

# Issues & Views

by Clayborne Carson

## 1965: A Decisive Turning Point in the Long Struggle for Voting Rights

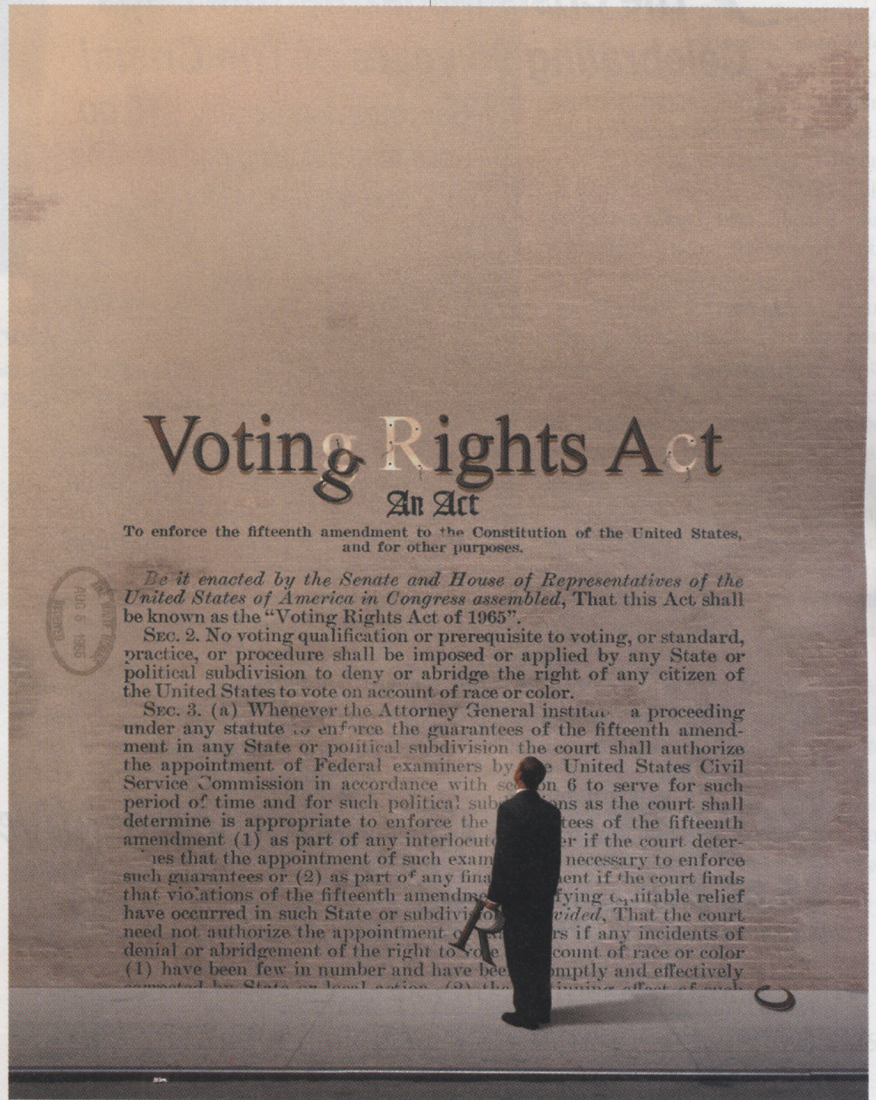
At the beginning of 1965, African Americans were starting to enjoy the new opportunities made possible by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They were, nonetheless, split over the future direction of their freedom struggle. Years of protest, grassroots organizing, litigation and civil rights lobbying had dealt a decisive defeat to the Jim Crow system of segregation in the South. Yet, despite major civil rights gains, Black political activism continued to intensify in many parts of the nation.

The 1964 Mississippi Summer Project had begun with the murder of three civil rights workers and culminated with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) unsuccessful demand to be seated at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, N.J. Rioting had erupted in Harlem, N.Y., Rochester, N.Y., and other urban areas, establishing an escalating pattern of long, hot summers of urban racial violence.

In addition, a growing White backlash against Black militancy led some Black leaders to back a moratorium on mass protests during the presidential race that pitted President Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, against Republican challenger Barry Goldwater. But soon after Johnson's landslide victory, Martin Luther King Jr. called for renewed mass protests in the Deep South "based around the right to vote."

When King returned from Oslo, Norway, after receiving the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, he announced that he would return to the "valley filled with literally thousands of Negroes in Alabama and Mississippi who are brutalized, intimidated and sometimes killed when they seek to register and vote."

King had long seen voting rights as the essential goal of the Black freedom struggle. "Give us the ballot, and we will



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no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights," he had insisted in his 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom address — the first of his two great orations at the Lincoln Memorial.

NAACP leaders had similarly maintained that voting rights were a crucial foundation for racial advancement. In the 1940s the NAACP's legal campaign had

produced the Supreme Court's landmark *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) ruling banning all-White primary elections in the South, where White voters were still loyal to the Democratic Party. This decision prompted a dramatic increase in Black political participation, especially in Texas (where the case originated), Georgia and Florida. The NAACP's lobbying efforts had also



played a crucial role in shaping voting rights provisions of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960 and 1964. Clarence Mitchell, director of the NAACP's Washington Bureau, believed that vigorous enforcement of these laws was needed more than new legislation.

The young civil rights workers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) also believed in stronger enforcement of existing legislation. As a result, they shifted their focus from desegregation protests to voter registration efforts. At the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, SNCC chairman John Lewis had criticized President John F. Kennedy's proposed civil rights legislation, pointing out that, even if it passed, it would not help Blacks who lacked the educational qualifications to vote. "One man, one vote is the African cry; it is ours, too," Lewis boldly remarked at the march. A year later, after President Johnson rebuffed the MFDP's effort to unseat the all-White delegation from Mississippi, SNCC vowed to step up its voter registration campaign in Alabama, where SNCC "field secretaries" had been organizing since 1963.

### Power Struggle

Although the major civil rights organizations agreed on the need for stronger enforcement of existing civil rights laws, they differed sharply about how to achieve further voting rights gains.

The NAACP, under the leadership of Roy Wilkins, had often questioned the effectiveness of mass protests, particularly after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Wilkins and Mitchell supported the Johnson administration's decision to put off submitting new voting rights legislation until Johnson's ambitious Great Society proposals could be pushed through Congress. They were already working closely with Justice Department officials to file suits against literacy tests or outright voter intimidation and to draft new voting rights legislation in preparation for the time when Johnson decided the moment was right to send it to Congress.

King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were less willing to defer action on voting rights. Justice Department lawsuits made little headway in removing obstacles to Black voting. "The patchwork reforms brought about by the laws of 1957, 1960 and 1964 had helped," King explained, "but the denial of suffrage had gone on too long, and had caused too deep a hurt for

Negroes to wait out the time required by slow, piecemeal enforcement procedures."

When King met with Johnson in December 1964, he urged the president to include a new voting rights bill in his legislative agenda. "Well, you know, political reform is as necessary as anything if we're going to solve all these other problems," King explained. Johnson responded by warning that the introduction of a voting rights bill during the next session of Congress might damage his entire legislative program. "I can't get it through, because I need the votes of the Southern bloc to get these other things through."

Early in January 1965, SCLC launched its voting rights campaign in Selma, Ala., at the invitation of the group's local affiliate, the Dallas County Voters League, and the Dallas County Improvement Association. With the exception of Mississippi, Alabama

**"This is Selma, Alabama. There are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls."**

had the lowest proportion of Blacks on the registration rolls. Despite constituting a majority of Dallas County's residents, less than 3 percent of eligible Black residents had been registered and even fewer were registered in the nearby rural counties.

Building on SNCC's ongoing organizing effort, SCLC's campaign emphasized staging "Freedom Days" during which local residents would attempt to register to vote and thereby expose the obstinacy of local registrars. Unlike SNCC's little-publicized central Alabama project, however, SCLC hoped that King's involvement would attract national press attention to the continued denial of Black voting rights.

SNCC's Alabama staff reacted suspiciously to news of SCLC's Selma campaign. In 1963, student activists Bernard and Colia Lafayette had initiated SNCC's central Alabama project, but the SNCC workers had made little headway against entrenched segregationist opposition. Their efforts had received little press attention when compared with the extensive coverage of the SCLC's 1963 Birmingham campaign or the 1964 Mississippi Summer

Project. Silas Norman, who took over SNCC's Alabama project in early 1965, sought not only to register Black voters, but also to stimulate independent Black political mobilization that would build upon SNCC's experience in Mississippi.

Although SNCC workers knew that King would draw press attention and perhaps prompt federal intervention against White Alabama authorities, they were also worried that King's charismatic presence would undermine their long-standing efforts to develop self-reliant grass-roots leadership and organizations. Nevertheless, they agreed not to hamper SCLC's campaign and even offered their equipment and facilities to SCLC representatives. SNCC workers initially sought to remain on the sidelines, expecting that Black residents would eventually recognize the deficiencies of SCLC's leader-centered approach to organizing. But SNCC's hands-off stance became increasingly difficult to maintain once SCLC's campaign gained momentum and police responded violently.

After King was arrested on Feb. 1 during a demonstration at the Selma courthouse, he instructed his associates to put pressure on Johnson. "We should not be too soft," he advised in a handwritten note from his jail cell. "We have the offensive." King also drafted a letter from Selma's jail that he hoped would garner support for the voting rights campaign. "Why are we in jail?" he asked, before explaining what prompted the SCLC's campaign.

"Have you ever been required to answer 100 questions on government, some abstruse even to a political scientist specialist, merely to vote? Have you ever stood in line with over a hundred others and after waiting an entire day seen less than ten given the qualifying test? THIS IS SELMA, ALABAMA. THERE ARE MORE NEGROES IN JAIL WITH ME THAN THERE ARE ON THE VOTING ROLLS."

### The Overture

While King was in jail in Selma, Malcolm X arrived in Alabama at the invitation of Tuskegee Institute students affiliated with SNCC. Since breaking with Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm had moved beyond the apolitical stance of his mentor and had sought to ally himself with militant grass-roots activists in SNCC and other organizations.

During the fall of 1964, he had a chance meeting in Nairobi with Lewis and another SNCC worker who were, like Malcolm, seeking to forge ties with African nations.



The Nairobi meeting was followed by a series of attempts by Malcolm to establish links with SNCC. Malcolm's Pan-African perspective and his emphasis on self-defense and racial pride converged with ideas gaining acceptance in SNCC.

In December 1964, he spoke at a Harlem rally supporting the MFDP's challenge to the seating of Mississippi's all-White Congressional delegation. During the same month, he invited Fannie Lou Hamer and the SNCC Freedom Singers to appear as honored guests at a meeting of his recently formed Organization of Afro-American Unity. While hosting a group of Mississippi teenagers brought together by SNCC, Malcolm applauded "the successful linking together of our problem with the African problem, or making our problem a world problem."

When he traveled to Selma in February 1965, Malcolm hoped to meet with King, to whom he had sent letters over the years. When King's incarceration prevented this, Malcolm emphasized to Coretta Scott King his desire to work more closely with civil rights activists in the South. Malcolm told her, "I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult." He added, "If the White people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King."

Malcolm's attempt to ally himself with the voting rights struggle was cut off when he was assassinated on Feb. 21, nearly three weeks after he returned from Selma.

#### Johnson v. King

A few days before Malcolm's death, the Selma protests took a new turn when state police severely wounded 26-year-old Jimmy Lee Jackson in Marion, Ala., as he was attempting to defend his mother from a police attack during a demonstration. Jackson's death a week later prompted King lieutenant James Bevel to suggest a protest march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery.

When King delivered the eulogy at Jackson's funeral, he announced that the march would begin on March 7. He placed responsibility for Jackson's death not only on segregationists, but also on the complacency of some Black Americans, as well as "the timidity of a federal government that is willing to spend millions of dollars a day to defend freedom in Vietnam, but cannot protect the rights of its citizens at home."



From left, leaders Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney Young with President Lyndon Johnson, who signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

"I don't see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam [and] the Congo ... and he can't send troops to Selma."

Dismayed that the demonstrations in Alabama were forcing his hand, Johnson tried in vain to persuade King to defuse the situation. When the two men met briefly on Feb. 9, he privately confided to King that he now accepted the need for new legislation. King remained convinced, however, that protests should continue in Alabama to maintain pressure on the president.

The relationship between the two men was superficially cordial, but was also strained by growing differences over American military escalation in Vietnam and by their mutual realization that the FBI was maintaining close surveillance of King.

On the eve of the Selma campaign, King had received a tape recording and an anonymous letter, which he quickly surmised had been drafted on orders of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, that threatened to expose King's adulterous

behavior. The letter concluded with an invitation for suicide: "There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation." The FBI's vendetta against King was intended to displace him as a national leader, but it actually reinforced his determination to steer an independent course — consulting with Johnson, but also prodding him through sustained mass protests in Alabama.

#### The Last Straw

SNCC's staff grudgingly decided to support SCLC's Alabama campaign when John Lewis, a member of SCLC's board as well as chairman of SNCC, insisted on participating in the scheduled march from Selma to Montgomery.

Lewis and activist Hosea Williams led more than 500 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of Selma, Ala., and were met by state troopers and deputies.

Television and newspaper photographers captured images of the police-initiated violence on "Bloody Sunday," which came to symbolize the viciousness of segregationist resistance. "I don't see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam [and] the Congo ... and he can't send troops to Selma," Lewis complained at a church mass meeting before being taken to the hospital. "Next time we march, we may have to keep going when we get to Montgomery. We may



have to go on to Washington.”

On March 11, King arrived to lead another group of marchers across the Pettus Bridge. Once again, marchers were confronted by police on the other side. Making a decision that would stir resentment in the marchers' ranks, King unexpectedly turned the demonstrators around rather than provoke a repetition of Bloody Sunday. “It was not that we didn't intend to go on to Montgomery, but that, in consideration of our commitment to non-violent action, we knew we could not go under those conditions,” King remarked.

Later in the day, the Rev. James Reeb, one of many civil rights supporters who responded to King's call for outside support, was attacked by segregationists while walking through Selma with three other ministers. President Johnson sent a plane to transport Reeb's wife and father from Boston to Birmingham, where Reeb later died.

In sharp contrast to the earlier death of Jimmy Lee Jackson, the killing of a

told Congress and a national television audience in what many would remember as his greatest speech as president.

As NAACP lobbyist Mitchell watched from the gallery, Johnson explained that previous legislation had been insufficient to overcome obstacles to Black voting. What was needed, he said, was new legislation that “will establish a simple, uniform standard” for voter registration. Federal voting registrars would be sent to areas where there was a systematic denial of equal voting rights. Johnson described voting rights demonstrations as necessary “to call attention to injustice, designed to provoke change, designed to stir reform.” He evoked the broader implications of the voting rights campaign:

“What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes,



**Civil Rights activist Hosea Williams tries to escape during “Bloody Sunday” on March 7, when Alabama state troopers attacked civil rights demonstrators.**

White minister brought an immediate national response. Civil rights supporters from across the nation arrived in Selma for a memorial service. In many cities, thousands of demonstrators staged sympathy protests demanding federal intervention. President Johnson then used the Selma crisis as an opportunity for a nationally televised address to propose new voting rights legislation.

### **The Finest Hour**

Addressing Congress on March 15, Johnson presented his voting rights proposals. “At times, history and fate meet at a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom,” the president

but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome!”

King, who was watching Johnson's address with Lewis at a home in Selma, shed tears as he heard Johnson adopt the slogan of the Black freedom struggle.

He later called the White House to offer his congratulations. “It is ironic, Mr. President, that after a century, a southern white President would help lead the way toward the salvation of the Negro,” King said. Johnson replied by expressing his own appreciation. “You're the leader who is making it all possible. I'm just following along trying to do what's right.”



As Johnson's voting rights proposal moved steadily through Congress, the struggle to get the legislation passed exposed divisions between African Americans and the rest of America. Increasing congressional opposition to Johnson's legislative initiatives forced voting rights supporters to accept compromises, such as removal of provisions to eliminate poll taxes in state elections.

Ultimately, the House passed the legislation on Aug. 3 by an overwhelming vote of 328 to 74. The Senate followed suit a day later by a 79 to 18 vote, after invoking cloture to overcome a filibuster by Southern opponents.

The new legislation suspended the use of literacy tests and other such devices in areas of the South where few Black citizens were registered. States that were covered included Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Virginia and parts of North Carolina. In these areas, officials were prohibited from changing voting requirements unless they demonstrated to the U.S. Attorney General or a federal court that such changes would not have a discriminatory impact. In addition, federal examiners were authorized to review the qualifications of prospective voters.

On Aug. 6, the major civil rights leaders gathered in Washington for the signing of the Voting Rights Act. Rosa Parks, Wilkins, Lewis and King were among those who were given the pens that Johnson used to sign the legislation.

"That day was a culmination, a climax, the end of a very long road," Lewis later wrote. "In a sense it represented a high point in modern America, probably the nation's finest hour in terms of civil rights."

#### Reality Check

The sense of optimism and unity stimulated by the Voting Rights Act was short-lived. Wilkins recalled that the signing ceremony had suggested "we were bringing to an end all the years of oppression. The truth was that we were just beginning a new ordeal."

Less than a week after the signing, widespread racial violence erupted in the Watts section of Los Angeles.

King rushed to the scene of the riots. "As soon as we began to see our way clear in the South, the shock and horror of Northern riots exploded before our eyes, and we saw that the problems of the Negro go far beyond mere racial segregation," he



**President Johnson presents Martin Luther King with one of 72 pens used to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964.**

remarked. "The catastrophe in Los Angeles was a result of seething and rumbling tensions throughout our nation and, indeed, the world."

The events of subsequent years would reshape the perspectives of the architects of the Selma voting rights movement and the Voting Rights Act. During the spring of 1966, Lewis would lose his position as SNCC chairman to Stokely Carmichael, who saw SNCC's role independent of the Democratic Party.

The following summer, the voting

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rights march through Mississippi was marked with contention. The NAACP refused to participate after clashing with SNCC representatives. Carmichael's new Black Power slogan placed King on the defensive and ignited a bitter debate among national Black leaders.

Meanwhile, President Johnson's preoccupation with the war in Vietnam shifted his attention from the Great Society and provoked criticism from SNCC, CORE and, by 1967, SCLC.

During the tumultuous year following passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it was hardly possible for civil rights proponents to appreciate the momentousness of the achievement without also acknowledging its limitations. The

Voting Rights Act expanded the most essential of all rights of citizenship, but by itself the legislation could do little to overcome the legacy of centuries of racial oppression.

The considerable expansion of Black voting in the South did not bring about a commensurate increase in Black political power. Black voters overwhelmingly supported Democratic candidates — unsurprisingly, given the role of Democrats in the passage of civil rights legislation.

But Johnson's victory in 1964 became the last presidential election in which a majority of White voters and a majority of Black voters backed the same candidate. Most Southern White Democrats soon switched their allegiances to the Republican Party. Black voters could not prevent the demise of Johnson's liberalism or the subsequent rise of Ronald Reagan's conservatism.

#### Success and Disappointment

Although many of the obstacles to voting were removed, today Black voting continues to be hampered by laws discouraging registration and voting by those who move frequently, work on Election Day or have felony records. Still further efforts will be needed to ensure that political rights can be translated into better lives.

Nevertheless, the growth of Black voting strength during the past 50 years has still had great historical significance. If Black voters did not prevent the overall conservative trend in national politics, they have reshaped politics in many states, cities and towns.

Black political power has created many opportunities. There are now more than 9,000 Black elected officials, more than six times the number in 1970. The Congressional Black Caucus now has 43 members — including former SNCC chairman John Lewis — compared with 13 when it was established in 1969.

Black voting strength was crucial in the election of the only two Democratic presidents elected since passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Thus, African Americans have become an important, if not decisive, force in American politics. The rights secured in 1964 and 1965 are even more secure today due to the consolidation of Black political power at the local and national levels.

**Clayborne Carson** is a professor of history at Stanford University and editor of the King Papers Project.