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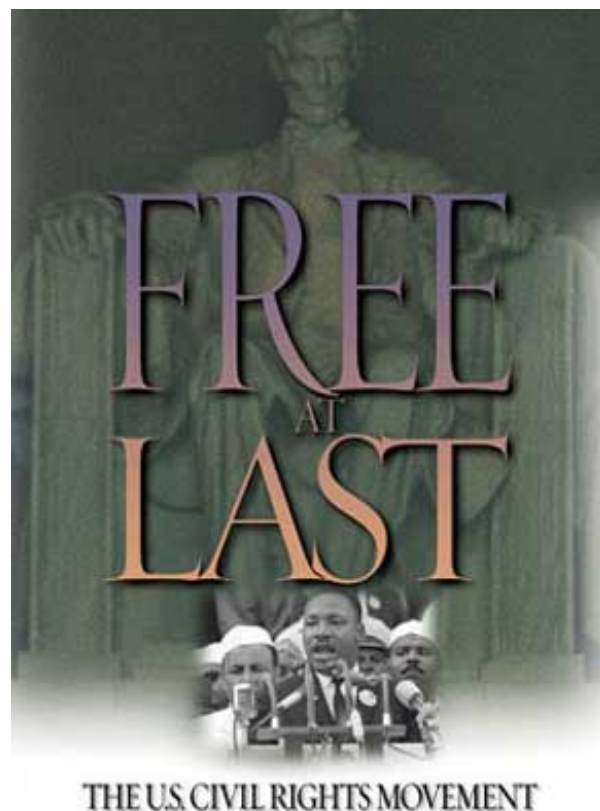
FREE AT LAST: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement

The chapters here are excerpted from an International Information Programs (IIP) publication, *Free at Last: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement*, scheduled for release in mid-2008.

This publication tells the story of the African-American civil rights movement in the United States, as well as of its roots in the historical injustices of slavery and segregation.



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FREE AT LAST: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement

"We Have a Movement"

The successful boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama — which began with the arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955 — transformed the civil rights cause into a mass political movement. It demonstrated that African Americans could unite and engage in disciplined political action, and marked the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr. — the indispensable leader who inspired millions, held them to the high moral standard of nonviolent resistance, and built bridges between Americans of all races, creeds, and colors. While many brave activists contributed to the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, it was King who more than any other individual forced millions of white Americans to confront directly the reality of Jim Crow — and shaped the political reality in which the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 could become law.

"Tired of Giving In": The Montgomery Bus Boycott

Rosa Parks would later say of the day that changed her life: "The only tired I was was tired of giving in." A secondary-school graduate at a time when diplomas were hard to come by for blacks in the South, Parks was active in her local NAACP, a registered voter (another privilege held by few southern blacks), and a respected figure in Montgomery, Alabama. In the summer of 1955, she attended an interracial leadership conference at the Highlander Folk School, a Tennessee institution that trained labor organizers and desegregation advocates. Parks thus knew of efforts to improve the lot of African Americans and that she was well-suited to provide a test case should the occasion arise.

On December 1, 1955, Parks was employed as a seamstress at a local department store. When she rode home from work on that afternoon, she sat in the first row of the "colored section" of seats between the "white" and "black" rows. When the white seats filled, the driver ordered Parks to give up her seat when another white person boarded the bus. Parks refused. She was arrested, jailed, and ultimately fined \$10, plus \$4 in court costs. Parks was 42 years old; she had crossed the line into direct political action.



A booking photo of Rosa Parks taken February 22, 1956. (AP Images)

An outraged black community formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to organize a boycott of the city bus system. Partly to forestall rivalries among local community leaders, citizens turned to a recent arrival to Montgomery, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. The newly-



Albany, Georgia, police chief Laurie Pritchett tells Martin Luther King Jr, left, and Dr. W.G. Anderson, center, that they are under arrest since they could not produce a permit to parade. (Bettmann/CORBIS)



A civil rights demonstrator in Birmingham, Alabama, is attacked by a police dog on May 3, 1963. (AP Images)

installed pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King was just 26 years old but he had been born to leadership: His father, the Reverend Martin Luther King Sr., headed the influential Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, was active in the Georgia chapter of the NAACP, and had since the 1920s refused to ride Atlanta's segregated bus system.

In his first speech to MIA, the younger King told the group:

We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.

Under King's leadership, boycotters organized carpools, while black taxi drivers charged boycotters the same fare — 10 cents — they would have paid on the bus. By auto, by horse-and-buggy, and even simply by walking, direct, nonviolent political action forced the city to pay a heavy economic price for its segregationist ways.

It also made a national figure of King, whose powerful presence and unsurpassed oratorical skills drew publicity for the movement and attracted support from sympathetic whites, especially those in the North. King, *Time* magazine later concluded, had

"risen from nowhere to become one of the nation's remarkable leaders of men."

Even after his house was attacked and King himself, along with more than 100 boycotters, was arrested for "hindering a bus," his continued grace and adherence to nonviolent tactics earned respect for the movement and discredited the segregationists of Montgomery. When an explosion shook King's house with his wife and baby daughter inside, it briefly appeared that a riot would ensue. But King calmed the crowd:

We want to love our enemies — be good to them. This is what we must live by, we must meet hate with love. We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us.

A white Montgomery policeman later told a journalist: "I'll be honest with you, I was terrified. I owe my life to that ... preacher, and so do all the other white people who were there."

In the end, the desegregation of the Montgomery bus system required not only Rosa Parks's personal initiative and bravery and King's political leadership, but also an NAACP-style legal effort. As the boycotters braved segregationist opposition, desegregationist attorneys cited the precedent of *Brown v. Board of Education* in their challenge to the Montgomery bus ordinance in the courts. In November 1956, the Supreme Court of the United States rejected the city's final appeal, and the segregation of Montgomery buses ended. Thus fortified, the civil rights movement moved on to new battles.

Sit-Ins

Shortly after the successful conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King and a number of senior movement figures — the Reverends Ralph Abernathy, T.J. Jemison, Joseph Lowery, Fred Shuttlesworth, and C.K. Steele, and the activists Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin — founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This new civil rights organization was devoted to a more aggressive approach than that of the legally oriented NAACP. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference launched "Crusade for Citizenship," a

voter registration effort.

Younger activists, meanwhile, were growing impatient with King's gradualist tactics. In 1960, some 200 of them, including Howard University student Stokely Carmichael, formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC. And in Greensboro, North Carolina, four freshmen at the all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College took matters into their own hands.

At 4:30 p.m. on February 1, 1960, students Ezell Blair Jr. (now Jibreel Khazan), Franklin Eugene McCain, Joseph Alfred McNeil, and David Leinail took seats at a local Woolworth department store's whites-only lunch counter. They were denied service, but sat quietly until the store closed an hour later. The next morning, 20 Negro students took lunch-counter seats in groups of three or four. "There was no disturbance," the *Greensboro Record* reported, "and there appeared to be no conversation except among the groups. Some students pulled out books and appeared to be studying." Blair told the newspaper that Negro adults "have been complacent and fearful. ... It is time for someone to wake up and change the situation ... and we decided to start here."

The nonviolent occupation of a public space, or sit-in, dated at least to Mahatma Gandhi's campaigns for Indian independence from Britain. In the United States, labor organizations and the northern-based Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had employed sit-ins as well. As events in Greensboro began to draw attention, SNCC moved swiftly to associate itself with this civil rights tactic, and over the next two months, sit-ins spread to more than 50 cities.

Particularly significant were events in Nashville, Tennessee, where the King-affiliated Nashville Christian Leadership Council had been preparing for this moment. Back in 1955, King had reached out to the Reverend James Lawson, a civil rights activist and missionary who had served in India and studied Gandhian satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance. King urged Lawson to relocate to the South: "Come now," King said. "We don't have anyone like you down there."

Working with King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Lawson in 1958 began to train a new generation of nonviolent activists. His students included Diane Nash, James Bevel, and John Lewis, today a U.S. representative from Georgia. All soon would assume prominence in the civil rights movement. At these training seminars, they agreed to stage a series of sit-ins at department store restaurants. Blacks were permitted to spend money in those stores, but not to eat at their restaurants.

The Nashville activists organized carefully and moved deliberately. But when the Greensboro sit-in began to draw national attention, they were ready. In February 1960, hundreds of their activists began the sit-ins. Their student-drafted instruction sheets captured the personal discipline and dignified commitment to nonviolence they would offer the world:

Don't strike back or curse back if abused. ... Don't block entrances to the stores and aisles.

Show yourself friendly and courteous at all times.

Sit straight and always face the counter. ...

Remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.

Remember love and nonviolence, may God bless each of you.

Typically a lunch counter would close when a sit-in began, but after the first few incidents, police began to arrest protestors, and the subsequent trials drew large crowds. When convicted of disorderly conduct, the activists chose to serve jail time rather than pay a fine.

Nashville was an early example of how Jim Crow could not survive exposure. The legendary journalist David Halberstam was just beginning his career, and his reports for the *Nashville Tennessean* helped attract national media attention. The sit-in movement spread throughout much of the country, and soon Americans across the nation were stunned by photographs like the one that appeared in the February 28, 1960 *New York Times*. The caption read: "A white

man swings an 18-inch-long [46-centimeter-long] bat at a Negro woman in Montgomery. She was injured by the blow. The attack occurred yesterday after the woman brushed against another white man. Police, standing near by, made no arrest."

On April 19 of that year, a bomb exploded at the home of the Nashville students' chief legal counsel. Some 2,000 African Americans swiftly organized a march to the City Hall, where they confronted the mayor. Would he, Diane Nash asked, favor ending lunch-counter segregation? Yes, came the reply, but, "I can't tell a man how to run his business. He has got rights too."

This "right" to discriminate lay at the heart of the struggle. Meanwhile, the bad publicity stung the businessmen of Nashville, as did the stark contrast between the dignified, nonviolent black students and their armed and all-too-violent opponents. Secret negotiations began, and on May 10, 1960, quietly and without fanfare, a number of downtown lunch counters began serving black customers. There were no further incidents, and soon thereafter Nashville became the first southern city successfully to begin desegregating its public facilities.

Freedom Rides

Some of the young Nashville sit-in leaders joined up with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which in 1961 helped to launch the "Freedom Rides." Back in 1946, Thurgood Marshall's NAACP lawyers had obtained a Supreme Court ruling that barred segregation in interstate bus travel. (Under the U.S. federal system of government, it is easier for the national government to regulate commerce that crosses state lines.) In the 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* decision, the Court expanded its ruling to include bus terminals and other facilities associated with interstate travel. But possessing a right and exercising it are two very different things.

It was widely understood that any African American who exercised his or her constitutional right to sit at the front of an interstate bus or use the previously whites-only facilities at a southern bus terminal would meet with a violent response. Understanding this, an interracial group of 13, including CORE National Director James Farmer, departed Washington, D.C., by bus. Farmer and his companions planned to make several stops en route to New Orleans. "If there is arrest, we will accept that arrest," Farmer said. "And if there is violence, we are willing to receive that violence without responding in kind."

Farmer was right to anticipate violence. Perhaps the worst of it occurred near Anniston, Alabama. Departing Atlanta, the Freedom Riders had split into two groups, one riding in a Greyhound bus, the other in a Trailways bus. When the Greyhound bus reached Anniston, the sidewalks, unusually, were lined with people. The reason soon became clear. When the bus reached the station parking lot, a mob set upon it, using rocks and brass knuckles to shatter some of the bus windows. Two white highway patrolmen in the bus, assigned to spy on the Riders, sealed the door and prevented the Ku Klux Klan-led mob from entering the bus.

When the local police finally arrived, they bantered with the crowd, made no arrests, and escorted the bus to the city limits. The mob, by some accounts now about 200 strong, followed close behind in cars and pickup trucks. About 10 kilometers outside Anniston, flat tires brought the bus to a halt. A crowd of white men attempted to board the bus, and one threw a fire bomb through a bus window. As the historian Raymond Arsenault writes: "The Freedom Riders had been all but doomed until an exploding fuel tank convinced the mob that the whole bus was about to explode." The bus was consumed by the blaze; the fleeing Freedom Riders, reported the Associated Press, "took a brief but bloody beating."

The second group of Freedom Riders shared their Trailways bus with a group of Klansmen who boarded at Atlanta. When the black Freedom Riders refused to sit at the back of the bus, more beatings ensued. The white Freedom Riders, among them 61-year-old educator Walter Bergman, were attacked with particular savagery. All of the Freedom Riders held to their Gandhian training; none fought back. When the bus at last arrived in Birmingham, matters only grew worse. CBS News commentator Howard K. Smith offered an eyewitness account: "When the bus arrived, the toughs grabbed the passengers into alleys and corridors, pounding them with pipes, with key rings, and with fists." Inside the segregated bus station, the Freedom Riders hesitated momentarily, then entered the whites-only waiting room. They, too, were beaten, some unconscious, while Birmingham's police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor,

refused to restrain the Klansmen and their supporters. Still, the Riders were determined to continue. In Washington, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy asked Alabama Governor John Patterson to guarantee safe passage through his state. Patterson declined: "The citizens of the state are so enraged I cannot guarantee protection for this bunch of rabble-rousers." A member of Alabama's congressional delegation, Representative George Huddleston Jr., deemed the Freedom Riders "self-anointed merchants of racial hatred." He said the firebombed Greyhound group "got just what they asked for."

In Nashville, Diane Nash feared the political consequences. "If the Freedom Ride had been stopped as a result of violence," she later said, "I strongly felt that the future of the movement was going to be just cut short because the impression would have been given that whenever a movement starts, that all that has to be done is that you attack it with massive violence and the blacks would stop." With reinforcements from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other black and white activists supplementing the original Freedom Riders, a new effort was launched.

On May 20, a group of Freedom Riders boarded a Birmingham-to-Montgomery, Alabama, Greyhound. Their bus was met by a mob estimated at 1,000 "within an instant" of pulling into the station, Associated Press reported. Among the injured were John Seigenthaler, an assistant to Attorney General Kennedy. Kennedy dispatched 400 federal marshals to Montgomery to enforce order, while the Congress of Racial Equality promised to continue the Freedom Ride, pressing on to Jackson, Mississippi, and then to New Orleans. "Many students are standing by in other cities to serve as volunteers if needed," James Farmer told the *New York Times*. And some 450 Americans did step forward, boarding the busses and then filling the jails, notably in Jackson, when Farmer and others refused to pay fines imposed for "breaching the peace."

On May 29, Attorney General Kennedy directed the Interstate Commerce Commission to adopt stiff regulations to enforce the integration of interstate transportation. The agency did so. With this sustained federal effort, Jim Crow faltered in bus terminals, on buses, and on trains, at least those that crossed state lines.

The Freedom Riders' victory set the tone for the great civil rights campaigns that followed. Not for the first time during these climactic years, a free press forced Americans to take a cold, hard look at the reality of racial oppression. The Birmingham mob beat Tommy Langston, a photographer for the local *Post-Herald* newspaper, and smashed his camera. But they forgot to remove the film, and the newspaper's front page subsequently displayed his picture of the savage beating of a black bystander. Each arrest and each beating attracted more media and more coverage. And while many of those accounts still referred to "Negro militants," the contrast between rabid white mobs and the calm, dignified, biracial Freedom Riders forced Americans to decide, or at this point at least begin deciding: Who best represented American values?

White religious leaders were prominent among those who lauded the bravery of the Freedom Riders and the justice of their cause. The Reverend Billy Graham called for prosecution of their attackers and declared it "deplorable when certain people in any society have been treated as second-class citizens." Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger denounced white segregationist violence as "utterly indefensible in terms of morality and law" and criticized whites who urged civil rights activists to "go slow." And always there were the righteous: Raymond Arsenault writes that while the Greyhound bus burned outside Anniston, "one little girl, 12-year-old Janie Miller, supplied the choking victims with water, filling and refilling a five-gallon [19-liter] bucket while braving the insults and taunts of Klansmen."

The Albany Movement

Two major civil rights campaigns during 1962 and 1963 would illustrate both the limits and the possibilities of the nonviolent resistance strategy. African Americans in the segregated city of Albany, Georgia, had traditionally engaged in as much political activism as was possible in the Jim Crow South. In 1961, SNCC volunteers arrived to beef up an ongoing voter registration effort. They established a voter-registration center that served as a home base for a campaign of sit-ins, boycotts, and other protests. In November 1961, a number of local black organizations formed the Albany Movement, under the leadership of William G. Anderson, a young osteopath. The protests accelerated, and by mid-December more than 500

demonstrators had been jailed. Anderson had met both Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleague, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, pastor at Montgomery's First Baptist Church and King's chief lieutenant at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He decided to invite King's help, both to maintain the Albany Movement's momentum and to secure national publicity for its cause.

Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett proved a formidable opponent for King and the other activists. Pritchett realized that news media coverage of segregationist violence against dignified, nonviolent civil rights activists already had turned many Americans against Jim Crow. Pritchett worked assiduously to deprive the Albany Movement of a similar "media moment." Albany police officers were warned against employing any kind of violence against protestors, especially if the press was nearby. While earlier protestors had successfully "filled the jails," Pritchett scattered them in jails throughout the surrounding counties. "In the end," the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* concluded, "King ran out of willing marchers before Pritchett ran out of jail space."

Pritchett also understood that King was the media star and that national press coverage would ebb if there was no King "angle" to pursue. King returned several times to Albany, and several times was arrested and convicted for breach of the peace. When the court offered King and Abernathy their choice of jail time or a fine, they chose jail, the option certain to attract press coverage. But they found that an "anonymous benefactor" — a segregationist recruited by Pritchett — had paid their fine.

When the media moment finally came, it was not the one King had hoped for. By July 24, 1962, many of Albany's African Americans had grown frustrated at the lack of progress. That evening, a crowd of 2,000 blacks armed with bricks, bottles, and rocks attacked a group of Albany policemen and Georgia highway patrolmen. One trooper lost two teeth. But Laurie Pritchett's well-schooled officers did not retaliate, and the chief was quick to seize the initiative: "Did you see them nonviolent rocks?" he asked.

King moved swiftly to limit the damage. He cancelled a planned mass demonstration and declared a day of penance. But a federal injunction against further demonstrations in Albany added to the difficulties: Up till then, the civil rights cause had had the law on its side. Further action in Albany would allow segregationists to portray King and his followers as lawbreakers.

King understood that his presence in Albany would no longer help the wider movement. SNCC, NAACP, CORE, and other local activists continued the fight in Albany and would eventually secure real gains for the city's African Americans. For King and his SCLC team, Albany was a learning experience. As King explained in his autobiography:

When we planned our strategy for Birmingham months later, we spent many hours assessing Albany and trying to learn from its errors. Our appraisals not only helped to make our subsequent tactics more effective, but revealed that Albany was far from an unqualified failure.

Arrest in Birmingham

If Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett possessed the political savvy and emotional detachment to fight nonviolence with nonviolence, his Birmingham, Alabama, counterpart, Bull Connor, did not. King and the other movement leaders rightly anticipated that Connor would prove a perfect foil. King biographer Marshall Frady depicted Connor as "a bombastic segregationist of the old, unapologetically bluff sort — a podgy, strutting, middle-aged bossman in a snap-brim straw hat who ... held a famously irascible temper." Connor did not represent the views of all white Birmingham residents; a recent municipal election had produced gains for reformist candidates. But he controlled the police, and the "greeting" that the Freedom Riders had experienced in Birmingham amply illustrated what activists might expect to find there.

Albany had taught King and his SCLC team to focus on specific goals rather than a general desegregation. As King later wrote:

We concluded that in hard-core communities, a more effective battle could be waged if it was concentrated against one aspect of the evil and intricate system of segregation. We

decided, therefore, to center the Birmingham struggle on the business community, for we knew that the Negro population had sufficient buying power so that its withdrawal could make the difference between profit and loss for many businesses.

On April 3, 1963, activists launched a round of lunch-counter sit-ins. A march on Birmingham's City Hall followed on the 6th. The city's African Americans began to boycott downtown businesses, a tactic King deemed "amazingly effective." A number of shops swiftly removed their whites-only signs, only to be threatened by Bull Connor with the loss of their business licenses. As the numbers of volunteers grew, the Birmingham movement expanded its efforts to "kneel-ins" in local church buildings and library sit-ins. The number of arrests grew and the jails filled.

The police response remained muted to this point. The *New York Times* described a typical incident:

Eight Negroes entered the segregated library. They strolled through three of the four floors and sat at desks reading magazines and books. The police were present but did not order them to leave. They left voluntarily after about half an hour.

About 25 whites were in the library when the Negroes entered. Some made derogatory remarks such as, "It stinks in here." Others asked the Negroes: "Why don't you go home?" But there were no incidents.

On April 10, Connor followed Pritchett's example, obtaining a county court injunction barring King, Fred Shuttlesworth, and 134 other leaders from engaging in boycotts, sit-ins, picketing, and other protest activities. Any violation of the injunction would be contempt of court, punishable by more substantial jail time than a mere breach of peace.

King now faced a choice. He and Abernathy decided they would violate the injunction. King issued a brief statement:

We cannot in all good conscience obey such an injunction which is an unjust, undemocratic, and unconstitutional misuse of the legal process.

We do this not out of any disrespect for the law but out of the highest respect for the law. This is not an attempt to evade or defy the law or engage in chaotic anarchy. Just as in all good conscience we cannot obey unjust laws, neither can we respect the unjust use of the courts.

We believe in a system of law based on justice and morality. Out of our great love for the Constitution of the United States and our desire to purify the judicial system of the state of Alabama, we risk this critical move with an awareness of the possible consequences involved.

On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King led a protest march toward downtown Birmingham. On the fifth block, King, Abernathy, and about 60 others, including a white clergyman who joined the protest, were arrested. As King was taken into custody, Connor remarked: "That's what he came down here for, to get arrested. Now he's got it."

Letter From Birmingham Jail

As King languished in his jail cell, he produced one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of American thought. A number of local white clergymen, themselves friendly to King's long-term objectives, disagreed with his short-term tactics. They published a public statement calling the King-led demonstrations "unwise and untimely," and they opposed King's civil disobedience "however technically peaceful those actions may be."

King's reply was the *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. Lacking writing paper, he scribbled in the margins of a newspaper page. King's handwritten words wrapped around the pest control ads and garden club news, recalled the aide who smuggled the newsprint out of the jail. Yet those margins held a powerful condemnation of inaction in the face of injustice, and they displayed

an extraordinary faith that in America the cause of freedom necessarily would prevail.

King answered the white pastors' charges with timeless, universal language. Accused of being an outsider fomenting tension in Birmingham, King replied that, in the face of oppression, there were no outsiders. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." As for the tension: "There is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth." For those who do not themselves suffer from the disease of segregation, King added, no direct action ever seems well timed: " 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' " No man, he continued, can "set the timetable for another man's freedom."

Acknowledging that he and his followers had indeed violated the county court injunction, King cited Saint Augustine's distinction between just and unjust laws. He asserted that one who breaks an unjust law in order to arouse the consciousness of his community "is in reality expressing the highest respect for law," provided he acts "openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty." Writing from his cell, King led by example.

From that cell, King believed that in the United States, freedom ultimately would — indeed, must — prevail: "I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle. ... We will reach the goal of freedom ... because the goal of America is freedom. ... Our destiny is tied up with America's destiny ... the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. ... One day," King concluded, "the South will recognize its real heroes."

"We Have a Movement"

Because the Birmingham campaign required their leadership, Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy posted bond after eight days in jail. They turned to an idea credited to the Reverend James Bevel, a Nashville sit-in and Freedom Ride veteran recruited by King to serve as Southern Christian Leadership Conference's director of direct action and nonviolent education. Knowing that few black families could afford to have their primary wage earner serve jail time, Bevel began to organize the city's young African Americans. College students, secondary schoolers, and even elementary school pupils were instructed in the principles of nonviolence. They prepared to march downtown, there to enter whites-only lunch counters, use the whites-only drinking fountains, study in the whites-only libraries, pray in the whites-only churches. In some denominations, at least, their churches welcomed the young blacks.

The decision to use children was a controversial one. The SCLC's executive director, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, defended it on the grounds that "Negro children will get a better education in five days in jail than in five months in a segregated school." In his *Autobiography*, King related the case of a black teenager who decided to march in the face of his father's objections:

"Daddy," the boy said, "I don't want to disobey you, but I have made my pledge. If you try to keep me home, I will sneak off. If you think I deserve to be punished for that, I'll just have to take the punishment. For, you see, I'm not doing this only because I want to be free. I'm doing it also because I want freedom for you and Mama, and I want it to come before you die."

That father thought again, and gave his son his blessing.

On May 2, 1963, hundreds of young African Americans set out, linked by walkie-talkie, singing "We Shall Overcome." Hundreds were arrested, swelling the Birmingham jail well beyond its capacity. Perhaps most importantly, they stretched Bull Connor's temper to its breaking point.

On May 3, Connor determined to halt the demonstrations by force. Fire hoses set to full pressure — enough to peel bark from a tree — knocked protestors off their feet and rolled them down the asphalt streets. At the police chief's order, police dogs were used to disperse the crowds, and several demonstrators were bitten.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist James Foreman was at SCLC

headquarters when the news came. He reported that the leaders there were "jumping up and down, elated. ... They said over and over again, 'We've got a movement. We've got a movement. We had some police brutality.' " Foreman thought this "very cold, cruel, and calculating," but, as the historian C. Vann Woodward concluded: "The more seasoned campaigners had learned the price and worth of photographic opportunities."

The young demonstrators returned each day that week, as did the hoses and the dogs. The resulting photographs, video, and written accounts dominated the news in the United States and in much of the world. Faced with the greatest provocation, most demonstrators remained nonviolent. James Bevel roamed the streets, shouting through a bullhorn: "If you're not going to demonstrate in a nonviolent way, then leave." By May 6, Bull Connor was housing thousands of child prisoners at the state fairgrounds.

A *New York Times* editorial expressed the feeling of growing numbers of Americans:

No American schooled in respect for human dignity can read without shame of the barbarities committed by Alabama police authorities against Negro and white demonstrators for civil rights. The use of police dogs and high-pressure fire hose to subdue schoolchildren in Birmingham is a national disgrace. The herding of hundreds of teenagers and many not yet in their teens into jails and detention homes for demanding their birthright of freedom makes a mockery of legal process.

In Washington, D.C., one very important reader shared this sentiment. As King biographer Marshall Frady relates:

One news photo of a policeman clutching the shirtfront of a black youth with one hand while his other held the leash of a dog swirling at the youth's midsection happened to pass under the eyes of the president in the Oval Office, and he told a group of visitors that day, "It makes me sick."

On May 7, Fred Shuttlesworth was injured by a fire hose stream that hurled him against the side of his church. Arriving a few minutes later, Bull Connor declared: "I'm sorry I missed it. ... I wish they'd carried him away in a hearse."

By May 9, Birmingham's business leaders had had enough. They negotiated an agreement with King and Shuttlesworth. Birmingham businesses would desegregate their lunch counters, restrooms, and drinking fountains. They would hire and promote black employees. The jailed protestors would be freed, and charges dropped. Bull Connor called it "the worst day of my life."

The triumph of the Birmingham movement reflected the bravery and discipline of the African-American protestors. It spoke to the inspiring and hard-headed leadership of men like Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Bevel, and others. It forced Americans to confront squarely — in their newspapers and on their televisions — the reality of Jim Crow brutality. And it reflected an idealism that had survived both slavery and segregation, and also an impatience over promises long deferred. On May 8, a Birmingham juvenile court judge conducted a hearing on the case of a 15-year-old boy arrested during the May 3 demonstrations:

JUDGE: I often think of what the Founding Fathers said: "There is no freedom without restraint." Now I want you to go home and go back to school. Will you do that?

BOY: Can I say something?

JUDGE: Anything you like.

BOY: Well, you can say that because you've got your freedom. The Constitution says we're all equal, but Negroes aren't equal.

JUDGE: But you people have made great gains and they still are. It takes time.

BOY: We've been waiting over 100 years.

The March on Washington

Birmingham was a real victory, but a costly one. The long-term solution could not be for African Americans to defeat segregation one city at a time or by absorbing beatings, dog bites, and hosing. Even as the civil rights movement scored real gains, each advance came over dogged opposition. Federal troops were needed to ensure the admission of James Meredith, the first black to study at the University of Mississippi, in 1962. The following year, Alabama's governor, George Wallace, whose inaugural address promised "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," staged a "stand in the schoolhouse door." Only the intervention of federal marshals ensured the enrollment of African Americans Vivian Malone and James Hood at the University of Alabama. The very next day, Medgar Evers, leader of the Mississippi National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was murdered outside his home in Jackson. And in Birmingham itself, on September 15, 1963, three Klansmen planted 19 sticks of dynamite in the basement of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the unofficial headquarters of the Birmingham movement. Four young girls — Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair — were killed and 22 injured.

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy told the nation that he would submit to Congress legislation prohibiting segregation in all privately owned facilities: hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and the like. "We are confronted primarily," the president said, "with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution." But the obstacles to passage of effective civil rights laws remained imposing.

A number of black leaders determined to change the political reality in which members of Congress would consider civil rights legislation. One was A. Philip Randolph. Now well into his 70s, Randolph had earlier organized and for decades led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union. African Americans had long supplied large numbers of rail car attendants. These were among the best jobs open to blacks in much of the country, and Randolph, as leader of these porters, had emerged as an important figure in the American labor movement.

Back in 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had sought to boost U.S. defense production in anticipation of possible U.S. entry into the Second World War. Randolph confronted Roosevelt, demanding an end to segregation in the federal government agencies and among defense contractors. Otherwise, Randolph warned, he would launch a massive protest march on Washington, D.C. Roosevelt soon issued an executive order barring discrimination in defense industries and federal bureaus and creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee. After the war, pressure from Randolph contributed to President Harry S Truman's 1948 order desegregating the American armed forces.

Now Randolph and his talented assistant Bayard Rustin contemplated a similar march, hoping "to embody in one gesture civil rights as well as national economic demands." A "Big Six" group of civil rights leaders was formed to organize the event. Included were Randolph, King, Roy Wilkins (representing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), James Farmer (Congress of Racial Equality), John Lewis (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and Whitney Young Jr. (Urban League). They fixed the date for the march as August 28, 1963, and the site of the main rally at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" would be the largest political demonstration the nation had ever seen. Chartered buses and trains carried marchers from throughout the nation. A quarter-million Americans, and by some estimates even more, gathered that day, among them at least 50,000 whites. On the podium stood a stellar assemblage of civil rights champions, Christian and Jewish religious leaders, labor chiefs, and entertainers. The black contralto Marian Anderson, who had performed at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after being refused permission to perform at Washington's Constitution Hall, sang the national anthem. Each of the Big Six addressed the crowd that day, except for Farmer, who had been arrested during a protest in Louisiana.

The best-remembered moment would be King's. Considered by many the finest oration ever delivered by an American, King's "I Have a Dream" speech drew on themes from the Bible and from such iconic American texts as the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. King structured his remarks in the style and structure of a sermon, the kind he had delivered at many a Sunday morning church service.

The speech began by linking the civil rights cause to earlier promises unfulfilled. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, King said, appeared to the freed slaves as "a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity." But 100 years later, he continued, "the Negro ... finds himself an exile in his own land." When the nation's founders wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, "they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the 'unalienable rights' of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' "

America, King continued, had defaulted on that promissory note, at least to her citizens of color.

We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

"There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights," King warned, but he also noted that

in the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence.

Some believe that King spoke extemporaneously as he delivered the "dream" portion of his address. The legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson was on the stage while King spoke, and she addressed him during the speech: "Tell them about the dream, Martin," she said. And he did.

... and so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

As the words and images of the day's events sped across the nation and around the world, momentum for real change accelerated. But there were battles still to be fought, and victory, while ever closer, still lay in the distance.

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FREE AT LAST: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement

"It Cannot Continue": Establishing Legal Equality

The civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and others was the indispensable catalyst for the passage of two new laws of unparalleled importance. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 at last would establish firmly the legal equality of African Americans. They were enacted partly because of a structural transformation of American politics, including the unexpected elevation of a powerful, pro-civil-rights southern president who helped overcome the forces that had defeated earlier civil rights legislation. Above all, support for these laws came from the growing political constituency for change — the millions of Americans horrified by the actions of segregationists in the South.

Changing Politics

Ever since post-Civil War Reconstruction failed to ensure the civil rights of blacks in the American South, two great obstacles had blocked efforts at the national level to end Jim Crow: the political party system and the rules of the U.S. Congress. When the United States acquired vast and potentially slaveholding territories (including California and much of today's American Southwest) in the Mexican War of 1846-1848, the nation's political parties increasingly formulated their positions on sectional lines: Democrats favored the South, and the expansion of slavery; Whigs, and later Republicans, favored the North, opposed the extension of slavery into the newly acquired territories, and often believed that complete abolition was only a matter of time. Whigs and Republicans in this era favored the aggressive use of federal power to promote economic development. Southerners and Democrats — fearing federal action against slavery — favored the supremacy of individual states against a federal government properly limited to only those powers specifically granted by the Constitution. This "states' rights" concept has deep roots in American history. Early in



President Lyndon Johnson - surrounded by senators and representatives -- signs the civil rights bill, July 2, 1964, in the East Room of the White House. (AP Images)



Dr. King makes his last public appearance at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, a day before his assassination on April 4, 1968. (AP Images)

the 19th century, however, it became entangled with the issues of slavery, segregation, and civil rights.

These patterns persisted after the Civil War. As we have seen, the postwar Radical Republicans pressed for a Reconstruction that would ensure African-American rights. After Reconstruction, the "Party of Lincoln" — the Republicans — continued to enjoy the support of most blacks. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, evolved into an alliance of southern segregationists and northern urban residents, often immigrants and industrial workers. As the 20th century progressed, the party's northern wing became more politically liberal, and, with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal economic policies, more accepting of broad federal powers. Liberal northern Democrats often chafed against southern racism, but their party could not compete nationally without the support of the "solid South."



West Tennessee Freedom Marchers, led by the Rev. James E. Smith (in sunglasses), enter Brownsville, Tennessee, July 25, 1966. (Bettmann/CORBIS)

The rules of the U.S. Senate were another formidable obstacle to civil rights legislation. While passing a bill required only a simple majority, any senator could block a vote simply by declining to stop speaking during Senate debate, refusing to relinquish the floor. At that time, a two-thirds majority of senators could vote "cloture" of debate. In practical terms, then, no significant legislation could pass the Senate without the support of two-thirds of its members. This meant that southern senators, elected in states where blacks were routinely deprived of the right to vote, could — and did — block civil rights bills.

Anti-civil-rights filibusters, as these lengthy senatorial speeches came to be known, blocked much legislation over the years. In 1946, a weeks-long filibuster defeated a bill that enjoyed majority support and would have prevented workplace discrimination. In 1957, Senator Strom Thurmond (then a Democratic senator from South Carolina) filibustered for 24 hours and 18 minutes in an unsuccessful effort to block the mild Civil Rights Act of 1957.

But slowly the constellation of political forces was shifting in ways that would prove helpful to the civil rights movement. The black vote, at least in the North, had grown more important. For most of the nation's history, the overwhelming majority of African Americans resided in the South. During the first half of the 20th century, many African Americans began to move from the South to Chicago and other northern cities. An estimated 6 million blacks would head north during this "Great Migration." The North was not free of racial prejudice, but blacks there could vote, and they became an increasingly attractive target for ambitious politicians.

In 1960, the Democratic candidate for president, Senator John F. Kennedy, was determined to increase his share of the historically Republican African-American vote. When Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed following an Atlanta sit-in, Kennedy phoned King's wife, Coretta Scott King, to offer his sympathy, even as his brother, the future attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy, worked to secure King's release. Freed on bail, King acknowledged a "great debt of gratitude to Senator Kennedy and his family." Kennedy carried an estimated 70 percent of the African-American vote in a tight election in which he prevailed over Republican Vice President Richard M. Nixon by less than 1 percent of the popular vote.

While historians differ over the Kennedy administration's civil rights record, it is not unfair to remark that it was better than that of its 20th-century predecessors, but not as strong as civil rights activists would have liked. John and Robert Kennedy repeatedly urged King not to press too hard. But when King would forge ahead, the Kennedys generally would follow.

As previously described, President Kennedy introduced broad civil rights legislation in the aftermath of the events in Birmingham. With Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, responsibility for that legislation would fall to his vice president and successor, Lyndon Johnson.

Lyndon Baines Johnson

The new president possessed two enormous assets: a singularly powerful personality and a mastery of the procedures and personalities of the U.S. Congress perhaps unparalleled in American history. From 1954 to 1960, Johnson had served, in the words of biographer Robert Dallek, as "the most effective majority leader in Senate history." To his command of the Senate's often arcane rules and traditions, Johnson added what one might call intense powers of personal persuasion. "He'd come on just like a tidal wave," said Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey. "He went through walls. ... He'd take the whole room over."

The historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who served as a White House fellow under Johnson, recalled Johnson's ability to focus all his energies on extracting a needed vote from a recalcitrant senator. She called it "The Treatment." King biographer Marshall Frady described it as

... a ferocious manner of persuasion that proceeded by a kind of progressive physical engulfment: wrapping one giant arm around a colleague's shoulder with his other hand clenching his lapel, then straightening the senator's tie knot, then nudging and punching his chest and sticking a forefinger into his shirt. Johnson would lower his face closer and closer to his subject's in escalating exhortation until the man would be bowed backward like a parenthesis mark.

Johnson had been born poor in Texas and understood intimately the conditions under which African Americans and Mexican Americans labored. As a congressman and then senator from a southern state, electoral realities obliged Johnson to mute some of his progressive views on civil rights and racial equality. But elevated unexpectedly to the presidency, Johnson placed the full measure of his political skills to work for the passage of the landmark civil rights laws.

As the new president told Richard Russell, an influential senator from Georgia whose opposition to civil rights legislation posed a formidable obstacle: "I'm not going to cavil and I'm not going to compromise. I'm going to pass it just as it is, Dick, and if you get in my way I'm going to run you down. I just want you to know that because I care about you."

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

For nearly a century, many states had managed to escape the obvious meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution:

No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and the many others won by Thurgood Marshall and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People finally established that *government*, even state governments in the Deep South, could not discriminate against African Americans or anyone else. Activists such as the Freedom Riders, who sought to assert their civil rights, risked their lives, but at least there was no doubt that the law was on their side and that those who attacked them were lawbreakers.

But the owners of a movie theater or a department store lunch counter were not the government. As a result, the civil rights movement was obliged to wage battles one city and one business at a time. While Rosa Parks's brave refusal to move to the back of the bus led to the desegregation of public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama, hundreds or even thousands more Rosa Parks — and Martin Luther Kings — would be needed to achieve this throughout the South.

Plainly, legislation was needed to prohibit acts of private discrimination in public places. Such a law would represent a dramatic expansion of federal authority. The American Constitution explains what the federal — and, in the post-Civil War amendments the state governments — may and may not do. It does not speak of Woolworth's lunch counter.

In the end, proponents of what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would assert, and the

courts subsequently would accept, that Congress possessed the authority to ban discrimination in employment, public accommodations, and other aspects of life. They pointed to the constitutional provision (Article I, Section 8) authorizing Congress "to regulate Commerce ... among the several States." By the mid-20th century, nearly every economic transaction involved some form of interstate commerce, were one to look closely enough.

In 1969, the Supreme Court, in *Daniel v. Paul*, rejected the claim of a discriminatory "entertainment club" that its lack of interstate activity exempted it from the Civil Rights Act. Among its findings: The snack bar served hamburgers and hot dogs on rolls, and the "principal ingredients going into the bread were produced and processed in other States."

President Johnson's introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provoked one of the nation's great political contests. The act prevailed because much of the nation had looked hard into Bull Connor's eyes and had not liked what it saw. But passage also would require all of Johnson's formidable skills. It was understood that majorities of Republicans and northern Democrats would support the bill, but that Johnson would have to engineer a two-thirds Senate majority to overcome the inevitable filibuster by southern Democrats.

Johnson, in his first State of the Union Address as president, on January 8, 1964, urged Congress to "let this session ... be known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined." The months that followed saw intense congressional fact-finding and debate over the act. The House of Representatives held more than 70 days of public hearings, during which some 275 witnesses offered nearly 6,000 pages of testimony. At the end of this process, the House passed the bill by a vote of 290 to 130.

The Senate filibuster would last for 57 days, during which time the Senate conducted virtually no other business. As the speeches continued (one senator carried a 1,500-page speech onto the floor), President Johnson subjected many a senator to "The Treatment," and a variety of labor, religious, and civil rights groups lobbied for cloture and a final vote. Finally, on June 10, 1964, the Senate voted 71 to 29 to end debate — the first time cloture had ever been successfully invoked in a civil rights matter. A week later, the Senate passed its version of the civil rights bill. On July 2, 1964, the House of Representatives agreed to the Senate version, sending the bill to the White House.

President Johnson affixed his signature that evening, in the course of a nationally televised address. "Americans of every race and color have died in battle to protect our freedom," he told the nation. He added,

Americans of every race and color have worked to build a nation of widening opportunities. Now our generation of Americans has been called on to continue the unending search for justice within our own borders.

We believe that all men are created equal. Yet many are denied equal treatment.

We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights. Yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights.

We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings — not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin.

The reasons are deeply imbedded in history and tradition and the nature of man. We can understand — without rancor or hatred — how this all happened.

But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. ...The purpose of the law is simple.

It does not restrict the freedom of any American, so long as he respects the rights of others.

It does not give special treatment to any citizen.

It does say the only limit to a man's hope for happiness, and for the future of his children, shall be his own ability.

It does say that there are those who are equal before God shall now also be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories ...

My fellow citizens, we have come now to a time of testing. We must not fail.

Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us lay aside irrelevant differences and make our nation whole. Let us hasten that day when our unmeasured strength and our unbounded spirit will be free.

The Act's Powers

After two centuries of slavery, segregation, and legal inequality, and the resulting economic disadvantage, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave the federal government and private individuals the legal authority they needed to attack squarely racial (and gender — the act also bars discrimination on the basis of sex) discrimination.

This authority is spelled out in broad provisions, called "titles." The major points include: Title I, which abolished unequal application of voter registration requirements.

Title II, which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations. The title authorized individuals to file lawsuits to obtain injunctive relief (a court order ordering someone to do or not to do something) and allowed the attorney general of the United States to intervene in those lawsuits he deemed "of general public importance."

Title III, which authorized the U.S. attorney general to file a lawsuit, provided the case would "materially further the orderly progress of desegregation in public facilities," where an aggrieved person was unable himself or herself to maintain such a suit.

Title IV, which authorized the attorney general to file suit to force the desegregation of public schools. This provision aimed to accelerate the slow progress made during the decade since *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Title VI, which extended the act's provisions to "any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." It authorized the federal government to withhold federal funds from any such program that practiced discrimination.

Title VII, which prohibited employment discrimination by any business employing more than 25 people. It established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to review complaints of discrimination in recruitment, hiring, compensation, and advancement.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965: The Background

Court decisions and civil rights statutes were crucial tools in establishing, protecting, and enforcing the civil rights of African Americans. The surest way to guarantee the permanence of these rights, however, was to empower blacks politically to assert themselves as full participants in the democratic system. The right to vote, then, was arguably the most fundamental right of all, and one that, practically speaking, African Americans in the South had not enjoyed since the failure of Reconstruction.

Looking back, after the withdrawal of northern armies from the South in 1877, white southern elites re-imposed their political dominance. Suppressing the African-American vote was crucial to this objective and was achieved by a number of methods. At first, raw violence was the preferred tool. A number of other practices developed.

One such practice was the "poll tax." This was a special tax levied equally on every member of a community. Citizens who failed to pay were deemed ineligible to vote. Many southern states introduced poll taxes between 1889 and 1910. Given the extent of African-American poverty,

the poll tax disenfranchised large numbers of black voters, and poor whites as well. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1964) prohibited denying any citizen the right to vote in an election for federal office for failure to pay a poll tax. A Supreme Court decision two years later extended this prohibition to state and local elections.

Another practice was the "literacy requirement" for voter registration. Highly subjective oral and written examinations nearly always were applied with special vigor to African-American applicants. Some states would not even permit an applicant to take the examination unless an already-registered voter would vouch for him or her. It was nearly impossible for many black applicants even to take the test, since there were very few African Americans on the southern voting rolls, and few southern whites would risk social ostracism or worse to vouch-in a prospective black voter. The examination was often blatantly unfair. It might require an applicant to write out a passage from the Constitution as dictated by the county registrar — dictated clearly to white applicants, mumbled to blacks.

Southern election officials adopted any number of tactics to prevent black applicants from qualifying. In Alabama, for instance, the decision whether an applicant passed or failed was made in secret, and there was no method for challenging the decisions. Not surprisingly, at least one Alabama board of registrars "qualified" each and every white applicant and not a single black. Whatever tactic was employed, the threat of violence always lurked in the background. Election officials might publish in local newspapers the names of black voter applicants. This alerted local white Citizens Councils and Ku Klux Klan chapters to blacks who might need to be "persuaded" to withdraw their applications.

Against this background of violent intimidation, activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality, among others, launched voter registration campaigns in rural and heavily black parts of the Deep South in 1961. The work took incredible courage. As an early volunteer, the plantation worker Fannie Lou Hamer, memorably explained: "I guess if I'd had any sense, I'd have been scared — but what was the point of being scared? The only thing they [white people] could do was kill me, and it seemed they'd been trying to do that a little at a time since I could remember."

In 1964, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Racial Equality, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee launched the "Freedom Summer." More than 1,000 northern whites, mostly college students, volunteered to travel to Mississippi and help black voters register. Their presence also was intended to draw national attention to the violent suppression of black voting rights.

On June 21, the very first day of Freedom Summer, the volunteers achieved this goal in a tragic manner. Three civil rights workers, African American James Chaney and two white Jewish Americans, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, were reported missing and later found murdered. Their murder forced Americans to confront more directly the related issues of voting rights and violence. While the brave volunteers persuaded some 17,000 equally brave African Americans to complete voter registration applications, election officials ultimately accepted fewer than 10 percent of these. Blacks, more and more Americans understood, comprised nearly half of Mississippi's population but only 5 percent of its registered voters.

Bloody Sunday in Selma

The following year, civil rights organizations launched a registration drive in Selma, Alabama, a small city about 50 miles west of Montgomery. There were about 15,000 blacks residing in Selma, but only 350 had successfully registered to vote. At a February 1965 voting rights rally in nearby Marion, police shot and killed a young black man named Jimmie Lee Jackson.

In response, activists called a March 7 march from Selma to the Alabama state capitol at Montgomery. Led by John Lewis of SNCC and Martin Luther King's aide, the Reverend Hosea Williams, some 525 marchers were met on the Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River by Alabama state troopers and local lawmen. They had gas masks at hand and nightsticks at the ready. The trooper leader (Major John Cloud) ordered the marchers to return to their church. Reverend Williams answered: "May we have a word with the major?" "There is no word to be had," came the reply.

The suppression of the march, the *New York Times* reported, "was swift and thorough." The paper described a flying wedge of troopers and recounted how "the first 10 or 20 Negroes were swept to the ground screaming, arms and legs flying." With the news media on hand and recording their actions for a horrified national audience, the troopers fired tear gas canisters. Local law enforcement pursued the retreating protestors with whips and nightsticks. "I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick ... I thought I saw death," said Lewis, hospitalized with a concussion.

For millions of Americans, March 7, 1965, would be known simply as Bloody Sunday. Typical was the reaction of U.S. Representative James G. O'Hara of Michigan, who called the day's events "a savage action, storm-trooper style, under direction of a reckless demagogue [a reference to Alabama's governor, George Wallace]."

From Atlanta, Martin Luther King announced that he and Ralph Abernathy would lead a second Selma-to-Montgomery march that Tuesday. He called on "religious leaders from all over the nation to join us on Tuesday in our peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom." Before the march could occur, a federal judge, not unfriendly to the activists but determined to hold hearings before acting, issued a court order temporarily forbidding the march.

King was under intense political pressure from every corner. Federal officials urged him to delay the march. With the judge's injunction now in place, King and his followers would be the lawbreakers should the march proceed. But younger activists, many affiliated with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, wanted to move faster. King risked losing his place at the head of the movement were he unable to satisfy their demands.

On March 9, King and Abernathy led some 3,000 followers — his black followers as well as hundreds of white religious leaders — on the second Selma-to-Montgomery march. Troopers again met them at the Pettus Bridge. The marchers stopped, then sang the movement's anthem: "We Shall Overcome." The group then prayed, and Abernathy thanked God for the marchers who "came to present their bodies as a living sacrifice." King then directed his followers to turn back. "As a nonviolent, I couldn't move people into a potentially violent situation," he told the *Washington Post*.

King's decision disappointed some of the more zealous activists. But King had been conferring quietly with federal officials. The events of Bloody Sunday also had exerted great pressure on an already sympathetic President Johnson. Too many Americans at long last had seen enough. From religious groups and state legislatures, youthful protestors and members of Congress, the demand for federal action was growing. The two leaders appear to have struck a tacit bargain: King would not violate the injunction, and the Johnson administration quietly suggested it would soon be lifted.

On March 15, Johnson introduced the legislation that would become the Voting Rights Act. Addressing the nation that night, President Johnson employed the plainest of language in the service of a basic American value — the right to vote:

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 ... to solve that problem.

The Constitution says that no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or his color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that Constitution.

We must now act in obedience to that oath. ...

There is no constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong — deadly wrong — to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country. There is no issue of States rights or National rights. There is only the struggle for human rights. ...

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 is not just Negroes but really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

Two days later, the federal court lifted the injunction against the marchers. U.S. District Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. further ordered that state and county authorities not interfere and indeed take affirmative measures to protect the activists. "The law is clear," the judge wrote, "that the right to petition one's government for the redress of grievances may be exercised in large groups ... and these rights may be exercised by marching, even along public highways."

The Selma-to-Montgomery March

By March 21, thousands of Americans from all walks of life began to assemble in Selma for the third Selma-to-Montgomery march. The marchers planned to cover the entire 87-kilometer route over the course of five days and four nights, with marchers sleeping under the stars. The route they followed is today a National Historic Trail.

With the support of the Johnson administration and an aroused American people, the difference from the earlier efforts could not be more apparent. Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers had ordered the beatings and gassings two weeks earlier. Now he was obliged to occupy the lead car accompanying the protestors across the Pettus Bridge. Federal military police were on hand to provide protection, and elements of the Alabama National Guard were temporarily placed under federal command. As more than 3,000 marchers began the first leg of their quest, Abernathy told them, "When we get to Montgomery, we are going to go up to Governor Wallace's door and say, 'George, it's all over now. We've got the ballot.' "

"Walk together, children," King instructed, "and don't you get weary, and it will lead us to a Promised Land."

The *New York Times* offered this description of the crowd as it set out along U.S. Highway 80:

There were civil rights leaders and rabbis, pretty coeds and bearded representatives of the student left, movie stars and infants in strollers. There were two blind people and a man with one leg. But mostly there were the Negroes who believe they have been denied the vote too long.

The marchers covered a bit over 11 kilometers that first day, then pitched two large circus tents and slept in sleeping bags and blankets. The next morning King announced: "I am happy to say that I have slept in a sleeping bag for the first time in my life. I feel fine." By the second day, though, blisters and sunburn were common.

Because the highway narrowed in rural areas, the federal court had ruled that only 300 marchers could participate until the road widened again outside Montgomery. But a fair number of "extras" chose to tag along, even during the third day, which was marked by torrential rains. The marchers responded in song; among their selections: "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round" and "We Shall Overcome."

King briefly left the march to deliver a long scheduled address in Cleveland, Ohio. There King made explicit his debt to Mahatma Gandhi, whose famous march to the sea anticipated the Selma-to-Montgomery trek. "We are challenged to make the world one in terms of brotherhood," King said. "We must learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish as fools."

As the marchers approached Montgomery, the crowd swelled to 25,000 or more. They came by chartered plane, by bus, and by rail. A delegation of leading American historians arrived to participate in the final leg. They issued a statement: "We believe it is high time for the issues over which the Civil War was fought to be finally resolved." The singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte enlisted an all-star group of Hollywood entertainers.

On March 25, with Martin Luther King at the head, the activists entered Montgomery. They marched up Dexter Avenue, tracing the path traversed a century ago by the inaugural parade of Jefferson Davis, first and only president of the Confederate States of America, the would-be nation whose championing of slavery sparked the Civil War. Now, a century later, the descendants of black slaves approached the state house to demand the rights to which they had long been entitled, and long been denied. Their petition read:

We have come not only five days and 50 miles [80 kilometers], but we have come from three centuries of suffering and hardship. We have come to you, the Governor of Alabama, to declare that we must have our freedom NOW. We must have the right to vote; we must have equal protection of the law, and an end to police brutality.

Governor Wallace had already fled the scene. It didn't matter.

King delivered that day one of his most famous speeches, one in which he quoted a 70-year-old participant in the Montgomery bus boycott. Asked one day whether she would not have preferred riding to walking, Mother Pollard replied: "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested."

The just concluded march, King said, was "a shining moment in the conscience of man." He singled out as honorable and inspiring "the pilgrimage of clergymen and laymen of every race and faith pouring into Selma to face danger at the side of its embattled Negroes. Like an idea whose time has come," King continued, "not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. We are moving to the land of freedom."

We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. That will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.

How long? Not long. Because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

The Voting Rights Act Enacted

Five months later, the Congress passed and President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Shortly before noon on August 6, 1965, Johnson drove to the U.S. Capitol building. Waiting for him were the leaders of Congress and of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis among them. In signing the act into law, Johnson told the nation:

The central fact of American civilization ... is that freedom and justice and the dignity of man are not just words to us. We believe in them. Under all the growth, and the tumult, and abundance, we believe. And so, as long as some among us are oppressed and we are part of that oppression, it must blunt our faith and sap the strength of our high purpose.

Thus this is a victory for the freedom of the American Negro, but it is also a victory for the freedom of the American nation. And every family across this great entire searching land will live stronger in liberty, will live more splendid in expectation, and will be prouder to be American because of the act that you have passed that I will sign today.

What the Act Does

The Fifteenth Amendment already barred racial discrimination in voting rights, so the problem

was not that African Americans lacked the legal right to vote. It was that some state and local officials had systematically deprived blacks of those rights. The Voting Rights Act accordingly authorized the federal government to assume control of the voter registration process in any state or voting district that had in 1964 employed a literacy or other qualifying test and in which fewer than half of voting age residents had either registered or voted. Six entire southern states were thus "covered," as were a number of counties in several other states. Covered jurisdictions were prohibited from modifying their voting rules and regulations without first affording federal officials the opportunity to review the change for discriminatory intent or effect. Other provisions barred the future use of literacy tests and directed the attorney general of the United States to commence legal action to end the use of poll taxes in state elections. (The Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in January 1964, already barred the poll tax in elections for federal office.)

The introduction of federal "examiners" ended the mass intimidation of potential minority voters. The results were dramatic. By the end of 1965, the five states of the Deep South alone registered 160,000 new African-American voters. By 2000, African-American registration rates trailed that of whites by only 2 percent. In the South, where in 1965 only two African Americans served either in the U.S. Congress or a state legislature, the number today is 160.

The Voting Rights Act was originally enacted for a five-year period, but it has been both extended and expanded to introduce new requirements, such as the provision of bilingual election materials.

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan signed a 25-year extension: "The right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties," he said, "and we will not see its luster diminished." President George W. Bush signed another 25-year extension in 2006.

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