They slowly marched toward the city. Their feet pounded the ground as their hearts pounded in their chests. Hundreds prepared for the moment they would reach Selma, but none could have imagined the reality of that moment. They knew there would be resistance, as there had been on every other occasion, but they also knew they must persevere if things were to change.

Topping the hill, they saw the force awaiting their arrival. On horseback and on foot, Alabama state troopers waited for the marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, complete with billy clubs and tear gas. The troopers called for the group to disperse as the marchers knelt to pray. The tear gas filled the air, the billy clubs struck, the horses trampled bodies, and the screams rang through the Alabama air. The marchers retreated from the bridge, but they knew they would return one day.

The demonstration that ended so violently on Sunday, March 7, 1965, was for a seemingly simple cause: the right to vote. Although it was illegal, some southern state and city governments refused to allow African Americans to vote, either through deceptive laws or harassment. In 1965, civil rights organizations focused their efforts on Selma, Alabama. After numerous failed attempts to register black voters, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) arranged a demonstration to protest the discrimination. They would march to Montgomery, the state capital, and petition for fair voting laws. The first attempt resulted in “Bloody Sunday,” but the protestors were determined. They had a right to petition their government and to assemble. They would cross the bridge.

The activists persevered. The organizations planned another march for Tuesday, March 9. They knew the state would prohibit them from crossing the bridge, but their voices would be heard. Tuesday morning, Dr. King led a group of two thousand protestors to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Again, state troopers met them and ordered them to disperse. The marchers prayed and then left the bridge to avoid further violence.

Throughout the week, television viewers across the nation watched the news footage of state troopers violently attacking the marchers in Selma, Alabama. The conflict was no longer in a faraway town; it was right in the middle of most American living rooms. More importantly, it was in President Lyndon Johnson’s living room. The events horrified him, and he immediately began a support network for the marchers. Johnson devoted much time to the issue in the days following the demonstration.

He also began fervently organizing the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The president’s administration attempted to pass such a bill earlier but received little support. The events in Selma shocked the nation into action, and the bill was revived. Johnson presented it to a joint session of Congress on March 15. He stated, “What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes,
but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”

With support from the Johnson administration and coverage across the nation, the leaders planned for another demonstration. They would deliver the voting rights petition to Alabama’s Governor Wallace, a staunch anti-civil rights politician. This time, the organizations appealed to the federal courts for protection during the march. The state claimed that the march would impede traffic, while the protestors argued their right to assemble and petition. Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. presided over the case. Despite great pressure from local officials, he ruled that the protestors’ right to assemble prevailed over the state’s concern of traffic. The march was on, this time with the protection of the federal government.

Two weeks after Bloody Sunday, more than three thousand protestors crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on their way to Montgomery. Troops surrounded the bridge, much as they did two weeks earlier, but this time, they were there to protect the marchers. The next day, as the crisp, cold air filled their lungs and bit their noses, the marchers walked from dawn to dusk. Volunteers prepared camps along the way in which the demonstrators could sleep. On the morning of March 23, they awoke to rain and bitter cold. They tromped through mud and slept in fields. The third day offered clear skies and comfortable weather. As the group approached Montgomery, their numbers began to swell. The four hundred marchers who began that morning were accompanied by an additional four thousand at nightfall.

Five days and fifty miles later, between ten and twenty thousand civil rights demonstrators gathered in Alabama’s capital city. Governor Wallace watched from his window as the mass assembled on the capitol steps. The governor refused to see the petitioners unless the petitioners were from Alabama, and the group was removed from the capital area. After several hours, the governor admitted the petitioners to the building, and his assistant offered to receive the petition.

Dr. King addressed the crowd that evening. He encouraged them, “Today I want to tell the city of Selma, today I want to say to the state of Alabama, today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world, that we are not about to turn around. We are on the move now.” Five months later, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Act allowed federal oversight of elections and guaranteed the end of unreasonable voter registration restrictions.

Bloody Sunday brought national attention to the plight of African Americans in the South, but the Selma-to-Montgomery march demonstrated the determination of those involved in the civil rights movement. They refused to be silenced, beaten, or ignored. They brought their grievances before the government in a petition and assembled to deliver that petition despite attacks. They demanded the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution of the United States. The activists persevered in their efforts and received the rewards. They never gave up, and they crossed the bridge.