

Chapter Eleven: Selma

In February 1965, a pivotal voting rights campaign emerged in Selma, Alabama, despite prior repression from Judge James Hare's orders that stifled activism. Local leaders, including Amelia Boynton, sought assistance from Martin Luther King Jr., who identified the local sheriff, Jim Clark, as an ideal antagonist to draw attention to their cause. King's hope was to propel a federal voting rights agenda, which the Johnson administration hesitated to push post-1964 Civil Rights Act. His arrival sparked jealousy among local SNCC workers who felt sidelined, fearing SCLC's strategy would compromise their grassroots work.

However, John Lewis from SNCC had a different view. As a connection between the two organizations, he supported King's involvement, believing local residents invited him to help. On January 2, following King's arrival, he announced an organized movement to secure voting rights throughout Alabama, rallying citizens to join him.

As the campaign unfolded, King and SCLC leaders tightly coordinated while SNCC sought unity through collaboration. Tensions escalated as peaceful demonstrations faced aggressive opposition, and numerous participants, including Lewis, found themselves frequently jailed. The collective effort rallied many locals despite ongoing arrests and brutal treatment from authorities. Lewis advocated that their patience during this turmoil underscored their fight for justice, even confronting Sheriff Clark directly.

As the situation intensified, a tragic incident occurred on February 10 when a group of teenagers protesting were violently halted. Lewis's condemnation of Sheriff Clark's conduct highlighted the systemic violence against Black individuals. Meanwhile, the community epitomized the emotion of the Civil Rights struggle, as Lewis's stirring speeches urged the assembled crowd to persist in their quest for dignity and justice.

Public outrage grew following the violent events, particularly after the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson on February 26. Activists began planning a march from Selma to Montgomery to protest his murder and demand voting rights, culminating in significant mobilization and nationwide support for their cause. Ultimately, the violence faced by the marchers galvanized public opinion and pushed the federal government towards acknowledging the need for legislative action on voting rights .