

Back in Selma

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The calendar tells me I'm getting old. Fifty years ago, in Selma, Alabama, I was getting educated.

A college student in Wisconsin at the time, I ventured south to participate in the civil rights movement, including the voting-rights march from Selma to Montgomery that began on March 21, 1965. It was there that my real education began, or at least a significant part of it. This past weekend, many of us who marched in Selma gathered there again, this time to mark the 50th anniversary of the event.

"You will be the people that will light a new chapter in the history books of our nation," Martin Luther King Jr. told us at the start of the march. "Walk together, children. Don't get weary, and it will lead us to the Promised Land. And Alabama will be a new Alabama, and America will be a new America."

Since then, Alabama and America have changed, but not as much as King hoped. Selma, for example, has been struggling to fulfill King's dream since the civil rights gains of the 1960s and before. Its public high school has been "resegregated" for years; most of the city's white children attend private school. Fewer than half of the city's residents own a home. More than 40 percent of Selma's children live in poverty.

In Selma this weekend, there was much remembering and reminiscing. Hugs were abundant. But the commemoration of events 50 years ago also provided an opportunity for today's activists to hold seminars and workshops on some of the challenges that, in their view, still lie ahead: racial segregation under the Fair Housing Act and other civil rights laws; a broken criminal justice system; a war on drugs that disenfranchises African Americans; the ongoing need for something like King's Poor People's Campaign; the weakening of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which President Lyndon Johnson signed into law largely as a result of public pressure emanating from the "Selma movement" earlier that year.

Jesse Jackson, who was with King on at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis when he was assassinated in 1968, said that “the glory of Selma is in the rearview mirror.”

“The need to protest [for social and economic justice] trumps the celebration of Selma,” said Jackson. “We achieved the freedom of politics... but we did not achieve economic equality.” He said that the Voting Rights Act indeed had secured the right to vote for all African Americans. “But the economic infrastructure of inclusion and exclusion,” he went on, “remains the same.”

President Obama, visiting Selma over the weekend, addressed a crowd of about 40,000 from the Edmund Pettus Bridge. That’s the place where hundreds of voting-rights protestors were tear-gassed and beaten with billy clubs and cattle prods by Alabama state troopers on “Bloody Sunday,” March 7, 1965.

“There are places and moments in America where this nation’s destiny has been decided,” the president said. “Selma is such a place.” He also said that “if Selma taught us anything, it’s that our work is never done.... The march is not yet over, the race is not yet won.... And we will not get weary.” En route to Alabama on Air Force One, the president signed into law legislation awarding the Congressional Gold Medal—one the nation’s two highest civilian awards—to the “foot soldiers” of the Selma-based demonstrations of March 1965.

As for me, it is my hope that, as we hand out medals, we will also remember that while Selma may have been yesterday, it is also today.