

# 3 PART

*By inviting confrontation but remaining nonviolent, civil rights activists demonstrated the justice of their cause and exposed the brutalities of racism.*



# Confronti

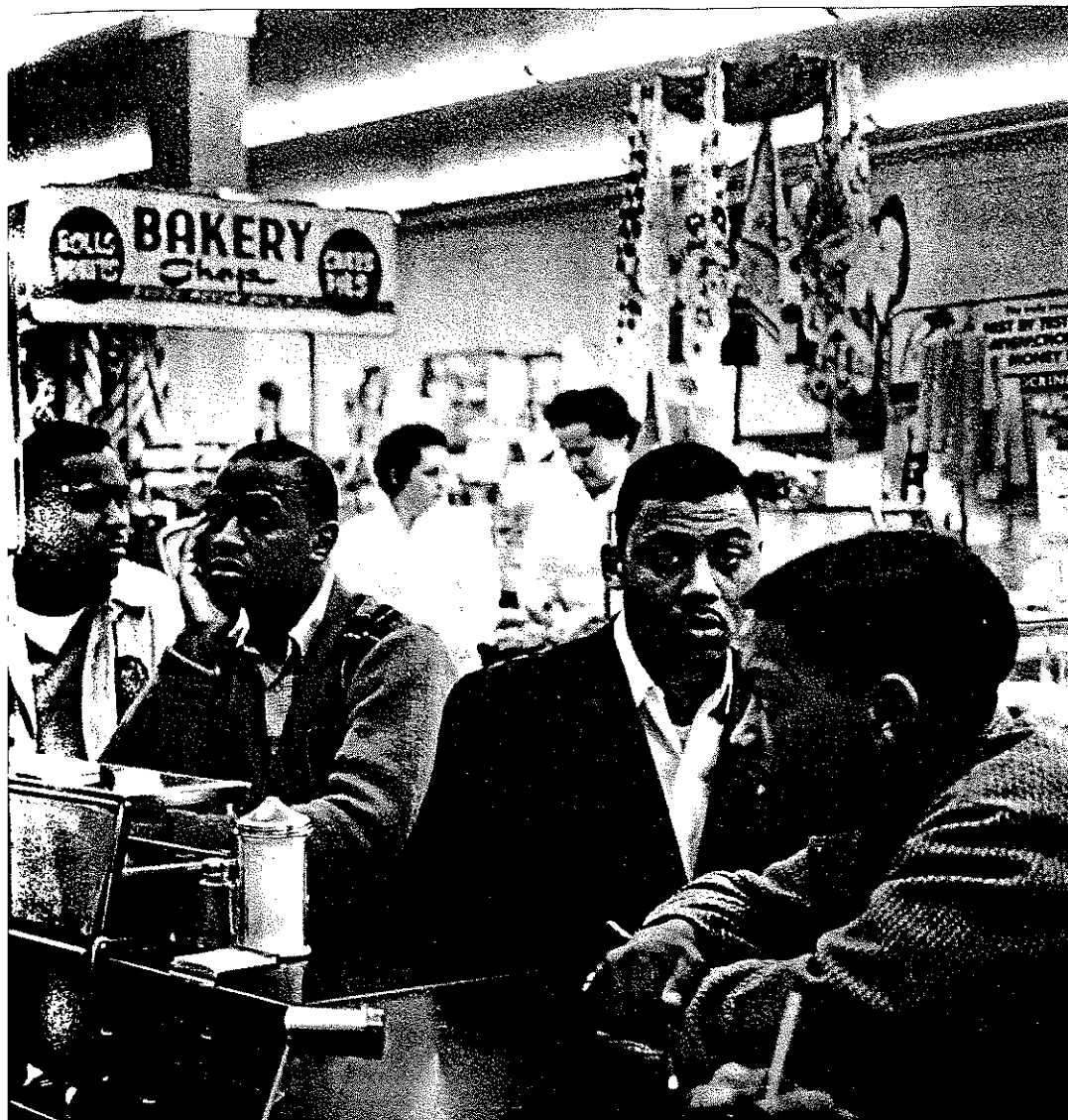
One Monday afternoon in 1960, four black college students walked into a Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina. They bought a tube of toothpaste and some school supplies, then sat down at the lunch counter and ordered coffee. "We don't

serve colored here," the waitress told them. The four young men kept their seats until the store closed.

The next day, they were joined by 19 other black students. By the week's end, 400 students, including a few

whites, were sitting in shifts at the Woolworth's lunch counter. The following week, sit-ins were taking place in seven North Carolina cities.

No previous sit-in had captured the attention of young Americans like those in North Carolina. Youth in more



Black students in Nashville sat patiently at all-white lunch counters for hours, enduring harassment and violence and sometimes boredom in their determination to break down the walls of segregation.

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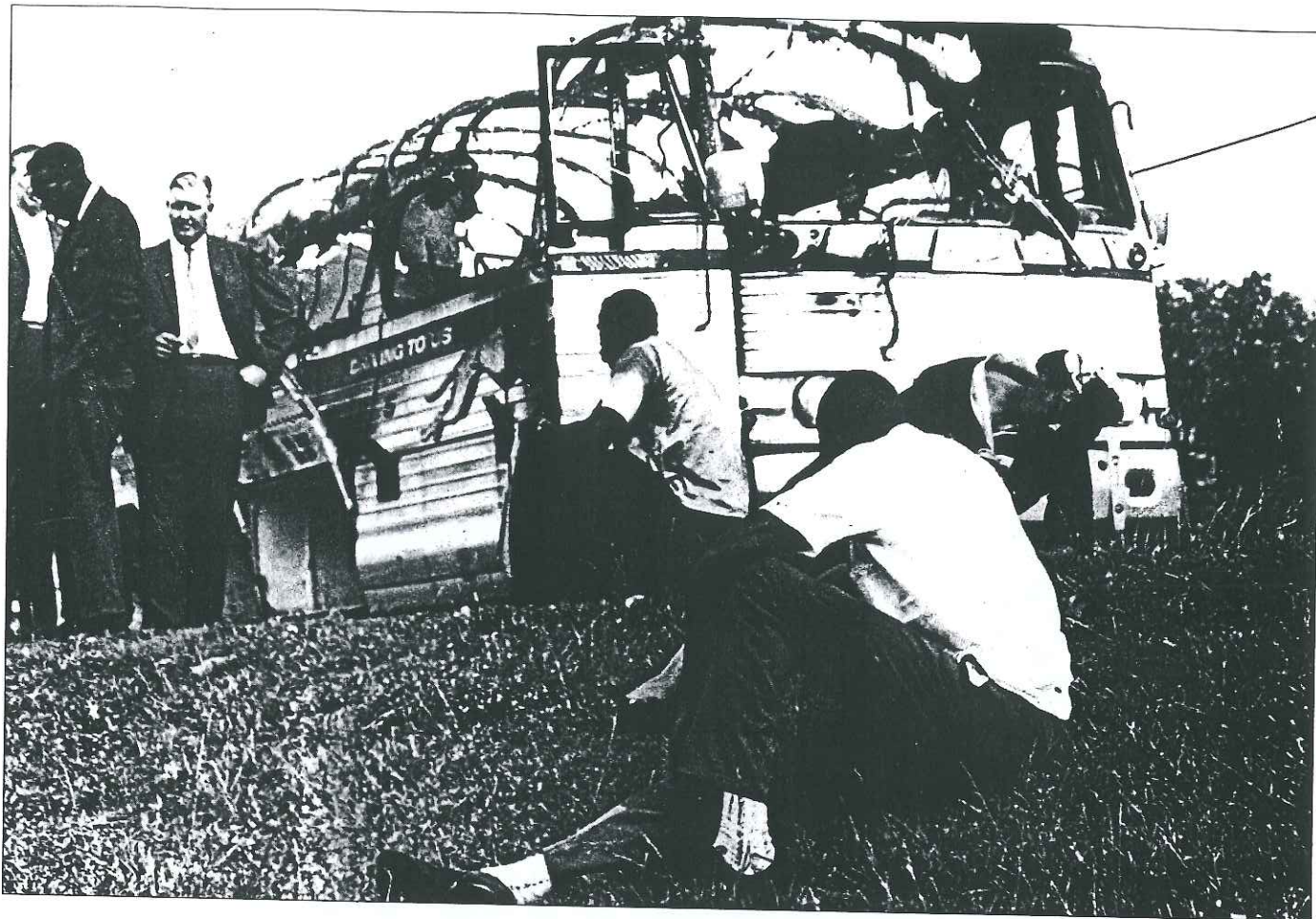
than 100 Southern cities conducted sit-ins against segregated restaurants, parks, swimming pools, libraries and theaters. Within a year, about 70,000 people had participated in sit-ins and 3,600 had been arrested. In some border states, young protesters succeeded in

integrating lunch counters quietly and easily. But in the Deep South, they were beaten, kicked, sprayed with food, and burned with cigarettes. Many were arrested or expelled from school.

The sit-ins brought black

youth into the front lines of the civil rights movement. Most of them were only children when the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation and they had grown into adulthood with the great hope that their rights would be fulfilled. When they saw how slow change was occurring, they became impatient with the established civil rights organizations. Seeking independence from the older generation, they formed a group called the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

The young members of SNCC were heavily influenced by James Lawson, a Nashville theology student who had studied the nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi. Like Martin Luther King Jr., Lawson believed the power of Christian love could overcome the forces of hatred. Lawson taught students how to sit peacefully while being screamed at and spit upon, and how to fall into a position that protected their head and internal organs from beatings.



He told them it was honorable to go to jail for the cause of equality.

Even those who did not share the religious beliefs of Lawson and King saw the effectiveness of nonviolence. Over and over again, peaceful protesters were battered by fists and clubs simply for trying to exercise their rights. These spectacles of undeserved brutality tore at the consciences of most Americans and forced the federal government into action.

### **FREEDOM RIDES**

On May 4, 1961, a group of blacks and whites set out on a highly publicized trip to test a Supreme Court order outlawing segregation in bus termi-



nals. Many of them belonged to the revitalized Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had tested integration laws during the 1940s. They called themselves Freedom Riders.

Ten days into their journey, on Mother's Day, the first bus of Freedom Riders pulled into the terminal at Anniston,

Alabama. Waiting for it was a mob of white men carrying pipes, clubs, bricks and knives. The bus driver quickly drove off, but the mob caught up with the bus again outside the city. They smashed the windows and tossed a firebomb

into the bus. As the bus went up in flames, the riders rushed out into the hands of the mob and were brutally beaten.

When the second busload of Freedom Riders pulled into Anniston, eight white men boarded the bus and beat the occupants from the front to the rear. The most seriously injured was Walter Bergman, who was thrown to the floor and kicked unconscious. He suffered a stroke as a result of

arranged for the wounded Freedom Riders to fly out of Alabama, students in Nashville made plans to finish the Freedom Ride. Federal officials tried to discourage them, but the students were determined. They drove to Birmingham, but were arrested at the bus station and then driven back to the Alabama-Tennessee line, where they were left on a lonely highway late at night. They made their way back to

around the world. To avoid further bloodletting, the federal government had to act.

Having failed to stop the Freedom Riders, President Kennedy decided to protect them. Attorney General Robert Kennedy told Mississippi officials they could continue to enforce their segregation laws if they would guarantee the Freedom Riders' safety. From then on, the Freedom Riders traveled unharmed into Jackson,

**Opposite page, above.** Freedom Riders rest after being attacked by members of a white mob. The Riders were beaten and their bus was burned outside Anniston, Alabama.

**Opposite page, below.** John Lewis (left) and Jim Zwerg were wounded in the attack on Freedom Riders in Montgomery. **Left.** Troops were finally brought in to protect the Freedom Riders after the series of attacks in Alabama. Many of the Riders were arrested and jailed in Jackson, Mississippi, at the end of their journey.



the beating and was confined to a wheelchair for life.

When the second group of Freedom Riders stepped off their bus in Birmingham, they were attacked by another white mob. Not a policeman was in sight to protect them. For ten minutes, the mob wildly beat the already-battered Freedom Riders. Several were hospitalized. Jim Peck, a long-time CORE activist, required 53 stitches to close his wounds.

As top federal officials

Birmingham and finally managed to get a bus to Montgomery. When their bus arrived in Montgomery, it was met by a mob of more than 1,000 whites who beat the Freedom Riders without police interference. This time, a presidential aide assigned to monitor the crisis was injured in the melee.

The unchecked mob violence was headline news

Mississippi, where they were promptly arrested and put in jail. By the end of the summer, 328 Freedom Riders had served time in Mississippi prisons.

Determined to put an end to the dangerous Freedom Rides, Attorney General Kennedy took the unusual step of asking the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue regulations against segregated terminals. In September, the Commission complied,



Luther King Jr., the Freedom Rides demonstrated "the real meaning of the movement: that students had faith in the future. That the movement was based on hope, that this movement had something within it that says somehow even though the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice."

King took that hope with him to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.

### **BIRMINGHAM**

Birmingham was known as the South's most segregated city. The best schools and restaurants were closed to blacks. The better paying jobs in business and government were withheld from blacks. Terrorists had bombed 60 black homes and churches since the end of World War II, yet no one had been arrested. The city police were notorious for their brutality and racism.

When King came to Birmingham to lead anti-segregation boycotts and mass marches, Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor ordered his police officers to respond with force. Americans saw nightly news coverage of the Birmingham demonstrators being struck by police clubs, bitten by dogs, and knocked down by torrents of water strong enough to rip bark from trees.

Hundreds of demonstrators, including King, were arrested. While in jail, King responded to white ministers who urged him to be more patient in his demands. In his

ordering bus companies to obey the earlier Supreme Court ruling.

Once again, young protesters had exposed the injustices of segregation and forced the federal government to defend constitutional rights. Their courage also served to revive the student protest

movement, which had slumped after the lunch counter sit-ins had ended. And they attracted fresh troops — many of them white and Northern — into the Southern civil rights movement.

Above all, said Martin



famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King wrote, "I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' " But, he said, "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Many in the Birmingham movement were school children. For weeks, they begged to be allowed to march with the other civil rights demonstrators. Finally, on May 3, 1963, thousands of children — some as young as six years old

— walked bravely through the police dogs and fire hoses and were arrested. Going to jail was their badge of honor.

The jailing of children horrified Americans, including Kennedy administration officials. Federal mediators were dispatched to Birmingham with orders to work out a settlement between King's forces and the city's business community. In the end, the businessmen agreed to integrate downtown facilities and to hire more blacks.

## A DREAM SHARED

The victory in Birmingham fueled the movement,

**Opposite page.** Soaked from the fire hoses used by Birmingham police, civil rights activists struggled to contain their anger. Their protests remained nonviolent through continual attacks by police during the spring of 1963.

**Above.** Demonstrators huddled for protection under the force of water powerful enough to rip bark from the trees.

**Left.** Police used fierce attack dogs against the Birmingham civil rights marchers.



and civil rights activities spread throughout the United States. Even in the White House, the support for reform was growing.

On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy delivered his strongest civil rights message ever. "We face... a moral crisis," he said. "A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution...peaceful and constructive for all." Only days later, Kennedy sent a comprehensive civil rights bill to Congress.

In August, a huge hopeful crowd of 250,000 blacks and whites marched on Washington to show support for the proposed bill. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the crowd from the front of the Lincoln Memorial. The successes of 1963, he said, were "not an end, but a beginning.

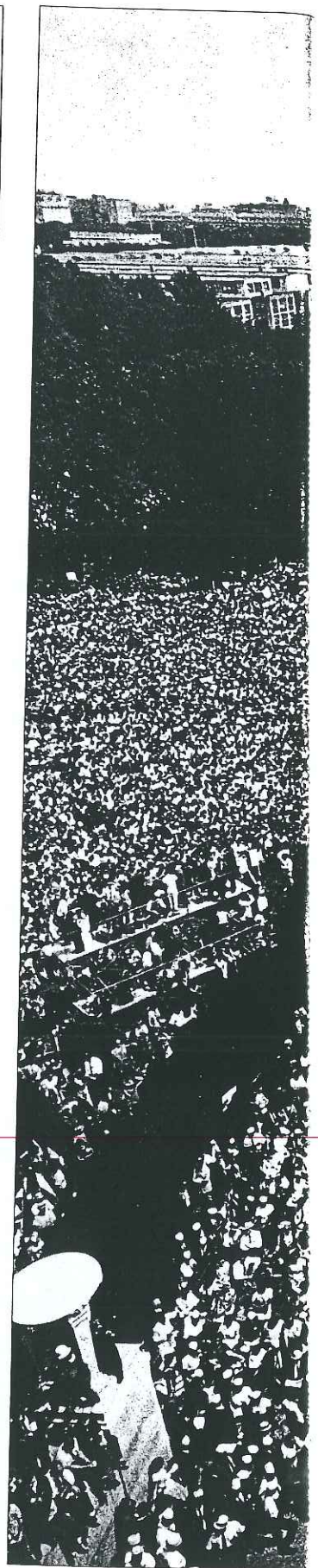
"There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights...We will not be

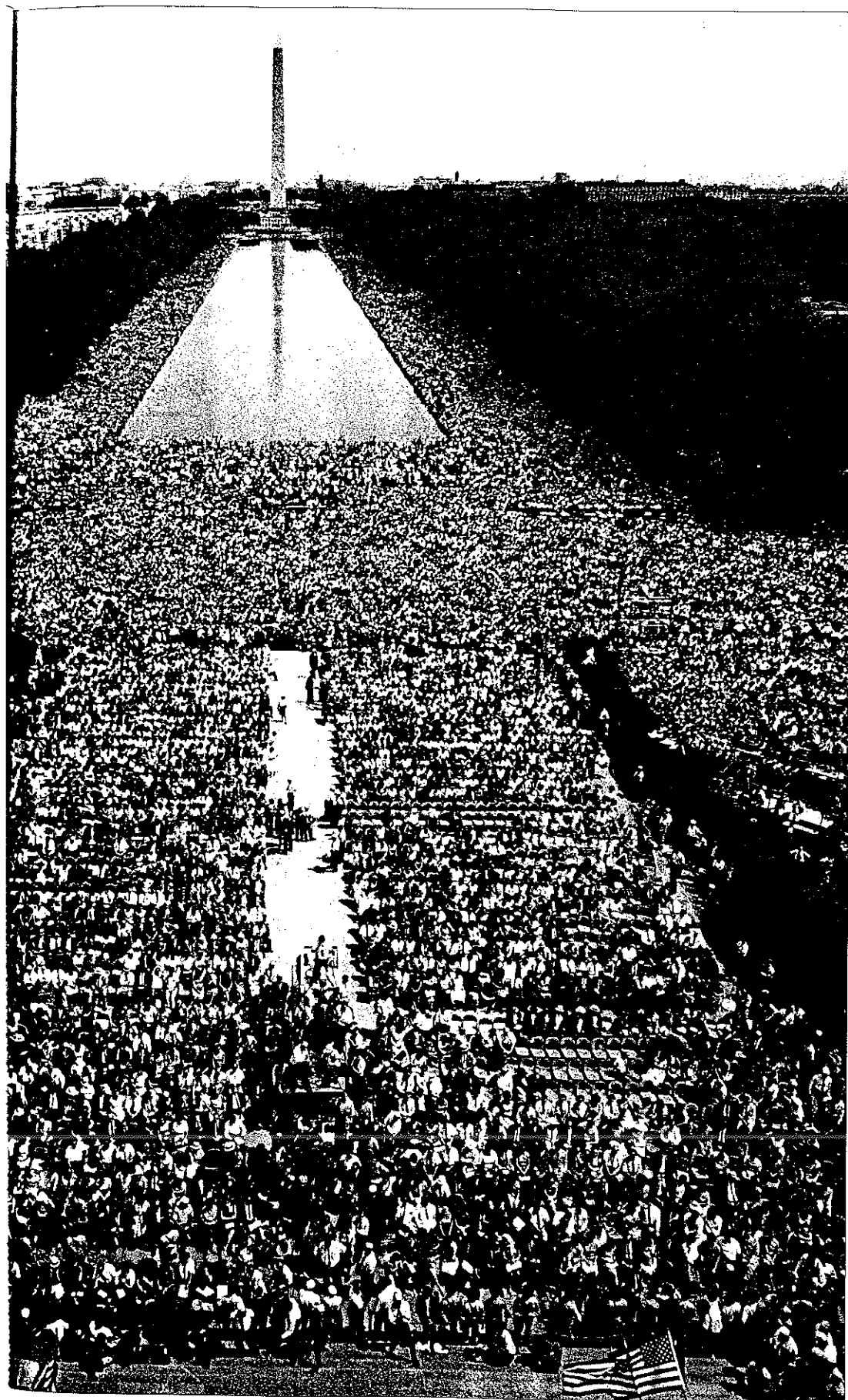
satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The crowd cheered in jubilation as King's speech came to a close: "When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children — black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants — will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

King's "I Have A Dream" speech would be remembered as a high point of the civil rights movement. Two weeks later, a dynamite explosion killed four Sunday School students at Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

The Birmingham bombing and the assassination of President Kennedy two months





later created increased public support for a comprehensive civil rights law. The following summer, Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. By outlawing segregation in public accommodations, the new federal law validated the cause of the Freedom Rides and student sit-ins, and ensured the end of Birmingham-style segregation. But it did not address the problem of voting rights — that struggle was taking place on another bloody battleground. ■

Martin Luther King Jr. (in robe) prepares to speak to the massive crowd (right) that gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington.