

# Bloody Sunday

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“Bloody Sunday” revolutionized America because it led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, garnered support in the Civil Rights Movement, and made the Edmund Pettus Bridge into a landmark in black history. Throughout the 1900s, African Americans were plagued with a significant conflict: *voting*. Jeered with intimidation, scare tactics and discrimination, few black people were even certified to vote--a basic right meant to be for *all* American citizens (*America’s Story from America’s Library*). Tensions ran especially high in the city of Selma, where over half of the population was black but only 2% of African Americans were registered to vote (*America’s Story from America’s Library*). According to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “This is Selma, Alabama. There are more negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls.” Soon, people grew tired of the constant neglect, injustice, and prejudice they faced and chose to express their angst through peaceful protest. In 1965, a series of demonstrations were centralized in Alabama to objectify discrimination in voting (Klein, Christopher). However, one of the most significant of these protests was “Bloody Sunday.” “Bloody Sunday” occurred when 600 demonstrators were whipped, battered, and bruised by deputies for protesting prejudice in voting and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson (Kindig, Jessie). Across the nation, ripples of outrage and disgust churned the stomachs of millions of Americans (*America’s Story From America’s Library*). As a result, the compromise to this conflict was reached when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Klein, Christopher). This law deemed discrimination in voting illegal, which not only remodeled black communities, but the *nation* (Klein, Christopher). It’s essential to remember this event since it was a stepping stone for the rights of African Americans and the state of America.

On March 7, 1965, 600 demonstrators set out from Selma, Alabama at Brown Chapel AME church (Klein, Christopher). “Bloody Sunday” was originally supposed to be a peaceful demonstration against prejudice in voting and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, and was

supposed to last 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama (Kindig, Jessie). Key coordinators of the march were John Lewis and Martin Luther King, while Hosea Williams and John Lewis led the march (*Selma to Montgomery March*). John Lewis was the 25 year old leader of the Student Nonviolent Committee (SNCC), while Hosea Williams represented the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) (*Selma to Montgomery March*). A few days prior to the march, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. met with President Lyndon B. Johnson about voting rights, and had planned to meet the demonstrators in “Bloody Sunday” the day after the march began (*Chapter 26: Selma*).

However, as the demonstrators marched across Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were stopped by Sheriff Jim Clark and Major John Cloud (*Selma to Montgomery March*). After the demonstrators refused to turn around when they were ordered, the deputies wreaked havoc on the thick crowd (*America’s Story from America’s Library*). Protesters were harassed and beaten by deputies as white bystanders cheered on the attack from the sidelines (*America’s Story from America’s Library*). Cameras caught the ghastly event on tape, and the vulgar footage was flown to New York (Klein, Christopher). As a result, “Bloody Sunday” was aired for the nation to watch (Klein, Christopher). Countless Americans were outraged, disgusted, and riled up from the brutal images relaying on their television sets (*America’s Story from America’s Library*).

“Bloody Sunday” was an event that rocked communities and the state of the nation. For too long, the injustices that African Americans faced were swept under the rug and discounted for. However, “Bloody Sunday” displayed physical proof of police brutality, racism, and the unfair treatment African Americans faced on a daily basis. No longer could Americans turn their cheek the other way at appalling headlines and recounted stories of prejudice and injustice--“Bloody Sunday” brought the prevalent issue of bigotry to millions of households across the nation.

However, “Bloody Sunday” didn’t occur for no reason. To begin, peaceful protesters getting harrassed by police was a reason that “Bloody Sunday” happened. For example, peaceful protesters were clubbed and beaten by state troopers in Marion, Alabama on February 18, 1965 (Klein, Christopher). This event sparked anger in the guts of many, since the protesters’ peaceful intentions were met with law enforcement’s guns and prejudice. Additionally, Jimmie Lee Jackson was fatally shot by a police officer in Marion (Klein, Christopher). A police officer was beating his mother when Jackson tried to stop him, which led to the officer fatally shooting him (Klein, Christopher). The death of Jimmie Lee Jackson convulsed communities, signifying to African American communities that black lives were essentially meaningless to law enforcement. Due to this, a fire was lit under many to protest and speak up against injustice. Likewise, in Selma, Alabama, the local law enforcement was notorious for brutality under Sheriff Jim Clark (*Selma to Montgomery March*). This made not only made protesters the brunt of police and discrimination, but succumbed marchers to have their dreams crushed under the weight of a club, gun or whip.

Another reason that “Bloody Sunday” occurred was that black people had prevalent troubles voting. For starters, in Selma, over half of the population was black, but only 2% were registered to vote (*America’s Story From America’s Library*). 15,000 African Americans were eligible to vote, but under 350 were registered (*Chapter 26: Selma*). The neglect of African Americans by the voting system encouraged many to use their voice to protest this injustice. Furthermore, African Americans were discouraged to vote through discrimination and scare tactics (*America’s Story From America’s Library*). Due to this, the oppression in America snatched away the rights of countless black people in American, leading to many itching to speak up. Moreover, Martin Luther King jr. wrote to the *New York Times*, “This is Selma, Alabama. There are more negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls” (Klein,

Christopher). The quote paints a picture of how the system deemed African Americans as convicts instead of potential voters, caging their freedom of expression inside of rusted steel bars.

Peaceful demonstrators getting arrested also contributed to “Bloody Sunday.” For example, thousands of demonstrators were arrested in Selma and neighboring communities for protesting discrimination in voting (Klein, Christopher). The toxic relationship between marchers and law enforcement portrays the injustice many faced for simply speaking their mind on prevalent issues. Additionally, on February 1, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed with over 200 protesters after the Voting Rights march in Selma, Alabama (*Chapter 26: Selma*). These arrests were meant to silence the voices of those who refused to stand down to the issues plaguing America. Similarly, the campaign held by the SCLC and SNCC in Selma and Marion, Alabama led to mass arrests (*Selma to Montgomery March*). The mass arrests attempted to cage outspoken minds in thick chains, but only strengthened communities and encouraged others to fight for what they believed.

The event “Bloody Sunday” happened in an arranged sequence of events. First, demonstrators were marching from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to meet Governor George Wallace, who ordered state troopers to “use whatever measures necessary to prevent a march” (Klein, Christopher). Then, they were unexpectedly stopped by Sheriff Jim Clark and Major John Cloud at the end of Edmund Pettus Bridge (*Selma to Montgomery March*). Clark and Cloud told the protesters that they had two minutes to turn around and end the march (*America’s Story From America’s Library*), but the protesters refused. As a result, the deputies ruthlessly attacked before the two minutes elapsed (*America’s Story From America’s Library*). Consequently, marchers were clubbed, spat on, whipped, tear-gassed, and trampled by horses (Eh52170). Despite this, the demonstrators didn’t fight back as they were kicked down on Edmund Pettus

Bridge, jeered by white bystanders (Mcjstaff). Cameras captured the obscene event inside thick lens and sent the film to ABC in New York.

As a result, "Bloody Sunday" was televised for the nation to see. On ABC at around 9:30 p.m., Frank Reynolds stopped the airing of "Judgement at Nuremberg" to air the footage (Klein, Christopher). Around fifty million people were watching, and the footage triggered outrage across the nation (Klein, Christopher). Consequently, the raw video of police brutality sent households--and the nation--into a moment of shock. Stomachs churned in anger, disgust, and retaliation. For the first time, people didn't just *hear* of stories of protests and injustice--now, Americans viewed the civil war occurring all around them, loudly relaying on their television sets.

As a result, the event "Bloody Sunday" had multiple significant short-term and long-term effects. For instance, an effect of this march was the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in response to the outrage relating to "Bloody Sunday" (Klein, Christopher). On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the act into a law (*Selma to Montgomery March*). This revolutionary law outlawed racial discrimination in voting. Additionally, it signified how much the shockwaves of "Bloody Sunday" were able to penetrate not only the voting system, but the rights African Americans have today.

Similarly, "Bloody Sunday" garnered more support in the Civil Rights Movement. For example, in 48 hours, 80 cities held demonstrations to support the voting rights marches (*America's Story From America's Library*). It was unbelievable that the imagery of hundreds being beaten down encouraged a plethora of Americans to stand up for what they believe in. Additionally, sympathizers had sit-ins, traffic blockades, and demonstrations across the nation (*America's Story From America's Library*). "Bloody Sunday" had spread all over America, affecting people of different classes, genders, and races. In like manner, the event led to the Selma to Montgomery March. After getting granted a federal order, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

and Coretta Scott King led 3,200 marchers from Selma to Montgomery (*Selma-to-Montgomery March*). The march began on March 21st, 1965, and lasted for four days (*Selma-to-Montgomery March*). Demonstrators valiantly walked 12 miles a day and slept in thick fields (*Selma-to-Montgomery March*). By the time they reached Montgomery, the protesters grew to a crowd of 25,000 people (*Selma-to-Montgomery March*). The fact that “Bloody Sunday” compelled thousands of people to march for an issue plaguing America speaks to the impact this event had on the country as a whole.

Furthermore, “Bloody Sunday” made Edmund Pettus Bridge a landmark. The bridge was originally named after a Ku Klux Klan Leader (Klein, Christopher). However, after “Bloody Sunday” occurred the bridge became a landmark for the Civil Rights Movement (*Selma-to-Montgomery March*). “Bloody Sunday” was able to transform an image of bigotry and hate into one that signified unification and a stepping stone in black history.

We should remember “Bloody Sunday” for countless reasons. First, it made it significantly easier for black people to vote. Before “Bloody Sunday,” African Americans were hindered from voting due to scare tactics and discrimination, leading to underrepresentation in the polls. However, “Bloody Sunday” brought national awareness to the issue demoralizing black people throughout America. The unnerving footage of police brutality and the outrage that followed led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which deemed discrimination in voting illegal. Though many African Americans still face troubles voting today, such as inaccessibility to the materials needed to vote in their communities (ex: places to get photo IDs), “Bloody Sunday” propelled black America into a realm of rights that people once thought could never be received.

Additionally, “Bloody Sunday” drove the Civil Rights Movement into the limelight. The footage from the ghastly march was aired for 50 million Americans to see, and affected families of all races, classes, and genders across America. As a result, outrage and disgust was sparked

in the chests of many, leading to sympathizers holding sit-ins, demonstrations, and traffic blockades. Furthermore, the Selma to Montgomery March was provoked by “Bloody Sunday” and attracted a crowd of 25,000 people to protest unfair voting rights. No longer were black issues only centered in African Americans’ lives—even without sound, the footage from “Bloody Sunday” spoke volumes to the amount of prejudice, injustice, and maltreatment black people face throughout the nation, making it a universal issue.

Furthermore, “Bloody Sunday” transformed the image of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Before, the bridge was originally named after a Ku Klux Klan leader. Back then, the structure emulated a message of hatred, bigotry, and segregation. However, after “Bloody Sunday” occurred, it reconstructed into an anchor of hope, justice, and a landmark in black history. When many view this structure, it serves as a reminder of the valiant civilians who fought for the rights we possess today. In a way, the bridge joins the divide between African Americans and their roots that are ingrained in American history.

I picked “Bloody Sunday” as my National History Day project to not only showcase the injustice, hardships, and bigotry African Americans endured to receive their basic rights, but to propel the power of peaceful protest into the limelight. Throughout history, African Americans were forced to objectify for their rights in a variety of ways—with their fists, with their voice, or with peace. For me, using your voice and the ability to rise above those who kick you down resonates deeper. Not everyone can throw a punch; not everyone can condone bloodshed and anger. However, nearly anyone can use their voice or their position to speak against the injustices plaguing communities. “Bloody Sunday” revealed to me that my voice alone can cause a ripple in the vast melting pot of America. The topic not only strung me back to the roots of a boundless ancestral tree, but it showcased the powerful and inspiring way I was able to receive my basic rights.



In the end, “Bloody Sunday” should always be remembered because of how it led to Voting Rights Act of 1965, brought national awareness to the Civil Rights Movement, and transformed the Edmund Pettus Bridge into a landmark in black history. Though African Americans across the nation faced many conflicts with voting and law enforcement, their voices revolutionized the future of America. Across the nation, demonstrators sacrificed their lives, freedom, and voices in order to hand my generation the rights we often take for granted today. Due to this, the conflict of prejudice in voting was solved by the compromise of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which deemed discrimination in voting as illegal. Though African Americans continue to face discrimination, injustice, and police brutality, we have acquired rights that we couldn’t even *dream* of only half a century ago. “Bloody Sunday” remodeled not only black communities, but America as a whole. Due to this, “Bloody Sunday” should *always* be remembered in the hearts and lives of voters--and *all* Americans--across the nation.

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