Selma, Alabama, the quiet seat of Dallas County, is about an hour's drive west of the state capital, Montgomery. To enter Selma you pass a strip of gas stations, car dealerships, and fast-food joints, then cross the Alabama River on a dramatic steel arch, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, named after a Confederate general. During Reconstruction, Pettus had testified before the U.S. Congress’s Joint Select Committee investigating Ku Klux Klan activities in Alabama and denied the existence of any such “bands” in his county. As for those that might exist elsewhere, he expressed only contempt for their ungentlemanly upbringing and methods.1

“Dallas is the birthplace of the White Citizens Council in the State of Alabama. It is also the Stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan,” noted Bernard Lafayette in a SNCC field report from Selma, written shortly after he and his wife, Colia, were posted there in February 1963.2 The Lafayettes were welcomed by one of Selma’s few black voters, Amelia Boynton, an insurance agent and a leader of the Dallas County Voters’ League. Despite the courageous efforts of the league and the NAACP, only about 1 percent of Dallas County blacks had been able to register. No surprise, given that the registration office was open only two days per month, on Monday. During the brief periods when the registrars were not out to lunch, they would subject any black applicant to endless forms and a grueling test of reading, writing, and knowledge of the Constitution.

Aided by Mrs. Boynton and other local stalwarts, the Lafayettes took on the task of shaking up Selma. They went to the Chicken Shack, the black Elks’ Club, bars, and churches, handing out leaflets and inviting folk to voter-registration classes. They held
mass meetings. They dealt with harassment, firings from jobs, beatings, and arrests of prospective voters. They ran up against Dallas County sheriff James G. Clark, Jr.

Clark was a notoriously sadistic and racist “peacekeeper.” His volunteer posse of over a hundred men rode into battle in cars and on horseback, carrying guns, whips, clubs, and electric cattle prods. Clark and his posse terrorized Dallas County and beyond, a self-appointed anti-civil rights squad, often working in concert with the state troopers under Colonel Al Lingo. Like Clark, Lingo (who had been appointed by his friend Governor George Wallace) tended toward violent excess.

On January 2, 1965, Sheriff Clark was in Miami for the Orange Bowl in which Alabama quarterback Joe Namath was most valuable player. In Selma that evening Nobel Laureate Martin Luther King, Jr. (recently named Time Man of the Year), addressed a large mass meeting. Gathered with him in Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church was a coalition of Selma blacks such as had never before been seen, a testimony to the long years of organizing by Amelia Boynton, the Lafayettees, and many others. With Clark out of town, his posse was kept under control by the newly appointed Selma police chief Wilson Baker, a relative moderate. King was inaugurating the SCLC’s Alabama Project:

At the rate they are letting us register now it will take a hundred and three years to register all of the fifteen thousand Negroes in Dallas County who are qualified to vote. . . . But we don’t have that long to wait. . . . Today marks the beginning of a determined, organized, mobilized campaign to get the right to vote everywhere in Alabama. . . . Our cry to the State of Alabama is a simple one: Give us the ballot. . . . We are not on our knees begging for the ballot. We are demanding the ballot.³

The Alabama Project, centered on Selma and Dallas County, was a major campaign to secure effective federal protection of voting rights. That protection had been compromised out of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Since Johnson’s landslide defeat of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election, the White House and the Justice Department had been discussing a new voting rights bill. King and other civil rights leaders were insisting on immediate, potent legislation that would install federal registrars whenever needed and that would ban all discriminatory poll tests.

The SCLC’s Alabama plans were not secret. Wilson Baker remembered: “We had obtained them through some sources. . . . I have heard the story that Dr. King either lost his briefcase or some way it was misplaced in Anniston. . . . I think every law enforcement officer in the state had a copy of the thing.”⁴ They knew that the plan involved exposing the hair-trigger cruelty of Jim Clark and his posse.
On January 19, the second day of the SCLC’s organized marches, Amelia Boynton was arrested by Clark in front of the county courthouse. A photograph of her being brutally manhandled ran the next day in the Washington Post and the New York Times. At a mass meeting Ralph Abernathy ironically nominated Clark to honorary membership in the Dallas County Voters’ League—for publicity services rendered. Clark heard such remarks on surveillance tapes that he had made of these meetings. “He’d scream bloody murder that he’d never do it again, he wouldn’t fall into that trap again and go out the next day and do the same thing,” Baker recalled.  

On February 10 Clark tried to dislodge a group of about two hundred high schoolers protesting outside the courthouse. First he simply surrounded them with his scowling posse. At lunchtime he ostentatiously handed out fried chicken to his men, hoping that hunger pangs would break the youngsters’ ranks. Then his patience ended. The posse pressed the teenagers into a “forced march” across town, down Water Street, and out beyond the city. Reporters and cameramen were kept away. Screaming, stumbling, panting, the kids were herded along by cattle prods, which delivered a fierce sting but left no scars. Some miles out of town, the march was terminated, the marchers left in ditches. Some were vomiting from exhaustion. Baker drove to the scene with two SNCC workers hidden in his car so that they could help bring the kids back to town. “I’m human too,” he explained.  

Even some of Selma’s white citizens—not one of whom had ever before spoken up publicly against racial injustices—called for putting Clark on a tighter leash.  

Two days later, in front of the courthouse and cameramen, the SCLC’s C. T. Vivian told Clark, “You’re racists in the same way that Hitler was a racist.”  

Clark (or his deputy) punched Vivian in the face with such force that he fractured a finger. Vivian was dragged off bleeding to jail. Clark checked into Vaughan Memorial Hospital the next day with chest pains. “The niggers are giving me a heart attack,” he told a reporter.  

Demonstrators prayed for Clark’s health, “In Body and Mind,” as one sign put it.  

Upon his release from jail, Vivian drove thirty miles northwest to Marion to address a mass meeting. A night march from the church to the jail was planned, and the police were spreading rumors that James Orange, a popular SCLC field secretary, was going to be broken out of jail by the marchers. Police reinforcements were speeding in from all around the state. Richard Valerianian, a reporter for NBC News, recalled: “I went to Marion and the crowd was particularly nasty that night. A lot of townspeople had gathered around, and we knew we were in for trouble right away because people came up and started spraying the cameras with paint.”  

Valerianian was clubbed to the ground. Albert Turner, a Marion leader, described what happened next:  

Probably one of the most vicious situations that was in the whole Civil Rights Movement. . . . One of the major things that was so bad that night, they shot the [street]
lights out, and nobody was able to report what really happened. . . . They beat people at random. They didn’t have to be marching. All you had to do was be black. And they hospitalized probably fifteen or twenty folks. And they just was intending to kill somebody as an example, and they did kill Jimmie Jackson. . . . He was shot in the side that night and later died.10

Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was trying to protect his mother from a beating, was shot at point-blank range by an Alabama state trooper. His murder had the movement boiling with rage and determination. A Marion activist, Lucie Foster, called for a march to the state capital. There was talk of laying Jimmie Jackson’s body at George Wallace’s feet. James Bevel, pacing outside his room at the Torch Motel, had been struck by a similar notion. At a memorial service for Jackson on Sunday, February 28, Bevel floated his idea at the end of a fiery sermon. His text was from the Book of Esther, where Esther is charged to “go unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.” “I must go see the king!” Bevel shouted, “We must go to Montgomery and see the king!”11

Several days later Martin Luther King, Jr., confirmed that a march from Selma to Montgomery would take place. He met with President Johnson in Washington, D.C., on March 5, outlining his views on the proposed voting rights legislation. On Sunday, March 7, about six hundred marchers, perhaps half from Marion, assembled in Brown Chapel. The mood was somber. Dr. King had been kept away by his aides, who had been warned in the strongest terms by Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach of credible threats to King’s life. At the head of the march would be John Lewis, SNCC’s national chairman, and the SCLC’s Hosea Williams; they had won a coin toss with James Bevel and Andrew Young. Next in line would be Albert Turner of Marion and Robert Mants of Selma SNCC. Governor Wallace had vowed to stop the march as “not conducive to the orderly flow of traffic and commerce.” The Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) had prepared four rented ambulances and hearses to serve as first-aid vehicles.

As Lewis remembers it: “We did have little bags, knapsacks, and lunch or something like that, books to read along the way. But we hadn’t set up tents along the way; we didn’t have any place to stay. Apparently the idea was that we would march outside of Selma that night and then come back, and then the next morning we would continue.”12

As the marchers crossed the hump of the Pettus Bridge just after 4:00 p.m., they could see the forces positioned at the bottom. They faced a blue wall of troopers, while a mounted posse and assorted thugs were lurking in the wings. The troopers had gas masks on their belts and were brandishing clubs. Al Lingo and Jim Clark pulled up in a car nearby. “John, can you swim?” Williams asked Lewis. “No.” “I can’t either,” said Williams, “and I’m sure we’re gonna end up in that river.” They led the marchers down to the line of troopers. The troopers donned their gas masks. Major John Cloud announced: “You are ordered to disperse, go home or to your church. This march will not continue.
You have two minutes,” Williams said, “May we have a word with you, Major?” “There is no word to be had.” After one minute, Cloud ordered, “Troopers, advance.”

The troopers rushed forward, their blue uniforms and white helmets blurring into a flying wedge as they moved.

The wedge moved with such force that it seemed almost to pass over the waiting column rather than through it.

The first ten or twenty Negroes were swept to the ground screaming, arms and legs flying. . . .

Those still on their feet retreated.

The troopers continued pushing, using both the force of their bodies and the prodding of their nightsticks.

A cheer went up from the white spectators lining the south side of the highway.

The mounted possemen spurred their horses and rode at a run into the retreating mass. . . .

Suddenly there was a report like a gunshot and a grey cloud spewed over the troopers and the Negroes.

“Tear gas!” someone yelled.

The cloud began covering the highway. . . .

Fifteen or twenty nightsticks could be seen through the gas, flailing at the heads of the marchers.14

Lewis recalled: “I was hit. I was hit almost on the same spot I was hit on the Freedom Ride in 1961. . . . This trooper just kept hitting. But it was such a force. They were running . . . over anything that was standing, so I was literally knocked down and hit. I just felt like it was the beginning of the end. . . . It became difficult for me to breathe, and you just sorta felt, ‘Just let me be.’”15

Sheyann Webb, an eight-year-old marcher, recollected: “I was runnin’. I was afraid, and Hosea picked me up, and I told him to put me down ’cause he was runnin’ too slow. . . . Tears were splattered everywhere, and I ran all the way home.”16 Another marcher recalled: “They literally whipped folk all the way back to the church. They even came up in the yard of the church, hittin’ on folk. Ladies, men, babies, children—they didn’t give a damn who they were.”17

The first-aid vehicles had been blockaded by the police at the city side of the bridge. Dr. Alfred Moldovan, who was leading the MCHR workers, pleaded with Baker to let them cross over to the wounded. At first the police chief threatened to blow the doctor’s head off, but eventually he let the vehicles through.18 “I recall,” said Lewis, “several people that had been on the march assisted in getting me back [across the bridge].”19 The nearly one hundred wounded were treated at several hospitals and makeshift first-aid centers. Lewis was hospitalized for three days with a brain concussion.
Hundreds of ministers, priests, nuns, and rabbis were heeding King’s call to come to Selma. One of them was Father Daniel Berrigan (later prominent in the antiwar movement):

Monday, March 15. We came in, thirty-five strong, from New York, in time for the memorial service for Reverend Reeb. . . . We approached Brown’s Chapel, the reality of Selma hit like a tight fist.

The church was ringed with . . . troopers. They lounged in the open cars, feet hung out of doors and windows, eyes half closed in sunlight; helmets, billy clubs a stereotype of sleepy brutal power, . . .

The church was packed. The TV cameras, the newsmen were there in force, tired out but still there. The nation needed to see this; better, since [Bloody] Sunday, it even wanted to see. A shabby backwater church . . . was for this week the heart and focus of America. In it, the most astounding ironies were being taken for granted. Black store-hands and field workers sat beside distinguished theologians. Hawaiians met New Yorkers, believers shook hands with the unchurched, beatniks sang along with nuns. Men who differed in every conceivable respect—faith and race and culture—found themselves bewilderred by a sudden unity whose implications went far beyond the unpredictable days they were enduring together.24

That evening President Johnson presented his voting rights bill to Congress and to television cameras. In what many consider the greatest of all presidential civil rights speeches, Johnson told an audience estimated at seventy million:

Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish, it must be rooted in democracy. The most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders. The history of this country in large measure is the history of the expansion of that right to all of our people. . . .

Wednesday, I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote. . . .

Even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a much larger movement that reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause is our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And, we shall overcome. . . .

The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety and even risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation. His demonstrations have been designed to call attention to injustice, designed to provoke change, designed to stir reform. He has called upon us to make good the promise of America. And who among us can say that we would have made the same progress if not for his persistent bravery, and faith in democracy.25
C. T. Vivian remembered reactions to the speech: “Martin was sitting in a chair looking towards the TV set, and when LBJ said, ‘We shall overcome,’ we all cheered. I looked over toward Martin and Martin was very quietly sitting in the chair, and a tear ran down his cheek. It was a victory like none other, it was an affirmation of the movement.”

On the judicial front, Judge Johnson ruled on Thursday that the third Selma to Montgomery march could proceed and that it must be guaranteed protection. When Governor Wallace refused to commit state forces (citing financial constraints) President Johnson federalized the Alabama National Guard.

The fifty-four-mile Selma to Montgomery march began on Sunday, March 21. Four thousand marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and set off down Highway 80, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Bunche, Constance Baker Motley, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and John Lewis, who has recalled:

> It was like a holy crusade, like Gandhi’s march to the sea. You didn’t get tired, you really didn’t get weary, you had to go. It was more than an ordinary march. To me, there was never a march like this one before, and there hasn’t been one since. It was the sense of community moving there—as you walked you saw people coming, waving, bringing you food or bringing you something to drink. You saw the power of the most powerful country on the face of the earth, the United States government.

The march took five days and proceeded without disruption. National Guardsmen—augmented by regular army troops, FBI agents, and U.S. marshals—checked the road for bombs and snipers and kept the hecklers along the route at a distance. Helicopters circled overhead. The tent crew of forty students from San Francisco Theological Seminary pitched the first day’s camp about seven miles outside Selma. A hot meal of pork and beans and spaghetti was delivered in eight brand-new galvanized garbage cans; supper was prepared each day by a crew of cooks in the large kitchen of Selma’s Green Street Baptist Church.

The Monday-night camp was on the property of a seventy-eight-year-old Lowndes County widow, Rosie Steele. She told a reporter, “I guess I’ve lived too long and just didn’t think things would change—until I heard the President’s speech the other night. I knew he was my President too. . . . I almost feel like I might live long enough to vote myself.”

Tuesday night’s campsite was the worst. The land belonged to A. G. Gaston, the black millionaire whose motel had been headquarters for the Birmingham movement. The field had turned to mud in the rain, and no matter how much hay was laid down, many of the marchers could not keep dry.

To keep traffic under control along the two-lane section of the highway, only three hundred marchers were allowed to complete the entire trek. At the edge of Lowndes County the road took on two more lanes and the march re-inflated. By the time it left the final campsite, the march comprised over twenty-five thousand people. It was the biggest civil rights gathering the South had ever seen.
The marchers proceeded down Dexter Avenue, Montgomery’s main street, and assembled opposite the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where the first bus-boycott meetings had been held ten years before. Across the avenue was the Alabama Supreme Court building, where the state ban on the NAACP had been upheld in 1956. Next to the church was the imposing Department of Public Safety building, headquarters of the state troopers. And just past that was the beautiful state capitol. On the portico, set into the top step, was a brass plaque commemorating the inauguration of the first Confederate president in 1861. And it was there that Governor George Wallace had been inaugurated in 1963, vowing, “Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever.”

From those steps Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed the rally. He began with Mother Hollard’s aphorism, “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.” He recited the history of the civil rights movement, outlined the hard work that lay ahead, then launched into an inspiring oration:

We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. That will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.

I know you are asking today, “How long will it take?” . . . How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long, not long, because you reap what you sow. How long, not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice . . .

Glory Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah!

His truth is marching on. 29

Governor Wallace refused to receive a delegation of marchers. Two weeks later he finally met with a group that included the SCLC’s Rev. Joseph Lowery, who recalled:

He said, “Well, I don’t advocate violence.” I said, “You don’t in so many words, but you do. You get on television, you rave against people taking the rights of little people and the government coming in and stirring up trouble, and you get your emotions released on TV. But the fellas in the dark street, he doesn’t have that forum, so he gets a lead pipe to identify with you, and cracks somebody’s skull . . .”

We moralized his conscience that day, I think . . .

He probably for the first time got to see face to face how the black community felt about him and his leadership. 30

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law on August 6. It had the strong provisions for federal registrars and against voter examinations that civil rights advocates had demanded. Within a year there were about nine thousand new black registrants in Dallas County. In the next election, they provided Wilson Baker with the margin needed to replace Jim Clark as sheriff. The number of black voters registered to vote leaped from an estimated
23 percent of voting-age blacks in this country in 1964 to 61 percent in 1969. In Mississippi the increase in the same period was from 6.7 percent to 66.5 percent. Southern politics was radically changed. Eight-year-old marcher Sheyann Webb remembered:

I felt real good at the last march. It was like we had overcome. We had reached the point we were fighting for, for a long time. And if you were to just stand there in the midst of thousands and thousands of people and all the great leaders and political people who had come from all over the world, it was just a thrill.

I asked my mother and father for my birthday present to become registered voters. They took me to the polls with them to vote.