

FIRST STEP TOWARD REFORM, April 7, 1965

National Catholic Reporter (Used with permission)

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Chris Condon, television columnist for NCR went to Montgomery to cover the voter registration march for KSD-TV, St. Louis, This is his account

Spring had come to Alabama. Already trees were budding, the lawns were turning green. On that afternoon of March 25, it was showery, hot and humid in Montgomery. But the warm weather was no unmixed blessing. Those who flew in from northern cities were forced to wear or carry throughout this march the overcoats they'd brought south. The thousands passing through the air terminal building that day found it boasted exactly six coin lockers in which to stow their gear. And terminal personnel – white and local – coolly turned aside appeals that the airline offices serve as temporary baggage rooms for a few hours. It was an early indoctrination into the prevailing, unanimous white reaction to our presence. The city that served as first capital of the Confederacy was plainly tolerating the “outsiders” only under duress, and the march itself, of course, only at the point of federal guns.

At best, Montgomery's a drab dismal town, only the state capital building lending a touch of elegance to the downtown section. Fittingly the march coursed first through the heart of the Negro district, where the marchers were made to feel like a liberating army. There were cheers and cries of encouragement and gratitude from onlookers on the curbs, on porches, and from the children waving from their school windows. Hundreds of bottles of cold soda were pressed on parched marchers with payment smilingly declined.

The deep poverty everywhere in evidence, and the heartfelt joy and gratitude expressed on many thousands of Negro faces of all ages, gave the marchers a lift and convinced them, as if they needed convincing, that here truly was a subjugated minority. The all-out Negro welcome was proof enough that contrary to the southern white argument, they do indeed feel oppressed.

Unlike the marchers, who maintained orderly ranks, I was able as a reporter, to stop and chat with many of the Negro spectators en route. Without exception I found them in full support of the march – in fact overjoyed by it.

About the halfway point we passed abruptly – and dramatically as the houses changed from miserable to modest – from the Negro into one of the poor white sections. The now generally white watchers were absolutely impassive and stonily silent. There were none of the shouted insults or taunts anticipated by many marchers. A bit uncharitably one might surmise they simply wanted to feel

superior to those in the line of marchers by a silent protest – by acting like real southern gentlemen. Also I think they were restrained in great degree by the presence of so many clergy, including dozens of Sisters. And it's just barely possible that in spite of themselves they were somewhat impressed.

It's now an article of faith with white southerners, of course, that this was essentially a rabble, compounded principally of beatniks and communist sympathizers. But, as the thousands of Montgomery whites who took the trouble to watch could clearly observe, a great many of the marchers were religious, or, as indicated by signs, religiously affiliated. And the young people in the line were for the most part clean cut college types. "Outsiders" in a limited sense, they may have been; but their appearances and manner gave the lie to that favorite companion epithet, "troublemakers." Many incurred financial sacrifice to be there and all were blessed with the kind of dedication to want to give of their time at least – to be a witness, to throw one more pebble into the segregationist ocean that is today the state of Alabama. And in truth all had placed their very lives in some degree of jeopardy as the tragedy that night made horribly clear.

Of the memories they carried home, I think one of the most searing must have been the sight of that Confederate flag atop the capital building of what was decided 100 years ago in blood, is and will remain a state of this Union. Doubtless many privately determined to do what they could to see the stars and stripes restored some day to its proper place. One had a strong feeling in that square in front of that building with its renegade flag and blocked off by a cordon of state employees, of being in a tiny enclave in an alien land. America seemed limited to that small area of the rally site surrounded by the federalized troops. Despite the march's prevalent atmosphere of hope, most realized only too well that the battle was just beginning. But embattled, embittered Alabama is part of their country and clearly they intend to help reclaim it. Many stressed to reporters that it was no one-day commitment. In the years ahead, there will no doubt be further outrages. For Alabama's clear and insolent reply to the insistent Negro demand for freedom now is still "never." But now at least her white residents are on notice that there are men and women of substance all over this country who care enough to come among them in simple protest.

The contribution of the white clergy to the current civil rights effort, while belated, is magnificent – lending the movement a strength and status it sorely needs. But now, it's up to these churchmen somehow to communicate the urgency and immediacy of this moral issue to their flocks. Far too many Americans are still passive in the face of this great social evil. Too many find it comfortable to believe with the south that civil rights marchers are outsiders who might better be occupied with the myriad problems in their home bailiwicks. But Alabama and the rest of the hard-core south present a national problem. And a protest marcher in Alabama, in effect, is calling attention not merely to local wrongs but to injustice everywhere. And protest via such peaceful demonstrations is the likely first step toward reform. Truly, thanks to such marchers, the answer now is "blowin' in the wind."