### Lesson Title
The Voting Rights Act of 1965

### Teacher
M. Beach

### Grade Level
8

### Duration of Lesson
3 class periods

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| SC Standards and Indicators | Standard 8-7  
The student will demonstrate an understanding of impact on South Carolina of significant events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.  
8-7.3 Explain changing politics in South Carolina, including the role of Strom Thurmond, the shift from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, the increasing political participation of African Americans and women, and the passage of the Education Improvement Act (EIA). |

| Common Core Strategy(ies) addressed | RH1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.  
RH6. Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose.  
WHST2. Write informative texts, including the narration of historical events...  

In the Socratic Seminar students cite lines from the President’s speech to support their ideas. This includes citing lines and interpreting Johnson’s motivation for the new law and plan to end disenfranchisement of African-American voting in the 1960’s.  

They design and write a product that provides information included in the Voting Rights Law, as well as a narration of the events that precipitated it. |
### Academic Vocabulary

Students select their own vocabulary as they work in small groups reading sections of President Johnson’s Speech, “We Shall Overcome.” Some chosen vocabulary words were:

- democracy
- convocation
- ingenuity
- flout
- registrar
- vindicate
- bigotry
- emancipation
- prejudice
- gallantry
- recourse

### Lesson Materials Needed (attached at end of lesson)

1. Any Civil Rights video that covers the 1960’s; A good one is *Free at Last* by Discovery Education
2. Graph of African American Voting in the 1960’s
3. Sample Literacy Test (from myvoteourfuture.org)
4. Class set of President Johnson’s speech “We Shall Overcome”
5. Good dictionaries—one per small group
6. Enough highlighters for each person
7. Youtube audio of President Johnson delivering his “We Shall Overcome” speech to the joint session of Congress March 15, 1965
9. Copy of possible discussion questions for Socratic Seminar (Teacher only)

### Content Narrative

When Lyndon B. Johnson was elected as president in 1964, he introduced a program known as the Great Society, which included expanded low-cost health insurance for the elderly under Social Security, grants for public schools, and the ending of discrimination against African-Americans in voting through the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This Act was part of a number of laws Johnson helped pass through Congress, many of which were designed to undo the discrimination that was widespread throughout the South under Jim Crow segregation laws (Huff 361).

This Act actually helped tighten up adherence to the Fifteenth and Nineteenth amendments, giving African-American men and all women the right to vote without having to take literacy tests. It also required certain southern states that had redrawn voting district lines in order to minimize African-American votes to submit any new redistricting plans to the federal government for approval (*Before the Voting Rights Act* [http://epic.org/privacy/voting/register/intro_a.html](http://epic.org/privacy/voting/register/intro_a.html))

### Lesson Set

#### Content Objective(s)

Students will be able to explain how the Rights Act of 1965 affected voting and political participation of African-Americans in South Carolina and the South as a whole.

#### Literacy Objective(s)

Students will be able to evaluate a primary source and cite excerpts from it in order to support their ideas in discussion.
| Lesson Importance | Throughout the first half of the 20th century, most African-Americans in the South were being denied their right to vote through a number of practices. The Civil Rights movement began to change the feelings of many Americans; and the Democratic Party in the 1960’s was successful in getting a number of federal laws passed to undo Jim Crow unfairness. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 has been called “the single most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever passed by Congress.” ([The Effect of the Voting Rights Act](http://epic.org/privacy/voting/register/intro_a.html)) |
| Connections to prior and future learning | We had previously learned that the Fifteenth Amendment, which was supposed to grant suffrage to African-American male citizens, was weakened by laws and practices in the Jim Crow South which greatly diminished the African-American vote. These included poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses (that allowed whites whose ancestors had voted to skip the literacy test), gerrymandering, and use of intimidation. We watched a civil rights video that highlighted the problems, as well as the actions of the Civil Rights activists of the 1960’s. Future learning will include the fact that African-American voting reached an all-time high during the 2008 and 2012 elections of Barack Obama. The Voting Rights Act continues to affect South Carolina and other states today as it was updated several more times and continues to provide federal oversight whenever any voting practices or procedures are changed, such as the new photo IDs required for voting in SC. |
| Anticipatory Set/ Hook (Engage) | Project on front screen the graph (attached) that shows voter registration rates of African Americans in the southern states in March of 1965, prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Ask students why 95 years after passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, only 37% of African-Americans were registered to vote. |

### Skill Development

Initial “explain” portion of the lesson. Introduce vocabulary, explain/demonstrate/model the skill required for the literacy objective, introduce content components. The content portion is only a brief introduction; the bulk of the student learning will take place during the guided practice activity.

| Introduce content components | Day 1-Remind the students of the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave African-Americans the right to vote, and how they were disenfranchised by poll taxes, intimidation, literacy tests, etc. Tell them that as they watch the video to try to answer the following questions: What motivated people to join in the Civil Rights movement? How do you think it created a climate that allowed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to pass? (Discuss and/or collect as Exit Slips.) |
| “I do” | Day 1-After passing out copies of Johnson’s speech urging passage of the voting rights and listening with the class to the president delivering his speech on Youtube as far as the words “we shall overcome,” the teacher then reads the final three pages of Johnson’s speech, modeling for the student how to select key vocabulary and determine their meaning, as well as significant or dramatic passages. |
| Skill from objective | introduce/explain/model |

### Guided Practice

This is the inquiry portion of the lesson, student-centered & often cooperative learning strategies used, teacher acting as facilitator, also known as Explore.

| “We do” | Day 2 cont’d-Working in groups of four or five, students orally read an assigned section of Johnson’s speech (The speech’s paragraphs are numbered in the handout making them easy to locate and divide for reading and discussion), identify, highlight and define 5 key vocabulary words in context, using a dictionary if necessary; then they select a short passage that seems particularly dramatic or important. Copy this down and write the reasons for selecting it. |
| Activity Description | Include student “explore” components and opportunities for them to explain their learning. |

| Checking for Understanding-“Informal” Assessment | Teacher circulates around the small groups and listens to the discussions and encourages the students to discuss, then each write their reasons in their own words. These papers can be handed in for closer scrutiny. |

### Closure

Teacher will re-visit content and answer students’ questions developed during the Guided Practice component. Summarize the lesson, clarify content, and revisit content and literacy objectives.

| Content Solidified | Day 2-After briefly reviewing student small group work, teacher reviews student vocabulary choices, words like registrar, bigotry, etc. and reinforces the key components why Johnson says a voting rights law is needed (primarily because the literacy tests were administered unfairly and intimidation through groups like the KKK diminished the African-American vote, along with poll taxes and other practices.  
At this time students can take part of a literacy test to see how it worked. See materials. |

### Independent Practice

| “You do” | Day 3-Teacher leads class in a Socratic Seminar on Johnson’s speech. The class sits in two concentric circles. The inner circle is for discussion and the |
outer circle for thinking and taking notes. Students move in and out of the circles at least twice during the seminar when directed to by the teacher. The teacher then gives an opening question and a minute or two for students to gather their thoughts. Please see the teacher handout for discussion questions. A good one to start with is “Where in the speech do you think the President was most effective sharing his ideas?” As students talk, the teacher merely listens and notes every time a student makes a “worthy” comment. (I draw the circles, add the student names, then use check marks for comments, or plusses for brilliant comments. At the end of the class, a check is a 70, 2 checks an 80, 3 checks or a plus and a check is a grade of 100. )

As comments begin to wane, the teacher throws out another question, such as “How important do you think it is that President Johnson is a southerner (Texan)?” Continue with other questions until time runs out.

**Summative/ “Formal” Assessment**

| Assessment | Students are to compose an attractive and colorful “billboard”, pamphlet, or a Facebook page that clearly shows the contents of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 AND its effect on African-American voting. They may also include some of the previous problems that diminished that vote. Product should use graphics and modern ways of communicating, rather than formal paragraphs. Students are given the handout “Voting Rights Act (1965)”, which succinctly provides background, motivation, provisions of the law, challenges, and impact. |

**Differentiation**

| During Lesson | Teacher can read and mark the above handout with the students, making sure they have the information they need. |
| Assessment | They can draw a political cartoon which shows any aspects of voting issues in the 1960’s. |

**Reflection**

| Lesson Reflection (What went well in the lesson? What might you do differently the next time you teach it? Evaluate the success of the lesson) | Students were fascinated by the Civil Rights footage in the videos; loved taking the Louisiana Literacy Test, and generally enjoyed the Socratic Seminar. They loved the idea that they can talk without raising their hands and they could pretty much control the discussion. However, some very quiet students chose to take a zero rather than participate. I even created an opening for them, such as “Mary, do you have anything you want to add?” However, I still feel they benefitted from listening to the discussion. Now that I know the extremely shy students (2/3 in each class), I could have them prepare a comment ahead of time to break the ice. On the whole, I feel the students were engaged and were learning. One |

very lazy student (forgetful of assignments and materials, slow to finish anything, absent off and on, and seldom on task) said on leaving class, “It was fun today.”

Materials Needed for Lesson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Materials and Handouts</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Voting Registration chart –Separate page below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Student copy of President Johnson’s speech “We Shall Overcome.” Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. and 6. As listed in materials were dictionaries and highlighters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Audio of Johnson delivering his speech to a joint session of Congress can be found at <a href="http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjweshallovercome.htm">http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjweshallovercome.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Copy of possible discussion questions for Socratic Seminar (Teacher only) Below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Effect of the Voting Rights Act

Soon after passage of the Voting Rights Act, federal examiners were conducting voter registration, and black voter registration began a sharp increase. The cumulative effect of the Supreme Court's decisions, Congress' enactment of voting rights legislation, and the ongoing efforts of concerned private citizens and the Department of Justice, has been to restore the right to vote guaranteed by the 14th and 15th Amendments. The Voting Rights Act itself has been called the single most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever passed by Congress. The following table compares black voter registration rates with white voter registration rates in seven Southern States in 1965 and 1988:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following figure traces the number of black Southern legislators during two 32-year time periods -- from 1868 to 1900, and from 1960 to 1992:2/
A similar pattern is found when one examines elections for local offices as well. Although the legacies of racially polarized voting and discriminatory voting practices have not vanished, the Voting Rights Act has dramatically curtailed their effect.

Notes


The State of Louisiana

Literacy Test (This test is to be given to anyone who cannot prove a fifth grade education.)

Do what you are told to do in each sentence; nothing more, nothing less. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test.

1. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.
2. Draw a line under the last word in this line.
3. Cross out the longest word in this line.
4. Draw a line around the shortest word in this line.
5. Circle the first, first letter of the alphabet in this line.
6. In the space below draw three circles, one inside (enclosed by) the other.
7. Above the letter X make a small cross.
8. Draw a line through the letter below that comes earliest in the alphabet.
   
Z V B D M K I T P H C

9. Draw a line through the two letters below that come last in the alphabet.
   
Z V B D M K T P E S Y C

10. In the first circle below write the last letter of the first word beginning with "L."

   1 2 3 4 5

11. Cross out the number necessary when making the number below one million.

   1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

12. Draw a line from circle 1 to circle 2 that will pass below circle 2 and above circle 4.

   1 2 3 4 5

13. In the line below cross out each number that is more than 20 but less than 30.

   31 16 48 29 51 47 22 17 98 26 39 25
Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Members of the Congress:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy.

I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause.

At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.

There, long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted. One good man, a man of God, was killed.

There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans. But there is cause for hope and for faith in our democracy in what is happening here tonight.

For the cries of pain and the hymns and protests of oppressed people have summoned into convocation all the majesty of this great government—this government of the greatest Nation on earth.

Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.

In our time we have come to live with moments of great crisis. Our lives have been marked with debate about great issues: issues of war and peace, issues of prosperity and depression. But rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance, our welfare or our security, but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation.

The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation.

For with a country as with a person, “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. And we are met here tonight as Americans—not as Democrats or Republicans—we are met here as Americans to solve that problem.

This was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose. The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South. “All men are created equal.” “Government by consent of the governed.” “Give me liberty or give me death.”
Well, those are not just clever words, or those are not just empty theories. In their name Americans have fought and died for two centuries, and tonight around the world they stand there as guardians of our liberty, risking their lives.

[14] Those words are a promise to every citizen that he shall share in the dignity of man. This dignity cannot be found in a man’s possessions; it cannot be found in his power, or in his position. It really rests on his right to be treated as a man equal in opportunity to all others. It says that he shall share in freedom, he shall choose his leaders, educate his children, and provide for his family according to his ability and his merits as a human being.

[15] To apply any other test—to deny a man his hopes because of his color or race, his religion or the place of his birth—is not only to do injustice, it is to deny America and to dishonor the dead who gave their lives for American freedom.

[16] Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish, it must be rooted in democracy. The most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders. The history of this country, in large measure, is the history of the expansion of that right to all of our people.

[17] Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult. But about this there can and should be no argument. Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to ensure that right.

[18] Yet the harsh fact is that in many places in this country men and women are kept from voting simply because they are Negroes.

[19] Every device of which human ingenuity is capable has been used to deny this right. The Negro citizen may go to register only to be told that the day is wrong, or the hour is late, or the official in charge is absent. And if he persists, and if he manages to present himself to the registrar, he may be disqualified because he did not spell out his middle name or because he abbreviated a word on the application.

[20] And if he manages to fill out an application he is given a test. The registrar is the sole judge of whether he passes this test. He may be asked to recite the entire Constitution, or explain the most complex provisions of state law. And even a college degree cannot be used to prove that he can read and write.

[21] For the fact is that the only way to pass these barriers is to show a white skin.

[22] Experience has clearly shown that the existing process of law cannot overcome systematic and ingenious discrimination. No law that we now have on the books—and I have helped to put three of them there—can ensure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it.

[23] In such a case our duty must be clear to all of us. The Constitution says that no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or his color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath.
Wednesday I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote.

The broad principles of that bill will be in the hands of the Democratic and Republican leaders tomorrow. After they have reviewed it, it will come here formally as a bill. I am grateful for this opportunity to come here tonight at the invitation of the leadership to reason with my friends, to give them my views, and to visit with my former colleagues.

I have prepared a more comprehensive analysis of the legislation which I had intended to transmit to the clerk tomorrow but which I will submit to the clerks tonight. But I want to really discuss with you now, briefly, the main proposals of this legislation.

This bill will strike down restrictions to voting in all elections—federal, state, and local—which have been used to deny Negroes the right to vote.

This bill will establish a simple, uniform standard which cannot be used, however ingenious the effort, to flout our Constitution.

It will provide for citizens to be registered by officials of the United States government if the state officials refuse to register them.

It will eliminate tedious, unnecessary lawsuits which delay the right to vote.

Finally, this legislation will ensure that properly registered individuals are not prohibited from voting.

I will welcome the suggestions from all of the members of Congress—I have no doubt that I will get some—on ways and means to strengthen this law and to make it effective. But experience has plainly shown that this is the only path to carry out the command of the Constitution.

To those who seek to avoid action by their national government in their own communities, who want to and who seek to maintain purely local control over elections, the answer is simple.

Open your polling places to all your people.

Allow men and women to register and vote whatever the color of their skin.

Extend the rights of citizenship to every citizen of this land.

There is no constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain.

There is no moral issue. It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country.

There is no issue of states rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.

I have not the slightest doubt what will be your answer.
[41] The last time a president sent a civil rights bill to the Congress it contained a provision to protect voting rights in federal elections. That civil rights bill was passed after eight long months of debate. And when that bill came to my desk from the Congress for my signature, the heart of the voting provision had been eliminated.

[42] This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, or no hesitation or no compromise with our purpose.

[43] We cannot, we must not, refuse to protect the right of every American to vote in every election that he may desire to participate in. And we ought not and we cannot and we must not wait another eight months before we get a bill. We have already waited a hundred years and more, and the time for waiting is gone.

[44] So I ask you to join me in working long hours–nights and weekends, if necessary–to pass this bill. And I don’t make that request lightly. For from the window where I sit with the problems of our country I recognize that from outside this chamber is the outraged conscience of a nation, the grave concern of many nations, and the harsh judgment of history on our acts. But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.

[45] Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

[46] And we shall overcome.

[47] As a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil I know how agonizing racial feelings are. I know how difficult it is to reshape the attitudes and the structure of our society.

[48] But a century has passed, more than a hundred years, since the Negro was freed. And he is not fully free tonight.

[49] It was more than a hundred years ago that Abraham Lincoln, a great president of another party, signed the Emancipation Proclamation, but emancipation is a proclamation and not a fact.

[50] A century has passed, more than a hundred years, since equality was promised. And yet the Negro is not equal.

[51] A century has passed since the day of promise. And the promise is unkept.

[52] The time of justice has now come. I tell you that I believe sincerely that no force can hold it back. It is right in the eyes of man and God that it should come. And when it does, I think that day will brighten the lives of every American.

[53] For Negroes are not the only victims. How many white children have gone uneducated, how many white families have lived in stark poverty, how many white lives have been scarred by fear, because we have wasted our energy and our substance to maintain the barriers of hatred and terror?
So I say to all of you here, and to all in the nation tonight, that those who appeal to you to hold on to the past do so at the cost of denying you your future.

This great, rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all—black and white, North and South, sharecropper and city dweller. These are the enemies: poverty, ignorance, disease. They are the enemies and not our fellow man, not our neighbor. And these enemies too—poverty, disease and ignorance—we shall overcome.

Now let none of us in any sections look with prideful righteousness on the troubles in another section, or the problems of our neighbors. There is really no part of America where the promise of equality has been fully kept. In Buffalo as well as in Birmingham, in Philadelphia as well as Selma, Americans are struggling for the fruits of freedom.

This is one nation. What happens in Selma or Cincinnati is a matter of legitimate concern to every American. But let each of us look within our own hearts and our own communities, and let each of us put our shoulder to the wheel to root out injustice wherever it exists.

As we meet here in this peaceful, historic chamber tonight, men from the South, some of whom were at Iwo Jima, men from the North who have carried Old Glory to far corners of the world and brought it back without a stain on it, men from the East and from the West, are all fighting together without regard to religion, or color, or region, in Viet-Nam. Men from every region fought for us across the world twenty years ago.

And now in these common dangers and these common sacrifices the South made its contribution of honor and gallantry no less than any other region of the great republic—and in some instances, a great many of them, more.

And I have not the slightest doubt that good men from everywhere in this country—from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, from the Golden Gate to the harbors along the Atlantic—will rally now together in this cause to vindicate the freedom of all Americans. For all of us owe this duty; and I believe that all of us will respond to it.

Your President makes that request of every American.

The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation. His demonstrations have been designed to call attention to injustice, designed to provoke change, designed to stir reform.

He has called upon us to make good the promise of America. And who among us can say that we would have made the same progress were it not for his persistent bravery, and his faith in American democracy?

For at the real heart of battle for equality is a deep-seated belief in the democratic process. Equality depends not on the force of arms or tear gas but depends upon the force of moral right; not on recourse to violence, but on respect for law and order.
There have been many pressures upon your president and there will be others as the days come and go. But I pledge you tonight that we intend to fight this battle where it should be fought: in the courts, and in the Congress, and in the hearts of men.

We must preserve the right of free speech and the right of free assembly. But the right of free speech does not carry with it, as has been said, the right to holler “fire” in a crowded theater. We must preserve the right to free assembly, but free assembly does not carry with it the right to block public thoroughfares to traffic.

We do have a right to protest, and a right to march under conditions that do not infringe the constitutional rights of our neighbors. And I intend to protect all those rights as long as I am permitted to serve in this office.

We will guard against violence, knowing it strikes from our hands the very weapons which we seek—progress, obedience to law, and belief in American values.

In Selma as elsewhere we seek and pray for peace. We seek order. We seek unity. But we will not accept the peace of stifled rights, or the order imposed by fear, or the unity that stifles protest. For peace cannot be purchased at the cost of liberty.

In Selma tonight, as in every—and we had a good day there—as in every city, we are working for just and peaceful settlement. We must all remember that after this speech I am making tonight, after the police and the FBI and the marshals have all gone, and after you have promptly passed this bill, the people of Selma and the other cities of the nation must still live and work together. And when the attention of the Nation has gone elsewhere they must try to heal the wounds and to build a new community.

This cannot be easily done on a battleground of violence, as the history of the South itself shows. It is in recognition of this that men of both races have shown such an outstandingly impressive responsibility in recent days—last Tuesday, again today.

The bill that I am presenting to you will be known as a civil rights bill. But, in a larger sense, most of the program I am recommending is a civil rights program. Its object is to open the city of hope to all people of all races.

Because all Americans just must have the right to vote. And we are going to give them that right.

All Americans must have the privileges of citizenship regardless of race. And they are going to have those privileges of citizenship regardless of race.

But I would like to caution you and remind you that to exercise these privileges takes much more than just legal right. It requires a trained mind and a healthy body. It requires a decent home, and the chance to find a job, and the opportunity to escape from the clutches of poverty.

Of course, people cannot contribute to the nation if they are never taught to read or write, if their bodies are stunted from hunger, if their sickness goes untended, if their life is spent in hopeless poverty just drawing a welfare check.
So we want to open the gates to opportunity. But we are also going to give all our people, black and white, the help that they need to walk through those gates.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn’t speak much Spanish. My students were poor and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them. But they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home late in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little that I knew, hoping that it might help them against the hardships that lay ahead.

Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child.

I never thought then, in 1928, that I would be standing here in 1965. It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country.

But now I do have that chance. And I’ll let you in on a secret; I mean to use it. And I hope that you will use it with me.

This is the richest and most powerful country which ever occupied this globe. The might of past empires is little compared to ours. But I do not want to be the president who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion.

I want to be the president who educated young children to the wonders of their world. I want to be the president who helped to feed the hungry and to prepare them to be taxpayers instead of taxeaters.

I want to be the president who helped the poor to find their own way and who protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election.

I want to be the president who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races and all regions and all parties.

I want to be the president who helped to end war among the brothers of this earth.

And so at the request of your beloved Speaker and the senator from Montana; the majority leader, the senator from Illinois; the minority leader, Mr. McCulloch; and other Members of both parties, I came here tonight—not as President Roosevelt came down one time in person to veto a bonus bill, not as President Truman came down one time to urge the passage of a railroad bill—but I came down here to ask you to share this task with me and to share it with the people that we both work for. I want this to be the Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, which did all these things for all these people.

Beyond this great chamber, out yonder in fifty States, are the people that we serve. Who can tell what deep and unspoken hopes are in their hearts tonight as they sit there and listen. We all can guess, from our own lives, how difficult they often find their own pursuit of happiness, how
many problems each little family has. They look most of all to themselves for their futures. But I think that they also look to each of us.

[89] Above the pyramid on the great seal of the United States it says—in Latin—”God has favored our undertaking.”

[90] God will not favor everything that we do. It is rather our duty to divine His will. But I cannot help believing that He truly understands and that He really favors the undertaking that we begin here tonight.

Textual Authentication Information

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This act was signed into law on August 6, 1965, by President Lyndon Johnson. It outlawed the discriminatory voting practices adopted in many southern states after the Civil War, including literacy tests as a prerequisite to voting. This “act to enforce the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution” was signed into law 95 years after the amendment was ratified. In those years, African Americans in the South faced tremendous obstacles to voting, including poll taxes, literacy tests, and other bureaucratic restrictions to deny them the right to vote. They also risked harassment, intimidation, economic reprisals, and physical violence when they tried to register or vote. As a result, very few African Americans were registered voters, and they had very little, if any, political power, either locally or nationally.

In 1964, numerous demonstrations were held, and the considerable violence that erupted brought renewed attention to the issue of voting rights. The murder of voting-rights activists in Mississippi and the attack by state troopers on peaceful marchers in Selma, AL, gained national attention and persuaded President Johnson and Congress to initiate meaningful and effective national voting rights legislation. The combination of public revulsion to the violence and Johnson's political skills stimulated Congress to pass the voting rights bill on August 5, 1965.

The legislation, which President Johnson signed into law the next day, outlawed literacy tests and provided for the appointment of Federal examiners (with the power to register qualified citizens to vote) in those jurisdictions that were "covered" according to a formula provided in the statute. In addition, Section 5 of the act required covered jurisdictions to obtain "preclearance" from either the District Court for the District of Columbia or the U.S. Attorney General for any new voting practices and procedures. Section 2, which closely followed the language of the 15th amendment, applied a nationwide prohibition of the denial or abridgment of the right to vote on account of race or color. The use of poll taxes in national elections had been abolished by the 24th amendment (1964) to the Constitution; the Voting Rights Act directed the Attorney General to challenge the use of poll taxes in state and local elections. In Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections, 383 U.S. 663 (1966), the Supreme Court held Virginia's poll tax to be unconstitutional under the 14th amendment.

Because the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the most significant statutory change in the relationship between the Federal and state governments in the area of voting since the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, it was immediately challenged in the courts. Between 1965 and 1969, the Supreme Court issued several key decisions upholding the constitutionality of Section 5 and affirming the broad range of voting practices for which preclearance was required. [See South Carolina v. Katzenbach, 383 U.S. 301, 327-28 (1966) and Allen v. State Board of Elections, 393 U.S. 544 (1969)]

The law had an immediate impact. By the end of 1965, a quarter of a million new black voters had been registered, one-third by Federal examiners. By the end of 1966, only 4 out of the 13 southern states had fewer than 50 percent of African Americans registered to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was readopted and strengthened in 1970, 1975, and 1982.
Socratic Seminar Questions for “We Shall Overcome” Speech of President Lyndon B. Johnson
(1965, prior to passage of the Voting Rights Act)

1. Do you think President Johnson was speaking for all Americans?

2. Where in the speech do you think the President was most effective sharing his ideas?

3. What are some of Pres. Johnson’s best reasons for passing a new voting law?

4. Why might this speech agitate some white southerners?

5. What makes this speech sound important, meaningful?

6. Why do you think this speech might give hope to African-Americans and those in the Civil Rights Movement?

7. How important do you think it is that President Johnson is a southerner (Texan)?

8. What events, ideas, and goals that Johnson mentions do you think are the most important?

9. How does Pres. Johnson see his place in history?

10. What does Johnson mean when he says “Even if we pass this, the battle will not be over.”?