

The Right to Vote

VIDEO: <https://www.nbclearn.com/portal/site/learn/cuecard/5136>

LESTER HOLT, reporting:

By 1965, progress had been made on many fronts, but in many southern states, obstacles like poll taxes and literacy tests still stood between black citizens and that most basic of democratic rights: the vote. When people marched for that right in Alabama, they were met by policeman with cattle prods and billy clubs. 1965 would be another year of great change and great sacrifice.

1965. While African-American soldiers were dying in Vietnam, Civil Rights workers were dying in the South. A full ten years after the Supreme Court ordered school integration and more than three years after the federal government declared interstate buses were to be desegregated, blacks in the South still did not achieve the most basic American right of all, the right to vote.

Pres. LYNDON JOHNSON: If our magnificent young men can die for freedom in a foreign land, how can we refuse them the full measure of freedom and opportunity here at home?

HOLT: In places like Selma, Alabama, poll taxes and literacy tests were imposed in an effort to prevent black voter registration.

Rep. JOHN LEWIS (D-Georgia): On one occasion, there was a black man who had a PhD degree. And he was told that he could not read or write well enough. He flunked the so-called literacy test. On another occasion a man was asked to give the number of bubbles on a bar of soap. Something had to give.

HOLT: Sheriff Jim Clark was the law in Selma.

Rep. LEWIS: They had a sheriff by the name of Jim Clark. He was a very big man. He wore a gun on one side, a night stick on the other side and he carried an electric cattle prod in his hand. He wore a button on his left lapel that said "Never," "never" to voter registration. He was mean.

HOLT: Sheriff Clark had ordered his officers to use cattle prods on those who wouldn't leave the courthouse steps in Selma after attempting to register to vote.

Reporters: Do you have any personal prejudices towards Negroes?

Sheriff JIM CLARK: None whatsoever. We have never used more than what was absolutely necessary to control the situation at any time. The cattle prod is actually much more humane than probably the night stick. It's just mild electric shock.

HOLT: As blacks continued to push for the right to vote, the level of violence increased. In February, 1965, not far from Selma, a state trooper shot 26-year old Jimmy Jackson. Jackson was trying to help his mother and grandfather who were being beaten by police during a voter rights demonstration.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr.: Jimmy Jackson just wanted to vote. Now we must see that Jimmy Jackson did not die in vain.

HOLT: During Jackson's funeral, reporters became targets of the violence. In this case, NBC's Richard Valeriani.

RICHARD VALERIANI (NBC News Correspondent): Some white segregationists got up behind me and whacked me with an axe handle. And I put my hand behind my head and looked at it, and it's covered with blood, and some white man walked up to me and he said, "You need a doctor?" And I, sort of stunned, and looked at my hand and said, "Yeah, I think so." And he thrust his face right up against mine and said, "We don't have doctors for people like you."

HOLT: Jimmy Jackson's death would lead to some of the worst clashes between police and Civil Rights demonstrators. It would set in motion one of the defining moments of the Civil Rights Movement.

Rep. LEWIS: And because of what happened to him, we made a decision that we were to march from Selma to Montgomery to dramatize to the nation that people of color wanted to register to vote.

HOLT: On Sunday, March 7th, 1965, 600 people started the march from Selma to Montgomery. The day would end in a violent confrontation and forever be known as "Bloody Sunday."

Rep. LEWIS: Governor Wallace had issued a statement on that Saturday that the march would not be allowed.

HOLT: The only way out of Selma was over the Edmund Pettus bridge. John Lewis was at the front of the demonstration when they arrived there.

Rep. LEWIS: We came to the highest point on that bridge. Down below we saw a sea of blue.

Major JOHN CLOUD: This march will not continue.

Rep. LEWIS: Alabama State Troopers. A man identified himself instead, "I'm Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers. This is an unlawful march and will not be allowed you to continue. And I give you three minutes to disperse and to go to your church." And before we could pass word back for people to kneel to pray, Major John Cloud said, "Troopers advance!"

Maj. CLOUD: Turn around and disperse.

Rep. LEWIS: They came to on us, beating us with night sticks, brutal force, tramping us with horses, releasing the tear gas.

HOLT: Lewis, wearing a backpack and a long white coat, was crushed in the onslaught and clubbed.

Rep. LEWIS: I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a night stick. I had a concussion at the bridge. I thought I was going to die. I thought I saw death. And to this day, 39 years later, I don't know how I made it back across that bridge, through the streets of Selma, back to that little church.

LEWIS (archive footage): Right now I'm feeling quite exhausted, weak, and a few pains in the head. Quite a few other people are still in the hospital.

HOLT: Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Selma and immediately made plans for a second march, two days later, not knowing if it, too, would end in bloodshed.

Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr.: Selma is as hard as a black's bell. Selma is a symbol of the resistance unto the right to vote. And for that reason, I will have to be here to march with you tomorrow morning in Selma.

HOLT: Dr. King and fifteen-hundred marchers headed for Montgomery and once again were stopped at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. But this time, instead of walking into a sea of night sticks, protestors sat

down in the middle of the road, said a prayer, and returned to Selma without incident. That night, however, there would be more violence. A white minister, Reverend James Reeb, was beaten to death by members of the KKK.

CHET HUNTLEY, co-anchor: James Reeb had become a martyr of the Civil Rights movement. Memorial services for him are planned this weekend in several cities and demonstrations have already begun.

DAVID BRINKLEY, co-anchor: About 3,000 clergymen held a memorial service for the Reverend Mr. Reeb. Their other purpose was to ask for more federal intervention in Alabama.

LEWIS: Because of what happened in Selma, on Bloody Sunday, that was a sense of righteous indignation, so President Johnson made a decision to speak to the nation. And he probably made one of the most meaningful speeches than any American president had made in more than time, and the whole question of Civil Rights, the voting rights.

President LYNDON JOHNSON: It is wrong, deadly wrong, to deny any of your fellow Americans the right vote in this country.

LEWIS: And he said one man, a good man, a man of God, was killed. He condemns, condemned what happened in Selma. And he introduced the Voting Rights Act.

President JOHNSON: There must be no delays, or no hesitation, or no compromise without purpose. Even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. All of us, must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

LEWIS: I was with Martin Luther King, Jr. as we listened to and watched President Johnson. It was March 15th, 1965.

President JOHNSON: There is no issue of states' rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.

LEWIS: While standing next to Dr. King and he started crying, tears came down his face. And we all cried a little. To hear the president of the United States say, "And we shall overcome."

HOLT: Finally Dr. King felt he had the full backing of President Johnson to win passage of the Voting Rights Act. So he organized a third march, a third attempt to walk over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Destination: Montgomery, for a rally in front of the state capitol.

Dr. KING: We have the right to walk to Montgomery if our feet can get us there.

HOLT: When 8,000 marchers began their trek on March 21st, 1965, President Johnson wanted to assure them there would be no repeat of Bloody Sunday. He sent hundreds of federal troops, U.S. Marshals, and national guardsmen, to protect them. He also told Governor Wallace the march must proceed. But just before the march was to begin, police found three bombs in nearby Birmingham.

REPORTER: The demolition experts deactivated them, just seconds before the clocks inside said they were set to explode.

HOLT: But dynamite couldn't stop the march either. On March 25th, 1965, NBC News provided live coverage as Dr. King and thousands of marchers arrived in the state capitol.

REPORTER: The purpose of the march is to dramatize the Negro protests against discriminatory practices against Negroes in registering to vote. Police brutality also became a target of this demonstration.

HOLT: It had taken four days to reach Montgomery.

REPORTER: This portion of the march that you see now was pre-recorded and flown by helicopter by NBC News to a transmission point.

HOLT: There, in the heart of Alabama, were men and women, young and old, black and white, all marching together in a common cause.

Dr. KING: I know you're asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking how long will prejudice blind the visions of men.

HOLT: 25,000 people gathered in the state capitol to hear Dr. Martin Luther King.

Dr. KING: I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long. Because truth crushed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long. Because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long. Because you shall reap what you sow.

HOLT: There was no violence that day. But violence would come in the dead of that night. A white Civil Rights worker, Viola Liuzzo, was gunned down by members of the KKK as she drove a young black man home in her car.

President JOHNSON: Ms. Liuzzo went to Alabama to serve the struggles for justice. She was murdered by the enemies of justice.

HOLT: The next day, Governor George Wallace defended the people of Alabama during a Today Show interview.

HUGH DOWNS, anchor: Our guest this morning is the governor of Alabama, George C. Wallace. He's in our Montgomery studio now with NBC News correspondent Richard Valeriani, Dick.

RICHARD VALERIANI, reporting: Governor, there are those who will say that your remarks denouncing the march afterward create the kind of atmosphere in which such incidents occur.

Governor GEORGE C. WALLACE: Well there those like yourself and the national news media who will of course continue to blame me and the people of Alabama about everything that happens. And I regret this incident, but I can say with 25,000 people marching in the streets, and chanting, and maligning, and slandering, and libeling the people of this state as they did for several hours on your network and the other networks, I think the people of our state were greatly restrained and I think they should be commended for it.

HOLT: Later that summer, on August 6th, 1965, in the same room where President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. Four decades later, John Lewis, who struggled so hard for the right to vote, is serving his ninth term as a member of the United States Congress.

LEWIS: If someone had told me that I was marching, getting arrested, going to jail forty times, getting beaten at the Greyhound bus station, on the bridge of Selma, that one day, I would be a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, elected by the good people of Georgia, I'd say you're crazy. You're out of your mind, you don't know what you're talking about. Sometime I can hear young

people, those not so young, say nothing, nothing has changed, I feel like staying calm, and walk in my shoes. It's a different world.