



Episode 6 concludes the saga of black Americans’ struggle for a comprehensive voting rights bill. The first segment chronicles clashes between legal and political officials in Selma, Alabama, and local activists. Years of bigotry, discrimination, and intimidation left the black population of

1965	
Jan.	SNCC and the SCLC initiate a voter registration campaign in Selma, Alabama
Jan. 4	In his State of the Union address, President Lyndon Johnson proposes to “eliminate every remaining obstacle to the right and the opportunity to vote”
Feb. 25	Malcolm X is assassinated in New York
Mar. 7	On “Bloody Sunday,” civil rights activists, attempting a march to Montgomery, Alabama, are beaten by state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma
Mar. 21	With protection from federal troops, King leads thousands on a successful march from Selma to Montgomery
Mar. 25	Viola Luzzio, a white civil rights activist from Michigan, is murdered while driving marchers back to Selma
Aug. 6	President Lyndon Johnson signs the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminates all voting tests used to discriminate against minorities
Aug. 11	The black neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles, California, explodes in a riot that leaves thirty-four people dead

Alabama disenfranchised and politically marginalized; in Dallas County (where Selma is located), fewer than ten percent of eligible blacks were registered to vote. In 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)\* and local activists intensified the voter registration drive, hoping to dismantle Alabama’s white supremacist political structure along with its discriminatory social system. Early in 1965, Alabama activists invited the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)\*\* and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to bolster the campaign. While Selma was chosen as the focal point, similar voter registration activities were held in nearby towns and counties. Tensions reached fever pitch in February, when police killed Jimmie Lee Jackson, a 26-year-old army veteran, at a demonstration in Marion, twenty miles northwest of Selma. Outraged by this latest act of police violence, activists decided to march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital, in protest and in honor of Jackson. The march was scheduled for Sunday, March 7, 1965.

Some SNCC members, however, voiced concerns that the 40-mile march entailed too much risk for too little gain. Despite opposition from within his own organization, SNCC chairman John Lewis decided to lead the march with the SCLC’s

field director Hosea Williams. Together they led marchers to face two of the state’s most dangerous men: George Wallace, Alabama’s arch-segregationist governor, and Jim Clark, a police sheriff known for his hot temper and unusual brutality.

On March 7, some six hundred protestors marched out of Selma only to be met by state troopers and Clark’s officers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. With little warning, the marchers were tear-gassed, chased, and cruelly beaten. Images of the incident became national news and prompted hundreds of sympathizers to come to Selma in support of the march. Two weeks after what the press called “Bloody Sunday,” and with the support of the federal government, the marchers crossed

\*The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed in 1961 by students dedicated to the protest tactics of nonviolence and civil disobedience. The organization emerged out of the sit-ins and Freedom Rides of 1960 and was led by Ella Baker, James Lawson, Marion Barry, and Diane Nash. The organization became influenced by nonreligious, Marxist, and ethnic ideas, which separated it from the SCLC. Under Stokely Carmichael’s leadership it embraced an ideology of Black Power and Black Nationalism and dropped its commitment to nonviolence.

\*\*The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed in 1957 after the successful bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama (see Episode 1), and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was chosen its leader. The SCLC represented a coalition of local churches and reflected the religious nature and structure of black communities in the South. The organization’s goal was to lead the struggle against segregation using the tactics of nonviolence and civil disobedience.

Edmund Pettus Bridge and proceeded to Montgomery.

The last segment of this episode depicts President Johnson delivering his historic speech in which he used the civil rights slogan, “we shall overcome,” to urge Congress to adopt a comprehensive voting rights bill. The program ends with the explosion of riots in Los Angeles, California—riots that made many within SNCC question the effectiveness of nonviolence.

## KEY QUESTIONS

1. What different strategies did activists in Selma use to draw national attention to discrimination in voting rights?
2. How did nonviolent direct action force people in Selma and around the country to assess their accepted customs and their consciences? What role did the press play?
3. What choices did local and national leaders make in response to the events in Selma?
4. Why did activists demand federal intervention in Selma?
5. How effective were the nonviolent tactics in Selma? How did they help reshape American democracy?

## Document 1: MEMORIES OF THE MARCH

In 1964, SNCC and local activists intensified their campaign to register black voters. Local black leaders asked the SCLC to join the campaign in Selma, Alabama, to protest discriminatory voting practices. Selma Sheriff Jim Clark responded to the nonviolent protests with physical force. In response to the arrest of an SCLC activist, protestors held a nighttime rally in the nearby town of Marion. The rally was entirely peaceful until the crowd left the Zion Methodist church. Then, mysteriously, the streetlights went out and a mob of white segregationists and police assaulted the protestors. One of their victims was 26-year-old army veteran Jimmie Lee Jackson, who died from his injuries a few days later. The Reverend James Bevel, an SCLC strategist, recalled how activist leaders struggled to find a way for the community to constructively express their grief and outrage:



A staunch protector of segregation, Sheriff Jim Clark prods blacks who attempt to register to vote with his police baton and a cattle prod.

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I had to preach, because I had to get the people back out of the state of negative violence and out of a state of grief. If you don't deal with negative violence and grief, it turns into bitterness. So what I recommended was that people walk to Montgomery [the state capital], which would give them time to work through their hostility and resentments and get back to focus on the issue. The question I put to them was, “Do you think Wallace sent the policemen down to kill the man? Or do you think the police overreacted? Now, if they overreacted, then you can't go around assuming that Wallace sent the men down to kill.

So what we need to do is to go to Montgomery and ask the governor what is his motive and intentions.”

It’s a nonviolent movement. If you went back to some of the classical strategies of Gandhi, when you have a great violation of the people and there’s a great sense of injury, you have to give people an honorable means and context in which to express and eliminate that grief and speak decisively and succinctly back to the issue. Otherwise the movement will break down in violence and chaos. Agreeing to go to Montgomery was that kind of tool that would absorb a tremendous amount of energy and effort, and it would keep the issue of disenfranchisement before the whole nation.

The whole point of walking from Selma to Montgomery is it takes you five or six days, which would give you the time to discuss in the nation, through papers, radio, and television and going around speaking, what the real issues were.<sup>1</sup>

The SCLC decided to march on Sunday, March 7, 1964. SNCC leaders, many of whom resented the SCLC’s presence in Selma, were reluctant to participate in the march. They questioned the benefits of the march and claimed that it was too risky. They also suspected that King and the SCLC would grab the media spotlight and leave before the campaign was finished. John Lewis, then the chairman of SNCC, remembered:

On a Saturday night, March the sixth, the SNCC executive committee met all night in the basement of a restaurant in Atlanta, debating whether we should participate in the march. It was the decision of the committee that we shouldn’t participate in this matter. Some people felt a lot of people would get hurt. Some people started saying the SCLC would have this march and then they would leave town, and the people would be left holding the bag. I took the position that people we had been working with in the heart of the Black Belt for more than three years wanted to march and we should be there with them. The decision was made that if I wanted to go, I could go as an individual but not as a representative of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I felt I had an obligation; I had gone to jail in Selma on several occasions. So I made the decision with three other members of that committee to leave Atlanta early Sunday morning, and we drove to Selma.<sup>2</sup>

Governor Wallace blocked the march on the pretext that his forces would not be able to guarantee the safety of the demonstrators. Despite the ban, six hundred marchers responded to the SCLC’s call. Unfortunately King, faced with a death threat and pressed to attend to his own congregation in Atlanta, could not lead the march. In King’s absence, John Lewis and the SCLC’s Hosea Williams were selected to lead the marchers over the Edmund Pettus Bridge and onto U.S. 80, the road to Montgomery. Lewis remembered:

When we arrived at the apex of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we saw a sea of blue: Alabama state troopers. About six hundred of us were walking in twos. It was a very peaceful,

orderly protest. The moment we got within shouting distance of the state troopers, we heard one state trooper identify himself. He said, "I'm Major John Cloud [the commander in charge]. This is an unlawful march. It will not be allowed to continue. I'll give you three minutes to disperse and go back to your church." In about a minute and a half he said, "Troopers, advance." And we saw the state troopers and members of Sheriff Clark's posse on horseback. The troopers came toward us with billy clubs, tear gas, and bullwhips, trampling us with horses. I felt like it was the last demonstration, the last protest on my part, like I was going to take my last breath from the tear gas. I saw people rolling, heard people screaming and hollering. We couldn't go forward. If we tried to go forward we would've gone into the heat of battle. We couldn't go to the side, to the left or to the right, because we would have been going into the Alabama River, so we were beaten back down the streets of Selma, back to the church.<sup>3</sup>

Sheyann Webb, an eight-year-old who had defied her parents' order not to participate, was caught in the fray. In an *Eyes on the Prize* interview she recalled that, "Bloody Sunday was one of the scariest days of my life":

I'll never forget that day simply because I saw some things that I never thought I would see. I remember that on the night prior to Bloody Sunday, there was a mass meeting and several speakers were talking about what our procedures would be for the march. [They said] it would be possible that we would not be successful with that march. But I was still determined as a child to march. [...]

As we approached the bridge, I was getting more and more frightened, and as we got to the top of the bridge, I could see hundreds of policemen, state troopers, billy clubs, dogs, and horses, and I began to just cry. I remember the ministers who were at the front of the line [told us to] kneel down and pray. I knelt down and I said to myself, "Lord, help me." Once we had gotten up, all I can remember is outbursts of tear gas. I saw people being beaten and I began to just try to run home as fast as I could. And as I began to run home, I saw horses behind me, and I will never forget a Freedom Fighter picked me up, Hosea Williams, and I told him to put me down, he wasn't running fast enough. And I ran, and I ran, and I ran. It was like I was running for my life.<sup>4</sup>



March 7, 1965. "Bloody Sunday." A state trooper prods a black woman to her feet after demonstrators were brutally attacked and tear-gassed during the first attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

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By the time the attack was over, nearly 60 marchers were treated for injuries at a local hospital; of those, seventeen were hospitalized, including John Lewis, whose skull had been fractured. Later that evening, the ABC television network interrupted the documentary film *Judgment at Nuremberg*—a film about Nazi racism—to show the shocking footage of police in Alabama attacking American citizens. Andrew Young remembers, “The film was interrupted several times to interject updates and replays of the violence in Selma, and many viewers apparently mistook these clips for portions of the Nuremberg film. The violence in Selma was so similar to the violence in Nazi Germany that viewers could hardly miss the connection.”<sup>5</sup>

John Lewis recalled the public outcry in the aftermath of the march:

The response we had gotten nationally in the wake of the Bloody Sunday attack was so much greater than anything I’d seen since I’d become part of the civil rights movement. [...] The country seemed truly aroused. People were really moved. During the first forty-eight hours after Bloody Sunday, there were demonstrations in more than eighty cities protesting the brutality and urging the passage of a voting rights act. There were speeches on the floors of both houses of Congress condemning the attack and calling for voting rights legislation. A telegram signed by more than sixty congressmen was sent to President Johnson, asking for “immediate” submission of a voting rights bill.<sup>6</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

1. Many SNCC staffers feared that the 40-mile march from Selma to Montgomery was not worth the risk. What did Bevel hope the march would accomplish? What is the role of a mass march in a non-violent movement? What similarities does this march share with the bus rides into the Deep South?
2. Why did Lewis decide to march? How did he understand his obligation as a leader in the movement? To his organization? To the people of Selma?
3. Lewis emphasizes that the marchers were “peaceful and orderly.” Why do you think he and others considered discipline essential if the march was to be successful?
4. The march provided opportunities to participate in the movement for ordinary people who, like Sheyann Webb, were too young to vote. How do you imagine participating in the movement changed the way they thought about themselves and about their role in society?

### *Document 2:* THE SECOND MARCH

In his autobiography, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., outlined his goals and expectations for the Selma campaign:

The goal of the demonstrations in Selma, as elsewhere, is to dramatize the existence of injustice and to bring about the presence of justice methods of nonviolence. Long years of experience indicate to us that Negroes can achieve this goal when four things occur:

1. Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights.
2. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them.

3. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation.
4. The administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation.<sup>7</sup>

Images of “Bloody Sunday” sent shockwaves throughout the country. Like many around the world, King was shaken by the brutality of the state troopers during the first march. Shaken was also some activists’ belief in nonviolence as a few SNCC members began to entertain Malcolm X’s argument that nonviolence was ineffective in the face of extreme brutality. At the same time, however, many “Americans of good conscience” responded by bombarding the president with telegrams demanding that something be done, while others flew to Selma to stand side by side with the nonviolent demonstrators.

King returned to Selma determined to lead a second march to demonstrate, yet again, the obstacles Southern blacks faced as they exercised their rights. In the following excerpt from his autobiography, King recounted the challenges he faced as a leader of a nonviolent campaign for justice in Selma:

The next question was whether the confrontation had to be a violent one; here the responsibility of weighing all factors and estimating the consequences rests heavily on the civil rights leaders. It is easy to decide on either extreme. To go forward recklessly can have terrible consequences in terms of human life and also can cause friends and supporters to lose confidence if they feel a lack of responsibility exists. On the other hand, it is ineffective to guarantee that no violence will occur by the device of not marching or undertaking token marches avoiding direct confrontation.

We determined to seek the middle course. We would march until we faced the troopers. We would not disengage until they made clear that they were going to use force. We would disengage then, having made our point, revealing the continued presence of violence, and showing clearly who are the oppressed and who the oppressors, hoping, finally, that the national administration in Washington would feel and respond to the shocked reactions with action.

On Tuesday, March 9, Judge Frank M. Johnson of the federal district court in Montgomery issued an order enjoining me and the local Selma leadership of the nonviolent voting rights movement from peacefully marching to Montgomery. The issuance of Judge Johnson's order caused disappointment and bitterness to all of us. We had looked to the federal judiciary in Alabama to prevent the unlawful interference with our program to expand elective franchise for Negroes throughout the black belt.

I consulted with my lawyers and trusted advisors both in Selma and other parts of the country and discussed what course of action we should take. Information came in that troopers of the Alabama State Police and Sheriff James Clark’s possemen would be arrayed in massive force across Highway 80 at the foot of Pettus Bridge in Selma. I reflect-

ed upon the role of the federal judiciary as a protector of the rights of Negroes. I also gave thoughtful consideration to the hundreds of clergymen and other persons of good will who had come to Selma to make a witness with me in the cause of justice by participating in our planned march to Montgomery. Taking all of this into consideration, I decided that our plans had to be carried out and that I would lead our march to a confrontation with injustice to make a witness to our countrymen and the world of our determination to vote and be free.

As my associates and I were spiritually preparing ourselves for the task ahead, Governor Leroy Collins, chairman of the newly created Community Relations Service under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and John Doar, Acting Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division, came to see me to dissuade me from the course of action which we had painfully decided upon.

Governor Collins affirmed and restated the commitment of President Johnson to the achievement of full equality for all persons without regard to race, color, or creed, and his commitment to securing the right to vote for all persons eligible to do so. He very strongly urged us not to march. I listened attentively to both Mr. Doar and Governor Collins. I explained to them why, as a matter of conscience, I felt it was necessary to seek a confrontation with injustice on Highway 80. I asked them to try to understand that I would rather die on the highway in Alabama than make a butchery of my conscience by compromising with evil. The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth said to the Governor that instead of urging us not to march, he should urge the state troopers not to be brutal toward us and not attempt to stop our peaceful march. Governor Collins realized at this point that we were determined to march and left the room, saying that he would do what he could to prevent the state troopers from being violent. [...]

[J]ust as we started to march, Governor Collins rushed to me and said that he felt everything would be all right. He gave me a small piece of paper indicating a route that I assume Mr. Baker, Public Safety Director of Selma, wanted us to follow. It was the same route that had been taken on Sunday. The press, reporting this detail, gave the impression that Governor Collins and I had sat down and worked out some compromise. There were no talks or agreements between Governor Collins and me beyond the discussions I have just described. I held on to my decision to march despite the fact that many people in the line were concerned about breaking the court injunction issued by one of the strongest and best judges in the South. I felt that we had to march at least to the point where the troopers brutalized the people on Sunday even if it would mean a recurrence of violence, arrest, or even death. As a nonviolent leader, I could not advocate breaking through a human wall set up by the policemen. While we desperately desired to proceed to Montgomery, we knew before we started our march that this human wall set up on Pettus Bridge would make it impossible for us to go beyond it. It was not that we didn't

intend to go on to Montgomery, but that, in consideration of our commitment to nonviolent action, we knew we could not go under the present conditions.

As to our next step:

As soon as we had won legal affirmation of our right to march to Montgomery, the next phase hinged on the successful completion of our mission to petition the governor to take meaningful measures to abolish voting restrictions, the poll tax, and police brutality.<sup>8</sup>



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March 21, 1965. King and Abernathy finally lead the march to Montgomery. President Johnson sent federal troops to protect the marchers and ensure their safety.

## CONNECTIONS

1. How do King's comments on nonviolence explain the choices that the SCLC staff made in Selma? In King's vision, what needed to happen before the federal government would take action to protect the constitutional rights of black Americans?
2. How did the march on March 9 illustrate the dilemmas King faced as a leader of a nonviolent movement in Selma? What were they? To whom did King feel a moral obligation? How did he try to resolve these dilemmas?
3. Governor Wallace prohibited the march from Selma to Montgomery, explaining that he would be unable to protect the protestors. After the first march, Federal Judge Johnson issued an injunction prohibiting future marches while he studied Wallace's argument. How did King balance the desire to "make a witness" to the "cause of justice," respect for the judge's ruling, and his responsibility to those who had volunteered to march?
4. Why do you think some activists began to question the effectiveness of nonviolence in the aftermath of the first march?
5. Before the Selma campaign began, Malcolm X explained his views on nonviolence. He said, "In the areas of the country where the Government has proven itself unable or unwilling to defend Negroes when they are brutally and unjustly attacked, then Negroes themselves should take whatever steps necessary to defend themselves."<sup>9</sup> How do you think King would respond to Malcolm X's comments?

### *Document 3: "WE SHALL OVERCOME"*

After "Bloody Sunday," President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized the need to take action. As important as the 1964 Civil Rights Act was, it was not enough; events in Selma exposed the numerous ways local registrars prevented black Americans from voting. It was obvious that the federal government had to take action in order to ensure truly universal suffrage for all citizens of the United States.

On March 15, 1964, six days after King led the second march in Selma, President Johnson addressed both houses of Congress about the urgent need for new legislation:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of Democracy. I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause.

At times, history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There, long suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many of them were brutally assaulted. One good man—a man of God—was killed.

There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans. But there is cause for hope and for faith in our Democracy in what is happening here tonight. For the cries of pain and the hymns and protests of oppressed people have summoned into convocation all the majesty of this great government—the government of the greatest nation on earth. Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country—to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man. In our time we have come to live with the moments of great crises. Our lives have been marked with debate about great issues, issues of war and peace, issues of prosperity and depression.

But rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance, or our welfare or our security, but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation. The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation. For, with a country as with a person, “what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.

And we are met here tonight as Americans—not as Democrats or Republicans; we're met here as Americans to solve that problem. This was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose.

The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: “All men are created equal.” [...] And those are not just clever words, and those are not just empty theories. In their name Americans have fought and died for two centuries and tonight around the world they stand there as guardians of our liberty risking their lives. Those words are promised to every citizen that he shall share in the dignity of man. This dignity cannot be found in a man's possessions. It cannot be found in his power or in his position. It really rests on his right to be treated as a man equal in opportunity to all oth-

ers. It says that he shall share in freedom. He shall choose his leaders, educate his children, provide for his family according to his ability and his merits as a human being.

To apply any other test, to deny a man his hopes because of his color or race or his religion or the place of his birth is not only to do injustice, it is to deny Americans and to dishonor the dead who gave their lives for American freedom. Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish it must be rooted in democracy. This most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders. The history of this country in large measure is the history of expansion of the right to all of our people. [...]

I have had prepared a [...] bill [that] will strike down restrictions to voting in all elections, federal, state and local, which have been used to deny Negroes the right to vote. This bill will establish a simple, uniform standard which cannot be used, however ingenious the effort, to flout our Constitution. It will provide for citizens to be registered by officials of the United States Government, if the state officials refuse to register them. It will eliminate tedious, unnecessary lawsuits which delay the right to vote. Finally, this legislation will insure that properly registered individuals are not prohibited from voting. I will welcome the suggestions from all the members of Congress—I have no doubt that I will get some—on ways and means to strengthen this law and to make it effective. [...]

And we ought not, and we cannot, and we must not wait another eight months before we get a bill. We have already waited 100 years and more and the time for waiting is gone. So I ask you to join me in working long hours and nights and weekends, if necessary, to pass this bill. [...] What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

And we shall overcome.<sup>10</sup>

On August 6, 1965, following what many consider his finest speech, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. Section 2 of the act reads: “No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.”<sup>11</sup> The act put an end to the various tests which Southern authorities used for years to stop black Americans from voting.

## CONNECTIONS

1. Sociologist Helen Fein writes that individuals, groups, and nations each have a “universe of obligation”—a circle of individuals and groups toward whom obligations are owed, rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.<sup>12</sup> Whom did President Johnson include in his “universe of obligation”?

2. How did President Johnson frame the issue of civil rights? What values does he articulate? Compare his speech to the nation after Selma to President Kennedy's address (see Episode 3) after Birmingham. What similarities do you find? What differences are most striking?
3. Why did he think that previous legislation denied people their democratic rights? How did voter literacy and knowledge tests undermine the foundation of democracy?
4. What were the historical precedents President Johnson drew upon to make his case?

#### Document 4: THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY

In his book entitled *The Children*, David Halberstam discussed the experiences of young people during the civil rights era, and updated some of their stories. In the following chapter, Halberstam describes the personal relationships between former adversaries within the movement and how some of these evolved into close friendships:

IN 1995, ON THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF SELMA, the Reverend James Luther Bevel returned to that city along with Jamese, his sixteen-year-old daughter, to be a part of the ceremonies commemorating both the past and the future. There he had received a surprisingly warm welcome from one of his old adversaries, Joseph Smitherman, who was still the mayor, and who told Jamese, "All of us were more afraid of your father than we were of any of the others. Your father's a small man physically, but when he would ride that bike by himself in the morning, with that hard look on his face, it scared us; not only because we had no idea what he was up to on those rides, but because we knew he didn't fear us. I mean, he was not supposed to be riding around by himself—Selma was dangerous for black people in those days, but he didn't seem to know it. We were more scared of him than of Dr. King.

Amazingly enough Smitherman, by 1997, had been mayor for thirty-two years. He was exhausted by the job, he said, but he wanted to hold on to it at least until the year 2000. He had long ago made his accommodation to the region's new political forces, which he had once so strenuously fought. He numbered John Lewis, he said, as one of his close friends, and on occasion during political events, the two of them would ride together in open cars.

Smitherman presided over a city of some 27,000 people, which was 55 percent black and 45 percent white, with slightly more whites in the voting age population. His transition from old, hard-line segregationist to new-age racial pluralist had been steady over the past thirty years, starting with simple things—paving streets and bringing decent lighting as well as a sewage system to the black neighborhoods: "One thing Joe Smitherman can do that George Wallace could always do is count votes," said James Chestnut, the black attorney. Over the years Smitherman, pushed by local black politicians, learned how to sell Selma's past. He would promote the town's unique history—it was, the promotional campaign emphasized, the place where the 1965 Voting Rights Act was born. That, after all, he

added, “was the most important piece of legislation to be passed by the Congress in one hundred years.” There was a monument to Martin Luther King now, and tourists visiting the city were told of the importance of the Pettus Bridge.

Smitherman turned out to be extremely skillful in tapping into the federal bureaucracy and getting money for integrated public housing units. Accompanied in Washington by local black officials, he became gifted at telling some of the black HUD [Housing and Urban Development] officials he met that they got their jobs because of what happened in Selma. Therefore, like it or not, Selma was a showplace city, and the feds owed the city. Over the years, with significant help from local black leaders, he was able to tap into the federal treasury for some \$75 million in federal funds, a remarkable amount for so small a town, enough to build seven integrated housing units, which by HUD decree were scattered through out the city, in rich white neighborhoods as well as poor black ones.<sup>13</sup>

On September 12, 2000, Smitherman was voted out after 36 years. His replacement was black. Before the election Smitherman explained, “I was on the wrong side of history.”<sup>14</sup>

### CONNECTIONS

1. Why did Smitherman change? What do you imagine the change from “hard-line segregationist to new-age racial pluralist” looked like? What accommodations do you think he had to make?
2. What do you think Smitherman meant when he said, “I was on the wrong side of history”?
3. What needs to happen for enemies to become allies?

### *Document 5:* VOTING AND DEMOCRACY

In the excerpts below, Andrew Young, the former SCLC executive director and congressman, attempted to evaluate the importance of the events in Selma. In his memoir of the civil rights era entitled, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, Young battled skeptics who thought the march accomplished very little:

[T]hree decades later, Selma remains indelibly impressed upon our memories because of its unforgettable images—the violence at Pettus Bridge, the long march to Montgomery—and also because it was the strongest single dramatization of the need for new legislation protecting the right to the ballot for all citizens. Thirty years later, the importance of Selma clearly stands out. There were those who had thought a campaign in Alabama in 1965 to demonstrate the need for protection of the right to vote was premature. There were also many of our brothers and sisters who were upset because they thought we ended the Selma campaign too soon, the same criticism leveled against us in Birmingham. There were always movement workers who wanted to continue demonstrating and keep campaigns going. But knowing the proper time to make settlements and bring demonstrations to a conclusion hinges on having a strong and precise concept of the objectives of the campaign. If the objectives were too broad, then there could be no

end to demonstrating, for the search for full justice is an ever-continuing struggle.

Our conflicts with SNCC in Selma once again had to do with the breadth of some of their objectives. Our objectives were simple: we wanted to clearly demonstrate to the nation that black citizens were being effectively deprived of their right to register and vote in Selma, Alabama, and that Selma was not an anomaly: it was representative of many other Southern towns in the black belt. Finally, we wanted everyone to know that we would continue to protest these conditions until the federal government passed legislation guaranteeing and protecting our right to the ballot. In my mind, we achieved those goals in Selma. The settlement was always the most contentious point in a movement. As in Birmingham, there were activists who wanted to keep marching, for whom incremental progress was unacceptable. But I always stressed that nonviolent social change requires reconciliation and forgiveness. The people in Selma had a lot to forgive, but without forgiveness, no real change could take place.

The monumental Voting Rights Act, which Congress passed and President Lyndon Johnson signed on August 6, 1965, just a few months after the Selma-to-Montgomery march, remains a lasting achievement of the civil rights movement. The Voting Rights Act helped to change the face of Southern politics in ways we could hardly imagine while we were still bogged down in Selma. In Alabama, in the space of just one year, black voter registration practically doubled—from 116,000 in August 1965 to 228,000 in August 1966. By 1990, there were more than 7,300 black elected officials nationwide, including the governor of Virginia. An amended voting rights act produced black members of Congress from Alabama, Florida, and North Carolina for the first time since Reconstruction. Rural black voters in Georgia and Louisiana sent black representatives to Congress as well.

The very real achievements under the Voting Rights Act must be attributed to the courage, vigilance, and persistence of local black leaders and a small number of attorneys in the states covered by the act. The provisions of the Voting Rights Act called for the placement of federal referees and monitors in counties with a clear practice of disenfranchisement. In my experience, that was virtually all of the more than seven thousand political jurisdictions covered by the Voting Rights Act. However, the Civil Rights Division began with a sadly limited view of its mandate and adopted an enforcement strategy that relied on the “smallest possible federal intrusion into the conduct of state affairs.” The weak enforcement practices of the Civil Rights Division reinforced my belief that President Johnson had stopped the Southern filibuster against the Voting Rights Act by promising federal restraint in its enforcement.

The Voting Rights Section of the Civil Rights Division was put in the position of encouraging cooperation from the same officials who had been beating people for attempting to register. Not surprisingly, white officials in the South resisted the Voting Rights Act, con-

tinuing to change polling places without notice, closing registration offices at times it might be convenient for blacks to register, disqualifying black candidates running for office on spurious grounds, annexing or deannexing communities to prevent a black majority, and purging voter lists between the presidential elections, when voter participation is highest. The civil rights leadership in each county bore the burden of alerting the Justice Department to irregularities, begging for election monitors, and finally finding lawyers to bring lawsuits against local officials. Largely effective when brought, lawsuits by private groups to force implementation of the Voting Rights Act cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees and research and often took years. To this day, this burden is borne by private citizens who contribute to organizations like the NAACP [National Association for Advancement of Colored People] Legal Defense Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union. Lawsuits must be brought in each individual jurisdiction, and a successful lawsuit in one county does not ensure compliance in the neighboring county.

One area where the Justice Department has been assertive is in the enforcement of the preclearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act. This has served as a critical enforcement tool to prevent Southern officials from using race-neutral actions designed to reduce black voting strength. Changes in districts, voting procedures, or voting eligibility have to be submitted to the Justice Department for preclearance and opponents of such measures are given an opportunity to explain their objections. Still, local jurisdictions often ignore the preclearance provisions and local black leaders have to take the initiative to inform the Justice Department when these provisions are being violated.

The preclearance provisions are also used to monitor the redistricting of congressional and state legislative districts that occurs after every national census. In the redistricting that took place under the 1990 census, the Justice Department during the administration of President George Bush [Sr.] took a very aggressive line on Voting Rights Act enforcement, which resulted in a dozen new black members of Congress from the Southern states. States like North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama sent blacks to Congress for the first time since Reconstruction. As of this writing, the conservative justices of the Supreme Court have declared many of those districts unconstitutional.

We still await full enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. There were and are so many subtle tools to discourage blacks, other minorities, and poor people from voting. Local political establishments use many tactics: annexation; deannexation of black neighborhoods; petty crimes provisions in eligibility; consolidation of polling places to an area inconvenient for black voters; enactment of at-large election statutes; raising bonds for qualification to stand for office; purging voter lists; raising residency requirements. All these and more undermine the impact of black voters.

In Selma, our goal was to overcome the selective enfranchisement that had been charac-

teristic of the United States throughout its history. It is my belief that a limited franchise and limited voter participation hurts our nation: in order to function as a true democracy, we must have full participation. Voting is not just a right, it's an obligation, like paying taxes. In this country, despite the passage of simplified voter registration provisions in 1992, there is a reluctance to see all Americans registered and voting. A nation committed to full voter participation would experiment with weekend voting, mail-in voting, proportional representation, and full enforcement of the Voting Rights Act until our participation levels were closer to ninety percent rather than below sixty percent.<sup>15</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

1. According to Young, what were the objectives of the campaign in Selma?
2. Young stressed, "Nonviolent social change requires reconciliation and forgiveness." What do you think he means? Do you agree?
3. In Young's view, to what extent was the Voting Rights Act a success? What is the role of ordinary citizens in enforcing this kind of an act?
4. Why does Young think voting is not just a right, but an obligation? Despite the passage of the Voting Rights Act, voter participation is nowhere near universal. What would it take to reach Young's challenge of 90 percent voter participation?

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 226.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 227-28.

<sup>4</sup> Sheyann Webb "Running For Her Life," *Eyes on the Prize: PBS Video Database Resource*, <http://videoindex.pbs.org/resources/eyes/primary/tp3.html> (accessed on July 24, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Young, *Any Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 358.

<sup>6</sup> John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 349.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Edited by James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writing and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986), 127.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-31.

<sup>9</sup> "Bridge to Freedom" (1965), *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*, VHS, Produced by Henry Hampton (Boston, MA: Blackside, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special Message to Congress: The American Promise," March 15, 1965, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650315.asp> (accessed on July 24, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Voting Rights Act of 1965, *United States Department of Justice*, [http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/eousa/foia\\_reading\\_room/usam/title8/cvr00019.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/eousa/foia_reading_room/usam/title8/cvr00019.htm) (accessed on July 24, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 4.

<sup>13</sup> David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 684-85.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Cabell, "After 36 years in office, Selma Mayor Voted Out," CNN.com <http://transcripts.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/09/12/smitherman.loss/index.html> (accessed on July 24, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Young, *An Easy Burden*, 368-71.