

## **A brief introduction to the 1965 Selma to Montgomery Marches**

*Read the following, taking breaks to watch short clips from the film “Selma”*

A well-organized, non-violent civil rights' movement had been waging war on racial discrimination in the United States for decades. However, despite important legal victories and a growing national sentiment against white supremacy, there was limited progress toward true racial equality; one example was the right to vote. The right to vote was first guaranteed to black Americans (or at least black males) in 1870 with the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment; but for nearly 100 years after, and for decades after suffrage, that right was systematically obstructed in many places across the nation. (Even now, voting rights remain contentious with portions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 having been struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013 and new voter ID laws sparking heated debate over the impact on voter participation.)

By the early 1960s, things were particularly bad in portions of the South – especially in Alabama, which had become a flashpoint for civil rights battles since Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery. Throughout the state, black citizens applying to vote were repeatedly blocked by local registrars – known to give impromptu literacy and civics tests featuring absurdly difficult questions designed to fail all takers. Furthermore, widespread poll taxes discouraged the poor and penalized those who chose to vote even if they succeeded in getting registered. By 1965, there were counties in Alabama where not a single black person had voted in any election for the previous 50 years.

In Selma – where only 130 of 15,000 black citizens were registered – citizens began to fight back. The national civil rights group, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (known as SNCC or “snick”), started organizing in the area in 1963, but faced considerable resistance, particularly from segregationist Sheriff Jim Clark who utilized local posses to intimidate, arrest and flat-out beat up those engaged in voter drives. In January of 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. – the young pastor who was becoming the nation’s most influential moral voice for nonviolent struggle against racism -- along with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (a group of ministers leading nonviolent boycotts, marches and sit-ins to protest segregation across the South) arrived in Selma to assist their growing movement.

*Reprinted courtesy of Paramount Pictures*



**Videos- The March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama**

*As you watch the following videos, think of the questions below and write down any thoughts you have on the questions asked.*

**Trailer for ‘Selma’ courtesy of Paramount Pictures**

What audience is the video intended for? What clues let you know?

Who is the central leader or hero of the March?

How are African Americans portrayed? How are white Americans portrayed?

What else do you notice?

**“The Most Powerful Instrument” courtesy of Finding Your Roots**

What audience is the video intended for? What clues let you know?

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**“Bloody Sunday” courtesy of the History Channel**

What audience is the video intended for? What clues let you know?

Who is the central leader or hero of the March?

How are African Americans portrayed? How are white Americans portrayed?

What else do you notice?