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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

March on Selma

by Leslie Stricker

Date: March 7-25, 1965

The demonstration bringing the greatest amount of attention to the lack of voting rights for African Americans.

Origins and History

One of the many goals of the Civil Rights movement was to increase the number of African Americans registered to vote in the South. For more than a year, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had been working in Selma, Alabama, where only 2.5 percent of eligible African Americans were registered voters. During the early weeks of 1965, small groups of local African Americans marched to the Dallas County courthouse, but none were permitted to register. Its funds were dwindling, so SNCC called Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for assistance.

The March

In an effort to bring national attention to police brutality and voter registration efforts in Alabama, King and local civil rights leaders decided to lead a march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. The fifty-four mile march brought five to six days of publicity to civil rights efforts in the South. Alabama governor George C. Wallace banned the demonstration. However, on March 7, the march began as six hundred men, women, and children left Brown's Chapel Methodist Church and quietly walked out of town. As marchers attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were met by approximately one hundred state troopers and police. Troopers, ordered by Governor Wallace to stop the march and armed with horses, whips, clubs, and tear gas, advanced on the approaching crowd. Offering no resistance, demonstrators turned back across the bridge. The police pursued, injuring dozens of marchers as the crowd fled. The incident, which became known as Bloody Sunday, was broadcast later that evening on national television. Viewers watched as nightsticks rose and fell on march participants, who could be seen through the cloud of tear gas.

The sight of Bloody Sunday encouraged hundreds of Americans to flock to Selma, eager to participate in a second march. U.S. District Court Judge Frank Johnson temporarily barred the march until a hearing could be held. On March 9, King again led marchers toward Montgomery. Demonstrators crossed the Pettus Bridge, where they were met by state troopers. Not wishing to defy a federal ban, King waited, hoping for police protection for marchers. The demonstrators prayed, then turned around and walked back to Selma, which had erupted in demonstrations and violence.

On March 15, Judge Johnson ruled that the march from Selma could take place. President Lyndon B. Johnson federalized eighteen hundred members of the Alabama National Guard to protect thirty-two hundred marchers as they left Selma on March 21. By the time the long walk ended four days later, twenty-five thousand people had participated. The event culminated in a speech given by King on the steps of the Alabama statehouse.

Impact

The march from Selma to Montgomery brought national attention to the plight of African Americans in the South. On August 6, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Its passage, promised during the march, gave the federal government stronger authority to enforce voting rights within state boundaries.

Additional Information

A detailed history of the march, which focuses primarily on its legal and social implications, can be found in Charles E. Fager's *Selma 1965: The Town Where the South Was Changed* (1974).

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