



*WALKING WITH
THE WIND*

A Memoir of the Movement

JOHN LEWIS

Anarchy and chaos.

Freedom and openness.

It's amazing how one set of values can slide almost imperceptibly into another, how principles that are treasured at one moment as positive and healthy can, with time and a shift in circumstances, become forces of destruction and divisiveness.

That was what had happened to SNCC by the fall of 1964. The precepts that had been so fundamental to us when we began—decentralization, minimal structure, a distrust of leadership—were now beginning to tear us apart. At the time I left for Africa that September, I knew these forces were at work, that issues of SNCC's identity and its direction were being called into question. Our people were upset. They were angry. They were frustrated. But I had no idea they would move so far and so fast in the mere ten weeks that I was gone. By the time I returned that November SNCC was shaking at its very roots, fragmenting and threatening to fall apart under its own weight.

The "weight" of SNCC—the growth in size of our membership—had become a serious issue. After Freedom Summer ended, a large number of volunteers in Mississippi stayed on as SNCC field workers, swelling our staff to nearly two hundred, by far the highest number of full-time personnel we had ever had. And we weren't prepared to deal with it.

SNCC had begun as a group with its focus on college campuses. During the early sit-in period we were composed of representatives—mostly students—of each Southern state's sit-in movement structure, as well as an executive committee to steer the group as a whole. Once or twice a year our entire membership would gather for groupwide discussions and workshops and to make groupwide decisions.

Our decision-making, whether in committee meetings or in these larger gatherings, was always by consensus, never by edict or even by vote. We all knew one another. We considered ourselves a band of brothers and sisters, a

circle of trust. We used that phrase often—"a circle of trust." Our meetings were "soul sessions"—freewheeling, wide-ranging, "anything goes" discussions through which we would finally arrive at a conclusion or decision accepted by everyone.

That type of process is workable when the participants all know and trust one another. But it becomes a problem when the participants are strangers. And that's what had happened by the fall of 1964—there were a lot of people in SNCC who simply didn't know one another.

It started, of course, that summer, when those eight hundred Northern students came into Mississippi. Our staffs in other states—Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama—bitched and griped about the focus on Mississippi, about who was getting what in terms of resources. There was a lot of grumbling in the field about decisions being made at our headquarters in Atlanta. There were a lot of complaints that not only were the staffers outside Mississippi being treated as stepchildren, but they were being ignored in favor of a bunch of outsiders. "Who are all those people in Mississippi? We don't even know them." I can't count how many times I heard that question. And the fact that the vast majority of those new people in Mississippi were white did not help.

In addition to the complaints from people in the field about the decisions we were making in Atlanta, there were concerns as well in Atlanta about the behavior of some of our people in the field. We had many reports that summer, both from staff people and from members of the local communities in which we were doing our work, that some SNCC staffers were misusing their position and status, that they were mispending money, that there was a significant amount of marijuana-smoking going on, mostly among the membership from Northern cities, black and white alike. When we tried to respond to these problems, we ran into classic SNCC-like objections: *You can't fire us. You can't tell us what to do. No one can be fired from SNCC. No one can be ordered to do anything within SNCC. SNCC is not an organization. It's not a union. It's not a club. It's a movement.*

The closeness and cohesiveness—the intimacy—that we had in the beginning was starting to disappear. Our campus representatives were virtually gone. Our membership now was more field-oriented. And those staffs of field workers were a blend of people with vastly different backgrounds, people who were starting to feel friction among themselves. On the one hand, you had large numbers of salt-of-the-earth Southern black men and women, local people who did not have much formal education but who were fiercely committed to the cause—people like Fannie Lou Hamer. And on the other, you had Northern, college-educated intellectuals like Cox and Carmichael, whose perspective was broader and more sophisticated in terms of politics and militancy and in terms of the emerging issue of black nationalism.

Normally an organization would depend on strong leadership to guide it through such tension and turbulence. But not SNCC. We had never been a group that trusted leaders. From the beginning we had just two leadership positions: the chairman, who was the visible representative of the organization; and the executive secretary, who was more the nuts-and-bolts, behind-the-scenes leader. I was the chairman, Jim Forman was the executive secretary. Both of us knew and respected the limits of our "leadership." Now, however, those limits had put us in a quandary.

I believed in consensus. I believed in a bottom-up system of direction. I thought it would be the death of SNCC if it became so highly organized and disciplined that it resembled the very governmental and traditional organizational structures that we were opposing.

On the other hand, I also felt—and I still feel—that in any movement or struggle there come times when you need some individual or some group of individuals to step forward and become the symbol of the struggle, the personification of its essence, the *face*, if you will, of what you are fighting for. Call it a leader, but it's not a leader in the sense of any kind of control. It's a leader in terms of inspiration and vision. It's a man or woman who doesn't see himself as any larger than the movement itself.

Martyrs, champions, men and women of all kinds throughout time have stepped forward as this kind of figure, from Jesus to Joan of Arc. Gandhi played this role in the struggle for liberation in India. John F. Kennedy became it for many Americans at the turn of the 1960s. Martin Luther King played it for a large section of the civil rights movement. And if we in SNCC were going to reject King as such a figure, the time had come for us to find someone or something to replace him.

Ironically, the one person who might have become that symbol for us, the one man in SNCC who was respected and trusted enough to actually be embraced by most of our membership as a "leader," was the one man most repelled and alarmed by the notion of a leader of any sort. That was Bob Moses.

Just as the end of 1964 had become a terrible time for SNCC, it was also probably the low point of Bob Moses's life. He clearly felt crushed by the guilt and responsibility for all that had gone wrong that year, from the death and suffering in Mississippi to the debacle in Atlantic City.

Moses was aware of the godlike reverence he was accorded by others. He knew that many of our SNCC staffers saw him as a Jesus figure, all-knowing and all-holy. That made him so uncomfortable he felt like climbing out of his own skin. From his days as a student at Harvard on through the years he spent traveling every dirt path and back road in the state of Mississippi, Bob had always remained a true intellectual, a passionately and intensely deep thinker, reading and absorbing everything from the existential philosophy of

Albert Camus to the political theories of Mao Zedong, to the notions of black intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and John Hope Franklin. He would pick one idea from here, another from there, and over time he created a synthesis, a tapestry of personal philosophy with an underpinning of absolute, individual freedom. He had a near-religious attitude toward autonomy and self-direction. By the fall of 1964, he had become a fervent believer in people following their soul, their inner voice, their impulses. In the language of the time, we called it "doing your own thing." And by that fall, this attitude had crystallized into a concept that was embraced by the vast majority of SNCC staffers, a concept we all called Freedom High.

The Summer Project people really got into that attitude. It was just like the old song we used to sing when we marched: "Go where the spirit say go. Do what the spirit say do." No one is responsible to anyone or answerable to anything other than his or her own instinct, his own spirit—a spirit fueled by the righteous, sweeping sense of almighty *freedom*. Freedom High. It meant exactly what it said. You were high on freedom, literally carried away by the feeling, drunk with it. And whenever and wherever that feeling arose, you followed. If it was midnight and you were seized with the desire to pile into a car and drive from Selma to Montgomery and climb on the roof of the governor's mansion and sing a freedom song, then you did it. You just *did* it. It might not be a wise thing. It might have no point. But if you felt it, that was enough. If you felt it, you did it.

Bob Moses completely supported this attitude. If a SNCC staffer wanted to write a play or a poem, he believed the staffer should go and write that play or a poem. If the staffer felt like going off in the woods and singing a song with a guitar, the staffer should do that. And he or she should continue to be paid just like any other staffer. Writing that play or poem or song should be considered part of that staffer's job. Yes, there might be problems with accountability, with communication, with follow-through and organization, but those problems would just have to be worked out somehow. Personal instincts and the right to follow them were sacrosanct.

Freedom High. It contained all the elements that were tearing at the seams of SNCC that fall, the tension between the beauty of individual liberty and the instability of total anarchy. If there was one thread that might have held it all together, it would have been Bob Moses himself. He was the only person who could have drawn respect and support and attention from the various factions that had developed within our increasingly faction-riddled organization. But he absolutely refused to fill that role, and we would all suffer because of it.

I knew SNCC was facing some serious problems at the time I left for Africa that September. Not only were there pressures from within the organization,

but there were pressures from without as well. In the wake of both Freedom Summer and of our actions at the Democratic convention, many white liberals who had previously supported us were now disturbed by our "extreme" and "aggressive" tactics. Red-baiting—unsupported charges of Communist influences—increased dramatically that fall, with people like Al Lowenstein, who had been so instrumental in helping shape our Freedom Summer campaign, now leading choruses of questions about the background of some of our volunteers in Mississippi. Some individuals or their families turned out to have ties to Communism. Our continued connection to the Lawyers Guild drew a lot of questions as well. It was red-baiting of the worst kind, and in that climate, with racial disturbances beginning to grow into full-scale riots in some urban areas—notably, Harlem and Watts—it had a dramatic effect. Just mention the word "Communism" and it became real. When people are afraid, they are ready to see bogeymen behind every door. They are ready to believe anything. By the fall of 1964, the American people were starting to become afraid.

One immediate effect on SNCC of these outside pressures was money—we were beginning to run out. After being flush with support for our Mississippi campaign that summer, we now saw our funds drying up. Contributors were no longer contributing. Our internal squabbles and dissent didn't help matters—efforts at fund-raising came almost to a halt. At a time when our growth in size required more money than ever for operating expenses—Forman estimated we needed about \$40,000 a month by that fall—our bank account was shrinking.

Not only was the general public becoming wary of us, but we were being attacked by other civil rights organizations as well. We had peaked that summer, with the nation's spotlight focused on our efforts in Mississippi. We had established ourselves as the movement's most forceful, most effective, most action-oriented group. We had separated ourselves from the other civil rights organizations and acted essentially on our own, for which there were no apologies made and none necessary. Now, though, as we began to come under attack from some sectors of the American public, not only did we not receive support from our brothers in arms—the SCLC, the NAACP, CORE—but some of those groups joined in the attack.

This was all boiling up at the time I left for Africa. And while I was gone, unbeknownst to me, it exploded, first in October, at an "emergency" meeting for the entire SNCC membership called by Courtland Cox, who was in charge while Forman and I and the others were out of the country. Forman returned just in time for that meeting, held at Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta. It lasted five stormy days, with the issue of leadership being the central

subject. People wanted to know who had set the agenda for this gathering, who was in charge and why they were in charge. There were plans to discuss something we called the Black Belt Summer Project, a campaign that would take the tactics we'd used in Mississippi that year and apply them to states throughout the South in the summer of 1965. But that discussion never took place. As soon as Forman mentioned the need for more organization and formal structure, some in the room saw this as simply a way for Forman to increase his own authority and control. There was finger-pointing and shouting, and several people, including Larry Guyot, who had rightly earned a lot of respect for his work with the MFDP in Mississippi, stormed out of the meeting.

People were upset. A lot of them turned to Bob Moses to see what he had to say. But Moses refused to speak. He felt it would not be fair for him to say anything because his words carried such weight. "Undue influence," he called it. He was so sensitive by then. At one meeting he complained out loud, "Nobody would ever call me a motherfucker." He said it with such lament, with sadness. He wished someone would call him a name like that. He wished he could just be another person, be treated like anyone else.

So he refused to assert himself. He refused to participate. He remained silent, and his very silence created even *more* reverence for him. It was maddening. You could see him almost starting to crack under all these pressures. It was as if all the strife and tension of the entire movement was playing itself out inside his skin, inside his soul and his head.

So, with no one voice to speak, all the voices spoke, and no one was really listening. There was no such thing as a consensus. The Black Belt Project was lost in the confusion and never addressed. It never took shape.

Forman made a prescient observation about the chaos of those five days, pointing out a growing trend that would eventually claim me as a victim:

Since it was SNCC's practice to make decisions by consensus rather than by voting, that liberalism opened the door for meetings to be tyrannized by a minority. The vast majority of people present would, after hours of discussion, be ready to adopt a proposal; a very few would say they were not in agreement—and the meeting would bog down.

That's what happened at that October gathering. One faction, the Freedom High faction, was opposed to any increase in structure. They questioned whether we should have a central committee anymore, or a chairman, or an executive committee. There were suggestions that we disband the Atlanta office altogether, do away with a central headquarters and allow ourselves to be guided by a loosely knit, geographically scattered, rotating circle of "leaders."

Arguing for this position, in very forceful, articulate terms, were the Northern "intellectuals" like Stokely and Cox and Ivanhoe Donaldson and Charlie Cobb. Arrayed against them were the field staff from the South, the more rooted, indigenous members who, on the whole, wanted more structure and more organization, so they could get the help and support they needed, so they could feel that their voices were heard. They felt overwhelmed and intimidated by the aggressiveness and sophistication of these "intellectuals."

In a way, the lines in SNCC were beginning to be drawn as North versus South. The Northern faction was much more political, much more outspoken about many issues, including, increasingly, the subject of racial separation. Some people, mostly among the Northern group, were pushing harder than ever to do something about the large number of white staffers in SNCC. Again, the loudest voices were those of people like Stokely and Cox, which I always considered ironic, because of their backgrounds. When they first came south and joined SNCC, many of these guys had more white friends back where they came from than black. They grew up and lived, for the most part, in a white world—certainly whiter than the world many of the Southern blacks among us, people like me, grew up in. They went to some of the best schools and some of the best universities in the nation. When the sit-ins began, they saw young black students in the South facing situations totally unlike what they faced in Washington or New York, and they wholeheartedly responded. They wanted to identify with what we were facing in the South.

In the process, many of them felt compelled to throw off their past, in a sense. They disowned their own experiences with whites in the North, as they came south and were swept up by ugliness and anger. I saw it so many times. One young lady, Tina Harris, a very beautiful black woman, came out of a bohemian East Village environment where she had gone through a stage—very familiar to many young men and women of that time—of denying the fact that she was "Negro." She insisted she was "East Indian." She had white friends. She lived in a white world. But then she joined the movement, came south, became swept up in the wave of "black consciousness" and black nationalism, and suddenly she disowned everything and everyone that was white. Tina became one of the most bitter people I knew in the movement when it came to the subject of white people.

It's interesting that some of the people who were most outspoken in asserting their black identity and disassociating themselves from whites were the ones who had grown up among and been very close to whites and who had, in many cases, disowned their own background. It was fascinating to see people disowning their backgrounds and reinventing themselves. For a lot of the newer, Northern-raised members of SNCC, radicalism in terms of racial

consciousness was almost inversely proportional to the degree to which they had, for one reason or another, kept down their "blackness" when they were younger. Roger Wilkins, who was a young black lawyer in the Johnson administration back during this time, later wrote about this very thing:

Stokely and the other young intellectuals in the movement knew what they were doing. They were purging themselves of all that self-hate, asserting a human validity that did not derive from whites and pointing out that the black experience on this continent and in Africa was profound, honorable, and a source of pride.

You didn't see as much of that kind of swing from the Southern blacks among us. In terms of black consciousness or black identity, they saw less need to take on the trappings of Africa, or to assert their blackness through things such as clothing and appearance. They didn't feel the same need to discover and assert their black identity, I guess, because they had never lost it in the first place. I'll never forget Bob Mants, one of our staffers in Lowndes County, Alabama, down near Selma, standing up at one of our meetings and saying, "A Southern Negro doesn't need to wear a sign saying he's black. We don't need to wear Afros to show that we are black. We know we are black."

There's a pattern here that is not limited to the subject of race. I think people who feel lost, people who are searching for a place to belong, for something to believe in, often move from one extreme to another, first embracing something or someone at one far end of a spectrum, then forsaking that position or person for something entirely at the other end, all in the process of trying to find themselves.

That's what SNCC was struggling to do that fall of '64—find itself. On the heels of the October meeting, which didn't settle anything, there was a staff retreat in November in Waveland, Mississippi, a little town in the southeast corner of the state, down near the Louisiana border, on the Gulf of Mexico. It was another mass gathering, a week-long event with about 160 members in attendance. Don and I were still in Africa, so we didn't hear about this one either until we got back.

There were dozens of "position papers" written and presented, addressing every conceivable issue, from the interracial composition of SNCC's membership to the structure of the organization itself, to the subject of feminism. Mary King and Casey Hayden presented a paper comparing the struggle of poor black Mississippians to the struggle of women in the movement. "Assumptions of male superiority," they wrote, "are as widespread and deep-rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro." When asked his opinion on what they had written, Stokely made his

famous response that the only position for women in SNCC was the "prone" position. He was half joking, but that hardly mattered. No one was in a mood to laugh.

All those papers presented at that November meeting, all the dialogue and arguments, all the breast-beating and the soul-sharing, all of it came down to the issue of how we felt about one another. There was no question that we had other important issues to settle, issues that cut to the very core of how we defined ourselves. But none of those issues mattered as much to me as how we felt about and related to one another. As long as we felt trust and security among ourselves, no issue was too big or too complicated for us to work out. I really believed that. The biggest problem we had, as I saw it, was the loss of that unity of spirit and purpose that we had shared in the beginning, the loss of faith in one another. We had become riddled with infighting and suspicion and rumors and behind-the-scenes politics—in other words, we were becoming much like the organizations we had opposed for so long.

By the end of that week in Waveland, most of our Southern field staff members had already gone home, disgusted and dispirited. That left the emotional and political momentum in the hands of those who remained—essentially the Northern contingent, those aligned with Stokely and Cox. When I got back late that month, rumors were swirling. There was talk of an impending "coup." Outsiders were whispering that SNCC had turned "Communist," and that Don and I had not traveled just to Africa, but had gone to visit Red China as well. It was crazy talk, but it was talk taken seriously by those who heard it, and so it became something I needed to address.

As soon as I got back, my friends—people like Charles Sherrod, Bill Hansen, Bob Mants, Laverne Baker and Julian—rushed to let me know what had happened while I was gone. They chastised me, telling me I had stayed away too long. I should have been more savvy, they said, more politically astute. "While the cat's away, the mice will play"—all that. I shouldn't have been so naive, they said. I shouldn't have been so trusting. But there was no other way I could be. There is no other way I can be. I always begin with an attitude of trust. I assume that your word is good until you show me otherwise. I refuse to be suspicious until I have reason to be. Yes, this sets me up to be burned now and then, but the alternative is to be constantly skeptical and distanced. I'd rather be occasionally burned but able to connect than always safe but always distant. "A circle of trust"—that's what it's all about.

As the end of that year approached, I began for the first time to have reason not to embrace everyone around me in SNCC with total trust. I learned that there were people stirring things up behind my back. I was told that

Stokely and a young guy named Lafayette Surney were going around saying I was cut off, disconnected, that I was off in Africa playing the big cheese when I should have been back with them facing all these problems. It didn't worry me personally to hear talk like that, but I was concerned about the effect this kind of dissension was having on the organization.

It was a dark, dark month, that December. With the wounds still fresh from our summer in Mississippi and from the convention in Atlantic City, news came that December 4 that federal authorities had arrested twenty-one white Mississippians—including Sheriff Rainey and his deputy, Price—in connection with the deaths of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman. Evidence gathered by the FBI showed that a lynch mob had been allowed to remove the three from the Neshoba County jail that night and have their way with them before burying the bodies and dumping the car. Since murder was not a federal crime, and effective state prosecution for that charge was unlikely, the Justice Department decided instead to charge the mob members with conspiracy to deprive the dead men of their civil rights.

A week after those arrests, at a preliminary hearing in Meridian, the government's charges were dismissed by none other than U.S. District Judge Harold Cox—who had compared blacks to "chimpanzees" prior to our Freedom Summer campaign. The defendants, including Rainey and Price, filed out of Cox's courtroom laughing and congratulating one another.

That was devastating. Not until 1967, after an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court and new testimony, would seven of those men—including Price, but not Rainey—finally be convicted and sentenced to prison for violating federal civil rights laws.

The same day Cox dropped those charges, December 10, Dr. King became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech, delivered in Oslo, Norway, he said he was receiving the award as "a trustee for the twenty-two million Negroes in the United States of America who are engaged in a creative battle to end the night of racial injustice."

I was overjoyed to hear those words and to see Dr. King be so honored. Only one other black American had ever received that prize—diplomat Ralph Bunche in 1950. But I was clearly in the minority among my SNCC colleagues, most of whom actually felt resentment and disdain. It was frightening. I could see us becoming more isolated every day, more cut off from those around us, black and white alike. In the middle of that month, after returning from a fund-raising trip to New York and Philadelphia, where rumors were rampant about the breakup of SNCC, I wrote an open letter to our entire membership:

From: John Lewis
To: All SNCC Staff

I have been back from Africa for more than two weeks. I hope by now that each of you has a copy of the report on the trip. I hope to talk with each of you about Africa and the movement for liberation throughout Africa and how it relates to the Civil Rights struggle in this country. I am convinced more than ever before that the social, economic, and political destiny of the black people of America is inseparable from that of our brothers of Africa.

On my arrival in Atlanta I was thoroughly informed about the questions and issues that were raised at both the staff meeting and the staff retreat. I have read the position papers and minutes, and talked with many members of the staff with great interest concerning the nature of your deliberations...

While in New York and Philly for four days, I had the opportunity to speak at five rallies and parties, and also attended two smaller meetings of supporters. At each of these gatherings some of the persons in attendance raised questions about the following:

The alleged coup in SNCC:

- a: "Bob Moses is no longer Director of the Mississippi project, and he is out of the state."
- b: "Jim Forman is no longer Executive Secretary of SNCC."
- c: "John Lewis is no longer Chairman of SNCC."

The red-baiting of SNCC:

- a: "SNCC has been taken over by the communists."
- b: "Some of the key people in SNCC made a trip to Peking."
- c: "Most of the volunteers that SNCC recruited were communists or communist sympathizers."

Now we all know that there is not a word of truth in any of this. We all should know that Bob Moses is still the Director of COFO, Jim Forman is still the Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and I am still SNCC's Chairman.

If I can further dispel the rumor that I am leaving SNCC or the Movement, let me say—and this is contrary to what some of the staff have said—that I have no plans for leaving the Movement to enter school in either January 1965 or September 1965. I will be involved in the struggle one way or another till every victory is won.

Our supporters and friends are confused and bewildered, for they feel a sense of uncertainty and instability about SNCC. It is hard to get people to invest in anything that is shaky, unstable, and with-

out a sense of permanence, whether it be a country, the stock market, or a civil rights organization. I am of the opinion that these rumors are hurting SNCC financially and otherwise. In addition, we are under attack from many quarters—the press, and other civil rights groups. We must understand these rumors and the "red-baiting" as effective and destructive political gimmicks, and we cannot take this lightly. The situation demands that we reassure our friends, supporters, and the American public that we are a unified, effective, strong and vital force on the American scene for social, economic, and political change.

I am asking of all the staff to speak the truth of the work and programs of SNCC. We have nothing to make apologies for. Our projects and programs are worthy of support... As an organization SNCC does what SNCC must do and in SNCC's own way, that's that. What concerns me, however, is: that we do not let certain malicious and vicious rumors and attacks go unanswered. On the other hand we must never stoop so low as to engage in public slander or debate with any group.

I am asking Julian Bond and Betty Garman to use their respective departments to make a special effort to counter these rumors and attacks. Each of us must do our part to present the truth about SNCC.

During the next few days I will be visiting all of the projects and will be at your disposal. It is my hope that we will have some serious and honest discussions. My tentative schedule is as follows:

Dec. 17-18	Central Alabama
Dec. 19-24	Mississippi
Dec. 28-Jan. 5	Mississippi
Jan. 6-7	Eastern Arkansas
Jan. 9	Southwest Georgia

Hope to see each of you very soon.

Uhuru!
John Lewis

This was as close to desperate as I have ever felt. I was trying to do anything I could to put out the flames in our organization. I had never been much of a speechmaker. I had always believed much more in actions than in words. Keep on keeping on—that had always been my answer in a time of crisis. Always in the past—in Nashville, during the Freedom Rides—action pulled us back together when things seemed to be coming apart. I still believed, as always, that nothing would unify us, nothing would shore up our

crumbling foundation, like another battle. We needed, that December, to turn our energy and passions not on one another but on a deserving target. And I had a good idea just where that target might be, just where we needed to turn: Selma.

After all our activity there in the fall of 1963—more than three hundred demonstrators were arrested outside the Dallas County Courthouse that October alone—Selma had settled down to a few scattered protests during the first half of '64. That July, after the passage of the civil rights bill, there was a burst of activity as groups of Selma teenagers went downtown to test the new law's provision that public accommodations be desegregated. The kids tried entering Selma's still-segregated movie theater and were arrested for trespassing. At a rally the next day protesting those arrests, Sheriff Clark's deputies shot tear gas into the crowd, and his "squirrel shooter" posse was turned loose and allowed to beat dozens of demonstrators.

That led to my coming down and joining yet another protest that July 6. I'll never forget Clark emerging from the courthouse that afternoon. I had seen his anger many times, but this day he looked more furious than ever. You could see the rage just building up in him. He was a huge man—about six feet five, 230 pounds, maybe 240—and it seemed as if he was going to burst out of his clothes. He was wearing a suit and a hat that day, not the military-style uniform and helmet he often had on. He was trembling, literally shaking with anger. The man really looked as if he was going over the edge. You could see it in his eyes.

"John Lewis," he sputtered, coming straight at me, "you are nothing but an outside agitator. You're the lowest form of humanity."

I looked him square in those eyes and I said, "Sheriff, I may be an agitator, but I'm not an outsider. I grew up ninety miles from here."

I paused.

"And," I continued, "we are going to stay here until these people are allowed to register and vote."

I was arrested, of course, along with the rest of our group. That led to an injunction by a local circuit judge named James Hare, forbidding public gatherings of more than three people in the city of Selma. It was an absurd restriction, obviously aimed directly at us. Our attorneys spent the rest of the year trying to have that injunction dissolved, but with no success. And so, with the combination of Judge Hare's regulation and SNCC's focus on Mississippi, protest activity in Selma came to a virtual standstill.

By that December, barely more than three hundred local blacks had registered to vote in Dallas County—only 156 in Selma itself. That was hardly a nudge of an increase from the two hundred voters who were on the rolls when Bernard and Colia LaFayette began their work there nearly two years earlier.

The vast majority of the county's 15,000 eligible black voters remained unregistered, held back by fear of repression and violence. The few who actually did reach the registrar faced an absurdly difficult "literacy test." Members of right-wing groups such as the White Citizens Council, the John Birch Society and an organization called the Alabama Sovereignty Commission—funded by state money directly ordered by Governor George Wallace—routinely visited registrars around the state, instructing them on how to impede black voter registration. One of their most effective impediments was these "literacy" tests, which typically required interpreting arcane sections of Alabama's state constitution, a task that would stump a graduate student in government, much less a poor sharecropper with a sixth-grade education. While black men and women sat struggling with that test, white people who could barely write their own name walked past and registered without having to take it.

By the end of that year, our efforts in Selma had come practically to a standstill. Meanwhile, the SCLC—Dr. King's organization—was deciding where they should turn their sights next. They'd launched a campaign earlier that year in St. Augustine, Florida, but they wanted something bigger, something like Birmingham. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 now on the books, voting rights had become the focus of the entire movement. For all its significance, the Civil Rights Act made no provision to ensure the right of black Americans to register and vote. The SCLC was working toward that end in Alabama, as were we. They had Jim Bevel going all over the state with a grassroots voter registration program he and Diane had created called G.R.O.W.—Get Rid of Wallace. That November, King and his staff decided it was time to turn the entire force of the SCLC back toward Alabama. They would depend heavily on Bevel. And Selma, they decided, was where they would set their sights.

Plans for an SCLC move on Selma were already being drawn up that December when Dr. King met with President Johnson after returning from receiving the Nobel Prize. The two men discussed the need for a voting rights act, and Johnson said in so many words that it was just impossible. Not right now, the president said. The votes in Congress simply were not there. Johnson had his attorney general, Nicholas Katzenbach (the same man who had squared off against George Wallace in the schoolhouse door), putting together a piece of federal voting rights legislation, but they were moving slowly, carefully. After the upheavals of 1964 the President felt the country was tired of civil rights, that the American people needed a rest from this subject. He told Dr. King he didn't know when this legislation might actually start moving. Maybe in late 1965. More likely in '66.

Dr. King told the President the people were not going to wait. And he was right. No sooner did he get back to Atlanta after that meeting in Washington

than a contingent of local Selma men and women representing a group called the Dallas County Improvement Association arrived at the SCLC offices to personally ask Dr. King to come help them.

That invitation clinched it. The people of Selma themselves had now invited the SCLC in. If Dr. King and his staff had any concern about stepping on SNCC toes in Selma, they vanished after that visit. This was the last green light Dr. King needed.

As for our SNCC staff, we had known for some time that the SCLC was planning a move on Selma. And there were feelings—strong feelings—that toes were indeed being stepped on here. It was the same old story all over again. We dug in early, did the groundwork, laid the foundation, then the SCLC came in again with their headline-grabbing, hit-and-run tactics, doing nothing to nurture leaders among the local community but instead bringing in their own leaders, then leaving after they'd gotten what they needed out of it.

These were the feelings of most of our staff, especially of the guys already on the ground in Selma—Worth Long and a young staffer named John Love. They'd been doing just what we at SNCC always did—digging in for the long, hard haul, not just coming in for a day or a week or a month. They'd been down there in Selma a long time—Worth for over a year—continuing the work Bernard and Colia had begun. They, more than anyone, were upset that Dr. King and his troops were now going to move in.

I had many different thoughts about this. On the one hand, I knew exactly how Worth and John felt. They already felt neglected by our own SNCC leadership because of the emphasis we had put on Mississippi that year. And now they were being pushed aside by the juggernaut of the SCLC. But I also had more of a respect and understanding of what the SCLC was honestly and earnestly trying to do than most of my SNCC colleagues. I was still a member of the SCLC board, which put me in the peculiar position of having a foot in both camps—something that did not sit well with many of my SNCC colleagues, but something I never apologized for. I had respected Dr. King and all he stood for in the beginning. I respected him now. I would always respect him. Simple.

Far outweighing the claims put on Selma by either the SCLC or SNCC, as far as I was concerned, was the fact that the people of Selma themselves had gone and asked King to come help them. How could we stand in their way, no matter how valid our reasons or objections or concerns might be? We might not like it. We might choose to be minimally involved—which turned out to be the case, at least in the beginning. But we had no choice but to accept the fact that the Selma campaign was now going to officially become an SCLC undertaking.

Which it did that December 28, with an SCLC announcement that Dr. King would kick off the organization's new campaign in Selma with a speech there on Saturday, January 2. This would be the first mass meeting of Selma's blacks since Judge Hare's injunction had gone into effect nearly six months earlier. That gathering, commemorating Lincoln's January 1 signing of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, was a fittingly symbolic occasion to defy the judge's order.

I was there that day. An overnight snowfall had dusted the streets white. It reminded me of the morning in Nashville five years earlier when I'd awakened in my college dorm room to go downtown for the first sit-in of my life.

As I headed to the church where Dr. King would make his speech that day—Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church—I felt I was walking through a town I knew almost as well as my hometown of Troy. I had spent so much time in Selma over the years, I was familiar with almost every one of its streets—the paved ones in the white section of the city, and the unpaved ones that ran past the white clapboard shanties and redbrick housing projects where the black people lived. I knew the buildings downtown, from the sleepy little five-and-dime stores to the old cotton warehouses perched on the steep bluffs that sloped down to the Alabama River.

Among the nicer buildings in town was a stately three-story structure off the steps of which as many as five hundred slaves a day were auctioned in the 1800s. Many of those slaves stacked the cotton on the riverboats that routinely arrived at the waterfront docks down below those warehouses.

I knew the bridge, too—the quaint, humpbacked Edmund Pettus Bridge, its steel framework arcing high across the river, an arched wrought-iron sign at its foot, with the words "SELMA WELCOMES YOU" spelled out above a Confederate flag, the entryway into Selma for all travelers arriving from the east.

Howard Zinn, an activist and a historian who was in and out of Selma during this time—Zinn was a lanky Spelman College professor in his thirties who joined us in some of our demonstrations in Atlanta during the fall of '64 and eventually became an informal advisor to SNCC—wrote of Selma's downtown in the mid-1960s:

It is as if a movie producer had reconstructed a pre-Civil War Southern town—the decaying buildings, the muddy streets, the little cafes, and the huge red brick Hotel Albert, modelled after a medieval Venetian palace.

This was the town I walked through that January morning as I headed for Brown's Chapel to hear what Dr. King would have to say. There were already seven hundred people crushed into the church by the time I arrived. Police were there, but, curiously, they were directing traffic, not making arrests. That

was because they were under the command not of Sheriff Clark, but of Selma's public safety director, a man named Wilson Baker.

Baker was a former police captain who had run for county sheriff against Clark in 1958 and lost. He was a hefty man with eyeglasses who always wore a suit and a dress hat. He was a comparatively reasonable and well-read man—he sometimes taught a criminology class at the University of Alabama. He was a segregationist, but a careful, smart one, more like a Laurie Pritchett than a Bull Connor.

Wilson Baker represented what there was of a white-collar Selma, and he was closely aligned with the city's newly elected mayor, a former washing machine salesman named Joe Smitherman. Smitherman was a young guy, skinny, crew cut, with big ears that even he made fun of. He was in his thirties, but he looked even younger—he looked as young I was. Like Baker, Smitherman was a segregationist but a moderate, especially when compared to his predecessor, a hardcore racist named Chris Heinz.

Smitherman had just been elected that October. He was still getting his feet wet as mayor, focusing on simple, basic issues like paving the roads and putting up streetlights. He leaned toward Baker in terms of dealing with the city's civil rights "troubles," but he had to please everyone. And so he wasn't above calling Dr. King "Martin Luther Coon," then chucking at his slip of the tongue.

Positioned against Baker and Smitherman was Clark. If Baker was Laurie Pritchett, Clark was Bull Connor through and through. He had a violent temper, he took everything personally and he always retaliated physically, with the support of his "posse"—the deputized citizenry of Selma, which included not just poor whites, but well-to-do businessmen and landowners as well, many of whom answered his calls on horseback. When our demonstrations began in 1963, Clark had issued the call for all white males over the age of twenty-one to come to the courthouse and be deputized, creating an armed posse with one purpose—to keep the black people of Dallas County from voting. During Dr. King's '63 campaign in Birmingham, Clark had arrived with two hundred of his "possemen" from Selma—reinforcements for Bull Connor's men—and they busted heads with relish when they got there.

Clark took his orders not from Smitherman or Baker but from Judge Hare, the man who had issued the injunction the year before against gatherings of more than three people at a time. Judge Hare was a tightly wrapped, chain-smoking, dyed-in-the-wool segregationist. Like most of the judges we came up against throughout the state, he had studied law in Tuscaloosa, at the University of Alabama, and he was a traditionalist—which is to say, he liked his "nigras" obedient and kept in line. He and George Wallace saw eye to eye on that issue. And that was essentially the chain of command we faced in Selma:

Judge Hare as an extension of George Wallace, and Jim Clark as an extension of Hare.

With the judge and the governor behind him, Clark ran the county like a king. He really believed that the old racial order was the way things should be and that the black people of Dallas County were *happy* to have it that way. He stated over and over again that it was people like Martin Luther King and John Lewis—"outside agitators"—who were stirring up the county's "good colored people."

We in SNCC had known for a long time, and the SCLC learned quickly, that Clark's short fuse made him an easy target for provocation. And since he considered the county courthouse—where all voters were registered—his personal domain, it was inevitable that we would square off against him. That's what we prepared for. That's also what Baker and Smitherman did their best to prevent, knowing the damage Clark's temper and his violent reactions might do to the city's image and to its legal footing. In many ways the Selma campaign would come down to a tug-of-war between Baker and Smitherman on one side and Clark on the other, with us forcing things Clark's way, and with Judge Hare cooperating by pushing Clark out to stop us.

But the day that King first came to Selma to speak was calm. There was no march on the courthouse, not yet. There was no showdown with Jim Clark, not yet. This was a rally, a laying down of the gauntlet. Dr. King told the audience that if Governor Wallace and the Alabama state legislature didn't force Dallas County to begin registering its black citizens, "We will seek to arouse the federal government by marching by the thousands." He even threatened another March on Washington. "We must be willing to go to jail," he said, again, "by the thousands."

The actual demonstrations, he announced, would begin in about two weeks. Meanwhile, we—a coalition of SCLC, SNCC and Dallas County Voters League leaders—set about planning, preparing and organizing. SNCC had a small office downtown, on the corner of Alabama and Franklin Avenues, in a second-story room above a bail bondsman's office and the neon Budweiser sign of a barbecue restaurant, right across the street from the public safety building and the jail. Not far away was a little restaurant called Clay & Liston's—named for the heavyweight prizefighters. Clay & Liston's and a place called Walker's Cafe were the two main spots where black people in Selma could get something to eat. Both became informal meeting places for people in the movement, especially Walker's, which had a wonderful soul food menu with greens and pig's feet and combread and grits and sweet potato pie—and a great jukebox, to boot.

There was no SCLC office in Selma, so Dr. King and his staff turned Brown's AME and another local church just up the street, First Baptist, into

command centers. Technically, the SCLC shared a small office with the county's Voters League in a little building down near the city's black upper school, Hudson High. But in reality, the churches were the headquarters. Both were located right beside the city's largest black housing project, the George Washington Carver Homes, a federally built community of two-story, redbrick apartment buildings. Living in those small, spare apartments were hundreds of the men, women and children who would become foot soldiers in the coming siege. These were salt-of-the-earth people—schoolteachers, beauticians, undertakers, housewives, men, women and children from every walk of black life in Selma. The "ground crew," I called them—nameless individuals to outsiders, faceless people to all but those of us who were there. Yet they were the face of the civil rights movement, these unidentified men and women with no titles in front of their names, no Ph.D.s after them.

They were the rank and file, in Selma, in Americus, in Little Rock, everywhere. You see their faces today in photographs in history books and nobody knows their names. That young guy sitting stoically at the lunch counter in Jackson with mustard streaming down his face and a mob of white hoodlums crowded around him taunting and laughing—who is he? Where is he today? The young man whose pants leg is being torn by a snarling German shepherd in Birmingham—what is his name? Where is he? Whatever happened to the little girl who was turned head over heels by those fire hoses?

Every one of our campaigns across the South was full of people like these, the "maaaasses," as A. Philip Randolph might have said. But Selma was even more a mass movement than any of the others, very different from, say, Birmingham, where there were lots of generals on the scene, lots of staff and leaders—the Fred Shuttlesworths and the Dr. Kings—carefully planning every move, all of it very organized from the top down. Selma was more of a bottom-up campaign, of the people acting with minimal direction from the leaders. We were there to guide and help carry out what the people wanted to do, but it was essentially the people themselves who pointed the way. People like Mrs. Amelia Boynton, who with her husband, Sam, had helped form the Dallas County Improvement Association and who had led the contingent that went to ask Dr. King to come to Selma. And Fred Reese, a high school science teacher and president of the local Voters League. And Marie Foster, a dental assistant. And Claude Brown, Ernest Doyle, J. D. Hunter, James Gildersleeve and Ulysses Blackman, all longtime civil rights soldiers in Selma.

These were the people who led the way in the almost-daily summit meetings and planning sessions held in the Brown Chapel Sunday school room, with its little tables and chairs, and drawings of Jesus and baby lambs on the walls. We—the SNCC and SCLC staffers who gathered for these meetings—took our lead from them. Besides Worth Long and John Love and Avery

Williams, who had been on the job in Selma before the SCLC moved in, SNCC was represented in those meetings by Silas Norman, our Alabama project director, brother of the opera singer Jessye Norman, and one of the calmest, steadiest young men I'd ever met. He wasn't much older than I, but he carried himself like a man in his forties.

Besides Bevel, who was the SCLC's point man on this project, and whose presence smoothed a lot of the ruffles among our SNCC people because of his ties to us—no matter where he went or what he did, Jim Bevel would always be one of us—Dr. King's contingent in Selma included one of King's own staff members, a guy from Georgia named Hosea Williams.

I knew Hosea from the SCLC board meetings. He was a very colorful person, a solid, beefy man, a World War II veteran who had joined the SCLC in Savannah in the early '60s and had rapidly moved up in the organization. He had a strong personality. He was a guy who wanted to be out there, who wanted to push. He was a doer, a man who was impatient with meetings and discussions, who tired quickly of analysis. Dr. King used to joke regularly about people getting bogged down in the "paralysis of analysis." Hosea did not have that problem. Quite the opposite. He was always the one who would throw up his hands and say people were just talking something to death here. What are we going to do? That's what Hosea always wanted to know. He saw himself as one of Dr. King's field hands, getting out there on the scene, organizing the troops, preparing the way for Dr. King to follow.

That's essentially what everyone was doing during those first two weeks of January, preparing for King to come pull the trigger. Bevel was the spearhead, wearing that skullcap and his SNCC-style overalls, preaching as much as speaking, gathering the masses, getting the people of Selma and the surrounding counties—hundreds of people, *thousands*—ready to be out in front of that courthouse every day beginning the middle of that month.

The Dallas County Courthouse. Those green marble steps, thirteen of them, leading up to that twin set of glass doors, the entranceway into that fortress-like three-story stone building inside which sat the keys to the kingdom, the office of the voter registrar—this would be our stage for the coming months. How many months, no one could say.

But it began on the eighteenth, when Dr. King and I led four hundred men and women from Brown's Chapel nine blocks to the white downtown section of the city and up to the courthouse steps, where we were confronted by a crowd of various right-wing figures who had flown in from across the country to make a show of their own positions against us. Among them was the founder and chairman of the American Nazi Party, a man named George Lincoln Rockwell. He looked like just another young tough from one of the many mobs I'd faced during the past five years. Slim, dark-haired, in need of

a shave on this particular day, he was a former U.S. Navy commander who tapped into the same reactionary fear and hatred that fuels the neo-Nazi hate groups of today. It was Rockwell's followers, dressed in Third Reich-style uniforms, who staged the "hate bus" trip during our 1961 Freedom Ride. Later, wearing swastika armbands and "White Power" T-shirts (Rockwell wrote a book with that title), they would attack black demonstrators in the streets of Chicago. Eventually, in 1967, Rockwell would be shot to death by one of his own followers outside a Laundromat near his home in Arlington, Virginia.

On this day, in mid-January 1965, he was in his element, making a large show of standing against us outside the courthouse. Sheriff Clark was there as well, wearing his officer's cap with gold military braids and an Eisenhower-style waist jacket, and carrying a swagger stick. He was playing his role to the hilt, the commander in chief of his own special army.

His deputies stood behind him as Clark stepped forward and told us we'd have to clear the sidewalk out front and form a line in an alley beside the building, which we did. And we waited.

And waited.

And waited.

What tends to be forgotten among the dramatic photographs and news accounts of the moments of violence that erupted during so many demonstrations like this in so many cities across the South during the civil rights era were the days and days of uneventful protest that took place outside these courtrooms and jails. People silently walked a picket line for hours on end, or sang freedom songs from dawn to dusk, or simply stood in line at a door they knew would not be opened, hour after hour, day after day. The patience and persistence it took to endure those countless hours of weary boredom in stifling heat or bone-chilling cold, in driving rain and wet, slushy snow, is as admirable as the bravery it took to face the billy clubs of those deputies.

Waiting. Keeping the pressure on by simply maintaining a relentless presence. That would become the rhythm of our days in Selma. The courthouse workers would see the black people coming, and the registrar would put an "OUT TO LUNCH" sign in the window, and that "lunch" would last all day. Many days the people would stand out there from morning to night and not a single one would get through those doors. Other days, one or two might be let in, maybe a handful, and they'd be given the literacy test, fail it and come out empty-handed.

This day, the first day, Monday, January 18, was like that. None of us left that alley. No one was let into the courthouse. No one was registered to vote. But the line had been drawn, and that was enough. At the end of that afternoon, Dr. King went to the Hotel Albert—the ornate redbrick building that Howard Zinn compared to a Venetian palace—walked into the lobby and

stepped up to the registration desk to sign in as the hotel's first-ever black guest. A good-sized group of us stood with him to watch. Also looking on were some white men and women, who did not look too happy.

What happened next was a blur.

Out of the group of white people lunged a tall, gangly man. He said, "You're Martin Luther King," and then, as if just saying those words pushed a button inside him, he began kicking and punching at Dr. King. It was weird. Very spontaneous, as if the man was just seized by some impulse.

I responded with an impulse of my own. I'm not a physical person. I've never been in a fight in my life. I've been hit—many, many times—but I've never hit back. At that moment, though, something shot up in me, something protective, something instinctive, and I jumped in and put a bear hug on the man. I wasn't even thinking about whether he might have a weapon or anything like that. It was just a visceral reaction. I didn't strike the man, though I thought about it. I don't think I've ever come as close to hitting someone as I did at that moment. Maybe it was because Dr. King meant so much to me. I don't know, but that moment pushed me as close as I've ever been to the limits of my nonviolent commitments. It made me realize there *were* limits, which was a humbling reminder of how human we all are.

It was all over in a few seconds. Wilson Baker, who was on the scene, stepped in and pulled the man away. The guy turned out to be one of those right-wingers who had been over at the courthouse earlier in the day, a man named Jimmie George Robinson, who belonged to a group called the National States Rights Party. Nobody was particularly upset about it, not even Dr. King. It was just a bizarre little incident, but one that got a lot of publicity, especially after the attack that had happened up in Harlem several years earlier, where the woman had stabbed Dr. King at his book signing.

That was the only violence that first day. The next, however, Sheriff Clark got his turn. We marched again to the courthouse, again Clark ordered us into the alley, but this time we refused to go. He and his deputies then moved in to push us off the sidewalk. Mrs. Boynton apparently moved too slowly for his tastes, and the next thing you knew he was manhandling her, really *shoving* and roughing her up. I couldn't believe it. You could hear the news photographers' cameras clicking, and I knew that now it was starting, that cycle of violence and publicity and more violence and more publicity that would eventually, we hoped, push things to the point where something—ideally, the law—would have to be changed. Sure enough, the next morning's newspapers across the country carried photos and descriptions of Clark's attack on Mrs. Boynton. As *The New York Times* described it, the sheriff "grabbed her by the back of her collar and pushed her roughly for half a block into a patrol car." Mrs. Boynton was taken to jail that day, as were sixty-six other marchers.

The next morning, Wednesday, came my turn. Our plan that day was to approach the courthouse in waves, three large groups of us, one after the other. I was in the first group, and when we got there Clark told us we had to line up in the alley and enter through a side door. I responded that we wanted to enter through the front door.

"You have one minute to move," he told me. Then he began counting out loud, the way a parent does with a child.

"One . . . two . . . three . . ." All the way to sixty.

Then he arrested us. The next group had arrived by then, and they were arrested as well. Baker had arrived by then as well, and he was not happy. The night before, in the wake of the incident with Mrs. Boynton, Baker had complained to reporters that Clark was "out of control." Now the two men stood chin to chin, arguing, almost shouting, in full view of us and the reporters. It was a real scene. This was no laughing matter, but inside you had to chuckle a little at how comic these two men looked.

Clark wound up arresting all three groups that day. He locked us in a fenced outdoor compound next to the jail—the jail was already full—and he kept us there until buses arrived to take us to a county work farm, which had been vacated by the convicts already there, who were put out on road gangs to make room for us. And so I settled in for another series of nights in a setting I knew well. The smell of honeysuckle from the surrounding forest. The buzz of cicadas filling the air at night. The chicken coop pens in which we were kept, sleeping on the floor with blankets we had to share because there were more of us than there was "bedding."

While I was there, the marching continued. Dr. King, who had left town after that first day to honor a speaking engagement—that was his routine with all these campaigns; he was much too busy, too much in demand by too many people, to settle in for the duration of any one demonstration—returned that Friday to join a group of more than a hundred Selma schoolteachers led by Fred Reese, the Voters League president and a teacher himself. This was a significant demonstration because in the past teachers had been reluctant to take part in our protests. They were generally conservative, careful, wary of confrontation. They were also, however, among the upper crust of the local black community. They were among the best-paid and certainly the best-educated black professional men and women in every city. For them to be kept from voting was clearly outrageous. For them to step forward and face arrest in Selma was a big step forward for all of us. Their arrest that day inspired other groups of professionals in the city to stage their own marches in the days to come. The undertakers. The beauticians. It was beautiful.

The following Monday, a week after the demonstrations had begun, I was out of jail and on the line again, and again I watched Sheriff Clark's temper

play right into our hands. Again it was a woman he confronted, and again the press delivered a blow-by-blow account of the fight.

And it was a fight—two heavyweights throwing punches at each other. One was Clark and the other was a large fifty-three-year-old woman named Arrie Lee Cooper. Mrs. Cooper worked as a maid at the Torch Motel—the only black hotel in town. I'd met her several times in the past, and I liked her. She was up-front, pleasant and, as she showed on this particular day, absolutely fearless.

We were, as usual, lined up on the courthouse steps—the local men and women waiting to register and people like me and Hosea and other SNCC and SCLC people who were there to support and make sure these marchers had all that they needed. Clark and his deputies, as usual, were there to make sure they did not. As Clark's men moved in and began pushing people aside, Mrs. Cooper—all 235 pounds of her—confronted him.

"Ain't nobody scared around here," she said.

Clark wasn't one to stand for backtalk, especially from a woman. He shoved Mrs. Cooper, hard. But not hard enough. She came right back and punched the sheriff in the head, sending him reeling.

Three deputies then grabbed Mrs. Cooper and wrestled her to the ground, where she kept flailing and kicking even as they held her down. Clark looked out of his mind with anger. He had his billy club out and looked as if he was about to hit her with it. Then he hesitated. You could see his mind clicking in, his realization that everyone was watching. Us. The reporters. The photographers. Everyone.

What happened next was described in the following day's *New York Times* by reporter John Herbers:

"I wish you would hit me, you scum," she snapped at the sheriff. He then brought his billyclub down on her head with a whack that was heard throughout the crowd gathered in the street.

It took two pairs of handcuffs to hold Mrs. Cooper as she was taken away to jail, blood dripping from a wound over her right eye. Photos of that, too, appeared across the country the next day.

I left several days later for the West Coast to raise some badly needed money for SNCC. Our involvement in Selma was minimal—except for our local field staffers already working there, I was the only one taking part in the campaign on a regular basis. As far as most SNCC people were concerned, this was an SCLC show, so they kept their distance.

While I was gone, Dr. King was arrested—by Baker, who peaceably intercepted King and the group he was marching with before they reached the courthouse and a confrontation with Clark. By now Clark had received reinforcements with the arrival of nearly fifty Alabama state troopers under the

command of George Wallace's state public safety director, Colonel Al Lingo. The manpower was needed, with literally hundreds of marchers now being arrested each day. As Bevel had done in Birmingham, the SCLC mobilized schoolchildren in Selma, and now they began marching as well. The same day Dr. King and the 250 men and women walking with him were taken to jail, 500 Selma schoolchildren, some carrying protest signs written in crayon, were arrested outside the county courthouse.

That was Monday, February 1. The next day, several hundred more children were arrested. The day after that came three hundred more, who sang "Ain't gonna let Jim Clark tum me around..." as they were taken off to jail.

Then came Thursday, and the arrival of Malcolm X.

Malcolm had promised Don Harris and me during our meeting in Africa that he would come south to visit "our" movement. Soon after our return from that trip, we—SNCC—sent a group of teenage students from Mississippi up to Harlem to meet with Malcolm, who told them essentially the same thing he had said to Don and me, that this was a world struggle we were engaged in here, not just an American struggle. "It is important for you to know," he told those children, "that when you're in Mississippi, you're not alone."

Now he kept his promise to come south himself. While I was out on the West Coast, Jim Forman contacted Malcolm in New York and arranged for him to come to Tuskegee to speak to the students at Tuskegee Institute. Because Selma was not far, Malcolm decided to make a side trip there, arriving Thursday, February 4, with a group that included Fred Shuttlesworth and Coretta King, sitting in for her husband, who was behind bars in the Selma city jail.

They all spoke that day—Shuttlesworth, Mrs. King, and Malcolm—at a rally at Brown's Chapel. I heard later that Malcolm was received politely though not enthusiastically by the audience of local Selmans. That didn't surprise me. These were Southern black people, used to the singsong preacher-like cadence and the God-and-heaven context of Southern black speakers. Malcolm was much more strident, much more fiery and much more political than what they were used to. Still, he struck a chord, including his use of the phrase "by any means necessary," referring to our struggle in the South to gain the right to vote.

At a press conference later that day, he elaborated:

I think that the people in this part of the world would do well to listen to Dr. Martin Luther King and give him what he's asking for and give it to him fast, before some other factions come along and try to do it another way...

Those words were meant as a threat, and even as Malcolm X spoke they were being taken to heart by SNCC sympathizers in cities across the North. A loose web of demonstrators and protestors called the Friends of SNCC had begun mobilizing that month in New York and Chicago and Washington, staging sit-ins at federal buildings to protest the lack of U.S. government intervention in Selma. They even staged a sit-in at the White House. These weren't actual SNCC members, and we often knew nothing about their actions until we read about them in the newspapers like everyone else. But as with our own staff members, we were happy to have these people join the cause, regardless of their personal politics or background. Some of them went so far as to help raise money, and we welcomed that as well. My only concern was when their methods violated our commitment to nonviolence. And that was beginning to happen that February. One clash at New York City's federal courthouse between fifteen SNCC sympathizers and the U.S. marshals who tried to block them from sitting in resulted in a fistfight described in *The New York Times*: "Hard punches were thrown and found their marks on both sides." That bothered me a lot. This was just one more sign of the growing sense of impatience and militancy spreading throughout the movement, especially within SNCC. It did not bode well.

The day after Malcolm X spoke in Selma, I flew back from California. That same day—Friday, February 5—a contingent of fifteen U.S. congressmen, all liberals, of course, arrived from Washington to get a firsthand look at what was going on. Organized by Michigan's Charles Diggs (who had come south ten years earlier to watch the Emmett Till trial) and John Conyers, who like Diggs was black and a Democrat, the group was sprinkled with politicians whose reputations were already large but whose names would become even more well known in the decades to come: John Lindsay and Ed Koch of New York, both of whom would become mayors of New York City, Charles Mathias from Maryland; Ogden Reid from New York and Augustus Hawkins from California; and U.S. Assistant Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who would eventually step forward as one of the earliest and foremost opponents of U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam.

They all came for a tour of Selma, which I joined and which Dr. King, who was released from jail that day, also took part in. While behind bars, King had written a "Letter from the Selma Jail," intended to arouse the same interest in a federal voting rights bill that his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" had inspired for the civil rights act. This new letter—published as an SCLC ad in *The New York Times*—aroused nowhere near the same interest as the one from Birmingham, but it did prompt President Johnson to announce at a news conference that week that "all of us should be concerned with the efforts of our fellow Americans to register to vote in Alabama."

Things were clearly stirring in Washington. But the President's words fell on deaf ears in Selma. The day those congressmen came to visit, Sheriff Clark arrested some five hundred more marchers at the courthouse. Several days later he put the city in national headlines again by arresting more than 160 teenagers and sending them on a forced run of more than two miles out into the countryside. His deputies used clubs and cattle prods to keep those kids going. "March, damnit, march!" one officer reportedly yelled. "You want to march so bad, now you can march. Let's go!" One fifteen-year-old boy said to a guard, "God sees you," and the deputy answered by clubbing him in the mouth. By the time they returned, several kids had lumps and cuts on their heads, and a few had been burned by cattle prods. One nine-year-old boy stood with tears streaming down his face—he had made the march barefoot.

I thought I had seen everything, but this was disgusting. I wrote a statement that afternoon, which was rushed to radio and newspaper reporters as soon as we could get it typed up. I still have that statement, hand-scrawled on notepaper:

Sheriff Jim Clark proved today beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is basically no different from a Gestapo officer during the Fascist slaughter of the Jews. . . .

This is but one more example of the inhuman, animal-like treatment of the Negro people of Selma, Alabama. This nation has always come to the aid of people in foreign lands who are gripped by a reign of tyranny. Can this nation do less for the people of Selma?

Smitherman and Baker were just about beside themselves, and they weren't alone. A large number of white Selma residents were becoming embarrassed and concerned over the sheriff's actions. They weren't eager to give black people the right to vote, but they were certain there were more "civilized" ways of keeping us off the rolls. Unlike Birmingham, where an entire city essentially stood united against the black community, this was basically Sheriff Clark and his supporters against us, with the rest of Selma, including the mayor and the public safety director, looking on in distress.

It was important for us to hold the moral high ground, to maintain the principles of nonviolent action and response no matter what. Demonstrators may have begun fighting back elsewhere, some under the name of SNCC, but in Selma we were determined to stay the course that had gotten the movement this far. The second week of that February, when Sheriff Clark checked into the local hospital suffering from exhaustion—this thing was taking its toll on him as well—a group of black Selma schoolchildren went to the hospital and prayed outside for his recovery. They urged him to "Get well soon, in mind as in body," as one sign put it. Other signs read FREEDOM NOW. Clark

was not moved. When he was released from the hospital, he wore a one-word message of his own on a badge pinned to his lapel: NEVER.

That Tuesday, February 16, Clark was back in front of the courthouse standing with his deputies in the chilly rain as twenty-five of us, including C. T. Vivian, approached. The Reverend Vivian had become increasingly active in the movement since our Nashville days, rising to a top position in the SCLC. He was there with us on the Freedom Rides, he did time in Parchman when he was in Birmingham in '63, and Mississippi in '64, and now he was here

When Clark stepped in front of our group that day, it was Vivian who squared off against him. He told the sheriff and his deputies that they reminded him of Nazis. "You're racists the same way Hitler was a racist!" he said, loud enough for the reporters to get every word. He then dared Clark to hit him. Even though deputies stepped in to try to stop him, the sheriff took the bait. He reached out and slammed his fist into Vivian's mouth, knocking him down the steps. He hit Vivian so hard he broke a finger in his hand. Vivian was then arrested.

That set up a march two days later up the road from Selma in the town of Marion, in neighboring Perry County. The people there had been demonstrating and being arrested by the hundreds, just as the Selmas had. On this night they held a rally protesting the arrest of an SCLC worker named James Orange. Vivian had been released from jail that day, and the people of Marion asked him and an SCLC staffer named Willie Bolden to come speak at their rally. By the time Vivian's speech was done, the people were eager to march, 450 of them, from their tiny local church—Zion Methodist—to the city jail, where they intended to sing outside Orange's cell. A half dozen or so reporters walked along with them, including John Herbers from *The New York Times* and NBC's Richard Valeriani.

This was a dangerous march, different because it took place at nighttime. We rarely staged marches at night. Too many things could happen. Too many things could not be seen.

The group had hardly stepped away from the church before they were stopped by the local police chief and state troopers. Jim Clark and some of his men were there as well. The marchers were instructed to turn around. One of them, a black farmer named James Dobynes, knelt and began praying.

Suddenly the streetlights went out. As if on cue, the police and troopers began beating the marchers while a crowd of white onlookers leaped on the press, spraying the TV camera lenses with paint and assaulting the reporters. Valeriani's head was gashed. A UPI reporter's camera was grabbed and smashed while he was beaten to the ground.

It was mayhem. The marchers broke ranks and tried fleeing back through the darkness to the church. There was screaming and blood on the pavement

from head wounds. One young black man, a twenty-six-year-old Army veteran named Jimmie Lee Jackson, veered off and ran with his grandfather, who had been hit in the head, to a nearby cafe, a place called Mack's. A group of state troopers followed them in, and a fight broke out. Jackson's mother was hit and Jackson, pushing his way into the middle of it, was shot in the stomach. He staggered from the building, then collapsed in the street, where he lay for half an hour before the local police picked him up and took him to the county infirmary. Late that night he was transferred to the hospital in Selma, where he was listed as critically wounded.

I got word the next morning, Friday, in Atlanta. This was serious. If Jimmie Lee Jackson died, no one could say what might happen. I left that day for a meeting down in Americus and kept the radio on all the way, listening for updates on Jimmie Lee's condition. What I heard instead was a statement from Governor Wallace, banning all nighttime marches in Alabama and denouncing the incident in Marion as a setup staged by "professional agitators with pro-communist affiliations."

Two days later, Sunday the twenty-first—my birthday—Jimmie Lee Jackson was still clinging to life in that Selma hospital. I was driving back late that day from Americus to Atlanta with Cleve Sellers, the radio on again, when a bulletin came over the air that took my breath away.

Malcolm X had been shot dead in New York, gunned down by assassins in a ballroom in Harlem, in full view of his congregation.

I couldn't believe it. Malcolm had been killed, by his own people, as it turned out, by Black Muslims. I had my differences with him, of course, but there was no question that he had come to articulate better than anyone else on the scene—including Dr. King—the bitterness and frustration of black Americans. I was encouraged by the fact that Malcolm had begun taking that frustration and rage into a broader perspective of hope and the future, into a worldview, linking the struggle for human rights in Africa and other nations to the movement here. He had begun looking beyond issues of race to issues of class, and those ideas were intriguing and appealing. Malcolm, like the movement, was moving toward new horizons.

And now he was dead. That was deeply disturbing to me. When I flew up with Cleve to the funeral later that week, I was struck by the severity, the solemnity, the silence of the occasion. Ossie Davis, the actor, delivered the eulogy, and you really could just about hear a pin drop. No one showed any emotions. No crying. No displays of grief, such as we always had at Southern funerals. No singing. Everyone held their feelings in. It was very stoic. Very grim.

Grim would describe the mood in Selma that week as well, with Jimmie Lee Jackson lying close to death. We had meetings every day, at tables pulled

together in Clay & Liston's restaurant, or over in the Walker's Cafe, or in someone's home. No one was quite sure what to do next. The SCLC people—Hosea, Bevel and Young, mainly—were essentially calling the shots while we, the SNCC representatives—Worth Long, Silas Norman, John Love, and I—listened and didn't say much. I was in a strange position, caught between the cold distance of my SNCC colleagues, who had continued to grow increasingly resentful of the presence of King and his people, and my own connections with the SCLC. Overriding everything, of course, were my concerns about the people of Selma, many of whom were sitting in jail at that moment. I had come to know them well, especially the families in the Carver housing project, where I stayed many, many nights, in one household or another.

That's where most of our SNCC people stayed, in Carver. We had a Freedom House that we rented down a dirt road and across the tracks from Carver, but it didn't have a lot of space. It was a small shack, really, with several bunk beds, a shower and a refrigerator. It was good for emergencies, but if we had any time to plan, we preferred staying with one of the families in the community. That was part of our philosophy of being with the people, of bonding, and I loved that aspect of the experience, the spontaneity of it, the human connection. You'd have a meeting or a rally and you didn't know where you'd be spending the night when it began. At the end, as people were leaving, someone would walk up and say, "You can stay with me" or "My mother said it's okay for you all to stay with us." It was very informal, very touching.

I was staying in one of those apartments in Carver when word came Friday, February 26, that Jimmie Lee Jackson had died. I knew it was only a matter of time until we got that news, but nonetheless it was very emotional. A lot of people had suffered during the previous two months. A lot of people had been beaten and hurt and jailed. But no one had died. Not until now.

The funeral was extremely emotional, four hundred people—most of whom had been in that march the night Jimmie Lee was shot—squeezed into the tiny church in Marion, with six hundred more standing outside in the rain.

Dr. King spoke. Then Bevel. And then we all gathered and walked behind the hearse from the church to the cemetery, down a narrow dirt road turned to mud by the rain. Tree branches bent over us, hanging low with the weight of the rain on their leaves. It was overwhelmingly dreary. Very sad.

And it was during that procession that Bevel suggested we take Jimmie Lee's body to Montgomery. Walk the entire fifty-four miles from Selma and lay this young man's casket on the capitol steps. Confront the governor. Confront the state of Alabama. Give them something they couldn't turn their heads away from.

They went ahead and buried Jimmie Lee Jackson that day, but Bevel's idea of a march on Montgomery caught fire. The next four days our meetings were dominated by discussions of this march. The SCLC people, including Dr. King, were all for it. The SNCC people, especially Forman, were dead set against it. The feeling was that such a march would do more for King than it would for Selma. I disagreed. I knew the feelings that were out there on the streets. The people of Selma were hurting. They were angry. They needed to march. It didn't matter to me who led it. They *needed* to march.

This was one of the most difficult situations I'd had to deal with since becoming chairman of SNCC. The struggle over my speech at the March on Washington was different. There I had the support of my SNCC colleagues. Forman and Cox were right by my side. Here I was alone. Personally I might have favored this march, but as chairman of SNCC I had an obligation to represent the sentiments and decisions of my brothers and sisters in the organization. So when Bevel formally announced on March 3 that there would be a "massive" march that Sunday from Selma to Montgomery, a march led by Dr. King, Forman drafted a letter to King from SNCC, a letter that carried my signature at the bottom:

We strongly believe that the objectives of the march do not justify the dangers . . . consequently the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee will only live up to those minimal commitments . . . to provide radios and cars, doctors and nurses, and nothing beyond that.

That was a SNCC letter, not a John Lewis letter. It was settled that SNCC was going to have next to nothing to do with this march. As for me, well, one way or another, I intended to be there. During the next three days, while Governor Wallace held summit sessions with his staff in Montgomery to figure out how they should respond to this march—he finally slammed his fist on a table and pronounced, "I'm not gonna have a bunch of niggers walking along a highway in this state as long as I'm governor"—I was in a kind of limbo, not really a part of the SCLC group that was mapping out the details for this event, and not really with my SNCC colleagues either, who were setting themselves apart.

That Saturday, the day before the march would begin, a contingent of seventy white people, all Alabamians, all sympathetic to our cause, marched to the courthouse in Selma. They were led by a minister from Birmingham named Joseph Ellwanger, who was a Selma native and who chaired a group called the Concerned White Citizens of Alabama. They were taunted and attacked by a crowd of white Selmans, who sang "Dixie" while Ellwanger spoke. Ellwanger's group responded by singing "America the Beautiful." And a small

group of local black men and women looking on broke out with a stanza of "We Shall Overcome."

You couldn't have scripted a scene that summed up the civil rights situation in the South any better than that.

As that scene was unfolding, I was four hours away, in Atlanta, in a back room of a restaurant called Frazier Cafe Society, coming to a decision that would change the course of my life.

Frazier's was a small soul food place, one of two favorite gathering spots in Atlanta for people involved in the movement. The other was a place called Paschal's. The SCLC people preferred Paschal's, which offered a big meeting room, while Frazier's was the main SNCC hangout—smaller and more intimate, with some of the best vegetable dishes you'd find anywhere in the South: early peas, green beans, fresh corn, turnips, collard greens . . . and yams that were out of this world. We'd often go there to eat, then move down to the basement for a meeting. Which is where we were that Saturday afternoon, talking hot and heavy about Selma.

There were about a dozen of us, primarily the executive committee. Forman, Marion Barry, Courtland Cox, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Ruby Doris Robinson and Julian were all there, along with Bob Mants, Silas Norman and Wilson Brown.

The decision had been made that SNCC would set itself apart from this march. But that decision could still be changed. This thing was going to be big, no question about it. It was going to attract a lot of attention. Did we really want to stand on the sidelines and not be a part of it?

That was one question. But there were so many others, such as the question of resources. Could we afford this in terms of manpower and money? And who would reap the benefits? King and the SCLC? And what about the danger? People could get hurt here, and where would King and his people be when that happened? Who would be left holding the bag?

All these questions and more flew around the room as that afternoon turned to night. After several hours it was clear that I was the only one arguing for joining this march. I felt that it was up to the people of Selma to decide whether to march or not, and we needed to support them, whatever their decision. If they wanted to march, we should march with them. This wasn't about us or our differences with the SCLC. It was about *them*, the people of Selma. They were the reason we had come in the first place. We had a moral obligation, a mission, to cast our lot with these people, wherever they wanted to go, whatever they wanted to do.

They were going to march, I said, and so it was just like the situation that morning of the March on Washington, when our leadership group had

emerged from the Capitol to see that ocean of humanity heading to the Lincoln Memorial. "There go my people. Let me catch up with them." That had been my feeling in D.C., and that was my feeling now. I couldn't imagine living with myself if the people of Selma had marched and I had not been with them. If something was going to happen, I wanted to be there when it did.

It was getting close to midnight when I had my final say.

"I'm a native Alabamian," I told the group. "I grew up in Alabama. I feel a deep kinship with the people there on a lot of levels. You know I've been to Selma many, many times. I've been arrested there. I've been jailed there. If these people want to march, I'm going to march with them. You decide what you want to do, but I'm going to march."

And that was that. The only decision left to make was in what capacity I would march. It was decided that I would take part, but not as a member of SNCC. I would march simply as John Lewis.

That hurt me. I never imagined that my own organization, SNCC, would ever step aside and tell me to walk alone. It hurt personally, and it hurt in an even deeper sense to know that they were abandoning these people, the people of Selma. For the first time since I had become a part of the movement I was walking alone, in a sense. I would be walking with the people, but *my* people—the people of SNCC—would not be with me. The fact that those two could ever be separated—the people and SNCC—was something I had never imagined.

The meeting broke up just past midnight. Bob Mants and Wilson Brown and I headed for Wilson's car, a white Dodge, and took off for Selma, four hours away. We arrived close to dawn and went straight to the SNCC Freedom House for a few hours of sleep. It was close to noon when we woke up. I crawled out of my sleeping bag, took a shower, put on my clothes and threw a few things in my green Army backpack—an apple, an orange, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a couple of books.

And then it was time to go.

Part V

GOING DOWN