



27.9 COFO Freedom School, 1964

Refusing to be intimidated when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of their Freedom School, Freedom Summer workers painted "freedom" on the blackened wood.

As the FBI investigation unfolded, Freedom Summer continued. Nearly one thousand black and white activists fanned out throughout Mississippi to register blacks in rural areas. Hoping to recruit and train a new generation of student leaders, SNCC and COFO founded summer Freedom Schools that taught high school students African American history to build pride in the long legacy of black accomplishment and gave remedial instruction in basic subjects to remedy their deficient public education. In a state with no mandatory school laws, black children often spent more time in the cotton fields than in the classroom. COFO volunteers refused to be intimidated when the Klan left a burning cross in front of a Freedom School in the Mississippi Delta (27.9). Writing their own counter-message of "Freedom" on the cross, Freedom Summer workers openly asserted that "COFO=Freedom Now" to underscore that it would take determined activism to meet their goals of "One Man, One Vote."

In the midst of Freedom Summer, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned segregation in businesses and places open to the public (such as restaurants and public schools) and prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, or sex. This landmark legislation, the most sweeping civil rights law since Reconstruction, came about because thousands of individuals risked arrest, murder, or unemployment to participate in boycotts, sit-ins, and street demonstrations in towns and cities throughout the South. Their activism went unnoticed in the national press, which focused mostly on a few dramatic moments such as the disappearance of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman.

A month after the Civil Rights Act's passage, after six weeks of searching, the FBI paid \$30,000 to an

informant who helped officers locate the three men's bodies buried in an earthen dam. All three had been shot in the head, and Chaney's shattered bones attested to the savage beating he had received. No one was ever convicted of the murders, although Price and nine others were found guilty on federal conspiracy charges in 1967 and served a few years in jail.

Like Kennedy, Johnson knew that the world was watching events unfold in Mississippi. Passage of the Civil Rights Act was front-page news overseas, and world leaders rushed to congratulate Johnson. Winning the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, King was now an international figure who inspired social justice activists worldwide.

Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was a great victory for the Civil Rights Movement, but the strain of combat-like conditions during Freedom Summer took its toll. Becoming increasingly fearful some SNCC volunteers began to arm themselves for self-defense. Many blacks resented the media attention given to white activists. Meanwhile female civil rights workers, black and white, increasingly objected to males' expectations that they would clean and cook for them. The stage was set for a fracturing within the activist community.

Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

The nonviolent Civil Rights Movement registered one more significant victory before that fracturing occurred, using a stand-off in Selma, Alabama, to secure President Johnson's open support for federal



What pivotal role did college-age students play in Freedom Summer?

legislation guaranteeing blacks the right to vote. On Sunday March 7, 1965, a day soon known as “Bloody Sunday,” about six hundred marchers left the small town of Selma, Alabama, and began walking across the Edmund Pettis Bridge that spanned the Alabama River. They intended to march 50 miles to Montgomery, the state capitol, to demand voting rights. At the other end of the bridge, a line of county troopers armed with clubs and tear gas waited for them. When the marchers knelt in prayer at the end of the bridge, Sheriff Jim Clark ordered the troopers to attack as white spectators cheered.

Photographers and television crews witnessed the violent attack in Selma. That evening ABC interrupted the film *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a dramatized account of the war crimes trials that convicted Nazi leaders of crimes against humanity, to show news footage of the Bloody Sunday assault. The juxtaposition between the film’s portrayal of the Holocaust and events in Selma haunted many viewers. Late that evening the door opened to the chapel in Selma that served as the marchers’ headquarters. “We have seen on the television screen the violence that took place today, and we’re here to share it with you,” announced a group of blacks and whites from New Jersey who had chartered a plane to arrive that night.

On Monday, March 15, 1965, President Johnson, who had spoken privately with King before Selma about how to win public support for voting rights legislation, announced in a televised address that he was sending a federal voting rights act to Congress. “It’s not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us, who

“I asked my mother and father for my birthday present to become registered voters.”

Eight-year-old SHEYAJI WEBB, youngest member of the first Selma to Montgomery march.

must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice,” Johnson told the nation. “And we shall overcome,” he concluded, quoting the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement.

A triumphant march from Selma began the following Sunday, March 21, 1965, a moment captured by James Karales’s stirring photograph for *Look* magazine (27.10). The photograph accompanied an article on the decision of northern white ministers to join the march in Selma, reaffirming the mainstream media focus on the role of whites in the Civil Rights Movement. When the marchers arrived in Montgomery five days later, King addressed the crowd on the steps of the state capitol building, looking down at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where he had helped initiate the Montgomery Bus Boycott ten years earlier (see Chapter 25). “I know you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ . . . How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever,” King said hopefully. Five months later Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, legislation that prohibited literacy tests and poll taxes, plus authorized the use of federal registrars to register voters if states failed to respect the Fifteenth Amendment. Within a year over nine thousand blacks had registered in Dallas County, Alabama, enough to block Jim Clark’s reelection as sheriff.

27.10 March from Selma to Montgomery, March 21–25, 1965
Storm clouds hovered as marchers walked along the rural highway that linked Selma to Montgomery, creating a poetic image that captured their resolve to keep moving forward, no matter what the obstacle.

