

We Shall Overcome! Two Films about Selma

David Wolford

This year marks the 50-year anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, which was signed into law in August 1965. Earlier that year, the city of Selma in Alabama became the center of the storm for African American voting rights. In and around Selma, blacks were denied not only voting rights, but also the rights of free speech, assembly, and due process. Two recent films portray this story. The first, *Selma*, is Ava DuVernay's dramatic 128-minute, PG-13 depiction centered on Martin Luther King's efforts to bring national attention to one of the worst localities for black voting. It is available on a Paramount DVD. The second, *Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot*, is a 40-minute documentary focused on student and teacher involvement in the local movement. Produced by Teaching Tolerance, a division of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, the film is a mix of period footage, reenactment, oral histories, and still art. Both films highlight the Jim Crow system, voter intimidation, civil rights leaders, and the South's bigoted white power structure.

Selma

Selma is a powerful and dramatic work that exposes viewers to the South's system of disfranchisement, and the leadership of a determined Martin Luther King, Jr. (David Oyelowo), in the face of intense, life-threatening pressures, and of competition from other civil rights groups. It vividly recounts events from the civil rights struggle in early 1965, and focuses on the marches in Selma that culminated with the historic march to the state Capitol in Montgomery. The movie is an enlightening and emotional picture, though its portrayal of President Lyndon Johnson is inaccurate.

This is the first large-scale, studio-backed release with King as the central character. Oyelowo, a British actor who worked diligently to master King's speech, cadence, and complicated persona, plays the role of King effectively.¹

King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) came to Selma because fewer than one per-

cent of African Americans there were registered to vote. In one scene, Annie Lee Cooper (played by Oprah Winfrey, also a producer of the film) tries to register to vote at the Selma courthouse. The white registrar asks arbitrary and increasingly impossible civic questions until he assures her failure. The viewer quickly understands the situation in 1960s Alabama.

The harsh sheriff, Jim Clark (Stan Houston), provides an aggressive, bloody response to the civil rights protests that puts this issue on the front pages, and more importantly on television. A pivotal eight-minute scene in the movie recounts the first march on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965. *New York Times* reporter Roy Reed (John Lavelle) narrates as he relays his story from a payphone. After a brief stand-off at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the state troopers attack the defenseless protestors with barbed-wire-wrapped Billy clubs and bull-whips. As Sunday-dressed

African American marchers fall to the ground, Alabama law enforcement brutalizes them before a teargas backdrop. DuVernay intersperses the violence on the bridge with LBJ, Governor Wallace, King, clergy, and the nation looking on, all to a powerful version of Ralph and Martha Bass's "Walk with Me."

For the remainder of the film, the bridge is the literal hurdle in the route to Montgomery and the symbolic hurdle in the quest for voting rights. Serene shots of the bridge's crest remind viewers of the final hump in this century-long struggle. Following Bloody Sunday, both black and white activists join the campaign. King's SCLC files successfully in federal court to enjoin the state from blocking the march. LBJ is leveraged toward supporting the cause. The film ends with the Oscar-winning number "Glory" by Common and John Legend, with historic updates on the main characters after 1965.

The movie addresses the Kings' intense challenges. In one scene Coretta (Carmen Ejogo) reveals how she, Martin, and their children are living under a constant threat of death. The movie shows the federal government warning King about his safety, letting him know that the Ku Klux Klan and others were planning a hit on him. The filmmaker also shows how the FBI of J. Edgar Hoover (Dylan Baker) wiretapped King and harassed him in hopes of weakening his power. His SCLC leadership knew of his extra-marital affairs, and the Church Committee's 1970s probe revealed that

the FBI had sent him an audiotape recording an affair with a letter suggesting he commit suicide.²

The movie also portrays the interaction and competition among different civil rights activists and organizations. Malcolm X arrives soon after King is arrested. Coretta meets with Malcolm X, much to Martin's dismay. "The white man pays me to keep Negroes defenseless.' That's what [Malcolm X] says about me, Coretta," King says to his wife through the bars of a Dallas County, Alabama, jail cell. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had been organizing in Selma for two years, had started to differ in philosophy and approach from King, as it moved toward a less patient and more militant stance. As the drama builds toward the first march, the film portrays SNCC activist James Forman (Trai Byers) and SNCC chairman John Lewis (Stephan James), a leader of the march, in a heated exchange about whether to join it.

While *Selma* offers a powerful portrayal of the conflict and King's leadership, it distorts Johnson's role, views, and relationship to King. At the time of *Selma's* release, LBJ Library director and biographer Mark Updegrave and Johnson's domestic policy advisor Joseph Califano both criticized the movie. Author Diane McWhorter and many historians joined the chorus, collectively saying that it "flies in the face of history," "falsely portrays President Lyndon B. Johnson," and is "the opposite of the truth."³ Actor Tom Wilkinson, who has played statesmen from Ben Franklin to Secretary of State James Baker, captures the Johnson character and his Texas-inspired political skills, but the script's dialogue and several confrontational scenes suggest the president flatly opposed federal voting legislation and King—both which are untrue. Granted, the president was not on the same timetable as King, who represented a disenfranchised constituency that had waited long enough. Johnson was a leg-



Young people demonstrate for African American voting rights at the courthouse in Selma, Alabama, Feb. 5, 1965. More than 400 protesters were arrested. (AP Photo/Bill Hudson)



This scene from *Selma* depicts marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, the site of "Bloody Sunday," when white police beat voting rights demonstrators. (Courtesy of Paramount Pictures)

islative machine who understood timing and strategy. He was already working on substance and strategy for such a bill when DuVernay has him delaying, nearly opposing it. His January 4, 1965, State of the Union message proposed to "eliminate every remaining obstacle to the right and opportunity to vote," and Johnson aide Nicholas Katzenbach had begun drafting the legislation.⁴

In the movie, the president opposes any SCLC action in Selma and shouts at King when he learns of the planned march to Montgomery. However, a taped January 15, 1965, conversation reveals King and Johnson discussing the political benefit of exposing the extreme cases of voter discrimination to persuade the country to favor such a federal measure. "If you can find

the worst condition...that'll help us in what we're going to shove through in the end." Though participants disagree on what influence LBJ had on creating the Selma spectacle, it is hard to realistically envision DuVernay's combative White House exchange. Johnson's relationship with King "was not very tense at all," declares King aide Andrew Young. "He and Martin never had that kind of confrontation."⁵

For teachers considering *Selma* for the classroom, it contains violence, the F-word, N-word, and additional adult language. Teachers can use an array of online sites that offer primary sources and background information on King, Johnson, and the film's events. For example, the *New York Times* historical database, available at many high schools and local libraries, allows students to look up historic articles in PDF format with date-specific advanced searches. The King Center's digital archive is extremely useful in hunting down King's letters, speeches, and other primary sources.⁶ The LBJ Library has a plethora of resources to learn more about the president's involvement in the passage of civil rights legislation.⁷

Consider showing the film and having students record the sequence of events. Then have them produce a date-specific timeline to include information beyond that presented in the film. Another useful source is Coretta Scott King's recollection of her Selma meeting with Malcolm X, which is available online in the *Eyes on the Prize* interviews.⁸ Several other civil rights leaders not yet mentioned are shown or mentioned in the film—Ralph Abernathy, James Bevel, and Bayard Rustin. Students could produce short biographies of these supporting real-life actors.

Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot

The documentary *Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot* essentially follows the same story as the above feature. An enlightening version of the struggle, it has been developed with the student-learner in

mind, in a black and white video with a mix of narration, news reels, and some re-enactments. Selma's student leaders and teachers are the main characters. Narrator Octavia Spencer (*The Help*) explains events and controversies, while lesser-known young actors read the oral history recollections of Selma's students. The film contains several instances of violence—vivid footage of street encounters and a few deaths. Like Teaching Tolerance's other films, this one-class period video shows a triumphant story of how injustice can be righted, comes with a comprehensive Viewer's Guide discussed below, and is free to educators. It is "[the] story of a courageous group of Alabama students and teachers who, along with other activists, fought a nonviolent battle to win voting rights for African Americans in the South."⁹ Producer Bill Brummel's portfolio includes episodes from the A&E Biography series to documentaries covering serious contemporary issues. Richard Cohen, the Southern Poverty Law Center's director, is co-writer. The documentary was developed for students from grades 6 through 12.

In selecting a documentary for a social studies class, the teacher has to consider to what degree students will be drawn into the production. Documentaries seem to fall into two categories: educational and captivating. The prior type is informative and produced in the classic documentary style, with narration, talking heads, still shots, and raw footage—think PBS for the last generation or so. Today, we see more innovative, eye-catching, and edgy documentaries that draw the viewer into the story. *Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot* straddles these two models, with characteristics that students will accept and find interesting.

Some historical scenes are shown with still artwork, graphic novel-like depictions to recount some of the violent scenes or those where no footage was available. For example, when one student recalls how her African American teacher could not exactly endorse stu-

dents skipping school to publicly protest, he turned his back on the class, thus allowing students to leave and join the protest without witnessing their departure. Another illustration depicts the violent state trooper attack on Jimmie Lee Jackson that resulted in his death.

"We did this to solve a problem," says Teaching Tolerance Director Maureen Costello. "There was no photographic or filmic record of the scenes the young people were describing. Our director, Bill Brummel, came up with the idea, and we turned to Nate Powell because, as the illustrator of John Lewis's *The March*, he knew the story and had a style we really liked."¹⁰

The soundtrack for *Bridge to the Ballot* is upbeat and powerful. Modern versions of classic Negro spirituals accompany the story and add lift to the script. These start early in the film after a somber introduction emphasizing the Birmingham church bombing. Artists include Mavis Staples and the Blind Boys of Alabama.

Bridge to the Ballot credits the lesser-known students and teachers in Selma as well as the early and initial efforts of SNCC. The voting rights effort there was somewhat organic, in that the Dallas County Voters League had been working toward this goal for years. Additionally, SNCC leader Bernard Lafayette (noticeably absent or unmentioned in *Selma*), arrived in 1963 to organize voter registration drives. Martin Luther King, Jr., enters this film about 12 minutes in, and is a main character, but does not overshadow the film's emphasis on the local effort. Notably, this script explains that when King presses the president to pass a federal voting rights law, "Johnson, though supportive, says the time is not right."

Teaching Tolerance's film exposes the intense bigotry of local civic leaders. Here you get the real Jim Clark, who is a violent, loose cannon, hell-bent on maintaining the Jim Crow system. As the press converged on the conflict, the sheriff provided TV film crews with

intense confrontation. We see him at an early press conference smiling and candidly stating, “I’m a segregationist... if my ancestors had not been segregationists, I might be a mulatto, and I’m proud to be a white man.” He faces off with local African Americans, prods them with his Billy club, manhandles a leading black woman, and punches a reporter. When Clark is admitted to a hospital after a heart attack, the contrast between his ruthless approach and the peaceful, non-violent activists is evident as they publicly wish him well. Clark’s colleague Mayor Joseph Smitherman, absent in *Selma*, appears at a press conference to casually and brazenly refer to “Martin Luther Coon,” before he smirks and corrects himself as if he misspoke.

Brummel and Cohen cram in relevant statistics and emphasize several primary sources. Both the narrator’s and King’s words offer some perspective on the dire situation. “In the early 60s, 15,000 black adults live in Selma; only 130 are registered to vote,” the narrator explains. When King and others are arrested, he proclaims in a letter to the *New York Times* showcased on the screen, “There are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls.” The voiceover recollections of local participants far outweigh those of the narrator, and several unique lines come from printed sources from the era, such as newspaper headlines. Perhaps the most telling is a sign in the courthouse above the registrar’s desk explaining how the names of anyone registering to vote will appear in the newspaper for two weeks. This is to inform non-state actors, from employers to Klansmen, whom to intimidate or harm.

The 58-page Viewer’s Guide includes some advance readings for the teacher, reproducible handouts, a defined cast of characters, a five-page timeline, lesson plans, a project to better understand current voting laws and turnout, answer keys, and several other teaching aids. Perhaps the two most useful items are

the background readings on voting rights circa 1965 and film discussion questions. Depending on the age and student reading level, the teacher background readings could also serve as student handouts. Film questions seem to be the most essential and most overlooked complement to films in social studies classes. Whether a teacher asks these aloud after showing a segment or students answer these individually on paper while the film is rolling, there’s probably no better way to assure student engagement. The questions in the Guide are split between a page break, but are ordered by track and clearly labeled. These too could be reproduced or copied into your preferred electronic or paper format.

Teaching about race is a delicate issue, and many teachers find it uncomfortable. “Many teachers believe that ignoring race—adopting a colorblind stance—is the best way to overcome its negative power,” Teaching Tolerance claims. The kit, however, also states to do so is to “deprive students of the opportunity to understand much of American history.” Among its suggestions is a list to set clear guidelines for discussion.

Conclusion

Of the two films, *Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot* is the more practical for conventional classroom purposes. It is compressed into a shorter run time and uses real footage and primary sources. It is historically accurate and requires few disclaimers. It lacks foul language or suggestive scenes, and is certainly more conducive to a junior high class, or those in which the teacher wants to play it safe. Although the docudrama, *Selma*, is historically inaccurate in its portrayal of Johnson, it will captivate audiences, even if shown in segments. It has powerful scenes, including some with minimal dialogue that are very thought-provoking. It also enables classes to ponder complex questions about disfranchisement, the divisions within the civil rights movement, and the historical role of King. ●

Notes

1. One reason for the lack of a notable Martin Luther King feature film is that King’s speeches are protected by copyright. King first took legal action after he discovered a record company selling recordings of his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech. Since his death, his estate has worked diligently to enforce the copyright, which enables it to maximize revenues and approve the context in which King’s speeches are used. The estate has licensed film rights to Steven Spielberg’s DreamWorks and Warner Bros for a film to be produced by Spielberg. DuVernay, who did not make an agreement with the estate, captures King well, but not with a verbatim transcript. See Jonathan Band, “Can You Copyright a Dream? How the Martin Luther King Estate Controls the National Hero’s Image,” *Politico*, January 12, 2015. Accessible online at www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/selma-martin-luther-king-can-you-copyright-a-dream-114187.
2. Beverly Gage, “What an Uncensored Letter to MLK Reveals,” *New York Times Magazine* (November 11, 2014).
3. Mark K. Updegrave, “What Selma Gets Wrong,” *Politico Magazine* (December 22, 2014); Joseph Califano, “The Movie *Selma* has a Glaring Flaw,” *Washington Post* (December 26, 2014); Jennifer Schuessler, “Film Casts Johnson as Villain,” *New York Times* (December 31, 2014): A-1. A good summary of historians’ and participants’ criticism can be found in Richard Cohen, “*Selma* Distorts the Truth About LBJ,” *Washington Post* (January 5, 2015).
4. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and his Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 212–218; President Johnson’s State of the Union Address, January 4, 1965. For more on Johnson and Voting Rights Act, consult Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Passages to Power* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 569–70; C-SPAN, “Historians Presidential Leadership Survey” (Washington, D.C.: CSPAN, 2009), www.cspan.org.
5. Updegrave; Cohen.
6. See www.thekingcenter.org/archive.
7. See www.lbjlibrary.org/.
8. See the Eyes on the Prize Interviews, Washington University, <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eop/>.
9. Teaching Tolerance, *Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot: Viewer’s Guide Grades 6–12*, Southern Poverty Law Center: Montgomery, Alabama, 2015.
10. Maureen Costello, Director of Teaching Tolerance, in an e-mail interview with the author. August 25, 2015.

DAVID WOLFFORD teaches government and politics at Mariemont High School in Cincinnati. He is author of *United States Government and Politics: Preparing for the Advanced Placement Examination (AMSCO/Perfection Learning)*. His website is www.usgopo.com.