

I SAW A CITY DIE



BIRMINGHAM:

BY CHARLES MORGAN, JR., AS TOLD TO THOMAS B. MORGAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Last September 15, Cynthia Wesley, 14, Denise McNair, 11, Carol Robertson, 14, and Addie Mae Collins, 14, died in a bomb blast at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church. A white Birmingham lawyer, Charles Morgan, Jr., 33, (above) spoke out the next day. He condemned not only the bombing, but also the negligence of so-called nice people that encourages terrorists. Birmingham, he said, was dead. Here is his post-mortem—and his program for the rebirth of the city.

WHO KILLED BIRMINGHAM? We all did. Not only the hate-filled, demented murderers of four Negro Sunday-school girls, but we "nice people" who did nothing to save our city from race hatred.

Today, Birmingham retains surface manifestations of life. Down in the valley, below iron-rich Red Mountain, traffic moves, shops are open, and our medical center grows. Stubbornly, children go off to school. Men talk of 'Bama football and the Auburn game. And on most days, white and rust-colored plumes of smoke tell the sky that the hearths in our steel mills are fired.

As a Southern city, Birmingham offers neither the easy pleasures of New Orleans nor the healthy bustle of Atlanta. Its

downtown is drab, and its air is often heavy with soot. Yet Birmingham inspires love-of-home in most of its 700,000 black and white metropolitan residents.

In many of us, there is an almost fierce loyalty to the city, a sort of noncritical provincialism that says to those who would change things, "You don't like it here. Why don't you leave?" Birmingham is simply "home" to almost everyone who lives there, and a wall of civic conformity protects it from a world with which it does not agree.

But Birmingham steadily contradicts itself. The same people who say, "This race trouble is distorting our image," also say, "I don't care what they think about us in New York (or Paris or Africa)." The same people who want to bring in new industry also want to keep out social changes of the industrial age.

If change is a sign of life, then we in Birmingham have not been very healthy for the 18 years since the end of World War II. The conditions that are producing massive opposition to law and morality today existed in 1945. The only difference is that now they are virtually intractable.

For a time following World War II, hopes were high that

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The nice people of Birmingham are safe-as long as

Birmingham would recapture the promise of its early years, when it was optimistically called "The Magic City." But Birmingham's rate of economic growth has fallen below the nation's in recent years. Now the harsh fact must be faced: Birmingham is dead. Even if steel-mill sparks still light the sky, the community's life spark has been snuffed out by fear and violence. What has happened here is a timely warning of what can happen anywhere if men and women who say they believe in America's ideals—the good people—will not stand up for their convictions.

Can Birmingham—a New Birmingham—be born again? As one who loves his hometown, his friends and neighbors, I go on hoping this will happen. With help, Birmingham could revive—but past events make possible only the most pessimistic view of the city's future.

Birmingham has done little to save itself. This year, 3½ months went by between the desegregation demonstrations of May and the opening of schools in September. No Negro policemen were hired; no major, and few minor, changes were made. Birmingham dealt with all sorts of civic problems, but hardly discussed the big one, race. Thus, the stage was, and remains, set for racial violence and bloodshed.

Birmingham is a tough city, even in daylight. Any man, white or black, who speaks against segregation lives in fear—fear for himself, for his business and social position and, in some cases, for the safety of his wife and children. The man who never speaks out can say he has never been afraid. And, of course, such a man has nothing to fear—as long as he keeps silent.

Birmingham is no place for the nonconformist. Opinions that run counter to segregationist sentiment can lead to phone calls in the night.

"Is the mortician there yet?" a voice asks me. I say that I don't know any morticians. "*Well, you will,*" the voice says, "*when the bodies are all over your front yard.*" A morbid crank? Perhaps. But friends tell me to "be careful." Others are careful: The names of private citizens who contributed reward money for the capture of the Sunday-school bombers were not published in the papers.

In Birmingham, fear and cowardice have in effect suspended the First Amendment.

THE LAW in Birmingham is white. Even though roughly one third of our people are Negroes, we have had no Negro law officers, no Negro policemen, no Negro sheriff's deputies. Few Negroes serve on juries. Few vote, few practice law, few play a role in the administration of justice.

In the 18 years since World War II, the Birmingham police have failed to solve some 50 anti-Negro bombings and innumerable acts of racist violence. They failed to prevent the Freedom Ride beatings on Mother's Day, 1961, though the riot occurred not far from police headquarters. But they used police dogs and fire hoses on Negro demonstrators in the spring of 1963.

Education in Birmingham prepares our kids for life in a segregated world. That world will be gone by the time tomorrow comes. But our underpaid teachers are bound (as we all are) to a South that never was and never can be.

Birmingham's economy was born of steel-making. But steel in Birmingham has grown sick with Northern competition, automation and obsolescence. Population is up somewhat. Yet accord-

ing to Sheldon Schaffer, head of the Industrial Economic Section of Southern Research Institute, our rate of population increase is going down. Employment has declined 10 percent since 1957. And among 53 Southern metropolitan areas checked for manufacturing growth rate, Birmingham ranks 46th. Birmingham must create 8,000 to 10,000 new jobs every year just to keep pace with the rest of America. "Obviously," Schaffer says, "objectives such as these are going to require industrial development efforts that are far more aggressive or imaginative than anything Birmingham or Alabama has ever seen. . . ."

Where are Birmingham's long-promised new plants and industries going to come from? Our business leaders search for new industry—futilely. How many prospects have been frightened away? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? But Birmingham, worried about its "image," is still not concerned enough to do anything about its reality.

The wealth of Birmingham lives in bedroom communities away from the city, away from its smoke, noise and 20th-century problems. To residents of Mountain Brook, Homewood and Vestavia Hills, Birmingham is a burden to be endured eight hours a day, five days a week—but not at night and never on weekends. These people, who earn their livelihoods in Birmingham, are more concerned with "over the mountain" society, country clubs, debutante balls and cocktail parties than with the desperate problems facing the central city.

When, finally, "over the mountain" people became alarmed about the mounting racial crisis, it was too late. The situation was out of hand. The vacuum left by our complacent suburbanites had been filled by extremists. Too late, our "nice people" learned that the whirlwinds of race hate do not stop at suburban boundaries.

The white Christian religion in Birmingham boasts more than 400 churches. Our ministers talked of love—in general terms. But they also waited too long to speak against hate. Their sermons have dealt with symptoms, but rarely with the issue—how to inject the doctrine of the brotherhood of man into the stream of everyday life. Not many have taken equality for their text. Few have said clearly and unmistakably that prejudice is wrong, bigotry is evil, and the Christian religion has something to do with Christianity.

Under the pressure of events, culture retreats in Birmingham. The city has a civic symphony, civic-theater groups, an art museum, a botanical garden and a zoo. But the Broadway road shows are not coming to Birmingham. And our Music Club season of evening concerts almost failed this year because of ticket cancellations. Many people in Birmingham are afraid to go out after dark.

Professional hatemongers feel at home in Birmingham. Many of them live here. It follows that ours is a city in which armed guards protected temple doors and patrolled temple grounds on a 24-hour watch during recent Jewish services.

For generations, politics in our city has been firmly dominated by hard-line segregationists. We produced former Police Commissioner Eugene (Bull) Connor and former Mayor Art Hanes, who adheres to a simple thesis: Desegregation is Communist-inspired. Meanwhile, Atlanta kept electing Mayor William B. Hartsfield, who said his city was "too busy to hate," and elsewhere across the new South, moderates captured many city halls.

This year, Birmingham turned out its Con-

nor-influenced government in favor of Mayor Albert Boutwell and a "moderate" city council. But the defeated are still politically potent, and the new city administration has proven hesitant and faltering on the race issue.

Birmingham's mass media have fallen victim to the city's plague of intolerance. There are always excuses, but few TV shows dealing with the race crisis have been seen in Birmingham. On at least one occasion, community leaders were called to view ABC's *Walk in My Shoes* privately. Similarly, in one of our newspapers, we read Harry Ashmore's series on the Negro in the North. But his articles on the Negro in the South were not run. The Birmingham *News* has been bitterly attacked whenever it urged a counsel of reason in dealing with the city's festering race problem. An iron curtain has descended, aimed at keeping out information that might upset the racial status quo. How could the people be expected to face their problems? Many of them are only now beginning to find out what the problems are.

HATE AND FEAR have helped bring death to the spirit of Birmingham. Yet certain other motives in the short, unhappy history of Birmingham have perhaps been even more crucial. The town was born in 1871 and grew fitfully, a rough and bawdy mining town where the few might grow wealthy on the sweat of the many.

Outside interests moved in after the turn of the century, permanently removing control of Birmingham's most important single industry—steel—to the North. Birmingham made good its boast that it had the cheapest labor supply in the country, but only by fighting a pitched battle with organized labor and by manipulating the "nigger menace" to prevent union organization. To this day, although local union leadership is generally rather liberal, the unions themselves have taken few progressive steps in the field of race. The leaders are afraid to risk defeat on the race question. And some, in the craft unions, have consistently backed Bull Connor and other segregationists.

Ironically, Birmingham today remains dependent on the very "outside" Northern interests it holds in contempt. The truth is that were it not for "outsiders" and "Yankees," there would never have been a modern Birmingham. The city was a child of Reconstruction, came late to America's industrial expansion and still is, in 1963, a poor relation of businesses concentrated in the North. Thus, it is possible to understand Birmingham, if not to absolve it, for its principal failing: the inability of its people to accept responsibility for its present condition. They have yet to embrace the credo of another Southerner, Thomas Jefferson, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.

In Birmingham, we blame the Kennedys, Khrushchev, Martin Luther King, "outside agitators," the press—everyone except ourselves.

Who else should be blamed? Politicians whose mishandling of the race issue has been a major factor in the breakdown of law and order. Every Northerner who ever let a friend from Birmingham absolve himself of guilt by agreeing with him about "the niggers." Every Negro maid who ever lied to her white employer, telling her how happy she was with segregation. Every businessman and labor leader, North and South, who has failed to use all his influence in Birmingham,

they keep silent

among employees, associates and friends, to safeguard the rights of other Americans.

None of us in Birmingham has done as much as we could. But it should not be forgotten that we are ourselves subject to the foreboding power of a state administration totally dedicated to the maintenance of segregation "today . . . tomorrow . . . and forever." To countervail this power, there is, of course, the Federal Government. But in today's Birmingham, resentment runs deep against Washington. And little help has come from private sources, from labor and banking and industry—from the corporate conscience of the country.

Birmingham did not get into this fix alone, and it will not get out of it alone. The city's two daily newspapers are owned by Northern-oriented publishers—the Scripps-Howard and the Newhouse chains. Our two television stations are similarly owned, one by Newhouse, one by Taft Broadcasting, based in Cincinnati. Our biggest employer, Tennessee Coal & Iron, is owned lock, stock and mill by U.S. Steel. Any solution for Birmingham must be national as well as local.

Consider the steel industry. It has extracted great wealth from Birmingham. What is its responsibility in our community's struggle with bigotry and hatred? U.S. Steel has opened up more and more jobs to Negroes. But is that enough? Is the steel industry exerting its influence to bring about a solution to Birmingham's race problem?

And what could Scripps-Howard do about the Birmingham *Post-Herald's* role in helping solve our racial problems? Properly, most newspaper chains allow great latitude in local control of their properties. Yet our *Post-Herald* seems to follow Scripps-Howard's general editorial line on such issues as taxation, national leadership and foreign relations. Our paper goes along—until it comes to the race issue. Here, the *Post-Herald* for many years maintained a strong segregationist position. That point of view certainly has a right to be heard. But what is the responsibility of the officers of Scripps-Howard in New York? Must they allow one of their papers to label want ads "colored" and "white"? limit coverage of Negro community life to little more than a once-a-week column? operate in a town with a quarter of a million Negroes but not have a single full-time Negro on the editorial staff? and editorially endorse segregation?

For example, during the critical early stage of biracial meetings to end last spring's Negro demonstrations, the *Post-Herald's* contribution was an editorial implying that Dr. King was reaping profits from race turmoil. No doubt the city's racist intrinsics were pleased with the editorial, but it could not possibly have helped mediators in their difficult assignment. Next day, the paper said it "intended no such inference," but the incident did nothing to close our racial breach.

Moderates in the North as well as the South have stood by while Birmingham has been torn apart. Like the "over the mountain" people in Birmingham, they are concerned about order, but not about law. The South had an ordered society for 200 years; now that order conflicts with law. What do the moderates do about it? Isn't it time that they concerned themselves with the local policies of their companies, especially when these policies give aid and comfort to the enemies of our system of justice?

What happens next in Birmingham? The present course may result in more riot, violence



After his "Birmingham is dead" speech, Charles Morgan, Jr., received a card from a local man, summing up the sentiment of most letter writers—but some were crudely abusive.

and tragedy. But it is not beyond the realm of possibility that something can be done to revive the city. If ten men from around the country could sit down at a table to consider our problems, they could do wonders for Birmingham. They could reaffirm facts Birmingham itself has never faced: that desegregation is the law of the land, and that the life of a city depends on its citizens' respect for law. These men could then bring together a powerful team—of the press, of communications, of steel, of electric power, gas, construction, the banks, organized labor and the Federal Government—to resuscitate Birmingham.

NOTHING SHORT of a total national effort can help Birmingham now. Only the concern of the American people—and those American business leaders whose decisions shape our city's economy—can revive Birmingham. Only "outsiders"—not those interested merely in the wealth of our soil, but those who care about the moral well-being of our people—can strike the spark of life. Birmingham is dead—but can America afford not to breathe the new life into the city?

Given outside help, what can we do to recreate Birmingham? I know that we need at least the following program:

1. We need biracial committees to work on common solutions for common community problems—from air-pollution control to medical care for the poor and aged. Such committees would provide avenues for peaceful desegregation of many areas of public life.

2. We need a desegregated interfaith alliance of ministers, priests and rabbis backed and coordinated by state and national church organizations, bishops and others in the hierarchical chain. They could pledge to each other and to their faiths that they will preach for and organize the removal of racial restrictions from the life of the community and the church.

3. We need an alliance of businessmen resenting our major locally and nationally owned enterprises. With their influence, they, too, can open channels of communication. And with policies that favor desegregation and encourage em-

ployees to participate in the desegregation movement, they can set an example for the city.

4. We need to open the editorial pages of Birmingham's newspapers to columnists who favor and discuss desegregation, to provide employment opportunities for Negro reporters and to desegregate every aspect of newspaper life.

5. We need to schedule TV programs that present the problem of race in Birmingham and the nation to our people so that they may know the aspirations of Negroes and learn about solutions.

6. We need public-school courses on democracy, the fundamentals of law, and the facts of the race problem—in an attempt to bring forward an unprejudiced younger generation.

7. We need adult-education programs sponsored by labor organizations. We need apprentices programs and private employment opportunities open to Negroes and whites alike.

8. We need to remove barriers to Negro employment and other discriminations against Negroes by municipal and county government. We need to hire Negroes for the Birmingham police force and the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department. We need to restore the confidence of the Negro community in the desire and ability of the city to enforce the law with fairness and impartiality.

9. We need renewed voter-registration efforts in order to provide Birmingham's Negro population with its proportionate voice in the political life of the community.

10. By legislative action or otherwise, we need to merge suburban residential communities into the City of Birmingham so that, economically, suburbanites will belong to their city.

11. We need self-imposed restraint on the race question by reasonable men in the political arena. Politicians and lawyers must face up to their responsibilities and seek solutions to problems before new crises develop. Similarly, businessmen in their search for new industry must worry less about the city's "image" and more about its ability to answer the needs of all its people. Let them lead and industry will follow.

These things we need. Birmingham can't live without them.

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