

March 16, 1965
Memo, to Atlanta SNCC
From Howard Zinn

Here in Boston, SNCC is preparing to renew demonstrations on behalf of Selma and for more presidential action; in Washington, a large demonstration is about to take place. I fear that in these actions we may fail to make exactly clear to the American public what we are asking for. The reason we may fail is that since Pres. Johnson's statement of last Saturday, and his speech of Monday night, most Americans concerned with civil rights feel that he is now meeting the demands of the movement, so that any further actions directed at Johnson seem like empty grandstanding. I think we need to get clear ourselves, and to make clear to the public (in our releases, our picket signs, our leaflets, our public statements, etc.) exactly why Johnson's statements, though they represent progress, and are very eloquent, still do not meet the problem which Selma has brought to the fore.

In Johnson's statement of Saturday, March 13th, he declared an intention to use federal force to back up a court order, if and when issued, granting the right of peaceable assembly. And in his speech of Monday, March 15th, he proposed a fairly strong voting bill. Let me outline why all this is insufficient:

1. Selma is only another in a long chain of atrocities reaching far back into our history. There are a thousand potential Selmas in the deep South. Therefore, even the strongest action, for this time, in Selma, is no guarantee against more outbreaks of violence elsewhere.

2. Troops or marshals to back up a court order is exactly what Eisenhower and Kennedy did on several occasions (Little Rock, the Freedom Rides, Oxford, Birmingham). It is no departure in policy. It means that troops go in to quell a particular disturbance, and when things are calm again, they leave, and we are all back exactly where we were before. Court orders are issued only when violence has already taken place, but what is needed is federal force to be on hand before violence occurs.

3. The use of troops or marshals, as in those past instances, is a temporary device. What we are asking is continuing protection (or rather, what we should be asking, for our slogans about "troops" don't make this clear). This means for the President, using the authority of Section 333, Title 10, to create a special force of plainclothes agents -- many hundreds of them -- who will be stationed at key points throughout the hard-core areas of the South, and who will be available, on call, whenever anyone exercising his constitutional rights (to register to vote, to canvass for registration, to picket peaceably, to hand out leaflets, to hold a peaceable assembly, to march peaceably anywhere) can ask for protection. Such agents would be able often to use persuasion in advance to stop sheriffs and police from interfering; but behind their powers of persuasion would be the force of arms and the power of on-the-spot arrest. Such a force, equipped with radio cars and a few helicopters, would be able to ensure protection all organized civil rights activity. One auto with a few agents, accompanying those three fellows into Neshoba County last summer, would have prevented that murder.

4. No voting bill, no matter how strong, will work so long as local police can use brutality against Negroes or can intimidate them (so that they may even be reluctant to file complaints under the law). And no matter how effective, it always involves delay before it works. In the interim, unless protection exists, Negroes will still be at the mercy of local violence. Remember, this is the fourth voting bill in eight years. Each one was supposed to do the trick.