INTRODUCTION

THE ICONIC PHOTOGRAPHS OF CIVIL RIGHTS

Freelance photographers and reporters . . . realize that by slanting the news and the pictures . . . they can sell more copy and more pictures all over the country.

JIM CLARK, SHERIFF OF SELMA, ALABAMA (1965)

A photograph, which stops a split-second of action, can say anything an editor wants it to say.

ALBERT C. "BUCK" PERSONS, *THE TRUE SELMA STORY: SEX AND CIVIL RIGHTS* (1965)

In early 1963 two young workers from the grassroots civil rights organization the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) slipped into Selma, Alabama, to initiate a voter education effort among blacks. Selma was an alluring target for civil rights activists. Situated in Dallas County, it had one of the lowest percentages in the state of black citizens registered to vote. Out of fifteen thousand black adult residents, fewer than three hundred appeared on voter rolls. Nonwhites who attempted to register faced limited registration hours at the county courthouse (on the two days a month that the office was open); "literacy" tests that were designed for their failure; a local sheriff who understood his mandate to include intimidation of and violence against blacks who demanded their rights be honored (and occasionally against white reporters who covered civil rights stories); local judges who freely passed down jail sentences to the nonwhite victims of police violence and who enforced unconstitutional injunctions against black assembly; and a local white population that protected the status quo by firing black activists in their employ and committing violence against them. Despite this daunting environment, the SNCC workers joined with local activists to educate black citizens about their rights, register voters, and stage public protests to publicize the plight of black Americans in Alabama.

The lonely campaign begun by dedicated SNCC workers and their local allies received a boost in early 1965, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the umbrella civil rights organization he led, to join the struggle.

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King's arrival in Selma heartened the local black population and dramatically increased the willingness of middle-class blacks to take up the fight. Protests in the city also attracted greater national media coverage once King announced his involvement, especially after he and hundreds of protesting black schoolchildren were arrested at the end of January. But the campaign's dramatic climax came the next month after the killing of the black activist Jimmie Lee Jackson during a nighttime civil rights march in nearby Marion, Alabama.

The peaceful Marion march descended into chaos after Alabama state troopers and white vigilantes smashed streetlights and disabled or destroyed the film and still cameras of television and newspaper reporters covering the protest. As the city went dark, white law enforcement officers and mobs indiscriminately beat any black activist or bystander within reach. Jackson angered troopers by trying to protect his grandfather and mother from assault by rampaging officers; in retaliation, a trooper shot him in the stomach at point-blank range.[1] News of Jackson's death swept through the state and brought to a head the frustration of Selma's blacks, who were already impatient with the slow pace of voting reforms, the federal government's reticence to take a more active role in the conflict, and the daily violence of the Jim Crow South. Appreciating the depth of community anger about the killing and hoping to channel it into peaceful and productive ends, the SCLC supported local blacks in their decision to stage a protest march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery.

The march began at Brown Chapel on Sunday, March 7, with six hundred protestors, led by the activists John Lewis and Hosea Williams. Just six blocks into the journey, as the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they confronted a solid line of helmeted and armed Alabama state troopers, Dallas County sheriffs, and mounted civilian "possemen" blocking the four-lane road. As Lewis and Williams brought their columns to a halt some fifty feet from the line, the officer in charge, Major John Cloud, declared the protest march an "unlawful assembly" and demanded that the participants "disperse." Not wishing to provoke law enforcement officers by advancing but determined not to retreat, Lewis encouraged the marchers behind him to kneel in prayer. As word of the plan passed through the columns of marchers, Cloud ordered his men to advance on horseback and foot. Firing tear gas and wielding billy clubs and bullwhips, they drove the protestors back over the bridge to their church and homes, as newspaper and television cameras recorded the mayhem. Lewis recalled "how vivid the sounds were as the troopers rushed toward us—the clunk of the troopers' heavy boots, the whoops of rebel yells from the white onlookers, the clip-clop of horses' hooves hitting the hard asphalt of the highway, the voice of a woman shouting, 'Get 'em! *Get* the niggers!'" Between ninety and a hundred marchers were injured. More than fifty sought treatment at a local hospital, seventeen of whom were admitted. One nearly died. The next day, pictures of "Bloody Sunday" appeared in newspapers across the country.[2]

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1 Unknown photographer, *State Troopers Swing Billy Clubs to Break Up Civil Rights Voting March in Selma, Alabama,* March 7, 1965. AP/Wide World Photos, New York.

Virtually every major paper outside the South—including the *New York Times,* the *Chicago Tribune,* the *Los Angeles Times,* and the *Washington Post*—carried shocking front-page photographs showing a scrum of troopers in gas masks beating well-dressed black protestors who were offering no discernible resistance (figure 1).[3] In many of the photographs, John Lewis appears in the center foreground wearing his distinctive tan trench coat, with one arm raised protectively to his head, as an officer clubs him to the ground. The published photographs of the confrontation and accompanying news articles make clear that the primary focus of white media outlets was the drama of the clash. Typical of the Selma coverage in the northern white press was the front-page article in the *New York Times,* "Alabama Police Use Gas and Clubs to Rout Negroes." The *Times* report reproduced two photographs of marchers in flight, pursued and struck down by law enforcement officers swinging clubs, and a third showing troopers patrolling the streets in force after the breakup of the march. The article complements the photographic coverage with its dramatic description of black protestors "swept to the ground screaming [with] arms and legs flying." While the white media could have selected any number of stories to tell—on the determination of African Americans to root out the social, economic, and legal impediments to black franchise; their anger at the killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson; or

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2 Joseph Postiglione, *Firebombed Freedom Riders' Bus Outside Anniston, Alabama,* May 14, 1961. © Bettmann/CORBIS, Seattle, Washington.

their bravery in the face of state-sponsored aggression—they consistently framed the story as a narrative of spectacular violence.[4]

This emphasis was not an anomaly of the Selma campaign. With great consistency, white media outlets in the North published photographs throughout the 1960s that reduced the complex social dynamics of the civil rights movement to easily digested narratives, prominent among them white-on-black violence. A look at a representative sampling of iconic photographs confirms this predilection: white mobs harassing fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford as she integrates Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas in 1957 (see figure 40); sit-ins at segregated department store lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Jackson, Mississippi, or Nashville, Tennessee, showing activists taunted and bloodied by mobs of young whites throughout the early 1960s (see figure 9); the dazed and wounded Freedom Riders milling around their abandoned burning bus after segregationists firebombed it near Anniston, Alabama, in 1961 (figure 2); and most famous of all, fire hoses and police dogs turned against peaceful black protestors in Birmingham in 1963 (figures 3 and 4). Since newspapers and

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3 (Top) Bob Adelman, *Civil Rights Protestors Being Sprayed by Fire Hoses in Birmingham,* Alabama, May 3, 1963. © Bob Adelman/CORBIS, New York.

4 (Bottom) Charles Moore, *Police Dog Attack,* Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963. © Charles Moore/Black Star, New York.

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magazines had a financial interest in boosting sales, their focus on the spectacle of such events is not surprising. After all, graphic photographs of violence tend to be more attention getting—and marketable—than photographs of orderly lines of marchers armed only with protest placards or articles detailing the economic and social inequalities facing blacks.

Black newspapers faced the same pressure to maximize sales that their white competitors did, yet they published many civil rights photographs not reproduced in the white press. Moreover, they did so despite heavy reliance on photographic wire services for much of their coverage of national events. Drawing largely from the same pool of photographs available to the white media, black newspapers and magazines constructed a distinctive visual record of civil rights that was rarely glimpsed by whites. In its reporting on Selma, for instance, the *Chicago Daily Defender,* the largest-circulation black-owned newspaper of the era, published a United Press International photograph showing a jumble of fallen marchers *and* law enforcement officers (figure 5) with the caption, "Negroes and state troopers alike fell to ground in Selma, Ala., as troopers moved in to break up a march."[5] The photographic choices made by black reporters and editors in selecting and framing their stories on the civil rights movement were so distinctive that the journalists could have been reporting on a wholly different conflict. The black press's editorial choices were guided in part by its audiences; naturally enough, its presentation of civil rights protests reflected the interests and outlook of its readers. The same was true, of course, of the choices made by the photographers, reporters, and editors employed by the white press.

In contrast to the many books that focus on what civil rights photographs tell us about blacks, in this book I contemplate what they reveal about whites. Publishers of white newspapers and magazines were well aware of the anxiety that the "Negro question" raised in white Americans during the 1960s. Given the photographs' formulaic presentation of white-on-black violence and the racial stakes for whites in the representation of the civil rights movement, the photographs have at least as much to tell us about whites as about blacks. To illuminate the role that the photographs played in managing whites' anxieties about race, the following chapters analyze how white journalists and their audiences selected, framed, and responded to the most famous scenes of the civil rights era. I do not suggest that famous civil rights photographs were staged or doctored to meet the needs of whites. Most were not. I argue instead that the handful of "iconic" photographs endlessly reproduced in the newspapers and magazines of the period, and in the history books that followed, were selected from among the era's hundreds of thousands of images for a reason: they stuck to a restricted menu of narratives that performed reassuring symbolic work.

In clarifying how the most famous civil rights photographs served whites, I also examine the images' implications for blacks. Because nonwhites stood at the heart of American debates

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5 Unknown photographer, *Negroes and State Troopers Alike Fell to the Ground in Selma, Alabama,* March 7, 1965. United Press International. Courtesy of the Photograph Collection, Cleveland Public Library, Cleveland, Ohio.

on race, the media could not assuage the racial anxieties of whites without affecting the depiction of blacks. So, for example, the determined efforts of the white press to frame the civil rights movement as nonthreatening had the collateral result of casting blacks in roles of limited power. With great regularity, iconic photographs show white actors exercising power over blacks—dignified black schoolchildren silently suffering the jeers of unruly mobs, well-mannered black students at lunch counters weathering the abuse of mirthful white crowds, and stoic protestors buckling under the assaults of water jets and police dogs. The chapters that follow will make this general claim historically concrete, but here it is enough to acknowledge that most of the photographs that northern whites deemed representative of the struggle showed whites in charge. If, as many scholars of the civil rights era have claimed, photographs of the struggle helped advance social and legislative change, such photographs also limited the extent of reform from the start. To the degree that narratives illustrating white power over blacks helped make the images nonthreatening to whites, the photographs impeded efforts to enact—or even imagine—reforms that threatened white racial power.

This selectivity was not a conspiracy hatched by white media outlets in the North to discredit black agency or weaken the civil rights movement. On the contrary, white reporters and editors with middle-of-the-road and progressive outlooks on race promoted nonthreatening pictures of the movement partly because they believed that such images would best advance the interests of blacks. In the early 1960s, many white media outlets wished to gently promote civil rights

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without alienating their white reader base. Few reporters and editors were sufficiently attuned to the dynamics of race to articulate the link between scenes of black agency and the anxiety of whites. All they understood was that they and their readers found certain photographs to be "unaesthetic," "unappealing," or "uninteresting," and these images were typically ones that unambiguously depicted nonwhites in the streets demanding social and economic rights or that baldly advocated for changes likely to undermine white power. Photographs illustrating white-on-black violence proved both visually compelling to whites and capable of nudging society toward racial reforms. In depicting whites in charge, the photographs allowed white viewers to feel secure, and therefore more amenable to change, and in illustrating blacks as victims, they encouraged white sympathy for blacks, and hence more support for legislative action. By placing blacks in the timeworn positions of victim and supplicant, the photographs presented story lines that allowed magnanimous and sympathetic whites to imagine themselves bestowing rights on blacks, given that the dignified and suffering blacks of the photographic record appeared in no position to take anything from white America.

This book concentrates on some of the best-known photographs of the civil rights struggle—those depicting fire hoses and attack dogs turned on peaceful black marchers and bystanders in Birmingham during May of 1963. Each chapter probes a different facet of the Birmingham photographs in the white imagination. Chapter 1 lays out the unspoken rules that policed the eligibility of civil rights images for reproduction in the white press and considers how they drew on a host of nineteenth-century conventions for the depiction of blacks; chapter 2 explores how the photographs, in eliciting strong emotions from whites, both promoted incremental reforms and served as a barrier to systemic change; chapter 3 explores the "perfect" black victims in the white imagination and considers the limitations of the nonviolent direct action practiced by activists in the early 1960s; and chapter 4 examines the civil rights images that whites did not reproduce—some that were simply ignored by the mainstream press and others that were defined in ways that excluded them from the civil rights canon. While centered on the struggle in Birmingham, each chapter draws on a range of iconic photographs to make a broad case for the symbolic and real-world impact of the photographs in American society. I aim to illustrate the racial consequences of the images for blacks, throw light on the beliefs that united the era's reactionary and progressive whites, and show how the photographs helped limit racial reforms in the 1960s; but I also strive to provide a glimpse of other historical possibilities. Through analysis of the distinctive ways in which black activists, reporters, and a few radicalized whites represented the black freedom struggle, I consider the degree to which a conceptual framework then existed in America for picturing a society that was racially just.

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