

THE SELMA, AL NONVIOLENT RIGHT-TO-VOTE MOVEMENT

The introduction of Birmingham's children into the campaign was one of the wisest moves made. It brought a new impact to the crusade and the impetus that we needed to win the struggle. Jim Bevel had the inspiration of setting *D Day*, when the students would go to jail in historic numbers.



Why We Can't Wait, Martin L. King, Jr.



When the four little girls were killed in a Birmingham church bombing on September 15, 1963, Reverend Bevel decided that it could not be ignored. He could see the inter-relatedness of the bombing and the movement actions being carried out in Birmingham. Bevel decided to step up the action of the nonviolent movement. His overriding thought was to provide Black people with a tool that they could use to nonviolently protect themselves. He decided that getting the southern Black people the right-to-vote would go along way in providing this protection. On the day of the bombing, he and his wife Diane Nash drew up a plan for getting the right to vote. He sent his wife Diane Nash-Bevel to present the proposal to Dr. King, asking for his and SCLC's support for such a plan.

"My former husband (Jim Bevel) and I, cried when we heard about the bombing, because in many ways we felt like our own children had been killed. We knew that the activity of the civil rights movement had been involved in generating a kind of energy that brought out this kind of hostility. We decided that we would do something about it, and we said that we had two options. First, we felt confident that if we tried, we could find out who had done it, and we could make sure they got killed. We considered that as a real option. The second option was that we felt that if blacks in Alabama had the right to vote, they could protect black children. We deliberately made a choice, and chose the second option. We weren't going to stop working until Alabama Blacks had the right to vote."

Diane Nash-Bevel interview in *Voices of Freedom*, p. 173

"King's SCLC gave serious consideration to a national civil disobedience campaign (the right to vote proposal) drafted by Reverend James L. Bevel and his wife Diane Nash-Bevel, Field Secretary of SNCC...but a week later was forced to reverse itself when virtually every other civil rights group rejected the idea."

House Divided, Lionel Lokos

After several months, Reverend Bevel decided to move on the plan without the consent of Dr. King or SCLC. He took some of his staff to Alabama and started organizing people and resources to bring the plan to fruition. Official approval of the voting rights movement didn't come until November, 1964, just after the presidential election.

First the government was asked to remove all barriers that kept blacks from voting. The Congress was petitioned, the state of Alabama and Governor George Wallace were petitioned. This way of asking and engaging in clear communication before any demonstrations began, was proof that the barriers to voting did exist.

Bernard and Colia Lafayette came to Selma, in February 1963 to begin a voter education effort. Throughout the spring their monthly Dallas County Voters League clinics drew an average of forty people, and by mid-June they were able to draw seven hundred people to a mass rally at which James Bevel of SCLC spoke.

Protest At Selma, David Garrow

Although Selma had been declared "off limits" as an organizing district by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference earlier, Amelia Robinson, with her husband, S. W. Boynton, had labored for the right to vote in that area for over thirty years prior to the campaign of 1964.

Mrs. Amelia Boynton Robinson

Our Direct Action Department, under the direction of Rev. James Bevel, then decided to attack the very heart of the political structure of the state of Alabama and the Southland through a campaign for the right to vote.

The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., Martin Luther King, Jr.

As director of nonviolent education, James Bevel had the responsibility of educating and demonstrating nonviolence.

But at one, the Ward Four meeting held in the back of Brown Chapel, they got a reception from an SCLC staff member named James Bevel. Bevel was on Dr. King's executive staff, and was in charge of the SCLC workers in the city; although short and unimposing in appearance, he was one of King's most eloquent and fiery spokesman known especially for the vigor and force of his denunciation of racism. Before a small dumfounded audience, Bevel stood up and ordered the deputies to leave. One of them raised a camera to take his picture and he angrily told him to stop and repeated the order to leave. The deputies were wary of getting involved in such surrounding, and they left. The news of this unprecedented act of defiance quickly spread around the city.

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

Past experiences had taught Bevel that once a campaign was started, it had to be completed. He had come to Selma, with his staff to gain the right to vote, realizing that they would be offered everything but that. He however, was resolved that nothing less than the right to vote was acceptable. Next an injunction was issued by Judge Thomas.

"...the injunction represented a major attempt by the white leadership to head off the demonstrations in Selma. It contained what seemed to be real concessions, which would open up the voting rolls to larger numbers of Black citizens. Even the SCLC workers weren't sure at first what its impact would be. Andy Young told the people at Brown Chapel, when they heard it was imminent that, "In every battle there are many rounds, and this round may have come to an end. We may have a little breather."

James Bevel who had tossed the deputies out of a ward meeting, was the main preacher at the mass meeting that night, and he was in a combative mood! The order, he said, "may make it more difficult for us to do some of the things we have done before, and we might be cited for contempt of court. But I don't mind being cited for contempt because Negroes were born under an injunction in Alabama. If Judge Thomas plans to connive around with letters of the law in order to deny us our rights, he has a bad dream coming. We mean to vote and have representation in government, and we will settle for nothing less. I'm saying here and now," he finished, "that we must be prepared to fight and die for everything that is ours. And there is going to be rabble rousing all over Alabama until we get the right to vote."

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

Bevel took SCLC to Selma with one goal in mind, to win a strong federal voting rights law that would provide for executive branch enforcement of southern Blacks constitutionally guaranteed right-to-vote. Again and again they were offered everything else.

Over the weekend there was quiet negotiations between Black and White leaders over the use of an "appearance book." A number of the local leaders, including Reverend Reese, were momentarily persuaded that the opening of the appearance book a week early would constitute an important sign of good faith on the part of the Whites, and the Whites

believed that the Black leaders had agreed to end demonstration once it became available.

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

The instituting of an appearance book was not the equivalent of federal protection of voting rights and to end demonstrations or take a breather would have left Black people at the mercy of the already riled up Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council. There was a position of no compromise in the movement. This circumvented people who were not totally committed to nonviolence or who didn't understand it from giving in to less than the goal, the right to vote.

But things didn't work out as the Whites had hoped. The SCLC staff in the city particularly James Bevel, argued vehemently that the appearance book was just another White man's trick, a delaying tactic like so many others and no concession at all. On Monday morning, February eighth, they held a press conference to denounce it, and to call for the holding of registration in other locations as well, the appointment of deputy registrars, some of whom would be Black and the elimination of all voting requirements except age and residence. Bevel said he would lead a group to the courthouse to make explicit their boycott of the book.

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

As a result of the visibility that came to Reverend Bevel when he would not go along with other Blacks concessions when they were fooled by the White man's tricks, he was severely beaten, and received a concussion. He was jailed on the day of the appearance book protest.

James Bevel, had been beaten insensibly by sheriff's deputies and had sustained a concussion of the brain. Bevel was chained to his bed.

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

Not only was Bevel chained to his bed, he was also watered down and stripped of his clothes and caught pneumonia. His wife serving him divorce papers caused his inhumane treatment to come to light, as her lawyer found Bevel near death.

The first real causality of the Selma movement was the shooting and subsequent death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. His murder threatened to destroy the nonviolent movement, as people began to purchase bullets from neighboring states.

The Black community had armed themselves in Marion, and were ready to kill some policemen or White people. I (Bevel) convinced them that they should march instead and that, that would keep the question of the right to vote before the nation and would force President Johnson not to join the southern White folks in crushing the movement under the pretense of upholding law and order. This would have caused a restriction of travel and thus we would not have been able to keep the people at the courthouse. This was a tactical maneuver in the question of the right to vote, aimed at bringing the whole state government and the rest of the nation into the movement.

Interview with James Bevel, by Helen L. Edmond

As ministers we felt it was important to make a pastoral call to the family of the slain Jimmy Lee Jackson, to have prayer with them and give them spiritual encouragement. Jimmy was a young man who was the bread winner for the family and was now dead. He had a sister, a wife, and mother who had been beaten, and his

grandfather had a large knot on the top of his head from being beaten. Before leaving the Jackson's, Bevel asked the family, "What do you think we should do? Do you think we should continue to march?" Cager Lee Jackson said, "Oh yes, we have to march now, I have nothing to lose, I've lost everything I had." So Bevel said, "If we march would you march with us?" He said, "Yes, I'll march." So on our way back from the Jackson's house, Bevel said, "I'm going to march, and I'm going to march all the way to Montgomery." He asked, "Do you think I'll get anyone to march with me?" I said, "I'm just one person, but I'll march with you." So Bevel at the mass meeting that very same night made the announcement that he was going to march all the way to Montgomery. He asked, "How many people are going to march with me?" The whole church stood up."

Account by Dr. Bernard LaFayette

Marches began in Selma, AL on March 7, 1965. Marchers were mercilessly beaten. The third march was approved by Governor George Wallace on March 21, 1965. The Voting Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson on August 6, 1965. Reverend James Bevel and Diane Nash received the SCLC Rosa Parks Award for having conceived, initiated and successfully executed the Selma Right To Vote Movement.

"Dr. King's speech [in Montgomery] was impressive as usual, but the remarks of James Bevel got closest to the whole point of the struggle. Waving up at the capitol, Bevel said, 'Those police up there on the steps know we belong inside. Thirty-four percent of the seats in there belong to us. We don't want these steps. We want the capitol.'"

Black Activism, Robert H. Brisbane

"For Bevel, the march to Montgomery was not the end of the SCLC Alabama Project, but only the beginning. But once the march was completed, Bevel returned to his original plan. In fact, in light of the momentum developed by the march, he decided its sights should be raised; the Black citizens of Alabama should not settle for simply a federal voting law, he felt, they should demand the impeachment of Governor Wallace, the resignation of both houses of the state legislature, and a new, federally supervised election for all state offices. To reinforce the impact of the mass arrest in Montgomery, Bevel wanted SCLC to institute a nationwide boycott of the states industries and products, to add economic chaos to political disruption as the campaign heated up. The weekend after the rally at the capitol, Dr. King announced that he would call for a boycott of Alabama products and industries; and ask the federal government to withdraw its funds from programs in the state."

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

But there was resistance to this program within SCLC, led principally by Hosea William. Williams urged Dr. King to give him command of all the SCLC field staff, including those in Alabama, to help implement SCOPE. SCOPE was given a budget of \$480,000. This meant putting an end to Bevel's Alabama Project. SCLC's SCOPE Project did not turn out nearly as well as its sponsors had hoped. Everybody was waiting for the [voting right] bill to be passed. With almost a half million dollars to play with, SCLC's legendary disorganization became an industry in SCOPE.

Selma, 1965, Charles Fager

SCLC pulled out of Selma and the people of Selma and the Blackbelt were left to suffer under the racist tricks and ploys of those elected officials who had a 400 years jump start on keeping them oppressed. In addition the state constitution was founded on the oppression and enslavement of African Americans. The mayor of Selma in 1965 was Mayor Joe Smitherman and he served as mayor until 2003 (38 years). He maintained the racist policies in

new ways. In an interview with local Selma residents it was reported that people were encouraged to keep their children out of school and receive crazy checks. One young lady said, that her mother use to beat her when she voiced a desire to go to school. She became a resident of a mental institute.

Had Bevel's plan to hold new elections of all public servants been implemented Mayor Smitherman would not have served for forty more years and the people would have been able to move forward towards true democracy in the state of Alabama. To this day African Americans continue to suffer under the cruelty of unsavory politicians and unjust laws.

On January 14, 2014, the city council of Selma voted to award land to the Daughters of the Confederacy, for the building of a statue to honor Nathan B. Forest (Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan) in a African American neighborhood and African American members of the council voted for this. The movement wasn't finished and the local people felt the brunt of it. Whereas Selma is "The Capital of Democracy", democracy or justice has yet to be achieved.



"I'd say 98% of the plans and activities in Selma were Bevel's. The Selma Movement was Bevel's baby."

—Reverend James Orange

"I went to a meeting at this church, and they announced about this important mass meeting, something we wasn't use to, and said James Bevel would be speaking that night.

James Bevel did speak and everything he said, you know made sense."

— Fannie Lou Hamer

"I don't think we would have had a movement without him. He played a very important role, and that role was translated into a successful movement."

— Ambassador Andrew Young

"James Bevel was a pioneer for an American Revolution. It's the bad boys who cause revolutions. A person would have to be a tad bit insane to go up against Jim Clark, Bull Connor, police dogs and fire hoses. The culture of slavery created post-traumatic stress syndrome of slavery. The affect of the plantation system was disconnection. America and its structures had no avenue for healing. Only novelty can get you out of slavery. Bevel was born into slavery and inherited all the slave tendencies. His work was designed to bring healing to the nation."

—Dr. Nkosi Ajanaku, Future America Research Institute



Help support the creation of the "James L. Bevel Library and Restorative Justice Center", to further his work, by educating a new generation on the power of nonviolence. Send your donations to: James L. Bevel Library and Restorative Justice Center, 652 E. 89th Place, Chicago, IL 60619. Online at anewbeing.com/bevel-library.html

For further information read: The Nonviolent Right-To-Vote Movement Almanac, by Helen L. Bevel. Available at lulu.com. 50% of all proceeds will go to the above library fund.

"Whatever must be done to make justice the law is what government must do."

—Reverend James L. Bevel

Co-Author, Initiator, Developer, Director, Chief Organizer,
The Selma Right-to-Vote Movement



**THE FATHER OF THE 1965
NONVIOLENT RIGHT-TO-
VOTE MOVEMENT, SELMA, AL**

Reverend James L. Bevel

October 16, 1936 - IttaBena, Mississippi - December 19, 2008

To the Negroes of the state (of Mississippi) was issued a warning that the Democrats were preparing, through means of the constitutional convention, to shape the election law to their own needs and then "the policy of crushing out the manhood of the Negro citizens was to be carried on to success."

—J. S. McNeilly, "History of the Measures Submitted to the Committee on Elective Franchise, Apportionment, and Elections in the Constitutional Convention of 1890," in Mississippi Historical Society, Publications, VI (1902), 132

"I went to Selma to be government. I was operating in Selma as government." Someone asked me, "how do you know we are going to be successful?" I said, "Because the government is here. I'm here, I'm the government, and if I say you can vote, you can vote, because I say so, what I say goes. Whoever says you can't vote is lying and I'm going to dig up that lie."

—Reverend James L. Bevel

—Excerpt from audio tape in the collection of Helen L. Bevel dated October 16, 1981, A Government Study Workshop