

THE VICE PRESIDENT
WASHINGTON

March 12, 1965

MEMORANDUM

FOR : The President
FROM : The Vice President

As you suggested, I met this afternoon with the Council on Equal Opportunity to discuss the current situation in Selma and obtain the views of the Council members as to what further steps, if any, the federal government should undertake. At the opening of the meeting, I explained in some detail the actions which the federal government has already taken with respect to the Selma situation and discussed candidly the alternatives which seemed immediately available and the reasons why they were not used.

At that juncture I threw the meeting open and received suggestions and comments from almost everyone present. It was recognized that you and other officials have on numerous occasions spoken forcefully of the federal government's strong commitment to civil rights and the need for voting legislation at this time; nevertheless, it was felt that in the highly emotional, tense, present circumstances reiteration was necessary. A number of people expressed their concern that confidence of the civil rights movement in the federal government is threatened and stressed the need for making known in a positive and affirmative manner the concern of the federal government.

There was a strong general feeling that there would be great utility in your carrying to the public, via national television, a positive and affirmative statement of the federal government's position in the Selma situation. Such a statement could include the following items:

- (1) The federal government recognizes the serious barriers to full registration and voting participation by Negro citizens in certain areas of the South; therefore, you are sending to the Congress a special message and legislation to remove these barriers.
- (2) There exists a constitutional right for Americans to petition their government for redress of grievances and the federal government has vigorously pressed that right in the District Court proceeding -- the proper place for definition of the rights of the Selma demonstrators. The Attorney General has urged the court to issue an order allowing the march from Selma to Montgomery. If it is issued, the federal government will see that the order is enforced.
- (3) There must be preservation of law and order in all situations. The federal government stands ready to do whatever may be necessary to assure that this is so.
- (4) In response to the feeling shared by many Americans of "What can I do?", you can request that they petition Members of Congress for prompt passage of an effective and meaningful voting bill.

There was a strong feeling within the group that your message should be keyed to action by the federal government -- the strongest and most imminent action being submission of the Administration's voting bill to the Congress. It was also felt strongly by the group that the legislation should be submitted as soon as possible. There is believed to be some lack of public understanding as to the reasons why it has not already been submitted.

It should be emphasized that the group was not urging a television appearance by you prior to the time you could announce specific and imminent submission of the legislation. It was generally believed that such an appearance over the weekend announcing that the legislation would be sent to the Hill on Monday morning would be particularly beneficial. In fact, it was thought sufficiently important to make the announcement over the weekend even if it meant that the legislation submitted on Monday was not in final form.

For your information, I will also relay several other suggestions on which there was no general consensus:

(1) That you contact Governor Wallace and invite him to Washington, along with other appropriate Alabama officials, to discuss resolution of the Selma difficulties; while Governor Wallace probably would not accept your invitation, this, it was suggested, would make it clear that you had exhausted all possible avenues.

(2) That, either in conjunction with, or apart from, the foregoing, the broadest possible contacts be made with Alabama business and industrial leaders to urge them to bring all possible pressure against the Governor. It was suggested that Cabinet officers might be utilized to make some of these calls personally, using contacts among their clientele groups.

(3) That a high federal official, such as the Vice President or the Attorney General, go to Selma as a symbolic federal presence; as discussion progressed, however, this idea seemed to lose favor.

With but minor dissent, the group indicated a strong belief that federal troops should not be used under present circumstances. It should be emphasized, however, that this view was based on present circumstances and was subject to change with any significant change in the situation. The feeling was expressed that the F.B.I. does not represent a meaningful presence in Selma for Negro citizens and that, as a "presence" marshals would be better. The difficulties inherent in using marshals were recognized as probably precluding this course, however.

Finally, you should know that it was the overwhelming sentiment of the group that the decision as to use of force was one that could be made only by you and that the Council recognized the difficulty of this decision and was ready to support you wholly.

Because I knew you wished to have the advice of the Council members, I urged that they express themselves candidly and frankly. I have tried to reflect their expressions as accurately as possible.