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STRATEGIES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Doug McAdam

Editor's Note

Democratic governments lose public support when they appear to act in undemocratic ways. Social movements have learned to exploit these image concerns by engaging in disruptive forms of protest in locations where they are hated. They hope to provoke repressive police actions and thereby gain news media attention. News media framing of such incidents is likely to feature a David and Goliath scenario that depicts the protesters as abused victims and the authorities as abusing villains. People who see and hear these graphic stories are apt to side with the victims. Doug McAdam illustrates how the strategy works by tracking the activities of the American civil rights movement during the leadership years of Martin Luther King Jr.

McAdam was a professor of sociology at Stanford University when he wrote this essay. He was the coauthor and coeditor of several books about social movements and American politics. His research has been instrumental in identifying the important roles that news media can play in the success or failure of social movements.

Political movements face at least six strategic hurdles that typically must be surmounted if they are to become a force for social change. Specifically, movement groups must be able to

1. attract new recruits;
2. sustain the morale and commitment of current adherents;
3. generate media coverage, preferably, but not necessarily, of a favorable sort;

Source: Doug McAdam, "The Case of the American Civil Rights Movement," in *Research on Democracy and Society*, Vol. 3, ed. Frederick D. Weil, Oxford, U.K.: Elsevier, 1997, 155-176. Republished with permission from Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

4. mobilize the support of various "bystander publics";
5. constrain the social control options of its opponents; and
6. ultimately shape public policy and state action.

. . . [T]he last four of these goals have been the subject of very little empirical research by movement scholars. In what follows, then, I want to make them the principal focus of attention. Together they constitute the broader "environmental challenge" confronting the movement. . . .

In this chapter, I seek to show how the American civil rights movement was able, through the strategic framing efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), largely to accomplish these four goals. . . .

To fully appreciate the daunting challenge that confronted the civil rights movement, one has to understand the depths of black powerlessness on the eve of the struggle. In 1950, fully two-thirds of all blacks continued to live in the southern United States. Yet, through a combination of legal subterfuge and extralegal intimidation, blacks were effectively barred from political participation in the region. . . .

If change were to come, it would have to be imposed from without. This, of course, meant intervention by the federal government. However, with a moderate Republican, Dwight Eisenhower, in the White House and southern Democrats exercising disproportionate power in Congress, the movement faced a kind of strategic stalemate at the national level as well. To break the stalemate, the movement would have to find a way of pressuring a reluctant federal government to intervene more forcefully in the South. This, in turn, meant attracting favorable media attention as a way of mobilizing popular support for the movement.

Attracting Media Coverage

If one were to conduct an ethnographic study of virtually any social movement organization, be it local or national, one would be very likely to uncover a pervasive concern with media coverage among one's subjects. The fact is, most movements spend considerable time and energy in seeking to attract and shape media coverage of their activities. . . .

The simple fact is that most movements lack the conventional political resources possessed by their opponents and thus must seek to offset this power disparity by appeals to other parties. The media come to be seen—logically, in my view—as the key vehicle for such influence attempts. The civil rights movement represents a prime example of this dynamic in action, and no group in the movement mastered this dynamic and exploited its possibilities better than the SCLC and its leader, Martin Luther King Jr.

The media's fascination with King was evident from the very beginning of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. Launched in December 1955, the boycott inaugurated the modern civil rights movement and catapulted King into public prominence. From then until his death in April 1968, King never strayed far from the front page and the nightly news. What accounts for King's media staying power, and why were he and the SCLC, alone among movement groups, so successful in attracting favorable media attention? In seeking to answer these questions, I will emphasize the role of three factors.

1. *Disruptive actions are newsworthy.* First, the SCLC and King mastered the art of staging newsworthy disruptions of public order. The first requirement of media coverage is that the event be judged newsworthy. Their experiences in Montgomery convinced King and his lieutenants of the close connection between public disruption and media coverage. All of King's subsequent campaigns were efforts to stage the same kind of highly publicized disruptions of public order that had occurred in Montgomery. Sometimes King failed, as in Albany, Georgia, in 1961–1962, when Police Chief Laurie Pritchett responded to King's tactics with mass arrests but without the violence and disruptions of public order so critical to sustained media attention. At other times in other places—most notably in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 and Selma, Alabama, in 1965—local authorities took the bait and responded with the kind of savagery that all but guarantees media attention.

Still, his mastery of the politics of disruption explains only how King and the SCLC were able to attract the media but not the overwhelmingly sympathetic tone of that coverage. Given the openly provocative nature of the King/SCLC strategy, the generally favorable coverage accorded King's actions demands explanation. The key to the puzzle would seem to rest with King's consummate ability to frame his actions in highly resonant and sympathetic ways. The final two factors focus on King's framing efforts, first in conventional ideational terms and then in terms of the signifying function of his tactics.

2. *Ideational framing.* As noted previously, all work on framing betrays an exclusive concern with ideas and their formal expression by movement actors. These conscious ideational pronouncements—speeches, writings, and so on—are an important component of a movement's overall framing effort; and, in accounting for King's success in attracting sympathetic media coverage, much of the credit must go to the substantive content of his thought. Quite simply, no black leader had ever sounded like King before. In his unique blending of familiar Christian themes, conventional democratic theory, and the philosophy of nonviolence, King brought an unusually compelling yet accessible frame to the struggle. First and foremost, there was a deep "resonance" (Snow et al. 1986) to King's thought. Specifically, in employing Christian themes and conventional democratic theory, King succeeded in

grounding the movement in two of the ideational bedrocks of American culture. Second, the theme of Christian forgiveness that runs throughout King's thought was deeply reassuring to a white America burdened (as it still is) by guilt and a near phobic fear of black anger and violence. King's emphasis on Christian charity and nonviolence promised a redemptive and peaceful healing to America's long-standing racial divide. Third, King's invocation of Gandhian philosophy added an exotic intellectual patina to his thought that many in the northern media (and northern intellectuals in general) found appealing. Finally, while singling out this or that theme in King's thought, it should be noted that the very variety of themes granted those in the media (and the general public) multiple points of ideological contact with the movement. Thus, secular liberals might be unmoved by King's reading of Christian theology but resonate with his application of democratic theory and so on.

3. *The signifying function of SCLC actions.* King and his SCLC lieutenants' genius as "master framers," however, extended beyond the ideational content of their formal pronouncements. In their planning and orchestration of major campaigns, the SCLC brain trust displayed what can only be described as a genius for strategic dramaturgy. That is, in the staging of demonstrations, King and his lieutenants were also engaged in signifying work—mindful of the messages and potent symbols encoded in the actions they took and hoped to induce their opponents to take.

Arguably the best example of SCLC's penchant for staging compelling and resonant dramas is their 1963 campaign in Birmingham. Like virtually all major cities in the Deep South, Birmingham in 1963 remained a wholly segregated city, with blacks and whites confined to their own restaurants, schools, churches, and even public restrooms. In April of that year, the SCLC launched a citywide campaign of civil disobedience aimed at desegregating Birmingham's public facilities; but why, among all southern cities, was Birmingham targeted? The answer bespeaks the SCLC's strategic and dramaturgic genius. As a major chronicler of the events in Birmingham notes, "King's Birmingham innovation was pre-eminently strategic. Its essence was . . . the selection of a target city which had as its Commissioner of Public Safety 'Bull' Connor, a notorious racist and hothead who could be depended on not to respond nonviolently" (Hubbard 1968, 5).

The view that King's choice of Birmingham was a conscious, strategic one is supported by the fact that Connor was a lame-duck official, having been defeated by a moderate in a runoff election in early April 1963. Had the SCLC waited to launch its campaign until after the moderate took office, there likely would have been considerably less violence and less press coverage as well. "The supposition has to be that . . . SCLC, in a shrewd . . . stratagem, knew a good enemy when they saw him . . . one who could be counted on in stupidity and natural viciousness to play into their

hands, for full exploitation in the press as archfiend and villain" (Watters 1971, 266).

King and his lieutenants had learned their lessons well. After several days of uncharacteristic restraint, Connor trained fire hoses and unleashed attack dogs on peaceful demonstrators. The resulting scenes of demonstrators being slammed into storefronts by the force of the hoses and attacked by snarling police dogs were picked up and broadcast nationwide on the nightly news. Photographs of the same events appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout the nation and the world. The former Soviet Union used the pictures as anti-American propaganda at home and abroad. Thus, the media's coverage of the events in Birmingham succeeded in generating enormous sympathy for the demonstrators and putting increased pressure on a reluctant federal government to intervene on behalf of the movement.

In short, by successfully courting violence while restraining violence in his followers, King and the SCLC were able to frame the events in Birmingham as highly dramatic confrontations between a "good" movement and an "evil" system. Moreover, the movement's dominant religious ideology granted this interpretation all the more credibility and resonance. These were no longer demonstrators; rather, they were peaceful, Christian petitioners being martyred by an evil, oppressive system. The stark, highly dramatic nature of this ritualized confrontation between good and evil proved irresistible to the media and, in turn, to the American public.

Mobilizing Public Support

While favorable media coverage was the immediate goal of King and his lieutenants, it was never conceived of as an end in itself. Instead, the SCLC courted the media for the role that it might play in mobilizing greater public awareness of and support for the movement. That support, in turn, was seen as the key to breaking the strategic stalemate in which the SCLC and the broader movement found itself. With no chance of defeating the white supremacists in a direct confrontation, the SCLC knew that its prospects for initiating change would turn on its ability to prod a reluctant federal government into more supportive action on behalf of civil rights. Ironically, the election of John F. Kennedy as president in 1960 only intensified the government's long-standing aversion to "meddling" in southern race relations. The specific explanation for Kennedy's reluctance to intervene had to do with his narrow margin of victory in 1960 and the "strange bedfellows" that comprised his electoral coalition. Not only had Kennedy garnered the so-called black vote and the votes of northern liberals and labor, but he was also beholden to the "solid South." In rejecting the Republican Party as the party of Abraham Lincoln, white southerners had voted consistently Democratic since the late nineteenth century. Thus, Kennedy, no less than his party predecessors,

counted racist southerners and civil rights advocates among his constituents. The electoral challenge for Kennedy, then, was to preserve his fragile coalition by not unduly antagonizing either white southerners or civil rights forces. More immediately, Kennedy knew that the success of his legislative agenda would depend, to a large extent, on the support of conservative southern congressmen whose long tenure granted them disproportionate power within both the House and the Senate. For both electoral and legislative reasons, then, Kennedy came to office determined to effect a stance of qualified neutrality on civil rights matters.

In this context, the SCLC saw its task as destroying the political calculus on which Kennedy's stance of neutrality rested. It had to make the political, and especially the electoral, benefits of supporting civil rights appear to outweigh the costs of alienating southern white voters and their elected officials. This meant mobilizing the support of the general public, thereby broadening the electoral basis of civil rights advocacy. In concert with the other major civil rights groups, the SCLC was able to do just that. Between 1962 and 1965, the salience of the civil rights issue reached such proportions that it consistently came to be identified in public opinion surveys as the "most important" problem confronting the country. In six of the eleven national polls conducted by Gallup (1972) between January 1961 and January 1966, it was designated as the country's most pressing problem by survey respondents. In three other polls, it ranked second. Only twice did it rank as low as fourth. Moreover, the imprint of the SCLC's dramaturgic genius is clearly reflected in these data. The two highest percentages attached to the issue correspond to the SCLC's highly publicized campaigns in Birmingham (April to May 1963) and Selma (March 1965). Quite simply, the SCLC's ability to lure supremacists into well-publicized outbursts of racist violence kept the issue squarely before the public and ensured the growing support necessary to pressure Kennedy and Congress into more decisive action.

Constraining the Social Control Options of Segregationists

To this point, I have said very little about the effect of the SCLC's tactics on southern segregationists, but, in a very real sense, the success of the SCLC's politics of disruption depended not on the media or the general public but on the movement's opponents in the South. Had segregationists not responded to the SCLC's actions with the kind of violent disruptions of public order seen in Birmingham, the SCLC would have been denied the media coverage so critical to its overall strategy. Indeed, the SCLC's most celebrated failure turned on its inability to provoke precisely this response from segregationists. I am referring to the citywide campaign that the SCLC launched in Albany, Georgia, in November 1961. In all respects, the campaign was comparable

to the organization's later efforts in Birmingham and Selma. However, while the campaigns themselves were similar, the opponents' response to them was anything but. What was absent in Albany were the celebrated atrocities and breakdown in public order characteristic of Birmingham and Selma. This difference owed to Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett's clear understanding of the SCLC's strategy and his firm resolve to deny them the villain that they so badly needed. While systematically denying demonstrators their rights, Pritchett nonetheless did so through mass arrests rather than the kind of reactive violence that proved so productive of sympathetic media coverage in Birmingham and Selma. . . .

Shaping Public Policy and State Action

. . . The ultimate goal of King and the SCLC was to prod the government into action and to reshape federal civil rights policy in the process. That they were able to do so is clear. . . . What is also clear is that the extent and pace of their achievements were inextricably linked to their success in orchestrating the politics of disruption described here. In particular, the movement's two most significant legislative victories—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—owed, in large measure, to the Birmingham and Selma campaigns, respectively.

Birmingham, as we have seen, featured the brutality of Bull Connor and, in the waning days of the campaign, a Sunday morning bombing of a black church that claimed the lives of three little girls. As broadcast nightly into the living rooms of America, these atrocities mobilized public opinion like never before and, in turn, put enormous pressure on President Kennedy to act forcefully on behalf of civil rights. The ultimate result was administration sponsorship of the Civil Rights Act, which, even in a much weaker form, had earlier been described as politically too risky by Kennedy himself. Finally, there was Selma. One last time, King and the SCLC orchestrated the by-now familiar politics of disruption to perfection. Initiated in January 1965, the campaign reached its peak in March with a series of widely publicized atrocities by segregationists. . . .

In response to this consistent breakdown in public order and the public outrage that it aroused throughout the nation, the federal government was forced to once again intervene in support of black interests. On March 17, President Lyndon Johnson submitted to Congress a tough voting rights bill containing several provisions that movement leaders had earlier been told were politically too unpopular to be incorporated into legislative proposals. The bill passed by overwhelming margins in both the Senate and the House and was signed into law on August 6 of the same year.

However, Selma was to represent the high-water mark for King, the SCLC, and the movement as a whole. Never again was King able to successfully

stage the politics of disruption at which he had become so skilled. The reason for this is simple: As the movement moved out of the American South and sought to confront the much more complicated forms of racism endemic to the North, King was deprived of the willing antagonists he had faced in the South. As King had learned, southern segregationists could be counted on, when sufficiently provoked, to respond with the violence so critical to media attention and the increased public and government support that sympathetic coverage inevitably produced. No such convenient foil was available to the movement outside the South. In fact, more often than not, after 1965 civil rights forces came to resemble a movement in search of an enemy. . . .

Even when the movement was able, as in the 1966 open housing marches in Cicero, Illinois, to provoke southern-style violence in the North, local authorities were unwilling to intervene because they feared the political consequences of doing so. They knew that while the general public was prepared to accept an end to Jim Crow segregation in the South, it was assuredly not ready to acquiesce in the dismantling of de facto segregation in the North. Thus, the absence of supportive public opinion in the North denied the movement the critical source of pressure that had helped compel federal action in the South. The ability to command public and, by extension, state attention and support had been lost. In no public opinion poll since 1965 has the American public ever accorded black civil rights the status of the number one problem confronting the country, nor since then has Congress passed, with the exception of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, any significant civil rights legislation.

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THE AL JAZEERA EFFECT: HOW THE NEW GLOBAL MEDIA ARE RESHAPING WORLD POLITICS

Philip Seib

Editor's Note

If we think of news media as microphones that expand the range of message senders' voices, the number of truly powerful microphones, like the *New York Times* or major broadcast networks, was severely limited in the past. Established Western influential individuals and groups, such as high-level government leaders and large corporations, captured most of the time and space on these microphones. That scenario has changed dramatically. Philip Seib calls it the "Al Jazeera effect," referring to the transformation of the global media landscape in the Internet age. New broadcast channels and new voices from previously invisible and inaudible people and places have come to the fore.

In the Middle East, the Al Jazeera news network is a prominent example. It broadcasts news about life in the Middle East from perspectives offered by a medley of local voices, giving people from all parts of the world a chance to see and hear them. Obviously, the Western media's near-monopoly over the news flow and its content has been broken. The power of the traditional media and their traditional clients has been greatly diminished. The news spotlight now illuminates new faces, places, and issues.

Philip Seib was a professor of journalism and public diplomacy at the University of Southern California when his book about the Al Jazeera effect was published. His many books about the media's role in international relations had made him a highly regarded pioneer in this underexplored research field.

Source: Excerpted from Philip Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008. Chapter 8. Reprinted by permission of Potomac Books, Inc.