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Selma: Changing Tactics

Selma--

When Sheriff James Clark stopped getting the headlines on Selma, Public Safety Commissioner Wilson Baker began getting them. But they were of a different kind, and they were smaller and buried on the inside pages, almost unseen. For while Sheriff Clark has stopped marches with mass arrests and night sticks, Baker had used pleadings and only occasional arrests, orderly arrests.

News stories have been quick to praise the actions of Baker. And these actions have been an improvement over the actions of Clark. But the stories have forgotten one thing: that the aims of both men is the same--to stop Negro progress.

As Baker recently boasted, "I'm a segregationist."

There is worry among civil rights workers that the situation in Selma may become similar to the situation in Albany some two years ago. In that southwest Georgia town, Police Chief Pritchett --when other police officials were using cattle prods, dogs and hoses--simply arrested anyone who attempted to march or picket. His arrests, without violence, were praised. But they prevented a strong movement from developing. The mass arrests also kept down

pressure to integrate the town. No demonstrations could occur. Albany didn't take the first steps toward integration until after the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Many Selma white citizens have realized that brutal actions bring headlines and headlines bring demands for federal action. Thus: no headlines; no demand for federal action; no federal action; little change in the way of life.

A white man in a bar commented, "Hell, there's no headlines when Baker's in charge. He knows how to keep things calm."

On March 19, a group of white ministers and other civil rights supporters attempted to picket the home of the mayor. Baker and the city police prevented the picketing from even getting started.

"I'm going to take you into protective custody," Baker told one of them, Father Prater. "You poor sick father," he commented. "I'm going to take you to a mental institution. You're sick."

This feeling is little different from Sheriff Clark's. But Clark would have driven the group of 300 off with club-swinging possemen. Baker arrested the group, promptly and efficiently. Thus the group still was prevented from picketing.

If Clark had been there with his posse, there would have been headlines and the country would have known that injustice existed. But without headlines no one knows of this incident and no one cares.

This is one of the sad aspects of modern life. It takes headlines and brutality to make people aware of injustices. And only brutality brings headlines.

So with Baker in charge and the repression of the freedom drive quiet, no one will know, no one will care. And the Negroes of Selma will soon be cut off from the rest of the country-- forgotten--and left to wage a struggle by themselves with no outside

support against a powerful political and economic structure still determined to preserve the segregationist status quo.

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