

MLK Jr Leads Selma to Montgomery March

Written by Robert ID2438

Tuesday, 21 March 2006 02:13 -

On this date 41 years ago the Selma to Montgomery March began.

In the name of African-American voting rights, 3,200 civil rights demonstrators, led by Martin Luther King Jr., begin a historic march from Selma, Alabama, to the State Capitol at Montgomery.

U.S. Army and National Guard troops were on hand to provide safe passage for the "Alabama Freedom March," which twice had been turned back by Alabama state police at Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge.

In 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) decided to make the small town of Selma the focus of their drive to win voting rights for African Americans in the South. Alabama's governor, George Wallace, was a vocal opponent of the African-American civil rights movement, and local authorities in Selma had consistently thwarted efforts by the Dallas County Voters League and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to register local blacks.

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had won the 1964 Nobel Prize for Peace, and the world's eyes turned to Selma after his arrival there in January 1965. He launched a series of peaceful protests, and by mid-February thousands of protesters in the Selma area had spent time in jail, including Rev. King himself. On February 18, a group of white segregationists attacked some peaceful marchers in the nearby town of Marion. Jimmie Lee Jackson, an African-American demonstrator, was fatally wounded in the melee. After he died, King and the SCLC planned a massive march from Selma to Montgomery.

Although Governor Wallace promised to prevent it from going forward, on March 7 some 500 demonstrators, led by SCLC leader Hosea Williams and SNCC leader John Lewis, began the 54-mile march to the state capital.

After crossing Pettus Bridge, they were met by Alabama state troopers and posse men who attacked them with nightsticks, tear gas, and whips after they refused to turn back. Several of the protesters were severely beaten, and others ran for their lives.

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The incident was captured on national television and outraged many Americans. Hundreds of ministers, priests, and rabbis headed to Selma to join the voting rights campaign.

Martin Luther King Jr., who was in Atlanta at the time, promised to return to Selma immediately and lead another attempt. On March 9, Martin Luther King Jr. led 1,500 marchers, black and white, across Edmund Pettus Bridge but found Highway 80 blocked again by state troopers. King paused the marchers and led them in prayer, whereupon the troopers stepped aside.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. then turned the protesters around, believing that the troopers were trying to create an opportunity that would allow them to enforce a federal injunction prohibiting the march. This decision led to criticism from some marchers who called Rev. King cowardly.

In Selma that night, James Reeb, a white minister from Boston, was fatally beaten by a group of segregationists. Six days later, on March 15, President Lyndon Johnson went on national television to pledge his support to the Selma protesters and call for the passage of a new voting rights bill that he was introducing in Congress.

"There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem," he said, "And we shall overcome."

On March 21, U.S. Army troops and federalized Alabama National Guardsmen escorted the marchers across Edmund Pettus Bridge and down Highway 80.

When the highway narrowed to two lanes, only 300 marchers were permitted, but thousands more rejoined the Alabama Freedom March as it came into Montgomery on March 25. On the steps of Alabama State Capitol, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed live television cameras and a crowd of 25,000, just a few hundred feet from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where he got his start as a minister in 1954.

That August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which guaranteed African Americans the

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right to vote. By 1967, African-American registered voters in Alabama had nearly tripled.