

Ouachita Baptist University Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Articles

Faculty Publications

1993

"All They Want Is to Gain Attention": Press Coverage and the Selma-to-Montgomery March

S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

Deranda R. Granade

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/articles>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray and Granade, Deranda R., "'All They Want Is to Gain Attention': Press Coverage and the Selma-to-Montgomery March" (1993). *Articles*. 46.

<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/articles/46>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

“All They Want Is to Gain Attention”:
Press Coverage and the Selma-to-Montgomery March
by: Deranda R. and S. Ray Granade

March in Alabama can be a beautiful month with warm days, cool nights, flowers bursting from the ground with vibrant yellows, reds, and violets, and greens everywhere. Jonquils push through the ground like horns resounding with the song of spring and forsythia adorns itself in gold.¹ March can also fulfill the proverb “comes in like a lion, goes out like a lamb.” Alabama’s March of 1965 offered cold, wet, windy weather up until the end. But a different wind blew through Selma that month—the wind of discontent and change.

For the first three months of 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), had conducted a voter registration drive in central Alabama’s Black Belt counties. King sought to expose voting barriers in this part of the South as a means of eliminating them nation-wide through federal legislation.² Press coverage would be vital, focusing attention on the problem he sought to correct.

Settlers originally called the counties bordering the Alabama River the Black Belt because the rich limestone soil had become dark loam through the centuries. But the name also assumed an ethnological meaning; a majority of inhabitants descended from slaves who once worked its antebellum plantations. In 1965, those land-holdings still dotted the countryside, and many features of the old order still flourished. Contrasts also marked the region: majestic homes and ramshackle shanties, opulence and poverty, white and black, played against the endless sweep of cotton fields. In the midst of this Black Belt, athwart the Alabama River, sat Dallas County. Selma, on the river’s north bank almost in the center of both county and state, served as the county seat.³

Selma certainly exhibited this Black Belt contrast with its voter registration list. In 1965, the city boasted of a population of 55,000; 60% of it was black. Almost half of this black population was of voting age. Only 600 of those 15,000 were registered. Eligible whites

numbered a thousand less, but the names of 10,000 of them adorned the voter rolls. In short, 4% of the eligible blacks and 71% of the eligible whites had registered. Percentages of registered blacks in neighboring counties for the 1964 elections closely resembled those in Dallas, ranging from zero in Wilcox and Lowndes to seven in Choctaw and Perry.⁴

Coretta Scott King said that her husband chose Selma as the voter-registration drive target because it had become a symbol of black oppression. King aide Andrew Young reportedly called Selma the South's most oppressive city.⁵ King needed the right target for his assault on black oppression. A dramatic assault, well-reported by the media, would stir nation-wide support for stronger voting rights legislation and federal intervention.⁶ David J. Garrow, in his *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965*, argues that King targeted Selma because any confrontation there would certainly be dramatic and dangerous, assuring media coverage.⁷

Dallas County Sheriff James Clark ensured that any protest at Selma would be dramatic, dangerous, and thus newsworthy. He symbolized Selma and that for which she stood. In 1965 he was 43, and *Time* described him as a bully and segregationist who stood at the head of a "club-swinging mounted posse of deputy volunteers, many of them Ku Klux Klansmen." The magazine summed Clark up as "the perfect public villain."⁸ In the seven weeks preceding the dramatic March days, he had jailed 2,000 people, including women and children, for truancy, contempt of court, juvenile delinquency, and parading without a permit.⁹ The ever-present "NEVER" button on his clothes stated his position. When asked what it stood for, he called it his answer to the Negro freedom song, "We Shall Overcome."¹⁰ He and his deputies had exhibited an almost continuous pattern of "harassment, intimidation, coercion, threatening conduct, and sometimes, brutal mistreatment" toward black demonstrators encouraging Negroes to register and to protest discriminatory Alabama voter registration practices.¹¹

The voter registration drive, which King began on the second day

of 1965, plodded along. The days filled with repetitious marches on the courthouse, sporadic visits from King, lines waiting to register, meetings at Brown Chapel AME Church, jailings of demonstrators, and declining media coverage. Sheriff Clark was on his best behavior. Some King aides despaired of prodding the “perfect public villain” into action.

Finally, on January 19th, Clark’s restraint gave way under pressure from prominent black Selma citizen and demonstrator Amelia Boynton.¹² But the media largely ignored this change in Clark’s actions.

New impetus came not from Sheriff Clark’s personal “defense of the courthouse,” but from the small town of Marion, about thirty miles to the northwest in Perry County.¹³ During a mid-February night march on the Marion jail, the streetlights went out. Police and counter-demonstrators clashed with marchers. In the melee, someone shot young, black Jimmy Lee Jackson. When he died eight days later on February 26, Selma’s protestors had a martyr. The story gained front-page coverage nationally; King gained his rationale for a fifty-four mile “Freedom March” from Selma to the state capitol of Montgomery.¹⁴ The march would dramatize black demands to end voting discrimination and denounce police brutality.¹⁵ It would also ensure massive media exposure for the participants and their cause.

King’s choice of a march to dramatize the plight of Alabama blacks was not a haphazard one. A great admirer of Ghandi, King emulated his idol. As Harris Wofford, King confidant and one of the few whites to make the complete march, remarked:

Walking as a form of political action has been a special phenomenon of the twentieth century. From Ghandi’s first great South African march into the Transvaal and his later Salt March in India, to Mao Tse-tung’s Long March, to American marches for women’s suffrage, peace, and civil rights, it has been a powerful method of getting attention. It is a manifestation of politics as drama, in which citizens themselves can act on the public stage. For Martin King, marching was also a form of liturgy—a way of making words become flesh.¹⁶

In issuing his call for the Freedom March, King warned his followers that he could not promise that they would not get beaten, that

their houses would not be bombed or that they would not get scarred.

“But we must stand up for what is right!” was his battle cry.¹⁷

Sunday, March 7, 1965, was crisp and chilly, but sunny, in central Alabama. The day before, in a televised press conference, Governor George Wallace had announced that a march of such magnitude would not be tolerated because it would disrupt “the free flow of traffic and commerce.”¹⁸ Ignoring Wallace’s order, 650 Negroes and a handful of whites set out from Brown Chapel that afternoon to begin the 54-mile march to dramatize their battle for the right to vote.¹⁹ John Lewis, head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Hosea Williams, an aide in King’s SCLC, led the march. The peaceful, orderly group walked two abreast, many carrying bedrolls and knapsacks, along Selma’s back streets. They turned onto Broad Street and headed toward the hump-backed Edmund Pettus Bridge that crosses the Alabama River’s muddy waters.²⁰

As they topped the rise of the bridge, they saw a detachment of Alabama State Troopers headed by State Public Safety Director Al Lingo, a detachment of Sheriff Clark’s deputies, and his mounted posse, known among blacks as storm troopers.²¹ An eight-year-old girl in the group described the officers as a “blue picket fence, stretched across the highway.”²² This fence bristled with carbines, shotguns, sidearms, tear gas, nightsticks, and cattle prods. Col. Lingo ordered the marchers to disperse and return to the church within two minutes. When the tense two minutes ticked away and the marchers did not obey, the state troopers put on gas masks and began their advance. The demonstrators retreated a hundred yards and knelt. Troopers began to throw tear gas canisters and Sheriff Clark’s men “plunged into the melee, swinging clubs, canes and whips.”²³ The offensive did not end until the bleeding and choking blacks had reached the safety of Brown Chapel.

When the rout ended, seventeen of the march’s participants required hospitalization. An additional sixty-seven had also been injured. Some had fractured ribs and wrists, severe head gashes and broken teeth, and authorities believed that John Lewis had sustained a

fractured skull.²⁴ The tactics used by the State troopers, deputies and posses were compared to those recommended by the United States Army to crush armed rioters in occupied countries. Yet this was a peaceful and orderly group trying to exercise constitutional rights: the right to assemble peaceably and the right to petition the government for redress of grievances.²⁵

March 7 closed “tense but quiet” in Selma. Outside the state, as David Garrow observed, “reactions and responses to what writers would later call ‘Bloody Sunday’—the climax of the Selma campaign—were just beginning.”²⁶ An outcry arose over the treatment of the blacks on this spring Sunday afternoon at the hands of Alabama governmental representatives. Cities throughout the nation experienced protest marches; President Lyndon Johnson spoke out against it; and King called for clergymen from all over the country to join him on Tuesday, March 9, for a clergymen’s protest march to Montgomery. The response was remarkable. Clergymen of all faiths left for Selma, many arriving without even a toothbrush or change of socks. Around four hundred white churchmen came to Selma to participate in a second attempt to march to Montgomery to present Governor Wallace with grievances concerning central Alabama voter registration processes.²⁷

On Monday, March 8, King’s attorneys appeared before U.S. District Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., requesting an injunction to keep state and Dallas County police from interfering with the march planned for the following day. Johnson scheduled a hearing on the evidence for the first available date, which was Thursday, March 11. He advised that King postpone the march until after the ruling; King agreed.²⁸

King experienced pressure to continue the march without court approval; some claimed that he had lost his nerve. His wife Coretta remembered her husband agonizing about the decision because it went against his principles to flaunt federal law. But he had appealed nationwide for clergymen to join him for a second march, and he believed that if he postponed it, the media would turn its attention elsewhere. National media coverage, so vital for success, focused on Selma because of the violence; in its absence, that coverage would

vanish. So he told Federal Community Relations Service head Leroy Collins, sent to Selma by President Johnson as mediator, "It's better to die on the highway than to make a butchery of my conscience."²⁹

Learning that King intended to proceed with the march, Judge Johnson enjoined the marchers until he could hear the evidence in the case. Leroy Collins worked out a compromise so all could save face. Selma mayor Joe T. Smitherman, State Public Safety Director Lingo, and Sheriff Clark agreed that the marchers could cross the bridge to the point of Sunday's confrontation and then turn back. They further agreed that the demonstrators could conduct a prayer meeting before returning to the church.³⁰ On Tuesday, March 9, the scenario unfolded largely according to script. The New York *Herald Tribune* observed the next day: "For 20 tense minutes yesterday, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and 2,000 civil rights marchers confronted this segregationist state's armed might, and then both sides retreated."³¹ When asked later to comment on this second march, which went 250 feet closer to Montgomery, King called it the greatest civil rights demonstration in Black Belt history and said that he had to "march at least to the point where the troopers brutalized the people on Sunday" even if it meant "a recurrence of violence, arrest or even death."³²

This inconclusive march ending could have produced a stalemate in Selma if white extremists had not acted so brutally that night. White Boston Unitarian minister James Reeb had come to Selma to participate in the Minister's March. Four Ku Klux Klansmen beat him with a wooden plank as he came out of a black-operated Selma restaurant. They crushed his skull; he died without regaining consciousness two days later in a Birmingham hospital. This beating and death touched off a new surge of anger; sympathy demonstrations occurred across the United States. Expressed public opinion generally reflected a belief that now the Negroes would win their battle to march to Montgomery.³³

On March 17, the answer came. After a five-day hearing involving twenty-one attorneys, Judge Johnson authorized a march from Selma to Montgomery. He issued a preliminary injunction against further interference or harassment by state officials, and ordered police

protection for the marchers as needed.³⁴ He also approved the plan of march submitted by the plaintiffs relating to the movement along U.S. Highway 80 from Selma to Montgomery.³⁵ The Selma march seemed to violate Johnson's own basic precepts. But he considered it a unique affair, "the last hurrah" of the direct-action approach to civil rights reform born in the Montgomery bus boycott. Convinced that the concept would now come full circle, he had agreed.³⁶

Between March 17 and March 21, a flurry of activity took place in Selma as civil rights leaders planned the march according to court-ordered guidelines. They assembled bedrolls, air mattresses, and tents (including two big circus ones) to accommodate marchers for four nights on the highway; arranged to have hot meals trucked out to the marchers; lined up thirty-two portable "potties;" and arranged for a convoy of garbage trucks and ambulances. The route stipulated by the orders was the same one attempted two week earlier—leave Brown Chapel, cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and proceed down Highway 80 toward Montgomery.

A four-lane divided highway stretched from Selma to the Lowndes County line. Then it narrowed to two lanes bordered by piney woods and marshes for seventeen miles. At the Montgomery County line, the highway once again widened to four lanes. The plan specified that marchers would cover thirty-nine miles in three days. On the fourth day, at Montgomery's outskirts, they would camp at the City of St. Jude's, a Roman Catholic compound which marked the city's effective western extent. A rally on the Alabama State Capitol steps would end the march on the fifth day.³⁷

Sunday, March 21, two weeks after "Bloody Sunday," marchers, variously estimated at between three and five thousand in number and three hours behind schedule, began their "Freedom March"—a march that would lead them, King said, to the "promised land."³⁸ The day was sunny, with a 52-degree high temperature predicted. Marchers of both races in a festive mood crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and continued on for eight miles. At that point, they left the road and set up camp in a field near a Negro church. Busses and cars carried the ones not wishing

to sleep on the ground back to Selma.³⁹

The next day was partly cloudy but warmer. The march's first crisis came at noon. The court order only authorized three hundred marchers to walk the two-lane highway through Lowndes County. Sunburned faces and blistered feet had already thinned their number, but too many remained. March leaders finally settled on a quota system: 148 blacks from Dallas, 89 from Perry, 23 from Marengo, and 20 from Wilcox counties joined 20 mostly white out-of-staters.⁴⁰ That night, the Kings were driven back to Selma because of a rumored assassination plot. King had decided to accept a speaking engagement in Cleveland, Ohio, on Tuesday and Coretta left for Atlanta to check on their children. When they departed, the marchers' spirits seemed to dampen; the rain that began to fall did not help.⁴¹

The third day of the march, Tuesday, marchers endured rain that varied from a drizzle to a downpour. Marcher Harris Wofford wrote in his book *Of Kennedys and Kings* about one black marcher who sang "Lift 'em up and lay 'em down, we are coming from Selma town!" to keep up spirits during one period of heavy rain. The downpour and the absence of the Kings and Ralph Abernathy, who also had left to make a speech, did not diminish the reception from Negro bystanders along the parade route. Wofford remembered that often someone on the march would shout "What do you want?" and people along the road would shout back "Freedom!"⁴² The scheduled Tuesday night campsite was completely submerged, so marchers stopped after only eleven miles and camped in a field on higher ground. Mud remained a problem, but straw and plastic under and around the sleeping bags kept marchers from sinking into it.⁴³

On Wednesday, enjoying cloudy skies and contending with only occasional rain, marchers reached the next four-lane section of Highway 80. Dozens, hundreds, then thousands of new marchers came by bus and car to join the three hundred coming down the two-lane stretch.⁴⁴ The Kings and Abernathy rejoined the march at the Montgomery airport and all walked into Montgomery together with, as King put it, a new song in their hearts. The marchers camped Wednesday night on the grounds of

St. Jude's as planned. The ones who walked the entire fifty-four miles got bright orange plastic jackets to wear to assure them first preference in everything.⁴⁵

The climax to the march and Selma drive came on Thursday, March 25, as demonstrators approached the "Cradle of the Confederacy."⁴⁶ Flanked by marchers carrying United States and United Nations flags, King led more than twenty-five thousand marchers, many also carrying flags and banners, as they converged on Dexter Avenue and moved up Goat Hill towards the Capitol. Almost two hours passed after the head of the march reached the foot of the Capitol steps before the last marchers at the end of the throng, which extended all the way down Dexter Avenue to Court Square, arrived.⁴⁷ It was a day of speeches, of dignity, and of remembrance. King reminded the assembly of what had been accomplished over the decade since Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat on the city bus and move to the back after a day working at the Montgomery Fair on Court Square. Looking back on her thoughts as she sat on the platform and heard her husband speak, Coretta King wrote "We had desegregated the buses; we had desegregated public transportation, interstate as well as intrastate. Our right to use public accommodations had been guaranteed. We had progressed toward school integration." She further observed that "People like Jim Clark had said, 'If you march, you do so over my dead body'; Wallace had said, 'They shall not pass.' But here we were. Ten years ago we had talked about dignity, but we really felt it now."⁴⁸

Success for civil rights demonstrations like the Freedom March during the non-violent period between 1955 and 1968 required mass media coverage. Martin Luther King, Jr. was convinced that action in Washington depended on grass roots fire in the South. He hoped to pressure the federal government into appointing federal registrars in the South to ensure black registration and if necessary assigning federal marshals to escort blacks to the registration places.⁴⁹ To ensure this kind of attention, King needed national press exposure. Television informed the nation almost instantaneously of the events of Selma's "Bloody Sunday" and "transformed what would have been mainly a

local event a generation ago into a national issue overnight.” On Monday morning, newspapers across the nation informed people with their headlines of the previous day’s events.⁵⁰

If proof were needed of King’s recognition of the media’s role in his crusade, the organization’s blueprint for the Selma campaign should supply it. Prior to the year’s beginning, SCLC leaders mapped out their plan, event by event, to provide the proper timing to maintain media attention.⁵¹ The march itself was secondary to the aim of registering black voters in Alabama and other Southern states, an aim which involved federal government action. Was King successful in capturing media attention for his Selma campaign? If so, to what extent, and where?

To properly estimate the extent of King’s success would entail reading newspapers across the nation for the period involved. This study employed a sampling technique, choosing influential papers from the South, Midwest, and East—including one from Washington, D.C., since King looked to that city for succor. Examining the papers geographically proves instructive, and Southern papers, closest to the action, are the logical starting point. Southern papers chosen were the *Atlanta Constitution*, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, and two Alabama papers, the *Montgomery Advertiser* and the *Birmingham News*.

Initially the *Birmingham News* gave Selma events the most prominence. Banner headlines were the norm for the *News* March 8 through 10, with headlines on the left side of the page on the 21st through 24th and headline-of-the-day status returning on the 25th, the day of the Montgomery rally. All articles appeared on the front page, with related ones scattered throughout the paper. Staff reporters filed most articles, and all front-page ones. The *News* sent its own reporters to Selma, five of whom made the march itself.⁵² Surprisingly, the Birmingham paper was very evenhanded in its reporting. The tone of articles was factual, though they inclined toward King and what he was trying to accomplish. For the most part, editorials were pro-King, reserving criticism for King’s decision to disobey the court order and continue with the march on Tuesday, March 9. The march also usually

dominated the *News*' "Second Front Page" with articles and photographs. If pictures are worth a thousand words, then *News* stories deserve a higher word-count; four- and five-column pictures were the norm. Several editions included a picture page, which the march dominated. Only the bombs found in Birmingham on March 21 and the Gemini Space Flight edged the march out of the limelight as a newsworthy event.

The other Alabama paper studied, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, largely ignored the Selma-to-Montgomery story occurring in its home territory. The march never received a headline; Viet Nam and the Space Flight dominated the front page. When it appeared on the front page, the march received a small space, usually in column two or three. Only twice did it occupy the prominent columns six and seven, and never the most prominent one, column eight. Rather than relying on its own staff, the *Advertiser* used AP wire stories filed by Rex Thomas which were very factual and straightforward. Editorials, always anti-King, asked Alabamians to show their good manners and remain calm despite the provocation. One editorial asked Alabamians to think their thoughts about the march but not to express them out loud. The editor concluded that "A hundred years ago, federal occupiers came down that same pike. This time they will march out. We have only this day to get behind us and then they'll move on to afflict other regions."⁵³ Only one picture of the event made the paper, and it appeared on the 26th, after everything was over. Captioned "Line of Marchers Runs Out of Sight," the picture views Montgomery Street from Court Square and concerns the rally on the capitol steps. The *Advertiser* acted as if ignoring what was going on would cause the march to disappear like a nightmare.

The *Atlanta Constitution* offered its readers more coverage than the *Advertiser*, though less than the *News*. The story never received banner head line status but did have a headline on the left side of the front page with articles in columns one and two. This paper never afforded the story the most prominent position. Nor did it rely on its own reporters; articles were wire service entries by Rex Thomas of AP and Leon Daniel and Al Kuettner of UPI. The UPI articles were inflammatory, using phrases such as "mounted deputies bombarded" the

Negroes with tear gas and “attacked the screaming demonstrators with clubs.”⁵⁴ Very pro-King, the paper clearly favored this “favorite son” over the Alabamians. Only three pictures concerning events surrounding the “Protest March” appeared in the *Constitution* from March 8 through 10 and March 21 through 26. On March 26, an editorial rhetorically asked “The March: What Did It Accomplish?” The paper concluded that the march achieved publicity, and laws to secure voting rights and the right to assemble to seek redress of grievances. Finally, the clergy’s participation helped “the church” overcome its silence and goaded the public to impatience at “official resistance to the goal of an equal chance for all Americans.”⁵⁵

The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* covered the event on a par with the *Advertiser* although devoting more space to the coverage. No banner headlines for this cosmopolitan paper far from the scene: only small ones on the left side of the page with articles appearing in columns one through five. Articles appeared in column eight only on the 22nd, reporting the start of the march to Montgomery, and on the 25th, detailing the marcher’s entrance into Montgomery and the mass rally held on the grounds of St. Jude’s Wednesday night. The paper used AP wire service articles and only three photos. Related articles dotted its pages from the 22nd through the 25th. In tone, the *Times-Picayune* favored King, a reflection of its wire service news sources. One editorial, a March 24 reprint of a Washington columnist David Lawrence piece, favored Governor Wallace’s stand in asking the federal government to provide troops to help with the situation in Selma.⁵⁶

If the amount of coverage mirrors an event’s importance, the *News* considered the march most important, with 967 column inches devoted to it. The *Times-Picayune* was next with 562 column inches; the *Constitution* contained 299 column inches and the *Advertiser* 251. Picture coverage followed the same pattern. The Birmingham paper filled 588 column inches, the *Times-Picayune* 51 inches, the *Constitution* 37 and the *Advertiser* 23. Only the *Advertiser* used an anti-King, anti-march, and anti-demonstrators tone. Only the *Atlanta Constitution* employed an editorial cartoon. Its March 9 cartoon showed Governor

Wallace riding behind a state policeman on a mule called Selma with a mule riding over the demonstrators. The caption read: “Well, Maybe It’s Better Than Police Dogs!”⁵⁷

In the nation’s northeast, the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* were the two newspapers considered the region’s most influential. The *Times* certainly devoted space to the civil rights movement, with approximately 1,537 column inches covering the “Freedom March” from Selma to Montgomery. Photos appeared prominently throughout the paper with 227 column inches devoted to them alone. Selma and the subsequent march obtained front page coverage every day from the 8th through the 10th and again on the 21st through the 26th. The paper on the 9th, 21st, 22nd and 26th placed the article in the very prominent 8th column on the extreme right of the paper. Roy Reed, Ben Franklin, and Paul Montgomery, all of whom were on the march, filed most of the articles. Their stories were very factual. On Sunday the 21st, the *Times* ran a feature article in its Magazine section by Pat Watters, a worker with the Southern Regional Council, entitled “Why Negro Children March” and accompanied by a large photograph.

The *Boston Globe* gave daily prominence to the Selma situation with headlines on the all-important right side of the page, except for the 24th and the 25th. On those two days, the evening edition carried headlines of the Alabama happenings. The *Globe*’s morning edition devoted approximately 687 column inches to the story while the evening paper contained 643 column inches on it. UPI and AP photos frequently occupied the middle of the page, and 102 column inches were devoted to them in the morning edition while the evening one carried 245 column inches’ worth.

The *Globe* thought the events important enough, probably because several Boston-area groups participated, to send three of its own reporters—Robert Healey, Edward McGrath, and Jimmy Breslin—who filed their stories with such out-of-the-way datelines as Trickum, Alabama. Breslin concentrated on human interest stories. This paper’s tone was very inflammatory. Though factual, the stories seemed written to arouse sympathy with the cause of the Negro in Alabama. An

editorial on the 9th, “Selma’s Day of Shame,” was particularly inflammatory. The editor noted that “it was in that act of kneeling to pray that 600 Negroes were first attacked behind a barrage of tear gas, and then driven bleeding and screaming through the streets of Selma.” He then asked “What words can describe the depravity of the state troopers and mounted deputies who committed this outrage against America?”⁵⁸ Captions underneath photos carried the same tone. One picture, which appeared in the evening edition on March 10, portrayed a black youth standing apart from the crowd looking very forlorn. Behind him are troopers with their backs to the camera and other blacks in the background kneeling. The caption read: “The youth with bandaged head, the result of a clubbing, stands apart from a group of demonstrators. At right, burly state troopers watch as civil rightists pray in the street.”⁵⁹

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, in the nation’s mid-section, gave front-page, headline coverage, with the articles located in the 8th column, to the Selma story. Though the paper eschewed related articles, photos did accompany front page articles. Stories were filed by the *Post-Dispatch* AP wire service with only one article written by an in-house reporter. In the daily papers, the “Everyday Magazine” section contained one picture each day of the events happening in Alabama. Two editorials appeared, both criticizing Wallace and Alabama. The paper’s tone was very straightforward in describing the situation in great detail. Human interest stories, the paper’s staple for Alabama events, contained descriptions of marchers and how they were coping with the elements and march discomforts. Several photos pictured marchers’ feet, particularly their condition after walking fifty-four miles. One AP photograph featured Dr. King “re-shoeing” after a rest stop; another showed, close-up, marchers’ bare feet and others in tennis shoes, plastic wrapping, and rubber boots.⁶⁰ This paper devoted approximately 288 column inches in prose and 146 more in pictures to the “Freedom March.”

Because King hoped to influence legislation and the *Washington Post* is the D.C. area paper, this paper was chosen for study. On March

8, 10, 22, 23 and 26, front page headlines were the norm. Under this headline coverage, articles were printed in the 8th column with photos on the left. A few related articles appeared on the inside pages with editorials confined to the 9th and 10th of the month. The paper dispatched its own reporters, with the majority of the articles filed from the march itself by William Chapman and Thomas Kendrick, who shared the by-line. A few AP and UPI stories were printed, and normally the tone was critical of white Alabamians and especially of Governor Wallace.

Articles conveyed the tone of what was happening on the march. During the two days of rain and the nights of sleeping in the mud, the articles portrayed being tired and bogged down in the mud, which seemed to ooze everywhere. On Thursday the 25th, the conveyed the marchers' jubilation as they reached their destination and goal in Montgomery.⁶¹ In a related article on page eight of the 23rd, a *Post* staffer filed a story about an Alabama Welcome sign. The official road map displayed a message that read in part: "Alabama welcomes you Our accelerated highway program is among the finest in the Nation, and our good roads, along with an excellent climate, make travel easy and pleasant throughout the year."⁶² People from the Washington area left by the train-loads for Alabama, which may account for the fact that the *Post* gave 578 column inches for articles and 100 for pictures to the Selma story.⁶³

Was the Selma-to-Montgomery march successful because of the press coverage it generated? The nine newspapers examined devoted at total of 5,812 column inches in prose and 1,519 in photographs to the happening. This equaled a forty-page paper, with eight pages devoted exclusively to pictures. In the selected sample, the papers averaged 645 column inches of prose and 168.8 of pictures each, or 3.5 and .9 pages respectively.

TABLE 1

Paper	Column Inches Prose	Column Inches Pictures	Column Inches Total
<i>New York Times</i> 1,537	227	1,764	
<i>Birmingham News</i> 967	588	1,555	

<i>Boston Globe</i> (Evening Edition)643	245	888
<i>Boston Globe</i> (Morning Edition)687	102	789
<i>Washington Post</i> 578	100	678
<i>New Orleans Times-Picayune</i> 562	51	613
<i>St. Louis Post Dispatch</i> 288	146	434
<i>Atlanta Constitution</i> 299	37	336
<i>Montgomery Advertiser</i> 251	23	274
TOTAL5,812	1,519	7,331

As Table 1 indicates, the *New York Times* carried almost 2.5 times the average coverage in articles; the *Birmingham News* carried 3.5 times the picture average. Except for the *News*, the amount of coverage varies directly with the distance from the scene. If picture content provides a clue to story impact, then the *News* gave King his best coverage, over twice that of its nearest competitors, the *Globe's* evening editions and the *New York Times*.

If King aimed to focus the Northeast's attention on his cause, this sample of the *Post*, *Times*, and *Globe* indicates his success. In addition, the study indicates that he succeeded in large part due to the newspapers' sympathetic presentation of the event as well as to the amount of their coverage and prominence they gave the story. The three newspapers which played upon their readers' visceral reactions most were the *Post-Dispatch*, the *Post*, and the *Globe*, with the latter two leading the way; the closest to the action were the most factual and unemotional in their reports. Reporters playing on the human element of the march, humanizing a philosophical issue, were sure to garner more sympathy than their factually-oriented fellows.

An Alabama newspaper, the *Birmingham Post-Herald*, recognized King's tactics (perhaps from home-town experience two years earlier), and warned state officials. In what proved the most observant press reaction to the event, an editor urged Wallace to allow the march and protect all participants. The demonstrators, he remarked, thrived on violence. He concluded that the "primary aim was to focus national attention on Alabama for propaganda and publicity reasons" and that "television and newspapers would have followed Sunday's scheduled 50-mile hike step by step A dreary march would have been of little value to Dr. King" ⁶⁴ Given King's attachment to Ghandi as a prototype, former President Harry Truman's observation as quoted in the *Times-Picayune* was certainly accurate:

"All they want is to gain attention." ⁶⁵

NOTES

¹ Sheyann Webb and Rachael West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 83

² Robert Francis Kennedy, Jr., *Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.: A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), p. 182

³ Webb, p. 25. Selma is about 15 miles southwest of the state's central point.

⁴ Kennedy, p. 182; Tinsley E. Yarbrough, *Judge Frank Johnson and Human Rights in Alabama* (University, AL: University of Alabama, 1981), p. 113.

⁵ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 253; David J. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 39.

⁶ Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), p. 179.

⁷ Garrow, pp. 2-4.

⁸ "Civil Rights: The Central Point," *Time*, 85 (March 19, 1965): 23.

⁹ Kennedy, p. 183.

¹⁰ *Time*, 19 March 1965, p. 23.

¹¹ Leon Friedman, *The Civil Rights Reader: Basic Documents of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Walker and Co., 1968), p. 81.

¹² Garrow, pp. 39, 43

¹³ "Negro Goals in Selma," *New York Times*, 6 February 1965, p. 10:7.

¹⁴ King, p. 254; Kennedy, p. 183; Garrow, pp. 61, 66.

¹⁵ Yarbrough, p. 113.

¹⁶ Wofford, p. 201.

¹⁷ King, p. 259.

¹⁸ "The Weather," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 March 1965, p. 1.

¹⁹ Yarbrough, p. 113; *Time*, 19 March 1965, p. 23; Kennedy, p. 183.

²⁰ *Time*, 19 March 1965, pp. 23-4.

²¹ Friedman, p. 82; Kennedy, p. 184.

²² Webb, p. 93.

²³ Kennedy, pp. 184-185.

²⁴ Yarbrough, p. 114; Garrow, p. 76

²⁵ Friedman, pp. 82-83.

²⁶ Garrow, p. 77.

²⁷ *Time*, 19 March 1965, p. 24; Wofford, p. 178.

²⁸ *Time*, 19 March 1965, p. 25.

²⁹ King, p. 262; Wofford, p. 181.

³⁰ *Time*, 19 March 1965, p. 25; Kennedy, p. 187.

³¹ Yarbrough, p. 116.

³² Wofford, p. 184; John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 241.

³³ King, p. 263; "An American Tragedy," *Newsweek*, 65 (22 March 1965): 20.

³⁴ Yarbrough, p. 119; Kennedy, p. 188.

³⁵ Yarbrough, pp. 116, 118.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁷ “Civil Rights: Electric Charges,” *Time*, 85 (26 March 1965): 19.

³⁸ Yarbrough, p. 120 cites 3,000; King, p. 265 cites 5,000; and *The Atlanta Constitution* 22 March 1965, p. 1 cites 4,000; “Road From Selma Hope—and Death,” *Newsweek*, 65 (5 April 1965): 23.

³⁹ “The Weather,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 March 1965, p. 1; Wofford, pp. 187, 189; King, p. 265.

⁴⁰ “The Weather,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 22 March 1965, p. 1; Wofford, p. 189; “Under Heavy Guard—400 Marchers on the Second Leg of Trek,” *Birmingham News*, 22 March 1965, p. 1:1.

⁴¹ Wofford, p. 191.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 193

⁴⁴ “The Weather,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 March 1965, p. 1; Wofford, p. 195.

⁴⁵ Wofford, p. 195; Garrow, p. 116.

⁴⁶ “Climax of Freedom March,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1965, p. 1:4-8.

⁴⁷ Yarbrough, p. 121.

⁴⁸ King, p. 268.

⁴⁹ Alfred Steinberg, *Sam Johnson’s Boy: A Close-up of the President from Texas* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), p. 706; Garrow, p. 35.

⁵⁰ Garrow, pp. 78, 163.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵² Al Fox, Ron Gibson, Jack Hopper, Tom Lankford and Gillis Morgan all filed stories from the march.

⁵³ “Silence,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 March 1965, p. 4.

⁵⁴ “600 Selma Negroes Routed with Clubs,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 March 1965, p. 1:3.

⁵⁵ “The March: What Did It Accomplish?” *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 March 1965, p. 4.

⁵⁶ “Constitution Heeded in Alabama Troop Use: Says This Time President Acted at State’s Request,” *The Times-Picayune*, 24 March 1965, p. 8.

⁵⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 March 1965, p. 9:6.

⁵⁸ “Selma’s Day of Shame,” *Boston Globe*, 9 March 1965, p. 10. The only “Trickum, AL” is Trickum Valley, near the Alabama-Georgia line about halfway between Birmingham and Atlanta.

⁵⁹ *Boston Globe*, 10 March 1965, p. 1:1.

⁶⁰ *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 23 March 1965, p. 1D; 24 March 1965, p. 7.

⁶¹ “300 Pitch Camp in the Mud of Alabama,” *Washington Post*, 24 March 1965, p. A1:3; “Marchers Arrive in Alabama Capitol: Thousands Gather in Montgomery for Mass Rally Today,” *Washington Post*, 25 March 1965, p. A1:1.

⁶² “Alabama Extends Welcome to Roads,” *Washington Post*, 23 March 1965, p. A8:4.

⁶³ "Hundreds from Area Preparing to Join in March on Montgomery," *Washington Post*, 21 March 1965, p. A16:6.

⁶⁴ "Paper Says Dr. King Thrives on Violence," *New York Times*, 10 March 1965, p. 23:6.

⁶⁵ *The Times-Picayune*, 23 March 1965, p. 1:4