

Cleveland Sellers, 48 years after the Orangeburg Massacre

By [Gary G. Yerkey](#)

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A bipartisan group of some two dozen members of Congress will travel to Orangeburg, South Carolina, this weekend to pay tribute to those who were killed and injured by state law enforcement officers during a civil rights demonstration there 48 years ago. The pilgrimage, organized by the Faith and Politics Institute, will be led by Rep. James E. Clyburn and Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, along with civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis of Georgia. The group will also make stops in Columbia and in Charleston, site of the mass shooting last year at the historic Mother Emanuel AME Church.

I recommend that these members of Congress prepare by reading [The River of No Return](#). It's the autobiography of Cleveland L. Sellers Jr., a survivor of what has become known as the Orangeburg Massacre and a quiet but powerful leader of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. John Dittmer, author of the award-winning *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, has called Sellers's book "one of the two or three most important books to come out of the civil rights movement."

Sellers, now 71 years old, is the president of Voorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina—one of two historically black colleges affiliated with the Episcopal Church. After eight years in the post, he will be retiring at the end of the current academic year.

Sellers went to Howard University in D.C. and then returned to his native South Carolina, where he began organizing black students at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg as program director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. "By working with students," he writes, "I believed I could develop a movement focusing attention on the problems of poor blacks in South Carolina."

But things quickly turned ugly when, in February 1968, about 200 protesters from the university attempted to integrate a local bowling alley. On the night of February

8, the demonstrators lit a bonfire on the campus grounds, and as the police and firefighters attempted to put it out, one officer was injured by an object thrown from the crowd. The officers panicked and began firing their weapons. Three young men were killed, and 28 people were injured—including Sellers, who was shot in the arm.

Then-governor Robert Evander McNair blamed the incident on “outside Black Power agitators.” Nine police officers were later acquitted of using excessive force, while Sellers was convicted of inciting a riot and wound up spending seven months in prison.

According to Sellers, his friends at Howard included several future leaders of the civil rights movement, including Stokely Carmichael, “a special friend” who would eventually become chairman of SNCC. Throughout the 1960s, the two young activists worked together with other SNCC militants organizing protests and voter registration drives throughout the Deep South.

In June 1966, Sellers stood with Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi, when Carmichael sounded the cry for Black Power for the first time publicly. It was a speech that set off a firestorm of fear-mongering across white America and a revolution in the way that African Americans perceived themselves and their struggle.

Martin Luther King Jr. disavowed the phrase “Black Power,” calling it divisive and “an unfortunate choice of words.” But Sellers, who moved through the crowd in Greenwood distributing Black Power leaflets while Carmichael spoke, wrote later that, despite the drumbeat of opposition to the slogan, “we managed to keep Black Power alive.”

Later, Sellers earned a master’s degree in education from Harvard and doctorate from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. He also served as director of the African American studies program at the University of South Carolina.

Last month, I had the opportunity to meet Sellers in his office on the Voorhees campus. I brought along my dog-eared copy of *The River of No Return* for him to sign, which he did, saying that “the struggle for civil rights continues. We still have a very long way to go.”

Just before we met, Sellers spoke briefly at a school event marking Black History Month. “It’s time to step into the pages of history,” he told the students, “to make a difference.” He could have added—but didn’t—that this is exactly what he did.