

# DEFINING MOMENTS THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965



Laurie Collier Hillstrom

*Omni*graphics

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P.O. Box 31-1640  
Detroit, MI 48231

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# Chapter Five

## SHOWDOWN IN SELMA



History is going to reflect that the savagery of Bloody Sunday in Selma put a face on racist hatred that could not be ignored. The whole nation watched on television. It is questionable that most viewers understood that this had been going on for nearly a century. What mattered was that, finally, people were watching.

—Tavis Smiley, in *The Unfinished Agenda of the Selma-Montgomery Voting Rights March*

The events of 1964 convinced Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders that federal intervention was necessary to overcome the barriers erected in the South to prevent African Americans from voting. With this in mind, strong voting rights legislation became the main focus of the civil rights movement in the spring of 1965. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference chose Selma, Alabama, as the target for a series of protests designed to force the federal government to take action. On March 7—a date which became known as Bloody Sunday—these protests culminated in a brutal police assault on peaceful marchers attempting to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The racist violence helped convince President Lyndon B. Johnson to introduce a voting rights bill to Congress and created a surge of public support for its passage.

### Calling for Direct Federal Action

The credentials fight at the Democratic National Convention did not seem to hurt the reelection campaign of President Lyndon B. Johnson. He



After winning the November 1964 election, President Lyndon B. Johnson watched anxiously to see if the South would obey the various provisions of the Civil Rights Act.

earned a landslide victory in the November 1964 presidential election, winning 44 states. Civil rights leaders felt that Johnson's overwhelming victory gave the president a mandate to pass additional civil rights legislation. Specifically, they wanted the federal government to outlaw the various tactics—like poll taxes and literacy tests—that some state and local governments in the South still used to prevent African Americans from voting. They also wanted the federal government to send federal registrars to oversee the registration of black voters and federal marshals to protect black voters from harassment by local law enforcement officials.

Johnson suspected that a strong voting rights act might eventually be needed if African Americans were ever going to receive their full constitutional rights in the South. He instructed Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to research voting rights abuses and determine what should be included in a

new bill. But Johnson and many others in Washington were reluctant to try to pass additional civil rights legislation right away. They hoped that once people in the South had time to adjust to the new reality of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discriminatory voting practices would gradually disappear on their own. “We felt we had made some real honest-to-God progress [in 1964],” said the Senate minority leader, Republican Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois. “We felt everything would fall into its slot. We thought we were out of the civil rights woods, but we weren’t.”<sup>1</sup>

Many towns in the South removed “white” and “colored” designations from hotels, restaurants, theaters, bus stations, and other public accommodations following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But white resistance to integration remained strong in some places. Many segregationists were willing to use whatever means necessary—from defying federal law to police harassment and physical violence—to prevent blacks from voting. A string of reports of continued voting rights abuses made their way to Washington, but Congress and the White House remained hesitant to intervene. Civil rights leaders decided to organize a series of voting-rights protests in an effort to force the federal government to take action.

### The Situation in Selma

The target they chose for the protests was Selma, Alabama, a busy commercial town in Dallas County, in the middle of the state. Both Selma and the surrounding county had a poor voting rights record. Although African Americans accounted for half of Dallas County’s 30,000 residents, only 1 percent of eligible blacks (a total of 156 people) were registered to vote, compared to 65 percent of eligible whites.

Local officials strongly discouraged black residents from attempting to register to vote. When SNCC activists held a Freedom Day voter registration drive in Selma in 1963, for instance, Dallas County Sheriff James G. Clark (see sidebar “Sheriff Jim Clark and the Showdown in Selma,” p. 78) and his police force mounted a campaign of harassment. Volunteers from SNCC convinced 250 local African Americans to march to the county courthouse and wait in line to register to vote. Clark and his deputies showed up at the demonstration wearing helmets and carrying guns and billy clubs. The sheriff took photographs of everyone in the line and threatened to show the pictures to their employers and the Ku Klux Klan. His men also beat and arrested SNCC volunteers when they tried to bring food and water to the people in line.

## **Sheriff Jim Clark and the Showdown in Selma**

**A**fter civil rights leaders decided to stage voting rights protests in Selma, Alabama, Sheriff James G. Clark, Jr., became one of their most bitter foes. Confronting Clark carried no small amount of danger. He had already taken a prominent role in suppressing civil rights activism, not only in Selma but also in other southern cities. On numerous occasions in the previous two years, his heavily armed sheriff's posse had used nightsticks, tear gas, and electric cattle prods to break up civil rights rallies and intimidate peaceful protestors.

When the Selma courthouse protests got underway in the spring of 1965, Clark added a new accessory to his uniform—a button that simply read “Never”—which served as his reply to the activists' calls for reform. Despite pleas for restraint from Selma city officials, Clark's hotheaded personality soon showed itself. The images of the sheriff personally manhandling and striking protestors—and in one case being floored by a devastating counter-punch from an angry female activist—kept Selma in the headlines and maintained the campaign's momentum.

On Bloody Sunday, the sheriff and his posse joined Alabama state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Clark's input into the decision to attack the marchers is uncertain, but once the order was given, his mounted troops thundered through the line of protestors on horseback and struck them with bullwhips and lengths of rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire. In news footage of the incident, the sheriff can be heard yelling to his men to “get those god-damned niggers.”

While Clark personified the brutality of official resistance, he also came to symbolize the changes that took place following the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The following year, with barriers to registration removed, African-American participation in the local elections increased dramatically. Ballots from the county's black wards were decisive in voting Clark out of office.



Even if black residents of Selma made it inside the courthouse, they still found it nearly impossible to register successfully. The voter registration office was only open two days per month for limited and often unpredictable hours. In order to qualify, prospective voters had to complete a four-page form with more than 50 blanks, read passages from the U.S. Constitution and answer questions about them, write part of the Constitution from dictation, answer obscure questions about the American system of government, sign an oath of loyalty to the United States and the state of Alabama, and have a registered voter available to vouch for their good character. Nearly all African-American applicants failed some aspect of the daunting qualification process—even individuals who were better educated than the registrar giving the tests—while the vast majority of white applicants passed. Between May 1962 and August 1964, only 8.5 percent of black applicants successfully registered to vote in Dallas County, compared to 77 percent of white applicants.

The discriminatory nature of the voter registration system created anger and frustration within the black community in Selma. One of the few local African Americans who managed to register, voting rights activist Amelia Platts Boynton, remembered going to the courthouse to vouch for the character of an elderly black man. When the man's application to register was denied, he shared his outrage with the registrar: "I am 65 years old, I own 100 acres of land that is paid for, I am a taxpayer and I have six children. All of them is teachin', workin'," he declared. "If what I done ain't enough to be a registered voter with all the tax I got to pay, then Lord have mercy on America."<sup>2</sup>

### King Comes to Selma

In December 1964, Martin Luther King's contributions to the American civil rights movement were recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech for the prestigious award, the SCLC leader described himself as a "trustee for the 22 million Negroes of the United States of America who are engaged in a creative battle to end the night of racial injustice."<sup>3</sup>

King was thus at the height of his fame and influence when he announced his intention to join the campaign for voting rights in Alabama. He traveled to Selma on January 2 and gave a fiery speech at Brown's Chapel AME Church. "We will seek to arouse the federal government by marching by the thousands to the places of registration," he declared. "When we get the right to vote, we



### Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.

Some of the most important rulings in support of desegregation and civil rights came from the Alabama courtroom of federal judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. Despite pressure from white political leaders—and threats from white segregationists—Johnson stood firm in promoting racial justice. “You can’t intimidate me,” he declared in an interview. “If you can be intimidated, you don’t have any business being a judge.”

Johnson was born on October 30, 1918, in Winston County in northern Alabama. After earning a law degree from the University of Alabama in 1943, he joined the U.S. military and fought overseas during World War II. When the war ended, he returned home and practiced law in Jasper, Alabama.

Although the Democratic Party controlled Alabama politics during that era, Johnson became active in the Republican Party. He worked on Dwight Eisenhower’s presidential campaign as the head of his state’s Veterans for Eisenhower organization. Once Eisenhower was elected, he appointed Johnson the U.S. attorney for the northern district of Alabama.

In 1955—the year after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling outlawed segregation in public schools—Johnson was appointed to serve on the U.S. District Court of the Middle District of Alabama. As a federal judge, he was responsible for applying the Supreme Court decision to local cases. One of Johnson’s first important desegregation rulings came in the 1956 case *Browder v. Gale*, which grew out of the Montgomery bus boycott. Declaring that the *Brown* ruling applied to public transportation as well as public schools, he found the segregation of

will send to the statehouse not men [like Alabama Governor George Wallace] who will stand in the doorways of universities to keep Negroes out, but men who will uphold the cause of Justice. Give us the ballot.”<sup>4</sup>

King’s decision to throw his weight behind the Selma campaign got the attention of government officials at various levels. A week after he made his

city buses illegal. In 1961, following the Freedom Rides, he ordered the desegregation of interstate bus terminals in *Lewis v. Greyhound*.

Johnson also issued a number of important decisions regarding African-American voting rights. In *U.S. v. Alabama*, for instance, he ruled that the state must apply the same qualification standards for voter registration, regardless of the race of the applicant. Johnson also declared poll taxes unconstitutional, required the state to draw legislative districts fairly, and ordered that blacks be allowed to serve on juries. When Alabama Governor George Wallace refused to grant permission for civil rights activists to march from Selma to Montgomery in support of voting rights, Johnson ordered the governor to open the road for the marchers.

Johnson's decisions in support of African-American civil rights made him extremely unpopular among white segregationists. The Ku Klux Klan called him "the most hated man in Alabama," and he received so many death threats he and his family were placed under federal protection for 15 years. Ultimately, though, his decisions helped end centuries of discrimination and transform American society.

Johnson joined the U.S. Court of Appeals in 1978, and he continued to serve on the federal bench until his death on July 23, 1999. By the time of his death, he was one of the most widely admired judges in the country. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995, and the federal courthouse in Montgomery is named after him.

**Source:**

Academy of Achievement, "Frank M. Johnson, Jr.," 2006. Available online at <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/joh2pro-1>.

speech, the Justice Department announced that it was drafting legislation to outlaw literacy tests as a condition for voting in federal elections. It also filed a lawsuit challenging the statewide voter registration practices used in Alabama. Officials charged that these practices discriminated against African-American residents. Selma's white leaders, meanwhile, knew that King's involvement in the protests would bring a great deal of publicity to the city.

In an effort to limit the negative coverage Selma received, Mayor Joseph Smitherman hired a new director of public safety to supervise the actions of Sheriff Clark and his deputies.

Activists from SCLC and SNCC, along with local residents, launched the first in a series of protest marches in Selma on January 18, 1965. They marched across town to the county courthouse, where they lined up to try to register to vote. Under strict orders from the town's leadership, Clark avoided a violent confrontation on the first day. He merely herded the protesters into an alley behind the courthouse to keep them away from the news reporters covering the march. When the protesters returned the following day, however, they refused to obey the police order to line up in the alley. Clark angrily grabbed Amelia Boynton by the coat, shoved her to the ground with his billy club, and placed her under arrest. Dramatic pictures of the incident appeared on the front page of newspapers across the country.

An important turning point in the Selma protests came on January 22, when a group of 100 black teachers joined the march to the courthouse. Although the teachers served as leaders in the community, they did not usually participate in civil rights protests because they knew they would probably be fired by the white school board. When the teachers accepted this risk and joined the protest, it created a new sense of hope and purpose throughout Selma's black community. Their actions inspired African-American members of other middle-class occupations to begin marching for voting rights, and large groups of local schoolchildren soon joined in as well.

### **Civil Right No. 1**

As more and more people joined the marches, Clark and his officers began arresting large groups of protesters. The Dallas County jails soon became overcrowded and the prisoners endured terrible conditions. On February 1—hoping to bring more media attention to the situation in Selma—Martin Luther King made sure that he was among the 250 protesters arrested.

Following the example of his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King wrote a letter to be published during his incarceration in Selma (see “Martin Luther King’s Letter from a Selma, Alabama, Jail,” p. 184). This letter, entitled “Civil Right No. 1: The Right to Vote,” was published in the *New York Times* a few days later. “Have you ever been required to answer 100 questions on government, some abstruse even to a political science specialist, merely to

vote? Have you ever stood in line with over a hundred others and after waiting an entire day seen less than ten given the qualifying test?” he demanded. “This is Selma, Alabama, where there are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls.”<sup>5</sup>

While King was still in jail, the militant black activist Malcolm X came to Selma. In an echo of his “Ballot or the Bullet” speech, he encouraged state and local political leaders to meet the protesters’ demands and give African Americans full voting rights. If they did not respond to King’s nonviolent protest methods, he warned, then they should be prepared to face more extreme measures. Less than three weeks later, Malcolm X was assassinated. But his strong stance resonated with many young civil rights activists, who were beginning to feel frustrated with the slow pace of change.

Political leaders in Washington, meanwhile, monitored events in Selma with great interest. On February 4, President Johnson held a press conference to express his support for African-American voting rights. “All Americans should be indignant when one American is denied the right to vote,” he declared. “The loss of that right to a single citizen undermines the freedom of every citizen. That is why all of us should be concerned with the efforts of our fellow Americans to register to vote in Alabama.” Once King got out of jail, he met with Johnson on February 8 to make a formal request for new voting rights legislation.

### **Planning a March for Voting Rights**

Meanwhile, the protests continued in Selma and also spread to other towns in Alabama. On February 16, SCLC staff member C.T. Vivian confronted Clark and his deputies on the steps of the Dallas County courthouse. Vivian compared the law enforcement officers’ racist oppression of black citizens to the brutal reign of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany during the Holocaust. Clark responded by punching Vivian in the mouth, sending the activist sprawling and breaking the sheriff’s hand in the process.

Two days later, Vivian was invited to speak in the nearby town of Marion, Alabama. When a group of protesters began to march afterward, they were attacked by local law enforcement officers and an angry mob of white segregationists. During this violent incident, a 26-year-old black man named Jimmie Lee Jackson fought to protect his mother and 82-year-old grandfather. Jackson was shot in the stomach by a police officer, and he died in the hospi-



Civil rights activist C.T. Vivian (left) confronts Sheriff Jim Clark (center of photo) on the courthouse steps in Selma.

tal a week later. Many other people were badly injured, including NBC News reporter Richard Valeriani, who was hit in the head with an ax handle. He appeared on television the following night, from his hospital bed, to describe the frightening scene.

The brutal treatment of the peaceful protesters made headlines across the country. Instead of being intimidated by the violence, however, many activists grew even more determined to win the fight for voting rights. After Jackson's funeral, where King gave a moving memorial speech, some SCLC members came up with an idea for a dramatic protest march. The original idea involved carrying Jackson's body from Selma to Montgomery and laying it on the steps of the state capitol. Since this was not practical, though, they decided instead to deliver a list of demands to Alabama Governor George Wallace.

The SCLC scheduled the march to begin the following Sunday, March 7. It would begin in Selma, cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River, and follow Route 80 all the way to Montgomery. The organizers figured that it would take protesters about four days to travel the 50-mile route. King threw his support behind the plan, but SNCC leaders worried about the potential for violence. In the end, SNCC decided not to participate officially, although the organization permitted its members to march as individuals.

Upon hearing about the march, Wallace declared that the state would not allow it to proceed. He claimed that he made this decision out of concern for the safety of the protesters and the need to keep traffic flowing smoothly on public highways. Many white Alabama residents applauded the governor's stand. But others expressed frustration and disgust with the state's determination to prevent African Americans from voting. On March 6, a group of white citizens marched to the Selma courthouse to show their support for the protesters and their goals. "We consider it a shocking injustice that there are still counties in Alabama where there are no Negroes registered to vote and where Negroes have reason to fear hostility and harassment by public officials when they do try to register,"<sup>6</sup> the Reverend Joseph Ellwanger said in a speech at that event.

### Bloody Sunday

The Selma-Montgomery voting rights march started on schedule on Sunday, March 7, 1965. Many people expected King to lead the march, but after meeting with President Johnson in Washington the previous day, he decided to preach at his church in Atlanta rather than return to Selma. In his absence, the task of leading the 600-person procession fell to the Reverend Hosea Williams. He was joined in the front row of marchers by SNCC chairman John Lewis.

The protesters did not meet any resistance as they made their way through the streets of Selma. But as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of town, they found their path blocked by an estimated 200 Alabama state troopers and sheriff's department officers. The police looked menacing as they stood in formation wearing helmets and gas masks and holding billy clubs.

Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Police ordered the protesters to turn around and gave them two minutes to leave the area. When they refused





This image from Bloody Sunday in Selma shows John Lewis (in foreground on knees) being attacked by a club-wielding Alabama state trooper.

and began to pray, the troopers rushed toward the protesters and beat them with their clubs, knocking more than a dozen people to the ground. Then, as marchers bent down to help the injured or tried to run away, the police fired tear gas. Finally, a group of mounted police charged into the crowd, knocking protesters down and trampling those on the ground. “The police were riding along on horseback beating people,” SCLC leader Andrew Young remembered. “The tear gas was so thick you couldn’t get to where the people needed help.”<sup>7</sup>

John Lewis was clubbed on the head during the assault and suffered a fractured skull (see “John Lewis Remembers ‘Bloody Sunday,’” p. 186, and “Terror on the Edmund Pettus Bridge,” p. 194). Dozens of other demonstrators had to be treated in the hospital for their injuries. “People were left bloodied in the highway. Lewis was on his knees, suffering from two concussions and bleeding like a stuck hog. Women and even children were unconscious, others semiconscious, lying, sitting, trying to run, but literally being run over by horses—and hearing their ribs and limbs cracking. It was the worst day of my life,” recalled



civil rights lawyer J.L. Chestnut, Jr. “What I witnessed led me to believe America could not be saved and white people were not worth saving.”<sup>8</sup>

National television networks interrupted their regular programming to broadcast footage of the brutal police attack. Newscasters referred to the event as “Bloody Sunday.” People across the country watched in disbelief and outrage. Although most people were aware that civil rights protests sometimes met with violence in the South, the dramatic footage provided indisputable evidence of the true extent of the problem. Thousands of Americans from all walks of life were inspired to take action. They immediately dropped whatever they were doing and made arrangements to travel to Alabama and join the protests. “When that beating happened at the foot of the bridge, it looked like war,” recalled Selma mayor Joseph Smitherman. “That went all over the country. And the people, the wrath of the nation came down on us.”<sup>9</sup>

### Turnaround Tuesday

The outpouring of public support convinced organizers of the Selma-Montgomery march that the protest should continue as soon as possible. King called on religious leaders across the country to join him in a second march on Tuesday, March 9—two days after Bloody Sunday. Even in the face of escalating national pressure, however, Governor Wallace still refused to allow the march to proceed. He declared his intention to use state and local law enforcement officers to prevent the protesters from blocking traffic on public highways.

SCLC leaders formally requested that U.S. District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson (see sidebar “Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.,” p. 80) order Wallace not to interfere with the march. Although Johnson agreed to hold a hearing on the request later that week, he also ordered the protesters not to march until after the court date. This order put march organizers in a difficult position. They knew that Johnson had issued a number of important rulings in support of civil rights in the past, so they had hope for a favorable ruling. But they also knew that thousands of people had come to Selma specifically to participate in the protest, and they worried that many of these people would leave town if they delayed the march for several days.

After discussing the matter with SCLC and SNCC leaders, King decided to disobey the court order and proceed with the March 9 protest. He led 1500 marchers—many of them members of the clergy—back to the Edmund Pet-



When Martin Luther King, Jr., and other demonstrators organized another march out of Selma on March 9, 1965, they were turned back by law enforcement officers.

tus Bridge. Once again, a large group of law enforcement officers met the procession at the bridge and ordered the protesters to turn back. This time, however, King obeyed the order and led the marchers back into Selma. He explained that the aborted march had served a purpose by demonstrating that the police were still prepared to use violence against peaceful protesters. But many of the marchers were upset about King's decision and viewed it as a betrayal of their trust. They mockingly called the second attempt to march to Montgomery "Turnaround Tuesday."

Later that night, after the march ended, three white ministers went out for dinner at a black restaurant in Selma. As they left, they were attacked and

brutally beaten by local white segregationists. One of the men, Unitarian minister James Reeb, died from his injuries. The murder of Reeb put the Selma protests back in the headlines across the country. Many Americans expressed their outrage about the racist violence by demanding action from their members of Congress.

### **Johnson Delivers “The American Promise”**

Shortly after Bloody Sunday, President Johnson held a press conference to discuss the voting rights protests in Selma. He denounced the brutal police assault on the marchers as “an American tragedy” and said that it “must strengthen the determination of each of us to bring full equality and equal justice to all of our people.”

On March 15, Johnson appeared before a joint session of Congress to announce that he was introducing new legislation specifically designed to secure African-American voting rights. This historic speech, entitled “The American Promise,” was broadcast live on television to 70 million people. Many viewers were moved when the president repeated a theme from the civil rights movement, telling the American people that “we shall overcome” racism and injustice (see “President Lyndon Johnson Delivers ‘The American Promise,’” p. 197).

SCLC activist C.T. Vivian recalled watching Johnson’s speech on television in the company of King and other civil rights leaders. “When LBJ said, ‘And we shall overcome,’ we all cheered,” he noted. “And I looked over ... and Martin was very quietly sitting in the chair, and a tear ran down his check. It was a victory like none other. It was an affirmation of the movement.”<sup>10</sup> King later described Johnson’s address as one “that will live in history as one of the most passionate pleas for human rights ever made by a president of our nation.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The March Finally Reaches Montgomery**

In the meantime, federal judge Frank M. Johnson held his court hearing as scheduled to determine whether the march could legally proceed in the face of opposition from Alabama Governor George Wallace and Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark. The judge ruled that the protesters’ right to vote and right to assemble outweighed the state and local governments’ concerns about highway safety. “The extent of the wrong is taken into consideration when you are trying to determine whether an extensive protest is justified,”

Johnson explained of his decision. “If they had just deprived one person of the right to use a public fountain, then that wouldn’t have justified a march of 100,000 people from Selma to Montgomery on a public highway. But if you have general discrimination, throughout the state, on the right to vote and the right to do other basic things that citizens—white citizens—are entitled to, then you have a right to an extensive protest.”<sup>12</sup>

The march was scheduled to depart from Selma on March 21, 1965. To ensure that it proceeded without interference, President Johnson placed the Alabama National Guard under federal control. He also sent 2,000 U.S. Army troops, 100 FBI agents, and 100 federal marshals to protect the protesters on the road to Montgomery.

When the scheduled day arrived, King successfully led a procession of 4,000 marchers—both black and white—over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Although a few segregationists along the route held up signs and shouted at the protesters, the federal marshals maintained order. The marchers continued walking toward the state capital for four days. Many of them carried signs or American flags and passed the hours by singing freedom songs. They slept in tents by the side of the road at night, and volunteers supplied them with food and water. “The final march was enjoyable and it was tension-filled all at the same time,” recalled Ralph David Abernathy. “We knew that victory was in sight. We had to march on one side of the road, and the cars had to move on the other side. A great deal of profanity was yelled from the passing cars, and the old farmers came out, mostly white people, and they looked at us with utter disdain. But we knew that victory was in sight.”<sup>13</sup>

By the time the procession reached Montgomery on March 25, it had expanded in size to include 25,000 people. A number of prominent civil rights leaders joined King at the front, including Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and A. Philip Randolph. The national television networks covered the triumphant final leg of the march live, and pictures appeared on the front pages of newspapers across the country and around the world.

The Selma-Montgomery voting rights march concluded with a rally on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol. A group of eight marchers presented a petition to Governor Wallace demanding that the state remove all restrictions on black voter registration. Then King made a speech in which he honored all the people who responded to the Bloody Sunday assault by rushing to join the Selma protests. “Selma, Alabama, became a shining moment in the con-



In the days leading up the triumphant Selma-to-Montgomery march, other demonstrations such as this one in Brooklyn, New York, were organized to show solidarity with the Selma activists.

science of man,” he declared. “If the worst in American life lurked in its dark streets, the best of American instincts arose passionately from across the nation to overcome it.”<sup>14</sup> King concluded by encouraging the crowd to keep fighting to achieve true racial equality in America.

### Support Grows for Strong Legislation

When the rally concluded, organizers and federal marshals encouraged the protesters to leave Montgomery as soon as possible in order to minimize the potential for violence. People who had come from out of town headed to the airport, and a number of volunteers shuttled local marchers back to Selma. One of these volunteers, Viola Liuzzo, was a white homemaker who had come from Michigan to help out. As she drove back toward Montgomery



after dropping off a group of marchers in Selma, her car was chased and forced off the road by Ku Klux Klan members. Liuzzo was shot and killed. The black teenager who accompanied her on the drive, Leroy Moton, survived the attack by pretending to be dead. As it turned out, one of the people in the other car was an FBI informant, so the KKK members were arrested a few days later.

This latest incidence of racial violence further increased public support for Johnson's proposed voting rights legislation. "Recent events in Alabama, involving murder, savage brutality, and violence by local police, state troopers, and posses, have so aroused the nation as to make action by this Congress necessary and speedy," declared House Judiciary Committee member Emanuel Celler. "The climate of public opinion has so changed because of the Alabama outrages, as to make assured the passage of this solid bill—a bill that would have been inconceivable a year ago."<sup>15</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Voting Rights Act of 1965," The Dirksen Congressional Center. Available online at [http://www.congresslink.org/print\\_basics\\_histmats\\_votingrights\\_contents.htm](http://www.congresslink.org/print_basics_histmats_votingrights_contents.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1987, p. 254.
- <sup>3</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Nobel Prize Lecture," December 11, 1964. Available online at [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html).
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 258.
- <sup>5</sup> Source: King, Martin Luther Jr. "A Letter from a Selma, Alabama, Jail" [advertisement], *New York Times*, February 5, 1965.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 268.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 273.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in *The Unfinished Agenda of the Selma-Montgomery Voting Rights March*, p. 42.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 273.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 278.
- <sup>11</sup> "Our God Is Marching On," speech delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, March 25, 1965. Available online at MLK Papers Project, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches>.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Academy of Achievement, "Frank Johnson Interview," 1991. Available online at <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/joh2pro-1>.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Hampton, Henry, and Steve Fayer, with Sarah Flynn. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York: Bantam, 1991, p. 236.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Carson, Clayborne, et al, eds. *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954-1990*. New York: Penguin, 1991, p. 225.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Williams, p. 283.



**James Farmer (1920-1999)**

*Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during the Civil Rights Movement*

**J**ames Leonard Farmer, Jr., was born on January 12, 1920, in Marshall, Texas. His mother was Pearl Marion Houston Farmer, a former teacher. His father was James Leonard Farmer, Sr., an ordained Methodist minister who served as a campus chaplain and professor of philosophy and religion at several small black Methodist colleges in the South.

Education was a big priority in the Farmer household, and young James thrived in this setting. At the age of fourteen he enrolled in Wiley College, a small black liberal arts school in Marshall that also offered high school level courses. Farmer originally intended to become a doctor, but his discomfort with the sight of blood led him to set his sights elsewhere. He ultimately decided to follow his father's example and pursue a career in the ministry, in part because he thought that such a career would give him opportunities to campaign against racial discrimination, poverty, and other social problems. "It did not occur to me that in the civil rights struggle I would see more blood than I ever would have seen in a doctor's office or a hospital operating room," he later admitted in his autobiography, *Lay Bare the Heart*. But he acknowledged that this realization might not have stopped him, for he felt pulled to "wage war on racism."<sup>1</sup>

**A Believer in Peaceful Protest**

After graduating from Wiley in 1938, Farmer moved on to Howard University, a prestigious African-American school in Washington, D.C. As he pursued his religious studies he became fascinated by Mohandas Gandhi, who was carrying out a long, unrelenting campaign of nonviolent resistance to free India from British rule. He gradually became convinced that Gandhi's philosophy of forcing social change through peaceful protest could work in the United States as well. During this same period Farmer became a staff member for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a national peace group.



Farmer graduated from Howard with a master's degree in theology in 1941. He then moved to Chicago, where he and several friends launched a series of small but trailblazing anti-discrimination protests. In 1942, for example, Farmer led a civil rights sit-in at a Chicago restaurant that refused to serve African Americans in the main eating area. This protest, which was perhaps the first civil rights sit-in in U.S. history, ended in victory when the frustrated restaurant owner agreed to end his discriminatory policies.

Farmer and his allies decided to call their group the Committee of Racial Equality (CORE). They proclaimed that CORE intended to fight racial segregation and discrimination in America by using the same sorts of bold but peaceful protest campaigns that Gandhi used. Two years later the group changed its name to the Congress of Racial Equality.

Farmer was elected national chairman of CORE, but much of the group's early leadership consisted of white, middle-class men from the North. Farmer and other CORE leaders often disagreed on the priorities and tactics the organization should take, and in late 1944 he left CORE to focus on FOR and labor union organizing. In 1949 he married Lula Patterson, with whom he eventually had two children.

### Leading a Revitalized CORE

After the loss of its leading founder, CORE gradually faded from public prominence. But it never actually disbanded, and in the late 1950s the organization's philosophy of using peaceful protest and civil disobedience to advance civil rights was embraced by African-American college students, workers, and community leaders who had no affiliation with the group. The 1955 Montgomery bus boycott sparked a new wave of peaceful civil rights demonstrations across the South, and CORE received new life.

Farmer was delighted by the growth of the civil rights movement—and pleased that his philosophy of nonviolent protest was becoming such a central part of the movement. In 1959 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) hired Farmer to develop a direct action program for the organization. Like other established civil rights groups, the NAACP had previously focused on making civil rights gains through the courts and Congress. And despite their discomfort with some direct protests, NAACP leaders recognized that they needed to develop their resources in that

area. But Farmer never felt fully accepted within the NAACP, and in 1961 he left the organization to take the leadership reins at CORE.

Upon rejoining CORE, Farmer moved decisively to put the group's resources to work. He joined with the leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to organize a series of Freedom Rides across the Jim Crow South. These rides, which featured a mix of white and African-American volunteers, were meant to defy the South's practice of segregating buses, waiting rooms, and other public transportation facilities by race.

Over the ensuing months, Farmer and other Freedom Riders were subjected to beatings, bombings, unfair arrest and jail, and a steady drumbeat of harassment and death threats from enraged white racists in many Southern cities. But the Freedom Rides succeeded in publicizing the outrageous discrimination that existed all across the South. It also gave the entire civil rights movement a sense that there was no turning back in the quest to claim equal voting rights and end segregation.

Farmer himself realized that the Freedom Rides acquired a great symbolic value within the movement. When U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy wanted CORE and SNCC to agree to a "cooling off" period in which the Freedom Rides would be suspended, Farmer flatly refused to consider the request. "My objective is not just to make a *point*, but to bring about a real change in the situation," he declared. "We will continue the Ride until people can sit wherever they wish on buses and use the facilities in any waiting room available to the public.... We have been cooling off for 350 years. If we cool off any more we will be in a deep freeze. The Freedom Ride will go on."<sup>2</sup>

### **Fighting for Voting Rights**

Farmer himself was arrested numerous times in the early 1960s, and on one occasion he spent forty days in a Jackson, Mississippi, jail after he tried to enter a white restroom at a local bus station. He was in a Louisiana jail on August, 28, 1963, when the famous March on Washington took place. But even though he could not be there in person, Farmer sent a letter that was read to the assembled crowd. "We will not stop our demands for freedom," Farmer wrote, "until the heavy weight of centuries of oppression is removed from our backs and like proud men everywhere we can stand tall together again."

Under Farmer's leadership, CORE became an important force in organizing voter registration drives in the South in 1963 and 1964. The group's activi-

ties in this area helped create further momentum for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But even as these triumphs occurred, Farmer's continued insistence on nonviolent protest came under fire from militant black activists. In addition, Farmer became increasingly convinced that personality conflicts and petty jealousies within the larger civil rights movement were robbing it of much of its potential vitality and power.

Restless and frustrated, Farmer left CORE in 1966. He was asked to head a new federal literacy program, but President Lyndon B. Johnson blocked funding for the program—possibly as a way to punish Farmer for his public opposition to the Vietnam War, which the president supported.

Farmer accepted a faculty position at Lincoln University, a black college in Oxford, Pennsylvania, and taught there from 1966 to 1968. He then decided to run for political office in New York City, but he was defeated in his effort to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives by Shirley Chisholm, a black woman. In 1969 Farmer took a job in the administration of President Richard M. Nixon. As assistant secretary for administration in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Farmer helped establish new affirmative action hiring and promotion policies. But he left a year later out of frustration with many of the Nixon administration's policy positions.

Farmer never regained the prominence he had known as director of CORE in the early 1960s, but he continued to work on civil rights and labor issues for the rest of his life. He also became a professor of civil rights history at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1985. That same year he published his autobiography, *Lay Bare the Heart*, which was praised by critics as a fascinating and brutally honest account of the civil rights era.

In Farmer's later years he struggled mightily against the ravages of diabetes, which blinded him and forced him to undergo amputations of both legs. In 1998, though, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. U.S. Senator Charles Robb and Congressman John Lewis—who had worked with Farmer during the civil rights era—wrote a tribute to him for the occasion. "James Farmer has . . . spent a lifetime teaching America the value of equality and opportunity," they stated. "He has taught America that its most volatile social problems could be solved nonviolently. He has reminded us of the countless acts of courage and conviction needed to bring about great change. He has shown us the idealism needed to act and the pragmatism needed to succeed. His respect for humanity and his

belief in justice will forever inspire those of us privileged to call him mentor and friend.”<sup>3</sup> Farmer died one year later, on July 9, 1999, in Fredericksburg.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Farmer, James. *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*. 1985. Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1998, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Farmer, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, John, and Charles Robb. “A Tribute to an American Freedom Fighter.” Available online at [www.medaloffreedom.com/JamesFarmer.htm](http://www.medaloffreedom.com/JamesFarmer.htm).

## Learning the Bitter Truth about Jim Crow

*During the Jim Crow era, which lasted from the late 1800s through the 1960s, African Americans in the South were expected to follow strict rules of behavior that demonstrated respect and submission toward whites. During the summer of 1955, an African-American teenager from Chicago named Emmett Till broke these unwritten rules of acceptable black behavior during a visit to Mississippi and was murdered by white segregationists. Despite strong evidence, an all-white jury refused to convict the killers.*

*The brutal murder of Emmett Till had a profound effect on 14-year-old Essie Mae Moody (whose name was changed to Annie Mae Moody due to a problem with her birth certificate). In this excerpt from her memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, she recalls the tense racial atmosphere in the Jim Crow South and her sudden realization that she could be killed “just because I was black.”*

**N**ot only did I enter high school with a new name, but also with a completely new insight into the life of Negroes in Mississippi. I was now working for one of the meanest white women in town, and a week before school started Emmett Till was killed.

Up until his death, I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then. I remember once when I was only seven I heard Mama and one of my aunts talking about some Negro who had been beaten to death. “Just like them lowdown skunks killed him they will do the same to us,” Mama had said. When I asked her who killed the man and why, she said, “An Evil Spirit killed him. You gotta be a good girl or it will kill you too.” So since I was seven, I had lived in fear of that “Evil Spirit.” It took me eight years to learn what that spirit was.

I was coming from school the evening I heard about Emmett Till's death. There was a whole group of us, girls and boys, walking down the road headed home. A group of about six high school boys were walking a few paces ahead of me and several other girls. We were laughing and talking about something that had happened in school that day. However, the six boys in front of us weren't talking very loud. Usually they kept up so much noise. But today they were just walking and talking among themselves....

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From *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody, copyright © 1968 by Anne Moody. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

*[Moody and the other girls eavesdrop and hear them discuss an African-American boy who was recently murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman.]*

Questions about who was killed, where, and why started running through my mind. I walked up to one of the boys.

“Eddie, what boy was killed?”

“Moody, where’ve you been?” he asked me. “Everybody talking about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Greenwood by some white men. You don’t know nothing that’s going on besides what’s in them books of yours, huh?”

Standing there before the rest of the girls, I felt so stupid. It was then that I realized I really didn’t know what was going on all around me. It wasn’t that I was dumb. It was just that ever since I was nine, I’d had to work after school and do my lessons on lunch hour. I never had time to learn anything, to hang around with people my own age. And you were never told anything by adults.

That evening when I stopped off at the house on my way to Mrs. Burke’s, Mama was singing. Any other day she would have been yelling at Adline and Junior them to take off their school clothes. I wondered if she knew about Emmett Till. The way she was singing she had something on her mind and it wasn’t pleasant either.

I got a shoe, you got a shoe,  
All of God’s chillum got shoes;  
When I get to hebben, I’m gonna put on my shoes,  
And gonna tromp all over God’s hebben.  
When I get to hebben I’m gonna put on my shoes,  
And gonna walk all over God’s hebben.

Mama was dishing up beans like she didn’t know anyone was home. Adline, Junior, and James had just thrown their books down and sat themselves at the table. I didn’t usually eat before I went to work. But I wanted to ask Mama about Emmett Till. So I ate and thought of some way of asking her.

“These beans are some good, Mama,” I said, trying to sense her mood.

“Why is you eating anyway? You gonna be late for work. You know how Miss Burke is,” she said to me.

“I don’t have much to do this evening. I kin get it done before I leave work,” I said.

The conversation stopped after that. Then Mama started humming that song again.

When I get to hebben, I’m gonna put on my shoes,  
And gonna tromp all over God’s hebben.

She put a plate on the floor for Jennie Ann and Jerry.

“Jennie Ann? You and Jerry sit down here and eat and don’t put beans all over this floor.”

Ralph, the baby, started crying, and she went in the bedroom to give him his bottle. I got up and followed her.

“Mama, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old Negro boy who was killed a little over a week ago by some white men?” I asked her.

“Where did your hear that?” she said angrily.

“Boy, everybody really thinks I am dumb or deaf or something. I heard Eddie them talking about it this evening coming from school.”

“Eddie them better watch how they go around here talking. These white folks git a hold of it they gonna be in trouble,” she said.

“What are they gonna be in trouble about, Mama? People got a right to talk, ain’t they?”

“You go on to work before you is late. And don’t you let on like you know nothing about that boy being killed before Miss Burke them. Just do your work like you don’t know nothing,” she said. “That boy’s a lot better off in heaven than he is here,” she continued and then started singing again.

On my way to Mrs. Burke’s that evening, Mama’s words kept running through my mind. “Just do your work like you don’t know nothing.” “Why is Mama acting so scared?” I thought. “And what is Mrs. Burke knew we knew? Why must I pretend I don’t know? Why are these people killing Negroes? What did Emmett Till do besides whistle at that woman?”

By the time I got to work, I had worked my nerves up some. I was shaking as I walked up on the porch. “Do your work like you don’t know noth-



ing.” But once I got inside, I couldn’t have acted normal if Mrs. Burke were paying me to be myself.

I was so nervous, I spent most of the evening avoiding them going about the house dusting and sweeping. Everything went along fairly well until dinner was served.

“Don, Wayne, and Mama, y’all come on to dinner. Essie, you can wash up the pots and dishes in the sink now. Then after dinner you won’t have as many,” Mrs. Burke called to me.

If I had the power to mysteriously disappear at that moment, I would have. They used the breakfast table in the kitchen for most of their meals. The dining room was only used for Sunday dinner or when they had company. I wished they had company tonight so they could eat in the dining room while I was at the kitchen sink.

“I forgot the bread,” Mrs. Burke said when they were all seated. “Essie, will you cut it and put it on the table for me?”

I took the cornbread, cut it in squares, and put it on a small round dish. Just as I was about to set it on the table, Wayne yelled at the cat. I dropped the plate and the bread went all over the floor.

“Never mind, Essie,” Mrs. Burke said angrily as she got up and got some white bread from the breadbox.

I didn’t say anything. I picked up the cornbread from around the table and went back to the dishes. As soon as I got to the sink, I dropped a saucer on the floor and broke it. Didn’t anyone say a word until I had picked up the pieces.

“Essie, I bought some new cleanser today. It’s setting on the bathroom shelf. See if it will remove the stains in the tub,” Mrs. Burke said.

I went to the bathroom to clean the tub. By the time I got through with it, it was snow white. I spent a whole hour scrubbing it. I had removed the stains in no time but I kept scrubbing until they finished dinner.

When they had finished and gone into the living room as usual to watch TV, Mrs. Burke called me to eat. I took a clean plate out of the cabinet and sat down. Just as I was putting the first forkful of food in my mouth, Mrs. Burke entered the kitchen.

“Essie, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Greenwood?” she asked me, sitting down in one of the chairs opposite me.

“No, I didn’t hear that,” I answered, almost choking on the food.

“Do you know why he was killed?” she asked and I didn’t answer.

“He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything. He just came to Mississippi and put a whole lot of notions in the boys’ heads here and stirred up a lot of trouble,” she said passionately.

“How old are you, Essie?” she asked me after a pause.

“Fourteen. I will soon be fifteen though,” I said.

“See, that boy was just fourteen too. It’s a shame he had to die so soon.” She was so red in the face, she looked as if she was on fire.

When she left the kitchen I sat there with my mouth open and my food untouched. I couldn’t have eaten now if I were starving. “Just do you work like you don’t know nothing” ran through my mind again and I began washing the dishes.

I went home shaking like a leaf on a tree. For the first time out of all her trying, Mrs. Burke had made me feel like rotten garbage. Many times she had tried to instill fear within me and subdue me and had given up. But when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me.

Before Emmett Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn’t have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn’t know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought.

Source: Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. 1968. New York: Bantam, 1976, pp. 121-26.

# IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

## **14th Amendment**

Ratified in 1868, this constitutional amendment granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States and guaranteed “equal protection of the laws” to all American citizens.

## **15th Amendment**

Ratified in 1870, this constitutional amendment guaranteed the right of all male citizens to vote, without regard to race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

## **19th Amendment**

This constitutional amendment, ratified in 1920, gave women the right to vote.

## **Affirmative action**

A broad term used to describe policies that attempt to increase minority involvement in government, business, and education.

## **Baker, Ella (1903-1986)**

Civil rights activist and co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

## **Black Codes**

The name given to various laws passed in the South after the Civil War to limit the rights of African Americans to own property, work, travel, and vote.

## **Bloody Sunday**

A term used in reference to March 7, 1965, when a voting rights march in Selma, Alabama, was shattered by state troopers who used tear gas, clubs, and whips on the peaceful demonstrators.

# CHRONOLOGY

1776

Voting rights in the newly created United States are granted only to white male property-owners; women, blacks, Catholics, Jews, Quakers, and white men without landholdings are excluded.

1792

New Hampshire becomes the first state to do away with the rule that only property owners and taxpayers can vote. Other states follow suit.

1848

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American War and gives Mexicans living in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, and Nevada the right to vote—provided they are proficient in English.

1856

All white male citizens of the United States receive the right to vote, although exceptions are made for those convicted of certain crimes.

1865

After the Civil War ends in victory for the North, slavery is outlawed in the United States with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. *See p. 8.*

1866

The Civil Rights Act of 1866 is passed, granting citizenship to all native-born Americans. Voting rights, however, are still subject to various restrictions.

Oklahoma passes a “grandfather clause” that exempts men from literacy test requirements if they can prove that their grandfathers could vote. This law permits illiterate white men to exercise their voting rights, but disqualifies most African Americans since most of their grandfathers had been slaves. Other Southern states pass similar laws in the ensuing years. *See p. 14.*

1868

The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution becomes law. It grants citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States—regardless of skin color—and guarantees all U.S. citizens equal protection under the law. *See p. 8.*

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