Selma and Voting Rights

Johnson's vision of a Great Society included an unprecedented degree of racial harmony, with blacks granted equal opportunities to advance their well-being. He hoped that the 1964 civil rights act would begin the process of integrating African Americans into the mainstream of southern life. At the very least, he hoped that all sides in the region's racial strife would give the act a chance to work and relieve the federal government of the need to take new steps to right historic wrongs. This meant not only southern acceptance of desegregation in public facilities but also full participation by blacks in southern politics. In Johnson's view, allowing blacks to vote and hold local, state, and federal offices would give them the same political influence other groups had used to serve their interests.

In a conversation with New York Times editor Turner Catledge in December 1964, Johnson stated his wish for an Attorney General replacing Robert Kennedy who "will not be vindictive or punitive against the South. He wants to avoid rubbing the South's nose in its own troubles," Catledge recorded. "He thinks the 'good people' of the South have suffered quite a bit." He didn't want to force acceptance
of the civil rights act through "trial and punishment." When Catledge asked "whether it might not be better if the leadership of the civil rights movement would concentrate entirely on voter registration and leave the other things less active for a while," Johnson "bolted out of his chair waving his hands: 'That's exactly what I tell 'em! You know I'm thinking of a scheme to register 'em for federal elections at the post offices.'"

Yet Johnson knew that southern accommodation to desegregation under the 1964 law might not be enough to give blacks, who had been systematically excluded from the polls, the franchise. In Mississippi and Alabama, for example, only 6 and 19 percent, respectively, of voting-age blacks were on the rolls, and office-holders, whose power rested on the existing political customs, would not voluntarily alter a system that served their interests.

To make southern leaders understand that the alternative to regional reform was federal intervention, Johnson demanded an end to unconstitutional limits on black voting in his January State of the Union message. He asked for the elimination of "every remaining obstacle to the right and the opportunity to vote" and declared that "opportunity for all" must include the end to "barriers to the right to vote" by "Negro Americans." At the same time, he privately asked Nicholas Katzenbach, the acting Attorney General, to draft legislation that would enforce constitutional guarantees to vote.

Johnson was ambivalent about putting a voting rights bill before Congress early in 1965. Not because he doubted the value of giving blacks the ballot. He considered such a law "in many ways ... even more critical than" the civil rights act. "Once the black man's voice could be translated into ballots," he said later, "many other breakthroughs would follow." Rather, he saw prospects for congressional passage as "unpromising," and he was reluctant to force another confrontation with the South.

He was also concerned that another major civil rights drive might injure the movement. During 1964 he had read transcripts of FBI recordings of Martin Luther King's "personal activities," or womanizing, which the bureau hoped to use to discredit King. Bill Moyers remembers Johnson as "appalled at the possibility of the movement being collapsed because of this. I shared ... his concern," Moyers says. "There was nothing beyond what Stennis and Eastland and that crowd" might do to undercut King and the whole civil rights effort.

Despite the FBI, in the first three months of 1965, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference masterminded a campaign in Selma, Alabama, that persuaded Johnson to sponsor a voting rights act. King and the SCLC leadership saw no prospect of black
enfranchisement flowing from recent laws and actions. Efforts by a variety of civil rights organizations to register black voters under the “Freedom Summer” project in 1964 had brought little more than violence and intimidation. King saw black enfranchisement in the South coming only when the federal government made it happen. And this would require another Birmingham or some fresh demonstration of repressive police action against black demonstrators peacefully asking for the vote.

Selma, the “most oppressive” city in the South, where less than 1 percent of potential black voters was registered, became the focus of King’s campaign. It also had a law enforcement officer who was a caricature of himself. Pinning a “Never!” button to his lapel, surrounding himself with deputies carrying electric cattle prods, Jim Clark, a heavyset, jowly man who called blacks “the lowest form of humanity,” lived up to his advanced billings as a violent southern sheriff. After an attack on demonstrators that aroused national sympathy for their campaign and stiffened their resolve to fight on, civil rights organizations voted Clark “an honorary member of SNCC, SCLC, CORE [and] the N-Double A-C-P.”

In a speech on January 2 at Selma’s African Methodist Episcopal church, King declared that, if state and county authorities did not meet black demands for the vote, “we will seek to arouse the federal government by marching by the thousands to the places of registration.” And if this didn’t work, there would be another march on Washington “to appeal to the conscience of the Congress.” King received an answer of sorts to his demand when he tried to register at a local segregated hotel. Egged on by a white woman yelling, “Get him, get him, get him,” a twenty-six-year-old member of the National States Rights party hit King in the head and kicked him in the groin.80

Beginning on January 18, a series of demonstrations by black residents asking to register captured national attention. Jim Clark played into King’s hands by arresting numerous protestors, including hundreds of school children, and committing acts of violence that made the front pages of newspapers across the country. On February 3, King sent Johnson a message asking him to send a personal emissary to Selma to evaluate the situation, make a statement supporting the voting drive campaign in Selma, and take appropriate legislative and executive action to secure the right to vote in all elections, including those controlled by individual states.81

Johnson responded cautiously. At a press conference on February 4, he urged all Americans to “be indignant when one American is denied the right to vote. The loss of that right to a single citizen
undermines the freedom of every citizen. This is why all of us should be concerned with the efforts of our fellow Americans to register to vote in Alabama.” He explained that the government was “using the tools of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in an effort to secure [Negroes] their right to vote.” He also cited federal efforts to use the courts to eliminate voting discrimination. When a reporter asked whether he intended to send federal marshalls or military personnel to Selma or do anything else, Johnson restated his intention to use the civil rights act and the courts to assure the right to vote.84

Because Johnson evaded the issue, King now publicly declared his intention to press for a voting rights law. The following day, February 6, Johnson announced through his press secretary that he would ask Congress for such a bill. Though its content was yet to be determined, the White House indicated that it would go to Congress “this year.” Before the administration acted, however, civil rights advocates in the House introduced two bills on February 8. “I had hoped that we could wait until we had an opportunity to see the Civil Rights Act in operation before we took up new legislation,” one of them said, “but the events of recent weeks have made this impossible.”85

Despite these developments, Johnson was still not ready to act. He did agree to a fifteen-minute meeting with King at the White House on February 9, after King had seen Katzenbach and Vice President Humphrey. As a condition of the meeting, Johnson insisted that King issue a statement emphasizing the President’s commitment to voting rights and intention to propose legislation. King, in fact, told reporters that the President planned to do this “very soon,” though he did not repeat Humphrey’s expression of doubt that Congress was ready to pass a law. King, a biographer notes, “returned to the South knowing that further interest in voting rights problems and the Selma campaign needed to be stirred.”86

Violent confrontations over the next several weeks, including the death of a twenty-six-year-old demonstrator shot in the stomach by a state trooper, and King’s announcement on March 3 that he would lead a walk from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery beginning on March 7, sustained discussion in the administration and Congress of enacting a rights bill. At another meeting on March 5, LBJ and King renewed their discussion of legislation, but, according to King, Johnson did not tell him “exactly what would be in the voting proposal and had offered no promises.” Johnson also apparently warned King against mistakes by civil rights groups that could drain off national interest in voting legislation.85

All the mistakes now came from Alabama officials. On March 6, Governor George Wallace banned the March 7 walk as likely to
endanger the public safety. But 600 demonstrators, without King, who
remained in Atlanta after being warned of a plot against his life, set
out on the march anyway. After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge
over the Alabama River, they confronted some fifty state troopers and
dozens of Clark's deputies barring their path on U.S. Highway 80.
After warning the marchers to disperse and giving them two minutes
to leave, the troopers rushed forward, beating them with clubs and
driving them back across the bridge into town. Besieged by tear gas,
clubs, whips, and mounted horsemen, seventeen marchers needed hos-
pitalizing and forty required treatment for minor injuries and tear
gassing.86

The national reaction to what the press called "Bloody Sunday"
was everything advocates of a voting rights law could have wished.
Television provided graphic descriptions of the police actions, and
newspapers all over the country featured the story on their front
pages. Johnson himself issued a statement "deploring the brutality
with which a number of Negro citizens of Alabama were treated
when they sought to dramatize their deep and sincere interest in
attaining the precious right to vote." He also announced his intention
to send a voting rights bill to Congress in the following week.87

In the meantime, he focused his efforts on trying to head off
more violence in Alabama. When King announced that he would
begin another march to Montgomery on March 9, the White House
urged him to avoid a fresh confrontation. With a federal judge issuing
a temporary order barring all marches, King was reluctant to defy
the very authority he was trying to enlist in his campaign. Conse-
quently, he agreed to a compromise worked out by a mediator the
President had sent to Selma. King led 2000 marchers, including 200
religious leaders from all over the country, across the Pettus Bridge,
where Alabama troopers once again blocked the way. After singing
"We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the civil rights movement, and
kneeling in prayer for several minutes, King led the marchers back
to Selma without incident.

King's restraint contrasted dramatically with the actions of local
whites the next day. They beat up the Reverend James Reeb, a white
minister from Boston, who died in a Birmingham hospital the fol-
lowing night.88

Johnson now came under strong pressure to intervene with fed-
eral troops. Sympathy marchers in cities around the country urged
the President to protect the protestors in Alabama, while pickets out-
side the White House carried signs denouncing Johnson's inaction:
"LBJ, just you wait... see what happens in '68."89

Johnson was pained at the attacks on his commitment to support
black voting rights. "Once again my Southern heritage was thrown in my face. I was hurt, deeply hurt," he wrote later. But he was determined "not to be shoved into hasty action." Though he had put 700 troops on alert during the second march on March 9 and though federal attorneys, marshalls, and FBI agents had been sent to Selma to keep the peace, Johnson was reluctant to publicize his actions. Southern obstructionists eager to show the South as a victim of overbearing federal power might use them to their advantage. If he acted too aggressively, Johnson believed it would alienate southern moderates, antagonize centrists everywhere, and block passage of a voting rights act. On the other hand, if he did nothing to protect the marchers, it would deepen the rift between North and South and undermine his ability to lead a law through Congress.90

Johnson needed the cooperation of George Wallace, who also wanted to prevent further bloodshed. Wallace had national ambitions and the sense to see that more violence would mark him as simply a racist rather than an opponent of federal authority, which he rightly believed could be made into a popular political issue. "Now that Wallace, he's a lot more sophisticated than your average southern politician, and it's his ox that's in the ditch, let's see how he gets him out," Johnson said at a meeting convened to discuss the crisis.

To escape his dilemma, Wallace asked Johnson to see him. Johnson agreed at once, and they met at the White House on the afternoon of March 13. The meeting provided the occasion for what one aide called possibly LBJ's finest performance. Johnson's objective was to put Wallace on the spot, to make clear that he would back the legitimate demands of the marchers and insist that Wallace protect peaceful demonstrators from police violence.91

Johnson orchestrated every aspect of the meeting. He received Wallace in the Oval Office, where he sat him on a couch with soft cushions that placed him some three or four feet above the floor. Johnson positioned himself in a rocking chair "and leaned toward the semi-recumbent Wallace, his towering figure inclined downward until their noses almost touched." After Johnson let Wallace say his piece against outside agitators stirring up trouble and his opposition to federal intervention in the affairs of his state, Johnson gave him the "treatment." "I know you're like me, not approving of brutality," Johnson said, and handed the governor a newspaper with a picture of a state trooper kicking a black protestor who had been knocked to the ground. Johnson waved aside Wallace's explanations that the troopers were only doing their duty, that it was an isolated incident, and that they didn't start the ruckus. Johnson pressed Wallace into acknowledging that there was "brutality."
Then raising the issue of black disenfranchisement, Johnson asked Wallace to persuade Alabama registrars to give blacks their constitutional right to vote. Wallace protested that he didn't have the wherewithal to sway these local officials. "Don't shit me about your persuasive power, George," Johnson replied. "I saw you . . . attacking me [on television], George. And you know what? You were so damn persuasive that I had to turn off the set before you had me changing my mind."

But Lyndon wanted Wallace to understand that he was the great persuader, who would bend Wallace and the South to his will. "Why don'tcha just desegregate all your schools?" he asked Wallace. "You and I go out there in front of those television cameras right now, and you announce you've decided to desegregate every school in Alabama." Wallace replied: "Oh, Mr. President, I can't do that, you know. The schools have got school boards; they're locally run. I haven't got the political power to do that." Johnson said, 'Don't you shit me, George Wallace.'"

After nearly three hours of hammering at the governor, Johnson appealed to his sense of history. He urged Wallace not to "think about 1968; you think about 1988. You and me, we'll be dead and gone then, George. Now you've got a lot of poor people down there in Alabama, a lot of ignorant people. You can do a lot for them, George. Your president will help you. What do you want left after you when you die? Do you want a Great . . . Big . . . Marble monument that reads, 'George Wallace—He Built?' . . . Or do you want a little piece of scrawny pine board lying across that harsh, caliche soil, that reads, 'George Wallace—He Hated?'" After their meeting, Wallace remarked: "Hell, if I'd stayed in there much longer, he'd have had me coming out for civil rights."

At a subsequent press conference, Johnson left no doubt about his intentions. He wanted to eliminate "a deep and very unjust flaw in American democracy" by sending Congress a voting rights law that would enforce the constitutional guarantee against barring people from the polls because of race or color. As for his meeting with Wallace, Johnson described the governor as eager for law and order. To that end, Johnson said he had suggested three actions: that Wallace declare his support for universal suffrage in Alabama, that he assure the right of peaceful assembly, and that he call for a biracial meeting to promote greater unity among all Alabamans.

Johnson said nothing about an agreement with Wallace on how to keep the peace. When Wallace thought it necessary, he would ask the President for help, and Johnson, according to one aide, "would help him save his political ass by accepting the subterfuge." Conse-
quently, after a federal court had agreed to an SCLC plan for a march to Montgomery beginning on the 21st, Wallace wired Johnson that Alabama lacked the funds to protect the marchers and asked the President to use federal means to do the job. Johnson replied on March 20 by calling 1800 Alabama national guardsmen into federal service.\textsuperscript{93}

Johnson’s immediate concern was to mobilize congressional action on voting rights. He didn’t think it was enough simply to send a proposal to the Hill with a special message describing the historical record of constitutional violations of black rights. Rather, he felt compelled to go before Congress, where he could command the attention of the nation and the world and emphasize the importance and urgency of remedying this national insult to law and democracy. “I wanted to use every ounce of moral persuasion the presidency held,” Johnson wrote later. “I wanted no hedging, no equivocation. And I wanted to talk from my own heart, from my own experience.”

Though Richard Goodwin wrote the speech, it was, in Goodwin’s phrase, “pure Johnson. . . . It was by me, but it was for and of the Lyndon Johnson I had carefully studied and come to know.” Other aides also had a go at drafting, but, Eric Goldman says, “to an extraordinary extent the final manuscript was Lyndon Johnson in Lyndon Johnson’s own language."\textsuperscript{94}

It was Johnson’s greatest speech and one of the most moving and memorable presidential addresses in the country’s history. Comparing Selma to Lexington and Concord, to Appomattox, Johnson described it as “a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom. . . . Rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. . . . Rarely are we met with a challenge . . . to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved Nation. The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation.”

The issue, Johnson said, was democracy, the right of the individual, regardless of race or color, to vote. “There is no constitutional issue here,” Johnson asserted. “The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country. There is no issue of States rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.”

And, Johnson declared, measuring every word, “what happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which 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
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," Johnson paused, raising his arms for emphasis, "We
shall overcome."
A moment of stunned silence followed, as the audience absorbed
the fact that the President had embraced the anthem of black protest.
And then almost the entire chamber rose in unison, "applauding,
shouting, some stamping their feet." Tears rolled down the cheeks of
senators, congressmen, and observers in the gallery, moved by joy,
elation, a sense that the victor, for a change, was human decency, the
highest standards by which the nation was supposed to live.

Johnson did not wish to conclude before giving African Amer-
icans their full due. "A century has passed, more than a hundred
years, since the Negro was freed. And he is not free, tonight. . . .
A century has passed, more than a hundred years, since equality was
promised. And yet the Negro is not equal. . . . The real hero of this
struggle is the American Negro," the President added. "His actions
and protests, his courage to risk safety and even to risk his life, have
awakened the conscience of this Nation. . . . He has called upon us to
make good the promise of America. And who am I, in my place, can say
that we would have made the same progress were it not for his persistent
bravery, and his faith in American democracy?" Martin Luther King,
watching on television in Birmingham, cried.

Johnson was not content to confine his speech to a request for
voting rights. He linked this civil right to his larger purposes: the
war on poverty and the building of a Great Society. It was not enough
to give people full rights, Johnson asserted; it was also essential "to
open the gates to opportunity." He did "not want to be the President
who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion. I want
to be the President who educated young children to the wonders of
the world. I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry
and to prepare them to be taxpayers instead of taxeaters. I want to
be the President who helped the poor to find their own way and who
protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election. I want
to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men
and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions
and all parties. I want to be the President who helped to end war
among the brothers of this earth."

Idealism has been common in American political oratory, but
Johnson carried the art to heights not heard since Woodrow Wilson
promised to end war and make the world safe for democracy. As with
Wilson, Johnson meant every word of it. "I never thought . . . that I
would be standing here in 1965," Johnson told Congress. "It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those [poor Latino] students [I taught in 1928] and to help people like them all over this country. But now I do have that chance—and I'll let you in on a secret—I mean to use it." The speech was Lyndon Johnson at his best.96

First, though, he intended to shepherd the voting rights bill through Congress. Designing a constitutionally sound bill was a considerable challenge. The voting provisions of the earlier civil rights bills had placed the burden of enforcement on the courts with little positive result. Now, the administration decided to propose an automatic formula that would do away with literacy tests and rely on federal examiners to register voters in unresponsive districts. Specifically, the administration bill stated that literacy tests would automatically be suspended if less than 50 percent of voting-age citizens in a state or any of its political subdivisions were registered or voted in the 1964 elections. Further, if elimination of literacy testing did not raise the percentage of voters to 50 percent, the Attorney General could then send federal examiners into the offending state or district to register voters.96

Johnson had every indication that the bill would pass both houses quickly by wide margins. Though administration representatives in the Senate had to break a conservative filibuster and fend off liberalizing provisions that jeopardized the bill, by May 26, after only two and a half months, the Senate passed the bill by a lopsided 77 to 19 count. In the House, where conservative maneuvering presented a challenge, the bill won passage on July 9 by an overwhelming 335 to 85 vote. A conference committee spent all of July throwing out House and Senate additions, largely restoring the bill to what the White House had initially proposed. On August 6, in remarks in the Capitol Rotunda, Johnson emphasized the historical importance of the measure he was about to sign and promised that he would move swiftly to enforce its provisions.97

The impact of the law across the South was evident at once. By the end of 1966, only four states of the old Confederacy had less than 50 percent of their voting-age blacks registered, and in three of these, registration had reached 47 percent. Only Mississippi, with 33 percent of blacks on the voting rolls, was well short of the law's requirement. At the end of 1967, Georgia, Louisiana, and Virginia had also exceeded the 50 percent target, and Mississippi had 45 percent of its black citizens registered. By the 1968 election, Mississippi was up to 59 percent, and black registration in the eleven Confederate states averaged 62 percent. In 1980, ten million blacks were on the nation's
voting rolls, only 7 percent less than the proportion of voting-age whites.

Black office-holding now also expanded dramatically, with the number of black officials multiplying in six Deep South states during the next four years nearly sixfold. Between 1968 and 1980, moreover, the number of southern black elected state and federal officeholders nearly doubled. As important, white politicians seeking black votes abandoned the region's traditional racist demagoguery. In the words of one historian, "a new generation of moderate governors, putting aside the ancient obsession with race, gave the South enlightened leadership." The act also made a large difference in numbers of black elected officials nationally; by 1989, the few hundred black officeholders of 1965 had grown to 6000.98