

Document analysis: the Selma to Montgomery marches

Things will never be the same in Selma

from GAVIN YOUNG: Selma, Alabama, March 13

THE TOWN OF SELMA today is the eye of a nation-wide civil rights storm that may reach hurricane force by the end of next week when Dr Martin Luther King hopes to lead a massive march of demonstrators down the 50-mile highway from Selma to Montgomery, the State capital.

Attention here is focused on the Federal court in Montgomery where Dr King and his supporters are seeking an injunction to prevent State authorities blocking the march as they did last Sunday.

If Dr King succeeds in court—and it seems likely—Alabama may well be the scene of one of the most dramatic events since Dr King's crusade began in 1955.

A court decision is expected early in the week. Today, scores of demonstrators and Selma Negroes are maintaining their standing confrontation of city and State authorities in front of Brown's Chapel, their headquarters in a Negro quarter of the city.

All-night canteen

Elderly clergymen, stern as bishops, nuns, perky young ministers from northern cities, plump Negro housewives dressed to kill, teenagers in jeans link arms and rock to Gospel rhythms. Tonight, for the fourth night running, they will take shifts to sing freedom songs or sleep in the streets.

Local Negroes have set up an all-night canteen, serving coffee and sandwiches in the chapel. The demonstrators have been penned in the chapel area since Wednesday morning. Police and bull-necked State Troopers, in ornate blue uniforms with brass buttons, stand

blocking its approaches swinging billy clubs, or loll in patrol cars.

They, too, have brought up a canteen. "My men are getting a bit weary," said Selma's police chief, Wilson Baker, today. "It's tough on them having to stay out here all the time. They have wives and hobbies at home. I'm having to pay them overtime."

Weary or not, the State Troopers still look as though they'd like to take a crack with their clubs at anyone who passes. Selma's mayor got a painful prod from one of them this week—whether deliberately or not no one knows.

But since troopers cut down and tear-gassed the marchers last Sunday Selma's authorities and Dr King and his assistants have jointly succeeded in keeping demonstrators and troopers at a safe distance. Members of the most radical of the civil rights movements, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, seem to have been urging younger Negroes to violence, but they have been ignored.

Although there has been some criticism by marchers that Dr King mishandled Tuesday's abortive march his leadership prevails.

On the other hand, Mr Baker has actively prevented strong-arm police tactics. Since Sunday, the city has seen little of Sheriff Jim Clark, the outstanding symbol of police violence in the South today.

Whites shaken

But violence is only around the corner in Selma as this week's murder of the Rev. James Reeb showed. His death has shaken many Selma whites already shocked by national criticism. But nothing that has happened has shaken their convictions. And hatred of outsiders—demonstrators, journalists, anyone—is plain. In Selma, one of the last places to end slavery, caste dies hard.

In Woolworth's I climbed the stairs under the menacing gaze of a group of white youths to talk to the assistant manageress, Mrs Carl Andrews, a willowy 40-year-old. "No nigras wanted to vote until Dr King came along. I think King is here to promote Communism," she said.

"He is trying to keep our eyes on Selma when we should be looking at Vietnam. If the Communists come pouring in there then King will bear the responsibility. I feel very deeply about that. Why our Government can't see that I don't know."

The prevailing white feeling is that Negroes have all they should want; that only the people of Selma can understand local Negroes.

Negroes make it plain what they want: one man one vote, no registration delays and an end to the literacy

test which a King lieutenant, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, here, believes is almost so difficult "that Chief Justice Earl Warren might stand a chance of failure."

Negroes here represent about 60 per cent of the population. The bitterness stirred up here in past weeks seems bound to last whatever happens. Local Negro youth is by now virtually wholly involved in the campaign despite lost jobs and school hours.

It is one of the campaign leaders' hardest tasks to restrain their enthusiasm. But what will happen to local Negroes when the civil rights leaders—and the Press—withdraw from Selma?

'Let them drown'

"After all this excitement is over we are going to burn them out," one angry white citizen said this week. A white sheriff's official said: "In the past white posses have helped Negroes when the river flooded their houses. Next time they can drown."

The foundations of an immutable racial hostility appear to have been laid in Selma. Alabama authorities, from Governor Wallace down, seem totally opposed to compromise.

If King's campaign continues and next week's march takes place, violence seems unavoidable. "Things have gone on for so long that I just don't know what the solution is here no more," said police chief Wilson Baker today. "We sat talking in his police car. The car headlights flooded the swaying column of civil rights marchers outside Brown's Chapel. They were chanting: "No more troopers over us"—one of their favourite freedom songs.



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Introduction:

The analysed document is an article that was published by a British newspaper, "The Guardian", on March 13, 1965. It follows some of the events that took place during the marches from Selma to Montgomery, which are considered today as a milestone of the Civil Rights Movement, while also providing us with some insight into how white people perceived these protest marches.

Historical context:

Even though the 15th Amendment, which was ratified in 1870, granted African American men the right to vote, which was extended to women in 1920, almost a century later African Americans were still often denied the right to register to vote by white supremacist officials, especially in southern States, such as Alabama. Therefore, in 1965, Selma, a city in Alabama with a black majority, became the starting point of three marches for the black voter registration campaign lead by Dr. Martin Luther King.

The first of the non-violent protest marches from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital, took place on Sunday, 7 March 1965. As a crowd of about 600 marchers was crossing the bridge that lead out of Selma, they were stopped by state troopers and, after the warning to disband was ignored, they were attacked with tear gas and clubs and dispersed by force. Nearly 100 people were brought to hospitals with serious injuries. The event soon became known as "Bloody Sunday". The second march was held on March 9, but the marchers turned around as they were once again blocked by the troopers and, therefore, a third march was organised. In the meantime, president Johnson announced that a new voting bill was to be approved and a federal judge ruled that the marchers had a right to protest and that the state troopers could not stop them.

On March 21, 1965, thousands of people set off for their 50-mile march to Montgomery. By the time they arrived in the capital, on March 25, the number of protesters had reached 30 000. The Voting Rights Act was ratified in August 1965 and is still considered today as a great achievement of the Civil Rights Movement.

Document analysis:

The first part of the article focuses on the situation in Selma, where people were preparing themselves for a third march and waiting for a verdict from the federal judge on whether they were allowed to protest. In fact, the article was written on March 13, after the first two marches but before the third, and final, one, at a time where it was still unclear whether all these efforts had been in vain. Nevertheless, the title of the article, "things will never be the same in Selma", underlines the fact that the situation was bound to change after there had been such a great disruption of normal life, and that the awareness that these marches would have an incredible impact on history ("Alabama may well be the scene of one of the most dramatic events since [...] 1955").

Then, the article shifts towards a description of the life of the people in Selma, while juxtaposing that of the protesters, who had opened a canteen and sang freedom songs, and that of the troopers, who blocked the approaches of the canteen. Even though the police chief defended the troopers saying that they too were tired of the continuous fighting, they are still criticised in the

article for their violent behaviour (“the State Troopers still look as though they’d like to take a crack with their clubs at anyone who passes”).

The third part starts by once again talking about violence, in particular the murder of James Reeb, a white pastor who went to Selma to join the protests after the events of “Bloody Sunday”. The article states that, even after these bloody clashes, the hatred of local white supremacists has remained unchanged. The writer of the article then reports an interview with the assistant manager of the local Woolworth store, who was convinced that black people already had everything they could wish for and that the Government should have looked at the Vietnam war instead of paying attention to the unjustified demands of the “nigras”. This belief was very common at that time since most people were still convinced of the superiority of the “white race” and of the fact that African Americans shouldn’t have the same rights as white people. On the other hand, African Americans rightly fought for equality and, therefore, for the right to vote without having to give a literacy test that greatly disadvantaged them.

Nevertheless, the majority of the white population still saw their black fellow citizens as inferior beings who should regard the rights they had as privileges and not aim for racial equality. Thus, as we can once again see in the analysed article, the reaction of the whites at the protests were extremely violent and this hatred was expressed not only through actions, e.g. the murder of James Reeb, but also through threats, e.g. “we are going to burn them out” and “next time they can drown”. As the days went by, the tensions grew and grew as both sides of the conflict were opposed to compromise and, therefore, as the article states, violence seemed “unavoidable”.

The article was published by the British newspaper “The Guardian”, which released articles about the situation in Selma almost every day for nearly a month and, thus, showed that the marches from Selma to Montgomery had become a matter of international importance. “The Guardian” also send journalists there to report on the events. One of them was Gavin Young, the reporter who wrote the article shown above, but another reporter to remember was Hella Pick, who wrote down her own experience of the marches and freely declared her support of the marchers. Even Gavin Young’s article is, at some points, openly critical towards the violence of the state troopers and of the common white people. Therefore, in my opinion, this article is very interesting, because not only it reports some of the events that took place at that time, but mainly it focuses on the perception of these events by the people and it especially outlines the reactions of white people from an objective perspective, while also justly criticizing them.

As I said before, the marches from Selma to Montgomery were a fundamental turning point in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, but they were also just one step towards the achievement of racial equality, in a fight that still takes place today. This is the reason why it is so important to remember these events and realize what a long way people have gone from there and how many changes for the better have been made, but also what a long path that still lays ahead of us.

Sitography

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