LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

DECADES AFTER BLOODY SUNDAY, IS TRUMP TAKING CIVIL RIGHTS BACK TO BEFORE SELMA IN '65?

LAURA FLANDERS: Since taking office for his second term in January 2025, Donald Trump's administration has taken direct aim at voting rights, affirmative action, employment opportunities, and anti-discrimination efforts, dismantling so-called DEI initiatives and even telling federal employees to snitch on their colleagues who refuse to comply. The administration's instructed agencies to delete hundreds of terms from federal rules and regulations, including the words "bias," "gender," "LGBT," "abortion," "Black," "female," and "Native American." They've also attempted to censor academic discussions about racism, sexism, and systemic oppression. And in a little-noticed memo issued within hours of taking office, Trump revoked a 1965 order signed by President Johnson banning segregation by federal contractors. Civil rights activists were feeling the effects of all this this March, even as they observed the 60th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, one of the landmark events of the civil rights era. What were they making of it all? We went to Selma, Alabama to find out. 60 years ago, on March 7th, 1965, civil rights activists led by among others, a very young John Lewis led a march across this bridge, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in an effort to kick off a Selma to Montgomery March for civil rights and voting rights. The events of 60 years ago included the battering bloody of Lewis and his colleagues, but eventually, the march did happen and it precipitated the signing eventually of the Voting Rights Act by President Johnson later that year. So the events of this town on this bridge, very important to American history. But the people that are gathered here this year are gathered not just to commemorate, but to honor, reflect, and recommit themselves to struggle. In 2015, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama came to this small western Alabama town to commemorate the day in 1965 when police attacked the Selma to Montgomery marchers. The 50th anniversary drew 100 members of Congress, one Republican former president and his wife, and tens of thousands of people from across the country. President Obama gave a nationally-televised speech.

- BARACK OBAMA: There are places and moments in America where this nation's destiny has been decided. Many are sites of war. Concord, Lexington, Appomattox, Gettysburg. Others are sites that symbolize the daring of America's character. Independence Hall and Seneca Falls, Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral. Selma is such a place. It was not a clash of armies, but a clash of wills. A contest to determine the true meaning of America. And because of men and women like John Lewis, the idea of a just America and a fair America, an inclusive America, and a generous America, that idea ultimately triumphed.

LAURA FLANDERS: 10 years on, one could be forgiven for questioning that word "triumph." All the keystone measures signed into law by President Johnson under the pressure of the Civil Rights movement in Selma are under attack. The Voting Rights Act, Medicaid, even immigration rights. And to many, it looks as if the Trump team has systematically sought not just to slow, but specifically to reverse the gains of that moment. This year, the crowd was smaller and the weather worse than when Barack Obama came to Selma. The place still buzzed with visitors, but some of its institutions were in sad shape.

MAYA WILEY:: The National Voting Rights Museum and Institute is really the place where community members and community leaders came together and created this museum to not just remember, but ensure that everyone learns the history of the fact that we had to fight for voting rights, which we still have to fight for. And it is just unconscionable that this museum is for sale and the efforts to fundraise and save it are critically important.

LAURA FLANDERS: Melinda Hicks and Willard and Kiba Armstead made the journey to Selma from Georgia with much weighing on their minds. About 30% of all the federal employees fired in the first month of the Trump and Musk administration's attack on what they call waste in the federal workforce were veterans, and military families like theirs were feeling the pain of lost services and staff.

MELINDA HICKS: My father is a veteran. I have two sons in the military and my husband is a veteran. And so I see it all the time and I have the pleasure and opportunity to work with veterans and it's just a lot that they go through. They feel like the government has failed them. That I gave my all for this government and for this country. I gave a oath to this country and they love this country. And in this day and age and in this time, they're being treated as though they're second class citizens. You know, that we can just get rid of your benefits just like that. Just because one person decides, "Eh, we could use that money somewhere else." A lot of them are feeling as though, "What did I do all this for?"

WILLARD ARMSTEAD You know, as a disabled veteran, I fought hard for my benefits and I know a lot of veterans, they're more depressed than I am at some given point in time. So when things like this happen, it's tragic waiting to happen.

ANN TOBACK: 60 years ago today, Workers Circle members were on this bridge, crossing this bridge, attempting to cross this bridge for voting rights, arm in arm with their Black brothers and sisters. And today, we're here both to remember the incredible bravery and incredible activism of John Lewis, Amelia Boynton, of MLK, of Martin Luther King Jr. And we're also, of course here to remember the activism of our leaders and our members and continue that fight for voting rights, for democracy, for freedom in the United States.

LAURA FLANDERS: Jaribu Hill is the executive director and founder of the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights in Greenville, Mississippi and the Delta.

JARIBU HILL: Yes. Well, we're in the poorest region, next to Appalachia, in the country. And so workers are, Black workers in particular, suffer still after the auction block. Low wages, brutal treatment on the job, no opportunities, retaliation when they complain and speak out. We're seeing wage theft. We're seeing women being grabbed at work like we've never seen before. We're seeing rapes at work. We're seeing people unprosecuted for these crimes, going about their business as bosses and managers and being allowed to mistreat people. So we are here to celebrate the struggle, but also to let people know that the fight is not over. That it did not end on Bloody Sunday. That was the beginning of a long haul resistance movement. And we're just gonna keep coming every year to mark it, and to say to those who tell us they're gonna erase our history, they're gonna keep us out. We're gonna say, "No way, no how." We're saying we are gonna stand up in their names and we're gonna fight back.

LAURA FLANDERS: The rain held off for the marches to cross the bridge. Among them, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, the Reverend Jesse Jackson and the Democrats House Speaker Hakeem Jeffries.

- HAKEEM JEFFRIES: We appreciate the service and the sacrifice and the work of John Lewis having served with him. One who would always tell us during good times and troubled times, never give up, never give in.

LAURA FLANDERS: Congressman John Lewis died in 2020 and the number of original marchers still living is small. But one of those is Sheyann Webb-Christburg who marched at speed ahead of the crowd again this year.

SHEYANN WEBB-CHRISTBURG: I was the youngest little girl on the Bloody Sunday March back in 1965. I was eight years old.

LAURA FLANDERS: Who brought you?

SHEYANN WEBB-CHRISTBURG: Who brought me? I brought myself. I became a disobedient child when I was growing up in the Selma Civil Rights Movement, especially after having met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When he struck a chord with me and I was encouraged, motivated, and inspired by him. And you couldn't be a part of that movement unless you had courage. Either you were in or out and I was in. I wanna take a picture with these state troopers right here, if they don't mind.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why do you wanna do that?

SHEYANN WEBB-CHRISTBURG: Yeah, why do I wanna do it? Because 60 years ago, as a child, when I came across this bridge, I was only eight years old. The youngest little girl on that Bloody Sunday March. And today when I see you all standing and we are not facing the tear gas, the billy clubs, the dogs and the horses, I feel good about it, especially when I see young men who weren't even born then. I'm just proud to see you all standing and I thank you for your service. So if y'all don't mind, let me take this picture with y'all.

LAURA FLANDERS: One of the most significant organizations working for voting rights in this country today is Black Voters Matter, which was founded by two organizers with ties to Selma, LaTosha Brown and Clifford Albright.

CLIFFORD ALBRIGHT: For me and my wife and my friend and partner, LaTosha Brown, it's like coming home because LaTosha's literally from Selma, my wife April and I, we lived in Selma for 10 years. And so this is always like a coming home feeling for us. It's important for people to understand it didn't start when Dr. King or SCLC showed up. So there had been a local movement, but SNC and SCLC had not been involved in large part to basically summarize the feeling at the time. They said that the white folks are too mean and the Black folks are too scared. And so it wasn't until after the Birmingham bombing, the four little girls that some of the workers said, you know, just out of the pain and frustration and in defiance, they said, "You know what? We're going to Selma." And so that's when the movement went to like kind of this next level. But when we look at what they were up against, you know, you had Sheriff Jim Clark, who was the Dallas County sheriff, he had obviously, the governor who was a full-blown segregationist, right? When you look at the forces that they were up against and the lack of attention and the lack of support, when you look at the battles that Dr. King and others were having with the White House with Lyndon B. Johnson, who just kept saying, "Now's not the time for a Voting Rights Act." You know, when you look at all of those forces, the fact that people, 600 people were able to that day, go and start that march. And even get to the top of the bridge and you just have to kind of imagine it, right? Because people know the photo of John Lewis and the front line standing, you know, face-to-face with the troopers. But that's not the first time they saw the troopers. When they got to the top of the bridge, they saw the wave of troopers that were waiting on them. And so for that whole way down the bridge until they got to the foot, they're knowing this is not going to end well. But they still went forward, right? And so when we look at those forces that they were up against, we're up against some of the same forces today. We're up against police forces that are being told from the White House that basically anything goes. What we at least had in 1965 was once they got the federal court order that said that the march could go forward right after Bloody Sunday. That's what let the actual march happen from Selma to Montgomery, it happened because there was a court order that said they can march. And the federal government and the state obeyed that court order. What would happen today if that same court order was given? Right? Would this administration obey it? Would this administration send

National Guard or federal troops to enforce that court order? Or would they do the exact opposite and send federal troops to say, "We're not going to obey this court order." Trump has basically said that like, "If I don't obey what you gonna do to me, you gonna arrest me?" Well, we know they're not gonna do that, right? We've been through a lot of bad before, but this particular dynamic is really fundamentally different than anything we've seen really since Reconstruction. We're not gonna phone bank our way out of this. We're not gonna text our way out of this. And in truth, we're not even gonna vote our way out of this. It's going to take a different level of organizing, some different strategies. It's gonna take revisiting some of the same strategies that we saw here in Selma in terms of nonviolent civil disobedience and direct action. If we're not prepared for that, then we're not prepared for this moment.

LAURA FLANDERS: Law professor and author Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, co-founder and director of the African American Policy Forum also came to Selma for the anniversary. She agrees that American history holds a lot of relevant lessons for this moment, if only teachers are permitted to teach those lessons.

KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW: I guess one of the main problems is that we don't understand racial tyranny. We don't understand racist state, we don't understand white Christian nationalism. We don't understand the period in which Reconstruction was overthrown as being an example of America's particular flavor of fascism. Partly because it didn't happen to everyone. It only happened to Black people. So when we see and hear and think about fascism, we think about anti-democratic movements in Europe. We think about the Holocaust. We think about what happened in Italy and in Spain and in Portugal. But for Black people, as Langston Hughes said, you don't have to explain to us what fascism is. We experienced it. That is what we were fighting for the 60, 70 years after Reconstruction was overthrown. That was what was so significant about Selma in the 1960s because that was the moment when at last, decades later, we were able to push back against the overthrow, against the dissent into racial tyranny. That's the history that we don't tell ourselves. So that's why in this moment when another page out of that same book is being read and performed, we don't understand it for what it is. And that lastly is the entire reason why the first thing that MAGA went after was history, was our words, was our ability to shape and frame and communicate what is happening. So if anyone at all is surprised right now with the long list of words that now cannot be said in our federal government, it only means you weren't paying attention. 'Cause they started this nearly a decade ago. And this is what happens when we don't know our history enough to protest the erasure of our history.

LAURA FLANDERS: Progress towards genuine democracy and equal citizenship in the US has always moved in fits and starts. After the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, Reconstruction and the Great Society programs of LBJ, steps forward have always been followed by retrenchment. Donald Trump ran for election on a pledge to take America back, and he won majority power in DC. So what power remains for the civil rights movement today?

KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW: One of the things that I think we have learned now from the MAGA takeover of local governments is that power is local. Power is in our story. Power is in our narrative. Power is making sure that no power is left on the table. And all too often, I think that the civil rights story and the civil rights legacy has been projected purely as a national or federal project. And as a consequence, we haven't been as activated and motivated to get involved on the local level. So a lot of this underbrush that's been dried out, it happened at the local level. Taking over school boards, taking over county commissioners, taking over city councils, and then taking over state legislatures. That's where even the victories that we are able to get on a local level get overturned at the state level or in the governor's office. So power is closer to where the people are than we have been led to believe when we are called to action only every four years for a presidential campaign. There's been an emergency now around the state of our democracy. But a lot of people who talk about the state of our democracy don't talk about racism and the erasure of voting rights. We have to understand that our multiracial democracy and anti-racism in American history are two sides of the same coin. Whenever we have lost democratic rights, it has been through the weaponization of racism. Whenever we have gained racial justice, it's been a gain for everyone. When we lose sight of that, that becomes the parting of the waters that allows MAGA Trumpism to march into our Capitol and do more destruction than the Confederates did during the Civil War. That's what we're facing now.

NOELLE DAMICO: There are millions of people that are coming off the sidelines right now. They're coming off because they're seeing that what's going on by the Trump administration is not right. It's harming people here in this country and around the world. People who have never linked arms together are linking arms together now. Because we know, first they came for the immigrants, right? Next, they came for federal workers. Next, they came after DEI. Now they're going after student loans. Who's next? We're all next. We all have to stand together and the best news ever is that people aren't waiting. They're on the move now.

MAYA WILEY: This is a commemoration, but it's a commemoration that's a call to action. It is a commemoration that says not only do we have to remember where we have come from, what we've endured, what the fight produced, but that we have to fight on. We have to move forward fighting. Representative Terri Sewell that represents Selma reintroduced the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. It's been under attack since 2008. It's still under attack. There's still pieces of legislation, not just in states, but in the federal government. Like what is misnamed the SAVE Act. But it's really a way to say that anyone who can't produce a birth certificate or a passport cannot vote. Do you know how many people don't have one of those? Or how hard it is sometimes to get one? You might not. There are a lot of Black people, a lot of students, and a lot of guess what? Women who change their names. All of these who will not have ID that will match up, but it's about making it harder for us to vote. No vote, no voice. So the fight continues.

TRAYVON BOSSA: It seems like all the progress and all that stuff is regressing from the people that we have in office and all that stuff. It's like we basically going back in time, taking steps back. It's not even progressing as a nation.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what are we gonna do about that?

TRAYVON BOSSA: Just gotta keep fighting. That's really it. Keep fighting, keep speaking up, keep trying to make a change.

MYLA PERSON: So it is our first time coming here and as a chapter, we decided to come and unite and march because this march gave or put us in the position where we are today, where we, as Black people, can vote and be free civilians. And while there is still a march to go, we are in a great place right now and we just hope to keep on moving forward as a community.

SHEYANN WEBB-CHRISTBURG: My participation in the movement and during those turbulent times in Selma, Alabama in the '60s changed my life in a most profound way. It has really charted my course from childhood to even now as an adult in terms of how important it is for me to touch the lives of young people because it was when my life was touched when I was a young person. So it gives me, and it has given me the opportunity to work with young people to inspire and encourage them that regardless of how young you are, regardless of what walk of life you come from, you matter and you can make a difference.

LATOSHA BROWN: We're looking at this moment as a setback. This is a setup. This is a moment for us to really push harder, not to pull back and not to even say what we had was enough 'cause it wasn't. So if we are talking about we're gonna change everything, let's change everything. Let's create the kind of nation that we all desire and we deserve. So we see this moment as a moment to reset. We see this as a moment to resist. And we see this as a moment to reimagine.

LAURA FLANDERS: The Selma to Montgomery marchers were ordinary people. As President Obama reminded the nation, they weren't rich or powerful or elected or even physically imposing. And they weren't supported by the people in power at the time. No, for the most part, they were called names by them. Names like "communist" and "traitor" and "outside agitator" and "sexual and moral degenerate." It's worth remembering as we hear activists and organizers and journalists and teachers and even scientists called those very same names today. What propelled the activists forward down that bridge even towards the beating that they knew would come? Well, having been there, I think it came down to love and memory. Love for the people around them and before them, and memory of all that their people had been through to bring them thus far. If they could change this nation into a more inclusive place then, fueled by those forces in that time, there's no reason to think that we couldn't do the same again today. Can we

write another chapter, a more inclusive one even now? Absolutely. Will we? Well, that's the question, and we'll be asking it weekly on this show. You can find more information and our uncut conversations with Clifford Albright and Kimberlé Crenshaw at our website. And don't forget that you can get the full, uncut version of every week's conversation through subscribing to our podcast. All the information is right there at our site. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at lauraflanders.org.