March on Montgomery

Ernest Bonner
Marching on Montgomery

Both of you were too young to remember, I am sure, so I thought I would jot down the things I remember from a whirlwind trip to Montgomery, Alabama, to march with Martin Luther King and the 300 marchers from Selma as part of their voters' rights campaign in Alabama in 1965. I found a quick history of the event for context, and a transcript of Dr. King's speech. In dredging up these memories it reminded me once again that until '... justice runs down like water; and righteousness like a mighty stream ...' we are going to have to march. It also reminded me what a truly great man Dr. King was.

In honor of Dr. King and the brave ones who followed him, here is one guy's account of that memorable day back in March of 1965 when voters' rights was the only item on the agenda and Dr. King was the principal speaker.     Dad.

In Oregon, we are voting. It is primary season, and we are, of course, voting by mail. It is so quick and easy to vote, in fact, that I have time to reflect on voting practices in earlier years. It is also 35 years since the march on Montgomery, a march by people from around the nation, led by the black residents of Selma, to secure the basic voting rights of the black residents of Alabama.

Russ Olin and I had the occasion to join in that march, from St. Jude's on the outskirts of Montgomery, to downtown Montgomery and the state capitol, where the Confederate flag proudly flew until late in this century.

So, for your history lesson this week, read my account and Russ' account (I particularly like Russ' account) and Dr. Martin Luther King's speech on that occasion. There will be a test on Friday.

Ernie/Dad.

Dad - I just got back online after wrestling with the computer. This is so wonderful - thank you! I have just recently been wondering if you and Mom could tell us about your activist beginnings. I can remember marching somewhere (as a very small child), while holding a white candle in my hand. While I was very awed and very aware of the enormity and importance of what was going on around me, I was also just a little bit
worried about burning my hand!!! When would that have been? Do you remember? I also remember marching in an anti-American, anti-War demonstration in Finland, and being told to be quiet and inconspicuous so that we would not be found out as Americans.

I am still so proud of both of you (and Ninny, too for her quieter, yet no less lasting and important activism) for your continued involvement in and concern with social issues. What a family legacy. All three of you continue to be great role models. I look forward to pouring myself a glass of wine tonight, and reading through all of this. Thanks!

Kathleen

From: Ernie Bonner <erbonner@teleport.com>
To: Tick and Kathleen Houk <thouk1@earthlink.net>
Sent: Tuesday, May 02, 2000 7:58 PM   Subject: Re: March on Montgomery, Alabama

I remember a candlelight march in Madison, I think. I am pretty sure it was in Madison but I am not so sure what it was for. It could have been against the bombing in Cambodia by Nixon, which occurred about that time. But, of course, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were both assassinated while we were in Madison, as well. I remember being surprised that the candles did not blow out. I'll bet you your Mom would remember what the march was about. (and your Mom went to a march in Washington while we were at Pittsburgh I think.)

I do remember a student-police conflict on campus. I was down there for some reason. I wasn't a part of the demonstration, but got caught at the periphery by a police squad, which lobbed a tear gas canister down the street which exploded at my feet. I ran, but got liberally sprinkled with the tear gas. When I got home, I had to hang the pants outside on the clothesline because the stench was too strong for the house.

> From: Tick and Kathleen Houk <thouk1@earthlink.net>
> To: Ernie Bonner <erbonner@teleport.com>   Cc: Chris Bonner; Lynn Guilbert Bonner
> Date: Tuesday, May 03, 2000 9:15 AM   Subject: Re: March on Montgomery, Alabama

I remember the tear gas incident! Remember, I used to ride my bike through the clothes on the clothesline, and I rode right through your pants that were airing out on the line? I came stumbling into the house, eyes stinging and tearing up. I had no idea what was going on!!! I have recounted that incident many times!

From: Ernie Bonner <erbonner@teleport.com>
To: Tick and Kathleen Houk   Cc: Chris Bonner; Lynn Guilbert BonnerDate: Tuesday, May 03, 2000 1:29 PM   Subject: Re: March on Montgomery, Alabama

You can always say that you were gassed in the sixties! :)

March on Montgomery
Ernie Bonner
April 30, 2000

[Though the Civil Rights Act had been passed in 1964, Blacks in many southern states still could not register to vote in 1965. Selma, Alabama was a case in point: 15,000 Blacks were eligible to vote, but only 355 were registered, due to official refusals and delays.

A project to increase Black voters in Selma had been underway since 1964. When little progress had been made, Dr. Martin Luther King agreed to visit Selma and lead a march to the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma. There he was arrested, in February of 1965. King and Ralph Abernathy announced that a march would begin on March 7, from Selma to Montgomery, the capital city, to bring attention to voter discrimination in Alabama. Governor George Wallace opposed the march, and sent 200 state troopers to Selma to stop the marchers.

On March 7, as the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, on the way to Montgomery, they were attacked by troopers using whips, cattle prods, clubs, tear gas and horses, and the march was routed back onto the Pettus Bridge. Several hundred were arrested that day. The whole nation saw the event and were appalled. Two days later, another march was started, then called off when the threat of further bloodshed was clear. This infuriated the radical Blacks. And in the next few days, a white pastor from Boston and a white woman from Detroit were murdered, as it would turn out, by other whites in Alabama.

Dr. Martin Luther King then flew to Washington, DC and pleaded with President Lyndon Johnson to pass a national voters' rights bill. And Johnson met with Governor Wallace to make sure he understood that the courts were going to lift his ban on the marches. Wallace told Johnson that he didn't want a massive march in his State; Johnson agreed to limit the size of the march— to 300 people. On March 17, the courts did indeed lift the ban on the march.

On March 21, 1965, 300 protesters were allowed to march from Selma about 40 miles up Route 80 to Montgomery.]

Three days later, on Wednesday, March 24, at about midnight, Russ Olin and I boarded a charter plane from Denver, Colorado to Montgomery, Alabama. We were part of a party of 90 people from Colorado (45 from Boulder and 45 from Denver) who were going to Alabama to support the Selma marchers. People from all over the country, in fact, were converging on Montgomery to join with the original 300 protesters from Selma at the outskirts of Montgomery and then to accompany them through Montgomery to the state capitol building on a hill above downtown. There, King would deliver a message of hope and inspiration to the marchers, and a reminder of the power of nonviolent action in support of a just cause.

After an early morning arrival at the Montgomery airport, we got a ride to the march staging area—the grounds of St. Jude's Catholic School and hospital on the outskirts of Montgomery. Thousands were milling around. It was cloudy and cold. I remember a lot of mud. At one point, our group was located next to a small contingent of those who had marched all the way from Selma. One of those marchers was John Lewis, a present day Congressman from Georgia. He was not gracious. He was all business. He was about 6' tall and about 225 pounds—all muscle. He was among about a half dozen men who were assigned to protect Martin Luther King.
I was impressed with these 300 marchers. They had walked all that way, in danger all the time. The President had assigned 4,000 national guard troops to protect and provision the marchers from Selma to Montgomery. Still, it must have been scary. They had courage.

Organizing ourselves to assure our own safety during the march was the first reminder that we were going into a possibly dangerous situation. Everybody in the Colorado contingent was assigned to a squad. Each squad had 9 people. I was in Squad 6. Russ Olin was the Squad leader. (See Russ’ comments [attached] for the rules to be followed by each person in the march.) Nobody went anywhere without their squad. If any member had to leave the march, the whole Squad would leave the march. Each line in the long, long parade to Montgomery was a single squad of 6 people abreast. The wisdom of this would be proven before the end of the day.

I had taken a camera and Russ had taken a tape recorder. We quickly ran out of film and batteries. With the rush of events, the discipline of the march and the growing tension, we took a few pictures (less than 25, probably) and we got at most one tape. None of this material can we find today. (It is possible that you can spot us on an FBI tape, as a lot of men in trench coats were taking a lot of film of the marchers.)

The march was staged from St. Jude’s Catholic School and Hospital on the outskirts of Montgomery. From St. Jude’s we marched for 2 to 3 miles through a black community (where the kids were laughing and running along with the march, and their parents and grand parents were waving American flags from their front porches.) It was definitely a poor neighborhood. But there was a mood of celebration and joy in that place.

As we neared downtown Montgomery, the black neighborhood gradually transitioned into a poor white neighborhood. And the mood of the march shifted as we marched. There were fewer people visible. All of them were stony-faced and quietly hostile. The marchers were quiet. I would bet that most of the marchers felt a growing sense of danger and insecurity. Certainly, I did. And I got a little sense of the perspective of the white people, as well. For them, we were the devil incarnate—foreigners butting in on their territory trying to tell them how to think, what to do, etc. And because this was undoubtedly the largest parade to ever visit their neighborhood, they could easily have been just as scared as we were.

As we left the poor white neighborhood and entered the downtown, the marchers turned more confrontational. Police and FBI lined the streets, there were lots of boos and cat-calls. This is the reaction we were expecting, so it relieved tensions a little bit. And everyone repeated, stay with your squad, stay in line, concentrate . . .

The route of the march continued through the downtown, and up the hill to the Capitol building. The Capitol sits on a hill at the edge of downtown, providing a perfect place for a speakers’ forum. I don’t remember much about those who spoke before Dr. King (there were many). In fact, the speakers were so far away from me (we were standing near the back on the right hand side as you face the Capitol) that I could not really see them that clearly. And, of course, Dr. King gave a rousing speech (See transcript attached) and provided us with a great release of tensions, and a gathering of strength. He was (and is, in death) an inspirational man, the perfect person for his time.

After the speeches, we were told to move a block to the north of the Capitol Building, where buses were to take us from that staging area to the airport for our return trip home. As we walked to this area, it was clear that we were not just annoying the locals, we were infuriating them. Truckloads of Army and National Guard troops were there at strategic locations to form a
wall around a two- or three-block area. The State Police were also there. They were openly hostile and sullen. It was the first time I ever felt that the ones who were supposed to protect us were in fact out to get us—a feeling that many minorities must feel quite often.

So we weren’t feeling that secure. In addition, the staging ground was in a rather run-down area, with undeveloped surroundings. As I cased out the joint, it became more and more obvious that if someone wanted to do in a bunch of us, he would only have to camp out in some of the surrounding buildings and take pot shots at us. And I wondered if the Army or the Police would do anything about it.

The buses arrived in fits and starts, and with ever-increasing intervals between buses. Could the authorities be delaying the buses on purpose? As the crowd of some several thousand dwindled down to a few hundred, and as dusk approached, we all got a little uneasy. Then the National Guard and Army left, spitting on us as they went by. And finally the police left as well. And the 200 or so of us who were left were alone in the growing dark 3 blocks from the Alabama State Capitol.

As each bus came, there was a surge of the crowd trying to be the first on the bus and get out of there. We tried to maintain our squad, but one person broke for the bus by herself. She was just so frightened she had to get on the bus. Others began to panic as well. We stayed there for only about 2 hours, but it seemed like hours. It was getting real dark when we got out of there. I was real scared, and I know others were as well. I only got my strength and confidence back when I reminded myself that black people in Alabama must be scared like that once a day, for their whole life. I only had to fight off the fear for a few hours. But I was damn glad to get on that bus.

From there, the story is simple. Back to the airport. Then, back to Boulder, Colorado. We touched down in Denver just about midnight on Thursday, March 25, 1965. We had been away only 24 hours. But the next day it was obvious from the newspapers that the march had produced an incredible response around the country.

Ernie Bonner

[Later in 1965, the Voters’ Rights Bill passed, empowering the U.S. Attorney General to replace local registrars with federal registrars where discrimination was present. State literacy tests were banned. And, in 1966, Poll taxes were prohibited with the ratification of the 24th amendment. Almost 180 years after the formation of our federal republic, blacks in the south were getting the right to vote.]

March on Montgomery
Russell Olin
March 29, 1965

The following account of my participation in the civil rights march on the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery on Thursday, March 25, 1965, is intended primarily as a chronological account of what I did and what happened to me on the trip. I shall attempt to include some comments about how the events of that day affected me, but in the interest of brevity—and perhaps to avoid revealing my lack of verbal artistry—I shan’t attempt here to interpret the events of that historic day. Suffice it to say that with the possible exception of contemplating the birth of my children, the march on Montgomery was the most inspiring event of my life. Russell Olin
After the repeated brutalization of civil rights demonstrators by Alabama troopers and Dallas County sheriff’s deputies and posse men following the attempted march to Montgomery on March 7, Carol and I felt an intense moral responsibility to go to Alabama to take part in the demonstrations. Neither of us was able to go, however, so when I learned on Sunday, March 21, that I would be able to get a seat on a chartered airliner to take part in the final day of the march on Montgomery, naturally I jumped at the chance and Carol enthusiastically urged me to go.

Ninety people, 45 each from Boulder and Denver, paid $95 apiece for round trip passage to Montgomery to take part in the march. We were scheduled to take off from the Denver airport at midnight Wednesday and return to Denver at midnight Thursday. According to our wrist watches and wall calendars, we did approximately that, but everyone who went on that trip knew that far more than 24 hours had passed; we spent an age in Montgomery and our watches and calendars had simply conveniently stood still.

The 90 people aboard the airplane were divided into eight squads, each in the charge of a squad leader. I was leader of Squad six which included 3 women and 6 men, all from Boulder. As squad leader it was my responsibility to make and enforce regulations which would assure the safe return of the members of the squad. Before leaving the Denver airport, the squad leaders met and discussed the best approach to the problem. The following rules and procedures are the essence of what we agreed to under the guidance of Dan Hoffman, former Denver manager of Safety, who was in charge of the flight;

- under no avoidable circumstance would a squad split up. If one member of the squad had to leave the march, all of the other members would leave it with him.
- each woman would have a man assigned to her. It was that man’s responsibility to keep the woman to whom he had been assigned in sight at all times during the day.
- one man in each squad would be given the assignment of getting necessary medical attention should a member of the squad become ill or injured.
- the rules of nonviolence would be strictly enforced and it was the duty of the squad leader to see that members of his squad observed them.
- on-the-spot decisions of the squad leader were to be obeyed without question or argument by the members of the squad.

After we arrived at the Montgomery airport (about 8:30 a.m. on Thursday), I submitted these rules to the members of my squad (squad 6), and they were accepted without reservation.

The Montgomery airport is about 10 miles from the state capitol and about 5 miles from St. Jude Catholic school and hospital grounds where the civil rights marchers were camped. There was considerable concern that we would be unable to get transportation into the campground to join the marchers, but we soon found that Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers and other fearless and dedicated volunteers were providing transportation to the march in every conceivable kind of conveyance. Squad 6 rode in an International Harvester station wagon which had been brought to Alabama by its New York owner and which was being driven by a young man from Toronto, Ont., Canada. The driver, who looked utterly worn out, told us that in the previous three days he had driven his vehicle 2,000 miles transporting people to and from Montgomery, Selma and the line of march. He estimated that he had slept about three hours during that time. He had to take a back road to get to St. Jude because, he told us, the local police would no longer let him drive in by the most direct route.

St. Jude sits in the middle of a typically poverty-stricken Montgomery Negro Neighborhood. It occupies about 40 acres of earth which is a kind of yellow clay. Several days of intermittent rain had made a quagmire of the area where about 4,000 marchers had camped the night before.
Portable toilets on trucks gave parts of the area a distinctly unpleasant odor. To say that the surroundings were not conducive to optimism would be a gross understatement, yet joyful optimism reigned supreme.

Flags from several states could be seen and banners identified delegations from universities, religious groups, political organizations and communities from all over the nation. Over the next three hours the crowd at St. Jude's grew to a throng of about 40,000 people of every shape, size, color and age. The religious overtones of the southern Negro movement were very much in evidence, and the fundamental brotherhood of this nonviolent movement was obvious and touching.

The camp area was surrounded by US Army Military Police, and the entrances to the grounds were guarded by Military Police and Montgomery police, including, to my great surprise, Negro policemen. A Montgomery Negro told me that it was to his great surprise too. Up to that day, he said, he had been aware of only two Negroes on the Montgomery Police Department, and their job was guarding a school crosswalk.

Overhead, helicopters, light airplanes, jet fighters and one heavier propeller aircraft maintained a constant patrol of the campground, the route of march and all approaches to the city.

The original Selma-Montgomery marchers (who were stopped at the bridge by state police clubs, ropes and tear gas) wore bright orange vests. When they took their place near the front of the line of march, they were instantly surrounded by a human chain which served, we took it, less as protection than as a symbol of the revered position which these people had assumed in the movement.

When we arrived at the campground, we took positions in what we thought was the line of march near what we thought was the front of the line. We soon learned that a 'lineup' of that many people is a very fluid thing, indeed, and by 10 a.m. we were at least 10,000 people away from what then was obviously the front of the line of march at a north gate of the grounds. About that time, the front of the line marched briskly into the street—for a distance of about 50 feet where it stopped and remained for another hour and a half.

We never did hear an explanation for the delay, but during that time, the 'line' that we were in reversed itself, expanded, shrank, disintegrated, regrouped, snaked around, sang freedom songs, chanted freedom chants, clapped hands and built up at least 6 inches of gumbo clay on every foot on it.

Then, at approximately 11:30 a.m., squad 6 double-timed it through the gate into the street and we were in it. Three housewives, two students, one philosophy professor, one airlines engineer, one research economist and one editor from Boulder, Colorado, were in the greatest civil rights demonstration the deep South has ever seen and perhaps one of the most significant ones in American history. If that sounds overly-dramatic, I can only say that that is how we all felt and the feeling grew as we marched on through the Negro district with aged Negroes on both sides of the street weeping, waving and cheering us on.

The emotional impact of being a part of that sea of dedicated humanity sweeping through the streets of Montgomery beggars description. I had just barely recovered from the effects of marching by a school with hundreds of Negro youngsters cheering us on when an aging Negro lady directly behind me in the lines of march shouted to a 4-year-old standing clapping on the sidewalk: "That's right, honey, you clap--this is for you, I's too old."
All through the Negro district, and I would guess we marched in it for about 2 1/2 miles, a feeling that was born in the early camaraderie of the campground was confirmed, reconfirmed and burned indelibly into our minds: the southern Negro is a most remarkable person, absolutely without bitterness or rancor. Anyone who extends a hand of friendship to him becomes his brother in the deepest sense of the work. Why this is or how it can be considering what the southern Negro has been through, I do not know, but I do know absolutely that it is true.

We next arrived at the poor white district, which was, if possible, even more pathetic than the Negro district in terms of housing and was most definitely more pathetic in human terms. One little girl—perhaps 8 years old—who looked retarded started instinctively to return our waves, then looked fearfully toward the adults to see if she had been observed. The adults simply watched us blankly. Their expressions were not hatred, really, just disgust, or in some cases just nothing. The world was marching by their door and they hadn’t the slightest idea what it was about.

We next came into a white business district which included, ironically, Black and White Ambulance Service (No Colored Accepted). Here the blank looks became unmistakably hateful looks. The reaction of the marchers was instantaneous and particularly noticeable among the Negroes: they pulled tighter together in the ranks and the singing, chanting and clapping became still and formal and perhaps just a little louder than it had been.

Now the march wheeled to the north again and we looked down a hill toward the Jefferson Davis Hotel and Confederate Square—the heart of the ‘heart of Dixie.’ Off to the north through the tops of the downtown buildings peeked the lilly-white great dome of the capitol, the ‘White House of the Confederacy.’ Except for the marchers and a half-dozen employees high up in the Jefferson Davis Hotel, no Negroes were in sight. White faces lined the street—or perhaps more accurately appeared in sullen, hateful looking little bunches along the streets—and filled most doorways and windows. Here, as elsewhere along the march, there were little bunches of military police or ‘federalized’ guardsmen at each intersection. (Federalized is in quotes there because each guardsman wore a miniature Confederate flag on his left chest, making it hard to think of them as representing the United States of America.)

By now we were right downtown and there was a perceptible change from hate to dismay in the expressions. The march was beginning to have its effect. The good White Folk of Montgomery were beginning to realize that these miles of six-abreast marchers were trampling the old South into the dust and it could never rise again. We knew this wouldn’t be taken lightly, and just to show it, a couple of affluent looking businessmen would occasionally walk up the line and carefully and deliberately snap a front, profile and back picture of a Montgomery Negro. The message was clear and nobody doubted the extremes that the retribution would take; yet the Negroes showed no fear.

Now we jogged to the right through Confederate Square by the tall statuary-fountain and we were looking directly up broad Dexter Avenue directly at the front of the Capitol building, a beautiful and impressive structure. In the huge square in front of the capitol, the marching line was again becoming the throng that we remembered from St. Jude, but always orderly, always peaceful. As we started out march up the final hill, a woman’ voice, amplified many times filled the air with that wonderful and curiously powerful song, “We Shall Overcome.” For at least the 100th time since leaving St. Jude, we all sang it again and everyone was taken with a great emotion as we reached the end of the march, sat in the street, finished the song, watched the great crowd still in the march behind us arrive and melt into the group, and waited.

We all knew that the Alabama capitol flies the Confederate flag and not the American flag, but that really hadn’t prepared us for it. The sight is a shock and the meaning crystal clear. I shall
never again be able to look at the Confederate flag with equanimity. If it was during the Civil War an emblem of misguided determination, it is today a symbol of hatred and violence against the black man. That is why it is flown.

After the march had really ended, we all stood and hundreds of American flags appeared above the hands of the marchers. We sang the Star Spangled Banner, and you may believe me when I say that all of the meaning of freedom and democracy was packed into that song; I will never hear it again without being carried right back to Montgomery and the freedom march.

A too-long program which included too many speeches by too many men and women who had risked all in behalf of freedom culminated in a quietly intelligent speech by Dr. Ralph Bunche and the most inspiring oration I ever hope to hear by Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the truly great men of our time. We sang 'We Shall Overcome.'

Then, it was over and some 40 to 50,000 people simply left; no harsh words, no arguments, no fights, only helping hands, words of brotherhood and farewell.

Squad 6 moved to the appointed place one block west and tried to get aboard a bus to the airport. It was then 4:30 p.m. At 5:30 p.m., we still had not been able to board a bus and at that time the Army and National Guard loaded into trucks and left. Perhaps 200 people were left on a Montgomery street with darkness falling and without the strong arm of Uncle Sam protecting them from a hostile populace and even more hostile police. At this point for the first time, the agreement to stay together no matter what took on ominous overtones, but also for the first time became really meaningful. As buses came, it might be possible for one or even two to squeeze aboard, but then we might leave one person alone. We reconfirmed the agreement and finally at 6:30 p.m. Squad 6 got aboard a bus and we were off. That our concern was not exaggerated was tragically confirmed with the murder of a woman, that night.

At the airport, passengers from 55 chartered airliners, plus, I presume, some regular airline passengers, created absolute pandemonium. Our aircraft was at the field but it was nearly an hour before a loading gate was available for it. Finally, we got aboard and discovered that, almost miraculously, all 90 were safely on the airplane. We took off for Denver at 8:40 p.m.

On the flight back we all groped for words to tell each other how deeply we had been affected by the experience. There was no doubt that everyone aboard the plane was a better person for having taken part in the march and we vowed to do what we could to see that the meaning of the freedom march in Montgomery was brought home across the nation.

We landed safely in Denver a 24-hour lifetime after our departure.

Russ Olin, Boulder, Colorado
March 29, 1965

"Our God Is Marching On!"
A Speech by Martin Luther King
25 March, 1965
In front of the State Capitol in Montgomery, Ala.

My dear and abiding friends, Ralph Abernathy, and to all of the distinguished Americans seated here on the rostrum, my friends and co-workers of the state of Alabama, and to all of the
freedom-loving people who have assembled here this afternoon from all over our nation and
from all over the world; Last Sunday, more than eight thousand of us started on a mighty walk
from Selma, Alabama. We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills. We
have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways. Some of our
faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering sun. Some have literally slept in the
mud. We have been drenched by the rains. [Audience:] (Speak) Our bodies are tired and our
feet are somewhat sore.

But today as I stand before you and think back over that great march, I can say, as Sister Pollard
said—a seventy-year-old Negro woman who lived in this community during the bus boycott—
and one day, she was asked while walking if she didn’t want to ride. And when she answered,
“No,” the person said, “Well, aren’t you tired?” And with her ungrammatical profundity, she said,
“My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.” (Yes, sir. All right) And in a real sense this afternoon, we
can say that our feet are tired, (Yes, sir) but our souls are rested.

They told us we wouldn’t get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only
over their dead bodies. (Well. Yes, sir. Talk) but all the world today knows that we are here and
we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, “We ain’t goin’ let
nobody turn us around.” (Yes, sir. Speak) [Applause]

Now it is not an accident that one of the great marches of American history should terminate in
Montgomery, Alabama. (Yes, sir) Just ten years ago, in this very city, a new philosophy was born
of the Negro struggle. Montgomery was the first city in the South in which the entire Negro
community united and squarely faced its age-old oppressors. (Yes, sir. Well) Out of this struggle,
more than bus [de] segregation was won; a new idea, more powerful than guns or clubs was
born. Negroes took it and carried it across the South in epic battles (Yes, sir. Speak) that
electrified the nation (Well) and the world.

Yet, strangely, the climactic conflicts always were fought and won on Alabama soil. After
Montgomery’s, heroic confrontations loomed up in Mississippi, Arkansas, Georgia, and
elsewhere. But not until the colossus of segregation was challenged in Birmingham did the
conscience of America begin to bleed. White America was profoundly aroused by Birmingham
because it witnessed the whole community of Negroes facing terror and brutality with majestic
scorn and heroic courage. And from the wells of this democratic spirit, the nation finally forced
Congress (Well) to write legislation (Yes, sir) in the hope that it would eradicate the stain of
Birmingham. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave Negroes some part of their rightful dignity, (Speak,
sir) but without the vote it was dignity without strength. (Yes, sir)

Once more the method of nonviolent resistance (Yes) was unsheathed from its scabbard, and
once again an entire community was mobilized to confront the adversary. (Yes, sir) And,
again, the brutality of a dying order shrieks across the land. Yet, Selma, Alabama, became a
shining moment in the conscience of man. If the worst in American life lurked in its dark streets,
the best of American instincts arose passionately from across the nation to overcome it. (Yes, sir.
Speak) There never was a moment in American history (Yes, sir) more honorable and more
inspiring than the pilgrimage of clergymen and laymen of every race and faith pouring into
Selma to face danger (Yes) at the side of its embattled Negroes.

The confrontation of good and evil compressed in the tiny community of Selma (Speak, speak)
generated the massive power (Yes, sir. Yes, sir) to turn the whole nation to a new course. A
president born in the South (Well) had the sensitivity to feel the will of the country. (Speak, sir)
and in an address that will live in history as one of the most passionate pleas for human rights
ever made by a president of our nation, he pledged the might of the federal government to
cast off the centuries-old blight. President Johnson rightly praised the courage of the Negro for awakening the conscience of the nation. (Yes, sir)

On our part we must pay our profound respects to the white Americans who cherish their democratic traditions over the ugly customs and privileges of generations and come forth boldly to join hands with us. (Yes, sir) From Montgomery to Birmingham, (Yes, sir) from Birmingham to Selma, (Yes, sir) from Selma back to Montgomery, (Yes) a trail wound in a circle long and often bloody, yet it has become a highway up from darkness. (Yes, sir) Alabama has tried to nurture and defend evil, but evil is choking to death in the dusty roads and streets of this state. (Yes, sir. Speak, sir) So I stand before you this afternoon (Speak, sir. Well) with the conviction that segregation is on its deathbed in Alabama, and the only thing uncertain about it is how costly the segregationists and Wallace will make the funeral. (Go ahead. Yes, sir) [Applause]

Our whole campaign in Alabama has been centered around the right to vote. In focusing the attention of the nation and the world today on the flagrant denial of the right to vote, we are exposing the very origin, the root cause, of racial segregation in the Southland. Racial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races immediately after the Civil War. There were no laws segregating the races then. And as the noted historian, C. Vann Woodward, in his book, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, clearly points out, the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land. You see, it was a simple thing to keep the poor white masses working for near-starvation wages in the years that followed the Civil War. Why, if the poor white plantation or mill worker became dissatisfied with his low wages, the plantation or mill owner would merely threaten to fire him and hire former Negro slaves and pay him even less. Thus, the southern wage level was kept almost unbearably low.

Toward the end of the Reconstruction era, something very significant happened. (Listen to him) That is what was known as the Populist Movement. (Speak, sir) The leaders of this movement began awakening the poor white masses (Yes, sir) and the former Negro slaves to the fact that they were being fleeced by the emerging Bourbon interests. Not only that, but they began uniting the Negro and white masses (Yeah) into a voting bloc that threatened to drive the Bourbon interests from the command posts of political power in the South.

To meet this threat, the southern aristocracy began immediately to engineer this development of a segregated society. (Right) I want you to follow me through here because this is very important to see the roots of racism and the denial of the right to vote. Through their control of mass media, they revised the doctrine of white supremacy. They saturated the thinking of the poor white masses with it, (Yes) thus clouding their minds to the real issue involved in the Populist Movement. They then directed the placement on the books of the South of laws that made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level. (Yes, sir) And that did it. That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist Movement of the nineteenth century.

If it may be said of the slavery era that the white man took the world and gave the Negro Jesus, then it may be said of the Reconstruction era that the southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow. (Yes, sir) He gave him Jim Crow. (Uh huh) And when his wrinkled stomach cried out for the food that his empty pockets could not provide, (Yes, sir) he ate Jim Crow, a psychological bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than the black man. (Right sir) And he ate Jim Crow. (Uh huh) And when his undernourished children cried out for the necessities that his low wages could not provide, he showed them the Jim Crow signs on the buses and in the stores, on the streets and in
the public buildings. (Yes, sir) And his children, too, learned to feed upon Jim Crow, (Speak) their last outpost of psychological oblivion. (Yes, sir)

Thus, the threat of the free exercise of the ballot by the Negro and the white masses alike (Uh huh) resulted in the establishment of a segregated society. They segregated southern money from the poor whites; they segregated southern mores from the rich whites; (Yes, sir) they segregated southern churches from Christianity (Yes, sir); they segregated southern minds from honest thinking; (Yes, sir) and they segregated the Negro from everything. (Yes, sir) That’s what happened when the Negro and white masses of the South threatened to unite and build a great society: a society of justice where none would pray upon the weakness of others; a society of plenty where greed and poverty would be done away; a society of brotherhood where every man would respect the dignity and worth of human personality. (Yes, sir)

We’ve come a long way since that travesty of justice was perpetrated upon the American mind. James Weldon Johnson put it eloquently. He said:

We have come over a way
That with tears hath been watered. (Yes, sir)
We have come treading our paths
Through the blood of the slaughtered. (Yes, sir)
Out of the gloomy past, (Yes, sir)
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam
Of our bright star is cast. (Speak, sir)

Today I want to tell the city of Selma, (Tell them, Doctor) today I want to say to the state of Alabama, (Yes, sir) today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world, that we are not about to turn around. (Yes, sir) We are on the move now. (Yes, sir)

Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us. (Yes, sir) We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us. (Yes, sir) The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us. (Yes, sir) We are on the move now. (Yes, sir) The beating and killing of our clergymen and young people will not divert us. We are on the move now. (Yes, sir) The wanton release of their known murderers would not discourage us. We are on the move now. (Yes, sir) Like an idea whose time has come, (Yes, sir) not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. (Yes, sir) We are moving to the land of freedom. (Yes, sir)

Let us therefore continue our triumphant march (Uh huh) to the realization of the American dream. (Yes, sir) Let us march on segregated housing (Yes, sir) until every ghetto or social and economic depression dissolves, and Negroes and whites live side by side in decent, safe, and sanitary housing. (Yes, sir) Let us march on segregated schools (Let us march, Tell it) until every vestige of segregated and inferior education becomes a thing of the past, and Negroes and whites study side-by-side in the socially-healing context of the classroom.
Let us march on poverty (Let us march) until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat. (Yes, sir) March on poverty (Let us march) until no starved man walks the streets of our cities and towns (Yes, sir) in search of jobs that do not exist. (Yes, sir) Let us march on poverty (Let us march) until wrinkled stomachs in Mississippi are filled, (That's right) and the idle industries of Appalachia are realized and revitalized, and broken lives in sweltering ghettos are mended and remolded.

Let us march on ballot boxes, (Let's march) march on ballot boxes until race-baiters disappear from the political arena. Let us march on ballot boxes until the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs (Yes, sir) will be transformed into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens. (Speak, Doctor) Let us march on ballot boxes (Let us march) until the Wallaces of our nation tremble away in silence. Let us march on ballot boxes (Let us march) until we send to our city councils (Yes, sir), state legislatures, (Yes, sir) and the United States Congress, (Yes, sir) men who will not fear to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God. Let us march on ballot boxes (Let us march. March) until brotherhood becomes more than a meaningless word in an opening prayer, but the order of the day on every legislative agenda. Let us march on ballot boxes (Yes) until all over Alabama God's children will be able to walk the earth in decency and honor.

There is nothing wrong with marching in this sense. (Yes, sir) The Bible tells us that the mighty men of Joshua merely walked about the walled city of Jericho (Yes) and the barriers to freedom came tumbling down. (Yes, sir) I like that old Negro spiritual, (Yes, sir) "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." In its simple, yet colorful, depiction (Yes, sir) of that great moment in biblical history, it tells us that:

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, (Tell it)
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, (Yes, sir)
And the walls come tumbling down. (Yes, sir, Tell it)
Up to the walls of Jericho they marched, spear in hand. (Yes, sir)

"Go blow them ramhorns," Joshua cried,

"Cause the battle am in my hand." (Yes, sir)

These words I have given you just as they were given us by the unknown, long-dead, dark-skinned originator. (Yes, sir) Some now long-gone black bard bequeathed to posterity these words in ungrammatical form, (Yes, sir) yet with emphatic pertinence for all of us today. (Uh huh)

The battle is in our hands. And we can answer with creative nonviolence the call to higher ground to which the new directions of our struggle summons us. (Yes, sir) The road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. (No) There are no broad highways that lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. But we must keep going.

In the glow of the lamplight on my desk a few nights ago, I gazed again upon the wondrous sign of our times, full of hope and promise of the future. (Uh huh) And I smiled to see in the newspaper photographs of many a decade ago, the faces so bright, so solemn, of our valiant heroes, the people of Montgomery. To this list may be added the names of all those (Yes) who
have fought and, yes, died in the nonviolent army of our day: Medgar Evers, (Speak) three civil
rights workers in Mississippi last summer, (Uh huh) William Moore, as has already been mentioned,
(Yes, sir) the Reverend James Reeb, (Yes, sir) Jimmy Lee Jackson, (Yes, sir) and four little girls in
the church of God in Birmingham on Sunday morning. (Yes, sir) But in spite of this, we must go on
and be sure that they did not die in vain. (Yes, sir) The pattern of their feet as they walked
through Jim Crow barriers in the great stride toward freedom is the thunder of the marching men
of Joshua, (Yes, sir) and the world rocks beneath their tread. (Yes, sir)

My people, my people, listen. (Yes, sir) The battle is in our hands. (Yes, sir) The battle is in our
hands in Mississippi and Alabama and all over the United States. (Yes, sir) I know there is a cry
today in Alabama, (Uh huh) we see it in numerous editorials: "When will Martin Luther King, SCLC,
SNCC, and all of these civil rights agitators and all of the white clergymen and labor leaders and
students and others get out of our community and let Alabama return to normalcy?"

But I have a message that I would like to leave with Alabama this evening. (Tell it) That is exactly
what we don’t want, and we will not allow it to happen. (Yes, sir) for we know that it was
normalcy in Marion (Yes, sir) that led to the brutal murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson. (Speak) It was
normalcy in Birmingham (Yes) that led to the murder on Sunday morning of four beautiful,
unoffending, innocent girls. It was normalcy on Highway 80 (Yes, sir) that led state troopers to use
tear gas and horses and billy clubs against unarmed human beings who were simply marching
for justice. (Speak, sir) It was normalcy by a cafe in Selma, Alabama, that led to the brutal
beating of Reverend James Reeb. It is normalcy all over our country (Yes, sir) which leaves the
Negro perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast ocean of material prosperity. It
is normalcy all over Alabama (Yeah) that prevents the Negro from becoming a registered voter.
(Yes) No, we will not allow Alabama (Go ahead) to return to normalcy. [Applause]

The only normalcy that we will settle for (Yes, sir) is the normalcy that recognizes the dignity and
worth of all of God’s children. The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that
allows judgment to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Yes, sir) The
only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy of brotherhood, the normalcy of true peace,
the normalcy of justice.

And so as we go away this afternoon, let us go away more than ever before committed to this
struggle and committed to nonviolence. I must admit to you that there are still some difficult
days ahead. We are still in for a season of suffering in many of the black belt counties of
Alabama, many areas of Mississippi, many areas of Louisiana. I must admit to you that there are
still jail cells waiting for us, and dark and difficult moments. But if we will go on with the faith that
nonviolence and its power can transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows, we will be able
to change all of these conditions.

And so I plea with you this afternoon as we go ahead: remain committed to nonviolence. Our
aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and
understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a
society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the
black man. That will be the day of man as man. (Yes)

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" (Speak, sir) Somebody’s asking, "How long
will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom
from her sacred throne?" Somebody’s asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the
streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of
shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody’s asking, "When will the
radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night. (Speak, speak,
speak) plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, (Speak) and truth bear it?" (Yes, sir)

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, (Yes, sir) however frustrating the hour, it will not be long. (No sir) because “truth crushed to earth will rise again.” (Yes, sir)

How long? Not long. (Yes, sir) because “no lie can live forever.” (Yes, sir)

How long? Not long. (All right. How long) because “you shall reap what you sow.” (Yes, sir)

How long? (How long?) Not long: (Not long)

   Truth forever on the scaffold, (Speak)
   Wrong forever on the throne, (Yes, sir)
   Yet that scaffold sways the future, (Yes, sir)
   And, behind the dim unknown,
   Standeth God within the shadow,
   Keeping watch above his own.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. (Yes, sir)

How long? Not long, (Not long) because:

   Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; (Yes, sir)
   He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; (Yes)
   He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword; (Yes, sir)
   His truth is marching on. (Yes, sir)
   He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; (Speak, sir)
   He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat. (That’s right)
   O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!
   Our God is marching on. (Yeah)
   Glory, hallelujah! (Yes, sir) Glory, hallelujah! (All right)
   Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!
   His truth is marching on. [Applause]