

The march to Montgomery, 1982

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Abstract: An all-white jury had convicted them of vote fraud -- of illegally filling out absentee ballots for a few illiterate black voters -- and a judge had sentenced them to four and five years, respectively It had all the earmarks of an old-fashioned, pre-1965 frameup In Selma hundreds joined the marchers for a day, walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and kneeling in prayer on the other side.

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Full Text: Boom boom boom boom! Two drummers set a brisk, imperative pace, and off we go down Highway 80 toward Montgomery A young black man with a megaphone helps us keep the beat. In the manner of "slave shouts" across cotton fields, our leader yells out a line and we yell another back. But the words are far from antebellum Reagan, Reagan, he's no good Send him back to Hollywood Some of the marchers seem road-weary. Their pilgrimage began 10 days before in Pickens County, 170 miles northwest of Montgomery. As for me, this is my first day on the march. I'm a tardy pilgrim from the North, summoned here by my friend Billie Jean Young "You better hurry on down," she told me on the phone. "There won't be a chicken left in rural Alabama." What Billie Jean meant was that black folks were welcoming the marchers at every stop along the way, and feeding them fried chicken The message was more than culinary. All that fried chicken suggested that rural Alabama, the cradle of civil rights protests in the '60s, was reawakening in the '80s In Pickens County there'd been just Billie Jean and a handful of fellow protesters. What they were protesting was the jailing of two black freedom fighters - Maggie Bozeman, 51, and Julia Wilder, 69. An all-white jury had convicted them of vote fraud -- of illegally filling out absentee ballots for a few illiterate black voters -- and a judge had sentenced them to four and five years, respectively It had all the earmarks of an old-fashioned, pre-1965 frameup In Selma hundreds joined the marchers for a day, walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and kneeling in prayer on the other side. That was where white police had savaged the followers of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965 The King-led march from Selma to Montgomery had turned out to be effective. In its wake Congress passed its Voting Rights Act, which led to conspicuous gains in political power for Southern blacks Now we latter-day marchers are trying to preserve those gains by persuading Congress to renew the part of the act that expires in August. It's a worthy goal, but it offers few possibilities for heroism Our little procession yearns for drama. Some of us talk about our willingness to go to jail. We sing, "Ain't Goin' to Let Nobody Turn Me Around," though nobody's trying. Instead of standing in our way, the police are running interference for us, smoothing our path Notoriously racist counties hold no terror for us now. The sheriffs there are black. They come to greet us; they join the march Reagan, Reagan, ain't you heard This is not Johannesburg In the absence of physical conflict, we flaunt symbols. Some of my companions wear bright orange vests -- a sign that they participated in the 1965 march. For civil rights workers that march is Bunker Hill, Bull Run, and Iwo Jima rolled into one Even the two drummers seem vaguely metaphorical. Certainly they stand out in this crowd, for they are Japanese Buddhists with shaved heads and long gowns It seems that they, too, have been part of a march - an international peace march sponsored by Buddhists. Somewhere near Anniston, Ala., the two processions intersected. As a gesture of solidarity they assigned two of their drummers to accompany the freedom marchers Now I am walking alongside the drummers, whose names are Ishi Yama and Shima. They beat their small drums with long crooked rods the color of birchwood. In this symbol-saturated climate, I instantly look for hidden meaning "What is the significance of that?" I ask Ishi Yama, pointing to his drumstick Ishi Yama does not understand the question "What do you call that?" I ask Credit: By Richard Margolis; Richard J. Margolis is a writer on social issues who

lives in Georgetown, Conn.

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