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NEGROES ARE DRAGGED OFF FEDERAL PROPERTY AS THE FBI LOOKS ON

Registration in Alabama

Selma

There are 30,000 Negroes and less than 25,000 whites in Dallas County, Alabama. On the voting rolls, however, there are about 130 Negroes and 7,000 whites. On the first and third Mondays of every month, the Board of Registrars of Dallas County takes additional applications from would-be voters. The form, however, is a long one, and the applicant is also questioned orally. As a result, the Board has never been able to enroll more than 30 new voters in a day.

At this rate even making the incredible assumption that the Board accepted every Negro applicant, it would take the Board 10 years to enroll as many Negroes as whites. Nevertheless, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began a voter-registration campaign in Dallas County last summer. It proclaimed October 7 as "Freedom Day." At 9:30 a.m. on Freedom Day there were 50 Negroes in line before the county courthouse, in the cotton town of Selma.

By 11:00 a.m. there were 250 Negroes in the line, which extended the full length of the block, around the corner, and halfway down the street. Two hundred of them would never get inside the courthouse door.

Standing over these men and women, were helmeted men with clubs and guns, members of Sheriff Clark's posse. By noon, the line of Negroes reached 300. The sun was hot, and the line did not seem to be moving.

Directly across the street from the county courthouse in Selma is the Federal Building. Here are the federal court, the draft board, the social security office - all the visible manifestations that the Civil War was won by the Union and that the national government is supreme all over the United States. In this building, on the first floor, its windows looking directly at the county courthouse, is the office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the police force of the national government, created to enforce the laws of the United States.

Four FBI agents and two Justice Department lawyers spent Freedom Day in this building. The FBI agents were taking pictures, and watching. The Justice Department men were just watching.

Through all that happened on that Monday, while federal law was broken again and again, these law enforcement officials of the federal government stood by and watched. By the time Freedom Day was over in Selma, the Constitution had been violated in a number

of its provisions, several statutes of the US Congress had been ignored, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 had been turned face down on the sidewalk. For all the good the federal officials did, George Wallace might have been President of the United States.

What happened in Selma on Freedom Day?

A Negro registrant, before he got to the door of the county courthouse, had to run a gauntlet of armed troopers and a local cameraman whose pictures could cost the Negro his or her job.

The registrants waited from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., standing in the sun without food or water, without being able to go to the toilet. State troopers told them they could not leave the line and return. (When I asked a Justice Department lawyer standing by if he would go over to the state troopers and say that these Negroes had a right to get a drink of water, he said: "I think they do have that right. But I won't do it.")

There were two "incidents."

1. At 11:55 a.m. I looked away from the line of registrants, across the street to the Federal Building. On the steps of the building - so still that for a weird second I thought they were statues - stood two young members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, facing the county courthouse across the street and holding signs. One, in overalls and a fedora, carried a sign saying "Register Now for Freedom Now." The other, in a polo shirt and slacks, carried a sign which read, "Register to Vote."

I crossed the street to get a better look. At that moment - it was a few moments before noon - Sheriff Jim Clark and two members of his posse also crossed the street, walked up the steps of the Federal Building, snatched the signs, and pulled the two young fellows down the stairs and into a police car. I have seen a number of examples of the invisibility of federal power in the South, but I didn't quite believe this. I turned to the Justice Department man and asked, "Is that a federal building?" "Yes," he replied.

2. Lunchtime passed, but no lunch for the more than 300 Negroes on the registration line. The sun was hotter now. Jim Forman, in charge of the day's operations, sent some people for sandwiches and water. By now, Al Lingo's blue-helmeted state police - commanded by Major Joe Smelley - had taken over from the posse, but

Sheriff Clark and his men were still around. Jim Forman and Mrs. Boynton (a local Negro leader) walked over to talk to Sheriff Clark (it was 1:55 p.m.). Forman said: "Sheriff, we'd like to give these people some food." Clark replied: "They will not be molested in any way." Forman said: "We don't want to molest them. We want to give them food and to talk to them about registration." Clark shouted: "If you do, you'll be arrested. They will not be molested in any way and that includes talking to them."

Forman and Mrs. Boynton went back across the street to the alley alongside the Federal Building, where a shopping cart with a keg of water and sandwiches were set up. Newsmen were called over. Mrs. Boynton said: "We want to see if to Mr. Clark 'molesting' means giving people food." Forman told the newsmen: "We wired the Justice Department last night for marshals; we figured Clark might be violating federal law today. But we've had no reply."

Two SNCC members, Chico Neblett, a tall, good-looking former student at Southern Illinois University, and Avery Williams, dark, quiet, stepped forward and filled their arms with sandwiches and registration material. It was an unreal scene: food was going to be delivered to people standing in line in front of a public building, and it was as if paratroopers were preparing to drop into enemy country in wartime.

"Let's go, man," Neblett said. He and Williams crossed the street. We - newsmen, photographers, a few

others - followed. The state troopers converged on the two young men as they approached the line. Major Smelley yelled: "Get 'em!" Suddenly the two were on the ground. I saw Chico Neblett stretched out, troopers over him. I saw them jab at him with their clubs and saw him writhe under what looked like shock induced by the electric cattle prods the troopers carried. Four of them picked him up and dragged him away, and then I saw them throw him and young Williams into the green arrest truck at the corner. In the meantime state troopers and posse men were pushing and shoving all of us standing nearby, cursing, threatening, ripping one photographer's clothes. We retreated across the street. The Justice Department men hurried in and out of the Federal Building. The FBI watched.

I walked down to the corner a few minutes later, to see if the line that had extended all the way around it and halfway down the block was diminished by the tension. Some 30 more Negroes had joined the line. I went back to the steps of the Federal Building and waited for Freedom Day to be over. At 4:30 p.m. it was, and the several hundred men and women in line drifted away. A young Negro lawyer, visiting from Detroit, who had observed the day's events, said with emotion in his voice, pointing to the people walking quietly from the line: "Those people are heroes. They should be given medals."

Then what should be given the President and the Attorney General of the US?

HOWARD ZINN

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This article points out some of the problems that have been faced by workers for the STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE in many parts of the resistant South. Selma, Alabama is not an isolated example.

The STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE has similar voter registration projects in Southwest Georgia, Southeastern Arkansas, and the five Congressional Districts of Mississippi.

SNCC workers are paid subsistence wages of \$9.64 a week. Your help is needed if the future is to mean that democracy can work in the most difficult hard core areas of the South.



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