CHAPTER
SIX

ECHOES OF A SUNDAY MORNING

FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE BIRMINGHAM BOMBING THAT KILLED FOUR GIRLS, THE CITY SHOWS JUST HOW FAR IT HAS COME

BY JON MEACHAM

Recognition *Last year the four girls who lost their lives in the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church, at right, were posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal. From left: McNair, Robertson, Collins and Wesley*

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD William Bell was getting ready for church when he heard the blast. It was 10:22 a.m. on the morning of Sunday, Sept. 15, 1963, and the sound of the dynamite exploding at the 16th Street Baptist Church roared across Birmingham. The noise startled even the Bells, who lived nearly three miles away on Fifth Avenue Southwest in the city's Titusville neighborhood. Young Bell's father rushed him into the family car and they drove to the church, where they found chaos and tragedy: four young girls, Bell's contemporaries, had been massacred by a white supremacists' bomb: Denise McNair, 11; Carol Robertson, 14; Cynthia Wesley, 14; and Addie Mae Collins, 14. "Every individual in this town knew at least one of the girls or knew their families," Bell says. "Carol Robertson is a cousin of mine. That impacted our family. Denise McNair went to school with my brother. Her mother taught my brother. You felt it, the pain of it."

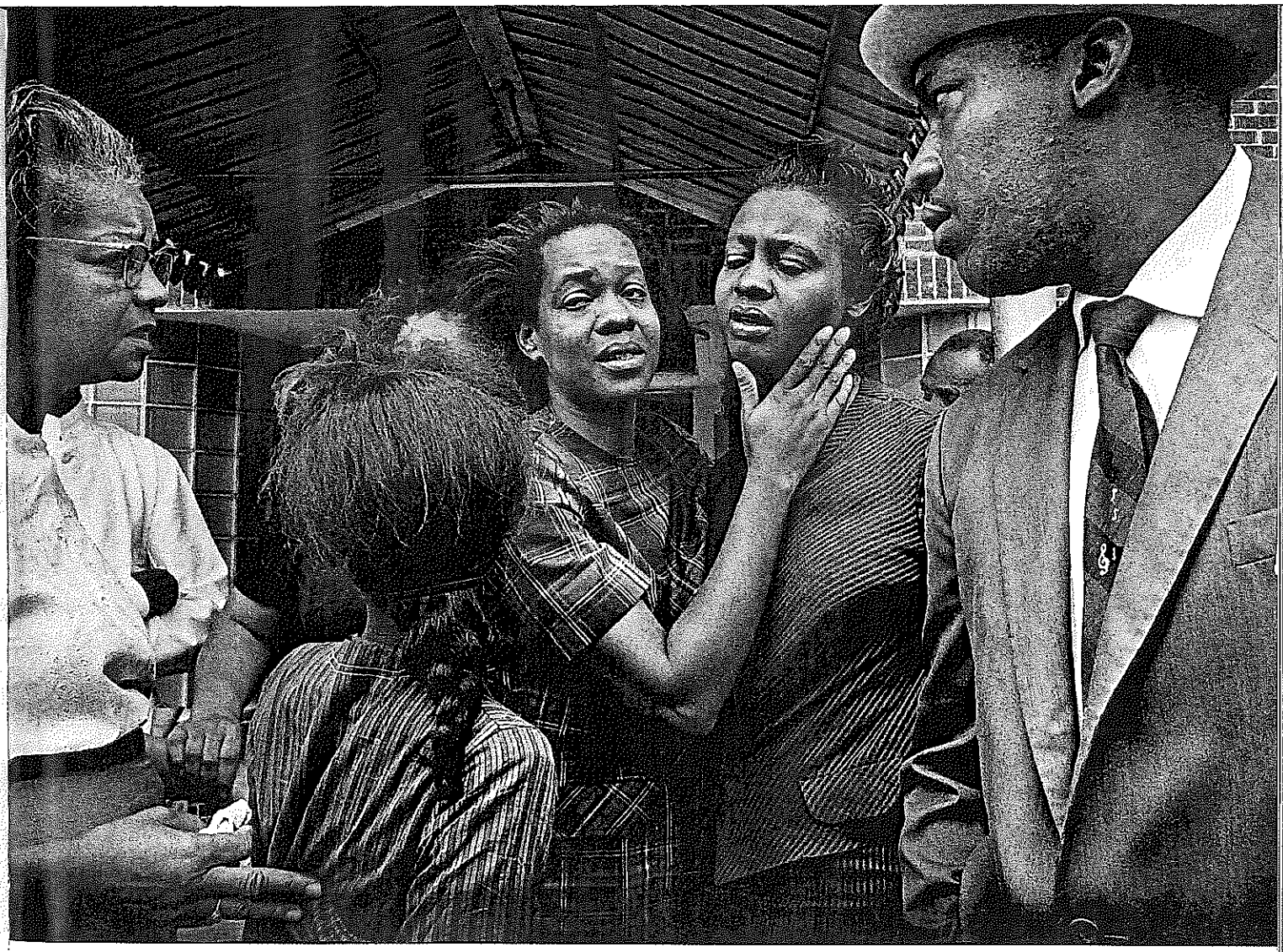
Fifty Septembers later, William Bell, now the mayor of Birmingham, presides over a city faced with the perennially complicated task of bearing witness to the past while simultaneously moving beyond it. The attack on the 16th Street Baptist Church was an act of terror and of martyrdom that stands as one of the great turning points in American history. Together with the August March on Washington, the September murder of the four little girls in what was known as "Bombingham" for its persistent racial violence opened the way for Lyndon Johnson's successful push for legislation in 1964 after the November assassination of President Kennedy.

September 15th was the annual "Youth Sunday" at the 16th Street church. The girls were gathering before the 11 a.m. service—a service they were to lead in the sanctuary. They were excited; it was a big day. They had just finished the day's Sunday School lesson in Mrs. Ella C. Demand's class (its title: "The Love That Forgives") and had adjourned to a lounge in the northeast corner of the building to prepare themselves for the main liturgy. Then the dynamite hidden by a group of Ku Klux Klansmen went off.

Tragically, the attack was only the most dramatic of many such hours of violence in the South in general and in Birmingham in particular in those years. The *New York Times* reported that there had been 50 unsolved bombings of African American property in the city since World War II, and the white power structure, from the governor to the mayor to the mass of white citizens, showed far too little interest in solving anything.

Yet there had been some hope a few months before. In June 1963, in reaction to the widespread police attacks on nonviolent protestors, including children, President Kennedy had delivered a remarkable speech from the Oval Office proposing civil rights legislation. "Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise," Kennedy had said. "The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South ... A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all."

The forces of reaction were ready to strike, and strike they did. Medgar Evers of the NAACP was assassinated in Mississippi just hours after Kennedy's address. Alabama Governor George C. Wallace also took his "stand" in the schoolhouse door the day of the president's speech, fighting the integration of the University of Alabama. A canny politician, Wallace so believed in his defense of segregation that he was about to test the presidential waters

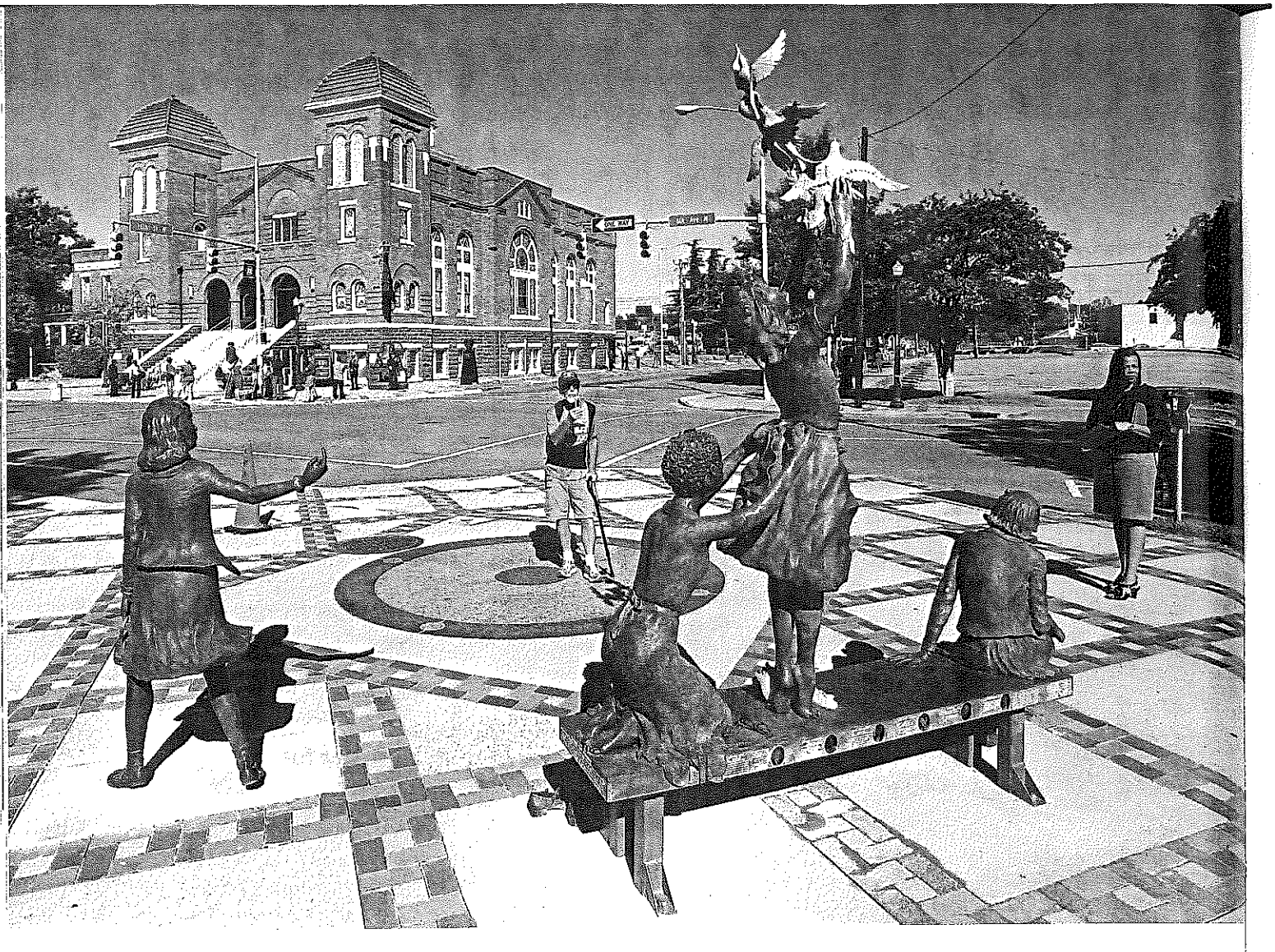


Mourning *Juanita Jones, center, comforts her sister, Maxine McNair, whose daughter Denise was one of the four young girls killed by the Klan's bomb.*

by putting his name on the Maryland Democratic ballot. The governor sensed that his flamboyant defiance of the federal government's attempts to enforce integration would play beyond Alabama—a sign that neither Kennedy's June speech nor the March on Washington had fundamentally changed long-held white views on race and power.

Then came the bombing. "There is a great deal of frustration and despair and confusion in the Negro community," Martin Luther King Jr. told Kennedy afterward. "And there is a feeling of being alone and not being protected. If you walk the street, you aren't safe. If you stay at home, you aren't safe—there's a danger of a bombing. If you're in church now, it isn't safe. So the Negro feels that everywhere he goes, if he remains stationary, he's in danger of some physical violence."

Kennedy was sympathetic but felt constrained. The most practical of men, he told King and others that he did not see how the deaths of the four little girls really altered the political calculus that prevented him from sending in federal troops or doing more than he was already doing in trying to move civil rights legislation through a reluctant Congress. "Now it's tough for the Negro community," Kennedy allowed. "... And I know that this bombing is particularly difficult. But if you look, as you know, at any of these struggles over a period,



Memory *In a park in the shadow of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, a memorial honoring the girls was unveiled on the 50th anniversary of their deaths.*

across the world, it is a very dangerous effort. So everybody just has to keep their nerve." He would send two emissaries to Birmingham. One of them was the former football coach at West Point.

Given the momentous nature of the times, it is understandable that the significance of the 16th Street bombing was not immediately clear to those struggling with the complexities of the battle against Jim Crow. So much was happening so fast; so much blood was being shed.

Hearing the news of the bombing on the radio, John Lewis, the young activist, traveled to Birmingham from his parents' home in Pike County, Alabama. At dusk on the day of the attack he was there outside the sanctuary, wondering. "It was unreal to stand there and try to absorb what had happened," Lewis recalled. "I looked at the people standing on that sidewalk across the street, these black men and women of Birmingham, who had lived through so much, and I knew that they had to be asking themselves, How much *more*? What *else*? What's *next*? ... Four children killed on a Sunday morning in church, in God's house. What *could* be next?"

It was a question that tragically had an answer: Dallas, and the murder of the president of

the United States, which brought Lyndon Johnson to ultimate power. And Johnson, for all his manifold sins, was determined to finish the work of Lincoln by liberating a captive people.

The fact that such liberation was required is an uncomfortable reality at the heart of our history. The mechanics of memory are particularly fraught in the American South, where so much unfolded the day before yesterday. There is a natural human tendency to want to shut the door on a painful past, to push it away, to say *that belonged to another time.* When we're being totally honest with ourselves, however, we know that William Faulkner was right when he observed, in *Requiem for a Nun*, that the past is never dead; it isn't even past. The question for leaders like Bell and cities like Birmingham thus becomes *how*, not *whether*, to deal with a troubled history.

In an act of civic candor entitled "Fifty Years Forward," Birmingham marked the 50th anniversary of 1963 forthrightly, acknowledging the city's sins but understandably asking for the nation—and the world—to see the city in full, not just for what it was then but for what it is now. "My thought all along is be exactly who you are," says Bell. "There's nothing we can do to change our past. We are who we are. What is oftentimes missed with Birmingham is the city we've become. The images are always about the dogs and the hoses. And yes, that's who we were, but we've come out of that. Now is the time to showcase Birmingham for who we are."

Which is a Southern city trying to make its way economically and culturally. The Jackie Robinson movie *42* was filmed in Birmingham, which boasts a new minor-league ballpark for the Southern League's Birmingham Barons. Mercedes and Honda have built plants in Alabama in recent times. Mayor Bell spends his time talking up investments in the University of Alabama at Birmingham's medical research center.

Such things were unimaginable half a century ago. No city played a larger role in the midcentury war over the fate of Jim Crow than Birmingham. In Alabama governor George C. Wallace and in Birmingham public-safety commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, civil rights leaders King, Fred Shuttlesworth and others found formidable foes whose violent opposition to the movement vividly dramatized the stakes of the struggle. The images of fire hoses and snarling dogs come from here; the face of Jesus was blown out of one of the 16th Street church's windows during the attack, an eerie and enduring symbol of a world where hate, at least in the moment of the bombing, overshadowed love.

For Mayor Bell—and for Birmingham, and for the country—the movement and its martyrs changed everything. "Their sacrifice made my life possible, made my being the mayor of Birmingham possible," he says. "My biggest hope was a job in the mines or the steel mills. But now opportunities abound because of 1963." Out of terror came hope.

Today a memorial window, a gift from the people of Wales, depicts a crucified Jesus and a quotation from Matthew 25: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." The Jesus in the window is a black man, arms outstretched, reaching, it seems, to a future beyond the blood and the bombs—a future that is far closer to reality now than appeared even remotely possible when the Klan's bomb ripped through the stone of the church and the flesh of the churchgoers.

Fifty years ago, King preached at the funeral for three of the four victims. "God still has a way of wringing good out of evil," he said. "And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city." And so it has.