**March from Selma**

**Gale Global Issues in Context**

**(Accessed through The Westminster Schools, Carlyle Frasier Library databases, February 23, 2012)**

**Source:** AP Images.

**About the Author:** This photograph was taken by a contributor to the Associated Press, a worldwide news agency based in New York.

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. chose **Selma**, Alabama as the site of a renewed voting rights campaign. The growing militancy of the civil rights movement made it essential that he score a quick victory in order to restore confidence in his non-violent approach. When segregationist police attacked the peaceful marchers, King had his victory. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed through Congress shortly thereafter.

**Selma** was home to 14,400 whites and 15,100 blacks, but the city's voting rolls were ninety-nine percent white. Every time that an African American attempted to register to vote, SheriffJim Clark and his deputies, many of whom were Ku Klux Klan members,turned the would-be voter away. During one week, more than three thousand black protesters were arrested for protesting this voting ban. In February 1965, a mob of state troopers assaulted a group of blacks, fatally shooting a young man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, as he tried to protect his mother and grandmother.

Jackson's death inspired black leaders to organize a fifty-four-mile (eighty-seven-kilometer) **march** from **Selma** **to** **Montgomery** to petition Governor George Wallace for protection of blacks registering to vote. On **March** 7, the **march** began. King was absent, having returned to Atlanta because of pressure from White House officials. He missed the sixty helmeted state troopers and local police with gas masks who lined up opposite the six hundred marchers at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. While white spectators cheered and Sheriff Clark ordered them to attack, the troopers moved on the protesters, swinging bullwhips and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire. The marchers stumbled over each other in retreat and seventeen went to the hospital with injuries. That evening, horrified viewers throughout the nation watched the images from the Pettus Bridge on television.

This incident, known as Bloody Sunday, pushed the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson



**PRIMARY SOURCE: March from Selma Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and supporters march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge during the second of their three attempted marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 9, 1965. The marches brought attention to the struggle for Afircan American voting rights. AP IMAGES.**

into action to protect the voting rights of African Americans. To keep the pressure on, King led a second **march** on **March** 9th. A federal injunction had forbidden the marchers to proceed to **Montgomery** while their case was investigated, but as a comrpomise King and his marchers were allowed to cross the Edmund Pettus ridge, pray and demonstrate, and then return to **Selma** voluntarily. Later, the federal courts ruled that the protest should be allowed to take place, and King led a third and final **march** from **Selma** **to** **Montgomery**, starting on **March** 21 and ending **March** 25th in front of the state capitol.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

**MARCH FROM SELMA**

*See* primary source image.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

The **Selma** **marches** kept public attention focused on the injustices African Americans faced in the South, despite the recent passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They played a major role in encouraging President Johnson and other political leaders to move forward with another landmark civil rights bill, which would become the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Lyndon Johnson made greater and more effective efforts on behalf of civil rights than any other politician of his era. Both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are part of Johnson's legacy, though both pieces of legislation passed largely because of the efforts of King. His strategy of non-violence posed against the violence of the segregationists made civil rights activists look reasonable and sympathetic.

The Voting Rights Act made possible by **Selma** allowed millions of African Americans in the South to cast ballots without being intimidated. The legislation removed artificial barriers such as poll taxes and literacy tests that served to bar blacks from the voting booths. For the first time, the Constitution applied to all of the people as blacks were permitted to enjoy all of the rights and privileges of citizenship that they had been granted by the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. The Voting Rights Act is set to expire in 2007. While it is expected to be renewed, some legislators have argued that it is no longer needed.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

**Books**

Fager, Charles. ***Selma****, 1965*. New York: Scribner, 1974.

Garrow, David J. *Protest at* ***Selma****: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978.

Stanton, Mary. *From* ***Selma*** *to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

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