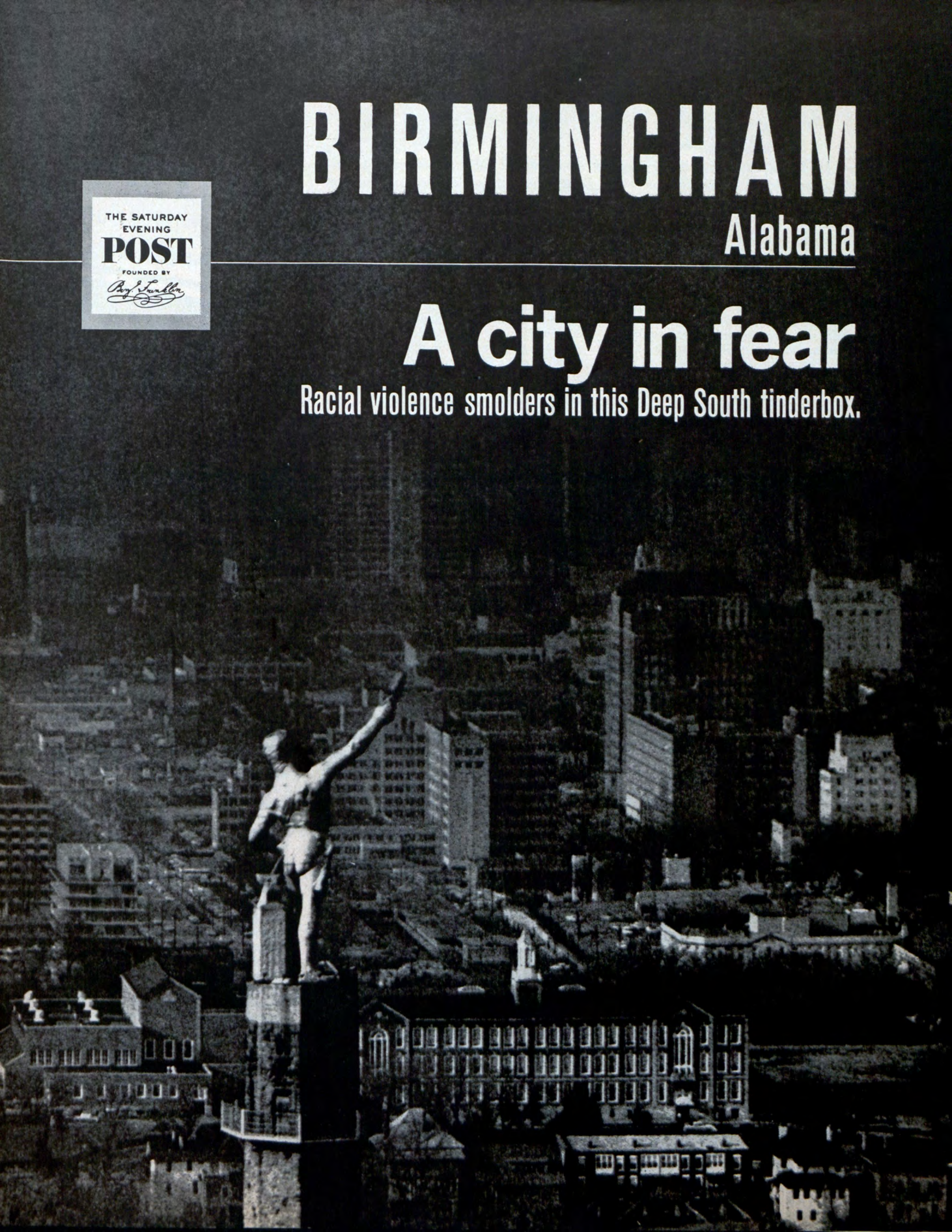
THE SATURDAY EVENING POST
FOUNDED BY Benj. Franklin

BIRMINGHAM
Alabama

A city in fear

Racial violence smolders in this Deep South tinderbox.



BIRMINGHAM

By JOE DAVID BROWN

Joe David Brown was born in Birmingham, attended local public schools and the University of Alabama, then worked on the old Birmingham "Post." Between assignments as a foreign correspondent and authorship of three successful novels, Brown frequently revisited his native city. On his most recent visit he found some schoolmates in high public office, others pillars of local society and industry. "The people were as charming as ever," Brown says, "but their hardened attitude, their fear of desegregation saddened me."

My Aunt Margaret is getting on now. I do not mean that Aunt Margaret is palsied or failing, for she still is an active, handsome woman, and time has treated her more gently than it has a lot of us. It's only that when I go to Birmingham and visit with Aunt Margaret nowadays I find it easy to forget that she was the pale lovely little girl with enormous tragic eyes who on a quiet evening leaned against the old Grand Rapids hat rack with the marble top that stood in my grandfather's front hall and cried and cried because her favorite beau had telephoned to break a date.

Aunt Margaret eventually married that beau, and although he has been dead so long that his tombstone has lost its luster, she still lives in the sprawling and drafty 90-year-old house where he took her as a bride. Aunt Margaret manages to keep busy. She looks after her property and visits with her two daughters who now have half-grown children of their own, and usually on a Sunday she attends services at the Ruhama Baptist Church, which is one of the oldest churches in Alabama. When it is her turn, Aunt Margaret also entertains the W.C.T.U. in her front parlor and pours tea and serves angel food cake and discusses ways to smite the booze trade. Aunt Margaret has lived in Birmingham all of her life, and she simply can't understand why all of a sudden it is supposed to be the toughest and most violent city in the South.

When Yankee reporters come down to Birmingham and write that fear and hatred and violence stalk the streets, Aunt Margaret is more bewildered than indignant. "I declare, I just don't know how they get such ideas," she says.

Most people in Birmingham feel exactly the same way as my Aunt Margaret and, to be fair about it, so much emphasis on Birmingham's race troubles has in many ways given the city a much worse name than it deserves. There are 340,000 people living within the city limits of Birmingham, about 36 percent of them Negroes. One has only to drive through the quiet residential streets and watch yelling kids booting footballs in vacant lots, observe housewives placidly trudging home from supermarkets laden with groceries and trading stamps, and see husbands tenderly buffing family cars in driveways to realize that the overwhelming majority of people in Birmingham, like people everywhere else, are decent, law-abiding citizens, filled with folklore and prejudices, worrying about their kids, struggling to pay their bills, but normally fearing only God and the Internal Revenue Service.

Outspoken segregationist Eugene "Bull" Connor speaks in streets during mayoralty race.

Judged solely by its downtown district, Birmingham admittedly is not an attractive city. It has only one of the slab-sided, glass-filled office buildings that add so much dash and glitter to other cities, and most of its buildings are well over 30 years old, nondescript and streaked with grime from the blast furnaces and steel mills that make Birmingham the South's greatest iron-and-steel producing center. It is only when one drives to the top of nearby Red Mountain and gets a startling cinemascopic view of the entire city ringed by mills sending up plumes of white smoke that one also realizes that Birmingham's streets are broad and laid out with sweeping geometrical precision. Then it is obvious that with some civic face-lifting here and there Birmingham could be an impressive and maybe even a striking city. Moreover, people in Birmingham always have been house-proud, and, scattered around the outskirts of the city and arrogantly spread over the mountains of unmined iron-ore surrounding it, are some of the loveliest residential sections found in all the South.

Birmingham is not without things to boast about. It is the cast-iron capital of the world. It

Solitary Negro stares at deserted Highland Park, closed along with other recreational areas to avoid desegregating them.

has its towering medical center, two fully accredited colleges, a fine symphony orchestra and its Oscar Wells Museum of Art. It also has 700 churches, for it has a strong, almost puritanical, religious streak, and now and again it claims to have more Sunday-school students per thousand population than any other city in the country.

Despite its cultural and social overtones, Birmingham essentially is a blue-collar, shirtsleeves mill town, with all the grimy faults and all the sweaty hardships of a mill town. As a typical mill town set down in a hard-scrabble region, it also probably has more freckle-eared, sorghum-fed toughs in its population than most large cities in the South. Some of these millbilly hoodlums belong to the Ku Klux Klan, but most of them do not even have this unsavory excuse for their acts of violence, large and small, which keep Birmingham perpetually on edge.

A bomb for Christmas

Only a few nights before last Christmas, for example, a crude dynamite bomb ripped apart the front of a church in which a group of small Negro children were rehearsing a Nativity play. It was the 17th bombing in and around Birmingham since 1957, all of them directed against Negro churches and the homes of civil-rights leaders. Like any decent community, Birmingham reacts with righteous indignation when such lawless acts are committed, and after the pre-Christmas bombing, rewards posted for the perpetrators totaled $5,000 within a few days. "Let a carload of riffraff throw a stick of dynamite and—boom—we're set back another five years," a Chamber of Commerce officer said gloomily.

Birmingham has a tendency to blame its hoodlum element for most of its troubles, but the real reasons for its newfound notoriety are some grave social and political problems peculiarly its own. Anyone who wishes to be honest about it has to admit that the Yankee reporters, who have aggrieved my Aunt Margaret and others, have stated them fairly well. Sometimes their prose was too molten, and a few writers stooped to such tired old journalistic practices as making all of Birmingham's white leaders sound like uneducated Negroes while making all Negroes sound like Sir Winston Churchill; but in the main they have been uncannily accurate. The writers were not attracted to Birmingham in the first place because of the activities of a few possum-faced hoodlums. Neither did they come primarily because Birmingham is a segregated city; segregation is a problem in many places, North and South, and even Yankee editors know the futility of trying to make the issue a clear-cut contest between good guys and bad guys, or stupid men against bright men. If the issue were that simple it would have been solved long ago.

Birmingham is news because it is the largest city in the United States which adamantly refuses to call its white and Negro citizens together even to try to work out some solution to a problem which the Federal Government and enlightened public opinion plainly intend to force the city to solve. This makes Birmingham a backward big city by any standards, and it remains backward because to this day there is no communication between its white and Negro population on an official level.

Furthermore, Birmingham persistently has demanded attention with a strident defiant voice, presenting an ugly face to the world. If it had hired experts and set out to do it deliberately, it probably could not have been so successful in creating a bad national reputation. Worse still, largely because of a lack of progressive leadership, Birmingham has allowed a small, moronic hoodlum minority to make it into the most danger-laden, potentially explosive city in the nation.

If Birmingham's public schools are ordered desegregated this fall—and cases now pending in Federal court make this a likely possibility—nasty, noisy trouble almost certainly will erupt.

"It's not a question of will there be trouble," said a Birmingham newspaperman. "The only question is how much trouble will there be. If the responsible people get together and demand that the police keep order, we'll probably have a lot of jeering and some minor scuffling, but probably no more serious trouble than New Orleans had. But if there's not a change in Birmingham, the red-necks might get out of hand the same way they did when the Freedom Riders came through. If that happens, what goes on here will make Little Rock and Oxford seem like a church social."

Asked what would happen if the schools were desegregated a soft-drink deliveryman glowered. "They just ain't—period," he said. "We'll kill every damn nigger in town first."

Such threats of violence are not heard often, but they are representative of the sort of people

BIRMINGHAM / "I will never permit integration in this state unless I am compelled to by force,"

Mob beats Freedom Rider James Peck during 1961 riot after busloads of Riders arrived in city.

Battered and bloody, Peck sits up in Birmingham hospital after being treated for his injuries.

who have burned more than 50 crosses around the city since 1958. Most of Birmingham's more backward citizenry seem to take it for granted the schools will be closed rather than be desegregated, probably because for a number of years city officials have promised to take such action.

"I quit school up in Attalla when I was nine," said a taxi driver, "and it don't seem to have hurt me none. I reckon it won't hurt my girl to quit when she's twelve."

Various groups of middle-aged business leaders have been scurrying around secretly as if they were plotting a revolution instead of dealing with a pressing social problem, and there are occasional vague references to a "Birmingham plan," a secret scheme to prevent racial strife. The melancholy truth, however, is that absolutely nothing has been done in Birmingham to create a climate which will permit even token integration to be carried out peacefully.

"It's all quite simple," said a well-known clergyman. "We've delayed too long, and now we are about to reap what we've sown. For more than eight years the mightiest and most influential people in this town have told us to fight, to resist, not to give in at any cost. We've interpreted that according to the kind of people we are. Some of us thought it meant to resist legally, to delay, to drag case after case through the courts as long as possible. But others have interpreted it as a call to arms, a cry to rally and fight the Civil War all over again if necessary. After whipping these people into a fighting mood for eight years, it simply is not possible to tell them that the rules have been changed. How sad it all is. If our leaders had started talking restraint and moderation eight years ago, people who are ready to spill blood would now be prepared to accept some gradual integration in our schools."

No matter what degree of trouble develops when the first Negro children attempt to enroll in its previously all-white schools, it is a disquieting fact that Birmingham can expect neither aid nor comfort from the state of Alabama, but only more trouble.

Governor George Corley Wallace, the prancing, voluble little man who was sworn in as Alabama's 47th chief executive before the capitol of the Confederacy on Goat Hill in Montgomery in January, talks tough about almost everything. But he talks the toughest of all about school desegregation. When he campaigned up and down the state with a hillbilly singer last year, Wallace acted as if he were a one-man army at war with the Federal Government. He shouted that the U.S. Supreme Court "did not have the brains to try a chicken thief," accused Federal courts in general of "judicial dictatorship and judicial tyranny." But he pleased crowds the most when he vowed that he would resist school integration even if he had to go to jail.

"I shall ask the legislature to give me the right to assign pupils to schools that are threatened with integration," he said. "When the court order comes, I am going to place myself in the position so that it must be directed against me and not some lesser official. I shall refuse to abide by any illegal Federal court order, even to the point of standing at the schoolhouse door."

When he was swept into office with the greatest popular vote ever given an Alabama governor, many people expected Wallace, a former circuit judge, state legislator and World War II flight sergeant, to forget his "stand in the door" pledge. Instead he seems determined to keep it.

In his inaugural address, he shouted his defiance even more loudly. "I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!"

Little 43-year-old George Wallace, who walks with his back arched like a cavalry officer leading a charge against Yankee cannon at Shiloh, has defiance stamped on his brow. One has only to meet him, and to see his eyes, which are dark as a Cherokee chieftain's, flash with scorn, and to listen to his angry tirades against the Federal Government, to know that here is a man whose name will appear in many black and rattling headlines before he is finished.

"Who suppresses Negroes?"

"I told the people of this state what I would do if I was elected," he said not long ago. "I told them, 'If you don't want me to do it, don't vote for me.'" He rummaged in his desk and produced a county-by-county tally of his overwhelming election victory and handed it over triumphantly. "They did elect me, and I'm not going to let them down. I will never permit integration in this state unless I am compelled to by force," he said, eyes flashing, cheeks flushed. "They must use force—physical force—directly on me. Let them put their hands on the governor of this sovereign state and see what happens. We're going to show the people of this country what we stand for, and they'll be glad we did. I've got stacks of mail from good people, on letterheads from all over the country, and they say, 'Thank God for you southern people. You're the only hope to save this country.'

"They talk about law and order. Hell, I'm for *law* and order; law is more important than order. The Government watched us build separate schools, raise up mortar and bricks for 100 years, and then they turn around and tell us it's unconstitutional. It's against the Negroes. Hell, what do they mean it's against the Negroes? Who's suppressing the Negroes? Did you see that case over in Mississippi the other day? A Negro and a white man came in a restaurant together and the owner served the Negro, and then he turned to the white fellow and said, 'The law says I have to serve this man, but the law doesn't say anything about a sonuvabitch like you, and I'm not serving you.'

"The Mississippi action wasn't violence against Negroes. It was Federal troops and marshals firing on young white boys. Suppose they did harangue them. Since when has it been against the law to harangue? Sure, I'm for *law* and order, but I also believe in the Federal Government obeying the law, and it's the duty of the state to preserve law. I'll do anything necessary to keep my foot in the door to obstruct this attempt to push Negroes into our schools. I'm going to ask the legislature to give me authority so I can raise lawful questions about the legality of whether we have a right to decide who shall go to our schools or shall the Federal Government dictate to us."

Although the Montgomery *Advertiser*, which

says Alabama's governor.

supported Wallace's candidacy, has called his "stand in the door" plan a "fantasy," and a Birmingham editor speaks of him as "the loneliest man in Alabama," almost everyone agrees that Wallace desires more than anything else to confront Federal troops and make them use physical force on him. It also is obvious that he would prefer this confrontation to take place at the University of Alabama, which for six years has been under a continuing Federal order to accept a Negro student and seems likely to comply next fall.

But the University of Alabama is a far different place than it was in 1956 when the admission of Negro coed Autherine Lucy brought both violence and notoriety to its quiet campus. Under an able and suave new president, Dr. Frank Rose, it has raised its academic standards, hiked salaries to lure outstanding scholars to its faculty, is in the midst of a $42 million building program and is almost truculently determined not to let George Wallace or anybody else use it as a battleground.

President Rose made that clear recently when he said, "This university cannot go through another crisis such as occurred in 1956 or happened at the University of Mississippi. . . . [It] must never become the scene of mob violence, battle troops or national news media seeking sensational headlines."

The university's trustees, alumni association, faculty and student body all quickly backed him up by passing resolutions saying, in effect, that if a Negro student is accepted by the university they will not raise any objections, and they expect the police to see that outsiders do not interrupt the school's normal routine. Various powerful emissaries also have carried the word to Wallace that the state constitution states that the university is under control of a board of trustees and, short of a constitutional amendment, nobody at the university will recognize Wallace's right to decide any student's entry.

If Wallace stands in the door anywhere, Birmingham may be the place. Whether he will be welcomed there or encounter formidable pressure to stay out of its affairs will, among other things, be settled in an election being held this month. Since even many people in Birmingham believe this election is the result of a sudden yeasty transformation that began taking place under the city's surface last fall, it is necessary to explain that the groundwork really was laid back in February, 1961.

A group of businessmen, worried about the bad publicity the city was getting and its slow rate of growth, asked the Chamber of Commerce to appoint a committee from the local bar association to look into the advisability of changing Birmingham's three-man city commission form of government. Specifically, it had long been felt that if some way could be devised to guarantee them a voice in city hall, Birmingham's large and prosperous suburban communities such as Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills and Homewood, probably could be persuaded to join the city. Not only would this almost double the city's population to 640,000, it also would make some of Birmingham's richest and brainiest business and professional men legal residents of the city and presumably make them start taking an interest in its affairs.

Bomb damage at Bethel Baptist Church is viewed by Rev. V. C. Provitt. Blast occurred last December.

BIRMINGHAM / Bold leadership on the segregation issue has not been permitted in the city hall.

Mild-mannered Albert Boutwell, city's best hope for racial peace, seeks votes in mayoralty race.

Near the end of 1961 the panel of lawyers reported that a mayor-council form of government would do the trick. While this report was being handed around and discussed, a whole series of events roiled Birmingham and created a general feeling of dissatisfaction. A drop in steel demand increased unemployment, Negroes started boycotting downtown stores, and there was more bad publicity about the city's race troubles.

Finally, when city commissioners closed down the city's park system rather than comply with a Federal desegregation order, and Little Leaguers, den mothers, scoutmasters and outraged golfers began howling, a group of young lawyers and businessmen organized a "Citizens for Progress" movement. In one day they collected 11,000 signatures on petitions demanding a referendum on a change in city government.

The election was held last November and the mayor-council proposal squeezed through with a bare majority. Birmingham will vote for a mayor and nine councilmen on March 5. Since they can now be guaranteed a voice in city affairs, there is a good possibility that Birmingham's suburbs may eventually be persuaded to join the city. Since the Negroes have 10,000 of the city's present 80,000 votes, there also is an excellent possibility that they may be able to elect a councilman, which will certainly improve race relations in the city.

But whether 10 men in city hall instead of three will be an improvement obviously depends almost entirely on who is elected mayor. Most cure-minded groups are supporting and confidently expect the election of Albert Boutwell, a mild-mannered 58-year-old lawyer and a former lieutenant governor and state senator. Boutwell ran for governor last year but had to withdraw from the campaign after he collapsed from exhaustion. His name heads the bill that keeps Alabama's schools segregated; Boutwell is a staunch conservative. His best quality in the eyes of most Birmingham voters is that he speaks soberly and thoughtfully and is not the kind of man to attract unfavorable publicity.

Another candidate is Eugene (Bull) Connor, Birmingham's best-known citizen, who has been one of the city's three commissioners since the mid-'30's (except one term, 1954–58). Bull likes his nickname so much he uses it officially. While few people think he is a shoo-in, Bull Connor is "a man of the people," as the expression goes, and he'll certainly give Boutwell a race. During his long tenure as a city commissioner, Connor, among other things, was responsible for Birmingham's police department (he often is erroneously identified as the city's police chief or police commissioner). Southerners have always been partial to politicians who are part clown, part humble public servant, and part hard-boiled administrator, and nobody can deny that in 65-year-old Bull Connor all these qualities are powerfully evident.

Most people in Birmingham refer to Connor, as Ole Bull and, until fairly recently, at least, they usually smiled when they said it. They know Ole Bull as a jug-eared, paunchy, overgrown country boy who first worked as a telegrapher, later made his name a household word in Birmingham by the uninhibited corn-pone way he announced baseball games over the radio. In 1936, for no good reason except that he made them laugh and seemed to be exactly like them, only

more so, they elected him a city commissioner.

Since the president of the city commission in those days was a one-legged, strong-minded one-time police constable named Jimmy Jones, who ran both city hall and Birmingham with an iron hand, most voters probably felt Ole Bull couldn't do much harm anyway. They were pleased when Ole Bull actually proved to be no fool, but a hardworking and honest, if somewhat buffoonish, city official. Ole Bull fell from grace for one term back in the early 1950's after a city detective with whom he had been feuding surprised him in a hotel room with a woman secretary. There was no indication of improper conduct, but he was required to pay a small fine. After working mightily for four years to convince the electorate that he had been framed, Ole Bull was returned to city hall.

As his name implies, Ole Bull is a colorful spieler, with a knack for saying things that attract attention. Since he speaks with a gravelly croak, dislikes junketeering journalists and sometimes bawls out city-hall petitioners whom he considers his inferiors, Ole Bull often is described as tough. He likes this appellation. When Ole Bull growled that whites and Negroes "were not going to segregate together" as long as he had anything to do with it, Birmingham laughed and was not aware that the rest of the country was laughing with a different tone. Ole Bull is fond of calling himself *the* segregation man. He has bellowed defiance at the Supreme Court, offered to fight the Attorney General, vowed that "blood would run in the streets" of Birmingham before it was desegregated. Birmingham police arrested a U.S. Senator who went there to address a meeting because he entered through a door marked COLORED. The police have hauled off Negroes by the carload when they have attempted peaceful demonstrations.

Voice of segregation

Through the years Ole Bull has created such a ruckus, in fact, that his name has become synonymous with Birmingham, or, as a national publication put it, "the voice of a police chief, Bull Connor, has emerged as the voice of one of the greatest cities in the United States." The publication missed Connor's position but it got the voice right.

It took people in Birmingham a long time to realize that Ole Bull's bullfrog voice was creating a strange impression of the city in other parts of the country. Some of them still find it difficult to believe that the clownish man in their city hall has become to people in other parts of the country an example of a die-hard segregationist.

The vast difference between the way Ole Bull is viewed at home and elsewhere was vividly illustrated when a television crew came to Birmingham to put together a CBS documentary. One of the persons interviewed was a matronly churchwoman who scathingly denounced Ole Bull for "jumping up and yelling, 'Nigger, nigger,'" every time he wanted some votes. "Aren't you afraid of Bull Connor?" the interviewer asked. The lady was as surprised as most people in Birmingham would have been. "Afraid of Bull Connor?" she repeated incredulously. "No. That's amusing."

Nowadays a lot of people blame Ole Bull for giving Birmingham bad publicity, and they are eager to explain that he is neither the voice nor a fair representation of the city's citizens. This may be true, but even a visitor kindly disposed to Birmingham soon discovers that it richly deserves some of the unfavorable publicity it has been getting, and in the case of Bull Connor this is certainly true. If a majority of the people had not approved of the sentiments Ole Bull was spouting, his sensitive political antenna would have picked up the signal and he would have moderated his tones or shut up completely. It is obvious that most of them did approve, and what really disturbs them now is that his intemperate and raucous voice has attracted a lot of unexpected and unwelcome attention.

Majority opinion in a democracy, particularly at the local level, is not simply a blessing but can be turned into an unconscionable tyranny; and Birmingham cannot evade the harsh truth that on the segregation issue it has not permitted bold, progressive leadership in city hall. On the contrary, it shamelessly has badgered and pressured its elected officials until, sooner or later, all of them developed a kamikaze determination to maintain the *status quo* at any cost.

There is, for example, Art Hanes, a handsome and vigorous man of 45, who last year was elected president of the city commission, a post which gives him the title of mayor, though he shares equal power with Bull Connor and another commissioner, J. T. Waggoner. No city could have asked for a more personable mayor than Art Hanes, son of a beloved Birmingham minister, married to a gracious lady from a fine Birmingham family, a lawyer, ex-FBI agent, a PT-boat commander with a distinguished record during World War II.

Nobody is quite sure what happened to gutsy, strong-willed Art Hanes after he entered pressure-packed city hall; perhaps he doesn't know himself. But Hanes gave his supporters a rude jolt when he voted along with his fellow commissioners to close down the city's entire park system—parks, playgrounds, golf courses and community houses—after a Federal court ordered them desegregated. Furthermore, during the uproar that followed, Hanes vigorously defended the commission's action, and his friends and neighbors were aghast to discover that moderate, widely traveled Art Hanes, who has a son at Princeton and a sister who has devoted her life to mission work in Africa, sounded almost exactly like Ole Bull: "I'll never give up either to integration or Communism. They are one and the same as far as I'm concerned. . . . I don't think any of you want a nigger mayor . . . or a nigger police chief . . . but I tell you that's what'll happen if we play dead on this park integration."

Under bitter protest, the city finally has been forced to desegregate its public transport system, waiting-room and restaurant facilities at its airport, and two bus and two railroad terminals, but that is all. Besides closing down its park system rather than allow its Negro and white citizens to mingle, Birmingham has sacrificed its baseball team, no longer receives an annual visit from the Metropolitan Opera and is by-passed by most theatrical companies touring with Broadway hits.

But these are only petty annoyances compared with some grave economic and social woes which have developed because of the city's reputation for intransigence and violence. Partly because people believe it is a bad place to live, work and raise families, Birmingham's metropolitan population increased only about 14 percent during the period 1950–60, although metropolitan areas in the United States as a whole increased by 26.4 percent. During the same period Atlanta, Birmingham's old rival, grew by almost 40 percent and Memphis by 30 percent.

Outgoing Mayor Hanes, once thought of as moderate, now talks like a segregationist.

Largely because the mere mention of Birmingham sets alarm signals flashing in the minds of manufacturers who want to build new plants in the South, the city has been unable to lure any new industries to speak of for the last five or six years. Without new industries to take up an unemployment slack caused by automation in its mining and steel industries, Birmingham has suffered a drop of 10 percent in the number of jobs it has to offer in the last five years alone, though there has been an increase in jobs in the U.S. Even if it just holds its own, experts say that Birmingham must create from 8,000 to 12,000 new jobs a year. This does not give Birmingham a very rosy future and, by comparison with more vigorous cities in the region, it already is losing its status as a major Southern city.

A typical example of how Birmingham is losing new industries is the case of a company that wanted to build a Southern plant to make products out of steel. The Chamber of Commerce beguiled the company with an account of Birmingham's advantages, both the state and city made lavish concessions, and Alabama's governor even sent a state plane to bring company officials to Birmingham.

Negotiations still were going on when a busload of Freedom Riders arrived at a local bus station on Mother's Day, 1961. The Riders had telegraphed city officials the time of their arrival, and their movements were being watched carefully because they had encountered violence from

BIRMINGHAM / Most community leaders feel integration is inevitable, but they are afraid to speak up.

the time they crossed the state line. Yet police were conspicuously absent when the Riders reached Birmingham. A mob was waiting, and it charged the Freedom Riders, swinging lengths of pipe and blackjacks. Before it was through for the day, the mob also battered a newspaper photographer and roughed up a TV newsman. Newspapers all over the country were still playing up Birmingham's Mother's Day Riot when the company sent its regrets and said Birmingham was out of the question. It eventually put its plant in Tennessee, although it has to ship in its steel from Birmingham.

The Wall Street Journal started a story with a quote from Sidney Smyer, president of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce: "These racial incidents have given us a black eye we'll be a long time trying to forget."

Another Birmingham businessman was less restrained: "We let twenty-one college-age kids looking for trouble come into our town and make a half million of us look like damn red-necks—besides losing us a lot of money, time and jobs."

Birmingham's most pressing economic problem is one that almost nobody wants to talk about. For almost a year now its downtown stores have been slowly strangled by a Negro boycott which is about 90 percent effective. Some people believe it is possible that every major department store, as well as many smaller stores, showed a loss for 1962. "It stands to reason," said a newspaperman. "Negroes make up almost forty percent of the population in this trade area. Take away twenty-five or thirty percent of any store's customers and it loses money."

Whether this glib assessment is accurate is anybody's guess. The only people who really know how much the boycott has cut business are the merchants themselves; they refuse to discuss losses. They speak warily even when discussing the boycott for fear that if they sound as if they are weakening, their white customers will boycott them also. "If I told you this is my worst year since I started in 1932, you wouldn't believe me, would you?" asked one store owner. "Don't ask me about it, just tell me what to do about it," said another.

In desperation some stores removed COLORED signs on washroom doors and above drinking fountains. With one exception the signs were replaced after police threatened to prosecute storekeepers for violating the city's segregation ordinances. Since Alabama law forbids boycotts, Birmingham's Negroes also are chary about discussing the boycott; when they refer to it at all they call it a "selective-buying campaign." The boycott was inspired by the 800 students at Miles College, a run-down Negro school on the western outskirts of Birmingham, and it is the first time the city's Negro community, which is split into numerous cliques and factions based on income, religion and even class, has ever united solidly behind any movement.

Although many Negroes were slow to realize it, the boycott is about the most powerful weapon they could have hit upon to make the white community gain a new awareness of them and their demands. For since Birmingham is so highly unionized and they draw prevailing wages, the city's Negroes are a prosperous lot by Southern Negro standards. Nearly 50 percent of them own their own homes, and Negro residential sections—with their manicured lawns, trimmed hedges, and every type of house from prefab ranch to impressive brick Tudor—are among the city's showplaces.

More than 40 percent of Birmingham's Negroes own automobiles; 92 percent own electric refrigerators; and while 34 percent of the Negro population still earn $2,000 a year or less, a whopping 64.6 percent range through the $2,000–$7,000 bracket, and 1.4 percent have an annual income of more than $7,000.

On a normal, day-to-day basis relations between the races are surprisingly good in Birmingham. The Negro shoeshine boys, elevator operators, mill hands, and business and professional men one meets in Birmingham are, in the main, friendly and courteous. White households with even modest means usually employ a Negro domestic in some capacity. Fights and shoving matches do occur on buses now and then. Some whites claim that Negroes flaunt their newfound rights to sit where they please, and some Negroes claim that whites are rude and overbearing. But there was no serious trouble until last December when a bus driver shot and killed a Negro passenger who allegedly drew a knife after they had exchanged words.

Are the whites worried?

The Negro community is walking with special care these days because it realizes the slightest flare-up between the races will be exploited by Ole Bull in his race for mayor. Asked about the worries of the Negro community, Orzell Billingsley, the alert and personable young attorney who handles most of the N.A.A.C.P.'s cases in Birmingham said, "I don't know of any particular worries or fears. If anybody is worried, it must be the white community."

All of the South's big cities prefer segregation to integration, but even more they prefer continued prosperity to economic blight, social change to civic suicide. What makes Birmingham so notoriously different? It is not because it is more closely bound by Southern traditions. Although Birmingham often seems ferociously Confederate, the land where it now stands was a prosperous farm during the War Between the States, and the city was not incorporated until 1871, seven years after Sherman burned Atlanta.

From its earliest days, in fact, Birmingham had more of the flavor of a Western boom town than a Southern community. During the years of its most phenomenal growth, it was a lusty brawling place that welcomed all comers, proud that it was free of stultifying traditions and was known as the New South. As recently as 1941 the WPA guidebook on Alabama, written by Alabamians, described Birmingham as "the most unsouthern of southern cities," and added, "Birmingham people are a new type of Southerner. They are not so much concerned about where a person was born . . . as about his political opinions and how much money he has." This still is true.

The people of Birmingham are no more backward than people in other Southern cities. Although they don't like it, most of the leading business and professional people in Birmingham realize that integration is inevitable, and probably a majority of them also feel that it is time to start making plans so the transition can be made smoothly and peacefully—and as slowly as possible. The reason they do not speak up is, quite simply, fear. It is not the eye-rolling, quaking fear seen in police states, and people in Birmingham prefer to call it by other names, but it is fear all the same.

It is fear of being ostracized or called names, fear of losing status, jobs, customers, clients and advertising, and, more often than would seem possible among a hardy people, fear of chili-parlor hoodlums who have wrapped themselves in Confederate flags although they are upholding no tradition but hate and no custom except violence.

Last May about 150 civic Big Mules were summoned to the Chamber of Commerce by word-of-mouth and told emphatically by a clergyman, a lawyer and a leading businessman that unless the Federal courts altered their system the Birmingham schools would be ordered desegregated by the opening of the fall term in 1963. Birmingham's elite had better start preparing for it. Although 110 of the men present pledged their support to any program that would permit desegregation to be carried out peacefully, none has spoken out boldly or carried the message to the general public. The ironic thing, of course, is that white leaders fear to expose themselves to the almost identical risks that Negro leaders are now accustomed to facing.

It is fear that causes a fine newspaper editor to say to a visiting reporter, "For God's sake, don't say too many nice things about me, or you'll spoil my usefulness." It is fear that prompts an industrialist to say, "Please don't use my name. I made a speech along these lines a year ago, and it's only here lately that I feel safe in leaving my wife alone nights." It is fear that causes a utility-company official to refuse to head up a committee to meet with Negro leaders and discuss desegregation, and fear that caused a group of prominent businessmen to choose him in the first place because "white people won't boycott a utility company."

It is fear that silences voices of moderation; if this silence is broken, hoodlums are likely to look up the offender and dump filth on his front porch. It is fear that makes a newspaperman keep a loaded shotgun near his front door. It is fear that causes presidents of large corporations to speak with sweet reasonableness about the inevitability of integration and always add: "This is off the record, of course."

It is fear that has always made Birmingham's elected officials follow rather than lead the voters, and it is fear that prevents all the many people who believe it to be a fact from speaking out boldly and saying, "We are going to have to integrate our schools whether we like it or not, and we are a community of fools if we don't start doing something about it now."

It was fear that made my Aunt Margaret say, when she heard she was mentioned in this piece, "Be careful what you say or the Kluxers will burn a cross in front of my house." Fear is the real shame of Birmingham. THE END

Governor Wallace defies integration forces: "I draw the line, toss the gauntlet."