

Selma's Future: The Unsolved Police Problem

By JERRY DE MUTH

Atlanta—The question of local police authority has been one of the main problems in Selma, Alabama.

Police and possemen under Dallas County Sheriff James Clark and State Troopers under Col. Al Lingo obviously have not been protecting the rights of Negroes and civil rights workers in Selma. And it has been this way for years, long before the march was beaten back last March 7.

The Justice Department has named Sheriff Clark as one of the defendants in three separate suits, charging him with intimidation and harassment of Negroes and civil rights workers. Yet at the same time, the Justice Department has relied on him to protect Negroes and civil rights workers.

At the hearing on one of these suits, Sheriff Clark was asked why he had officers at voter registration meetings. He testified, "I was informed by the FBI and also by leaflets that there would be a mass meeting of Negroes for the purpose of urging voter registration at the church."

Doesn't Quite Make Sense

Sheriff Clark continued, "I have been advised by the FBI on each one of these meetings and asked to have protection."

This unusual situation was noted and commented upon by Alabama's attorney general and assistant attorney general in their appeal brief. It does not quite make sense that when Negro leaders asked the FBI through the Justice Department for protection, the FBI would communicate this request to Sheriff Clark whom the department was suing for intimidating Negroes by his presence at voter registration meetings.

Yet this is what happened. Further, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach has made clear that the Department continues to have this same approach.

Thus the Justice Department is in the contradictory position of supporting the person it is opposing. Both justice for Negroes in Dallas County and a court victory for the Department are delayed by this action.

The brutality of March 7 didn't change the Justice Department's attitude. Three days later Katzenbach still declared, "The primary job of maintaining order in Alabama does rest, and should rest, on local authorities, even though order has not been satisfactorily restored by local authorities there."

Attorney General Disagreed

Katzenbach even opposes legislation which would prohibit local authorities from intimidating Negroes. Rep. John Conyers of Detroit declared, "We must stop all this violence by law enforcement officers in the South and by members of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan." He proposed "either more laws or the enforcement of the laws we have" and added, "It's as simple as that. Don't you think so, Mr. Katzenbach?"

But the Attorney General disagreed, still supporting Sheriff Clark and other police officials in their offices. "My theory," he explained, "is that we should enact the bill for voting registrars first. Then you can vote guys like Sheriff Clark out of office."

However, voting registrars can't remove the fear of registering instilled in Negroes by Sheriff Clark and other police. All the voting registrars that can possibly be appointed won't be able to register Negroes if intimidation and harassment continue to keep many away from the registrar's office.

Katzenbach's attitude also assumes that if a sheriff violates a person's civil rights not-

ing more should be done than to vote him out of office.

The proposed voting bill will not be as effective as persons assume until the federal government finally comes to grips with the problem of the Sheriff Clarks and the countless forms of intimidation aimed at Negroes who wish to register. At present, the proposed bill deals only with intimidation of voters (those already registered) and not with intimidation of those seeking to register.

But intimidation, through Sheriff Clark, his posse and the economic power of the White Citizens' Council and KKK, has been one of the main deterrents preventing Negroes from seeking to register in Dallas County. It can be done perhaps even more effectively, because with fewer headlines, by use of the tactics employed by Selma's Public Safety Commissioner Wilson Baker.

When Sheriff Clark stopped getting the headlines on Selma, 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.

Aim Is The Same

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

Into Protective Custody

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.

So with Baker in charge and the repression of the freedom drive quieter, few will know, few will care. And the Negroes of Selma may soon be cut off from the rest of the country, forgotten and left to wage a struggle by themselves with little outside support against a powerful political and economic structure still determined to preserve the segregationist status quo.