

Things to Think About

- In explaining why he had decided to organize the Selma-Montgomery march, Martin Luther King, Jr. said "The federal government reacts to events more quickly when a situation cries out for its intervention." How are public demonstrations able to affect government policy? In what way do public demonstrations still play an important role? Can you think of some recent examples? What are some other methods used today by large numbers of people to demand action from the government?
- In 1965 an Atlanta newspaper columnist wrote, "The South one day will be grateful when it realizes what the alternative would have been had Dr. King, with his capacity to stir and inspire, come preaching violence, hate, and aggression." King was a proponent of the philosophy of nonviolence (see Vocabulary). How was King able to employ this philosophy successfully? Is it still a valid way of bringing about social change?
- The Selma to Montgomery march was a vivid illustration of how crucial the right to vote is in a democracy. Nevertheless, the number of people who vote in the United States has been steadily declining since the 1960s. Why do you think that is? What can be done to reverse the trend of decreasing voter participation in elections?
- After the Voting Rights Act was passed, Martin Luther King, Jr., began to turn his attention to the plight of African Americans in the North. His assassination in April 1968 kept him from accomplishing his goals there, but what issues particularly concerned African Americans in the North? What problems continue today? To what extent have the differences between North and South in their treatment of African Americans been erased since the 1960s?

Internet Resources

- <http://www.uua.org:8080/guest/archives/uua-1/98-10/msg00015.html> – From the Unitarian Universalist Association, information about a memorial to James Reeb dedicated in Selma on Nov. 15, 1998.
- <http://foia.fbi.gov/liuzzo.htm> – From the FBI Web site, a large archive of documents on the Viola Liuzzo murder.
- <http://www.flashbackpro.com/newspapers/week4.htm> – Information on how to get (for a fee) reprints from the Selma Times-Journal of articles published during the time of the march on Montgomery.
- <http://www.blackforum.com/Liuzzo.html> – From a Web Site entitled "Black Forum," a page on Viola Liuzzo.
- <http://selmatomontgomerymarch.com/> – A Web site whose purpose is to provide a repository of information on the Selma to Montgomery march.
- <http://www.voterights.org/> – The official Web Site of the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute in Selma, Alabama.
- <http://www.chronicle.duke.edu/chronicle/95/11/15/s08TheVoting.html> – From Duke University, a page entitled "The Voting Rights Act: 30 Years Later."
- <http://www.seattletimes.com/mlk/index.html> – From the Seattle Times, a useful Web site on the career of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- <http://avatar.lib.usm.edu/~archives/m250.htm> – From the University of Southern Mississippi, notes on Vernon Dahmer and its

collection of materials relating to him.

<http://stop-the-hate.org/dahmer.html> – The text of a New York Times story on the Dahmer case.

Other Resources

For students:

Bullard, Sara. *Free at Last: A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle.* Oxford University Press, 1994.

Lusane, Clarence. *No Easy Victories: Black Americans and the Vote (African-American Experience).* Franklin Watts, 1996.

Miller, Marilyn. *The Bridge at Selma.* Silver Burdett, 1985.

Rochelle, Belinda. *Witness to Freedom: Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights.* Puffin Books, 1997.

Siegel, Beatrice. *Murder on the Highway: The Viola Liuzzo Story.* Four Winds Press, 1993.

Webb, Sheyann; Nelson, Rachel West; and Sikora, Frank. *Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days.* University of Alabama Press, 1997.

For adults:

Belfrage, Sally, and Moses, Robert P. *Freedom Summer.* University Press of Virginia, 1990.

Davidson, Chandler and Grofman, Bernard, eds. *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990.* Princeton University Press, 1994.

Eskew, Glenn T. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle.* University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Fager, Charles E. *Selma, 1965: The March that Changed the South.* Beacon Press, 1985.

Halberstam, David. *The Children.* Fawcett, 1999.

Howlett, Duncan. *No Greater Love; The James Reeb Story.* Harper & Row, 1966

Lawson, Steven F. *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969.* Lexington Books, 1999.

Lewis, John. *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement.* Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Stanton, Mary. *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo.* University of Georgia Press, 1998.

A television movie, Selma, Lord, Selma, based on the book by Webb, Nelson, and Sikora was broadcast in 1999.

FREE AT LAST: CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES

Part III VIOLA LIUZZO/REV. JAMES REEB
JIMMY LEE JACKSON/VERNON DAHMER

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FREE AT LAST: CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES

The civil rights movement in the United States is usually considered in terms of its leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., or of its dramatic events, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. But often the catalysts for progress were people who fought from within a larger group or performed individual, and seemingly small, acts of heroism. Some were victims who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time but whose fate stirred the nation. These are some of those stories.

Part III VIOLA LIUZZO REV. JAMES REEB JIMMY LEE JACKSON VERNON DAHMER

In February 1965, during a small demonstration in Marion, Alabama, a skirmish broke out and one of the protestors, Jimmy Lee Jackson, was shot by an Alabama State trooper. The hospital in which Jackson worked refused to treat him because he was black. He died a few days later. The subsequent landmark march from Selma to Montgomery was planned in tribute to his memory.

In March 1963, after the second attempt to stage a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama failed, the would-be participants returned to Selma. Three white Unitarian ministers had dinner in a café that catered to blacks and, as they left, were attacked by four locals.



One of the ministers, the Rev. James Reeb of Boston, was murdered. His death received particular attention from Washington's political establishment.

Viola Liuzzo was a housewife from Michigan who had come to Alabama in 1965 and participated in the Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery. Just hours after the march ended on March 25 with a rally in Montgomery, she was shot and killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan while driving between the two towns. She is believed to be the only white woman in the civil rights movement to be murdered.

In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1966, several members of the Ku Klux Klan set fire to the home of Vernon Dahmer, a successful black businessman and farmer and the president of the local chapter of the NAACP. Dahmer died from his injuries. Four of the perpetrators were subsequently convicted, but not the ringleader. Yet Dahmer's family would not let it go, and over 30 years later, in 1988, that man was finally convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

The Right to Vote

In the 1950s and the early 1960s the main goal of the civil rights movement was to end discrimination in employment and in the use of public facilities. The segregation of schools was one of the first obstacles to fall – that practice was declared unconstitutional in May 1954 in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 marked the first successful challenge to segregated public transportation. In February 1960 college students in Greensboro, N.C., organized sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, and in 1961 protestors conducted “freedom rides” across the Deep South to protest discrimination in interstate travel. These events persuaded President John F. Kennedy to submit legislation that would abolish discrimination in public accommodations and employment. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, signed that legislation into law on July 2, 1964.

These achievements, as notable as they were, were limited because African Americans still lacked the one key ingredient to full integration into society – the right to vote. It had been denied them by a host of laws, such as burdensome poll taxes or the need to pass difficult examinations before registering. Without the right to vote, African Americans were unable to change discriminatory laws or to remove politicians who denied their basic rights. As a result, the focus of civil rights leaders now turned to securing the vote. As they did so, white resistance grew stronger and more violent, and several murders resulted. Yet the movement grew and attracted sympathizers from the North, both white and black. The result was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which put the weight of the federal government behind voter's rights. By 1968 half of the African American voting age population in the South was registered to vote.

The Impact of the Events

- One observer commented that the march on Montgomery had, for the first time, brought whites and blacks from all over the country into the South for a civil rights action. The event, therefore, was crucial in transforming what was previously a regional conflict into a national one.
- After the signing of the Voting Rights Act, the federal government

August 28, 1963 – During the civil rights march on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his “I have a dream” speech.

July 1964 – An Alabama state judge bans all African American marches and meetings in Selma. The injunction is strictly enforced by the local police.

July 2, 1964 – President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

December 10, 1964 – Martin Luther King, Jr., is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

January 2, 1965 – King, accompanied by his principal aide, Ralph Abernathy, makes a brief visit to Selma to assess the situation.

January 18, 1965 – King returns to Selma to open his voting rights campaign. Over the next several days, he leads marches on the courthouse.

February 1, 1965 – King, along with more than 200 demonstrators, is arrested and jailed in Selma for marching without a permit.

February 5, 1965 – The New York Times prints King's “Letter from a Selma Jail,” which says, “We need the help of all decent Americans.”

February 18, 1965 – Jimmy Lee Jackson is shot by a state trooper during a demonstration in Marion, Alabama.

February 26, 1965 – Jackson dies in Selma.

March 3, 1965 – King preaches at a funeral service for Jackson and says that he will lead a mass march to the Alabama capitol in Montgomery.

March 7, 1965 – While King is in Atlanta, the first attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery is violently turned back by Alabama state troopers. King responds by appealing to clergymen around the nation to join the Selma protestors.

March 9, 1965 – The second march to Montgomery ends when the demonstrators turn back without incident. That evening, The Rev. James Reeb is assaulted by four whites. He dies two days later.

March 15, 1965 – President Lyndon Johnson speaks before Congress and on national television, eloquently pleading for a federal voting rights bill.

March 17, 1965 – A judge in Montgomery grants King and his followers permission to march from Selma.

March 21, 1965 – The march on Montgomery begins.

March 25, 1965 – Some 25,000 demonstrators march on the Alabama capitol. That night, Viola Liuzzo is murdered by Klansmen.

August 6, 1965 – Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act, which ensures voting rights for African Americans.

August 20, 1965 – Federal voting registrars open offices in nine Alabama counties. More than 1,100 applicants register successfully.

December 1965 – Three men are convicted of conspiracy to violate Viola Liuzzo's civil rights and are sentenced to the maximum ten years in prison.

January 10, 1966 – Vernon Dahmer's house is bombed shortly after 2 A.M. He dies later that day.

March 28, 1966 – The Justice Department authorizes the FBI to file charges against Sam Bowers and 13 other klansmen.

October 20, 1967 – Seven klansmen, including Bowers, are convicted of civil rights violations in the deaths of three civil rights workers murdered in June 1964.

May 1968 – The jury in the Bowers trial for the murder of Vernon Dahmer is unable to reach a verdict; two more mistrials follow.

August 21, 1998 – Sam Bowers is convicted of the murder of Vernon Dahmer. He is sentenced to life in prison.

March 5, 2000 – President Bill Clinton speaks in Selma to honor the 35th anniversary of the marchers' crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

moved quickly to enforce the new law. It filed suits against laws that had impeded African American voting, and federal examiners began supervising voter registration. Within three years, the number of registered black voters in Alabama rose 150 percent. Many law enforcement officials who had suppressed African American demonstrators were voted out of office.

• As the civil rights leader John Lewis has pointed out, the subsequent prosecutions of the killers of Dahmer and others, even though they took many years, had “a cleansing effect on the very soul of the South.” In fact, shortly after the civil rights movement had achieved its gains, people began speaking of a “New South,” one not only free of the racial barriers of the past, but one more economically and socially progressive.

Important People

Bowers, Sam – The Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi.

Hoover, J. Edgar – The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1924 until 1972. He has an intense animosity toward Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he suspects of being a dupe of the Communists, if not a Communist himself. He also has this animosity toward the civil rights movement in general. The FBI's investigations of the murders of civil rights workers are widely criticized as halfhearted.

Ingram, Jim – FBI agent in Mississippi who participates in the investigation of the Dahmer murder.

Mitchell, Jerry – Alabama newspaper reporter whose investigations help reopen the Dahmer murder case in the 1990s.

Moton, Leroy – Liuzzo's companion in the car the night she is shot. He survives and testifies against the Klansmen.

Pitts, Billy Roy – Klansman who assists in the attack on Vernon Dahmer's house. He later quits the Klan, testifies against Bowers, and asks the Dahmer family for forgiveness.

Rowe, Gary – An FBI informant, he is in the assailants' car when Viola Liuzzo is murdered.

Vocabulary

Ku Klux Klan – An organization founded in 1865 to perpetuate white supremacy in the South. It virtually disappeared in the 1870s and then revived in the 1920s only to dwindle again. It reappeared in the late 1940s in response to the civil rights movement. During the 1960s its membership was estimated at nearly 17,000. Its violent tactics during that period had a backlash effect and helped gain public support for the passage of civil rights legislation.

Nonviolence – The principle espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who adapted it from the philosophy of Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), the father of independent India. King argued that “this willingness to suffer and this refusal to hit back will soon cause the oppressor to become ashamed of his own methods,” and he organized his demonstrations – such as the Selma to Montgomery march – so that the protestors reacted to physical abuse with passive resistance. The tactic proved effective in building support worldwide for the civil rights movement and was instrumental in bringing King the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.