

Bridging History: Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

The Honorable John Lewis of Georgia

Chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 1963–1966

Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, December 11, 2014

Selma, this little town on the banks of the Alabama River, made it possible for all of our citizens to become participants in a democratic process.

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

Today, Selma—that little town along the Alabama River—casts a long shadow over the history of voting rights in America. When Alabama state troopers brutalized a peaceful protest there in March 1965, the United States Congress reacted with urgency. Over the previous decade, the civil rights movement scored key victories through legal, legislative, and direct actions. But despite that steady progress, movement leaders, as well as many in Congress, recognized that hundreds of thousands of African Americans were still denied that most basic American right: the vote.

The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton of the District of Columbia

Member, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, January 31, 2015

The movement had to empower black people to change their own lives. And the way to do that—the only way to do that—was to give them the same vote that others had used throughout American history to change their lives.

Benjamin Zelenko

Former Counsel, House Committee on the Judiciary

Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, August 20, 2014

The whole history of voting, of course, was one of the things that led to the enactment of civil rights legislation. Blacks were routinely denied the right to register to, let alone vote. They were threatened if they came to register. Some were hung. Others were injured. Churches were burned. Homes were blown up. The whole history of the right of the black population to vote had gone on for years, with very little success.

Narrator

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Dallas County, in south-central Alabama, fit the pattern of voter exclusion and intimidation. In the early 1960s, the voting age population of Dallas County was 30,000, more than half of whom were African American. However, only a few hundred black residents had successfully registered to vote. With an invitation from local black leaders, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—commonly call SCLC—led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., decided to focus its next campaign on Selma, the seat of Dallas County, in late 1964. Registering black voters would be the primary goal.

On January 2nd, 1965, King and the SCLC arrived in Selma and the voter registration campaign began. The local sheriff and his deputies, in favor of segregation, reacted violently, beating and arresting black citizens. Throughout January and February, the jail population continued to rise. Reports of imprisoned children, and the startling fact that there were more blacks in jail than on the voter rolls, raised alarms on Capitol Hill.

In early February, after a congressional delegation investigated the situation in Selma, Members called on Congress to pass voting rights legislation. Some introduced voting rights bills of their own. Despite congressional concerns, the tension and violence continued unabated.

On February 18th, in nearby Marion, Alabama, a night march turned violent and a young man named Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot as he tried to defend his mother from state troopers. When Jackson died from his injuries eight days later, James Bevel, a member of the SCLC, called for a march from Selma to Montgomery to honor Jackson. Over the next week, Bevel's idea grew to encompass a broad protest against voting rights abuses.

On Sunday, March 7th, some 600 individuals set off from Selma's Brown Chapel AME Church and began walking toward Montgomery. The demonstrators took a route across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, spanning the Alabama River. When they reached the opposite bank, Alabama state troopers blocked the road, refusing to let them pass.

Major John Cloud

Alabama State Trooper

Video of protest in Selma, Alabama, recorded March 7, 1965

It would be detrimental to your safety to continue this march, and I'm saying that this is an unlawful assembly. This march will not continue. Troopers here advance toward the group.

The Honorable John Lewis of Georgia

Chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 1963–1966

*Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives,
December 11, 2014*

You saw these men putting on their gas masks and behind the state troopers are a group of men, part of the sheriff's posse, on horses. They came towards us, beating us with nightsticks, trampling us with horses, and releasing their tear gas. I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick. My legs went from under me. I don't know how I made it back across the bridge but apparently a group just literally took me back.

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

John Lewis suffered a fractured skull. Including Lewis, 17 marchers were hospitalized and roughly 100 wounded in all. That evening, network news channels broadcast footage of what came to be known as "Bloody Sunday." On Monday morning, the front pages of newspapers across the country recounted the violence on the Pettus Bridge. The nation's, and the world's, eyes were on Selma.

In Washington, mail and telegrams began to pour in, demanding congressional action on voter legislation. On Capitol Hill, Members of the House took to the floor to register their horror at what happened in Selma. The violence only amplified the need for a quick legislative solution.

On March 15th, eight days after Bloody Sunday, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a Joint Session of Congress, calling for passage of the Voting Rights Act.

President Lyndon B. Johnson

Joint Session of Congress on the Voting Rights Bill

Video of House Chamber Proceedings, U.S. Capitol, Washington D.C., recorded March 15, 1965

There is no moral issue. It is wrong, deadly wrong to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country. [Applause]

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

In a show of solidarity, Johnson used the cry of the movement to underline his commitment to the cause.

President Lyndon B. Johnson

Joint Session of Congress on the Voting Rights Bill

Video of House Chamber Proceedings, U.S. Capitol, Washington D.C., recorded March 15, 1965

But really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.
And we shall overcome. [Applause]

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

While Capitol Hill readied the legislative response to Bloody Sunday, demonstrators in Selma organized a second march. Once again, state troopers blocked their way. This time the incident ended peacefully, and the marchers returned to Brown Chapel. For the next two weeks, the SCLC negotiated with federal officials seeking an injunction to prevent the state of Alabama from interfering with the march.

After a federal judge ruled in favor of the SCLC, the 54-mile march to Montgomery began on March 21st. As the marchers neared the state capital four days later, their ranks had ballooned to 35,000 people. Later that day, King addressed the crowd.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Leader, Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Audio of Speeches on the Steps of the Alabama State Capitol, Montgomery, Alabama, recorded March 25, 1965

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

The Voting Rights Act was introduced on March 17th, two days after President Johnson spoke to the Joint Session. Over the next four months, the bill sailed through the Judiciary Committees of the House and Senate. The moral authority behind voting rights reform was so apparent that the bill swiftly cleared the normal legislative hurdles.

Benjamin Zelenko

Former Counsel, House Committee on the Judiciary

*Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives,
June 11, 2014*

The bill that was developed by the Justice Department was ingenious. We were willing, we were receptive to that bill immediately when that came up. That bill went through the committee like a hot knife through butter. We had 10 days of hearings, not 22 days. From start to finish that bill passed the Congress in six months—Voting Rights Act.

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

By late July, the House and Senate reached agreement on the legislation, and the Voting Rights Act passed in early August by wide margins in both chambers. The final version of the legislation was sweeping.

Echoing the 15th Amendment, it prohibited interference with the right to vote and barred literacy tests in elections. A section identified states where less than 50 percent of the voting age population had voted in the previous election and put their election laws under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Justice. The Attorney General gained the authority to appoint federal voting registrars and poll watchers, and was urged to file suit in states that utilized the poll tax as a discriminatory tactic. The 1965 Voting Rights Act, which passed with broad bipartisan support, stands out as one of the signal pieces of legislation in the 20th century.

The Honorable Paul Findley of Illinois

*Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives,
January 12, 2015*

The Voting Rights Act was a turning point in my life. I felt privileged to be able to cast a vote affirmative for it. It was the proudest vote I ever cast and I've often cited that as the preeminent step forward for human rights in the history of our country.

The Honorable John Dingell, Jr., of Michigan

*Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives,
November 14, 2012*

Because that was voting, which is probably as basic a right as, as an American has. It, it resulted in us having serious steps taken towards abating these problems. And I think most everybody now recognizes that it, in fact, did save this country.

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

President Johnson came to Capitol Hill to sign the bill into law on August 6th.

Jeffrey Oshins

House Page, 1965

Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, September 10, 2013

The Rotunda, the Capitol, is one of the great temples in the country, if not—you know, certainly political temple in the country. You know, the frescoes on the ceilings, and the statues, and everything. And, and it's a great hollow sound in there. I don't ever remember anything—I, I don't know if there's been a ceremony like that before or since. It was awe-inspiring.

Narrator

Matthew Wasniewski

Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

Standing in the Capitol Rotunda, flanked by two statues of Abraham Lincoln, President Johnson congratulated Congress for passing the landmark legislation. Johnson then went into the President's Room, where he signed the bill into law. There, he handed a pen to John Lewis.

Congress continues to mark the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the legacy of the civil rights movement with the Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage. Since 1998, Representative John Lewis and the Faith & Politics Institute have taken Members to cities and sites important to the civil rights movement. The annual pilgrimage culminates when the group marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

The Honorable Terri Sewell of Alabama

Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, December 12, 2014

Why is it important? For Members of Congress I think it is a reminder of the value of the right to vote. We who are representative of our districts, representative of this democracy, you can't help but feel the importance of what happened in Selma to this great country and the right to vote, how pivotal that is, a basic right that is the cornerstone of our democracy.

The Honorable John Lewis of Georgia

Chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 1963–1966

*Oral History Interview conducted with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives,
December 11, 2014*

Selma is a place where we injected something very meaningful into our democracy. We opened up the political process and made it possible for hundreds and thousands and millions of people to come in and be participants.