

Civil Rights

Organizing the First Pilgrimage

Reverend Doug Tanner, Founder and Chief Advisor, Faith & Politics Institute

Reverend Tanner explains the origin of the annual trip to Selma.

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So, the next year, we did the first congressional pilgrimage to Alabama. And we were promoting it at the House Democratic Caucus Retreat. And Governor Romer, Roy Romer from Colorado, was there. And he heard us, and he said, "I want to go." And I said, "Well, that's great, but we need to invite the Republican . . ." he was chair of the DNC at the time. I said, "We need to invite the Republican National Chairman too." And we invited him, it was Jim Nicholson, who later became the ambassador to the Vatican, and the Veterans Affairs Secretary. And he came down on Saturday; Governor Romer was with us on Friday. We had—I can't remember exactly who we had without scratching my head a little bit more, but I know we had a total of 10 Members. Fred Upton came down on Sunday, too, he couldn't come earlier. And we had the chairs of the DNC and the RNC. And there was, like, 30 of us total. And we went to BWI, and we flew down on Southwest, like anybody else, and we got on a bus, and we're in Birmingham to start with. And Amo came over to me that evening, and he said, "You are a fraud." {laughter} And it took me aback, and he said, "You said all I would need to do would be sign a few letters, and maybe make a couple of calls, and here I am in Alabama for the weekend, and I'm loving it!" {laughter} The whole experience just knocked their socks off, all of us, and it happened very spontaneously. I mean, we knew we were going to visit a given place, but we didn't know who we would see there.