their televisions put relieved Americans in the perfect mood to answer a clarion call. On May 24, Johnson received a letter from Webb that said: “The President has approved the program you submitted, with very few changes, and the message will go up on Wednesday.”

The message was part of an extraordinary address to a joint session of Congress on May 25, 1961. Kennedy listed the initiatives by which he would wage the Cold War with renewed vigor. Last but not least came this: “Finally, if we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny. . . I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”

Because Congress did commit to that goal and NASA did meet that goal, Kennedy’s place in history is partly defined by it. Apollo was a rhapsody of engineering and the human spirit, a truly giant leap for humankind. But it was also a melancholy achievement, because what scholars call “the Kennedy effect” turned out to be a drag on progress in space. To make a given technological achievement the measure of all things (“second in space means second in everything”) can only skew progress for a season and then kill it altogether once the race is over and won. Only now, four decades after Apollo 11, has NASA even been invited to think about returning to the Moon, just as a fiscal crisis ensures it won’t happen. Indeed, the origins, execution, and effects of the original decision to go to the Moon can teach us Americans a great deal about ourselves.

KING MAKER

During demonstrations in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. took perhaps the most fateful decision made during the civil rights era

By Clayborne Carson

On April 12, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr. faced the prospect of failure in his most significant civil rights campaign. For all his generally acknowledged leadership in the escalating southern black protest movement, King had actually never initiated a major demonstration. Depicted in the press as America’s Gandhi, he had disappointed some of his youthful admirers when he declined to join the May 1961 Freedom Rides, and when he left jail on bond after his arrest during the subsequent mass protests in Albany, Georgia. King admitted that the Albany campaign was a “partial victory” at best. “Our protest was so vague that we got nothing, and the people were left very depressed and in despair.”

Birmingham offered an opportunity for redemption, a chance for King and his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to demonstrate that they could still give focus and direction to the freedom struggle. Considering the violent history of “Bombingham,” King knew that segregationist resistance would be fierce but a victory would “break the back of segregation all over the nation.”

Despite extensive planning and preparation, however, the campaign ran into a succession of setbacks. Its start was delayed to avoid inadvertently aiding the mayoral campaign of racist police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, who, according to King, prided himself on knowing how to handle the Negro and keep him in his “place.” King saw Birmingham as a “police state, presided over by a governor—George Wallace—whose inauguration vow had been a pledge of ‘segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!’”

After Conner disputed the apparent victory of a more moderate segregationist in the April 2 runoff, the SCLC launched a series of sit-ins and mass meetings designed to encourage a boycott of downtown white-owned stores. The escalating protests, resulting in more than 400 arrests, discouraged normally brisk pre-Easter retail sales, putting pressure on business leaders and the local community. City officials responded by obtaining a court injunction against further protests.

King was prepared to violate the injunction (something he had never done before) by leading a march on April 12. Good Friday, but soon faced another obstacle when the bondsman announced that he would no longer continue to furnish bail for the demonstrators. King felt responsible for those who were waiting to be bailed, and realized that civil disobedience would be sharply reduced if volunteers knew they would have to endure long jail times until they were tried.

One of his colleagues warned him of the dilemma he faced: “We need a lot of money. We need it now. You are the only one who has the contacts to get it. If you go to jail, we are lost. The battle of Birmingham is lost.” But King knew that not going to jail also held considerable risks. “What would be the verdict of the country about a man who had encouraged hundreds of people to make a stunning sacrifice and then excused himself?”

Sitting in Birmingham’s Gaston Motel listening to his colleagues’ conflicting advice, King realized that he faced a crucial test of leadership. “I was alone in that crowded room,” he recalled. Excusing himself from the debate, he went off by himself. “I thought I was standing at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought of the
King soon found himself in solitary confinement

Without King’s courageous action and ultimate triumph in Birmingham, it is unlikely that he would have had the chance to deliver his famous “I have a dream” speech. The march itself, if it had occurred at all that summer, would have been much less high-hearted and much more subdued if King had just suffered a major defeat. It is also unlikely that a defeated King would have been named Time magazine’s Man of the Year in December 1963 or would have received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

Of course King’s moral leadership might have survived a setback in Birmingham, but in 1963 there were other leaders, including Malcolm X, who were prepared to challenge King’s preeminence, and there was considerable black support for more militant alternatives. King’s current stature as one of his whole nation’s great leaders honored with a national holiday should not blind us to the possibility that the struggle for racial justice in America might well have taken a far more destructive course if King had failed in Birmingham.