr. is hauled roughly in for processing, the point seems plausible. In Paul Hendrickson, *Sons of Mississippi: A Story of Race and its Legacy*, New York 2003, 131.

America had a common vision of what society should look like, but that they built their distinctive visions on shared racial bedrock that few whites questioned. Taking society as they found it, photographers and editors of the northern white press used long-standing norms of racial identity to move their white audiences in productive ways. Instead of complicating or disrupting whites' standard picture of blacks, or the civil rights struggle, the white press relied on these legible and comfortable formulations to make the case for reform. This meant that from the outset the limits of reform were embedded into the project's grammar, given that the changes civil rights photographs encouraged could not alter the "passive" role for blacks that generated white sympathy in the first place. In an odd way, the iconic photographs accepted and perpetuated the same destructive dynamic of white power enacted in the streets by southern white mobs and law enforcement officials.

[33] We often see images of violence as serving one or another opposing functions: they endorse (i.e., "this is what happens when people forget their place") or they condemn (i.e., "this is what happens when people lose their humanity"). But in practice they serve both. America has a long and troubling history of lynchings in which mobs worked with the tacit approval, even support, of authorities to torture and kill a victim outside of the legal system. Up through the early decades of the twentieth century, gruesome photographs of lynching victims circulated freely in American society – even as postcards sent to friends and family through the U.S. mail – as racist endorsements of white power. But in the hands of black anti-lynching crusaders, such as Ida B. Wells, those same images were displayed as condemnations of white brutality.³² The photographs were identical, so inevitably, some of those who viewed lynching postcards and some of those who viewed anti-lynching tracts surely had emotional responses opposite to what the presenters intended. It is difficult to see any photographs depicting the abuse of black Americans as wholly benign.³³

³² For more on the history of American lynching, see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, New York 2002. For more on Ida B. Wells, see Linda O. McMurray, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, New York 2000; Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, New York 2009. The cultural historian of photography, Shawn Michelle Smith, notes that it was illegal to send lynching postcards through the U.S. mail after 1908. In *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*, Durham 2004, 122. Despite the letter of the law, there exist many extant examples of lynching postcards created – and mailed – up through the 1930s. For a horrifying sampling, see James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, Santa Fe 2000.

³³ Within this context it is fascinating to consider that President Kennedy's initial reading of the Gadsden photograph was that it better supported the racial values of Connor than King. Using recordings of Kennedy's White House meetings, the historian Nick Bryant illustrates that contrary to press reports, the image left the President more confused than "disgusted." Bryant quotes the President's taped comment that the Hudson photograph was "a terrible picture....The fact of the matter: that's just what Connor wants." In Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*, New York 2006, 387-89. I have more to say on the President's reaction in chapter two. For a sophisticated consideration of the promise and perils inherent in narratives of violence against black bodies, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York 1997; for a consideration of political and ethical considerations in the reproduction of photographs of suffering, see Mark Reinhardt, Holly

[34] Intellectual and practical dangers exist in the circulation of any violent imagery, but when the group depicted is disproportionately the victim of real-world violence, the stakes are even higher. Depictions of violence are not the same as violence itself, and even violent scenes are capable of catalyzing productive change. The point is that in a context where representations of black passivity and victimhood are the norm, images that adhere to this norm play a collateral role in maintaining racial systems of domination. Without taking anything away from those liberal whites who empathize with blacks because of the depicted violence, neither a sympathetic engagement with black protestors, nor disgust with segregationist tactics exempts one from complicity in a nineteenth-century dynamic of black and white relations that has consistently limited the opportunities of blacks. Although scenes of violence against blacks generated discomfort in liberal whites, they also offered a socially acceptable way of illustrating racism. For white audiences, they are perversely safe images to look at, given the distance they create between those who perpetrated and witnessed violence. It is important to note that white discomfort with such scenes was a visceral reaction to the violence performed by "bad" white actors on "innocent" black victims. If the photographs had instead illustrated the racially discriminatory social and economic practices that oppressed blacks across the U.S., and which were tacitly supported by many millions of whites in the north, public discomfort with the photographs would have had a more threatening, personal root.

[35] If the white photographers of civil rights had produced photographs foregrounding the agency of black protestors, popular white periodicals would probably not have published them. Had the white media published images directly communicating to whites the active role of blacks in tearing down segregation, they would probably not have generated sympathy for blacks among many northern whites, nor would they have aided the passage of civil rights legislation. Had such progressive images been created, appropriately captioned, and published in popular venues, they would surely have proved counter-productive in the short term – unnerving northern whites, leading them to feel greater sympathy for southern whites, and possibly smoothing the way for Alabama's Governor George C. Wallace to deploy National Guard troops to crush Birmingham's civil rights protests. While whites could have theoretically made and published photographs representing the "activeness" of blacks in the struggle, such images would not have worked as quickly to improve the day-to-day lives of blacks. While King was quick to chastise liberal whites when they failed to commend "the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation," he also needed and appreciated the images mainstream press photographers created. In the climate of

Edwards and Erina Duganne, eds., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Chicago 2007.

1963, few could imagine photographs circulating in the white press that both articulated the power of direct action *and* generated the sympathy among liberal whites that the movement desperately sought. Understanding that black frustration with segregation was high and support for nonviolent direct-action limited, King repeatedly explained to white audiences that reform could not wait.³⁴

[36] Yet I have no doubt that images forcefully depicting black agency in the mainstream press *could* have helped usher American society into a new racial era by chipping away at a longstanding orthodoxy that confined people of color to marginal roles in the American drama and ensured that their voices went unheard whenever they too obviously rejected their assigned parts. As we have seen, photographs of the white mainstream press observed this orthodoxy – counting on its existence to generate white good will and, ultimately, unthreatening reforms. Images of empowered blacks in *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Look* and *The Saturday Evening Post* would only have paid off in the long term. They would not have spurred immediate legislative action, but could have aided in the process of eliminating the ideological foundations that made both prejudiced beliefs and unjust laws appear natural and right. Such imagery, in other words, might have attacked the source of racial inequality rather than right superficial wrongs that were merely symptomatic of the disease.

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³⁴ King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 33. King conceived of the book as a moving explanation for white Americans as to why blacks cannot be reasonably asked to wait for freedom.