

I9b Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965, 1965

On August 7, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, one of the most important pieces of legislation in America since the era of Reconstruction. It signaled the victory of a battle that was fought five months earlier in Dallas County, Alabama. On March 25, twenty-five thousand participants—the largest civil rights gathering the South had yet seen—converged on the state capital of Montgomery, concluding a four-day march for voting rights that began in Selma, fifty-four miles away.

James Karales, a photographer for the popular biweekly magazine *Look*, was sent to illustrate an article covering the march. Titled “Turning Point for the Church,” the piece focused on the involvement of the clergy in the civil rights movement—specifically, the events in Selma that followed the murder of a white minister from the North who had gone down to support voting rights for blacks. Karales’s photograph of this event captured the spirit and determination of civil rights workers during those tense and dangerous times.

As in Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (see 4-A), the participants face human and natural obstacles that stand in the way of heroic action. Karales positioned his camera so that we look up at the train of marchers, who appear to climb some unseen path toward the low, threatening sky as they move resolutely from right to left. As though in defiance of the oncoming storm, four figures at the front of the group march in unison and set a brisk, military pace. In the center of the photograph, the American flag, a symbol of individual freedom and Constitutional rights, is carried by



19-B James Karales (1930–2002), *Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965, 1965*. Photographic print. Located in the James Karales Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. Photograph © Estate of James Karales.

invisible hands beneath a heavy, black thundercloud that appears ready to break.

In the week before Karales took this iconic picture, two unsuccessful attempts to march on the capital had already been made. On Sunday, March 5, the first activists, recorded by television cameras and still photographers, crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge out of Selma. Horrified viewers watched as unarmed marchers, including women and children, were assaulted by Alabama state troopers using tear gas, clubs, and whips. The group turned back battered but undefeated. “Bloody Sunday,” as it became known, only strengthened the movement and increased public support. Ordinary citizens, as well as priests, ministers, nuns, and rabbis who had been called to Selma by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., flocked to join its ranks. The second attempt—“Turnaround Tuesday”—which Karales had been sent down to cover, was halted at the bridge by Dr. King before anyone was injured. Finally, six days later, the last march began after President Johnson mobilized the National Guard and delivered his voting rights legislation to Congress.

At first, Karales’s photograph did not receive much exposure or recognition. He was a quiet man who let his work speak for itself. Born in 1930 to Greek-immigrant parents in Canton, Ohio, Karales trained as a photojournalist at Ohio University and then apprenticed with legendary photographer W. Eugene Smith. He worked for *Look* magazine from 1960 until the magazine folded in the early 1970s, and covered significant events of that turbulent decade such as the Vietnam War, the work of Dr. King, and the civil rights movement. Of all his photographs, it was those of this last group for which he became known, and his image of the Selma march has become an icon of the civil rights movement. It caught the attention of a broad audience when it appeared in the 1987 award-winning documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize*, which chronicled the history of the movement and acknowledged the role played by the news media in getting the story to the American public.

Karales’s *Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965* reveals the strength of conviction demonstrated by hundreds of Americans seeking basic human rights. Transcending its primary function as a record of the event, it tells the story of the desire for freedom that is the shared heritage of all Americans. It is also a testament to Karales’s ability to capture a timeless image from a fleeting moment—one that still haunts the American conscience.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to carefully study this photograph

and think about the kind of mood it sets.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M | S

Ask students to locate two flags. Why does the American flag play a prominent role in this march?
These people were marching for equal voting rights for African Americans in the United States. As citizens of the United States, African Americans wanted the same rights and opportunities as other Americans.

M | S

Encourage students to imagine where the photographer placed himself in order to take this picture.

He was slightly below the marchers, looking up at them.

Ask what is in the background behind the marchers.

A light sky with dark clouds is above the marchers.

Ask students how this viewpoint emphasizes the message and drama of the scene.

Karales makes the marchers look larger by tilting the camera up and creates drama by silhouetting the figures against the sky.

Discuss how this image might lose some of its impact if buildings and trees were included in the background.

M | S

How does the photographer suggest that there are many people participating in this march?

The camera angle exaggerates the perspective, making the line look as if it stretches into a great distance; we can't see the end of the line because it continues behind the hill.

INTERPRET

E | M | S

What do the outstretched legs and thrust-back shoulders of the three leading marchers suggest about their attitude?

They seem young, determined, and strong.

E | M | S

Call students' attention to the legs of the leading marchers. Apparently they are marching together in unison. What might they be doing to keep this same rhythm and beat?

They may have been singing and marching to the rhythm of music.

You may wish to play or have students sing "We Shall Overcome," a song popular during the civil rights movement.

E | M | S

What do the clouds overhead suggest?

There is the possibility of a storm.

M | S

Have students discuss why the publication of this photograph and others like it in magazines and newspapers helped the movement for civil rights in the United States.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: Jim Crow laws; sit-ins; boycotts; civil rights movement

Historical Figures: Martin Luther King, Jr.; Rosa Parks

Geography: the shift in cultural geography that occurred as a result of the civil rights movement (integration)

Literary Connections and Primary Documents

My Brother Martin: A Sister Remembers Growing Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Christine King Farris (elementary); *Goin' Somewhere Special*, Pat McKissack (elementary); *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee (secondary); *When Justice*

Failed: The Fred Korematsu Story, Steven A. Chin (middle, secondary); "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "I have a dream" speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. (elementary, middle)