

Selma to Montgomery March

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In early 1965, Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) made Selma, Alabama, the focus of its efforts to register black voters in the South. That March, protesters attempting to march from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery were met with violent resistance by state and local authorities. As the world watched, the protesters (under the protection of federalized National Guard troops) finally achieved their goal, walking around the clock for three days to reach Montgomery. The historic march, and King's participation in it, greatly helped raise awareness of the difficulty faced by black voters in the South, and the need for a Voting Rights Act, passed later that year.

VOTER REGISTRATION EFFORTS IN SELMA

Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination in voting on the basis of race, efforts by civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to register black voters met with fierce resistance in southern states such as Alabama. In early 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC decided to make Selma, located in Dallas County, Alabama, the focus of a voter registration campaign. Alabama Governor George Wallace was a notorious opponent of desegregation, and the local county sheriff in Dallas County had led a steadfast opposition to black voter registration drives. As a result, only 2 percent of Selma's eligible black voters (300 out of 15,000) had managed to register.

DID YOU KNOW?

Ralph Bunche, who participated in the Selma to Montgomery March with Martin Luther King Jr., won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his successful negotiation of an Arab-Israeli truce in Palestine a year earlier.

King had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and his higher profile would help draw international attention to Selma during the eventful months that followed. On February 18, white segregationists attacked a group of peaceful demonstrators in the nearby town of Marion. In the ensuing chaos, an Alabama state trooper fatally shot Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young African-American demonstrator. In response to Jackson's death, King and the SCLC planned a massive protest march from Selma to the state capitol of Montgomery, 54 miles away. A group of 600 people set out on Sunday, March 7, but didn't get far before Alabama state troopers wielding whips, nightsticks and tear gas rushed the group at the Edmund Pettis Bridge and beat them back to Selma. The brutal scene was captured on television, enraging many Americans and drawing civil rights and religious leaders of all faiths to Selma in protest.

A HISTORIC MARCH

King himself led another attempt on March 9, but turned the marchers around when state troopers again blocked the road. That night, a group of segregationists beat another protester, the young white minister James Reeb, to death. Alabama state officials (led by Wallace) tried to prevent the march from going forward, but a U.S. district court judge ordered them to permit it. President Lyndon

Johnson also backed the marchers, going on national television to pledge his support and lobby for passage of new voting rights legislation he was introducing in Congress. Some 2,000 people set out from Selma on March 21, protected by U.S. Army troops and Alabama National Guard forces that Johnson had ordered under federal control. After walking some 12 hours a day and sleeping in fields along the way, they reached Montgomery on March 25.

Nearly 50,000 supporters-black and white-met the marchers in Montgomery, where they gathered in front of the state capitol to hear King and other speakers including Ralph Bunche (winner of the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize) address the crowd. "No tide of racism can stop us," King proclaimed from the building's steps, as viewers from around the world watched the historic moment on television.

LASTING IMPACT

On March 17, 1965, even as the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers fought for the right to carry out their protest, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, calling for federal voting rights legislation to protect African Americans from barriers that prevented them from voting. That August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which guaranteed the right to vote (first awarded by the 15th Amendment) to all African Americans. Specifically, the act banned literacy tests as a requirement for voting, mandated federal oversight of voter registration in areas where tests had previously been used, and gave the U.S. attorney general the duty of challenging the use of poll taxes for state and local elections.

Along with the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act was one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation in American history. Its effects greatly reduced the disparity between black and white voters in the U.S. and allowed a greater number of African Americans to enter political life at the local, state and national level.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What did Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference make Selma, Alabama, the focus of?

- A. its efforts to register black voters in the South
- B. its efforts to get President Lyndon Johnson's support
- C. its efforts to negotiate an Arab-Israeli truce in Palestine
- D. its efforts to show support for Alabama Governor George Wallace

2. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Council responded to fierce resistance to the registration of black voters by organizing a march from Selma to Montgomery. What does the text describe is an effect of this march?

- A. The march helped increase support for Alabama Governor George Wallace and desegregation.
- B. The march helped raise awareness of the difficulty that black voters faced in the South and the need for a Voting Rights Act.
- C. The march helped raise awareness of the need to negotiate an Arab-Israeli truce in Palestine.
- D. The march helped increase support for President Lyndon Johnson and the passage of new legislation he was introducing in Congress.

3. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination in voting on the basis of race. However, efforts led by civil rights organizations to register black voters were met with fierce resistance in southern states. In Alabama's Dallas County, the local county sherriff had led a steadfast opposition to black voter registration drives. As a result, only 2 percent of Selma's eligible black voters had managed to register. What can be concluded about the South's reaction to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 based on this information from the text?

- A. The South was very supportive of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.
- B. The South was very resistant to the Civil Rights Act in 1964.
- C. The South was uninterested in the Civil Rights Act in 1964.
- D. The South was skeptical about the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

4. Based on the text, why was public awareness of the Selma march important?

- A. It helped the public realize that the civil rights movement was no longer necessary.
- B. It helped politicians realize that issues related to race could be used as a political tool.
- C. It motivated more people in the South to support segregation.
- D. It helped the public realize there was a need for the Voting Rights Act.

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

- A. Alabama Governor George Wallace was a notorious opponent of desegregation, and the local county sheriff in Dallas County had led a steadfast opposition to black voter registration drives.
- B. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination in voting on the basis of race, efforts to register black voters were met with fierce resistance in southern states.
- C. The march from Selma to Montgomery helped raise awareness of the difficulty faced by black voters in the South and the need for a Voting Rights Act.
- D. President Lyndon Johnson went on national television to pledge his support for Selma-to-Montgomery marchers and lobby for passage of new voting rights legislation.

6. Read these sentences from the text:

"Along with the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act was one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation in American history. Its effects greatly reduced the disparity between black and white voters in the U.S. and allowed a greater number of African Americans to enter political life at the local, state and national level."

Based on this evidence, what is the meaning of the word "expansive" in this excerpt?

- A. forgotten or neglected
- B. focused or targeted
- C. limited or narrow
- D. far-reaching or comprehensive

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

_____ the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination in voting on the basis of race, efforts to register black voters were still met with fierce resistance.

- A. However
- B. Although
- C. Therefore
- D. Instead

8. What effects did the Voting Rights Act have?

9. What did President Lyndon Johnson do during the march from Selma to Montgomery?

10. Explain how the march from Selma to Montgomery helped raise awareness of the difficulty faced by black voters in the South.