Liberty and Equality: Persevering from Selma to Montgomery

Abernathy Children on front line leading the SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH for the RIGHT TO VOTE, 1965

READINGS, ACTIVITIES, AND HANDOUTS
Civil Rights Reading

The Civil Rights Movement sought to win the American promise of liberty and equality during twentieth-century America. From the early struggles of the 1940s to the crowning successes of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts that changed the legal status of African-Americans in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement firmly grounded its appeals for liberty and equality in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Rather than rejecting an America that discriminated against a particular race, the movement fought for America to fulfill its own universal promise that “all men are created equal.” It worked for American principles within American institutions rather than against them.

African-Americans endured racial prejudice in World War II and fought in segregated combat units. It was particularly hard to accept because the war was fought against the racist Nazis who were attempting to eradicate the Jews grounded in racially-based totalitarianism. For black soldiers, the stark contradiction with American wartime ideals was as repulsive as their daily condition of fighting separately. Many black units—most famously the Tuskegee Airmen—fought just as courageously as their white counterparts. Fighting for the “Double V” for victory over totalitarianism and racism, returning black veterans were not keen on returning to the Jim Crow South with legal (de jure) segregation nor to a North with informal (de facto) segregation.

In the postwar years, civil rights leaders prepared a dual strategy of attacking all discrimination throughout American society. On the national level, African-Americans sought to overturn segregation with legal challenges up to the Supreme Court, pressuring presidents to enforce equality, and lobbying Congress for changes in the law of the land. On the local level, marches were held to demonstrate the fundamental immorality and violence of segregation and to change local laws.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was established by W.E.B. DuBois and other black and white, male and female reformers in 1909 to struggle for civil rights, helped lead the legal battle in the courts. The NAACP legal team, led by Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first black justice on the Supreme Court, scored the first major success of the Civil Rights Movement with Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) decision that overturned Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), which had set the precedent for legalizing segregation. New Chief Justice Earl Warren persuaded his fellow justices to issue a unanimous 9-0 decision for the moral force to overcome expected white Southern resistance. The outcome was a landmark decision for black equality that initiated the Civil Rights Movement.

The good outcome led many to overlook the questionable legal reasoning employed in the decision. The Supreme Court shockingly admitted white and black schools were equal despite evidence to the contrary. Moreover, the Court stated that the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment had “inconclusive” origins related to segregated schools and doubted whether it could be applied to this case. Instead, the Court turned to social science as the basis
for its decision. It referred to experiments in which black children played with dolls of different races. Members of the Court misread the evidence because the results of the studies actually showed that the segregated black children chose to play with black dolls. The Court mistakenly reported that the black children played more with the white dolls and had a “feeling of inferiority.”

The Court settled for declaring the edict that segregated schools were “inherently unequal” based on dubious social science and missed an opportunity for a constitutionally-grounded precedent banning all racial discrimination.


By ignoring Harlan’s understanding of the equality principle in the Constitution and settling for the use of social science, Chief Justice Warren diminished the constitutional force of the decision, which, if read narrowly, did not exactly overturn *Plessy*.

Even with the unanimous decision that Chief Justice Warren sought, the case encountered opposition, and it took a decade of direct action by African-Americans to win equality. In 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott initiated a decade of local demonstrations against segregation in the South. In December 1955, Rosa Parks courageously refused to give up her bus seat to a white man because she was tired of being treated like a second-class citizen. African-Americans applied economic pressure for more than one year to force concessions for desegregation at the local level. A charismatic young Baptist minister, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., provided vision and leadership for the emerging movement at Montgomery.

As a result of the *Brown* decision, many white politicians and ordinary citizens engaged in what they called “massive resistance” to oppose desegregation. In 1957, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to use the state National Guard to protect black children at Little Rock High School. President Dwight Eisenhower sent in troops from the 101st Airborne Division to compel local desegregation and protect the nine black students while federalizing the Arkansas National Guard to block Faubus. The Little Rock Nine attended school under the watchful eye of federal troops. The principles of equality and constitutional federalism came into conflict during this incident because the national government used the military to impose integration at the local level.

In the early 1960s, African-Americans continued to press for equality at the local and national levels. In 1960, black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina started a wave of “sit-ins” in which they took seats reserved for whites at segregated lunch counters. The sit-ins led to applying the economic pressure of a boycott that successfully desegregated the local lunch counters.

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. used his moral vision and rhetoric to achieve the greatest successes of the movement for black equality and the end of segregation. King helped to organize marches in Birmingham, Alabama, where police dogs and fire hoses were turned on the Birmingham marchers and caused shock and outrage across the nation when the violence was televised. King and hundreds of others were arrested for demonstrating without a permit.
From his jail cell, King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” defending the civil rights demonstrations by quoting the great Christian authority St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.” Employing the principles of America’s Founders, King explained that a just law is a “man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God.” King posited that just laws uplift the human person while unjust laws “distort the soul” (Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963).

He argued that just laws are rooted in human equality, while unjust laws give a false sense of superiority and inferiority. Moreover, segregation laws had been inflicted upon a minority who had no say in making the laws and thereby passed without consent, violating American principles of republican self-government.

King closed the letter by asserting that the Civil Rights Movement was “standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” (Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963).

On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy responded and addressed the nation on television. “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution,” he told the nation. For Kennedy, the question was “whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities” (John F. Kennedy, “Civil Rights Address,” June 11, 1963). 

Kennedy was mindful of the historical significance of the year when he appealed to Lincoln’s Proclamation freeing the slaves: “One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free...And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free” (John F. Kennedy, “Civil Rights Address,” June 11, 1963).

On August 28, 1963, the greatest event of the Civil Rights Movement occurred with the March on Washington. More than 250,000 blacks and whites, young and old, clergy and laity, descended upon the capital in support of the proposed civil rights bill. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King evoked great documents of freedom when he said “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation” (Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have A Dream,” August 28, 1963). The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the Confederate States one hundred years before on January 1, 1863. Simultaneously, he also subtly referred to the other great document of 1863, Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” which was inscribed in the wall of the memorial, and begins, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” November 19, 1863).

King offered high praise for the “architects of our republic” who wrote the “magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.” King began his evocative peroration “I Have a Dream” by declaring that his dream is “deeply rooted in the American dream.” “One day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are
created equal’” (Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have A Dream,” August 28, 1963).

African-Americans won the fruits of their decades of struggle for civil rights when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Act legally ended segregation in all public facilities. The act had to overcome a Southern filibuster in the Senate and the fears of conservatives in both parties that it was an unconstitutional intrusion of the federal government upon the rights of the states and into local affairs and private businesses.

Although the Fifteenth Amendment had been ratified a hundred years before, African Americans still voted at low rates, especially in the Deep South. A number of devices—literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses that prevented descendants of slaves from voting—severely curtailed black suffrage. Violence and intimidation were the main vehicles of preventing African-Americans from voting in the mid-1960s.

In March 1965, Martin Luther King and other leaders organized marches in Selma, Alabama, for voting rights. After enduring beatings by club-wielding mounted police officers on “Bloody Sunday,” the marchers eventually set out again several days later and reached Montgomery under the watchful eye of federal troops. Congress soon passed the Voting Rights of 1965, banning abridgment of the right to vote on account of race.

Yet in the wake of the great legislative triumphs for social and voting equality the summer of 1965 (and successive summers) witnessed the explosion of racial violence and rioting by black citizens in American cities. Despite gaining rights of equal opportunity African-Americans still lived under obvious economic disparities with whites. The passage of federal laws securing equal opportunity led to rising expectations of immediate equality, which did not happen. Young “Black Power” advocates also began advocating self-reliance as a race, a celebration of African heritage, and a rejection of white society. Forming groups like the Black Panthers, a minority of young African-Americans spoke in passionate terms advocating violence, leading to confrontations with police. Many white Americans were shocked and confused at the urban riots occurring just after legal equality for African-Americans had been achieved.

In the 1970s and 1980s, plans of “affirmative action” were introduced in college admissions and in hiring for public and private jobs that soon became controversial. Intended to remedy the historic wrongs of slavery and segregation, affirmative action policies established preference or quotas for the number of African-Americans (and soon women and other minorities) who would be admitted or hired. Its proponents sought to achieve an equality of outcome in society rather than merely equal opportunity in American society. Some whites complained that this was “reverse discrimination” against whites and introduced lower standards for the benefited groups. The most notable Supreme Court case addressing the issue was the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978) decision, in which racial preferences were upheld.

The Supreme Court essentially agreed with the supporters of affirmative action who argued that “discrimination against members of the white ‘majority’ cannot be suspect if its purpose can be characterized as ‘benign’” (Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, Opinion, 1978)
The Court held in favor of affirmative action that took race into account but not specific quotas requiring a certain percentage of the favored groups.

Certainly racial prejudice against African-Americans continues in America, and racial differences are still hotly debated. Yet the Civil Rights Movement achieved great success more quickly than any other movement in American history. Federal laws worked rapidly to ensure legal equality for African-Americans. While blatant economic discrimination began to ebb, disparities in income and wealth between the races remained. An unparalleled social change in opinion away from racism took place in the minds of most Americans, including Southerners, within a generation. African-Americans have won much greater equality of opportunity and visibility in leadership roles in schools, the media, politics, and workplace. The modern struggle for civil rights—whatever future progress still needs to be accomplished—demonstrated the fulfillment of the promise of America by anchoring itself deeply in America’s Founding principles.
Teaching Tips

Have students read **Handout A: The Declaration and Martin Luther King, Jr.** and answer the critical thinking questions. Students should then discuss with a partner how Martin Luther King, Jr. justified his argument for equality and civil rights for African American using American Founding documents and principles.
Handout A: The Declaration and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Excerpts from The Declaration of Independence, 1776

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Excerpts from Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham, and all over the nation, because the goal of American freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”

Excerpts from the “I Have a Dream Speech”, 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr.

“So we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”
Critical Thinking Questions

1. What documents does Martin Luther King, Jr., refer to several times? Why?

2. What constitutional principles does Martin Luther King, Jr., appeal to many times? Does King think that those constitutional principles apply to all people equally?

3. Does Martin Luther King, Jr., support or reject the American Dream for African-Americans?

4. Why did Native Americans and American women appeal to American Founding documents and constitutional principles when arguing for equality and justice?
Handout A Answer Key

Handout A: The Declaration and Martin Luther King

Document Summary

The Declaration of Independence asserts the universal rights of all humans to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, among others, and defines the purpose of government to protect those rights.

In the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr., ties the rights of African Americans to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and tradition of rights in America. Despite a history of slavery and oppression, King links the destiny of African Americans to the destiny of America.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech, King calls the principles of liberty and equality in the Declaration of Independence a “promissory note.” King argues that although African Americans have not enjoyed those rights during the time of slavery and segregation, they are entitled to those rights, and he is confident that they will someday enjoy them in America.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. King refers to the Declaration of Independence because of its assertion of universal rights for all people. He also refers to the Constitution because it is a framework for a just and free representative government of self-governing citizens.

2. King appeals several times to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, equality, and justice.

3. King argues strongly that African Americans should enjoy natural rights and constitutional liberties, and embrace the American Dream as their own even though America had not lived up to its promise for African Americans for centuries.

4. When arguing for greater rights and participation in American civic life, African Americans, Native Americans, and women all appealed to the universal principles of liberty and equality for all humans and pressed for a constitutional government that protects those rights.
Teaching Tips

Distribute **Handout J: Primary Sources on the Right to Petition and Assemble Peaceably**. As a large-group, read the selections and discuss the related questions at the bottom of the page. Use this exercise to assess students’ background knowledge and understanding of the ideas that will be presented in this lesson.

Distribute **Handout K: Perseverance Quotes**. Allow time for students to read them then instruct them to select one and write a journal response, focusing on their understanding of what it means to act with perseverance and perhaps providing an example of when they either have done so or wish they had done so.

Using **Handout L: Focus Questions**, lead a discussion about perseverance and reach a class consensus about a definition, listing class contributions on the board. Explain to students that although the rights to peaceable assembly and petition are protected by the Bill of Rights, groups of individuals have sometimes found it necessary to persevere in their efforts to secure these rights. The next portion of the lesson will focus on one such example.

Distribute **Handout M: Selma to Montgomery** and **Handout N: Analysis – What Happened Between Selma and Montgomery?** Assign students to groups of three to four allow time for them to read the narrative, then answer the related questions and to complete **Handout N** in writing.

Lead a class discussion about both the limits and the merits of perseverance in the case of the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers and others involved in the civil rights movement. Refer back to the Focus Questions as helpful. Directly explore the line between “perseverance” and “obstinacy”. When is “enough enough” or is there a “never say die” approach if the cause is “just” or “right”? Who determines the value of the cause – the individual or the government?

Have students select (either on their own or from a teacher-provided list), from the periods of history the class has studied thus far, a person or group who has exemplified perseverance. Students will write a piece of historical fiction in the form of a three or four-page diary entry written from the point of view of his/her selected person, or a member of the selected group. The narrative should not only be well-written, but should also be explicitly based on well-researched, historically accurate names, dates, people, and events related to the selected person or group. Provide an additional copy of **Handout N** as a form of scaffolding for this assignment.
Handout J: Primary Sources on the Right to Petition and Assemble Peaceably

**Directions:** Read the following statements about the right to petition (ask) the government and the right to assemble. Answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of paper.

**Selection 1: Magna Carta (1215)**

“... if we, or our justices, or our bailiffs or any one of our officers, shall in anything be at fault towards anyone, or shall have broken any one of the articles of this peace or of this security, and the offense be notified to four barons of the foresaid five and twenty, the said four barons shall repair to us (or our justices, if we are out of the realm) and, laying the transgression before us, petition to have that transgression redressed without delay.”

**Selection 2: The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1791)**

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

**Selection 3: De Jonge v. Oregon (1937)**

“The right of peaceable assembly is a right cognate [equal] to those of free speech and free press and is equally fundamental... It follows from these considerations that, consistently with the Federal Constitution, peaceable assembly for lawful discussion cannot be made a crime. The holding of meetings for peaceable political action cannot be proscribed [prohibited].”

**Critical Thinking Questions**

1. What five rights are protected by the First Amendment?
2. In the excerpt from the Magna Carta, what rights are listed/implied?
3. Paraphrase this statement: “Congress shall make no law ... abridging ... the right of the people peaceably to assemble ...”
4. In the excerpt from De Jonge v. Oregon, what did the Supreme Court decision explain about the right to assemble?
5. Are there any limitations on the types of assembly that people can have? If so, what are they?
6. Paraphrase this statement: “Congress shall make no law ... abridging ... the right of the people ... to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”
7. List some groups that have exercised these rights throughout American history.
Handout K: Perseverance

Directions: Read each of the quotes below. Select one quote and write a journal response focusing on what it means to act with perseverance.

Perseverance is more prevailing than violence; and many things which cannot be overcome when they are together, yield themselves up when taken little by little.

—Plutarch, Greek biographer

Courage and perseverance have a magical talisman, before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish into air.

—John Quincy Adams, 6th President of the United States

Press on: nothing in the world can take the place of perseverance. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

—Calvin Coolidge, 30th President of the United States

Perseverance is a great element of success. If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake up somebody.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, American poet

Just remember, you can do anything you set your mind to, but it takes action, perseverance, and facing your fears.

—Gillian Anderson, American actress

If your determination is fixed, I do not counsel you to despair. Few things are impossible to diligence and skill. Great works are performed not by strength, but perseverance.

—Samuel Johnson, English author

I do not think there is any other quality so essential to success of any kind as the quality of perseverance. It overcomes almost everything, even nature.

—John D. Rockefeller, American philanthropist
Handout L: Focus Questions

**Directions:** Define the term “perseverance,” then answer the questions below.

1. Where have you heard the word “persevere” or “perseverance” before?
2. What is the difference between “persistence” and “perseverance”?
3. Who are some people who have persevered?
4. Look at the various goals pursued. Are some “better” than others?
5. Can dedication to a purpose be bad?
6. In what areas of your life have you persevered?
7. Is there a difference between “obstinacy” and “perseverance”?
8. For what ideals should we persevere?
9. Does a persevering person ever give up?
10. How did the people who participated in the Civil Rights movement persevere?
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, armed 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 urged Congress 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 George 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.
Critical Thinking Questions

1. In what ways did the Selma to Montgomery marchers persevere?

2. Imagine what would have happened if the marchers had not taken the initiative and persevered in their march on Montgomery. How do you think the outcome may have been different, if at all?

3. The marchers faced a number of obstacles as they pursued their goal. Have you ever persevered in the face of overwhelming odds? What was the result? Explain.
Handout N: Analysis – What Happened Between Selma and Montgomery?

Directions: Analyze the events of the Selma to Montgomery March by referring to the narrative Selma to Montgomery: Crossing the Bridge (Handout L) to complete the following information.

1. Who started the movement?

2. When did the action take place?

3. Why did the group assemble, protest, and petition?

4. What was the group’s goal?

5. What types of action did they take?

6. How did the government react to this movement?

7. What was the final outcome of this movement?
Handout J: Primary Sources on the Right to Petition and Assemble Peaceably Answer Key

1. Religion, speech, press, peaceable assembly, and to petition the government for redress of grievances.

2. Right to petition for redress of grievances.

3. The legislative branch will not make laws that diminish the peoples’ right to peacefully gather.

4. The right to peaceably assemble is equal in value to the rights to free speech and freedom of the press, and therefore cannot be made a crime.

5. The protections are for peaceful and lawful gatherings. Accept additional reasonable responses that are based on the texts of these documents as well as of the U.S. Constitution.

6. The legislative branch will not make laws that diminish the peoples’ right to appeal to the government when the people believe the government has harmed them or is depriving them of their rights.

7. Accept reasonable, factually based responses.
Handout L: Focus Questions Answer Key

Student responses will vary; use this as a reference to guide the discussion.

1. Where have you heard the word “persevere” or “perseverance” before?
   E.g., at home, at school, from coaches encouraging students to continue to pursue a goal

2. What is the difference between “persistence” and “perseverance”?
   To persist is to continue to work hard and go forward in spite of interference; to persevere is to continue to work hard and go forward steadfastly, despite discouragement, counterinfluences, and opposition. In general, you may say that perseverance involves sticking to a belief or idea (i.e., being steadfast, or loyal), and persistence is sticking to a course of action.

3. Who are some people who have persevered?
   E.g., athletes who are recovering from an injury; explorers fighting against nature’s forces (Peary, Hillary); scientists discovering a cure (Salk, Curie); historical figures may include: civil rights activists, Revolutionary War patriots (Valley Forge), suffragists, Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln (lost numerous elections before becoming President), and Nelson Mandela

4. Look at the various goals these people pursued. Are some “better” than others?
   Answers will vary—initiate discussion of personal goals versus altruistic or “higher purpose” goals.

5. Can dedication to a purpose be bad?
   Students may identify compulsive behaviors—addictions, self-absorption—or evil actions (e.g., Hitler was dedicated to a specific purpose, but his actions were not laudable).

6. In what areas of your life have you persevered?
   Students will likely emphasize persistence more than perseverance. They may provide answers like: picking myself up when I make a mistake, doing school work, going to my job, getting along with others, maintaining relationships.

7. Is there a difference between “obstinacy” and “perseverance”?
   An obstinate person is stubborn and unwilling to listen to others while one who perseveres usually takes the opinions of others into account. Obstinacy implies a refusal to acknowledge reality; one who perseveres understands reality and continues to work hard.

8. For what ideals should we persevere?
   E.g., justice, faith, equality, hope, tolerance, and integrity

9. Does a persevering person ever give up?
   Answers will vary, but perseverance implies never-ending commitment.

10. How did the people who participated in the Civil Rights movement persevere?
    Those who fought for civil rights for African Americans persevered by continuing to protest discriminatory laws and practices through protests, marches, boycotts, and taking cases to court.
Handouts M–N Answer Keys

Handout M: Selma to Montgomery–Crossing the Bridge Answer Key

1. The Selma to Montgomery marchers moved steadfastly forward toward their goal in spite of heavy opposition and even violence.

2. Accept reasonable answers that can be supported from the text as well as other factual information.

3. Answers will vary.

Handout N: Analysis – What Happened Between Selma and Montgomery? Answer Key

1. Accept reasonable answers that can be supported by the text and student research.