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# THE CHILDREN

DAVID  
HALBERSTAM

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

1. Interviews with Willie Mae Carter Lewis, John Lewis's mother, and Ore Lewis Crawley, his oldest sister
2. Interview with Ore Lewis Crawley
3. Interview with Willie Mae Carter Lewis
4. Interview with Lillian Miles Lewis
5. Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980, p. 166
6. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 125
7. Branch, p. 417

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

1. Interview with Wayne Whitt

## CHAPTER THIRTY

1. Branch, p. 430
2. Interviews with Diane Nash, John Seigenthaler, and George Barrett; Branch, pp. 429–30
3. Interviews with Diane Nash and John Seigenthaler; Reeves, p. 126

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

1. *Newsweek*, April 15, 1963, p. 29
2. Interview with Catherine Burks
3. Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*. New York: Macmillan, 1988, p. 113
4. Interview with Catherine Burks

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

1. Marshall Frady, *Wallace*. Cleveland: NAL, 1968, p. 127
2. Interview with former Governor John Patterson
3. Interview with Ray Jenkins
4. Interview with Ray Jenkins
5. Powledge, p. 270

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS LATER JOHN LEWIS REMEMBERED THE EXACT DAY and moment they left the Nashville bus station heading for Birmingham. It was Wednesday, May 17, 1961—seven years to the day, he remembered, from the day the Supreme Court had ruled in *Brown*—and it was 6:30 A.M. There were ten of them, seven men and three women. John Lewis had no doubts about their course. In the defining moment of the debate with the ministers he had asked the critical question: “If not us, then who? If not now, then when? Will there be a better day for it tomorrow or next year? Will it be less dangerous then? Will someone else’s children have to risk their lives instead of us risking ours?” No one had been able to argue with that. How would they ever be able to explain to their own children, he had asked, that they had started out to protest segregation, had won a battle over lunch counters in a border state, and then stopped?

Now he was going back to Alabama, the state from which he had come. He tried not to think about the danger ahead, but rather of their purpose in taking this journey. He remembered when he had been a little boy and the family had driven from Pike County to Buffalo, New York, and the humiliations of that trip, of how his mother had been forced to cook all their food in advance because they could not eat at restaurants and how they had had to go to the bathroom along the roadside. He had hated the sight of that, of his grown parents being forced to turn the roadside into a rest room. If nothing else, this was a blow he and his friends were striking against that America. John Lewis was determined that he was not going to watch his own children humiliated.

As their bus approached Birmingham, the driver had been flagged down by a police car, and had pulled over. Bull Connor, the Birming-

ham police commissioner, a mythic figure, if not among local whites, then certainly among the city's blacks, had boarded the bus. At that moment he was, as far as black people in Alabama were concerned, the best known white man in the state. In Nashville, because the political situation was much healthier, the police force did not operate on its own in a lawless and essentially totalitarian way, and the students had barely known the name of the police chief, Douglas Hosse. In Birmingham no one knew the name of the mayor, but everyone knew Bull Connor.

Bull Connor liked it that way. There was nothing subtle about him. He had quite deliberately made himself the symbol of a certain kind of white-black relationship, one in which the raw police power of white people was used as nakedly as need be to keep black people in their place. In Birmingham he *was* the law. What pleased him on a given day was legal; what displeased him the next day was illegal. His fondness for pure physical force appealed to white people in Birmingham: no niceties, no subtleties. "We ain't gonna segregate no niggers and whites together in this town," he had once said in a memorable statement.<sup>1</sup> Bull, it was said in the local vernacular—and it was the principal reason for his political success—knew how to handle niggers. Even his nickname helped: He had originally gotten it as a broadcaster of local baseball games because he was able to kill the long, boring moments of a game by shooting the bull over the air, but now it had a new meaning, someone who used brute force on black people.

His was an elected position and he had held it once before, but had been voted out of office when he had been caught by a political rival in flagrante delicto with his secretary in a hotel. But post-*Brown*, as the tensions over race had escalated sharply, he had staged a political comeback and had been reelected in 1957. Birmingham was his city, and it was a testimonial to his will and his reputation as a hard man that it was generally considered the most segregated city in the Deep South, its police force notoriously hostile to blacks. In racial matters, he was not merely the top cop, he was judge and jury as well. He took no small amount of pride in that. In recent years there had been an increasing number of bombings aimed at blacks who did not seem to know their place, against some who wanted to move, in his opinion, too close to white residential areas, and others like Fred Shuttlesworth, who were leading protest marches or trying to put their

children in all-white schools. When one black man had had the audacity to buy a home near a white neighborhood, it was Bull Connor who went out to see him to tell him personally, in unvarnished language, that he and the Birmingham police could not protect him if he did so foolhardy a thing. The translation of that warning was simple: Bull Connor could not and would not protect him from Bull Connor. When Shuttlesworth had surfaced as the Birmingham embodiment of the modern social-activist minister, someone had thrown a packet with sixteen sticks of dynamite at his house, destroying it and part of his church, but in no way dampening Shuttlesworth's remarkable willingness to challenge the existing order. A certain black section of Birmingham where a number of explosions had taken place was known as Dynamite Hill. The failure of the Birmingham police to find the people responsible for any of these bombings had convinced not merely local blacks but federal authorities that if Bull Connor himself was not a member of the Klan, he had very close ties to it.

There were no black cops on Connor's police force in 1961, unlike in other major Southern metropolitan areas. Not everyone in the white establishment was entirely comfortable with the growing power of Bull Connor, and just under the surface there was a significant division among the people of the upper middle class, the business establishment, and Connor himself, but as racial tensions grew in the late fifties, those dissident whites found themselves increasingly intimidated.

That morning as he boarded the bus, Bull Connor's confidence was obvious. He was a man who seemed to swagger even when he was standing still. He stopped at the front of the bus, where Paul Brooks and Jim Zwerg, the former black, the latter white, were sitting in the seats right behind the driver. Though there had been a general agreement that they would not try to integrate either the buses or trains which took them to Birmingham, Zwerg and Brooks had decided to sit next to each other, something which irritated the others. They had been aware of the risk they were taking; Zwerg was sure he was going to be killed, because he had learned the hard way that white boys were the prime target. He and Brooks had spoken on the way down about how beautiful Alabama was at that time of year, how green everything outside seemed. He had pondered the contrast of that, the verdant quality of the countryside, with the darkness of what he was sure his

fate was, and was amused by the irony of the thought. Bull Connor, boarding the bus, asked them both to move. They refused. Connor seemed pleased by their refusal. They were in violation of Alabama law, he said, and arrested them. The two of them were taken off the bus. With that, this new group of Freedom Riders had crossed a line with the most powerful racist in Alabama.

Bull Connor stayed on the bus and told the driver to drive to the Birmingham bus station. Once they got there, Connor came back and checked everyone's ticket. The tickets of the SNCC kids read Nashville-Birmingham-Montgomery-Jackson-New Orleans. He separated everyone with one of those tickets from the regular riders. A young white woman named Selyn McCollum, whose assignment was to serve as an observer and report back to Diane Nash, and who was under orders *not* to be arrested, was herded in with the others. "I'm not with these people," she had said, but Bull Connor did not play the game. "Yes, you are," he said, and pointed out that remarkably enough she had the exact same kind of ticket. Even as this was being played out, Connor's people were covering the windows of the bus so that members of the media could not see in.

John Lewis, looking out the window as the bus first pulled into the station, picked up on something which the others had missed, and which was critically important: He saw that there were more reporters waiting than he had ever seen before. That meant what they were trying to do—to catch the attention of the government by catching the attention of the media—was beginning to work. In addition these journalists were, he was sure, from the *national* media, because it was extremely unlikely that many Southern papers would cover an event like this. That was a plus—there was no purpose in offering yourself up to your sworn enemies if no one was watching. Soon they had all been arrested and put in the Birmingham jail. Bull Connor had kept them on the bus for about two hours before arresting them.

By the time John Seigenthaler arrived in Birmingham, Bull Connor had already put Lewis's bus riders in jail. It was Seigenthaler's first assignment to try and talk Bull Connor into releasing the Freedom Riders. That was not going to be easy, he soon discovered. He identified himself to the police commissioner. The first thing that Bull Connor did was to laugh at him. That meant he was laughing not just at Seigenthaler but at the Kennedy Justice Department. The other thing

he kept doing was calling Seigenthaler "sonny boy." "Well, sonny boy," he said, "they violated the law, so they're going to have to pay the price. You just tell all your friends up in Washington that." Seigenthaler did not like the idea of these young people being in Bull Connor's jail, and he felt that events were racing forward in an ominous way.

Bull Connor had sent Jim Zwerg and Paul Brooks to jail. Zwerg was to spend most of the next two days in a drunk tank. Connor told the eight others that he was going to take them into protective custody. They were all put in a paddy wagon around 1:00 P.M. on Wednesday, May 17, and taken to the Birmingham jail. The group stayed there that night, and the next day, separated by gender and by race, cut off from everyone else. The one thing they had any control of was their own bodies, and so before they were split up they had decided to go on a hunger strike, which was part of the traditional Gandhian strategy. Then early Friday morning, Bull Connor came in and roused them. It was around 1:00 A.M., Lewis believed, though he could not be sure of the time. Connor was accompanied by a few of his aides, and, Lewis believed, a reporter from one of the Birmingham papers. "I'm going to take you all back to Nashville," he said, and then he put them in a three-car caravan. Seven of them were packed in the cars; Selyn McCollum had apparently already been sent home separately.

John Lewis was in the car with Bull Connor and Catherine Burks, a beautiful young black woman from Tennessee A&I who was part of their group. He was intrigued by the fact that Connor, rather than being the fierce anti-black racist of legend, now seemed if anything quite relaxed and genial. He had taken a liking to Catherine Burks, and the teasing byplay between them was almost surrealistic. Their conversation did not seem like that of a legendary white racist with a dangerous Freedom Rider. Rather it was more like that of an avuncular uncle and favored niece, with slight overtones of flirtation. She seemed to enjoy talking to him—it was easier for her to challenge him, she believed, because she was a young woman and she could get away with saying things that Bull Connor would not accept from the men.<sup>2</sup> Connor told them he was taking them all back to Nashville and would drop them off at their schools. At one point Catherine Burks said they were all hungry because of the hunger strike. When Connor said that he was hungry too, she invited him to join them for breakfast at Fisk.



“You ought to eat with us, you ought to get to know us better,” she said. “Well, you know, I might just do that,” he said. It was all very low key and pleasant, Bull Connor being a good old boy, Lewis thought. And then the caravan slowed as they came up on a little town near the Tennessee-Alabama border named Ardmore. There on the outskirts of town, the three cars stopped, and probably around 3:00 A.M. Connor ordered them all out and told them they were on their own. “There’s the Tennessee line. Cross it and save yourselves a lot of trouble.”<sup>3</sup> No longer the good old boy, once again his harder self, Bull Connor started to get back in the car, and Lewis heard Catherine Burks tell him, “We’ll be back in Birmingham by the end of the day.” Bull Connor laughed as if he thought that was the best joke he had heard in weeks. It was a moment John Lewis loved; the spirit was there among them. She really is fearless, he thought.

They were, of course, absolutely terrified. They were by themselves in the midst of Klan territory. It was, they were sure, a setup: They would disappear into Klan hands at night, and Bull Connor would be able to say that he had taken them all back to the Tennessee border, and he would even have a journalistic witness to his benign role. John Lewis knew how dangerous the game had suddenly become; he was sure that there were already Klansmen, tipped off earlier, who were out looking to pick them up. Rural Alabama was where alien black people—uppity ones like the Freedom Riders—disappeared and were never seen again. No outside media people had witnessed the exchange at the Birmingham jail; it had been done in the dead of night. In Nashville, Diane Nash thought they were still in the Birmingham jail. Only their enemies knew where they were.

But John Lewis knew one thing, that Ardmore was in Alabama and it was poor, which meant that it had to have poor black people living there, who if approached quietly, would help them. Their job was to try and find some black family before any white people found them. They knew they had to get off the highway as quickly as they could because that was the most dangerous place for them.

It was still dark out. No one was allowed to light a cigarette and they spoke in whispers. Finally someone noticed a dilapidated old shack. It seemed to stand apart—there were no other shacks clustered around it as in the black sections of most Alabama villages. No lights were on. “There’s got to be black people there,” one rider said. Beside

the shack was a beat-up pickup truck. For sure, John Lewis thought, black people live here.

They walked to the shack and Lewis knocked on the door. They could hear sounds inside, and then the voice of an old black man, asking what was going on. "We're Freedom Riders, and we're in trouble," Lewis said. What he was doing was in one sense terrible, he knew, bringing the danger of the modern civil rights struggle to the door of the simplest, most vulnerable black people in the South. For people like this, any knock on the door in the middle of the night would be trouble. But he had no choice; he was their leader, responsible for six other lives. The movement inside the door seemed to stop. "We're Freedom Riders. Please let us in," Lewis repeated. "Keep talking loudly," Catherine Burks said. "If we talk loud enough we can wake the woman inside there and she'll let us in." Catherine was sure they had a better chance with the woman of the house—in places like this the men were more directly vulnerable to white society, she believed, and were more readily intimidated.<sup>4</sup> Then they heard a lock turn, and they had a terrible sense that the door was being locked. Lewis could feel his own hope slipping away, and then he heard the man's wife say, "Honey, let those people in."

The man did what he was told. This was the poorest of houses. But amazingly enough these simple, dreadfully poor people had a telephone. The Lord truly works in wondrous ways, Lewis thought. He quickly called the Nashville headquarters, and again was surprised by his luck because Diane Nash was there. First she updated him using their latest codes. "Ten other packages have been shipped by other means." That meant that ten additional Freedom Riders were going by train. Selyn McCollum's father had flown down to pick her up and take her back to Nashville. Zwerg and Brooks had been released from jail, had been tried and convicted of disobeying a police officer, and the two of them had headed to Fred Shuttlesworth's church, eager to continue.

The one thing that Diane needed to know was whether Lewis and his group wanted to come back to Nashville or to go right back to Birmingham. They decided they wanted to go back to Birmingham as quickly as possible. By then it was Friday morning and they were starved—they had not eaten since Wednesday morning. They gave the

old man some money and he went out for food. He intrigued Lewis. He was absolutely terrified. His world was being threatened as it had probably never been threatened before. The most dangerous words in Alabama at that moment were *Freedom Rider*. But whatever else on this day, he was going to act like a man. He was also very shrewd. In order to get enough food for so many people, he went to three different stores, so that no one would know how many guests he had.

Diane Nash dispatched a young sit-in leader named Leo Lillard to pick them up. They did not have a lot of cars and so Lillard drove alone. He got there in less than an hour, which amazed them. They all piled in. By then it was late Friday morning. How they ever fit in his car, eight people including the driver, plus their luggage, no one ever knew. They were tired and they were dirty, but they were going back to Birmingham. On the radio all the news reports were about the Freedom Riders, which was gratifying. They heard bulletin after bulletin: Bull Connor had delivered them back to Nashville. That pleased them, they had fooled old Bull, but then a few minutes later there was another bulletin: The Freedom Riders were reliably reported to be on their way back to Birmingham by car. That was not good news, Lewis thought, because they were so obvious a sight for police eyes, crowded in as they were in one car, and in addition it confirmed what they always suspected, that their phones were tapped. But no one spotted them, and when they got back to Birmingham on Friday they teased Catherine Burks that she should call up Bull Connor and tell him she was there so they could still get together for a meal or for a date. There was already a certain sense of victory among them—they had made it back to Birmingham in order to join the Freedom Ride, despite Bull Connor's attempt to dump them like trash on the Tennessee-Alabama border.

They went first to Fred Shuttlesworth's house, and then later they linked up with Bernard Lafayette's group at the bus station. It was midafternoon when they got to the bus station. John Lewis looked over and saw a group of ten other Freedom Riders. There was Bernard and he was wearing what Lewis considered his silly little hat. Bernard thought the hat quite snappy—indeed, it did have a snap brim on it, and clearly he thought he was a man among men when he wore it. John had never entirely shared Bernard's opinion that the hat

made him seem older. But he had never been so glad to see Bernard and his goofy little hat. Bernard and his people all looked rested and fresh and were wearing clean clothes, and Lewis and his group were tired and dirty and wearing clothes which they had been living in for almost two days, both in prison and in the Ardmore shack. Now, as the two groups joined up, they all felt a little less alone.

#### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

1. Interviews with Willie Mae Carter Lewis, John Lewis's mother, and Ore Lewis Crawley, his oldest sister
2. Interview with Ore Lewis Crawley
3. Interview with Willie Mae Carter Lewis
4. Interview with Lillian Miles Lewis
5. Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980, p. 166
6. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 125
7. Branch, p. 417

#### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

1. Interview with Wayne Whitt

#### CHAPTER THIRTY

1. Branch, p. 430
2. Interviews with Diane Nash, John Seigenthaler, and George Barrett; Branch, pp. 429–30
3. Interviews with Diane Nash and John Seigenthaler; Reeves, p. 126

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

1. *Newsweek*, April 15, 1963, p. 29
2. Interview with Catherine Burks
3. Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*. New York: Macmillan, 1988, p. 113
4. Interview with Catherine Burks

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

1. Marshall Frady, *Wallace*. Cleveland: NAL, 1968, p. 127
2. Interview with former Governor John Patterson
3. Interview with Ray Jenkins
4. Interview with Ray Jenkins
5. Powledge, p. 270