

A Letter from a Selma, Alabama, Jail” Martin Luther King, Jr.

A major part of King’s and the SCLC’s political strategy for the Selma protest campaign involved drawing national news media attention to the political plight of Selma’s largely disenfranchised black citizens. On February 1, 1965, King himself was purposefully arrested and jailed as part of the SCLC’s strategy for drawing national attention to the Selma situation. Even before he was incarcerated, the SCLC had prepared a fund-solicitation advertisement for publication in The New York Times that was designed to remind readers of King’s already famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” This letter is part of the advertisement, which appeared in The New York Times on February 5, the same day King emerged from jail. February 1, 1965.

The Letter

Dear Friends: When the King of Norway participated in awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to me he surely did not think that in less than sixty days I would be in jail. He, and almost all world opinion will be shocked because they are little aware of the unfinished business in the South.

By jailing hundreds of Negroes, the city of Selma, Alabama, has revealed the persisting ugliness of segregation to the nation and the world. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed many decent Americans were lulled into complacency because they thought the day of difficult struggle was over.

Why are we in jail? Have you ever been required to answer 100 questions on government, some abstruse even to a political scientist specialist, merely to vote? Have you ever stood in line with over a hundred others and after waiting an entire day seen less than ten given the qualifying test?

THIS IS SELMA, ALABAMA. THERE ARE MORE NEGROES IN JAIL WITH ME THAN THERE ARE ON THE VOTING ROLLS.

But apart from voting rights, merely to be a person in Selma is not easy. When reporters asked Sheriff Clark if a woman defendant was married, he replied, “She’s a nigger woman and she hasn’t got a Miss or a Mrs. in front of her name.”

This is the U.S.A. in 1965. We are in jail simply because we cannot tolerate these conditions for ourselves or our nation.

We need the help of all decent Americans. Our organization, SCLC, is not only working in Selma, Ala., but in dozens of other Southern communities. Our self-help projects operate in South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and other states. Our people are eager to work, to sacrifice, to be jailed--but their income, normally meager, is cut off in these crises. Your help can make the difference. Your help can be a message of unity which the thickest jail walls cannot muffle. With warmest good wishes from all of us.

Sincerely,
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.