Walk to Freedom: How a Violent Response to the Civil Rights Protest at Alabama's Pettus Bridge Unwillingly Created the Voting Rights Act of 1965

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Walk to Freedom

How a Violent Response to the Civil Rights Protest at Alabama’s Pettus Bridge Unwillingly Created the Voting Rights Act of 1965

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The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was created on the streets of Selma, Alabama. The accepted history of the Civil Rights Movement maintains that it was the police violence, where unarmed protestors were beaten by Alabama law enforcement officials in full-view of television cameras, which birthed the most important Civil Rights initiative since the Emancipation Proclamation. What that history generally fails to discuss is how Civil Rights leaders developed increasingly confrontational strategies to provoke and display segregationist violence. The events at Selma were a modern morality play, composed by the ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to illuminate the legal injustice under which the American Negro had long suffered. This thesis places those protests in their global, national, regional, state, and local contexts.
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DEDICATION

In gratitude to the doctors:
    Borie, Ernstoff, Fowler, and Crosby
    Kay, Holmes, and Lang
The former healed the body while the latter nourished the spirit.
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The writer wishes to express his appreciation to Jean Brown, at the Department of American Studies, for her invaluable assistance in linking Williamsburg and Vermont.
INTRODUCTION

A stunning photograph provoked this thesis. Two pages of an otherwise uneventful issue of my alma mater’s magazine were devoted to a stark composition.

In a vivid dramatization of injustice, photojournalist Flip Schulke framed a line of protestors kneeling in prayer against the nightstick of an Alabama State Trooper. This masterful image, which simply yet eloquently portrayed a battle between good and evil, conjured images of street theater (Happe 12).

The principal goal of a Civil Rights protest was to start a process of questioning (Berger 5). From the powerful image of Marian Anderson
standing before the Lincoln Memorial to that of a battered Emmett Till, photographs and photographers exposed the reality of segregation (Berger 8). With visual media African-Americans had the means to communicate their perspectives to the nation at large (Berger 10).

Consider the photograph that provoked this thesis, where a single frame challenged an entire culture. A line of protesters kneeling in protest; among them are black and white, male and female, ordained minister and everyman. Here is a visual representation of what the movement had become, and why Selma would be remembered.

Beyond demonstrating diverse support, the presence of clergymen in the image raised moral questions. Clerical collars in mid-twentieth century America were powerful symbols of right, justice, and the establishment. In an age of the western, a roman collar was the equivalent of a white hat. By 1965 Civil Rights was not a matter of state’s rights, but right and wrong. A movement born in the churches of Montgomery, Alabama was increasingly uniting America’s secular and religious leaders.

Although violence is restrained in this particular photograph, the threat and tension that accompanies it are present. An Alabama State Trooper dominates the foreground, his hand resting on a nightstick. Although charged with the protection of the public safety, troopers were agents of the state. Alabama’s finest bore no resemblance to Mayberry’s Andy Taylor.

This thesis asserts that the ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference used the streets of an otherwise obscure Southern
town and the infant medium of television to stage a modern morality play. The beating of unarmed protesters on March 7, 1965 helped expose the depths of America's racial hatred and make the rather abstract and complicated question of Negro suffrage a compelling issue of national good (Garrow 150). With the protests at the Pettus Bridge the abstractions and complexities of Civil Rights vanished among tear gas and billy clubs. The beating of peaceful, nonviolent protestors before representatives of the world's media provided graphic evidence of America's stubborn racism. In an era when Americans were committed to fostering democracy around the world, the protests at Selma provided further evidence of homegrown apartheid.

Selma became the stage for a revived Corpus Christi Festival, where the Eucharist would unknowingly be celebrated in the streets. Reflecting on the violence of Bloody Sunday, Reverend Maurice Ouellette remarked:

"All the people who had been hurt that day, they were the body and blood of Christ. They were Christ in today's church. They offered themselves. They had walked the Stations of the Cross. They had walked across the bridge and they had been crucified." (Sisters of Selma)

The ministers of SCLC arrived in Selma mindful of the tremendous publicity they had enjoyed two years earlier in Birmingham, when graphic photographs of spectacular violence ran on the front pages of newspapers from New York to Moscow. The Albany protests failed because they lacked the spectacular violence, or possibly thereof, which attracted media attention (Roberts 376). If Selma's Sheriff Jim Clark followed Birmingham's Bull
Connor, responding with equally disproportionate and public force, the resulting national outcry could end the long-standing denial of the ballot to African-Americans (Garrow 3).

When unedited film of the protest march at Selma’s Pettus Bridge broke into a Sunday night movie about the Nuremberg Tribunals, Americans of conscience across the country were moved to action (Friedland 121). College students, ministers, university professors, and everyday citizens traveled to Selma. As Lyndon Johnson said before Congress on March 15, 1965:

“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’s not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.” (Johnson, Voting Rights Address of 1965)

When the President of the United States invoked the words of America’s foremost Civil Rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, the battle for voting rights had been won (Leonard ix). The protests at Selma had been a successful morality play, one in which the necessary components were blood sacrifice and mass media.
CHAPTER I
MORALITY PLAY

The Civil Rights Movement was a religious phenomenon (McGreevey 149). Charles Marsh characterizes its demonstrations as a radical experiment in Christian community (Marsh 52), a vivid testament to the countercultural impulses of the Christian faith (Marsh 185). Led by ordained ministers and centered in faith communities, the protests in Birmingham, Washington, and Selma were activities that rejected white supremacy, violence, and the unfulfilled promises of American capitalism (Marsh 77). The morality plays created by Dr. King and his fellow ministers were designed to showcase the conflicts between segregation and Christianity (McGreevy 68).

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was a regional alliance of African-American ministers and seminarians. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. directed the organization from its formation in 1957 until his assassination in 1968. If the protests of the SCLC were a morality play, as this thesis maintains, then the ministers of SCLC were its directors (Fairclough 121).

Love, equality, nonviolence, and respect for the dignity of the human person were at the core of King’s faith (Bennett 134). He was greatly impressed with the “Social Gospel,” a twentieth-century movement furthered by Baptist theologian and seminary professor Walter Rauschenbusch, which maintained that churches should be actively involved in real-world problems...
King would use his pulpit to speak out against discrimination, lack of economic opportunity, and ultimately the Vietnam War.

A childhood encounter with racism may have helped form his life's work. As a young student King delivered an oration entitled “The Negro and the Constitution,” only to have a bus driver insist that he and his teacher surrender their seats to newly boarded white riders. The anger of that moment remained with Dr. King throughout his life and must have been rekindled when his first congregation became involved in a bus boycott (Garrow 35).

Dr. King anticipated the solidarity of churchmen, whether black or white, during the protests of the early ‘60’s. That they did not come to his aid was a bitter disappointment (Friedland 49). King’s famed “Letter From A Birmingham Jail” was a response to ministers who had publicly stated that the boycott was ill timed (Branch 273). Perhaps King’s colleagues were unprepared for his easy mixing of America’s founding documents with Christ’s teachings.

As protests shifted throughout the south it became increasingly clear that the vote was the means by which the movement could achieve its goals (Garrow 77). The ballot could mean paved streets, decent housing, quality schools, protection against police brutality, and better paying jobs (Hite 186). If legislation could be drafted placing voter registration and elections under the protection of the federal government, an entire new order could be
established (Garrow 352). Suffrage could open legislatures, city halls, and even police departments to African-American participation.

Dr. King’s intention to secure the vote was well placed in postwar America, where the New Deal had altered the political landscape. The federal government had been transformed, taking great responsibility for employment, housing, and education (Goodwin 206). The focus of the national government was beginning to shift from the protection of property to that of individual rights. With increasing urgency, Dr. King challenged Americans to embody both their Christian and democratic principles. During the March on Washington Dr. King spoke of America’s founding documents as binding contracts that had yet to be realized in matters of Civil Rights (Lewis 229).

As the movement developed and refined its strategies, SCLC deployed morality and religious principles with greater accuracy against America’s conscience (McWhorter 76). SCLC developed a strategy that depended upon nonviolence to bring crisis and confrontation (Bennett 149). By the time SCLC reached Selma a script had developed. A notoriously segregated city would be selected and local African-Americans mobilized. Protest marches and arrests would be used to create tension, forcing white authorities to negotiate or react with violence. If they chose the latter, King exposed segregation’s inherent brutality, forcing federal authorities to intercede (Fager xii).
Nonviolence perplexed its enemies, who were deprived of the traditional means their predecessors had used for centuries to ignore demands for Civil Rights. With their public avenues filled with protesters, every depiction distributed by the national and international press prompted mayors and city councils of targeted cities had few other options but to yield to popular pressure. Tension in the streets created an insurgency that bypassed the courts, legislatures, and governor's mansions that had been unresponsive for decades (Bennett 161).

By ensuring that racist brutality was showcased on the front pages of American newspapers and led the evening news, SCLC made the question of whether Civil Rights fell to the courts, to the Congress, or to the states irrelevant. Selma's protests ensured that outcry could be transformed to action (Bennett 261).

The direct-action campaigns of the Civil Rights movement made conflict and tension a norm, bringing order and focus to an otherwise complex web of political, social, and economic forces (Reporting 711). The enrollment of nine African-Americans at Little Rock's Central High School under the leadership of Daisy Bates gave dimension to the otherwise academic issues of states rights and federal supremacy. Student led sit-ins and SNCC's Freedom Rides brought tremendous urgency to questions of equal access to public facilities. The SCLC protests which paralyzed Birmingham and Selma followed this pattern, forcing America's political leaders to choose between
sanctioning the status quo and undertaking meaningful social reform (McGreevey 148).

The most successful protests of the Civil Rights Movement created a clear line of separation between virtue and vice, good and bad (Hopper 49). These protests were vivid, public dramatizations that forced Americans to reconcile Christian principle with America’s deeply institutionalized racism (Schell xvii). That internal struggle spurred a dialogue that was paramount to the movement’s success, reawakening America’s moral conscience (Coldeway 7).

Unlike traditional drama, which is often rooted in daily life or historical events, morality plays were created to illustrate ethical conflicts (Hopper 9). These medieval works were performed in open-air settings outside a church, in a street, or on a public green (Hopper 14). The morality play was an allegory that demonstrated religious and political controversy while instructing the largely illiterate masses in how to live (Berman 14). When successful, these ritual dramas revived and animated religious principles among believers (Hopper 21-22). As trained ministers of the gospel Dr. King and his associates were certainly aware of the power of theater in the early church, which they brought to streets and sidewalks in Birmingham, Washington, and Selma (Roberts 376).

Although morality plays lacked formal separation between actor and audience, they utilized familiar dramatic structures (Hopper 27). Each began with an exposition, where setting and protagonist were introduced. A rising
action accompanied the entrance of the antagonist, and a climax was achieved when the two came into direct conflict. A falling action, or unraveling, followed before the entire work terminated with the resolution, which the medieval audience knew as a catastrophe.

By linking moral issues with traditional dramatic structure, church leaders employed theater to showcase the struggle between virtue and vice, spurring consciousness-raising among their audience (Hooper 48). Dr. King and his associates accomplished the same in Birmingham, Washington, and Selma - crafting protests that cast matters of Civil Rights in the strictest moral and ethical terms.

The hundreds of protesters who left Brown A&E chapel on foot provided the exposition, but it was only as they crossed the brow of the Edmund Pettus Bridge that television viewers sensed the ensuring climax. When Alabama State Troopers charged forward swinging nightsticks, beating unarmed protestors into unconsciousness, they who were the antagonists. In a mere fifteen minutes of news footage showed an uninterrupted narrative, putting the horrors of American segregation before the eyes of a national and international audience.

The protests at Selma, like a medieval morality play, were an extension of preaching. The demonstrations were a homily in disguise, which engaged viewers in a complex moral drama. The morality play emphasized moral conflict, subtle argument, and even straightforward terror to educate the viewer (Happe 12). Theater and the dramatic arts were useful to the church
because they encouraged the masses to become fully absorbed in an alternative reality (Berman 9). This ritual presentation of vice and virtue used abstract characters to convey meaning and truth, often achieving an emotional impact upon the viewer (Hopper 48). Bull Connor and Jim Clark were unknowing actors in an age-old ecclesiastical tradition, which had been rekindled and deployed successfully by the SCLC.

A Baptist minister, Martin Luther King Jr. was well versed in religious terminology and symbolism - which he conveyed to white America with stirring public oratory and Christian piety (Reporting 456). Major moments of the Civil Rights Movement, whether boycott or march, were highly theatrical experiences. SCLC honed a successful strategy of playing virtue against buffoonery, as was the case with their adversary in Birmingham, before embarking on the Selma campaign. One of Martin Luther King’s greatest strengths was his ability to orchestrate an extravagant outpouring of evil, which would dramatize the immorality of segregation (Reporting 578). Where early protests like Montgomery and Nashville were launched by local actors, the protests in Birmingham and Selma were carefully planned spectacles organized and executed by an outside organization.

The Selma campaign would be King’s last great victory before Civil Rights was overtaken by Vietnam, urban crisis, and the arms race (March 140). The movement rapidly split into activist groups after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, obscuring core issues of economic redistribution
and racial reconciliation among a clash of personalities and strategies (March 199).

Selma’s highly theatrical protests were successful because the resulting public outcry pushed President Johnson, who had pledged democracy for Southeast Asia, to undertake meaningful voting rights legislation. The police riot at the Pettus Bridge helped create the coercive force that Reinhold Niebuhr believed necessary to overtake the innate selfishness of groups (March 26). Yet the moral lessons conveyed by those protests would not be illusions created within the temporary reality of theater, they were a blood sacrifice which shocked a people who believed their nation was a citadel of justice and democracy (Schell vii).

If the Civil Rights Movement was the Civil War’s final phase, many of its participants were bloodstained veterans. From the beating and murder of Emmett Till through the police riot at the Pettus Bridge, African-Americans were continually targeted by segregationist violence. (Durham 7).

After the Supreme Court’s stunning unanimous decision in Brown a jubilant Thurgood Marshall declared that school segregation would be eliminated within five years (Kluger 902). Although the high court decreed that there was no real difference between white and black children, Marshall and his colleagues naively believed that racists would respect the rule of law. The four presidents who grappled with desegregation crisis confirmed otherwise (Kluger 808).
Segregation reinforced the deeply held belief that African-Americans were inferior beings. White Southerners would not dismantle the Jim Crow system because nine men in black robes told the South it was wrong (Reporting 869). The challenge to integrate schools was a direct assault upon the region’s folkways and a deeply entrenched oligarchy to which the old south rose in massive defiance. (Reporting 209) Citizens’ Councils were formed to keep the people whose ancestors had been in slavery as near that stage as possible (Kluger 852). There was little reason to burn a cross when a bank could foreclose.

Rather than condemn racial discrimination and set an example for the nation, President Eisenhower said little in the wake of the Brown decision (Reporting 709). Despite the awful legacy of Hitler’s genocide, the collapse of colonial rule, and far-reaching Cold War rhetoric of freedom and democracy no anti-segregationist political faction stood to challenge the status quo of 1954 (Daniel 22). This was particularly disappointing given the service and sacrifice by millions of African-Americans during the Second World and Korean Wars. Military service under the banner of promoting democracy abroad would push Harry Briggs, Oliver Brown, and Medgar Evers to demand their rights (Reporting 52).

Although racism could have been attacked as hypocritical, leaders neither North or South seemed willing to reconcile practice with principle until the body of a fifteen year old boy from Chicago was found floating in the Tallahatchie river and nine Arkansas teenagers risked their lives to attend
high school (Kluger 869). It was the blood of Emmett Till and the facing down of a lynch mob by Elizabeth Eckford that captured America’s attention.

Emmett Louis Till may have been the first martyr of the Civil Rights movement. By flirting with a white woman in Mississippi, whether in actuality or imagination, Till violated a basic premise of what was then known as the southern way of life. His brutal beating and murder at the hands of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam would have gone unnoticed had it not been for the steely determination of Mamie Bradbury Till. (Reporting 235)

By allowing Jet Magazine to publish two photographs of her good son, one a family snapshot and the other showing his mutilated corpse, Mamie Bradbury Till engaged in a sophisticated campaign of consciousness raising which electrified the black community and made his son’s killing an example of southern racism. The resulting publicity forced Mississippi authorities to file murder charges against Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. The not guilty verdict of an all-white jury was a painful reminder that neither the courts nor the police could be depended upon to enforce the civil rights of African-Americans.

Some four months after the Till murder, the NAACP’s program of litigation and legislation was overtaken by mass protest and civil disobedience (Arsenault 80).

The Montgomery Bus Boycott marked the birth of a theological drama (March 6). In regular mass-meetings Dr. King and his fellow ministers made clear that segregation was a byproduct of racism and white supremacy, which
were totally incompatible with Christianity and democratic values (Kluger 961).

The Montgomery protests interwove redemptive suffering with the cross and resurrection (Marsh 44). Here was a faith-based movement, sincerely grounded in the transformative power of religious institutions (March 5). The Supreme Court vindicated the Montgomery protests, yet the ruling was so narrow in scope that only the segregation on Montgomery’s municipal buses was declared unconstitutional. Although the Civil War amendments protected all Americans from discrimination, the high court was unwilling to issue another sweeping ruling where law and custom were deeply intertwined (Kluger 751).

The integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957 at bayonet point demonstrated that violence, or the immediate threat thereof, would force the executive branch to defend African-American’s rights. President Eisenhower took decisive action when Governor Faubus left nine teenagers at the mercy of a mob (Reporting 305). Little Rock’s organizers understood that it would take a vivid example of the continued moral, physical, and political subjugation of African-Americans to smash through white America’s deafness (Reporting 307-8).

Some of the most dramatic images of the Civil Rights Movement came from the Freedom Rides, when the Congress of Racial Equality deliberately precipitated a crisis in Alabama (Arsenault 164). Although the Till case and the desegregation of Little Rock’s Central High school pierced the veil of
public complacency, Americans were unprepared for images of a burning Greyhound bus outside of Anniston (Arsenault 165). It hardly seemed just that United States citizens were beaten bloody and nearly killed for simply sitting next to someone of another race.

By welcoming white violence demonstrators generated tremendous national and international publicity, which then forced action from the white power structure (Reporting 455). The willingness of student leaders to, in the words of Freedom Rider John Lewis, “give a little bit of blood to redeem the soul of America” was a new phenomenon - one to which the Kennedy administration was unprepared to respond (Arsenault 513). The moral warfare of the Freedom Rides stunned an administration mired in anti-communism. John Kennedy’s passion for Cold War politics forced him to openly confront the hypocrisy of Jim Crow and phrase the struggle for Civil Rights in moral terms (Arsenault 5).

The Freedom Rides marked an all-out assault on Jim Crow (Arsenault 403). The impending loss of racial privilege and social control created a panic throughout the Deep South (Arsenault 346). The Freedom Rides, and the subsequent sit-ins, confirmed the power of public protest (Arsenault 462). Well-publicized brutality had successfully dramatized the issue of segregation, making the morality play and blood sacrifice key ingredients for successful protests (Arsenault 397). Television’s unflinching gaze transformed bullies into savages, allowing demonstrators to seize the moral high ground while exposing segregation’s absurdities (Daniel 285).
By 1963 the Civil Rights Movement had celebrated its eighth anniversary and there was an increasing desperation among whites to maintain their long-enjoyed economic, political, and social dominance. Given all that was at stake in Birmingham, it is little wonder that Bull Connor succumbed to all the pathological emotions racists feel while in full-view of television cameras (Reporting 474).

The Birmingham protests, dubbed “Project C” by the SCLC, were designed to subtly provoke law-enforcement officials into abusing protesters before the cameras of television and photojournalists (Aretha 27). When a white police officer allowed his German shepherd to sinks its teeth into the stomach of a young African-American male, the photograph struck the American mind like lighting (Newton 401). Here was the value of street theater during America’s Civil Rights movement, with violence came movement.

That Bull Connor was operating under the dated assumption that violent techniques, particularly in the use of fire-hoses and police dogs, would deter protesters was a boon to a movement (Reporting 150). The unthinking opposition of Bull Connor and Jim Clark pushed the Civil Rights Movement forward (Reporting 452). That Connor was at his most brutal and unsuspecting on Good Friday was a complete realization of SCLC’s strategy (Kluger 954). Photographs and television footage of young black protestors being repulsed with fire hoses and police dogs conjured up the very images of sacrifice and death that are central tenets of Southern religion. That it was all
happening on a day in the church calendar that marked the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was not lost on residents of the region or the nation at large (Matthews 1). Photographs from Birmingham helped transform the nation mood to make legislation both possible and necessary (Durham 28-9).

The March on Washington, which came in the immediate wake of the Birmingham protests, showcased far-reaching support for federal Civil Rights legislation in the magnificent arena of the nation’s capitol (Reporting 9). The day’s events were planned and carried out under the watchful eye of Bayard Rustin, who believed that a demonstration was a theatrical event that would create a memorable experience for the viewer. That Rustin understood and utilized the power of television, symbolism, allegory, and biblical imagery was undeniable as the protest unfolded (Reporting 131). There were unforgettable images of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. standing in the shadow of the great emancipator while calling for basic human rights.

Although not planned as street theater by movement organizers, the integration crisis at the University of Mississippi produced remarkable images as well. Scenes of federal marshals fighting back against a mob with tear gas and nightsticks made clear that Mississippians would shed their own blood to defend the old south (Dunham 18).

The movement recaptured martyrdom when Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman were murdered during SNCC’s Mississippi campaign. The arrest of two Mississippi law enforcement officials, Sheriff Rainey and Deputy Price, shocked residents of the north and west into
the realization that “a police state” existed in America. Rather than protect Civil Rights workers, local authorities could be willing accomplices to segregationist violence. In one of those rare instances since reconstruction, there was again widespread support for the protection of the lives and liberties of African-Americans (Reporting 249). Movement leader Bob Moses noted the necessity of sacrificial violence:

“Other people are going to be killed. No privileged group in history has ever given up anything, without some kind of blood sacrifice.” (Levy 138)

From the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 through the slayings of three young SNCC staffers in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964 the first near decade of the Civil Rights movement is a history of compelling imagery and blood sacrifice. The two went hand-in-hand for much of the movement, creating the shock necessary to prod a reluctant nation to confront its own system of racial apartheid. To win the battle for voting rights, MLK and the SCLC chose to stage a drama the following year, in Selma, where a multitude of volunteers shed their blood to change America (Aretha 102). The unearned suffering of those marchers helped change the balance of power in the United States, vividly undermining a long established order.

A trinity of faith, action, and outrage seemed to motive white supremacists when their worldview was openly challenged by Civil Rights protestors (Matthews 6). When the purity of segregation was challenged, white men perceived that they had been granted permission to sacrifice offending African-Americans (Matthews 9). Such metaphors of torture and
death are familiar in Protestant Christianity, particularly given emphasis on retributive justice of which Jesus Christ is a celebrated exemplar (Matthews 11). These ideas, detailed by Donald Matthews, do help explain the brutality of American racism, most notably in Alabama and Mississippi. The attacks on Freedom Riders, Civil Rights volunteers, and schoolchildren were not far removed from the lynch law that empowered able-bodied white men to maintain slavery and later segregation.

Television transformed the Civil Rights movement by making the invisible visible. Television transported the viewer to the streets of Alabama and Mississippi, forcing them to honestly evaluate democracy’s aspirations and realities (Graham 179). Mass media eliminated the geographic isolation that had long protected local and regional identities and customs.

Americans became conditioned to televised spectacle in the post-war era (Graham 182). They watched Julie Andrews in “Cinderella,” the annual crowning of Miss America from Atlantic City, and Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade from New York. Television became a window to the world, uniting an otherwise dispersed population with the power of camera and microphone (Berger 109). Television, which had become a means of selling products, became a giant mirror that offered unprecedented glimpses of reality (Graham 1).

Television came of age with the Civil Rights movement. The integration of Little Rock’s high school was the first “race” story extensively documented by television news (Graham 40). Although athletes and
entertainers had challenged the color line for decades, television captured the south’s psychological and social crisis within a national theater space (Graham 42). By the close of the decade the white southern rebel, who had refused to sheathe his sword at Appomattox, was a cinematic figure (Graham 145).

Bull Connor and Jim Clark became leading television villains. Before cameras their resistance became assault, relaying the perspective of African-Americans to the nation as a whole for the first time. When Jim Clark lunged at a television camera he attacked the viewing audience, whose members could no longer take comfort in silence, omission, and selective memory (Graham 154). American ideals became little more than a sham before a watching world (Graham 118). Television exposed the physical and moral scars of racism, transforming reporters into national prophets who exposed their nation’s sins (Graham 170).

The Civil Rights movement foreshadowed the seamless mixture of American history and film, and hinted at the power of media to shape historical events (Graham 190-1). Television put previously unimagined power into the hands of an educated and vocal group of African-American ministers, hinting at the power of media in the modern age (Berger 131).
CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS THEATER AT SELMA

Alabama was distinctive during the Civil Rights movement as a particularly intransigent bastion of white racism. George Wallace was governor and the Citizens Council movement was born the cradle of former Confederacy (Hein 14). Reminders of the Civil War were everywhere. The very landscape of the Old South, with its picturesque antebellum homes and heroes cast in bronze and carved from marble, instructed the Southern people in matters of racial superiority (Carter 83). The very landscape evoked a catechism of white supremacy.

Alabama waged war against integration. Its courts drove the NAACP from the state and temporarily silenced Civil Rights coverage with a libel suit against the New York Times. The state moved against King himself by issuing a warrant on tax charges (Garrow 130). The state assembly repealed Alabama’s compulsory school attendance laws and authorized the closure of any facilities overtaken by disorder (Jordan 130).

School integration was a consistent flash point in Alabama. In early 1956 a young black woman, Autherine Lucy, was met by a brick-throwing mob of 3,000 as she tried to attend classes at the University of Alabama. Although more than 1,000 students of color had already been matriculated at
Southern universities without incident, things were different in Mobile (Carter 83). A year before the integration crisis in Little Rock, which required the presence of the U.S. Army to quell segregationist violence, Alabama was pioneering the use of mob violence (Carter 83). Segregation’s opponents would also use that state as a laboratory, but they would labor to develop and refine new techniques of social protest (Roberts 376).

As the white south struggled to reconcile Christianity and white supremacy, nightmares of a second reconstruction were created out of whole cloth to justify violence and terrorism (Carter 37). Law enforcement, Citizens Councils, and the Klan acted to protect Southern culture, laboring to reverse the New Deal emphasis on equality and opportunity (McWhorter 99). Sheriff Clark likened his posse to Washington’s troops (Jackson 59) and Governor Wallace ordered images of the Confederate battle flag mounted on the front bumper of every state police cruiser (Fager 221). Deputies and troopers alike defended the folklore and traditions of their state by breaking up Civil Rights activities (Hein 19).

SCLC expected Alabama’s violent segregationists to shatter the image of a genteel region (Fairclough 210). What happened in Alabama was as close to a race war as America had ever come. George Wallace and his policy of stubborn resistance paved the way for passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, putting segregationists on a collision course with the ministers of SCLC (Carter 262).
The events of Sunday March 7 1965 were a compelling moral drama, street theater of the highest order. Television viewers saw a double-line of marchers cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge before the camera turned to reveal a line of state troopers blocking the entire highway. Adversaries advanced upon the marchers, pushing forward as tear gas canisters began to explode. Searing images of troopers beating African-Americans interrupted ABC’s "Judgement at Nuremburg" (Friedland 121). This juxtaposition linked the silent acquiescence of the German people to Hitler’s policies with the tolerance of institutional racism in America (Roberts 386).

Selma became a war zone that Sunday afternoon in 1965. Fifty-six demonstrators were hospitalized (Thornton 488). Not unexpectedly, Alabama authorities had revealed the face of southern racism to the world (Chesnut 216). The people who had allowed the firebombing of a bus and the deployment of police dogs and fire-hoses against children had not disappointed the Civil Rights Movement.

The beatings at the Pettus Bridge forced Americans to honestly evaluate the chasm between their democratic ideals and the reality of daily life for African-Americans. The events in Selma, captured in an uninterrupted narrative by television cameras, so horrified the nation that thousands of religious leaders, educators, and students rushed to Selma to stand in solidarity with the African-American community (Fager xii).

Dr. King had waited ten years to have the weight of public opinion embrace his cause, during which time SCLC had discovered and refined their
use of morality plays. The images from Selma were so powerful that the federal government brought forth the 1965 Voting Rights Act, one of the most powerful Civil Rights measures in American history. The legislation outlawed traditional impediments to voter registration, permanently altering the pattern of southern and national politics (Fager xii).
CONCLUSION

Leaders in the Civil Rights movement produced spectacles that expressed discontent with white supremacy (Guthrie 436). Theatrical acts conveyed political messages to larger audiences, which were forced to digest their meaning (Guthrie 437). This form of consciousness-raising made injustice visible. Freedom Rides, sit-ins, and marches dramatized discrimination while serving as catalysts for far-reaching social change (Guthrie 449).

Film offered undeniable evidence of American racism and state-sponsored coercion through a universal medium, relaying images of organizing, demonstrations, and police brutality directly into people’s homes. What appeared in newspapers and on television explained abstract concepts while humanizing protestors and leaders. By recording the mayhem and violence of events contrived to provoke white supremacists, photographs offered an immediacy and reality that would invite scrutiny from the nation and the world (Rainford 2). Photographs simultaneously became weapons and shields, creating a window that shaped public opinion while protecting actual participants from excesses (Rainford 10).

A seismic shift in public opinion routinely followed spectacular segregationist violence, contributing to breakthrough legislation that opened the ballot box and halls of power to African-Americans (Kroroszynski 1).
Before the close of the twentieth century, 4,000 African Americans held elected office below the Mason-Dixon line, forty-times that of a generation or two prior (Koroszynski 9). So much is written about the Civil Rights movement because it has a profound effect on the American nation, challenging the entire white power structure. The iconic images of the movement are an inscrutable part of American history, cultural documents that reflect both reality and aspiration. The morality plays staged at Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge captured the anxiety, tension, vulnerability, and violence of a segregated society (Raiford 14).

In a single remarkable frame photographer Flip Schulke captured the fundamental tenets of the Civil Rights Movement, linking theology and protest. His image preserved an otherwise fleeting moment of a modern morality play, one that depended upon blood sacrifice and mass media to communicate the injustices of segregation (Cripps 1). At one point during the Selma campaign Dr. King chastised Schulke for interrupting segregationist violence, telling the photographer:

“The world doesn’t know this happened, because you didn’t photograph it. I’m not being cold-blooded about it, but it is so much more important for you to take a picture of us getting beaten up than for you to be another person joining in the fray.” (Roberts 383)

Dr. King understood the power of graphic images to communicate racism to the nation at large (Roberts 383).

The protests at Selma were a high water mark of the Civil Rights Movement, where major voting rights legislation was won through a cunning strategy that combined civil disobedience and blood sacrifice. The events at
Selma, coupled with other protests, began a new era in American political life – one in which African-Americans would become mayors, police chiefs, congressmen, and even President of the United States.
Thesis Bibliography


VITA

Brian C. Rainville

Brian C. Rainville was born on August 14, 1973 in St. Albans, Vermont. He graduated from Missisquoi Valley Union High School in June of 1991 and from Saint Michael’s College in May of 1995, with degrees from the latter in American Studies and Secondary Education. Brian C. Rainville began teaching at Randolph Union High School in January of 1996, where he has since been named an Outstanding Vermont Educator and has twice been selected by his peers as Teacher of the Year. He has directed the theater program since 1997, which has claimed three New England Championships during his tenure.

Awarded a Senior Fellowship by the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation in 1998, Brian C. Rainville began graduate study at the College of William and Mary in August of 1999. A battle with cancer interrupted his study, but in the summer of 2001 he completed coursework required by his sponsor at Georgetown University. He has since undertaken coursework at the University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary while meeting the responsibilities of his full-time professional responsibilities at Randolph Union. Soon to be entering his fifteenth year of classroom service, Brian C. Rainville relishes the opportunity to share his love of history and theater with students in rural central Vermont.