

Free Speech—Fighting Injustice

In 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led a nonviolent campaign aimed at Birmingham, Alabama, which at the time was described as the “most segregated city in America.” In an attempt to halt the SCLC’s planned actions, Circuit Judge W. A. Jenkins issued a blanket injunction against “parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing.” Ignoring the injunction, the April 12 peaceful demonstration against segregation started as planned and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., along with nearly 50 other protestors and civil rights leaders, was arrested and jailed.

While Dr. King was in jail, someone smuggled him a copy of *The Birmingham News* which published a statement entitled “A Call for Unity” written by eight white clergymen. In the open letter, the clergymen expressed disagreement with the illegal protests “directed and led in part by outsiders” and urged activists to engage in negotiations and to use the courts to resolve any racial injustices.

King started writing an impassioned response on the margins of that same newspaper and eventually finished on a pad given to him by his attorneys. In the letter, King first addressed the idea of his being an outsider by stating that as the leader of the SCLC he could not sit “idly by in Atlanta” because “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” King went on to express his frustration with the well-meaning clergy asking for patience and wrote, “... *Wait* has almost always meant *Never*.” King even cited Chief Justice Warren’s ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, “... justice too long delayed is justice denied.” By the early fall of 1963, King’s eloquently written, 7000 word, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (whole or in-part) had begun to appear in publications across the country.

His letter calling for “constructive, nonviolent tension” to force an end to unjust laws became a landmark document of the civil-rights movement and was the basis for King’s own book, “Why We Can’t Wait,” which took a look back at the successes and failures of the Birmingham Campaign. The book was released in July 1964, the same month that President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act.

Both the white clergymen and Martin Luther King Jr.’s words were published by a free press — effectively amplifying their message to a larger audience. Look through the news to find examples of small groups or individuals using news media to increase their reach. Compare and contrast modern examples with those of the past. Did you find any examples of someone fighting a current day injustice?

Next: Free Press as “Government Watchdog”

New York Times v. United States (1971)
Pentagon Papers Case