

Bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, 1963

Introduction

On the morning of September 15, 1963, Denise McNair (age 11), Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Cynthia Wesley (age 14), and Carole Robertson (age 14) were killed when nineteen sticks of dynamite exploded at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Fourteen others were injured in the bombing.

Just five days after the bombing of the church, Reverend C. Herbert Oliver wrote a “Report on Birmingham,” making an appeal on behalf of the Inter-Citizens Committee to prospective supporters and documenting the violence that was consuming the city.

The Inter-Citizens Committee was formed in April 1960 at Trinity Baptist Church in Birmingham by Oliver and the reverends Harold D. Long, G. L. Terrell, James Lowell Ware, and J. C. Wilson. The Committee documented “cases of alleged rights violations, both official and non-official” from 1960–1965, sending their accounts, mainly by mail, to press and government representatives nationwide.

In his report, Reverend Oliver catalogs seven other bombings and twelve instances of police brutality against African Americans in Birmingham from March to September 1963. Six of the twenty attacks he lists in this six-month period occurred in the wake of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In his words, “The savage, brutal, murderous, and ungodly bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church . . . has revealed to the whole world the evil of racism. Those few terrifying moments of the blast said what we have been trying to say to the nation for years, that there exists in Alabama the most unconscionable disregard for man and God on the part of some.”

A witness in the subsequent trial claimed that Robert Edward Chambliss, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, placed the bomb in the church. However, on October 8, 1963, Chambliss was found not guilty of murder and given a \$100 fine for being in possession of 122 sticks of dynamite without a permit. When the case was reopened in 1977, Chambliss’s niece testified against him and he was convicted of murdering the girls.

A 1965 memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover identified the bombers as Robert Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Thomas Edwin Blanton, and Frank Herman Cash. This evidence remained hidden until 1997. Blanton was convicted in 2001, Cherry in 2002. Cash died before he could be prosecuted.

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Excerpt

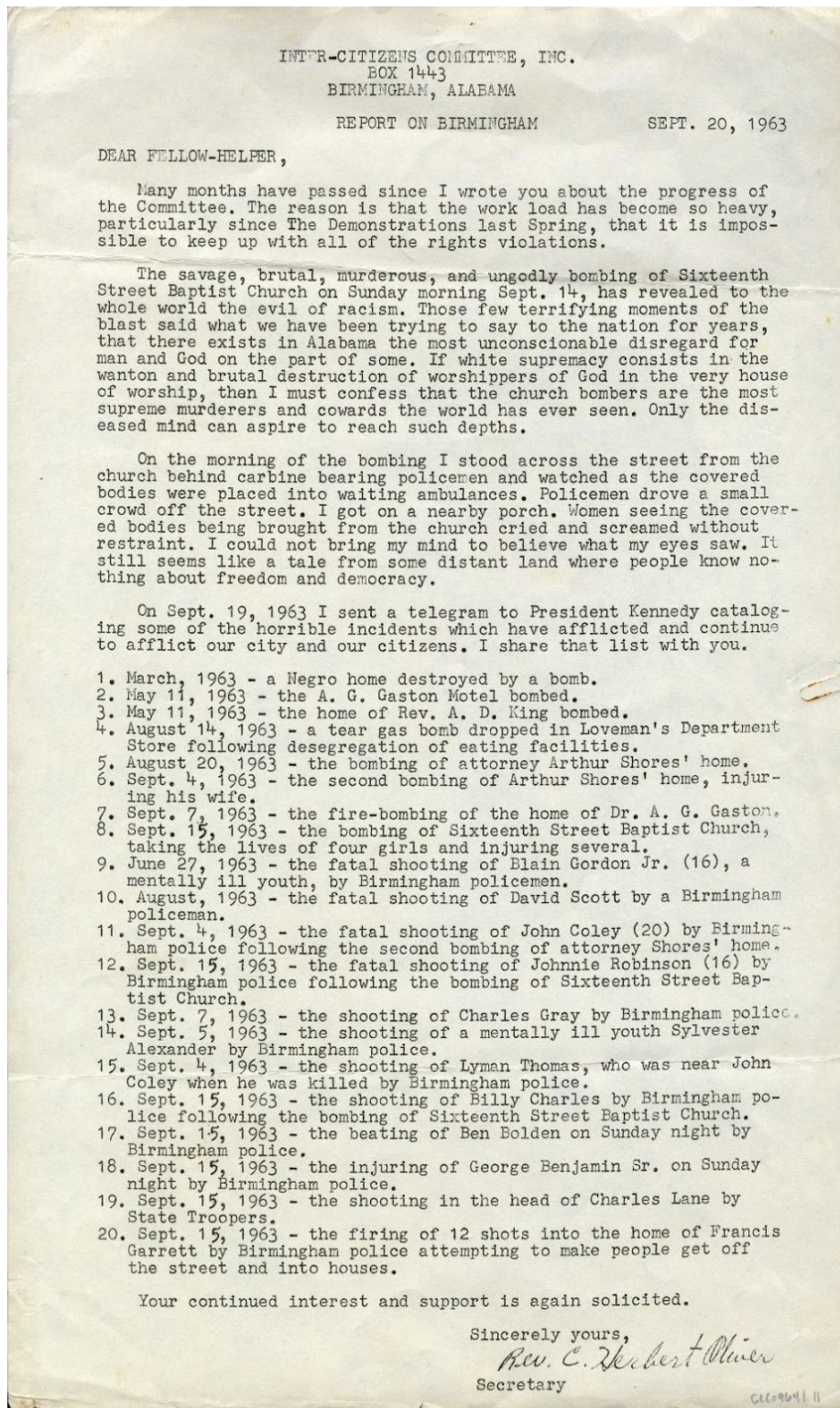
On the morning of the bombing I stood across the street from the church behind carbine bearing policemen and watched as the covered bodies were placed into waiting ambulances. Policemen drove a small crowd off the street. I got on a nearby porch. Women seeing the covered bodies being brought from the church cried and screamed without restraint. I could not bring my mind to believe what my eyes saw. It still seems like a tale from some distant land where people know nothing about freedom and democracy.

Questions for Discussion

1. C. Herbert Oliver described the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as “savage, brutal, murderous, and ungodly.” Have you witnessed a local or national incident that you would describe in similar terms?
2. In the third paragraph of his report, Oliver powerfully conveys the ineffable horror of events as he watched them unfold in Birmingham on September 15, 1963. What is Oliver’s tone in this paragraph? Is there a shift in register from the previous paragraphs? Explain.
3. In the days after the bombing, Oliver compiled a chronology of violent attacks that year on African Americans in Birmingham, sent it by telegram to President Kennedy, and then distributed it by mail to other potential supporters. If you were to assemble a list of injustices today, what would it include (civil rights issues, economic issues, school issues, etc.)? By which digital or print means would you disseminate it, and to whose attention would you address it?
4. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the Birmingham police killed a sixteen-year-old African American boy, shot two men (one of them in the head), and beat, injured, and fired upon others. What does this reveal about law enforcement in the South in the 1960s?

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Images



C. Herbert Oliver, "Report on Birmingham," September 20, 1963
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09641.11)

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Transcript

INTER-CITIZENS COMMITTEE, INC.
BOX 1443
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA
REPORT ON BIRMINGHAM

SEPT. 20, 1963

DEAR FELLOW-HELPER,

Many months have passed since I wrote you about the progress of the Committee. The reason is that the work load has become so heavy, particularly since The Demonstrations last Spring, that it is impossible to keep up with all of the rights violations.

The savage, brutal, murderous, and ungodly bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on Sunday morning Sept. 14 [sic], has revealed to the whole world the evil of racism. Those few terrifying moments of the blast said what we have been trying to say to the nation for years, that there exists in Alabama the most unconscionable disregard for man and God on the part of some. If white supremacy consists in the wanton and brutal destruction of worshippers of God in the very house of worship, then I must confess that the church bombers are the most supreme murderers and cowards the world has ever seen. Only the diseased mind can aspire to reach such depths.

On the morning of the bombing I stood across the street from the church behind carbine bearing policemen and watched as the covered bodies were placed into waiting ambulances. Policemen drove a small crowd off the street. I got on a nearby porch. Women seeing the covered bodies being brought from the church cried and screamed without restraint. I could not bring my mind to believe what my eyes saw. It still seems like a tale from some distant land where people know nothing about freedom and democracy.

On Sept. 19, 1963 I sent a telegram to President Kennedy cataloging some of the horrible incidents which have afflicted and continue to afflict our city and our citizens. I share that list with you.

1. March, 1963 – a Negro home destroyed by a bomb.
2. May 11, 1963 – the A. G. Gaston Motel bombed.
3. May 11, 1963 – the home of Rev. A. D. King bombed.
4. August 14, 1963 – a tear gas bomb dropped in Loveman's Department Store following desegregation of eating facilities.
5. August 20, 1963 – the bombing of attorney Arthur Shores' home.

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6. Sept. 4, 1963 – the second bombing of Arthur Shores' home, injuring his wife.
7. Sept. 7, 1963 – the fire-bombing of the home of Dr. A. G. Gaston.
8. Sept. 15, 1963 – the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, taking the lives of four girls and injuring several.
9. June 27, 1963 – the fatal shooting of Blain Gordon Jr. (16), a mentally ill youth, by Birmingham policemen.
10. August, 1963 – the fatal shooting of David Scott by a Birmingham policeman.
11. Sept. 4, 1963 – the fatal shooting of John Coley (20) by Birmingham police following the second bombing of attorney Shores' home.
12. Sept. 15, 1963 – the fatal shooting of Johnnie Robinson (16) by Birmingham police following the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.
13. Sept. 7, 1963 – the shooting of Charles Gray by Birmingham police.
14. Sept. 5, 1963 – the shooting of a mentally ill youth Sylvester Alexander by Birmingham police.
15. Sept. 4, 1963 – the shooting of Lyman Thomas, who was near John Coley when he was killed by Birmingham police.
16. Sept. 15, 1963 – the shooting of Billy Charles by Birmingham police following the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.
17. Sept. 15, 1963 – the beating of Ben Bolden on Sunday night by Birmingham police.
18. Sept. 15, 1963 – the injuring of George Benjamin Sr. on Sunday night by Birmingham police.
19. Sept. 15, 1963 – the shooting in the head of Charles Lane by State Troopers.
20. Sept. 15, 1963 – the firing of 12 shots into the home of Francis Garrett by Birmingham police attempting to make people get off the street and into houses.

Your continued interest and support is again solicited.

Sincerely yours,
Rev C. Herbert Oliver
Secretary