

# Washington: The Rising Spirit of Protest

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, March 18— It is clear from the present crisis over voting rights in Alabama that the new activist spirit of the church and the university in America, allied to the modern television and airplane, is now having a profound influence on law and politics in the United States.

The "right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" goes back to the first article of the Bill of Rights (1792) and even to Chapter 61 of the Magna Carta (1215), but the power of these rights has been greatly increased by the new modern instruments of communication.

It is the almost instantaneous television reporting of the struggle in the streets of Selma, Ala., that has transformed what would have been mainly a local event a generation ago into a national issue overnight. Even the segregationists who have been attacking the photographers and spraying black paint on their TV lenses understand the point.

## The Student Revolt

It is the new generation of clergymen and students, condemned not so long ago for apathy and timidity, who are

now using the modern vehicles of transportation to rush to Selma and Montgomery from all quarters of the nation.

We are told by our philosophers and sociologists that our machines are enslaving and debasing us, but in this historic battle over voting rights these very machines are proving to be powerful instruments for equality and justice.

So long as the demonstrations in Selma were a local affair limited mainly to Negroes and a sprinkling of whites, Sheriff James G. Clark Jr. was able to deny "the right of the people peaceably to assemble" at the Dallas County (Alabama) courthouse.

But once it had been swelled to thousands by people from all over the nation, including a great many middle-class white students and clergymen, the force and nature of the protest changed and the right of assembly was granted.

## The Church Militant

This is not, of course, the result of machines alone. Ever since the massive civil rights march on Washington two years ago, the churches have been organizing to support the Negro revolt. Actually this church movement gained strength shortly after Bull Connor, the Police Chief in Birmingham, made his club-swinging nation-

al television debut in May of 1963.

The National Council of Churches, representing 31 denominations, and the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice have been active ever since, and Archbishop Patrick A. O'Boyle of the Washington archdiocese, recently announced that priests and nuns under his jurisdiction could participate in the Selma demonstrations if they wished.

Meanwhile, something important is happening on the university campuses of the nation. Even a few years ago, when the students of other nations were crying out against the Red Army's suppression of the Budapest uprisings, American students were widely criticized for their comparative passivity.

These, it was said, were the children of a new American mass culture—vaguely restless, but overwhelmed by numbers; not militant but complacent and even indifferent to events outside their own communities.

This popular indictment may still hold for many, maybe even for the majority of university students, but there seems to be a growing number of students who have seized upon the civil rights conflict as if it were what William James called "The Moral Equivalent of War."

Some of them have been

working in Mississippi and Alabama out of religious conviction; others have got involved in the demonstrations almost as a substitute for the faith of their parents and grandparents; and some of those who have been demonstrating here at the White House give the impression that they are doing it for a lark.

## Washington's Fears

This latter group worries officials here who favor the President's new voting rights bill. They are particularly concerned about the coming march on Montgomery, which will coincide with the spring holidays of colleges on the quarter-year plan.

Up to a point, these officials say, increased numbers of demonstrators in Alabama may help. But they are afraid of those who may go to Alabama instead of to St. Augustine, Fla., for a "spring rumble."

Nevertheless, this rising protest in the nation is having its effect, and promises to help transform the voting laws. Prosperity is increasing mobility; conviction and commitment by a militant minority are tempering the apathy of the majority; and President Johnson is using the new instruments of communication himself to encourage the trend, and put Federal registrars in the South.