Selma: Sustaining the Momentum

Selma, Alabama, March 9.

+ HAVING TRAVELED to Atlanta by plane, many of the civil rights demonstrators who converged on Selma today rode by bus or rented car past the state capitol in Montgomery before reaching their destination. Two flags, those of Alabama and of the Confederacy, fly atop the capitol dome to inform visiting Americans that they are outsiders. The demonstrators rode on new interstate highways dotted by signs bearing those same flags — highways paid for largely by federal taxes but designated the "Wallace Program" to honor the governor who makes visitors outsiders. The logic of the federal experience, however, will not permit George Wallace and his followers to have their way: in regard to the concerns of this nation all are insiders. As with state, so with church. None of the New Testament's metaphors for the church will permit today's demonstrators to be thought of as outsiders, so long as there is suffering among Christians in Alabama.

Today's insiders were responding to an appeal that came yesterday afternoon from Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and from allied civil rights groups (including SNCC and CORE, whose untiring stalwarts deserve more credit than they have received for the rights activities in progress in Alabama). Banks had already closed by the time the appeal reached Chicago and other northern cities. The ministers, rabbis, priests, executives, professors, editors, students and housewives who had only a few hours to get to Selma reached into emergency funds, piggy banks, petty cash boxes and other symbols of free enterprise to scrape together plane or train fare. (We thought of these varied resources as we looked into the eyes of the white citizens of Selma who were looking into our eyes: we were sure that they were sure these funds just had to come from the communists!)

Weary from the night's travel, hundreds of participants assembled at Browns Chapel A.M.E. Church in a Selma that was ominously quiet, oppressively tense. Inside the crowded church, recent history and events of recent days were being recounted. Listeners knew that in 1965 voting rights would be the focus of aspirations and demonstrations. Though Negroes had been in North America for three and a half centuries, few of them in the south could exercise such rights; a century after emancipation, almost no black belt Negroes were free to share in the most basic expressions of American freedom. Speaker after speaker repeated the story and the problem. Local and state "power struc-
tures" (a phrase used almost as an incantation) have not helped the Negro in his quest for the vote, in fact have brutally thwarted him as he sought it. Demonstrations were to call attention to the difficulties Negroes have in registering to vote on the basis of existing law. The larger purpose of attracting attention is of course to compel passage of federal legislation which will guarantee Negroes their rights.

Of the 32,687 Negroes in Dallas county, of which Selma is the county seat, only about 340 are registered to vote — a pattern which prevails in much of the deep south. If a Negro is fortunate enough to be one of the few permitted to reach the registrar's desk in Selma on one of the two registration days per month, he can expect to be subjected to a "literacy" test containing questions that might very well stump a professor of history or political science. Sample questions: (1) Who has the power to make laws applying to the areas of federal arsenals, and who must consent to such laws? (2) What happens if the House of Representatives fails to act when the duty of choosing a President of the United States devolves upon it? (3) Which of the original 13 states had the most representatives to the first Congress? (4) What limitation in size does the Constitution put upon the District of Columbia?

What the speakers in Browns Chapel knew and what gradualists and moderates often forget is the importance of momentum. Without demonstrations nothing will happen. The demonstrations now have momentum; if this is lost, nothing will happen. The momentum would accelerate or be broken today. Speakers recalled the events of the previous weekend with the kind of passion with which, back when men heard such things gladly, Christian preachers recounted the history of salvation. Saturday, three days ago, under the leadership of the Reverend Joseph Ellwanger, about 60 representative white Alabama Christians marched in Selma in a historic and unprecedented act of identification with their black neighbors. That was "great," according to one speaker. Sunday was greater. In an animalistic blood-letting that shocked the nation, Alabama state troopers and mounted possemen set upon Negro demonstrators — including women — with clubs, whips and ropes after rendering them helpless with tear gas. Monday King's call for help went out. Tuesday, declared the speaker, would be the "greatest": national religious leaders and others had arrived within hours of that call. King was later to agree; after today's march he said, "This was the greatest demonstration for freedom, the greatest con-
frontation we have ever had in the south." Then he called for even greater works.

The central aspect of today's events was the agony of conscience imposed suddenly and surprisingly on old demonstrators and new participants alike. The Negro leaders of the registration campaign had asked for a federal injunction against Governor Wallace, Sheriff James G. Clark and other militant segregationists. Instead, Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., of Montgomery, a sometime moderate but — along with President Johnson and Attorney General Katzenbach — clearly a "bad guy" in all the speeches delivered in the church, had issued an injunction against King's planned 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery. Judge Johnson wanted to wait until Thursday to rule; then he might have sufficient evidence. King, his aides, the respondees to his appeal were stunned and mystified. Why had the judge acted this way? What did his actions mean? What was Washington's part in all this? Would a march actually constitute contempt of the U.S. government? Questions which might preoccupy legal analysts for months were forced on civil rights activists for answers within hours. After considerable struggle of conscience, King, a respecter of law whose S.C.L.C. had never before acted contrary to a federal court injunction, told the waiting crowd, "I must march."

Only a few of the people we encountered today responded out of emotional reaction to the appeals voiced in the church. Only a few declared that their response came easily. But almost without exception the men and women who had journeyed to Selma took places in the line when the march began. Many of the church leaders, ministers and professors who marched found the first step difficult — not merely because they faced the prospect of 50 miles of marching, but because of the implications of that step. They are people who stress the theological foundation of law, who appeal to the federal experience, who recognize the fundamental importance of legal institutions and hold them in high esteem. On this occasion one judge seemed to them to be misrepresenting those institutions and one Negro leader seemed to be affirming them. They chose to witness with King and to wrestle with their consciences regarding the legal question when the march was over and time available. A study of the complex of motives and decisions concerning the march would make a book — it was different for each person with whom we talked. But almost everyone spoke in some manner of the need for witness today. More practically, they knew that failure to march would mean a break in the momentum, a surrender to Alabama's forces of evil, a halt in the Negro's progress toward freedom.

An improbable cloud of witnesses marched today. Roman Catholic bishops, senators' wives and widows, eggheads, seminary deans joined the "regulars" of Alabama. We walked past contemptuous Selmans who stood on their porches, spitting an occasional "Nigger lover!" or "Don't come on my property!" — or merely smirking spitefully. At one point a police officer on a motorcycle drove rapidly up onto the opposite sidewalk for the simple sadistic pleasure of chasing and scattering a group of Negro children. There is no need to detail this part of the experience: today's drama lay not in the march; that is old stuff to the regulars and the participation of today's guests hardly ranks them with the heroic veterans. We crossed the bridge over the Alabama river after hearing Chief Deputy U.S. Marshal H. Stanley Fountain read part of Judge Johnson's restraining order. A short distance beyond the bridge Sheriff Clark and State Police Major John Cloud confronted the marchers with several hundred battle-ready troopers and possemen. Though situated only 20 or 30 rows from the front, we heard little of the confrontation; we did hear the order for the troopers to break their rank, and the order from our side, following prayers offered by some of the leaders, to turn our mile-long column around and head back to the church.

Tonight's radio reports speak of a march's having been prevented, of the marchers' retreat, of the failure of the demonstration to break out onto the highway for Montgomery. Few of the marchers would interpret their actions in these terms. The story that went through the column as we returned went something like this: two "power structures," Wallace and King's, met on a day when neither could win all or lose all but when King's labored under an unexpected legal handicap. We were given the impression that some sort of agreement had been made: the troopers would open the highway, but we would not use it. The fact that the march ended rather undramatically does not contradict what King called it: the "greatest" yet.

What happened today? First, the momentum of the drive was not impaired. Further, the demonstrators by their variety and their spirit witnessed to the American religious community: the pastors, priests and rabbis of the future are not going to settle for culture-religion of the kind that permits the rights of Negroes to be denied. Liberal and conservative, large and small denominations were represented; their leaders not only have moved toward consensus but are willing to make that consensus visible in the risk of their own careers and lives. Finally, Martin Luther King was able to demonstrate that Negro leadership could rapidly summon an army of the kind of people who seldom participate in demonstrations and that this ungaily group of freedom fighters could be marched into what was for them literally an unknown, into the embrace of Governor Wallace's burliest brutes, without the protection of federal law. At the moment the prayers were being said and before the turn-around, no one knew

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whether clubs, tear gas or worse would be the fate of the kneeling marchers. King enabled them to tell the world, “None of us can be intimidated.”

Without doubt it would be easy to exaggerate the importance of this day's strange demonstration. By the time these words see print Selma's marchers will have gone on to new sufferings and, one hopes, new victories. Today was a day of sustained momentum which is building up to legislation and more freedom; it was a day of witness. That was all King asked for and that was what he and his co-workers got.

D.P. and M.E.M.

'And See the Land, What It Is'

_Kibbutz Ginosar, March 3._

+A CHRISTIAN making his first visit to Israel should distinguish if he can between the truths that come to him through the portals of sentiment and those that come through observation and reasoning. This word of caution does not imply that one medium is more reliable than the other or that the various insights he receives will necessarily conflict with each other. It suggests instead both the perils and the blessings of a dual orientation. The visitor is at once in the Holy Land and in a modern state which is young and dynamic, small but pivotal in Middle Eastern affairs. Land of revelation and experimentation, tradition and pioneering, East and West, Israel releases and excites the emotions both by what it has been and by what it strives to be, and at the same time its achievements and its problems — huge and complex — deserve a cool, detached audit and analysis. In this report and subsequent ones I will try to be faithful to both points of view, fully aware of the danger of failing one or the other or both.

First sentiment, then science. How can it be otherwise when I write with the waves of the Sea of Galilee lapping at my door, having just eaten a baked fish from these waters — a St. Peter's fish found only here, I was told. Over this ground Christ walked, there on that hill — tradition has it — he delivered the Sermon on the Mount, from this lake he called fishermen to be his disciples, across the way he multiplied loaves and fishes. From this spot draw a circle with a ten-mile radius and you encompass the sites of a precious Christian history. Hardly the place from which to express an objective analysis of Israeli affairs. Yet not five miles away Israeli and Syrian soldiers exchanged shots this afternoon. The Jerusalem Post reports that Jordanians and Syrians are infiltrating the Israeli side of the border, damaging farm buildings and equipment — hard reminders that nostalgia is not a trustworthy witness to modern conditions in the Holy Land. Less than five miles to the north at the Eshd Kinrot Pumping Station begins the Lake Kinneret—Negev water project which diverts water from the lake and the Jordan River to parched but arable land 100 miles to the south. War and water — on the danger of one and prospects for the other Israel's future hinges. The air here is heavy with memories, but they do not subdue the throbbing of the great water pumps under the hill or the rare but real crack of the rifle.

During my fortnight in Israel I am accompanied by Isaac Austrian, an Israeli who does not want to be called my escort or my guide, since these titles suggest that I am seeing only what the government wants me to see. So I shall call him my aide because he helps me go wherever I want to go and talk with anyone I want to talk to. Though this Polish Jew oozes from every pore a passionate loyalty to his adopted country, he obviously wants me to see everything for myself and come to my own unbiased conclusions. He does not want to prejudice me, yet unintentionally, inescapably he does. I ride over the country almost daily with a man who escaped from Poland as Hitler's troops broke through Poland's thin defenses in September 1939. Austrian's father and his brother, not so fortunate, died in the gas chambers. His mother and his wife spent years in concentration camps. Fleeing to Russia where he was imprisoned for two years Isaac Austrian eventually came by cunning and resolution to his new home in Israel.

Thus day by day I ride beside a living symbol of more than a million and a quarter Jewish refugees who have fled to Israel since the rise of Hitler in 1932. Except for a handful they came here because life had become intolerable and impossible in the lands where they and their ancestors had been citizens for decades and for centuries. They left behind them in the countries overrun by the nazis 6 million murdered kinsmen. Migration is always testimony to the failure of roots. It has happened in this century to 100 million human beings whose roots have been severed or jerked up by brutal forces, who have been compelled by circumstances they could not control to replant themselves in strange lands, who in most instances left behind loved ones and possessions and who did not know what new dangers would greet their exodus. Nowhere in the world has the ingathering of exiles been more dramatic, more heroic or more successful than here in Israel. Here met wealthy Jews and Jews with no belongings except the rags on their backs, cultured and ignorant, Asian and African and European, Ashkenazi and Sephardic, the newly born and the dying. And as for languages, it was Babel all over again except that this time oneness of need and purpose transcended confusion. Anyone traveling through this land, looking and listening, is soon
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