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6515 – March on Montgomery

Guest: Rep. William L. Dickinson (R-AL)

Morphew: Introduction...we were talking last week about the speech you made on the floor of the House about the march on Montgomery and you had a lot of interesting material...were you actually in Alabama during the march?

Dickinson: Yes. I flew home on Tuesday. I believe were supposed to have left Selma on Monday, as I recall, and I stayed in Montgomery throughout that week while the marchers were coming in and up to and including the march downtown in Montgomery.

Morphew: Some of the incidents you referred to in your speech, were you an eyewitness to any of them yourself?

Dickinson: No, no more than to just see the beatniks and the rabble on the road. Not all of them were. As I pointed out last week there were four distinct groups here. We had the local Negroes who had an interest here and were peacefully demonstrating for those things in which they believe and they have a right to do this. There's another group, the outside do gooders, ministers, your nuns, and other professional people who had a very sincere sense of propriety and what they feel was right which I feel is misguided, but however, were down there to participate in what they felt was a worthwhile cause and they did so out of sincerity. The third group, though, that caused all the trouble and caused all of these scenes that I've talked about are professional demonstrators. They don't care what they're demonstrating for. The same faces appear in Philadelphia, in California, Harlem, Selma. The newsmen say that they've seen the same dirty, bearded faces in most every demonstration. Some left there going for one demonstration. Others got in a bus going over to Mississippi. One girl said that she was going to leave, said they were going to try to get somebody killed and they were too violent, she was going over to Mississippi for the rest of the summer. But as I said, they were professional

demonstrators. They're paid and they really couldn't care less about the rights that they are professed to be demonstrating for. They're just out for kicks. They're adventurous and they've got just about the morals of an alley cat.

Morphew: So whatever the demonstration is about...many of the same faces turn up

Dickinson: That's right. That's exactly right. If somebody's paying them, and they were paid, I believe it came out in the paper recently, they had some paid workers there in the march. They had quite a few. I don't believe any of these groups have to account to anyone for the money that comes in, if so, I don't know to whom they do account. And they put on one of these demonstrations and get their emotions up and advertise in all of the papers, the Washington papers, the New York papers, send your money in to keep this thing going and nobody ever knows where the money goes or how it's spent. They just account to themselves and no one else, and so every time a demonstration happens and something bad happens they get full publicity then they pass the hat and the money, I'm sure, comes pouring in.

Morphew: In your speech you said that drunkenness and sex orgies were the order of the day in Selma, on the road to Montgomery and in Montgomery...you added that there were many instances of sexual misconduct in public between Negroes and whites...what is your basis for this statement, is there proof of this fact?

Dickinson: I have in my files affidavits from eyewitnesses, one was a woman who was parked in a car in downtown Montgomery one evening. I have an affidavit from a captain of the highway patrol. I have another affidavit from a national guardsman that was called into duty. I have I think all the proof that any fair-minded man would want from eyewitnesses who saw these things.

Morphew: And to show that it's not all native proof, from people who are inclined to be opposed to these demonstrations anyway, didn't many of the northern reporters on the scene also report these activities?

Dickinson: Yes. I know of two AP writers who witnessed these things. I was interviewed at the Capitol at the conclusion of my speech on the floor and one of the newsmen who interviewed me had just returned from Selma and he was saying he was discussing it when it started coming in on the wire and that what I had described on the floor he had personally seen and then he told me of some instances that he had seen. It's certainly not biased by section here. This is facts that need to be reported.

Morphew: You mentioned 4 groups and that the 2 groups causing the trouble were the professional demonstrators and the Communist and pro-Communist element that was there to try and stir up trouble

Dickinson: That's very true.

Morphew: Some of the others, the do gooders, some of the clergy from other parts of the country, some of them got so fed up and disgusted with what was going on that they left during the course of the demonstration

Dickinson: Yes, this is true, and this was reported in the press. It wasn't given much play, but a few were reported as having left out of disgust. Others went back and I suppose were a little ashamed to admit what they had been involved in and didn't say anything and didn't get much press coverage on that, but I know many came and expressed disgust and very let down at what they had seen because they realized that this was not they had been led to believe and turned around the same day and went back. So this was not an isolated incident that was reported in the newspaper but many in fact did go back.

Morphew: One point you made...you asked, what sort of people can leave home, family, and job if they have one and live indefinitely in a foreign place and demonstrate indefinitely and then you said, "this is no religious group of sympathizers trying to help the Negro out of a sense of right and morality. This is a bunch of godless riffraff out for kicks and self gratification that have left every campsite between Selma and Montgomery littered with whiskey bottles, beer cans, and evidence of sexual misconduct." What has your reaction been to this speech?

Dickinson: Dick, the response has been very gratifying. It's been overwhelming as a matter of fact. I'm getting several hundred letters per day. I've had telephone calls from all over the United States wanting reproductions of my speech, and I've found that for the most part there's been a very favorable response, and those few instances that have been unfavorable have been from those who have not taken the trouble to read my remarks. They've read what the newspapers have interpreted me to mean which was a reflection on the clergy and those sincere people that were there, and of course, I did not say that and I do not intend that. And I did make it very plain that there were four distinct elements here that could be readily identified and one should not be blamed for the other's misconduct any more than the state of Alabama should be blamed for the misconduct of one or two misguided individuals.

Morphew: You observed these demonstrations...it's been characterized to the nation as a demonstration about the right to vote and taken on many of the attributes of a holy crusade, as you've said in many of your speeches, do you feel that that's what this is all about, is the demonstration really about voting rights or is it more of a demonstration just to be demonstrating?

Dickinson: Well, Dick, this last instant, this march from Selma to Montgomery, could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered legitimately a demonstration for voting rights because first, the civil rights bill has been passed and the demonstrators haven't even given it a chance to work through the courts. Secondly, Judge Thomas of Mobile, the federal judge who had charge of this voting registration in Selma, has already ordered registrars to register more and to say that any that weren't registered by June, he would make some different arrangements. Now this has been done. Everyone who wants to vote can vote. Anyone who wants to register can register. They've been given every legal right

that they say that they want. They have no other cause to demonstrate, now, except for the sake of demonstration, but they have gotten together and created such an emotional upheaval that, they just had a good thing going with the money coming in, they had the sympathy of the country and had some bad breaks for the state of Alabama through some misguided people and they were able to capitalize on this and get the money coming in and keep their cause going and really perpetuate themselves as heroes of the day.

Morphew: You mentioned a handbill that was being distributed in the camp areas where the demonstrators were camping during the march, do you have a copy of that with you?

Dickinson: Yes, I do, Dick, and I made it plain on the floor that I don't know who printed this, I do not know how it got to the parade. I do know that they were in evidence and were passed out among the marchers advertising a tent show nightly where everybody's free to come in and lose their inhibitions and join in. I don't know where it came from but it was in evidence there.

Morphew: It says at the top, "welcome freedom marchers to Hollywood burlesque" and then "girls, girls, girls, girls, girls" and down at the bottom "note to southern girls, come join in the fun if you can cast of the old fashioned ideas, whether of racial bigotry or medieval moronic morality"...I think that speaks for itself.