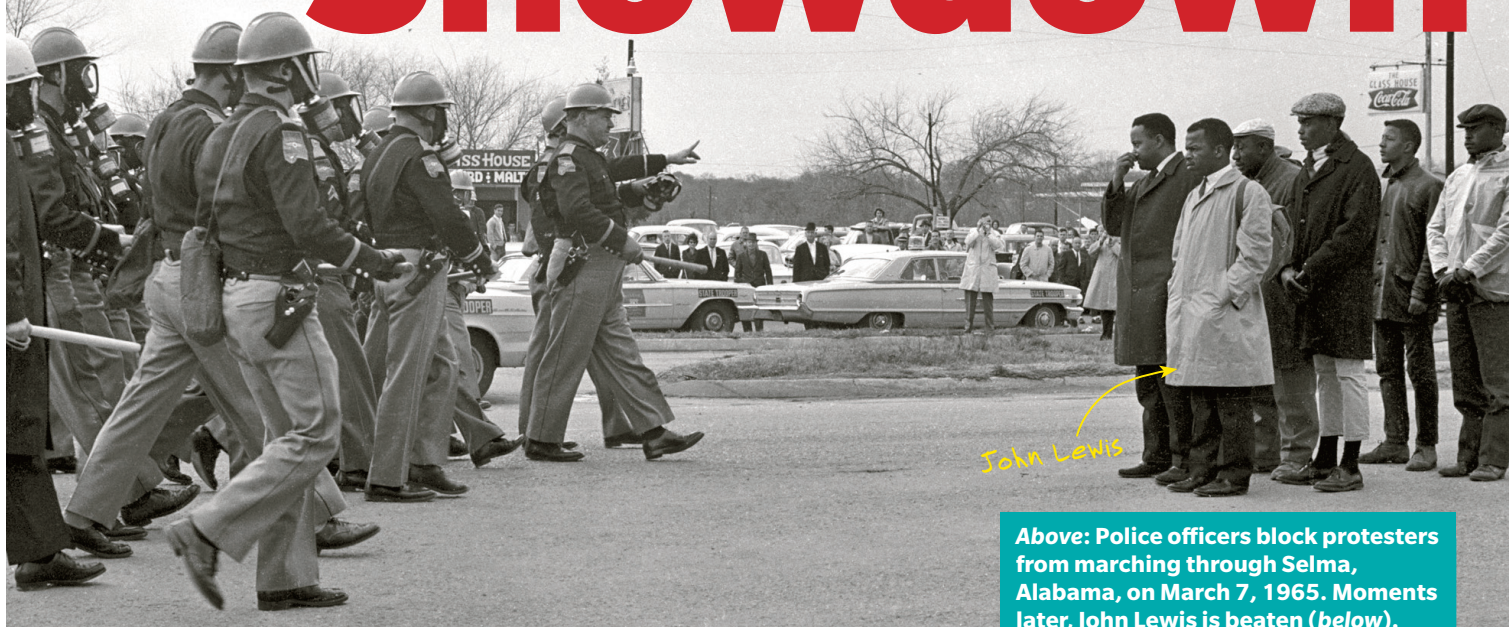


# Showdown



Above: Police officers block protesters from marching through Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965. Moments later, John Lewis is beaten (below).

## Fifty years ago, people put their lives in danger during a march to demand equal voting rights for African-Americans.

**O**n Sunday, March 7, 1965, John Lewis walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, with about 600 people behind him. Waiting on the other side were about 200 police officers and state troopers. Alabama's governor, George Wallace, had ordered them not to let the marchers pass. Lewis expected trouble.

"I was prepared to die on that bridge in Alabama, if necessary,"

### Words to Know

**fundamental** (fuhn-deh-MEN-tuhl) *adjective*. of central importance

**discrimination** (dis-krim-ih-NAY-shuhn) *noun*. unjust behavior toward others based on differences such as age, race, and gender

says Lewis, who is now a U.S. congressman from Georgia.

Lewis was one of the leaders of a peaceful march to protest racist laws that kept African-Americans from voting. The marchers planned to walk 50 miles, from Selma to the state capital, Montgomery, to demand that Governor Wallace protect their right to vote.

But they didn't get very far. When the marchers refused to turn around, the police beat them with clubs and shot tear gas into the crowd. Lewis suffered a fractured skull.

"There was mayhem all around me," recalls Lewis. "All I could hear was screaming, weeping, and gunshots."

That day nearly 50 years ago is known as "Bloody Sunday." It was



a major turning point in the civil rights movement—the struggle in the 1950s and 1960s to gain equal rights for African-Americans. The horror of that day would help lead to a law that protects everyone's right to vote.

### Fighting for a Voice

For a long time, the only people who could vote in the U.S. were white men. It wasn't until 1870, when the 15th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, that African-American men were granted suffrage—the right to vote. (Women didn't get suffrage



# in Selma

until 1920.) But white officials, mainly in the South, used threats, violence, and other tactics to prevent African-Americans from voting (see “Blocked From Voting”). As a result, many black people were denied one of their **fundamental** rights. For example, in Selma and nearby towns, less than 3 percent of African-Americans were registered to vote in 1964. So civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., organized a march from Selma to Montgomery to begin on March 7, 1965. (King didn’t take part in that day’s march, however.)

## After Bloody Sunday

Though the marchers didn’t get very far on Bloody Sunday, their actions would have a huge impact. TV viewers across the country were outraged as they watched footage of the attack. Thousands of people, both black and white, from all over the U.S. went to Selma to join the protests.

On March 15, President Lyndon B. Johnson appeared on TV to urge all Americans to stand with the marchers in Selma.

Five days later, the protesters—led by King, Lewis, and others—set out again for Montgomery. President Johnson had ordered more than 2,000 U.S. Army troops to protect them. After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge without any trouble, the marchers kept walking for five days. At night, many slept outside. Finally, on March 25, nearly 25,000 people reached Montgomery. In a speech from the capitol steps, King called for an end to **discrimination**.

Less than five months later, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. It made it illegal to deny anyone the right to vote based on race. By the end of that year, more than 250,000 African-Americans had registered to vote.

Lewis is proud to have helped so many people exercise one of their most powerful rights. “I feel very blessed to see the changes that have taken place,” he says, “and also to have played a role in paving the way for millions of Americans to register and vote.”

—by Joe Bubar



## Blocked From Voting

**B**efore the Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law, these were two of the main techniques used to deny African-Americans their right to vote:

**POLL TAXES** were fees that people were forced to pay when they registered to vote. White officials knew that many African-Americans were poor and couldn’t afford the fees. Meanwhile, many white voters were excused from having to pay poll taxes.

**LITERACY TESTS** were written or oral exams that people had to pass before they could register to vote. These tests were often rigged to make it nearly impossible for black people to pass. The tests often included questions that were purposely confusing, and white officials would fail African-Americans for getting just one wrong answer. Here are a few questions reportedly from a literacy test given in Louisiana in 1964:

- Print the word “vote” upside down, but in the correct order.
- Write right from the left to the right as you see it spelled here.
- Spell backwards, forwards.



In 1966, African-Americans in rural Alabama line up to vote for the first time.

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