Selma: Sustaining the momentum

Two *Century* editors report from the second march in Selma, Alabama, on March 9, 1965

by Dean Peerman and Martin E. Marty

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Having traveled to Atlanta by plane, many of the civil rights demonstrators who converged on Selma today rode by bus or rented car past the state capitol in Montgomery before reaching their destination. Two flags, those of Alabama and of the Confederacy, fly atop the capitol dome to inform visiting Americans that they are outsiders. The demonstrators rode on new interstate highways dotted by signs bearing those same flags—highways paid for largely by federal taxes but designated the "Wallace Program" to honor the governor who makes visitors outsiders. The logic of the federal experience, however, will not permit George Wallace and his followers to have their way: in regard to the concerns of this nation all are insiders. As with state, so with church. None of the New Testament's metaphors for the church will permit today's demonstrators to be thought of as outsiders, so long as there is suffering among Christians in Alabama.

Today's insiders were responding to an appeal that came yesterday afternoon from Martin Luther King Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and from allied civil rights groups (including SNCC and CORE, whose untiring stalwarts deserve more credit than they have received for the rights activities in progress in Alabama). Banks had already closed by the time the appeal reached Chicago and other northern cities. The ministers, rabbis, priests, executives, professors, editors, students and housewives who had only a few hours to get to Selma reached into emergency funds, piggy banks, petty cash boxes and other symbols of free enterprise to scrape together plane or train fare. (We thought of these varied resources as we looked into the eyes of the white citizens of Selma who were looking into our eyes: we were sure that they were sure these funds just had to come from the communists!)

Weary from the night's travel, hundreds of participants assembled at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in a Selma that was ominously quiet, oppressively tense. Inside the crowded church, recent history and events of recent days were being recounted. Listeners knew that in 1965 voting rights would be the focus of aspirations and demonstrations. Though Negroes had been in North America for three and a half centuries, few of them in the south could exercise such rights; a century after emancipation, almost no black belt Negroes were free to share in the most basic expressions of American freedom. Speaker after speaker repeated the story and the problem. Local and state "power structures" (a phrase used almost as an incantation) have not helped the Negro in his quest for the vote, in fact have brutally thwarted him as he sought it. Demonstrations were to call attention to the difficulties Negroes have in registering to vote on the basis of existing law. The larger purpose of attracting attention is of course to compel passage of federal legislation which will guarantee Negroes their rights.

Of the 32,687 Negroes in Dallas county, of which Selma is the county seat, only about 340 are registered to vote—a pattern which prevails in much of the deep south. If a Negro is fortunate enough to be one of the few permitted to reach the registrar's desk in Selma on one of the two registration days per month, he can expect to be subjected to a "literacy" test containing questions that might very well stump a professor of history or political science. Sample questions: (1) Who has the power to make laws applying to the areas of federal arsenals, and who must consent to such laws? (2) What happens if the House of Representatives fails to act when the duty of choosing a President of the United States devolves upon it? (3) Which of the original 13 states had the most representatives to the first Congress? (4) What limitation in size does the Constitution put upon the District of Columbia?

What the speakers in Brown Chapel knew and what gradualists and moderates often forget is the importance of momentum. Without demonstrations nothing will happen. The demonstrations now have momentum; if this is lost, nothing will happen. The momentum would accelerate or be broken today. Speakers recalled the events of the previous weekend with the kind of passion with which, back when men heard such things gladly, Christian preachers recounted the history of salvation. Saturday, three days ago, under the leadership of the Reverend Joseph Ellwanger, about 60 representative white Alabama Christians marched in Selma in a historic and unprecedented act of identification with their black neighbors. That was "great," according to one speaker. Sunday was greater. In an animalistic bloodletting that

shocked the nation, Alabama state troopers and mounted possemen set upon Negro demonstrators—including women—with clubs, whips and ropes after rendering them helpless with tear gas. Monday King's call for help went out. Tuesday, declared the speaker, would be the "greatest": national religious leaders and others had arrived within hours of that call. King was later to agree; after today's march he said, "This was the greatest demonstration for freedom, the greatest confrontation we have ever had in the south." Then he called for even greater works.

The central aspect of today's events was the agony of conscience imposed suddenly and surprisingly on old demonstrators and new participants alike. The Negro leaders of the registration campaign had asked for a federal injunction against Governor Wallace, Sheriff James G. Clark and other militant segregationists. Instead, Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr., of Montgomery, a sometime moderate but—along with President Johnson and Attorney General Katzenbach—clearly a "bad guy" in all the speeches delivered in the church, had issued an injunction against King's planned 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery. Judge Johnson wanted to wait until Thursday to rule; then he might have sufficient evidence. King, his aides, the respondees to his appeal were stunned and mystified. Why had the judge acted this way? What did his actions mean? What was Washington's part in all this? Would a march actually constitute contempt of the U.S. government? Questions which might preoccupy legal analysts for months were forced on civil rights activists for answers within hours. After considerable struggle of conscience, King, a respecter of law whose S.C.L.C. had never before acted contrary to a federal court injunction, told the waiting crowd, "I must march."

Only a few of the people we encountered today responded out of emotional reaction to the appeals voiced in the church. Only a few declared that their response came easily. But almost without exception the men and women who had journeyed to Selma took places in the line when the march began. Many of the church leaders, ministers and professors who marched found the first step difficult—not merely because they faced the prospect of 50 miles of marching, but because of the implications of that step. They are people who stress the theological foundation of law, who appeal to the federal experience, who recognize the fundamental importance of legal institutions and hold them in high esteem. On this occasion one judge seemed to them to be misrepresenting those institutions and one Negro leader seemed to be affirming them. They chose to witness with King and to wrestle with their consciences regarding the legal question when the march was over and

time available. A study of the complex of motives and decisions concerning the march would make a book—it was different for each person with whom we talked. But almost everyone spoke in some manner of the need for witness today. More practically, they knew that failure to march would mean a break in the momentum, a surrender to Alabama's forces of evil, a halt in the Negro's progress toward freedom.

An improbable cloud of witnesses marched today. Roman Catholic bishops, senators' wives and widows, eggheads, seminary deans joined the "regulars" of Alabama. We walked past contemptuous Selmans who stood on their porches, spitting an occasional "Nigger lover!" or "Don't come on my property!"—or merely smirking spitefully. At one point a police officer on a motorcycle drove rapidly up onto the opposite sidewalk for the simple sadistic pleasure of chasing and scattering a group of Negro children. There is no need to detail this part of the experience: today's drama lay not in the march; that is old stuff to the regulars and the participation of today's guests hardly ranks them with the heroic veterans. We crossed the bridge over the Alabama river after hearing Chief Deputy U.S. Marshal H. Stanley Fountain read part of Judge Johnson's restraining order. A short distance beyond the bridge Sheriff Clark and State Police Major John Cloud confronted the marchers with several hundred battleready troopers and possemen. Though situated only 20 or 30 rows from the front, we heard little of the confrontation; we did hear the order for the troopers to break their rank, and the order from our side, following prayers offered by some of the leaders, to turn our mile-long column around and head back to the church.

Tonight's radio reports speak of a march's having been prevented, of the marchers' retreat, of the failure of the demonstration to break out onto the highway for Montgomery. Few of the marchers would interpret their actions in these terms. The story that went through the column as we returned went something like this: two "power structures," Wallace and King's, met on a day when neither could win all or lose all but when King's labored under an unexpected legal handicap. We were given the impression that some sort of agreement had been made: the troopers would open the highway, but we would not use it. The fact that the march ended rather undramatically does not contradict what King called it: the "greatest" yet.

What happened today? First, the momentum of the drive was not impaired. Further, the demonstrators by their variety and their spirit witnessed to the American religious community: the pastors, priests and rabbis of the future are not going to settle for culture-religion of the kind that permits the rights of Negroes to be denied.

Liberal and conservative, large and small denominations were represented; their leaders not only have moved toward consensus but are willing to make that consensus visible in the risk of their own careers and lives. Finally, Martin Luther King was able to demonstrate that Negro leadership could rapidly summon an army of the kind of people who seldom participate in demonstrations and that this ungainly group of freedom fighters could be marched into what was for them literally an unknown, into the embrace of Governor Wallace's burliest brutes, without the protection of federal law. At the moment the prayers were being said and before the turn-around, no one knew whether clubs, tear gas or worse would be the fate of the kneeling marchers. King enabled them to tell the world, "None of us can be intimidated."

Without doubt it would be easy to exaggerate the importance of this day's strange demonstration. By the time these words see print Selma's marchers will have gone on to new sufferings and, one hopes, new victories. Today was a day of sustained momentum which is building up to legislation and more freedom; it was a day of witness. That was all King asked for and that was what he and his co-workers got.

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