

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Three Southern Villains

BY [JAMES RESTON, JR.](#) 2/15/15 AT 9:15 AM



A statue of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. outside Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama, January 8, 2015. The town was the scene of a major civil rights confrontation in March 1965, during which police beat protesters who were marching to demand voting rights for African Americans. JIM YOUNG/REUTERS

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Early in the movie *Selma*, a pivotal scene depicts a conversation between Martin Luther King Jr. and a young John Lewis when the movement is trying to decide whether to make Selma the main focus of its efforts in 1965. The protest was coming off several years of frustration in Albany, Georgia and desperately needed a transformative success if the push for voting rights was to succeed. Of paramount importance was the opposition. Would the movement face in Selma someone as vicious and mistake-prone as the police commissioner of Birmingham, Bull Connor, who two years before had given the world the horrendous images of his attack dogs and fire hoses? Or in the sheriff of Dallas

County, Jim Clark, would they face someone politically astute like the police chief of Albany, Laurie Pritchett, who had frustrated and defused and, in most people's minds, defeated the movement with his sensitivity to the movement's goals and his tactic of mass arrests?

“Is Jim Clark a Bull Connor or a Laurie Pritchett?” King asks Lewis.

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Whether it actually happened or not, the exchange interests me immensely.

Eleven years after Selma, in 1976, I had tracked down these dark figures of civil rights struggle, Jim Clark and Laurie Pritchett, with a project for the [Southern Oral History](#) program in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Whatever happened to the Southern villains? I wanted to know.

Bull Connor was not available. He had died in 1973. The answer I found was that of the two remaining villains one had moved on to a career of considerable distinction in law enforcement after his confrontation with King, while the other had turned to a life of crime.

I found Jim Clark not in Selma but in the north Alabama town of Ft. Payne. The search had taken me over a month, tracking him from Alabama to North Carolina, Tennessee to Florida, and by the time I found him, I knew enough, maybe too much, about his life to make my approach comfortable. When I came upon him in a restaurant in the Holiday Inn, there was no doubt that this was Jim Clark, the Jim Clark, who I remembered seeing in Selma in 1963 as a young reporter for the Chicago Daily News, with his white military helmet liner pulled down a correct two fingers above his nose, standing with a few posse members, cattle prods dangling from their belts.

He sat alone, with his profile to me, displaying that large head with its flattened boxer's nose. His hair was graying now. He wore glasses, and there was no button in his lapel reading “Never!”, but there was no mistaking that profile.

I delivered my rehearsed introduction to him haltingly. A professor at a Southern university, I had written a book on the Joan Little case, and so the reputation of the Southern law man intrigued me greatly. He invited me to sit down. He did not ask if I was a member of the "liberal press" which he scorned and had steadfastly avoided for nine years. He did not ask how I found him, not that I would have admitted that the FBI had helped. Nor did he ask if I knew anything about his legal troubles since 1968, not that I would have told him about two of his Alabama prosecutors who had also helped in my search.

Instead we talked about the caricature of Southern lawmen that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. On that subject he was animated.

"Anytime you laugh at a caricature, it's because you see something human in it, something of yourself in it," Clark said with surprising candor. "If you can't laugh, you're in trouble."

Jim Clark's credentials to be sheriff of Dallas County were part military and part political. He had been a lieutenant colonel in the Second World War and in his training, had competed against General George Patton in war games in the Louisiana swamps. In the 1954 campaign of "Kissin" Jim Folsom, Clark coordinated an 11-county area, and when Folsom was elected, he appointed Clark as an assistant commissioner of revenue.

In 1956 at the Democratic National Convention he was a floor manager for the campaign of Kentucky's governor, Happy Chandler, and he recalled how "Eleanor Roosevelt pushed that governor of Illinois [Adlai Stevenson] with his elevator shoes and lipstick." In 1957, the sheriff of Dallas County died, and even though Clark had no experience whatever in law enforcement, Folsom appointed him to the post.

For a time after his defeat for reelection in 1966 after the debacle at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Clark had continued in politics. A figure of international repute now, he lectured for three years for the John Birch Society, traveling to 38 states and 400 campuses. Once he spoke in the McCormick Auditorium in Chicago,

and the crowd was so large in the afternoon that the sponsors asked him to speak again in the evening. When there was a bomb threat, “they blamed me the next morning for giving such a fiery speech.”

His advance sheet read:

He attempted to restore and maintain order during the influx of thousands of white and Negro beatniks, revolutionaries, and “weekend” clergymen into Selma. Bearing out the oft-stated fact that local law enforcement agencies are a private target of Communist agitation, Clark and his men were attacked repeatedly..... By the use of Pavlovian techniques employed on a nation-wide basis, an image had been created and instilled in the public consciousness of “Jim Clark” as being a rednecked racist who embodies everything evil in the South.

After considering briefly a race for the governorship, Clark’s last dabbling in politics came in 1968 when he ran against Bull Connor in a campaign to be president of the Alabama Public Service Commission, the body that regulates state utilities. But Clark was not comfortable in the campaign, since Bull Connor was a friend. “He was partly paralyzed with saliva dribbling out of his mouth,” Clark recalled. So he didn’t campaign in the last three weeks of the election, and Connor won.

After 1968 Jim Clark dropped from sight, working hard at anonymity, covering his tracks diligently, and leaving orders with associates not to tell anybody about his whereabouts. He began skipping around the south in a number of financial ventures, some of which were highly questionable.

In 1969-70 he operated as a broker for the Tangible Risk Insurance Company in Birmingham, a concern that was backed by the Bank of Sark. Sark is a British island in the North Sea with a population of 560, and the Bank of Sark operated out of several rooms over a tavern.

In 1971, along with eight other men, Clark was indicted for mail fraud. His attorney wanted Clark’s case to be severed from that of his co-conspirators, telling the court that he would challenge any potential black juror that might have heard of the infamous Jim Clark. The former sheriff plead nolo contendere.

In 1973 he had gravitated to North Carolina as the general manager of the Pinehurst Mortgage and Loan Company, a firm offering unsecured loans at 9½ percent interest. With a slick presentation and widespread television and newspaper ads, the company became quickly known.

But Clark was fired after six months for an “unwise investment,” and a year after that, the company’s officers charged him with embezzling company funds. But the company itself soon had more serious problems. In April 1976 Pinehurst Mortgage and Loan ran afoul of securities laws and went into bankruptcy. The president of the company was convicted of fraud in a similar mortgage and loan fleece in Mississippi.

Clark stayed on in North Carolina and in 1975 he was leaving business cards as secretary-treasurer of Timberland Properties Ltd. But the Southern Pines Chamber of Commerce had never heard of the company.

In 1976 when I came upon him in Fort Payne, he was back in Alabama, operating in the fast buck climate of coal brokerage in Dekalb County. In partnership with two others, he was an officer of International Coal and Mineral. “ICM,” Clark joked, “like the intercontinental ballistic missile.” What I did not know was that Clark was again skirting the line of illegality. The previous October, Clark’s partner, George Mills, was indicted for embezzlement in the classic style of north Alabama coal shysters. The complaint stated that Mills had taken orders for coal, converted checks to his own use, and never paid the miner.

“George Mills and Jim Clark pretty well fit the mold of the quick buck shysters around here,” the Dekalb County prosecutor at the time, Richard Igou, told me.

Meanwhile, Clark absconded with a car he hadn’t paid for, and a Fort Payne state patrolman tracked him down in Mobile with a warrant for a stolen car. With the recovery of the ICM car and another, charges against Clark were not pressed.



David Oyelowo, center, as Martin Luther King Jr. and Carmen Ejogo as Coretta Scott King in the movie

“Selma.”ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/PARAMOUNT PICTURES

When Jim Clark’s mind turned to Selma in 1965, bitterness poured out. His words were quiet and seemed to come with a considerable effort at self-control. His hands trembled, as he recalled “the wall-to-wall mattresses in the condemned section of Selma without any sanitation,” the dispensing of birth control pills to the Yankee arrivees and the open use of LSD in his jail.

He spoke of Martin Luther King Jr. as a coward and a liar, who broke a lot of laws and caused more disrespect for the law than “any person in history.” He scoffed at Sammy Davis Jr. flying into Selma for a day, and appearing on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* the next night to ridicule Jim Clark and

his big black cigar: “And I don’t smoke. Don’t even like to be around people who do.”

He bridled at what he saw as press distortions: how the press turned Wilson Baker, the Selma safety director, into a “knight in shining armor” and him into a goat, how *Newsweek* printed a picture of him making it look as if he was striking a civil rights worker when actually, he claimed, he was taking a night stick away from her. He pointed to a scar on his finger where she bit him in the altercation.

“A friend of mine sent me a bottle of Adolf’s Meat Tenderizer the next morning...said, if I was going to let people chew on me like that, the least I could do was make myself more tasty.”

On the day of the charge by mounted state police and sheriff’s posse at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9, 1965, Clark had just returned from Washington, where he had appeared on the *Issues and Answers* television show. He arrived back in Selma just as “King’s professionals” were coming across the bridge. The governor, not he, was the chief authority that day, Clark was quick to point out. And when the horsemen charged the professionals, Clark asserted, the marchers fell flat, and “then they rose up with knives, ice picks and razors.” His only regret, he said, was losing his temper a few times. In particular, he allowed himself to be provoked by C.T. Vivian, one of the movement’s most prominent figures.

“Vivian was there with several hundred demonstrators,” Clark recalled. “and I was standing at the top of the courthouse steps, with my nightstick under my arm. I had only about six deputies behind me, waiting for reinforcement, and trying to stall for time. Vivian kept haranguing me, calling me a Hitler and a brute. A television stroke light came on me full face, and I said, ‘Put out that light, or I’ll shoot it out.’ At that point Vivian grabbed my stick under my arm.

“Well, I’d heard the expression ‘seeing red’ all my life, and never knew what it meant. It looked like a red glaze came over my eyes, and I hauled off and hit him. He went tumbling backward down 21 steps. I saw him down on the street

and wondered how he got there. Back in the courthouse someone said, ‘You sure knocked hell out of him. I didn’t know you had such a left.’ I couldn’t remember hitting him, but my knuckle hurt like hell. I went to the doctor and found I had a linear fracture in the knuckle joint. That night on television I saw me hit him.”

Two years after I saw him in Fort Payne, Jim Clark was indicted in Montgomery in a conspiracy to smuggle three tons of marijuana into the U.S. from Columbia. The plan was to use vintage aircraft that would land in remote Alabama airstrips.

He was sentenced to two years in federal prison and served nine months. In the freeze frame at the end of the movie “Selma,” the postscript beneath his image mentions only when he ended his career in law enforcement. It does not mention his turn toward criminality. He died in 2007.

Laurie Pritchett, the chief of police in Albany, Georgia, in 1961-64, is another story. In the lore of the civil rights movement, he was often coupled with Jim Clark and Bull Connor as a dread, evil symbol of white tyranny. And yet the three-year concentration on Albany is generally regarded as Martin Luther King Jr.’s worst defeat, and Pritchett as the smartest of King’s adversaries.

The chief’s tactics were mass arrests, the control of white racists, amiable relations with the press and even friendly contacts with King himself. If the Albany movement had not been followed by the fire hoses of Birmingham, the cattle prods of Selma and the earthen dam of Neshoba County, Mississippi, many scholars believe that the voting rights legislation might have been a lot longer in coming. Pritchett’s real triumph was that he was not a credible villain.

When I found him at his modest, cinder-block, lakeside house in South Mont, North Carolina outside of High Point, it was not hard to imagine why he had

been such an intimidating presence in Albany. He was a blockhouse of a man, stripped to the waist that hot day, with massive shoulders and a tapered waist. His hair was blond and wavy rather than the butch-cut of his more notorious days.

He looked back on the Albany struggle with evident pleasure, saying he was happy to have played a part in that historic era. Stacks of clippings and pictures from his heady days in Georgia were prominently displayed in his den, though not in his office.

Martin Luther King Jr. and his lieutenants were his “close personal friends,” he professed, and Albany was merely a clash of means rather than a disagreement of philosophy. He would have gone to King’s funeral, he said, if rioting over the assassination had not broken out in High Point. Each year, he treasured the Christmas card that Coretta King would send.

When the movement began its focus on Albany, Pritchett set out to learn everything he could about the philosophy of non-violence. From his study of Gandhi’s march to the sea, he thought King’s challenge could be neutralized with mass arrest on the pretext of simply enforcing existing law. Sure that King hoped to pack and overwhelm the Albany jail, he devised a plan to ship prisoners out of Albany to jails in surrounding towns, so that not a single protester would be jailed in Albany. The sheriffs of the surrounding counties as far away as 70 miles were glad to cooperate.

“They said, ‘Look, you’re fighting our battle. We know if Albany falls, all of us fall, so we’re with you.’”

Once the sheriffs were organized, they had the capacity to jail 10,000 prisoners. Over the three-year period of the Albany movement, about 2,400 were indeed jailed, and at an especially dramatic point in the struggle, 1,500 were jailed at once.

He trained his officers to resist provocation. “If they were spit upon, cussed, abused in any way, they were not to take their billy-clubs out,” he said. He

deactivated his canine corps, and closed Albany's bars. When King came personally to Albany, Pritchett would meet him in Americus and drive him the last 40 miles personally in a squad car.

In contrast to other places where reporters were hassled and photographers had their cameras smashed, Prichett held twice daily press conferences.

"[The reporters] would come to my hotel room," he said. "We kept them alerted as to what was going to happen, because we had sources of information. We knew when the [protesters] were going to march, where they were going to march, what they were going to do."

He never believed Albany should be segregated, he claimed, and called the public accommodations law a "good bill" that he was glad to see passed.

"We didn't differ in what they wanted, but in the means Dr. King employed," he told me. "He said the legal route cost too much money and was too time-consuming. I said, 'All right, doctor, you're drawing lines now. You're telling me that you're going to take to the streets in defiance of the law. If you do this, I'll have to arrest you. I'm telling you to go to court, get an injunction to stop us from enforcing an illegal law, if it is illegal. It won't take long. If it's not a good law, it will be overruled, and you'll be on your way.'"

James Reston, Jr.'s new book, [Luther's Fortress: Martin Luther and His Reformation Under Siege](#), will be published in May. A lecturer in creative writing at UNC from 1971-81, he is now a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. The tapes and transcripts of his interviews with Jim Clark and Laurie Pritchett, as well as with the sheriff of Neshoba County, Mississippi, L.A. Rainey, are in the Southern Oral History project at the University of North Carolina.