The Importance of Nonviolent Direct Action in the Selma Campaign of 1965

Ella Reagan
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During the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to successfully use nonviolent direct action to provoke violent responses from his racist opposition, to direct the American people's attention towards instances of injustice and discrimination. In Selma, Alabama, the protests organized by the King along with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were focused on the voting rights of African Americans which were being infringed upon by the local government. To strengthen their movement through peaceful protests, King and the SCLC purposefully used coercive strategies that would create violent responses from Southern whites that supported segregation. The most famous march in Selma, Bloody Sunday, came to have its reputation because of the violent resistance that came out of a peaceful protest. Bloody Sunday attracted widespread sympathy and attention from America's observing on television. Selma was one of the most important and successful communities that the SCLC focused their efforts on and they were successful in creating peaceful protests against the hate and systemic racism that existed in the Deep South.

King was originally called to Selma, Alabama, to support the African American community that was barred from voting in elections and with the backing of the SCLC he set out to fight for this relatively simple and achievable goal in Selma. Before the SCLC's arrival, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee had built up local momentum but had yielded little result in registering African American voters.[1] Techniques used during this time to limit African American voter registration included literacy tests and only opening the voter registration office two times per year. Because southern counties had populations that were 80% black but had not a single black registered voter, segregation was still in effect and the SCLC

[1] Adam Fairclough. "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change." *Phylon (1960-)* 47, no. 1 (1986): 1-15. doi:10.2307/274690, 7.

was drawn to Selma to protest it.[2] When coming into Selma, the SCLC's plan of action was to use nonviolent direct action to persuade Southern whites that the existence of segregation laws were morally wrong, but when they arrived they would discover that it would be much more difficult to succeed in this goal. During the months of tension leading up to the culminating march of Bloody Sunday, there was no way for the SCLC to predict the response their movement in Selma would have on the world. Although, King and his advisors were aware that the "peaceful demonstrations he was organizing would bring at least repressive measures by the police,"[3] it would have been difficult for them to predict how important Selma would become as an example of successful use of nonviolent direct action during the Civil Rights Movement.

The events of Bloody Sunday exemplified how strategic efforts by King in Selma used nonviolence to elicit violent responses that would change the public view of the Civil Rights Movement going forward. The original march began on March 7, 1965, and was organized in response to the police violence and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, an unarmed peaceful protestor. King lead a group of 600 marches along with John Lewis of the SNCC, in a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge to reach Birmingham, Alabama. In later years, John Lewis went onto describe how he had been "beaten and left lying there" and described the state troopers blocking the way as a "sea of blue."[4] Marchers were confronted by state troopers led by Governor Wallace and Sheriff Jim Clark, who blocked their path and ordered the marchers to disperse. Within minutes, the state troopers were ordered to force the marchers back across the

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[2] John E. Yang "Selma 1965: The Black March Into a Sea of Blue." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 12 (1996): 83. doi:10.2307/2962994.

[3] James A. Colaiaco, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Paradox of Nonviolent Direct Action." *Phylon (1960-)* 47, no. 1 (1986): 16-28. doi:10.2307/274691, 16.

[4] Yang, 1.

bridge by using tear gas, bullwhips, rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire and other brutal methods that were inhumane and evil.[5] This shows a stark contrast between the peaceful protestors and the aggressive state troopers that prevented them from marching and as a result, 17 people were hospitalized and 67 others were treated for injuries after the traumatic event unfolded. Although King wanted to avoid the injury of his followers and supporters as much as possible, he articulated that part of a successful nonviolent direct action campaign was the resistance of racists who unleashed violence against the protestors.[6] This does not discount the terror that participants in the Bloody Sunday march were subjected to judgment based on their race and fight for equal voting rights. They would be remembered for their peaceful approach that did not seek to combat violence with violence. One participant in the Selma campaign in 1965 maintained that although dedicated the focus in Selma was dedicated to nonviolence, "the Civil Rights Movement needed violence to sustain it."[7] In the days following Bloody Sunday, the effects that the nonviolent movement had on Americans became more and more apparent as well as the intentions of leaders in Alabama to not relent to the pressure of ending discriminatory laws that existed within their state.

The media's reaction to Bloody Sunday proved that change can only become upon by coercion through nonviolent action and not by persuading racist southerners to change their opinions. When the breaking news of the brutal violence in Selma broke to the American public, newscasters were quick to highlight that King and his followers were peacefully protesting for their right to vote and the State of Alabama was restructuring their right to vote as Americans.

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[5]Thomas R. Wagy "Governor Leroy Collins of Florida and the Selma Crisis of 1965." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (1979): 403-20. www.jstor.org/stable/30151004, 405.

[6] Colaiaco, 18.

[7] Colaiaco, 17.

On the night of March 7th, there happened to be a showing on national television of J*udgment at Nuremberg*, that was interrupted by the breaking news in Selma, which portrayed the atrocities the Nazis subjected the Jews to during World War Two.[8] Sympathetic white viewers were able to see similarities between the actions of Alabama state troopers and those of the Nazi regime, allowing for King to have more power in coercion than he initially intended to. Images shown on television and printed in newspapers showed the procession of African Americans holding up American flags with white protestors holding racist signs and the Confederate flag in opposition. [9] Because Selma was so racially divided, many people from the South were either in support of laws that discriminate against African Americans, or were passive and did not want to change from the discriminatory systems of the Deep South. The real success in the media coverage of Bloody Sunday came from the pressure that would be put on the governor of Alabama by the federal government after Americans insisted on change and reform based on what they had observed. Early on the SCLC made sure that reporters were there to cover the events of the march and the opposition by local Alabaman law enforcement. This was because the local black leaders had the foresight of knowing the value of racial violence depended on the ability of the press to report the gravity and depth of the violence itself to gain support.[10] Without media coverage, the effects of Bloody Sunday would not have been as widespread or had as much of an impact on the Civil Rights Movement. King's tactics of using nonviolence to combat racial

[8] Cornelia F. Sexauer "A Well-Behaved Woman Who Made History: Sister Mary Antona's Journey to Selma."

[9]Herman Nash. *Marchers under a battery of American flags.* March 25, 1965. Digital image. Digital Public Library of America.

[10] Fairclough, 11.

oppression were only effective because the media was able to portray the events of Bloody Sunday to the entire United States and not just locally in Alabama.

The message of King's peaceful campaign in Selma resonated so strongly across the country that American's wrote to Congress and made appeals to the government to interfere. These letters argued that the government should finally take control of the disregard for federal law occurring in Alabama. On March 8, 1965, Mrs. E. Jackson wrote to the House Judiciary Committee, on the day after Bloody Sunday, calling for immediate action after she had watched the police brutality against innocent protests in Selma. Jackson pleaded for help by saying, "For god sakes help those poor innocent people in Selma Alabama ...We can't sit by any longer and watch the shocking events in Alabama."[11] Although not much was known about Mrs. E. Jackson as an individual, she exemplified the opinion of thousands of white sympathizers across the country who were distraught over the cruelty occurring in their own country. King and the SCLC were portrayed as innocent protestors to television viewers of the march which caused the emotional observers of Bloody Sunday to call for reform measures. Although slavery had long been abolished, the depiction of African American men, women and children brutally beaten, served as a wake-up call to Northern white Americans who were disillusioned with what was happening in the Deep South. In the words of King himself, "By resisting, a black man would undoubtedly force his oppressor to commit his brutality openly- in the light of day- with the rest of the world looking on." Bloody Sunday was not only committed openly, but it was a civil rights crisis that showed the culmination of Alabama resistance to integration movements in the south. The effectiveness of nonviolent action can only be partially measured by the immediate

[11]Mrs. E. Jackson, Mrs. E. Jackson to the House Judiciary Committee, March 3, 1965, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives.

emotional response it evoked from white sympathizes, but later could be measured in the action that Americans took in being involved in the movement themselves.

On March 9th,1965, the second attempted march to Montgomery Alabama included not just those involved in the original march, but thousands of other participants who had been called to join in by Martin Luther King Jr. This marched was attended by thousands of clergymen and activists from across America, further proving that Americans wanted to take a stand against discrimination in Alabama and were affected by the disturbing footage they saw on tv. King called on clergymen and members of the religious community to join him and his followers in a march that aimed to successfully cross the Edmund Pettus bridge without tragedy ensuing. More specifically, Cardinal Ritter of St. Louis called on Catholic human rights workers "to respond to King's appeals for national religious leaders to come to Selma to support demonstrations for voting rights."[12] This shows that this movement was no longer small and concentrated in one area, King and his fellow marchers had appealed to the entire country in their fight for the right to vote and gained supporters through these actions. Unfortunately, there were some acts of violent retaliation by the Klu Klux Klan including the murder of a white woman Viola Liuzzo,[13] which strengthened the movement against the KKK and caused the federal government to become involved in the affairs of Alabama. Although King ended up turning the marchers around in this second march due to safety concerns, the protestors that traveled to Selma in support of King were living proof of the influence of nonviolent protests in contrast to hateful brutality.

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[12]Sexauer, 41.

[13] Liuzzo was a member of the SCLC who was working as a transport driver after the Selma to Montgomery march and was murdered by three Klansmen who saw her driving an African American marcher home.

One of the most influential women to travel to Selma was an African American nun known as Sister Mary Antona who traveled from Chicago to Selma to protest for Civil Rights. Sister Antona was compelled to join the Selma to Montgomery March to support the nonviolent protesters and to speak out about the issue of human rights as a member of the Catholic Church. King called for Americans of all faiths to come to Selma because he realized the strength multi-faith cooperation would bring to the second march. What made Sister Antona unique in this circumstance, was how she had no access to the footage of Bloody Sunday but she knew that if the church was sending her to Selma, the issue of civil rights was serious enough that she had to speak out in support of it.[14] It was unique for the Catholic Church to take a stand on political issues of this nature, but it spoke to the influence King and his marchers had on all types of religious leaders such as nuns, rabbis, and priests who became involved in the second march. To add to Sister Antona's significance in the march, she was the only African American nun in the group and led the march rebelling against white supremacy and black inferiority.[15] Although some people thought that Sister Antona was violating codes of Christianity by leading the marches in Selma and supporting nonviolence, most Americans saw her involvement as inspiring. This was the first time a nun had participated openly in any sort of Civil Rights demonstration, making it radical and somewhat unexpected for the period. During this time of national crisis, nuns such as Sister Antona were praised for helping to expose the injustice in Selma and showing that "only a non-violent, intelligent reaction to the suppression of the whites could bring change, lasting change."[16] The existence of multi-faith cooperation in the second

[14] Sexauer, 38.
[15] Sexauer, 46.
[16] Sexauer, 55.

march to Montgomery can be credited to King's success in using nonviolent direct action to both engage Americans in what was going on in Selma and gain active participants for his later marches.

After gaining nationwide attention for his nonviolent protests, King and the African American community of Selma were finally able to complete the march to Montgomery on the third attempt. During this time the pressure had been mounting on the U.S. government and especially on President Johnson to allow the marchers to peacefully protest without interference from Alabaman authorities. Johnson's concern over the rising tensions in the South could easily be observed when Johnson sent Governor Collins of Florida to Selma to deescalate the confrontation and find a compromise with King.[17] In total, as many as 25,000 people participated in the 50 mile march to Montgomery after it was approved by Federal District Court Judge Frank Johnson, who was persuaded by the American people to allow the nonviolent protests of Selma. Another piece of immediate reform that was passed by large public support and pressure on President Johnson to interfere was the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The purpose of this legislation was to outlaw literacy tests and increase the number of people registered to vote in an area where there was a record of previous discrimination.[18] President Johnson played a major role in passing the Legislature when he made a plea to Congress to pass it, but the action in Selma was what directly prompted Johnson's response and moved the entire country in the direction of change.

Although there were many positive repercussions to King's use of nonviolent direct action, many people argued about the dangers associated with it and whether it was putting

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[17] Wagy, 404.

[18] *History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives,* "Historical Documents: Selma and the 1965 Voting Rights Act,"

supporters of the Civil Rights Movement at risk. King himself was very public about his intentions to use nonviolence to spark responses out of his opposition and wrote in detail about his strategies in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In this letter, King explains, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."[19] In King's eyes, it was worth creating these contentious situations to bring attention to the never-ending discrimination that was occurring in the United States against African Americans. It can also be added that marchers knew there was a risk of danger when they first decided to join the Selma Voting Rights Campaign but chose to become involved regardless to fight back against systemic racism. In the words of King himself, "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what happened to the American Negro."[20] Other criticism of King attacked him on a more personal level and accused his of being unfaithful to his wife, Coretta Scott King, which was not connected in any way to his politics. Although there was some backlash to King's methods of protest the civil rights advocate's legacy of using nonviolence to spark change in Selma, Alabama, continues to inspire peaceful protests half a century later.

From the 1960s forward, King's tactics of nonviolence would grow immense public support for the Civil Rights Movement and change the way American's viewed discrimination and the oppression of minority groups in the future. As a result of King's efforts, he would go onto receive a Nobel Peace Prize for his lifelong dedication to achieving peace in the United States of America and ending segregation laws. Although King was only one man, he

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[19] Martin Luther King to Clergymen, April 16, 1963, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail.*
[20]Martin Luther King to Clergymen, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail.*

represented a fight for equality in the evil face of racism and the direct opposition of hatred. What truly set King apart from other Civil Rights leaders of his time, was his ideology of using peaceful protests to coerce and persuade those who opposed him while still obeying the law and avoiding extreme violence. King's actions as a Civil Rights Leader demonstrated how strong of a message nonviolent actions can send when executed correctly and efficiently. All evidence points to the fact that it would have been impossible for King to have achieved anything groundbreaking if he had used methods of violence instead. Over fifty years have passed since Selma, and American's still remember King's dedication to gaining voting rights through nonviolence as an accomplishment of humanity as a whole and serve as an honorable example of how to enact meaningful change in the world.

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