Selma: How the Selma-to-Montgomery marches 50 years ago helped end discrimination against black voters

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

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Sunday, March 7, 1965, was a tense day in Selma, Alabama. That afternoon, about 600 people—mostly African-Americans, many still in their church clothes—set off from Brown Chapel AME church. Their goal was to walk to the state capital of Montgomery, 54 miles away. Part of an ongoing campaign spearheaded by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., they were marching to demand the ability to vote, denied to them in much of the South.

As they set out, the mood among the marchers was "somber and subdued," John Lewis, one of the leaders of the group, recalled years later, "almost like a funeral procession," as if the marchers could sense the trouble ahead.

Crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge at the edge of Selma, they were confronted by a

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mass of helmeted state troopers with strict orders from Alabama Governor George Wallace: Don't let the group get any farther.

The nervous marchers came to a halt. "It would be detrimental to your safety to continue this march," Major John Cloud announced. Hosea Williams, one of King's aides, tried to reason with Cloud. But he had made up his mind. "Troopers, advance!" he commanded his men.

"The troopers . . . swept forward as one, like a human wave, a blur of blue shirts and billy clubs and bullwhips," wrote Lewis, a U.S. Congressman from Georgia since 1987. As panicked marchers tried to flee, Lewis received a blow to his head, cracking his skull.

Troopers fired tear gas into the crowd, causing disoriented protesters to weep and vomit. "Men on horses were moving in all directions, purposely riding over the tops of fallen people," according to *The New York Times*.

"All I could hear was screaming, weeping, and gunshots," Lewis tells *Upfront*. "There was blood everywhere. I thought I was going to die."

Although no one was killed, 94 people were taken to hospitals. That night, millions of TV viewers were shocked when ABC interrupted a movie to show film of the violence.

The day of chaos, 50 years ago next month, would soon have a name: Bloody Sunday. It would become one of the most important events in the struggle for civil rights that engulfed America in the 1950s and '60s.

In 1965, the U.S. was still wrestling with an old problem. The Civil War, fought in large part to end slavery, had been over for a century. The 15th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1870, had guaranteed blacks the vote.

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Yet in the states of the former Confederacy, authorities continued to deny the vote to blacks, using such methods as "poll taxes" and "literacy tests." In many places, blacks who tried to register could suddenly find themselves out of a job, or even killed. In Dallas County, where Selma is located, only 1 percent of eligible blacks were registered.

Gaining the vote became a central focus of the civil rights movement. For more than a year, activists in Selma had been struggling to register black voters. But every attempt was stopped by local authorities. Finally, Selma residents turned for help to King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

'Give Us the Ballot'

King, the charismatic symbol of the civil rights movement, brought a new energy to the struggle. "We must be ready to march. We must be ready to go to jail by the thousands," he said, firing up a crowd in Brown Chapel that January. "Our cry to the state of Alabama is a simple one. Give us the ballot!" In new attempts to register at the courthouse, King did go to jail, along with hundreds of other demonstrators.

Protesters and authorities came to a stalemate. Then in February, during a peaceful protest in a nearby town, a young black man named Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed by a state trooper. In response, King approved the ambitious march to Montgomery. Governor Wallace, a steadfast enemy of integration, was determined that it wouldn't happen.

On March 7, Bloody Sunday, Wallace got his wish. But he hadn't expected how the nation would recoil at images of his troopers beating up peaceful marchers. It raised the stakes even higher.

The complex drama was unfolding on several stages. In Washington, D.C., President Lyndon B. Johnson had his hands full. Johnson had championed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in schools, employment, and other areas (*see Timeline*). He supported King's call for new legislation protecting voting rights. But the president also felt that he needed more time to build support for a voting rights bill, especially among Southern lawmakers. The violence in Selma only increased the pressure.

Fact vs. Fiction

***Selma* is a critically acclaimed film. But is it historically accurate?**

In a key scene from the new movie *Selma*, Martin Luther King Jr. meets with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House and insists that African-Americans need a voting rights bill. Johnson's response is a pat on the shoulder. "Dr. King, this thing's just going to have to wait," he says. The confrontation leaves both men frustrated and angry.

The relationship between King and Johnson is an important part of the film, which was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Picture. But *Selma* has also taken some heat from historians.

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Critics say the movie exaggerates LBJ's resistance to a voting rights bill. Bill Moyers, a Johnson aide who admired the film, objects even more to a particular scene that suggests Johnson was OK with the F.B.I.'s use of dirty tactics to intimidate King and his family. "That is the worst kind of creative license," Moyers writes.

Controversy over the accuracy of historical films—including Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* in 2012—is nothing new. *Selma*'s defenders say its portrayal of the heroic struggle of King and black Americans to win their rights is more important than the details of what Johnson did when.

"*Selma* essentially gets it right," writes former NBC reporter Richard Valeriani, who covered the marches. "I was there and I know."

The pressure on King was even more intense. Wanting to act quickly while the nation was watching, King—who wasn't able to attend the first march, on March 7—announced a second demonstration for March 9. People from all over the country, including hundreds of whites, poured into Selma to take part.

Meanwhile, a federal judge in Montgomery issued an order barring a march until he could hear arguments for and against it. To avoid violating the order, King led a symbolic march to Pettus Bridge and then back to Brown Chapel. That night, a Northern white minister who'd come to offer support was murdered by local toughs. The danger was still real.

'We Shall Overcome'

Then on March 15, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, broadcast to the nation. He called for a new voting rights bill. "Their cause must be our cause too," he said of the Selma marchers. Then, invoking the anthem of the civil rights movement, he said: "It's all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."

Events then moved at lightning speed. After a hearing, the judge ruled the march from Selma could continue. Angry that Wallace wouldn't guarantee a safe march, President Johnson "federalized" the Alabama National Guard to provide protection.

On Sunday, March 21, 3,200 people met at Brown Chapel to start the four-day journey to Montgomery. Photographer Stephen Somerstein from New York was one of many from around the country who went to witness the event. "Coming together, thousands of people marching through the [heart] of the Confederacy," he says, "you realized you were walking through history."

On March 25, a crowd of nearly 25,000 gathered at the state capitol to hear King give one of his most famous speeches. "How long will justice be crucified?" he asked, and answered: "Not long!" That August, he and Lewis were both at the Capitol when President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

In retrospect, the marches in Selma were the high point of the civil rights movement for many Americans. Soon, the nation would be torn apart by race riots that started in Los Angeles and spread to other cities. Some activists, black and white, denounced King's commitment to nonviolence. And King's assassination in 1968 was the biggest blow of all.

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But Selma remains a crucial milestone. "Before Selma, many people considered voting rights an African-American problem, and didn't concern themselves with it," says Sharon Dunn of the New York Historical Society. "The Selma march changed that."

Lewis continues to hold on to the promise of Selma. "The power is in our hands to shape and transform our society," he says, to which he adds one of King's favorite sayings: "There is nothing more powerful than a committed and determined people."

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Timeline: The Civil Rights Era

1948	1954	1955	1957	1960	1964	1965
The Military President Harry S. Truman issues an executive order to desegregate the U.S. armed forces.	***Brown v. Board of Education*** The U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregated public schools are unconstitutional, overturning the "separate but equal" standard established in 1896.	**Bus Boycott** Rosa Parks is arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. It sparks a boycott of city buses.	**Little Rock Nine** Nine black students attempt to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. They're turned away by an angry mob. Federal troops eventually escort the students inside.	**Greensboro** Four black college students in North Carolina stage a sit-in at an all-white lunch counter. The act of civil disobedience helps galvanize young blacks across the U.S.	**Civil Rights Act** President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing segregation in public places and employment.	**March** **Selma** **August** **Voting Rights Act** Congress outlaws literacy tests, poll taxes, and other obstacles to black voter registration.

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