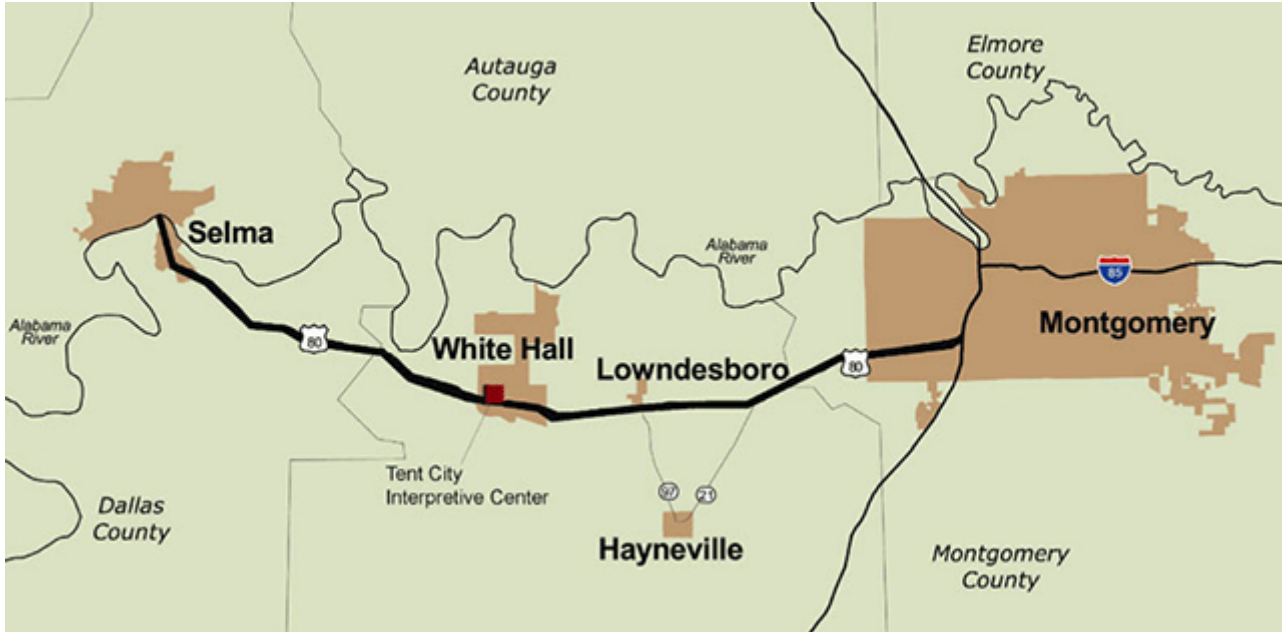


About 600 civil-rights marchers made their way across Route 80, in Selma, on the 7th of March, 1965. It was a Sunday and the non-violent demonstrators were planning to march about 50 miles to Montgomery—Alabama's capital city—to protest the shooting of a young black man—Jimmie Lee Jackson—by a white state trooper and to agitate for voters' rights.



Jackson, a Vietnam-War veteran, had been shot in Marion, Alabama on February 18th. He died eight days later. At the time, Selma not only had a very poor record of registering African-Americans to vote, the city had seen violence when (among other events) Annie Lee Cooper (who was waiting in a long line on voter-registration day) had challenged Sheriff Jim Clark (on January 25, 1965).

After the Sheriff hit Ms. Cooper with his night stick, the event (with pictures) made national news. (Annie also made news, decades later, because of her very long life.)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who believed that African-Americans in the South would only get the vote if the federal government passed laws to make it happen, wanted to start a campaign raising national awareness about black disenfranchisement.

Selma was a great place to start since it was a Southern city where "less than 1 percent of potential black voters were registered."

When the marchers reached Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge—about six blocks from their starting point—they were greeted by a line of lawmen who refused to let them pass.



Instead of turning-back the demonstrators, police officers—using billy clubs and tear gas—attacked them. The event, forever after associated with Sheriff Clark, became known as "Bloody Sunday."

On Capitol Hill, Jacob Javits (a Republican Senator from New York) called what happened:

...an exercise in terror.

Two days later, on the 9th of March, protestors tried to walk to Montgomery again. This time they were led by Dr. King.

Once again, as they made their way along Route 80, the peaceful marchers were met by waiting lawmen. They knelt to pray, sang "We Shall Overcome," then turned around and left the bridge without crossing it. Thereafter, the event has been known as "Turnaround Tuesday."

On the evening of "Turnaround Tuesday," three white pastors—James Reeb, Clark Olsen and Orloff Miller—had dinner together in Selma. They'd responded to Dr. King's call to march in solidarity with the people of Selma.

After leaving the restaurant, the three pastors followed the shortest route back to Brown A.M.E. Chapel (where everyone was gathering). Without knowing it, they were heading past a local bar which town whites patronized.

As Reeb, Olsen and Miller approached the street corner, three men came across the street shouting at them. The pastors were stunned to see several white men making their way toward them, in a hostile manner. One man was carrying a heavy wooden club.

After a vicious attack, Rev. Reeb was fatally wounded. He died two days later.

People across the country, who saw the events on national television, were outraged by the treatment which the marchers were receiving. Jackie Robinson, who broke "the color line" of major-league baseball, sent a telegram to President Johnson:

IMPORTANT YOU TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION IN ALABAMA ONE MORE DAY OF SAVAGE TREATMENT BY LEGALIZED HATCHET MEN COULD LEAD TO OPEN WARFARE BY AROUSED NEGROES AMERICA CANNOT AFFORD THIS IN 1965 JACKIE ROBINSON

It wasn't the first time Jackie (who'd refused to give-up his seat on a bus during his military days) had telegraphed a sitting President.

It also wasn't the first time the currently sitting President—Lyndon Baines Johnson—pondered what to do about civil rights in America.

By the time of the Selma March, Johnson had been elected President in his own right (after filling the remainder of President Kennedy's term, beginning on November 22, 1963). During the election year, of 1964, the events of "Freedom Summer" confirmed how far afield America was from voters of all color participating in the election process.

Realizing that he had to work with Dr. King on civil-rights issues, LBJ—as the President was often called—met with MLK in December of 1964 (as he had, the prior year, on December 3, 1963 as shown in this photo by Yoichi Okamoto).



Among other things, the two men discussed the need to pass a Voting Rights Bill at the national level. Too many African-Americans were being disenfranchised because of voter-registration restrictions in various states.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which became law not long before the two leaders met in December, gave the President some legal tools he could use to address voter-registration unfairness. One of the President's ideas was to allow African-Americans to register at post offices (operated by federal, not state, employees).

In early January, of 1965, LBJ brought his ideas to the American people. During his State of the Union Address—at 25:26 into his speech—he vowed that his administration would do whatever was needed to finally get rid of obstacles standing in the way of every American's right to vote.

Taking action within the Justice Department, LBJ directed his team to craft a constitutional amendment banning anything which interfered with a person's ability to register as a voter in his/her state. He also had his team work on legislation which would permit the federal government to register potential voters.

Later in January, the President and Dr. King talked by phone. During their lengthy discussion on the 15th, which we can hear, LBJ encouraged MLK to help him with the legislative process by positively discussing voting-rights legislation.

On the 9th of February, King (who wanted to move the voting-rights process forward quickly) and Johnson (who thought that moving too quickly might result in Congress turning-down a bill) had a fifteen-minute meeting in Washington.

The President urged King to tell journalists about a forthcoming bill which would correct the voter-registration problems. The next day, American newspapers reported not only that fact but gave more specifics (like the need to end literacy tests as a prerequisite to voter registration).

Although King and Johnson did not always see eye-to-eye on approaching and resolving the voter-registration problem, they tried to work together to end the unfairness. And ... there is evidence that the President was very concerned about J. Edgar Hoover's efforts, as head of the FBI, to discredit Dr. King.

What were those FBI efforts? Among other things, on November 8, 1964—less than a month before King accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo—Hoover had publicly called Dr. King "the most notorious liar in America."

Dr. King was also very aware of the FBI's less-public efforts to discredit him, and so was Coretta Scott King (his wife). Despite the incredible tension of the time, King pushed the movement forward with his actions and words.

Sometimes he'd call his friend Mahalia ("Halie") Jackson, the famous gospel singer, who would sing to him over the phone. One of the songs she'd sing was "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" (which Jackson also sang at King's

funeral).

The Selma March - which Americans witnessed on their televisions— fueled the idea that a federal law was needed to protect African-Americans who registered to vote. One week after the March, LBJ addressed the nation via a televised speech to a joint session of Congress.

From the House Chamber, the President said:

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.

Because the bill to enact a voting rights act was already in the works, LBJ was able to urge the Congress to quickly pass it. As shown in this excerpt from his now-famous speech, he concluded with these words (often said by Dr. King):

We shall overcome.

By the summer of 1965, the bill had enough votes to pass in both the House and the Senate. Dr. King was on hand when the President signed the Voting Rights Act.

Making the law official, LBJ said it was:

...a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that has ever been won on any battlefield.

It was also a personal “triumph” for Dr. King. Yoichi Okamoto took this photo of the President with Dr. King, at the Capitol, after LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act on the 6th of August.



The *idea* of a march from Selma to Montgomery was, itself, a personal triumph for Dr. King, especially when he was able to announce, to a gathered crowd, that Judge Frank Johnson had issued an order allowing it.

No longer—after that federal-court-order—could anyone declare that the march was an unlawful gathering.

To be sure the people were safe, en route, President Johnson federalized the Alabama National Guard.

On the first day of the now-authorized 54-mile march, around 3200 people gathered. They—like Dr. King—believed that “345 years” of slavery and segregation was “too long” to wait for more progress in racial equality. This AP photo depicts a scene on March 21st as Dr. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy led the crowd.



"Now is the time," Dr. King had declared in his "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech (nineteen months before the Selma march):

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

By the time the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers were in their fifth day of walking, their ranks had swelled to 25,000 people.

The events in Selma, during March of 1965, are featured in the film "[Selma](#)," released in 2014 and starring David Oyelowo (pronounced oh-YELL-oh-oh) in the role of Dr. King.

The video clip, at the top of this page, is a compilation of historical footage depicting the events of March 7 ("Bloody Sunday"), March 9 ("Turnaround Tuesday") and March 21 (the day [Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.](#) issued an order allowing the march to continue).

See, also:

[Civil Rights - Selma to Montgomery - March 21, 1965](#)

[Civil Rights - Selma to Montgomery, Part 2](#)

Credits:

Compilation of historical footage, by Universal Newsreels, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Selma-to-Montgomery-Bloody-Sunday0>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Selma-to-Montgomery-Bloody-Sunday0>

Media Stream



1965 - March from Selma to Montgomery

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



LBJ with MLK on August 6, 1965

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



LBJ with King Oval Office Dec 3 1965

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



Selma-Montgomery March 21 Mar 65

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>

Selma March - Police Attack Marchers

On the 7th of March, 1965, a group of civil-rights activists—numbering around 600 people—attempted to begin a march between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama.

They were protesting the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, an unarmed African-American who had been killed by police a few weeks before (in Marion, Alabama), and the inability of African-Americans to register-to-vote in Selma (where only 1-2% of African-Americans had successfully passed the highly restrictive requirements imposed on potential black voters by the State of Alabama).

The marchers, led by two young African-Americans named John Lewis (wearing a light-colored trench coat) and Hosea Williams (walking next to Lewis), were taking to heart an old African proverb:

*When You Pray,
Move Your Feet.*

The march began peacefully, as this photograph (likely taken by Charles White and provided to the Library of Congress by John Lewis) depicts. John Lewis, in March of 1965, was the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).



Why did civil-rights leaders pick Selma as the starting point of their march? To answer that question, we have to examine its background a bit more closely.



Selma, located in Dallas County, had a history of unfair-election issues. In 1896, the U.S. House of Representatives had to adjudicate the contested results of a congressional election.

At the time, speaking about the contested result under consideration (the matter of Aldrich vs. Robbins, Fourth District, Alabama), W.H. (William Henry) Moody (a representative from Massachusetts) said this during a [speech from the floor of the House](#):
...I need only appeal to the memory of members who have served in this House for years and who have witnessed the contests that time and time again have come up from the black belt of Alabama—since 1880 there has not been an honest election in the county of Dallas... Moody was referring to a time when African-American men were voting, as allowed by U.S. Constitutional amendment. Later, Southern States—like Mississippi and Alabama—began to impose [impossible-to-meet requirements](#) on black men who wanted to register. Similar requirements were not imposed on white men.

The existence of those voting restrictions, which effectively circumvented the Constitutional right to vote, were disenfranchising Southern black men.

After American women gained the right to vote, via the 19th Amendment, the [same voting restrictions](#) applied to Southern black women who, like their male counterparts, attempted to register.

Fed-up with the situation, [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), decided it would be wise to have a march between Selma and Montgomery. Publicity, surrounding such an event, would cause white Americans throughout the country to realize the plight of would-be black voters who were denied the right to register (a prerequisite to voting on election day).

Selma, in short, seemed the perfect place to have a march.

Initially, the marchers who maintained silence as they moved along the sidewalks of the city, met no opposition. But when they reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they encountered a line of law-enforcement officials who warned the marchers to leave. The march, they were told in no uncertain terms, was an unlawful gathering.

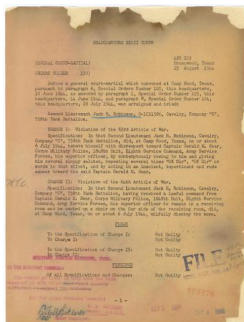
As historical footage shows, the police gave the marchers little-to-no time to turn around (and leave the bridge) before they began to physically force them to leave. Tear gas was just one item the police used against the marchers.

These rotating images are from the FBI files. They show four scenes during which the police attacked the marchers, at Selma, on the 7th of March, 1965.



Images, from the FBI, online via the U.S. National Park Service.

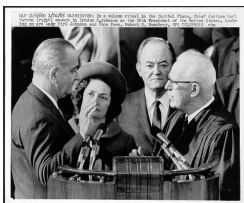
View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Selma-March-Police-Attack-Marchers>



Jackie Robinson - Court Martial Charges

Image of original document online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Jackie-Robinson-Court-Martial-Charges>



Swearing-In President Johnson - 1965

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

PD

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Swearing-In-President-Johnson-1965>



Civil Rights Act of 1964 - Signing Ceremony

Image online, courtesy the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

PD

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Civil-Rights-Act-of-1964-Signing-Ceremony->



Selma - Trailer

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View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Selma-Trailer>