

## Meet The Press: Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma March

<https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=48756>



### General Information

<b>Source:</b>	Meet the Press	<b>Resource Type:</b>	Video News Report
<b>Creator:</b>	Ned Brooks	<b>Copyright:</b>	NBCUniversal Media, LLC.
<b>Event Date:</b>	1965	<b>Copyright Date:</b>	1965
<b>Air/Publish Date:</b>	03/28/1965	<b>Clip Length</b>	00:23:57

### Description

Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks on Meet The Press one week after leading his historic five-day march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. King says that the demonstration was necessary not just to help push the Voting Rights Bill through, but to draw attention to the humiliating conditions in Alabama such as police brutality and racially-motivated murder.

### Keywords

Martin Luther King, Jr., Meet The Press, Selma, March, Montgomery, Alabama, Civil Rights, Poll, Tax

### Citation

#### MLA

"Meet The Press: Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma March." Ned Brooks, correspondent. *Meet the*

## APA

Brooks, N. (Reporter). 1965, March 28. Meet The Press: Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma March. [Television series episode]. *Meet the Press*. Retrieved from <https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=48756>

## CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

"Meet The Press: Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma March" Meet the Press, New York, NY: NBC Universal, 03/28/1965. Accessed Sat Nov 3 2018 from NBC Learn: <https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=48756>

## Transcript

Meet The Press: Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma March

MR. NED BROOKS, Moderator:

This is Ned Brooks, inviting you to MEET THE PRESS. Our guest today on MEET THE PRESS is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. King, who is the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He is in San Francisco, where he delivered a sermon this morning for Bishop Pike at the Grace Cathedral. Our panel of reporters is in Washington, D.C., and we will have the question now from Lawrence E. Spivak, permanent member of the MEET THE PRESS panel.

MR. SPIVAK: Dr. King, former President Truman was quoted by the A.P. as saying that the march from Selma--and this was his word--was "silly" and can't accomplish "a darn thing" except "to attract attention." There have been two murders, many beatings and a federal expenditure for troops of about \$300,000. Would you say that what the march accomplished was worth that cost?

DR. KING: Well, first, I would say that the march was not silly at all. I would think that the march did more to dramatize the indignities and the injustices that Negro people continue to face in the State of Alabama and many other sections of the South more than anything else. I think it was the most powerful and dramatic civil rights protest that has ever taken place in the South, and I think it well justified the cost that we put in it. Of course, we are sorry that a death occurred immediately after the march, and I am sure that all people of goodwill are outraged and in deep sorrow as a result of the death of Mrs. Liuzzo, but after all, we know in a non-violent movement that there are these possibilities, and we go on with the faith that unmerited suffering is redemptive.

MR. SPIVAK: Dr. King, I think the demonstration was largely to get your voting rights bill through--was it necessary for that purpose? Aren't you going to get that bill--wouldn't you have gotten it whether or not you marched?

DR. KING: Well, the demonstration was certainly for the voting rights bill. However, we must recognize that there are other very tragic conditions existing in the State of Alabama which are as humiliating, and

degrading and as unjust as the denial of the right to vote, namely, police brutality. We marched on the capital of Alabama to protest the long night of brutality, the constant murders that continue to take place in that state, for after all, under the administration of Governor Wallace there have been ten persons actually killed and murdered, and nothing has been done about it. There have been untold bombings of homes and churches. Again nothing has been done about this on the whole. We were marching there to protest these brutalities, these murders and all of the things that go along with them, as much as to gain the right to vote, so, it was a twofold march, aimed at trying to rectify the conditions of Alabama and expose the evils that are deeply engulfed in that state.

MR. SPIVAK: Dr. King, you had your great demonstration, and [former] Governor LeRoy Collins, head of the Community Relations Service, hoped there would be a "respite" from demonstrations in Alabama in order to give the state an opportunity to solve some of the problems, Do you think there should be a respite in Alabama now?

DR. KING: Well, here again with the murder of Mrs. Luizzo on the night after the march, I can't see how there can be a respite. This is a state that continues to deal with human life as if it is nothing. This is a state that continues to make murder a sort of nice pastime and gives respectability to resistance and defiance of the law. This is a state that continues to do all of the things that are contrary to our democratic creed, at least the political power structure of the state. In the light of this, it seems to me that it will be necessary to continue to demonstrate until these conditions are removed. We don't believe in demonstrating for demonstration's sake. We don't have demonstration fever, but we do feel that as long as the conditions of injustice and man's inhumanity to man infiltrate that state, it will be necessary to demonstrate in order to bring these issues to the surface and lay them squarely before the conscience of the nation.

MR. SPIVAK: Then as I understand it, Dr. King, you see an end to demonstrations at the present, either in Alabama or other sections of the country.

DR. KING: No, I don't. I don't believe in the indiscriminate use of demonstrations, but I think as long as we have the problems with us, we are going to have demonstrations, and I think in the immediate, we must face the fact that Alabama has not come to terms with its conscience. Too many people of goodwill and I do feel that there are many white people of goodwill and very decent white people in Alabama, but they have abdicated responsibility to the Governor and to the Sheriff Clark's and to the Bull Connor's and for this reason we feel that we have a moral obligation keep these issues before the public, before the American conscience before the mainstream of our nation, so that somebody will do something about it. And demonstrations have proved to be the best way to do this.

MR. SPIVAK: Dr. King, would you list for us the barriers remaining which you believe must be destroyed before you and your followers will stop these demonstrations and give the South the chance to catch up?

DR. KING: Yes. First, there must be agreement on the part of the political power structure of the South to guarantee the unhampered right to vote. This must be done with zeal, and it must be done with good faith. And this means removing every obstacle including the poll tax. Now there are some states in the hard core South and other sections of the South that still have the poll tax in state elections, and we feel that this

must be removed. Secondly, we confront the problem of brutality from sheriffs and from other police forces, from other law enforcement agents, and we feel that before demonstrations can cease, something must be done to end this kind of unnecessary abuse of police power and what we see as outright police brutality.

Third, I would like to say that if our demonstrations are to stop, there must be some equality in terms of grappling with the problem of poverty. We have a poverty bill which has been nobly initiated by the president of our nation and the Congress, but in the South so often Negroes are denied the opportunity to be a part of these programs, they are denied the possibility, the opportunity to be a part of the administration of them, and we feel that if demonstrations are to stop Negroes must be brought into the very central structure of the whole poverty program, and then along with that, I think that is a great necessity to get every local governmental agency to go on record for being in line with law and order. All of these things are necessary before we can call a halt to demonstrations.

NED BROOKS: We'll be back with MEET THE PRESS and more questions from our guest, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. First, this message.

Announcer: Now, back to MEET THE PRESS. Please remember, questions from our panel do not necessarily reflect their own point of view. Here's your moderator, Ned Brooks.

NED BROOKS: Resuming our interview, our guest today on MEET THE PRESS is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who is in San Francisco. On our panel of reporters in Washington, D.C. you've just met Lawrence Spivak. Our other reporters today are Tom Wicker of the New York Times, James J. Kilpatrick of the Richmond News Leader, and John Chancellor of NBC News. We'll continue the questions now with Mr. Wicker.

MR. WICKER: Dr. King, you said a moment ago that Alabama was a state that gives respectability to the resistance and defiance of the law, and you listed an observance of the law by local agencies in the South as one of the cardinal aims that you were seeking. Yet on March 9, you led the second march on Montgomery in violation of a federal injunction not to march. You said that order was unjust and John Lewis, one of your colleagues, said that "Negroes had a constitutional right to march, injunction or no injunction." Now, was that in keeping with the spirit of non-violence and the restraint that has always characterized your movement, and could you explain your reasoning in defying the court order that day?

DR. KING: Well, let me say two things to that, Mr. Wicker. First I did not consider myself defying the court order that particular day. I consulted with my attorneys before the march, and they stated that they felt that it was an invalid order and that it would not be—that I would not be in contempt of court of violating the court order, if I led the march to the point of having a moral confrontation with the state troopers at the point where the people were brutalized on Sunday, so I still don't consider that breaking a court order or breaking what I consider an unjust law.

On the other hand, I must be honest enough to say that I do feel that there are two types of laws. One is a just law and one is an unjust law. I think we all have moral obligations to obey such laws. On the other hand, I think we have moral obligations to disobey unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. I think that the distinction here is that when one breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, he must do it openly, he must do it cheerfully he must do

it lovingly, he must do it civilly, not uncivilly, and he must do it with a willingness to accept the penalty. And any man who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail in order to arouse the conscience of the community on the injustice of the law is at that moment expressing the very highest respect for law.

MR. WICKER: I can sympathize with a good deal of that, but it seems to me that you get into a very difficult point, here, at which one man's conscience is set, in fact, above the conscience of society, which has invoked the law. How are we to enforce law when a doctrine is preached that one man's conscience may tell him that the law is unjust, when other men's consciences don't tell them that?

DR. KING: I think you enforce it, and I think you deal with it by not allowing anarchy to develop. I do not believe in defying the law, as many of the segregationists do, I do not believe in evading the law as many of the segregationists do. The fact is that most of the segregationists and racists that I see are not willing to suffer enough for their beliefs in segregation, and they are not willing to go to jail. I think the chief norm for guiding the situation is the willingness to accept the penalty, and I don't think any society can call an individual irresponsible who breaks a law and willingly accepts the penalty if conscience tells him that that law is unjust, I think that this is a long tradition in our society, it is a long tradition in Biblical history; Meshach and Abednego broke an unjust law and they did it because they had to be true to a higher moral law. The early Christians practiced civil disobedience in a superb manner. Academic freedom would not be a reality today if it had not been for Socrates and if it had not been for Socrates' willingness to practice civil disobedience. And I would say that our own history there is nothing that expresses massive civil disobedience any more than the Boston Tea Party, and yet we give this to our young people and our students as a part of the great tradition of our nation. So I think we are in good company when we break unjust laws, and I think those who are willing to do it and accept the penalty are those who are part of the saving of the nation.

MR. KILPATRICK: In drawing your distinctions between just laws and unjust laws, Dr. King, do you distinguish between statutory laws such as a local ordinance requiring segregation, and the law that is promulgated by a court in the form of an injunction?

DR. KING: Yes, I do distinguish between these. It does depend, however, Mr. Kilpatrick, on the court that renders the decision, and it does depend on the situation. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that many of the state courts actually misuse and abuse the judicial process. And I would make a distinction here between the decision that comes from a state court that is committed to preserving segregation and a federal court that is committed to bringing the basic and underlying truths of the Constitution into being. One distinguished jurist has said, "Justice too long delayed is justice denied," and we have seen courts that have delayed justice and in the process denied justice. So I would make a distinction, here, but I think the situation is one that has to be taken under consideration.

MR. KILPATRICK: In your book you describe the opinion of the Supreme Court in the school segregation cases as "just law" if you will recall. Suppose the Supreme Court were to decide in some particular case against the interests of the demonstrators, as the court very nearly decided in January in the Cox case. Would you then regard such an opinion of the Supreme Court as unjust law to be disobeyed?

DR. KING: Well that is a rather iffy question, Mr. Kilpatrick. I would have to face it when I come to it or

when we face that in our society. I happen to feel that the Supreme Court has made a decision that it will never reverse. On the other hand, I might say that one has to understand what I mean by a just law. I think law is just which squares with the moral law, and I think a law is unjust which is out of harmony with the moral laws of the universe.

MR. KILPATRICK: Then the Supreme Court in the past has been unjust, has it not, then, in those cases in our history where it upheld segregation?

MR. KING: I think there are laws that have come into being that I considered unjust and, I think, the moral conscience of the nation considered unjust. This does not mean the persons who rendered the decision were unjust people or they were evil people. It simply meant that at that particular time they did not have the foresight to see what, let us say, back in 1896 Justice Harlan saw. They differed among themselves. While most of the jurists rendered a decision making "separate but equal" the law of the land, there was Justice Harlan who said at that time the Constitution is color-blind and rendered a dissenting opinion, which has now become the majority opinion of our country.

JOHN CHANCELLOR: Dr. King, we have reports from Atlanta which indicate that you will recommend to the nation's labor unions a nationwide work stoppage to keep the plight of Alabama Negroes before the country. Now can you give us some details on this plan?

DR. KING: Yes, Mr. Chancellor. I think the conditions in Alabama have degenerated to such a low level of social disruption and such a low level of man's inhumanity to man, that the whole conscience of the nation must rise up and engage in some kind of creative, firm action program that will bring the business leaders and the decent people of Alabama to the point of bringing pressure to bear on Governor Wallace and other officials who are responsible for this reign of terror.

I left Alabama last week after the march feeling that we had made a great triumph, and we certainly did in the march, and that maybe we would see a brighter day all over the State of Alabama. But the fact is, Governor Wallace refused to see those who had a petition to present, and not long after that, Mrs. Luizzo was brutally shot down in an automobile on Highway 80. This is just one other example of something that we have faced in the State of Alabama for a number of years. Consequently, I think that it is necessary for the nation to rise up and engage in a massive economic withdrawal program on the State of Alabama. To put it another way, I think the time has come for all people of goodwill to join in an economic boycott of Alabama products. So I am, in a few days, planning to call on the trade unions to refuse to transport or use Alabama products. I hope to call on all Americans to refuse to buy Alabama products, and I hope to call on the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States to withdraw all federal funds that it has on deposit in Alabama banks, and finally, I think it is necessary to call on all federal agencies, in line with the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, to withdraw support from a society that has refused to protect life and the right to vote.

MR. SPIVAK: Dr. King, the columnists Evans and Novak recently charged that the moderate Negro leaders, including you, have feared to point out the degree of communist infiltration in the civil rights movement. Have communists infiltrated the movement?

DR. KING: I certainly don't think so, Mr. Spivak, and I would like to vigorously deny that. I have no evidence for such an accusation. And I might say that in our bylaws, certainly in SCLC and NAACP, and CORE, and SNCC and the Urban League and in all the civil rights organizations we make it clear that

communists cannot be in official positions and cannot be in the membership.” Beyond this, I think I could say that the philosophical undergirdings of our movement would make communism impossible and would have Communists on alien territory. For our movement has been based and is still based on a philosophy of non-violence.

MR. SPIVAK: Dr. King, the A.P. reported the other day that a picture of you taken in 1957 at a Tennessee inter-racial school is being plastered all over Alabama billboards with the caption "Martin Luther King at a communist training school" Will you tell us whether that was a Communist training school and what you were doing there?

DR. KING: Well, number one I don't think it was a communist training school. In fact, I know it wasn't. The Highlander Folk School, which was referred to in that particular article, was a school that pioneered in bringing Negroes and whites together at a time when it was very unpopular, to train them for leadership all over the South, and I think they did an able job in doing it. This school was supported by some of the great Americans such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Reinhold Niebuhr, Harry Golden, and many others that I could name, Secondly, the fact is that I never attended the school, as far as training goes. I was there about one hour back in 1957 or '8. I went to deliver an address for the 25th Anniversary of the Highlander Folk School. I got there about 15 minutes before I was to speak. I spoke about 45 minutes, and then I left immediately after my speech. I think that is a pretty short period to get any training.

MR. WICKER: Dr. King, your movement has been distinguished for its non-violent approach, but your people are under great pressures in many cases. How deeply do you fear the eruption of Negro violence in pursuit of Negro rights?

DR. KING: I feel that we will continue to have a nonviolent movement and we will continue to find the vast majority Of Negroes committed to non-violence, at least as the best tactical approach and from a pragmatic point of view, is the best strategy in dealing with the problem of racial injustice. Realism impels me to admit, however, that when there is justice and the pursuit of justice violence disappears, and where there is injustice and frustrations, the potentialities for violence are greater, and I would like to strongly stress the point that the more we can achieve victories through non-violence, the more it will be possible to keep the non-violent discipline at the center of the movement. But the more we find individuals facing conditions of frustration conditions of disappointment and seething despair as a result of the slow pace of things and the failure to change conditions, the more it will be possible for the apostles of violence to interfere.

MR: BROOKS: I am sorry but I see time our time is up. Thank you very much, Dr. King, for being with us on MEET THE PRESS.