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BLACK, WHITE, AND SOUTHERN

Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present

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For Erik and Eleanor

tural shackles by revealing that southernness—religious faith, place, past, and manners—was not identical with white supremacy or at least with segregation. Southern blacks used these cultural elements not cynically but because they were southerners, and they touched white souls as a result. Even if whites could not bring themselves to embrace integration mentally, their awareness and guilt over seeing a mirror image of themselves in the black protesters minimized resistance to the law. Eventually they would come to feel good about integration, not necessarily because they had participated in a heroic resistance, but because it was the right thing, the *southern* thing to do.

But even as the barriers of segregation were falling, blacks were dying in Mississippi and Alabama. The small towns and rural areas of those states remained beyond the redemptive touch of the movement. They would become the last great battlegrounds of the civil rights crusade.

VII / The Last Crusade: Voting Rights, 1962–1965

For years, blacks bravely climbed county courthouse steps to register to vote. The registrars, if they were there, would sometimes smile and say, "Who you work for, boy?" and the courage would be gone. On occasion, the voting official would go through the motions, administer a literacy test or inquire about character. But it would be a charade, a way to pass the time of day, material for amusing dinner-table conversation. Once in a while, when things were slow, a few courthouse regulars would teach the prospective voter an indelible lesson in racial etiquette. There were even a few times when a lucky applicant would be registered, though there was no guarantee that his poll tax receipt would not be lost before election day or that his name would not be purged from the voting rolls.

For white southerners, voting was an important part of the regional racial etiquette. Voting, like segregation, was a form of public behavior that reflected the status of both black and white. To admit blacks into the polling booth was to admit political equality, and the carefully tended myths of the Reconstruction era had taught whites that the electoral participation of blacks was an invitation to corruption, disorder, and oppression. It meant that whites could find themselves on the other side of the color line. White political leaders had a significant stake in maintaining this fiction. As New South prophet Henry W. Grady explained candidly in the 1880s, "let the whites divide, what happens? Here is this dangerous and alien influence that holds the balance of power. It cannot be won by argument, for it is without information, understanding, or traditions. It must be bought by race privileges." So the leaders disfranchised blacks, congratulated whites on their regained status, and continued to holler "nigger" at the appropriate times to maintain white solidarity.

White leaders also had long memories. The specter of a poor white and black political alliance, dangerously close in the 1890s, loomed large. Such a merger would not only upset the political balance but could lead to economic changes—tax reforms, educational and social service measures, and regulatory agencies—that would erode or

threaten economic privilege in the region. In short, black suffrage could substantially alter the political and economic landscape of southern localities and states.

Voting was such a fundamental American right that the plight of black applicants generated considerable notice in many parts of the country after World War II. It was possible to argue that a lunch counter or a theater was a private enterprise and that the rights of property extended to patron selection, but elections were unmistakably public activities, the foundations of representative government. At a time when the American system and communism were being constantly compared in the forum of world opinion, it would not do for so basic a right to be denied to a segment of the American citizenry.

The Limits of Federalism

The federal government moved to correct the embarrassment. The Eisenhower administration, heartened by its showing among black voters in the 1956 presidential election, supported a voting-rights bill in Congress. After passage in the House, Democratic senator and majority leader Lyndon B. Johnson successfully maneuvered a weakened version through the upper chamber. Johnson, a Texan, had not compiled a notable record on civil rights prior to 1957, but he had presidential ambitions and sought to build a constituency with northern Democrats and blacks. The final version of the bill, which President Eisenhower signed into law in August, 1957, authorized the Justice Department to issue injunctions against voting officials who interfered with a citizen's right to register or vote. The bill also established a Commission on Civil Rights to investigate voting-rights violations and a Civil Rights Division within the Justice Department to initiate litigation when violations were uncovered.

The fact that southern lawmakers made only a half-hearted attempt at a filibuster indicated that the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was not perceived as a threat to Dixie's political culture. Only a formal complaint from a locality would set the machinery of the act in motion. Many blacks were unaware of the new law, and those who knew about it feared the inevitable reprisals that would accompany such action. If a black citizen screwed up enough courage to file a complaint, the law provided that the FBI would investigate. The federal agents were accustomed to working closely with local officials, so it was unlikely that they would jeopardize those relationships. In the improbable event that the FBI would certify a complaint and litigation were initiated, there was a good possibility that the case would be tried before a federal district-court judge in sympathy with the defendants.

By 1960, the act had added few blacks to the registration lists, despite the widespread abuses documented by the Civil Rights Commission. The NAACP continued to press for a stronger law, and in 1960, on the eve of a presidential election, Congress passed another voting-rights act. The 1960 Civil Rights Act only marginally strengthened the earlier statute by giving the Civil Rights Division access to local registrar records in order to build a case for litigation.

The access provision assumed that federal district-court judges would direct registrars to turn over their records to Justice Department attorneys. Judge Harold Cox demonstrated the fallacy of that assumption in *U.S.* v. *Lynd.* In August, 1960, the Justice Department requested Forrest County, Mississippi, registrar Theron Lynd to turn over his records in order to prepare a discrimination suit against him for violating the 1960 Civil Rights Act. Lynd refused, and federal attorneys petitioned Judge Cox in January, 1961, to order Lynd to comply with their request. Cox did nothing. In July, the Justice Department filed its request again. Seven months later, in February, 1962, Judge Cox dismissed the January, 1961, petition on the grounds that the July request superseded it. One month later, Cox called the case for trial. The Justice Department still had not received the registrar's records. Without that evidence, Cox ruled against the department.

Black registration figures reflected the ineffectiveness of federal initiatives. In 1958, the Civil Rights Commission discovered forty-four counties in the Deep South where not a single black was registered to vote, although blacks formed a majority or a strong minority of eligible voters in these districts. Altogether in the South, black voter registration had increased by only 3 percent between 1957 and 1960, but even that modest figure was misleading, since almost all of that gain occurred in the cities. Rural blacks, especially in the Deep South, remained disfranchised.

The persistence of voting-rights abuses embarrassed not only the federal government but a number of white southerners as well. The blatant nature of black disfranchisement became too obvious to ignore. In 1959, the Greensboro *Daily News* declared that "if a Negro is a citizen he should be treated as any other citizen in his right to the franchise." The Lee County (Ala.) *Bulletin* concurred a year later, stat-

ing that "states have failed to act honorably. [Alabama] officials ought to act in good faith in this matter of registering voter applicants regardless of race or color."

The newly installed Kennedy administration, impressed with such indigenous support for voting rights and rhetorically committed to furthering those rights, resumed the federal initiative. There was evidence that Deep South jurisdictions were tightening suffrage qualifications, despite federal law to the contrary. The Georgia legislature, for example, stiffened its literacy qualification in 1957. A political science professor at the University of Georgia conceded that even he might have difficulty passing the test. The Mississippi state legislature considered a constitutional amendment to prohibit citizens convicted of vagrancy, perjury, child desertion, adultery, fornication, larceny, and gambling from voting. When some lawmakers suggested adding habitual drunkenness to the list, objections were raised that such a provision "might even get some of us."

Finally, there was concern within the Kennedy administration that the sit-ins, which began during the president's first full month in office and soon spread throughout much of the South, could trigger violence. This might force federal action that could jeopardize the administration's legislative agenda. By shifting attention to voting rights and redirecting black protest into that channel, the administration hoped to avoid a volatile situation. Registering individual blacks seemed much less threatening than the massing of hundreds of demonstrators in the streets of southern cities. A longer-range consideration was that a growing black electorate in the South could liberalize Democratic party politics in that region, facilitating a better working relationship with the national administration.

Accordingly, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall and civil rights adviser Harris Wofford served as intermediaries to introduce SNCC leaders to several philanthropic foundations with the objective of financing a voting-rights drive in the South. Eventually SCLC, CORE, the NAACP, and the Urban League joined SNCC to form the Voter Education Project (VEP), to be administered through Atlanta by the Southern Regional Council. The civil rights conglomerate received grants from the Taconic and Field Foundations as well as from the Edgar Stern Family Fund totaling $870,000. Each organization within the VEP would choose a state and launch a voter-registration drive with the blessings of the Justice Department. The assumption among

VEP workers was that the federal government would be behind them if trouble arose.

The Delta Campaign: A Prison of Fear

SNCC drew Alabama and Mississippi primarily because, as one member recalled, "nobody else wanted 'em." SNCC began its campaign during the spring of 1962 in the Mississippi Delta. The Delta is an unflinchingly flat expanse of fertile land nourished (and occasionally overrun) by the Mississippi River, extending from the northwest quarter of the state up to Memphis, Tennessee. A few weather-beaten shacks dotted the landscape, but mostly it was cotton and soybeans for as far as the eye could see. Blacks still chopped (weeded) the crops by hand and lived under a racial regime that had changed little since the Civil War. They were the poorest of that state's impoverished population, subsisting on a level equal to one-fifth of the federal poverty standard, or $600 per year.

The campaign focused on Greenwood and its environs in Leflore County, the gateway to the Delta. Both Greenwood and Leflore took their names from a wealthy antebellum planter, Greenwood Leflore, who fashioned his plantation house after the Empress Josephine's palace, Malmaison. Leflore maintained his allegiance to the Union during the Civil War and died on his front porch framed by four grandchildren holding American flags over him. A century later, defiance of a different sort marked the area. No sooner had SNCC begun its activity than its workers were arrested and jailed. Though the Justice Department intervened to secure their release, it was only the beginning of SNCC's difficulties. The county cut off welfare to those blacks who had attempted to register, and SNCC soon became more a provider of social services than a civil rights organization.

The economic pressure failed to deter either SNCC or Leflore's blacks. When attempts to register blacks persisted, violence erupted. SNCC leader Bob Moses, a native New Yorker with a master's degree in philosophy from Harvard, received a vicious beating from some whites after attempting to register blacks in Liberty, Mississippi. The whites warned him and a colleague to "get the hell out of town" or they would be killed. In nearby Amite County, a white state legislator shot and killed a black farmer for no other apparent reason than that the farmer had attempted to register to vote. In Winona, SNCC worker Lawrence Guyot, who had gone to the sheriff's office to check on the

arrest of some of his colleagues, was worked over for four hours and then charged with attempted murder. In Clinton, twelve blacks who had petitioned the mayor to establish a biracial committee to discuss the community's problems were arrested on the charge of intimidating a public official. Within the year, SNCC, its resources and nerves depleted, abandoned the Delta campaign.

While the other VEP organizations achieved some modest success in other southern states, enfranchising a majority of eligible black voters in Tennessee, Florida, and Texas, only a few blacks were able to register in Alabama and Mississippi. The implied protection from the federal government never materialized—a bitter disappointment to SNCC. But even when the administration attempted to investigate the situation under existing law, Judge W. Harold Cox continued to obstruct Justice Department access to registrars' files.

SNCC workers faced a situation similar to what had confronted Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC after the Albany demonstrations. Not only had the Delta campaign failed, but the national media, after initial interest, generally ignored the voting-rights drive. It was difficult in a rural state to generate a critical mass of people to provoke a headline-grabbing confrontation. Ambushing individual blacks was not a drama; it was commonplace.

Equally important, the strong white reaction had frightened prospective black voters. Mississippi, the "closed society," as exiled university professor James Silver termed it, was shut tight. A rigorous censorship prevailed, blacking out national news broadcasts that depicted the state unfavorably, harassing editors who reported official violence against blacks, banning films that hinted at racial or ethnic brotherhood, deposing ministers who offered contrary interpretations, and corrupting the language to the point where the truth became whatever the newspapers and political leaders declared, regardless of its correspondence to reality. Thus when black leader Medgar Evers was murdered in June, 1963, the Jackson *Daily News* announced that police had arrested a Californian in connection with the crime. It turned out that the suspect was a native Mississippian who had spent a brief portion of his childhood out west. So too, Senator James O. Eastland assured his constituents that "there is no discrimination in Mississippi," and that "all who are qualified to vote, black or white, exercise the right of suffrage." In the senator's native Sunflower County, 161 blacks were registered to vote out of a black population of 31,020 in 1964. When the senator and his colleagues sought to explain the situa-

tion to uninformed outsiders, they adopted the following explanatory syllogism, according to native son Walker Percy: "a. There is no ill-feeling in Mississippi between the races; the Negroes like things the way they are; if you don't believe it, I'll call my cook out of the kitchen and you can ask her; b. The trouble is caused by outside agitators who are communist-inspired; c. Therefore, the real issue is between atheistic communism and patriotic God-fearing Mississippians." All of this reflected, Percy noted sadly, "a condition which can only be described . . . as insane."

With internal dissent thus effectively stifled and with external pressure deflected and increasingly weaker, it was not surprising that Delta blacks drew back from participation. Examples of the risks involved in even the appearance of civil rights activity abounded. Rumors of murders and beatings circulated constantly in the black communities. Police placed suspected activists under surveillance, opened mail, and warned family members to stay away from kin involved with voter registration. Anne Moody, who worked in the Delta town of Canton, recalled that her grandmother refused to let her stay at her house and that her sister begged her to give up her registration work because the police were harassing family members. When Moody recruited teenagers to canvass the area, a group of whites peppered them with buckshot to persuade their parents to keep the children at home. The fear wore down even dedicated workers. "It was always there," activist Cleveland Sellers wrote of the fear, "always stretched like a tight steel wire between the pit of the stomach and the center of the brain." The wire would snap on occasion, and the worker would be furloughed. With good reason, SNCC field worker Fannie Lou Hamer of Sunflower County called her native state "the land of the tree and the home of the grave."

But Bob Moses and other SNCC leaders were reluctant to abandon Mississippi and the blacks with whom they had worked and lived. Voting rights would succeed in the state, they believed, only if Mississippi blacks organized and assumed leadership roles. National or even regional civil rights organizations could not superimpose their structures or leaders on local blacks, nor could local black institutions effect change. As Moses explained, "there were very few agencies available in the Negro community that could act as a vehicle for any sort of campaign. The Negro churches could not in general be counted on; the Negro business leaders could also not in general be counted on. . . . Therefore, . . . the only way to run this campaign was to begin to

build a group of young people who wouldn't be responsible economically to any sector of the white community." And building required education and above all the dissipation of fear that hung over black Mississippi like a clinging shroud.

Despite the collapse of the campaign, SNCC began this building process. At least they raised the political consciousness of Delta blacks. As Hamer noted, "I had never heard until 1962 that black people could register to vote . . . I didn't know we had that right." There were also indications by the fall of 1963, however slight, that some white Mississippians, painfully aware of what Walker Percy called the "rift . . . between a genuine kindliness and a highly developed individual moral consciousness on the one hand, and on the other a purely political and amoral view of 'states' rights' at the expense of human rights," were seeking to close that "rift." Hundreds of women organized during the summer to smooth the way for the integration of a few school districts. Also, 650 white men in McComb issued a joint statement affirming their belief in law and order and opposing the use of coercion on voting-rights workers. It was likely that many more white Mississippians felt that way but were still afraid to speak out. Like the blacks, they were victims of fear as well.

SNCC leaders also took heart from events in Birmingham. The once-impregnable fortress of segregation had fallen that summer. Perhaps a dramatic confrontation would facilitate the enfranchisement of blacks in Mississippi. To that end, Moses contacted the other civil rights organizations for the purpose of reassembling the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which had formed during the Freedom Rides in the spring of 1961. The NAACP, CORE, and the SCLC responded favorably. Together with SNCC, they resolved to implement a strategy for black voter registration in the state. It was clear to COFO leaders that, as in Birmingham, their efforts depended on attracting media coverage that would, in turn, move the federal government to action.

Since blacks were barred from registering or voting in the upcoming state gubernatorial election, COFO leaders decided to hold a parallel "election" to demonstrate the eagerness of Mississippi's black population to participate in the political process. The so-called "Freedom Election" had the additional attraction of avoiding the official electoral machinery, thus reducing the hazards of participation for wary blacks. COFO presented a slate of "Freedom Candidates" headed by state NAACP chairman Aaron Henry. Though white officials caught on to the campaign and tried to intimidate "voters," the election was a

great success as eighty thousand "votes" were cast. The event did indeed generate media attention, though what struck Bob Moses was that some of the coverage focused on the one hundred or so white college students, mostly from Stanford or Yale, who came down to assist in the canvass. During their two-week stay, the students had drawn FBI protection for all of the campaign workers. Perhaps in the future, these students could be as useful for COFO objectives as the black schoolchildren were to Martin Luther King in Birmingham.

By the end of 1963, COFO had become mostly a SNCC operation. The support of the other civil rights groups had not been enthusiastic; there were too many dangers and too few chances for success to commit workers and resources beyond the "Freedom Election." Then, too, efforts focused on lobbying the civil rights bill through Congress, and the battle against segregation in public accommodations was not yet won. Even some SNCC members questioned the high priority given to voting rights. As Clarence Robinson argued, "this house-to-house activity is fine, but people are afraid of what they can't grasp. They never *have* voted, they don't know what it's all about. But they know they can't go to that movie." Bob Moses disagreed, believing that the ability to sit down and eat with whites at lunch counters (the action that, ironically, had produced SNCC) was meaningless unless you could afford to eat in the first place. And without the ballot, white leaders would be under no compulsion to improve service levels and job opportunities for black citizens.

Freedom Summer: How Many Roads?

Bob Moses and his field director, David Dennis, planned a voter-registration drive for the summer of 1964 in Mississippi. On the face of it, this was nothing more than the resurrection of the failed VEP effort. SNCC leaders, however, proposed to invite hundreds of white college students to the state to assist in registering blacks. They knew that few blacks would actually be registered that summer, but they hoped that the presence of white college students would provoke the kind of reaction to make voting rights a national priority and to create a moral drama. Both Moses and Dennis understood that the likely response of some white Mississippians to the "invasion" of their state by northern college students would be violent. As Dennis calculated, "we knew that if we had brought in a thousand blacks, the country would have watched them slaughtered without doing anything about it. Bring a thousand whites and the country is going to react to that." Indeed,

another SNCC worker, Lawrence Guyot, estimated that prior to 1964 sixty-three blacks had been murdered in Mississippi as a result of voter-registration campaigns, and the media had generally ignored the killings.

By mid-June, hundreds of student-volunteers had gathered in Oxford, Ohio, for a briefing prior to their descent into Mississippi. The sessions covered the type of work expected of the volunteers as well as an overview of Mississippi society and politics. The time was too short for reflection on why the state's white population behaved that way, on the generations of poverty and cynical leadership, or on the nature of regional culture. As Stephen Mitchell Bingham, a volunteer from Connecticut, complained, "we had, unfortunately, no fair idea of the white southerner." Perhaps it would have made no difference, considering the students' short stay in the Deep South and the confrontational character of their work, but, as Bingham noted, the absence of this perspective meant that the volunteers went south "hating what the staff hated, believing what others believed *because* others believed it." The moral foundation of the struggle and the ability to separate the sin from the sinner were missing.

The volunteers had time enough to learn fear, however. Discussion leaders such as Bob Moses told of earlier voter-registration drives and the fates of other workers. He recalled for the students a song Fannie Lou Hamer sang: "If you miss me from the freedom fight, / You can't find me nowhere, / Come on over to the graveyard, / I'll be buried over there."

The buses and cars crowded with the forewarned crusaders headed south and dropped off their passengers at small-town depots or weather-beaten stores stuck in the middle of a soybean field. June was "Hospitality Month" in Mississippi, and blacks opened their homes to the young visitors and with polite amusement listened to their optimism. The volunteers quickly fell into a routine, waking up at dawn, washing at the cold water pump (90 percent of black households in Mississippi lacked indoor plumbing), and taking a breakfast of pancakes before heading off in several cars to predetermined areas in order to canvass. At times they noticed patrol cars monitoring their movements. Even when law enforcement officials were not about, the volunteers found it difficult to break through the fear of the rural and small-town blacks. Rural blacks, well schooled in racial etiquette and mindful of the danger involved in even talking with these outsiders, politely agreed with everything the white workers said, but as one

white college student noted in frustration, "we knew we were not getting across . . . we were a danger to them." The workers tried mass meetings at local churches to overcome this problem; the blacks sang freedom songs and signed lists promising to visit the courthouse, but few ever undertook that dangerous journey.

The Freedom Summer was less than a week old when news spread that three COFO workers were missing near Philadelphia, Mississippi, in Neshoba County. Michael Schwerner was a twenty-four-year-old social worker from New York City who had been in the state since January running a COFO community center in Meridian, Mississippi, with his wife, Rita. Andrew Goodman, twenty-one years old, was a student at Queens College in New York. James Chaney, also twenty-one, was a black Mississippian who had been working as a CORE volunteer. The three had come to Neshoba County to inspect the ruins of a black church recently burned by night riders and to reassure blacks in the area that the voter-registration drive would continue. On their way back to Meridian, they passed through Philadelphia, and just outside of that town deputy sheriff Cecil Price arrested them. They were never seen alive again.

Six weeks later, the FBI uncovered three bodies from an earthen dam near Philadelphia. Long before then, the Freedom Summer workers had known the fate of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman despite fervent denials by Neshoba County sheriff Lawrence Rainey. The fear that had immobilized much of the black community now accompanied the white volunteers on every canvass. As Bingham related, "we lived in a perpetual state, not of fear so much as rational apprehension." Whatever it was called, it constrained the workers' movements and caused many workers to go about their rounds armed. It was not until December that the FBI arrested twenty-one men, including the sheriff and deputy sheriff, for carrying out a Klan-inspired plot to murder the three workers. Three years later, an all-white jury returned a guilty verdict against seven of the defendants. Judge W. Harold Cox meted out sentences, the most severe being a ten-year prison term.

COFO leaders now had the incident that would purportedly galvanize the nation for the cause of voting rights. The nation was indeed shocked by the wanton brutality of the Mississippi murders, but as the college students filtered back north in August, the spotlight on voting rights dimmed. The country was immersed in a presidential campaign, and registration drives became a sideshow. Alone now, COFO counted the results of the Freedom Summer: 35 shooting incidents; 30 homes

and other buildings bombed; 80 persons beaten; 6 murders; and 1,200 blacks registered to vote across the state.

Freedom Summer was more a casualty list than a moral drama. In particular, the murders of the three volunteers early in the campaign altered the tone of the effort from an idealistic crusade against injustice to an embittered fight for survival. At James Chaney's funeral, David Dennis cried out in anguish, "I've got vengeance in my heart tonight. Don't just look at me and go back and tell folks you've been to a nice service. . . . If you go back home and sit down and take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us . . . if you take it and don't do something about it . . . then God damn your souls!" Dennis' grief was understandable. By expressing it in such a manner, however, he risked losing the moral imperative. Throughout the Birmingham drama—the water hoses on helpless schoolchildren and the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—King had struck a deliberate pose of nonviolence, focusing on the redemptive nature of suffering. This as much as the events themselves stirred white southerners and the nation. Despite the obvious justice of the voting-rights cause, COFO leaders failed to frame it in a rhetoric appropriate to the regional culture or for a national policy initiative. The solution to voting rights awaited another crusade.

In the fall of 1964, Martin Luther King and his SCLC staff met to develop a strategy to focus national attention on black suffrage in the South. Another Birmingham-type confrontation would be necessary in order to fulfill that objective. As King explained in an article in the *New Republic* early in 1965, the strategy was relatively straightforward. It consisted of four components: "a. Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights; b. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them; c. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation; d. The Administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation."

King's candid admission that the success of his program depended in great part on provoking violence might have shocked some readers more accustomed to softer rhetoric from the prophet of nonviolence, but it was merely a simple statement of the strategy that King and his aides had followed with varied success since the beginning of the decade. The difficult feature of the plan was to find a suitable target. Mississippi was a likely choice: it was to voting rights what Birmingham had been to segregation. But the Freedom Summer had demonstrated that a statewide campaign covering mostly rural districts was not likely to produce the type of focused event implied by King's strategy. Instead, King chose Dallas County, Alabama, and its county seat, Selma.

Selma: "Marchin' On to Freedom Land"

Selma was a lovely southern town nestled gently above the Alabama River, a place of front porches, generous shade trees, white frame houses, and iced tea. Selma was at its loveliest in the spring, in March, when the residential streets of the well-tended white neighborhoods came alive with color and fragrance, where muffled voices mixed with gentle breezes in an expectant air of renewed life. Tree-lined Broad Street concealed the town's business activities, prosperous yet even-paced. At the foot of Broad, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, named for a Confederate brigadier general, arched gracefully above the river, an appropriate denouement to the community's graceful way of life.

Hidden away from the consciousness of lovely Selma lay another town off Broad, down Jeff Davis Avenue. There, Selma's blacks lived in shanties and drab rows of federal housing streaked with diesel soot from the passing engines of the L&N Railroad, whose tracks skirted the district. Soon these two disparate worlds would collide. Though the physical and psychological distances would persist, the two Selmas would henceforth be cognizant of each other.

Since the spring of 1962, black Selma had attempted to make this introduction by mounting a voter-registration drive. In two years, the effort netted a total of 93 new registrants. All told, 2.1 percent of eligible black voters were on the registration lists of Dallas County by that time. King quipped that, at this rate, "it would take about 103 years to register the adult Negroes." Nor were prospects good that the situation would change for the better. Dallas County officials, responding to the pressure from the black community, stiffened registration requirements in February, 1964, reducing the registrars' schedule to two days per month and lengthening the application procedure by presenting prospective voters with a list of sixty-eight difficult questions about the state constitution and government. These requirements were additions to the already extensive stipulations asking applicants to read, write, and interpret any article of the federal constitution and to present testimonials of good character from registered voters (read white voters).

Despite these restrictive regulations, King felt that he had an unwit-

ting ally in the person of Dallas County sheriff Jim Clark. The sheriff, almost a caricature of the Hollywood-inspired image of a Deep South lawman, was a tall, beer-bellied man who sported mirror sunglasses and a lapel button proclaiming "NEVER!" He wore an Eisenhower jacket and a helmet, and carried a swagger stick. Julian Bond said that he looked like General Patton. Clark's racial views were straightforward: when a reporter asked him if a particular woman defendant was married, the sheriff replied, "She's a nigger woman and she hasn't got a Miss or a Mrs. in front of her name." Public and private law enforcement had traditionally blended together in the South, especially in rural areas, and Clark was perhaps most notable in the vicinity for the personal posse that he had raised and led to racial trouble spots around the state. In defense of white supremacy, he had ridden to Montgomery during the bus boycott, to Tuscaloosa where he supported Governor Wallace's last stand for segregation at the university, and had offered to take his men to Birmingham. He had a reputation for a quick temper, and blacks perceived him as a "Bull" Connor of the Black Belt.

Selma's other public officials represented the newer breed of educated, business-oriented leadership that was becoming common throughout the urban South. Newly elected mayor Joe Smitherman, a small man in his late twenties with short black hair and large ears, had succeeded Chris Heinz, a vocal segregationist. The new mayor hired Wilson Baker, an old adversary of Clark, to serve as public safety director. After losing the sheriff's race to Clark in 1958, Baker left Selma to take a faculty position at the University of Alabama, teaching law enforcement. Though Smitherman had assured white residents that "I am a segregationist," his main objective was to build the economic base of the community, and Baker was merely one symbol of the reorientation at city hall. Smitherman was in the midst of negotiating with the Hammermill Paper Company to build a major facility in Selma when the Dallas County Voters' League, a coalition of black groups, invited Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC to come to Selma and launch a voter-registration drive.

King arrived in early January, 1965, and immediately organized the black community for marches to the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma. By the end of the month, Sheriff Clark had arrested nearly two thousand demonstrators and had held his temper. King decided to increase the pressure on February 1 by gathering seven hundred supporters, many of them children, and marching on the courthouse. They were arrested without incident. King continued the pressure of these mass pilgrimages to the courthouse throughout the month, and he succeeded in mobilizing middle-class blacks for their first protest marches, despite the danger of losing their jobs. Though Clark and his men occasionally lost control and began to shove and kick some of the demonstrators, they avoided the type of excessive violence that would create a national audience.

During the last week in February, King's dilemma heightened. A state trooper in nearby Marion, Alabama, had seriously wounded a black teenager, Jimmie Lee Jackson. The youngster and his mother were fleeing police who had forcibly dispersed a voting-rights demonstration. He died eight days later, but the incident failed to generate much national publicity about the ongoing repression in Alabama's Black Belt. Disillusionment and impatience were surging through the black community. King felt that something dramatic had to occur or the Dallas County campaign would collapse and with it the opportunity for black suffrage in the Deep South.

King and his SCLC aides discussed the possibility of a march from Marion to Montgomery to protest Jackson's death and to present voting-rights petitions to Governor Wallace, but King felt that the proposed route was too lengthy, so the starting point was changed to Selma, fifty-four miles from the state capital. The SCLC leadership set March 7, one week after Jackson's funeral, as the date for the march to Montgomery. King returned to SCLC headquarters in Atlanta and left his lieutenant Hosea Williams in charge. King's absence probably resulted from his desire to avoid a confrontation with President Johnson, who requested that King not lead the march, fearing his arrest or worse. King was also aware that the president was in the process of preparing voting-rights legislation.

On Sunday morning, March 7, white Selma was in a festive mood. Confederate flags decked parts of the town, and sales in firecrackers were brisk. Some families prepared picnic lunches to take to Pettus Bridge, which the demonstrators had to cross on the road to Montgomery. A different mood prevailed inside Brown's Chapel AME Church on Sylvan Street in the black section of town. As the March wind rattled against the windows, Hosea Williams addressed the two thousand marchers and supporters squeezed into the church. "I believe in the resurrection," he intoned. "But if you read your Bible carefully, you will notice that resurrection comes *after* crucifixion. If it is necessary to bring out the Southern white man's hatred by letting him beat us, then that is what we must do." Williams impressed upon the marchers

the importance of provoking violence while not participating in it. "We must pray that we are attacked, for if the sheriff does nothing to stop us, if the state troopers help us accomplish our long walk, if the governor meets us on the steps of the Capitol, . . . then we have lost. . . . We must pray, in God's name, for the white man to commit violence, and *we must not fight back!*"

The congregation prayed silently, interrupted by a single, thin soprano voice singing, "Be not dismayed whate'er betide, / God will take care of you," and soon all were lifting their voices: "Beneath His wings of love abide, / God will take care of you." Six hundred marchers walked double-file from the church with the hymn on their lips. They marched down Sylvan Street, some clutching tiny American flags, then turned onto Water Avenue and eventually onto Broad Street toward Pettus Bridge. They began to climb the bridge, still singing, looking straight ahead, trying not to think about Jim Clark and his posse who had watched the procession pass down Broad.

Deployed across the four-lane expanse of Highway 80 on the opposite side of the bridge stood Major John Cloud and fifty Alabama state troopers in their black uniforms and black helmets, backed up by thirty of Sheriff Clark's mounted possemen. The troopers had goggles and tin-can snouts covering their faces. Governor Wallace had dispatched Major Cloud and his men to preserve public safety and enforce his order forbidding the march. When the marchers passed the midpoint high above the Alabama River, Major Cloud stepped forward and announced, "I am Major Cloud. This is an unlawful march. It will not be allowed to continue. You have three minutes to disperse." Hosea Williams attempted to have a word with the major, who only repeated his order. Some of the demonstrators knelt to pray, others stood in frozen, fearful silence. Scarcely a minute had passed when the major raised his black-gloved hand and ordered, "Troopers, advance!" On the signal, his men charged toward the demonstrators, accompanied by shrieking rebel yells. Hosea Williams ordered a retreat back across the bridge as the troopers, flailing away with bullwhips and nightsticks, descended on them. Tear gas filled the air, blinding and choking the retreating marchers.

Up to this time, Sheriff Clark and his men on Broad Street were spectators. John Nixon, an observer from the Justice Department, had extracted a pledge from Clark not to pursue the marchers once they had left the bridge. But when the fleeing marchers entered the business district, Clark and the posse converged on them, twirling lassos of

rubber tubing wrapped with barbed wire. They pursued the bloodied demonstrators into the black section of town, stopping only when the marchers made it to the sanctuary of Brown's Chapel.

The ABC television network interrupted its popular "Sunday Night at the Movies" (the film was *Judgment at Nuremburg*) to bring viewers the scenes from Selma. They provoked a reaction not heard since the violence in Birmingham. King in Atlanta sought to capitalize on the national attention by ordering another demonstration on March 9. The SCLC sent out a national call for "people of good will" to join the march. As Andrew Young explained, "we didn't think they'd send out the National Guard to protect black people." Among the new recruits were 450 white clergymen. The atmosphere in the Brown's Chapel headquarters soon changed from despair to inspiration. The Johnson administration, fearing an even worse spectacle, sent former Florida governor Leroy Collins to work out a deal with King. The compromise called for King to lead a group across the bridge. Then, according to the scenario, Major Cloud would order the procession to halt. The marchers would stop and pray briefly, then retreat in an orderly fashion, unmolested by Cloud or Clark.

The script worked until King and his two thousand followers knelt on the bridge to pray. At that point, Major Cloud ordered his troopers to stand aside, and suddenly the road to Montgomery lay open. It was clearly a maneuver to embarrass King, who could do nothing but ask his bewildered followers to turn around and return to Selma. During the next several days, SNCC leaders and young Selma blacks expressed their anger and disappointment at the "Tuesday turnaround." Indeed, the compromise, even prior to Major Cloud's script change, seemed one-sided. The reason for King's strict adherence to the agreement, however, became evident on March 15 when President Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress on the subject of voting rights. Actually, the president had placed the ballot high on his legislative agenda soon after his November election victory. He received more than 90 percent of the black vote nationwide, and black voters were crucial in holding the Upper South for the Democrats. He had directed Attorney General Katzenbach to draft "the next civil rights bill—legislation to secure, once and for all, equal voting rights."

In his March 15 address to the joint session of Congress—the first such personal appearance by a president on a domestic issue since 1946—Johnson adopted the rhetoric of the movement: "Their cause must be 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." Those last words, Joe Smitherman recalled, were "like a dagger in your heart." King, who watched the speech on television, wept. Two days later, the president dispatched a voting-rights bill to Congress. In addition, he persuaded a sympathetic federal district-court judge, Frank M. Johnson, to expedite his ruling to lift the state's injunction against the march to Montgomery. The president also notified Governor Wallace that he intended to protect the demonstrators with 1,800 federalized Alabama National Guardsmen and would not tolerate interference with the procession.

President Johnson's concern about the potential for violence was well founded. Even prior to his voting-rights address, a gang of white youths had attacked three Unitarian ministers on a Selma street. One of them, the Reverend James J. Reeb of Boston, died from his injuries. The tense week culminated on Sunday, March 21, the scheduled date for the march. A sullenness had settled on Selma, at least among the white community. The holiday atmosphere of two weeks before was gone. Inside Brown's Chapel, the mood was still tense, though the omnipresent fear had receded, and Martin Luther King seized the moment to galvanize the marchers, whose ranks had now swelled to three thousand. "You will be the people that will light a new chapter in the history books of our nation," he promised. "Walk together, children, don't you get weary, and it will lead us to the Promised Land. And Alabama will be a new Alabama and America will be a new America." Flanked by Guardsmen, the marchers followed the familiar path from Sylvan Street, over to Water, onto Broad, and finally across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the road to Montgomery, singing as they went, "We're marchin' on to Freedom Land."

Four days later, the caravan, joined along the way by an interracial contingent of twenty-five thousand additional demonstrators, marched into Montgomery. If not exactly the "Promised Land," at least it was the satisfying culmination of a particularly difficult campaign. The fact that Governor Wallace refused to meet with the march leaders scarcely surprised or even interested the marchers. They had played for a national audience and had succeeded in drawing its attention. King mounted the Capitol steps, just as Jefferson Davis had little more than a century earlier, and proclaimed the coming of another sort of victory. "I know some of you are asking today, 'How long will it take?' I come to say to you this afternoon," he declared from the very spot where Davis had taken his oath of office as president of the Confederacy, "however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long because truth pressed to earth will rise again." His rhythmic cadence reached a crescendo as he asked again, "how long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." King concluded with a ringing declaration that connected the cause of justice both to that conflict a century earlier and to the religious foundation of his crusade. "How long? Not long. Because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. . . . His truth is marching on! Glory hallelujah! Glory hallelujah! Glory hallelujah!"

Viola Liuzzo, a white housewife from Detroit, was driving down Highway 80 between Montgomery and Selma that night. She had just ferried a carload of marchers back to Selma and was returning to the capital to pick up another group. A car containing four Ku Klux Klansmen pulled alongside her vehicle, shot her in the head, and killed her. An all-white jury in nearby Hayneville eventually acquitted the Klansmen despite the eyewitness testimony of an FBI informant. It seemed as if tragedy had to accompany triumph, as if unmitigated joy was inappropriate until the last vestige of white supremacy crumbled.

On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. The act applied specifically to Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Virginia, and twenty-six counties in North Carolina which, according to congressional formula, had evidenced significant voter discrimination. Aside from suspending literacy tests and other registration subterfuges, the act provided for federal registrars and poll watchers in those districts where blacks had complained about registration abuses. Within two months of the arrival of a federal registrar in Selma, black voter registration had increased from 10 to 60 percent. And the following spring black voters helped to elect Wilson Baker over Jim Clark for sheriff of Dallas County.

After Selma: Not an End, But a Beginning

Although King could not have known it at the time, his address at the Alabama state capitol and the subsequent passage of the Voting Rights Act marked the culmination of a phase in the continuing struggle for racial equality in the South. Some observers have referred to the period ending with the voting-rights legislation as the "Second Reconstruction." The implied connection with the first Reconstruction immediately after the Civil War is misleading, as historian Howard Rabinowitz has argued. The major thrust of the earlier movement was for

equal access. The freedmen accepted, even welcomed, segregation as an improvement over their exclusion from southern institutions. The epiphany from Montgomery to Montgomery a century later represented broader aims of full integration and participation in southern life. This included not only institutional involvement but the sharing of jobs and housing as well. As Rabinowitz noted, "there is a world of difference between the call for equal opportunity that dominated the First Reconstruction and the demand for equality of condition which threatened to control the Second."

Scholars have also tended to agree that the 1965 Voting Rights Act marked the end of the civil rights movement. They have argued that the disintegration of the interracial coalition, the internal dissension among the various civil rights groups, the difficulty of focusing strategies and objectives, the distraction of the war in Vietnam, the white backlash against black rights in the aftermath of northern urban riots, and the pursuit of a "southern strategy" by a Republican administration all served to deaden the moral intensity and policy momentum generated by the movement in the early 1960s. While these events slowed the advance of blacks in the South, they did not end the civil rights movement in the region.

For one thing, writers have overemphasized the national dimensions of the movement. While the legislation and court rulings as well as the major events such as Birmingham and Selma deserve a center-stage role in any account of the period, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the civil rights movement was comprised of many smaller movements. The tributaries of local activity flowed together to form the mainstream of the movement. Most of this activity occurred away from the national spotlight and away from the strategies of national or even of regional organizations. Black communities throughout the South reached deeply into their institutional heritage, or with the help of the outside groups formed new alliances to fashion an attack on the racial status quo. Churches, black schools, political clubs, and local branches of national civil rights or labor organizations formed the foundation of the movement at the local level. These institutions and the people who emerged to leadership and participation from them persisted after 1965, ready to pursue new goals for local blacks. These were the individuals and organizations that would put into practice the legal and legislative gains of the early 1960s. In this view, the 1965 Voting Rights Act represented not so much an end as the beginning of a maturation process for southern blacks. Leadership and participation had left them well armed with self-respect, identity, and visibility to continue the pressure against the vestiges of white supremacy.

Thus fortified, southern blacks, even in smaller communities, were able to strike down the demeaning racial etiquette that had governed contact between the races since the days of the Old South. The averted eyes, the shuffling response, the deferential tone, the careful choice of conversation topics, and the acknowledgment of "boy," "auntie," or "uncle" as proper names receded from public behavior and consequently as a reminder and definer of inferior status. This was especially so for younger blacks schooled in the movement. The readjustment in public behavior was as crucial, if much less publicized, as the ability to eat at lunch counters or even to cast a vote. Southern culture placed considerable emphasis on etiquette, not only because it made human interaction more pleasant, but also because it served to place people. At the least, the new etiquette placed blacks as persons.

Civil Rights and White Southerners: The Fruits of Liberation

This is not to say that the civil rights movement continued on only as a legacy among its black participants, for one of the most important characteristics of the movement was that it engaged southern whites as well, sometimes unwittingly and often unwillingly. The movement offered whites an education about the blacks in their midst. The events of the fifties and sixties supplied whites with numerous examples of how their preconceptions concerning blacks were erroneous, as events transported southern whites beyond their maids and shoeshine boys to ministers, professionals, and students—a class of blacks previously beyond their comprehension because it jarred the image of inferiority. The movement, in short, enabled whites to close a personal gap between reality and myth. The oft-heard rationale about contented blacks living in good environments could no longer be maintained when those same blacks were marching in the streets. As eyewitnesses, television watchers, or newspaper readers, whites found it difficult to escape the import of the events on the front lines. Whereas prior to the 1960s it was relatively easy for a white southerner to conjure up the image of inferiority in his daily encounters with blacks, other contradictory and often painful images surfaced when whites met blacks after 1965.

On occasion, the education became a revelatory experience for white southerners. South Carolina senator Ernest F. Hollings recalled that moment in his life when the verities of his culture suddenly disappeared to reveal a different truth. It came to him when he read Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Hollings admitted that "as governor, for four years I enforced those Jim Crow laws. I did not understand, I did not appreciate what King had in mind . . . until he wrote that letter. He opened my eyes and he set me free." True enough, such awareness and repentance may not have been general among white southerners, but numbers were not that important. What was important, especially for the continuation of racial reconciliation, was that at least a few whites attained enlightenment. Referring to God's pledge in Genesis not to destroy Sodom if only ten righteous people could be found there, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed that God "is able to see the whole people in a few, just as he saw and reconciled in One the whole of humanity."

Whatever the number of the redeemed, in the long run the experience of the movement would permeate southern culture. Perhaps the most signal aspect of the battle against white supremacy was its restorative impact on that culture. In terms of the important religious element of southern culture, the extirpation of white supremacy facilitated a reconciliation with God since, as Will Campbell noted, the classification and judging of groups denied "the sovereignty of God." In addition, by removing the public obsession with race, southern blacks enabled whites to regain contact with other cultural elements such as past, place, and manners. As theologian James Sellers noted, that obsession had diverted southerners from the enjoyment and learning derived from their land and history. The "domain of superior status" was a great temptation to the white southerner, but now he had the opportunity, courtesy of his black neighbors, to pursue his true destiny. The South could leaven "the nation with its sense of the land, personal relations, [and] the past." The movement had taught that white supremacy was not synonymous with southern culture; in fact, it was inhibiting the exercise of that culture.

This inhibition was especially evident with respect to the white southerner's sense of past, his perspective on history. The belief in the inferiority of the black man was at the center of that perspective, but the events of the sixties demonstrated, as James McBride Dabbs argued, that blacks and whites had been "fused by the fires of history." They had shared the same land, defeat, poverty, ignorance, and exploitation. And now blacks were imparting the lessons of that past to whites in order to remove the burdens from both races. With blacks as partners instead of objects, whites could allow their historical perspective to gain a maturity and an understanding that would liberate the future. The movement, by debunking one important myth of that perspective—black inferiority—called into question the meaning of other historical myths such as the Lost Cause, the Old South, and southern society after the Civil War. The movement did not necessarily degrade these myths so much as allow for varying interpretations. It was no coincidence, for example, that white southern historians launched major revisions on these themes in the fifties and sixties.

The liberation of southern history reflected the waning of the fortress mentality that had guarded regional culture prior to the 1960s. The victories in school desegregation, public accommodations, and voting rights dissipated the southern obsession with race. Race was the topic that colored all other aspects of regional life. It intruded heavily into politics; it limited economic development; it restricted the free flow of ideas and hence the education process for both races; and it prevented the cooperation of the races to build a better South for both. "By accepting the legal direction to obey the Constitution and do what was morally right," Ralph McGill observed in 1968, "the Southern white man was freed to advance his economy, to remove his political system from bondage, and to begin improving the quality of his education so that it would give Southern children equal opportunity . . . with children in the rest of the nation." It was no coincidence that the Sunbelt and racial reconciliation emerged in tandem in the mid-1960s.

Above all, the movement enabled the white southerner to be himself. By removing the false pride of racial superiority and the etiquette that accompanied it, black southerners allowed whites to exercise the gentility and love that derived from their rural-based culture. Black writer C. V. Roman reported in 1916 that he had visited a southern city and witnessed "a modest-appearing, well-dressed, but frail colored woman with a child in her arms attempt to board a street-car. She was about to fall. The conductor started to help her, then looked at the other passengers and desisted." Nearly a half century later, Pat Watters related the story of a white teacher in a Black Belt town who had one black boy in her second-grade class. On the last day of school, it was the custom for the students to come by her desk for a good-bye hug. "And do you know," the teacher explained to Watters, "that little colored

boy came too, holding his arms out to me, just like the rest. And I just had to push him away. All the other children were there watching. I just had to." The movement, by removing the stamp of inferiority and routing the orthodoxies of race relations, proffered a choice to whites. They could now act on their good instincts. As Martin Luther King had noted many times, it was the sin, not the sinner, that was the problem with the South.

But whether or not the southern white would accept the choice and assume the new perspective on his culture was another matter. Southern blacks had altered regional race relations less through moral suasion and the promise of redemption than through the compulsion of law. Instead of interpreting events of the sixties as liberating experiences, whites could very well perceive a massive defeat. As historian Joel Williamson argued, "the Southern white psyche in 1965 had reached a new low." The reason for this depression, Williamson concluded, was that "the Southern psyche was long driven to seek respect from the North and love from the Negro. Southerners might survive a lack of respect from the North, but they could not survive continuing manifestations of hate from black people." In short, the victory could produce a massive backlash, a persistent guerrilla war to maintain traditional race relations that would destroy blacks' accomplishments for themselves and their region.

But that was unlikely. In the rural areas of the Deep South, especially in Black Belt areas with relatively significant black populations, the new order doubtless generated hostility, fear, and even depression. But this was a passing South, physically and economically; the future of the region lay elsewhere. In the Piedmont cities and the prosperous farm areas of the Tennessee Valley, quite a different mentality prevailed. It was, as Walker Percy termed it in 1966, "an almost invincible happiness." That "happiness" stemmed from whites' having the region's most tragic problem behind them and believing (however erroneously and self-servingly) that they played a role in its relatively peaceful solution—compared with the conflagrations erupting in northern urban ghettos. Southerners were also happy because they were prosperous and because the North loved them still, despite the self-righteousness hurled in their direction over the previous decade. Indeed, things southern attained a high currency in the North—music, food, life-style, tourist attractions—in direct proportion to the deterioration of the quality of life above the Mason-Dixon Line. And this reversal of feeling occurred relatively quickly: the Watts riot in Los Angeles followed the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act by only five days. The urban crisis was upon us, and the racial dilemma had migrated out of the South.

But there was another reason for the regional good mood of the mid-1960s. The major change in race relations had occurred without destroying southern culture. The demonstrations were not "manifestations of hate," though for some blacks they were; rather, they were witnesses for redemption. Southern blacks sought not to overturn the South or to conquer whites. They sought reconciliation, not annihilation; participation, not domination. "To change," historian George B. Tindall wrote, "is not necessarily to lose one's identity; to change, sometimes, is to find it." And that was the blacks' greatest gift to their region.

Happiness, however, can readily induce forgetfulness or indifference. Black southerners could not count on a general conversion among whites just yet. In the succeeding years, blacks would draw upon their experience and organization to secure their hard-fought victories and forge new ones. To be sure, the last crusade was over. But the fruit of that triumph—the ballot—would play a major role in future challenges. And, as always, the moral imperative, the ground in southern culture, would be the straightest path to the fulfillment of Martin Luther King's dream.