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6509 – Selma

Guest: Rep. James D. Martin (R-AL)

Morphew: Introduction...the situation in Selma has attracted a great deal of attention across the nation for the past few weeks...it's something that you're exceptionally well informed about, have you been in Selma recently?

Martin: Yes, Dick. I went to Selma a few weeks ago when of our colleagues made an impromptu trip into the wonderful little city of Selma. I went the day before they made their journey so that I might be on hand and learn firsthand more about Selma and also be prepared to speak on the subject on the floor of the House.

Morphew: The American people has been led to believe that the series of demonstrations which have led to a number of arrests have been strictly about the right to register and vote, do you think this is the true picture?

Martin: Dick, of course, the people of Selma, both races, have always had the right to register and vote, and they could have gone down on any given registration day, as any other citizen should do and have been doing in the years past, and registered to vote. The fact that they had not availed themselves of that opportunity is one of the questions that we all asked, cause this is a problem throughout the country of getting people to cast their votes. I noticed the voting registration in some areas of Harlem and et cetera are extremely low. People need to be encouraged to go down and register to vote so obviously this was not their primary function.

Morphew: So there were many times when they could have registered but they just didn't show up and then all of a sudden here comes a line of several hundred people

Martin: Well, I might illustrate it, Dick, by telling you that because of the proposed demonstrations to encourage the Negroes of that area to register to vote, the Selma registrars applied for ten extra days in which to take care of these citizens. Well, the first six or seven days that the registrars opened their office the business was almost nil. As a matter of fact, only a trickle of citizens came into the office to apply for registration papers. Then all of a sudden 1500 show up on one day which created an impossible situation. They began to sing and stomp and yell and create turmoil inside of the registrars office and it became impossible to carry on business as normal. So, this is one of the great problems. Actually, registration has been proceeding as normal and people should be encouraged to register and vote, but they had another purpose in mind.

Morphew: What is that purpose?

Martin: Well, those of us who have thought carefully and looked carefully in the matter quickly came to the conclusion that it was not the right to vote or register because they already had that right. They had the right and of course it was secured more firmly for all citizens in the recently passed civil rights bill. There must have been something else. Well, that something else appears now on the scene to be a nationwide registration law that would abolish all state lines, do away with any qualification of voters. This morning I've been studying the qualifying voting law of the state of New York. I was surprised to find that it's as tough as Alabama. In fact, some of the questions are a little tougher. All states have, for the most part, taken it unto themselves to reach a decision on what they would use as the qualifying premise of their citizenry. Now, in Alabama of course, we had a voter registration test. It was to find out if people were qualified in their educational level to cast a vote. It was a test based upon, I suppose, about a sixth or eighth grade educational level which seems to be pretty general throughout the country. Now if they are successful through their demonstration and creating through the mass media this thought that they did not have the right to register to vote, which absolutely was not true, then they must be looking for something else, and that something else is of course a new voter registration law that we understand might be before the Congress in the next few weeks. It would abrogate and abolish state lines and states rights. It would send voter registrars under the auspices of the federal government in any state of the Union that the federal government would see fit to send them to register citizens regardless of their intelligence, regardless of their education, as long as they are 21 and could write their name in some way, shape, or form, they would register. This could upset many states of the Union where they have tried to raise the level of the citizenry to vote instead of lowering the level of the qualifying test. It seems that we in America want to encourage everyone to vote but somehow we've got to raise the level of the voter instead of lowering the bar because we improve our country by increasing the intelligence and the education level of our citizenry and our voters.

Morphew: Hasn't it historically been regarded that voter qualifications are within the purviews of the respective states to set...the Fifteenth Amendment says that a state may not apply one set of qualifications to one group of its citizens and a different set to a different group, but the qualifications are state matters

Martin: Yes, they are entirely state matters, Dick. This is a matter that's been left entirely to the state and should be held closely to the state. Eventually, if we continue this trend we are erasing state lines and states then become merely a geographical designation. Certainly the right to set the qualifying pattern of the citizenry and test is a state matter and should stay a state matter. I certainly don't believe that you should take a test and abuse any one group of citizens and I don't think that you should differentiate or penalize any group of citizens. Any test that any state, whether it's in the North, South, East, or West, should be applied equally to all citizens.

Morphew: Have you obtained any evidence of any Communist involvement in these demonstrations?

Martin: I made a speech on the floor of the House following an incidence that occurred in Selma and I revealed there that some of the people involved had been involved with Communist activities in the state of New York and elsewhere. This is of great concern to us because it's evident to us that these people get involved, for instance in New York, with Communist movements and the next thing you know they're in a sleepy little town in the South agitating and stirring up trouble. These same people are involved in different type troubles. I noticed one of the men that tried to blow up the Washington Monument was also arrested in one of these involvements. So, you've got, you've got all type of people accumulating in these little, small, wonderful, sleepy southern towns and stirring up trouble and strife. It's one of the great tragedies of our time.

Morphew: How are the people in Selma really feeling about this situation...are they determined to uphold the voting laws and to see that they are fairly applied to everyone?

Martin: I found this about the people of Selma. Of course I know Selma very well and I know her people. I'm one of those that loves the town of Selma because it is a wonderful town, a historic town, a beautiful little city. I found the people at all levels, whether they were officials or man on the street, saying to me, yes, we believe that we should obey any law that's on the books. We will fight in the Congress or the legislature any law that we do not like, we will try to appeal or to amend it, but once it's on the books we should abide by that law. And I found this feeling prevalent wherever I went in the city of Selma. There was a driving urge to obey the law to the very letter, to the last dot of the last 'I' because they said, look, we are in the focus of the nation now and we want to prove to America that we are law abiding citizens. So consequently, they are feeling that particularly acutely there in Selma, and I think that they have done a magnificent job in trying to obey the law and to fulfill this requirement.

Morphew: The provocations to violence have been extreme, have they not?

Martin: Yes. Of course, when you have the news media from all over the world you can't film just a quiet, peaceful scene. Something must be done to create a nationwide television or news media picture and if this doesn't happen, you must provoke it. So consequently, they move along until the opportunity comes, okay, the cameras are on, the scene's set, let's go. It's almost like you might be producing a giant movie of some kind

and you're getting ready to reach the crescendo. It's one of the catastrophes and one of the heartbreaking things happening on the American scene.

Morphew: I think one of the things that most Americans are unaware of is that you and other members of the Alabama congressional delegation have asked the Congress to appoint an impartial, unbiased investigating committee to go to Selma and tell what's really happening there...what's happened to this?

Martin: Yes. Of course, we have been anxious to have an investigating committee from Congress, from all sections of the country, from both political parties, to go to Selma and investigate and tell the American people the truth. There is no substitute in our land for the truth. Now, of course, we southerners are not perfect, we have lots of problems, everything that we have done has not been entirely correct, but there is one thing for certain, if the truth were told today, if America knew the truth about the South, we would have on our sides the vast multitude of America today that are seeking the truth, honesty, and integrity in our land.

Morphew: Why hasn't the committee been appointed?

Martin: They're not looking for the truth today. They are seeking in the mass media to create an impression in the country that the South is guilty of a great crime, and the truth would dispel this belief.