

## CHARLES MOORE OBITUARY

US photographer who made his name with powerful images of the fight for civil rights

By **Sean O'Hagan** : guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 24 March 2010 18.28 GMT



Charles Moore's portrayal of police dogs attacking protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963  
Photograph: Charles Moore/Black Star / eyevine

The American photographer Charles Moore, who has died aged 79, not only recorded history; he helped to change it. When his images of policemen with dogs attacking civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 were published in Life magazine, they caused a national outcry that reverberated all the way to the Senate. The historian and one-time adviser to President John F Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, said later that Moore's photographs "transformed the national mood and made legislation not just necessary, but possible".

From 1958 to 1965, Moore recorded the often-tumultuous dramas that attended the rise of the civil rights movement in the deep south. He trailed Martin Luther King as he preached, prayed, marched and, most famously, when he was arrested for obstruction on the steps of the courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1958. Moore, the only photographer present that morning, continued to shoot as King was frogmarched to the local jailhouse. There, Moore managed to position himself behind the desk, where he shot over the shoulder of the jailer and caught the unforgettable image of King, his arm wrenched behind his back, being charged as his wife, Coretta, looked on calmly. When the photograph was published, journalists from all over America were dispatched to Montgomery to cover the arrest.



Charles Moore managed to get behind the jailer's desk for his shot of Martin Luther King being charged in Montgomery, Alabama on 3 September 1958  
Photograph: Charles Moore/Black Star / eyevine

That single image attests to Moore's tenacity of purpose as a reporter and his willingness to place himself, often at considerable risk, at the very centre of the action he captured so dramatically. When the police turned water cannons on protesters in Birmingham in 1963, Moore positioned himself between the two sides, shooting a series of vivid photographs from ground level of the water jets hitting students and knocking them off their feet.

Back then, the media impact of such visceral images was immediate and dramatic, and Moore's photographs often seemed to be not only reflecting the onward thrust of the civil rights movement, but helping to sustain it. "To people who were really bigoted," he said later, "I was the worst enemy, a southern boy working for Life. I knew the south. I also knew how to talk back to racists."

Moore was born in Hackleburg, a farming town in Alabama. His father was a Baptist minister and a progressive liberal who sometimes preached in black churches and, as Moore later recalled, forbade the use of "the N-word or the word 'hate'". Moore grew up in Tusculum where, as a teenager, he bought his first camera, a Kodak Brownie. He served in the US Marine Corps as a photographer before enrolling as a student at Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California. On returning to Alabama in the mid-1950s after graduation, he worked as a portrait photographer before landing a job on the Montgomery Advertiser, where he shot society functions, sports events and local news stories.

The Advertiser's office was just three blocks from King's church on Dexter Avenue, and Moore went there to photograph him. He said later that the portrait of King preaching beneath a giant white cross "tied Dr King together with what he did, who he was".

It was Moore's reportage from the frontline of the civil rights campaign, though, that made his name. It is collected in a book, *Powerful Days: the Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore*, published in 1991. One unforgettable image, taken in downtown Montgomery in 1960, shocked Moore when he saw the developed print. It shows a white man with a baseball bat about to strike a middle-aged black woman. In the background,

another white man rains down punches on another black woman's head. Among the white spectators is a man armed with a steel rod, another holding a bottle, and yet another carrying a chain. Moore said later that he was haunted by the power of the photograph to show much more than the eye could see in the heat of the moment.

Moore also memorably captured the violence in 1962 between white protesters and national guardsmen that attended James Meredith's registration as the first black student at the University of Mississippi, an event that he later termed a truly historical moment. He was one of the few photographers to return to the campus to record Meredith's graduation, a peaceful event where, as he memorably put it, he caught "one lone black man in his graduation gown in a long line of white students".

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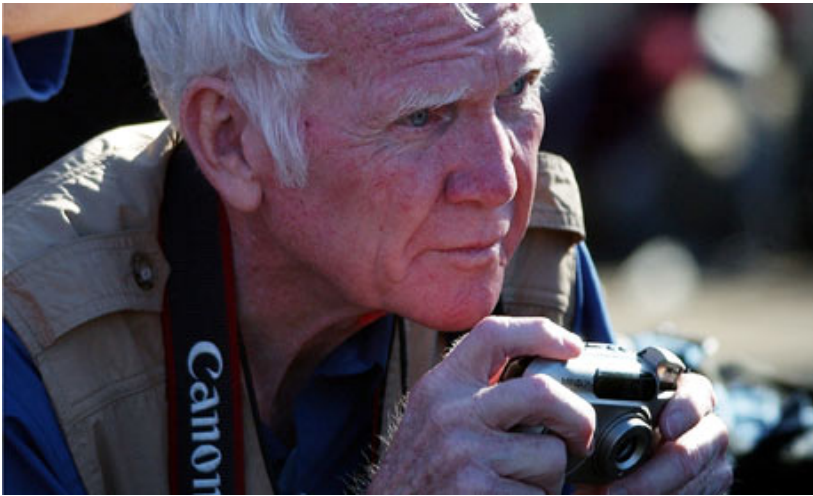
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Photographer Charles Moore in 2005  
Photograph: Karen S. Doerr/AP

For all his bravery and combativeness as a photographer, Moore was a quiet, self-effacing man who preferred to let his photographs speak for themselves. He chronicled the violence of the police during the march from Selma, Alabama, in 1965 and, when asked about it years later, replied: "I fought with my camera. I would rather my camera be my weapon than my fists any day."

Moore later photographed the war in Vietnam. Then, weary of violence, he specialised in fashion and nature photography. In 1989, his civil rights photographs earned him the Kodak Crystal Eagle award for impact in photojournalism. In 2002, he said: "I know the importance isn't me, but the photographs. If those pictures made my native south, which I love, a better place ... then I am darn proud of that."

He is survived by his daughters, Michelle and April; his sons, Michael and Gary; his brother, Jim; seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

- Charles Moore, photographer, born 9 March 1931; died 11 March 2010

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