

Martin Luther King and the Struggle for Black Voting Rights

In January 1965, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement in the United States, helped launch a campaign of civil disobedience in Selma, Alabama, to bring national attention to disenfranchisement of black voters in the South. On Sunday, March 7, as part of this campaign, 400 mostly black protesters, not including King, tried to march across the Pettus Bridge, just outside Selma, only to be stopped by state troopers and local lawmen, who attacked them with tear gas and clubs. That night, all three national television networks broadcast film of the assault. The broadcasts sparked outrage against the attackers and sympathy protests across the country. King announced that he would lead a renewed march over the bridge on Tuesday, March 9.

By early Tuesday morning, however, King had learned that President Lyndon Johnson, whose help he needed to win federal voting rights legislation, did not want him to march, and that a federal judge had issued a restraining order against the march until a hearing could be held. King thought his supporters' passions were so strong that he might not be able to cancel the march even if he wanted to, yet the modern civil rights movement had never before defied a federal court order. President Johnson's representatives told King that he might avoid violating the judge's order if he marched to the bridge and then turned around before crossing it. King did not say what he would do, however, and few of his supporters knew about the turnaround possibility.

Several hours later, with television cameras recording the unfolding events, King led 2000 marchers to the bridge, where state troopers and lawmen waited. Should he try to turn the march around, which his followers might not accept, or try to cross the bridge, contrary to the president's wishes and a federal restraining order?

Materials

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Assignment

1. Given the 14th and 15th amendments, which guaranteed "equal protection of the laws" and voting rights irrespective of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (and which were ratified in 1868 and 1870, respectively), how did racial segregation and large scale disenfranchisement of black citizens become entrenched in the South over such a long period of time?
2. Why did the NAACP (founded in 1909) adopt a *legal* strategy to fight segregation and disenfranchisement in the early decades of the twentieth century? If you had been around at the time, would you have been optimistic or pessimistic about this strategy?

3. How do you explain the timing of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision, which declared that "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal"? Could this decision have come twenty years earlier? Fifty years earlier? Why or why not?

4. By early 1965, what was the SCLC's strategy for securing comprehensive voting rights legislation? How had King and other leaders of the SCLC come to this strategy? If you had been advising civil rights leaders at the time, would you have endorsed this strategy or recommended a different one?

5. Imagine you had been marching beside King on March 9 and that he privately told you about the turnaround option and then asked for your advice about what to do. What would you have recommended and why?