united for a cause

THE REV. JAMES REEB
1927-1965
March volunteer beaten to death, Selma, Ala.

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From the time he was a boy, James Reeb followed his conscience. He spent his teenage years working with disadvantaged youth. He felt called to the ministry even before he graduated from high school. As a Unitarian minister in Washington, D.C., Reeb spent more time helping the poor people who lived near the church than he spent in church. By 1965, Reeb was living with his wife and three children at the edge of a Boston ghetto and devoting his life to improving slum conditions.

On March 7, 1965, Reeb watched in horror as television news showed the attack by Alabama state troopers on civil rights marchers in Selma. The next day, when Martin Luther King Jr. sent out a nationwide plea for ministers of all races and religions to come to Selma, James Reeb knew he had to go.

Reeb's wife, Marie, who was accustomed to her husband's unconventional choices, told him this time that she wished he wouldn't go to Selma. A fellow minister warned him, "You could get hurt." But Reeb saw the decision as one of conscience, and felt he had no choice.

That night, James Reeb was among hundreds who flew into Montgomery, Ala. From there it was a short drive to Selma, and by 9 a.m. on March 9, Reeb and ministers from all over the nation were in Selma, ready to march. They expected this to be a brief, jubilant demonstration of unity, and most of them planned to fly home the next day.

The gathering in Selma of white people from all over the country was a sensational boost for local Blacks who had been marching steadily for two years. It proved to the sheriff who hated them, the troopers who beat them and the governor who denounced them that people everywhere shared their cause.

MARCH HALTED

Then a federal judge ordered the march postponed. With 2,000 people waiting to march, King could not tell them all to go back home. They started out from Brown Chapel on the morning of March 9. James Reeb walked near the back, his arms linked with another clergyman and a black man from Selma. When the front ranks reached the line of troopers waiting for them, King gave the signal to retreat. He had never defied a federal court order, and could not bring himself to put the marchers in any more danger.

At Brown Chapel that night, King explained to the marchers why they had retreated. But he asked the people from out of town to stay awhile if they could and promised there would be a march to Montgomery.

James Reeb was among those who decided to stay. That night, after eating at a local black café, Reeb and two other ministers made a wrong turn as they were walking down the street. Strangers to Selma, they began heading toward the Silver Moon Café, a notoriously rough all-white club. They heard shouts, "Hey, you niggers!" and saw four white men approaching. One of the men swung a heavy club into the side of Reeb's head, sending him crashing to the ground. Then the gang knocked the other two down and kicked them. "That's how it feels to be a nigger down here," the attackers said before they left.

Reeb managed to get up from the blow, but he had an agonizing headache. The next few hours were a nightmare of mishaps as his condition worsened. Doctors at the local infirmary told Reeb to see a neurosurgeon in Birmingham, but the hospital there required an entrance fee, so the ministers had to wait until the $150 fee could be collected. On the way to Birmingham, their ambulance had a flat tire and they had to wait for another one — and this one's siren was broken. It was 11 p.m. before Reeb finally arrived at the hospital. He had a massive skull fracture and a large blood clot. He died two days later.

There was a surge of national outrage at Reeb's death, in sharp contrast to the official silence that accompanied the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. Memorial marches were held all over the country. The President phoned Marie Reeb, and the Vice Presi-

OPPOSITE PAGE
Clergy of all faiths came to Selma to join the voting rights demonstrators after state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge attacked them. Finally, protected by federal troops, thousands completed the march to the Alabama state Capitol on March 25.

dent attended Reeb's funeral.

Jimmie Lee Jackson's mother had received no such attention when she lost her son, and the reason, most believed, was race. Reeb was white; Jackson was black. No one in the movement questioned the value of Reeb's sacrifice; they only wished Jimmie Lee Jackson's had been similarly recognized.

Nevertheless, it was Reeb's death more than anything else that focused the national spotlight on Selma.

"It's a terrible thing to say, but it took the death of a white clergyman to turn things around," remembered Orloff Miller, one of the ministers who was attacked with Reeb. "When James Reeb, a white clergyman from the North, was killed in Selma, people suddenly sat up and took notice, and from then on things changed in the movement. People came from all over the country to Selma."

Four days after Reeb died, President Johnson delivered a voting rights bill to Congress. In a nationally televised speech, Johnson said the struggle in Selma "is part of a larger movement...Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."

Those last three words, spoken by the President, sent shock waves throughout the white resistance and brought tears to the eyes of civil rights activists. It was a sign that even white leaders, far removed from the battlefronts, were learning the lesson James Reeb had understood from the beginning: This was a struggle that demanded a commitment from all who loved justice, regardless of their color.

Reeb's death, like Jackson's and so many others, went unpunished. Although four white men were arrested and indicted, it took a jury only 90 minutes to decide they were not guilty.