



Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta (center), finally lead the marchers into Montgomery on March 25, 1965.

SELMA

Fifty years ago, protest marches in this Alabama town helped win voting rights for African-Americans



A young marcher on the road to Montgomery

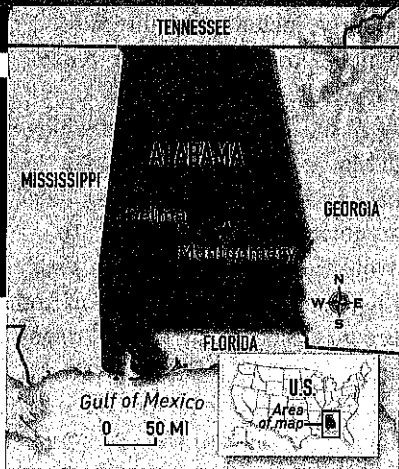
Sunday, March 7, 1965, was a tense day in Selma, Alabama. That afternoon, about 600 people—mostly African-Americans, many still in their church clothes—set off from Brown Chapel AME church. Their destination was the state capital of Montgomery, 54 miles away. Part of a campaign spearheaded by **civil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

John Lewis, the co-leader of the group, would later recall the march's "peculiar" feeling. "It was somber and subdued," he wrote, "almost like a funeral procession."

The marchers had good reason to be wary. As they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge at the edge of Selma, they were confronted by a mass of helmeted state troopers with orders from Alabama Governor George Wallace:

Words to Know

- **civil rights** (*n*): guarantees of freedom and equal treatment under the law
- **integration** (*n*): the act of making public facilities and other places open to all races



Alabama state troopers charged the marchers on Bloody Sunday. John Lewis (left and on the ground above) suffered a fractured skull from their blows.



AP IMAGES (TOP); JIM McALONAN/PHOTOGRAPH BY; MARION S. TRINGOLIO/STOCK MONTAGE/GETTY IMAGES (JOHN LEWIS)

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!" Cloud commanded his men.

"The troopers . . . swept forward as one, like a human wave, a blur of blue shirts and billy clubs and bullwhips," Lewis wrote. As

panicked marchers tried to flee, Lewis received a blow full to his head, fracturing his skull.

Troopers fired teargas 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," *The New York Times* reported.

"All I could hear was screaming, weeping, and gunshots," Lewis tells *JS*. "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 in Selma.

The day of chaos soon had 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.

"Give Us the Ballot"

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.

Yet throughout the states of the former Confederacy, authorities

continued on p. 14

continued to deny the vote to blacks using such methods as poll taxes and literacy tests. In many places, blacks who tried to register to vote could suddenly find themselves out of a job, or even be 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, the effort to achieve equality for African-Americans. For more than a year, activists in Selma had been struggling to register black voters. But their attempts were blocked by local authorities. Finally, in late 1964, Selma's black leaders turned to King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, for help.

King, the charismatic symbol of the civil rights movement, brought a new energy to the struggle.

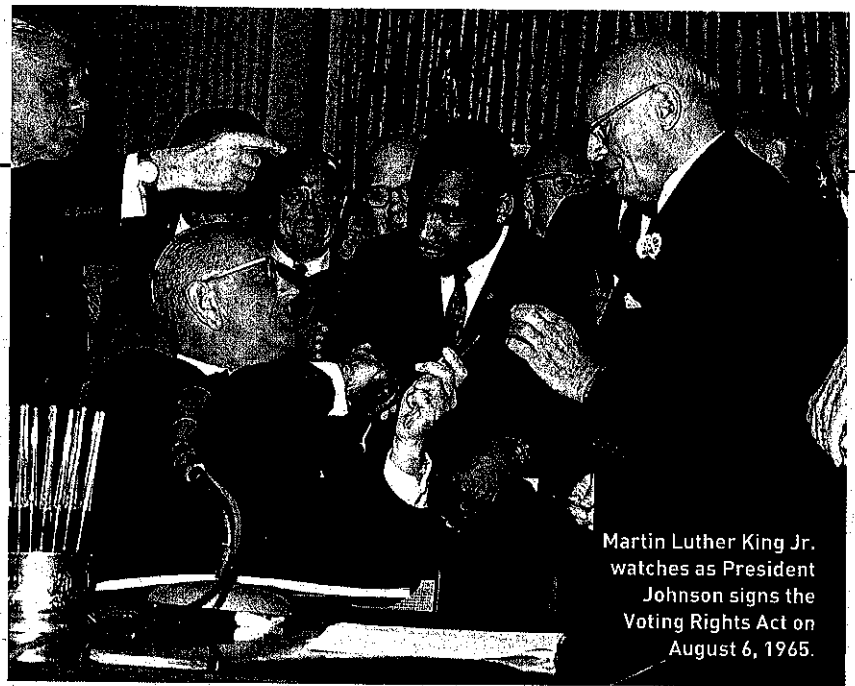
"We must be ready to march. We must be ready to go to jail by the thousands," he said, firing up a crowd in Brown Chapel in January. "Our cry to the state of Alabama is a simple one. Give us the ballot!"

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 black man named Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed by a state trooper. King approved an ambitious response to the murder: a march from Selma to confront Governor Wallace in Montgomery. Wallace, an enemy of **integration**,

"THE POWER IS IN OUR HANDS TO TRANSFORM OUR SOCIETY."

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



Martin Luther King Jr. watches as President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965.

was determined that the marchers wouldn't reach Montgomery.

On March 7, Bloody Sunday, Wallace got his wish. But he hadn't expected the shock that came when the nation saw his troopers beating peaceful marchers. It raised the stakes even higher.

"How Long?"

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 public schools, employment, and other areas. He supported King's call for new legislation protecting voting rights (*see sidebar*).

But the president also thought 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.

The pressure on King was even more intense. Needing to

act quickly while the nation was watching, King—who had been unable to make the first march—announced a second attempt for March 9. People from all over the country, including hundreds of whites, poured into Selma to take part in the march.

At the same time, a federal judge in Montgomery issued an order barring a march until he could hear arguments for and against it. To avoid violating the judge's order, King led a symbolic procession from Brown Chapel to the Pettus Bridge and back. That night, James Reeb, a white minister who had come to support the march, was murdered by local segregationists. The danger was still real.

Then, on March 15, President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, broadcast to the nation. Referring to the Selma campaign, he called for a new voting rights bill. "Their cause must be our cause too," he said of the marchers. 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. The federal judge in Montgomery ruled the march from Selma could continue. Angry that Wallace wouldn't guarantee a safe march, Johnson "federalized" the Alabama National Guard to protect the protesters.

On Sunday, March 21, some 3,200 people met at Brown Chapel to start the four-day journey to Montgomery. Photographer Stephen Somerstein from New York City was one of many people from around the country who went to witness. "Coming together, thousands of people marching through the [heart] of the Confederacy," he tells *JS*. "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, then answered: "Not long!" On August 6, he and Lewis were both present at the U.S. 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, both black and white, denounced King's commitment to nonviolence. King's assassination in 1968 was the biggest blow of all.

But Selma has remained 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, who has been a Congressman from Georgia since 1987, continues to hold on to the promise of Selma. "The power is in our hands to transform our society," he says, then adds one of King's favorite sayings: "There is nothing more powerful than a committed and determined people."

—Bryan Brown



How are protests like the ones in Selma important to a cause? Is there still a role for protests today? Explain.

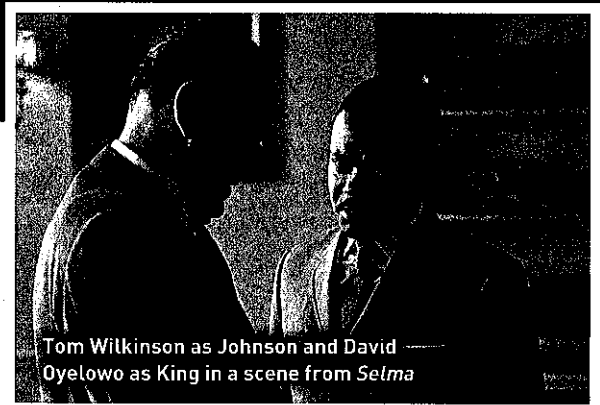
Is Selma Right?

People debate the accuracy of a movie

The scene unfolds as two strong-willed men struggle to make their points. Meeting in the White House, Martin Luther King Jr. insists to President Lyndon B. Johnson that African-Americans need a voting rights bill. The response from Johnson 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 Johnson and King is an important part of the new film *Selma*. The movie has gotten strong reviews and is nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture.

But *Selma* has also taken some heat from historians. They say it exaggerates the president's resistance to a voting-rights bill, which in fact he supported. Bill Moyers, a Johnson aide who liked the film, objects even more to a particular scene. It suggests that Johnson approved FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's use of dirty tactics to intimidate King and



Tom Wilkinson as Johnson and David Oyelowo as King in a scene from *Selma*

his wife, Coretta. "That is the worst kind of creative license," Moyers writes.

Controversy over the historical accuracy of movies—including Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* in 2012—is nothing new. *Selma*'s defenders say its portrayal of the 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."