

T. K. THORNE

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BEHIND THE  
**MAGIC  
CURTAIN**

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Secrets, Spies, and Unsung White Allies  
of Birmingham's Civil Rights Days



## *Behind the Magic Curtain*

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#### SUMMARY

Birmingham, Alabama, gave birth to momentous events that spawned the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and affected world history. But that is not why it is known as The Magic City. It earned that nickname with its meteoric rise from a cornfield valley to an industrial boomtown in the late 1800s. Images of snarling dogs and fire hoses of the 1960s define popular perception of the city, obscuring the complexity of race relations in a tumultuous time and the contributions of white citizens who quietly or boldly influenced social change. *Behind the Magic Curtain* peels back history's veil to reveal little-known or never-told stories of an intriguing cast of characters that include not only progressive members of the Jewish, Christian, and educational communities, but also a racist businessman and a Ku Klux Klan member, who, in an ironic twist, helped bring about justice and forward racial equality and civil rights. Woven throughout the book are the firsthand recollections of a reporter with the state's major newspaper of the time. Embedded with law enforcement, he reveals the fascinating details of their secret wiretapping and intelligence

operations. With a deft hand, Thorne offers the insight that can be gained from understanding little-known but important perspectives, painting a multihued portrait of a city that has figured so prominently in history, but which so few really know.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

T. K. Thorne has been passionate about storytelling since she was a young girl, and that passion only deepened when she became a police officer. Graduating with a master's in social work from the University of Alabama, Thorne served for more than two decades in the Birmingham police force, retiring as a precinct captain. She then was the executive director of City Action Partnership, a downtown business improvement district focused on safety, until she retired again to write full time. Her books and essays include two award-winning historical novels (*Noah's Wife* and *Angels at the Gate*); a nonfiction telling of the 1963 16th Street Birmingham church bombing investigation (*Last Chance for Justice*); and a dally with murder, mystery, and magic in *House of Rose*. She writes from her mountaintop home northeast of Birmingham, often with a dog and cat vying for her lap.

# Praise for *Behind the Magic Curtain*

“In *Behind the Magic Curtain*, T. K. Thorne introduces us to those who operated behind the scenes in the civil rights movement in Alabama, shedding light on the individual moral complexities of these participants—some firebrands, some reluctant players, and some predators who worked for their own gain. This journalistic exploration of a complicated time in Alabama’s social history will sit comfortably on the shelf next to histories by Dianne McWhorter, Glenn Eskew, and Taylor Branch.”  
— **ANTHONY GROOMS**, author of *Bombingham* and *The Vin Conversation*

“T. K. Thorne has hit another home run with *Behind the Magic Curtain*. For five and a half decades we have read accounts of the civil rights era in Birmingham and Selma written by those with a particular ax to grind. Thorne is an excellent reporter, recognizing the nuances that outsiders or opinionated journalists could not see or chose to overlook. Her reading and especially her interviews over the past several years have been remarkable, allowing her to give a far more accurate chronicle than we have had before. For those who want to know the secrets of what really went on behind the ‘magic curtain’ in those pivotal nation-changing days, days that brought the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Bill in 1965, this is an important book to read.”  
— **DOUGLAS M. CARPENTER**, retired Episcopal minister and son of Alabama’s Episcopal bishop, C. C. J. Carpenter

“T. K. writes like a seasoned news editor, meticulously hunting down facts and laying out the context in an intriguing account. *Behind the Magic Curtain* documents many untold stories of a time of racial transition in Birmingham.” — **TOM LANKFORD**, *Birmingham News*

“Deeply engaging, *Behind the Magic Curtain* tells a forgotten part of the Birmingham story, prompting many memories. Lively writing brings the characters and settings to life and provides a picture of the white community’s role in all its complexity. This is a treasure trove of stories not well known to the general public. In particular, journalist Tom Lankford’s sleuthing and the machinations of the Birmingham Police Department, along with the risk-averse role of the local newspapers and a full-blown portrait of the inscrutable *Birmingham News* VIP Vincent Townsend, make for a fascinating read.”  
— **ODESSA WOOLFOLK**, educator, community activist, and founding president of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

“Novelist and former Birmingham police captain T. K. Thorne demonstrates there was more to the Birmingham of the civil rights era than Bull Connor, Klansmen, and African American protestors. Behind that ‘magic curtain,’ an ethnically diverse group from downtown to the surrounding bedroom communities of ministers, priests, rabbis, newspaper reporters, and housewives comprised a community belying monikers like ‘Bombingham’ and ‘Murder Capital of America’ and fighting for justice in the Magic City.” — **EARL TILFORD**, author of *Turning the Tide: The University of Alabama in the 1960s*

“T. K. Thorne shares an important story of a dangerous time in Birmingham, Alabama, when it was known as America’s most segregated city. The dramatic events of the period are well remembered, but less so are the stories of those civic leaders and citizens, Black and white, who did their part to dissolve Jim Crow. *Behind the Magic Curtain* shows the world the importance of the people who inspire improvement and change within their own culture, working behind the scenes with courage and principle.” — **CHERVIS ISOM**, author of *The Newspaper Boy: Coming of Age in Birmingham, Alabama, During the Civil Rights Era*

## The Invasion of the Rabbis

While the negotiators debated into the night and early morning, Karl Friedman was awakened by a call from a friend and client who was in New York on a buying trip: “You got a problem coming. Some young rabbis, members from the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Rabbinical Assembly, are coming to Birmingham to witness for the black people. They’re on the plane now. We have pictures of them on the plane.”<sup>364</sup>

Jewish tradition called for rabbis, before coming into a community, to check with its elders to find out what was going on. Friedman knew that intense negotiations were ongoing. Surprised by the violation of protocol and fearful that the delicate situation in Birmingham could be upended, Friedman called several people in leadership positions to alert them.

The rabbis from New York equated what they perceived as silence on segregation from the Birmingham Jewish community with the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust. They came to Birmingham as a “testimony on behalf of human rights and dignity.” Birmingham Jewish leaders understood this, but the downtown Jewish merchants were in the middle of the controversy. The negotiators walked a precarious line and feared that the rabbis’ presence and message would thrust the Jewish community into a position that could affect the negotiators’ ability to bring everyone to the table.<sup>365</sup>

In addition, the local community saw these rabbis—the “nineteen messiahs,” as they came to be called—as outsiders who risked nothing by coming to Birmingham but could put the local Jewish residents at grave risk.

The fears were not unjustified. The Jewish community was on high alert. In reaction to demonstrations, the Klan had just held a large rally on the city’s outskirts. A “stepped-up campaign to distribute anti-Jewish and anti-Negro hate literature” had nerves on edge. Synagogues and the Jewish Community Center had hired off-duty law enforcement to keep watch.<sup>366</sup>

A group of local Jewish leaders that included Rabbi Milton Grafman,

Friedman, Dorah Sterne, Abe Berkowitz, and William P. Engel hastily convened to meet the New Yorkers at the airport on May 8, 1963. They hoped to greet the rabbis and explain the local concerns and the extremely volatile local situation. Their goal was to talk the rabbis into returning home or at least not participating in civil disobedience.

It was raining when the plane arrived at 2:15 a.m. on the city's single runway. The local contingent had no problem recognizing the rabbis, but a welcoming committee of Black activists had already encircled them.

When the Jewish group could at last get through, Berkowitz acted as spokesman. He asked that the rabbis speak to someone from the local Jewish community before they took part in any demonstrations. According to Friedman, the visiting rabbis' leader was Richard Rubenstein. "He was outspoken, angry, unpleasant, and disrespectful." Grafman—who knew the rabbis would be aware of an advertised six-month vacancy at Birmingham's conservative Temple Beth El—responded to Rubenstein's tirade by asking, "If you are so interested in changing things in Birmingham, why don't you become a rabbi here?"

According to Friedman, the New York rabbis:

. . . split up. Half of them came with us, back to my office, and we started talking about the problems. We said, "Look, we're not deterring you from coming to witness anything. We want you to know what you are walking into."

Well, the ones who went with us asked good questions, said what they thought, and we differed with some and agreed with some. And mostly what we agreed about was the timing was wrong.

The others scattered around town, and they headquartered themselves at the A. G. Gaston Motel. . . . They decided to march with Martin Luther King and some of his Alabama emissaries, up to city hall, right up Twentieth Street. They all got arrested and put in jail. That [was] part of the plan, to get put in jail. . . and we bailed them out.<sup>367</sup>

The afternoon of the rabbis' arrival, two other complications threatened the negotiations. The first was the high bond set by the judge for King and the others who had been arrested on Good Friday. But A. G. Gaston, recognizing that the moment was too crucial for King to be out of the picture, posted

the exorbitant bond. The second issue was local leader Fred Shuttlesworth.

That afternoon, police officers and blue-helmeted state troopers, primed for a confrontation, clustered at every intersection around the Kelly Ingram Park, waiting for marchers to exit the 16th Street Baptist Church. A crowd of sullen, restless onlookers also waited in the boiling heat. King, under pressure from the White House, and hoping for the approval of the negotiated agreement, called a moratorium on the marches.

Shuttlesworth was still in the hospital from being hosed down the steps at the church when he heard that King had called a moratorium. Livid that such an agreement had been made without his input, he left the hospital to confront King in the Drews' living room. When King refused to back down, Shuttlesworth announced the moratorium was over and headed out to lead another march.

Joseph Young, one of the Justice Department's team, stood between Shuttlesworth and the door while deputy assistant attorney general John Doar frantically got Robert Kennedy on the phone. Turning to Shuttlesworth, Doar offered him the phone receiver. "The attorney general would like to speak with you, Reverend Shuttlesworth."<sup>368</sup> Grudgingly, Shuttlesworth took the phone, and Kennedy convinced him that all the progress made would be jeopardized should the marches continue at this point. King's assurance that demonstrations could resume should an agreement not be in place by 11 a.m. the following day mollified Shuttlesworth.<sup>369</sup>

That evening the nineteen rabbis from New York visited services at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church. They marched down the aisle in full regalia, enthusiastically greeted and welcomed by the Black congregants. Several spoke, "including Richard Rubenstein, who compared Bull Connor's actions to police repression in East Berlin. The rabbis taught the congregation a song in Hebrew: 'Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity' . . . The mass meeting adjourned as the activists exited the church singing 'black and white together, we shall overcome, someday.'" Though the rabbis' visit was disturbing to the local Jewish community, it was a psychological boost to the members of the civil rights movement.

Media connections of the Jewish Committee members kept coverage of the visit out of the newspapers. Most likely, Grafman called into play his close relationship with Vincent Townsend.



The rabbis left on Thursday.

An agitated Grafman said later, "I would . . . be much more impressed if the men who have all the answers to this tragic problem which confronts the entire nation, not only the South, were to take pulpits in Alabama, Mississippi, and other areas of genuine tension instead of sublimating and expiating their failure to tackle problems in their own communities by indulging in homiletical [*sic*] heroics at a safe distance."<sup>370</sup>

UNRELATED TO THE VISITING rabbis, anti-Semitism was an issue of serious concern to the local Jewish community. Aside from Bull Connor's remarks about out-of-state "Jewish-owned newspapers," neither Lankford nor Friedman ever heard him express anti-Semitic comments. In fact, Friedman recalled two productive meetings with Connor in connection with a publication that was feeding the flames during the turmoil of demonstrations.

*The Thunderbolt* tabloid of the National States' Rights Party was described by Friedman as "a hate-sheet distributed throughout the community that clearly attacked Jewish people, black people, and Catholics. In those days the [major] newspapers had racks on the street where you could purchase the paper for a nickel. Next to it was a little stand with the [free] *Thunderbolt*."<sup>371</sup>

Its articles used religion and anti-communism to encourage violence should the races intermingle, with passages like these:

Segregation is not a Southern prejudice; it is an Anglo-Saxon principal (*sic*). The Bible states, "everything after its own kind" and segregation is in keeping with this command.

SEGREGATION OR MONGRELIZATION? THE CHOICE IS YOURS. Completely destroy segregation and mongrelization will follow as night follows day.

Most important of all is the fact that GOD IS A SEGREGATIONIST.<sup>372</sup>

Friedman gathered information on the NSRP, and in spring of 1963 he and two others approached Connor. "I want to tell you what's happening to your city," Friedman told him. "There is a group here publishing a newspaper, *Thunderbolt*. They don't have a license from the city of Birmingham to do that, and they're operating Sundays too."

"Connor replied, 'Well, I'll see what I can do about it.'"

It is difficult to know what motivated Connor. His reaction after the attempted synagogue bombing was outrage. With obvious serious intent, he had the police attempt to make a criminal case on the primary suspect.<sup>373</sup> He considered the NSRP “outsiders.”

The following Sunday, a great number of police officers appeared at the two-story residence that housed the printing of the *Thunderbolt*. They “tore down the front doors, pulled out the equipment used for printing, all the supplies and everything, and threw it on the sidewalk, and that was the end of *Thunderbolt* [in Birmingham].” The paper, however, continued to be published in Georgia, and the NSRP headquarters remained in Birmingham until 1965.<sup>374</sup>