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.

Credits:

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

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream

Selma March Attack

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John Lewis and Hosea Williams

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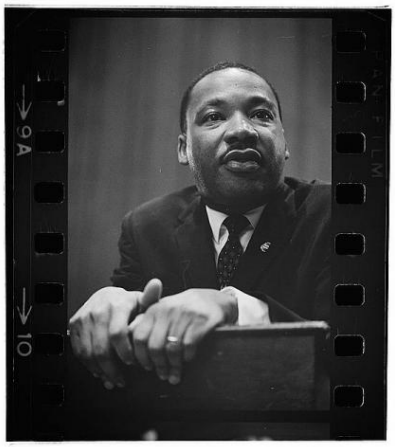

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was America's greatest civil-rights leader of the 20th-century.

We learn more about Dr. King from the Library of Congress:

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., twentieth-century America's most compelling and effective civil rights leader, was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia.

After entering Morehouse College at age fifteen, King followed his father and grandfather into the Baptist ministry. He received a bachelor of divinity from Crozer Theological Seminary in 1951 and a Ph.D from Boston University in 1955.

King entered the civil rights movement in 1955. A young, newly married pastor of a Montgomery, Alabama church, he was asked to lead a bus boycott aimed at ending segregation of public transport in Montgomery.

The boycott, initiated by Rosa Parks' refusal to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger, lasted over a year and resulted in the desegregation of the city's busses.

A founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King advocated non-violent action as a means of lifting racial oppression. Sit-ins, marches, and peaceful demonstrations highlighted issues of inequality.

The commitment and moral integrity of activists who remained calm in the face of violent opposition inspired national admiration. Jailed during an Alabama campaign to abolish segregated lunch counters, King delineated his philosophy of nonviolence in the now famous "Letter From the Birmingham Jail."

Click on the image for a better view.

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

Text quoted above from the U.S. Library of Congress, American Memory, January 15th.

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