



Selma

50 Years Ago

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Selma was the culmination of ten years of organizing, agitating, and demonstrating for civil rights which began when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. Ten years that changed America.

Selma, Alabama, 1965:

- A teacher's right to vote campaign in Selma—"Fit to Teach, Fit to Vote"—organized by Black educators, and supported by the American Teachers Association (ATA) and the NEA, sets the stage for broader protests.
- On February 18, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a 27-year-old Black civil rights activist and Deacon in the Baptist church, is shot and clubbed to death by a White state trooper in a voter rights demonstration. It is Jackson's murder that sparks a call for a Selma to Montgomery march.
- On March 7, Hosea Williams and John Lewis lead 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, protesting both Blacks being denied their right to vote and the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson. The marchers intend to march all the way to Montgomery, but they are attacked by local lawmen and state troopers with billy clubs and tear gas. Some 17 people are injured and the day becomes known as "Bloody Sunday."
- On March 9, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. leads another march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The marchers are stopped by a barricade of state troopers. The marchers kneel, pray and sing "We Shall Overcome" before returning to Selma.
- On March 17, about 3,200 demonstrators march out of Selma for Montgomery, 54 miles away. They stop at night and sleep in tents. On

March 25, the marchers reach Montgomery where they rally. Their feet may be sore, but their numbers have swollen to about 25,000.

Like the civil rights actions that preceded it, the Selma protests were initiated, sustained and led by African Americans. The protesters, however, also included Asian Americans, Hispanics, American Indians and Whites. And indeed, in the years since, social justice activists of all ethnicities and nationalities have drawn inspiration from the courage of the Selma protesters.

The 1950-60s civil rights movement that climaxed in Selma was about confrontation rather than going along to get along; it was about risk-taking rather than comfort seeking; it was about coalition-building and collective action rather than each person pursuing his or her interests individually; it was about holding firm to your nonviolent principles even when you were under violent assault. It was about listening to your conscience. It was about giving the next generation hope.

John Lewis, who was beaten bloody at Selma, said: "As a disenfranchised citizen who yearned for change, as a child born on the dark side of the American Dream, I heard the whispers of the spirit calling me to wrestle with the soul of a nation."

The ten years from 1955 to 1965 and Selma affirmed the wisdom of Frederick Douglass' words: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning...Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

Every step of the way on this ten-year journey was marked with the blood and lost lives of civil rights activists such as Jimmie Lee Jackson.

Selma has taken its rightful place along with Valley Forge and Gettysburg as hallowed American ground.