

## March on Washington

### **The Call to Negro America to March on Washington (1941), A. Philip Randolph**

[http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch30\\_02.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch30_02.htm)

*In May 1941, A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), the African-American head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a "thundering march" on Washington of 150,000 blacks "to wake up and shock white America as it has never been shocked before." Such a dramatic public event, he decided, was the only way to convince President Roosevelt to ensure equality of opportunity in the rapidly expanding defense industries and government agencies. Just before the scheduled march, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which created a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to eliminate racial discrimination in government hiring. Randolph thereupon canceled the march. But the mere creation of a new federal agency did not ensure justice. Randolph therefore kept the pressure on the administration to provide adequate funding and staffing for the FEPC. Although black employment in federal jobs increased from 60,000 in 1941 to 200,000 in 1945, the FEPC could not directly regulate private employers or labor unions. Moreover, despite these limitations, attempts to make the FEPC a permanent government agency never generated broad-based political support.*

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We call upon you to fight for jobs in National Defense. We call upon you to struggle for the integration of Negroes in the armed forces. . . .

We call upon you to demonstrate for the abolition of Jim-Crowism in all Government departments and defense employment.

This is an hour of crisis. It is a crisis of democracy. It is a crisis of minority groups. It is a crisis of Negro Americans. What is this crisis?

To American Negroes, it is the denial of jobs in Government defense projects. It is racial discrimination in Government departments. It is widespread Jim-Crowism in the armed forces of the Nation.

While billions of the taxpayers' money are being spent for war weapons, Negro workers are finally being turned away from the gates of factories, mines and mills—being flatly told, "NOTHING DOING." Some employers refuse to give Negroes jobs when they are without "union cards," and some unions refuse Negro workers union cards when they are "without jobs."

What shall we do?

What a dilemma!

What a runaround!

What a disgrace!

What a blow below the belt!

Though dark, doubtful and discouraging, all is not lost, all is not hopeless. Though battered and bruised, we are not beaten, broken, or bewildered.

Verily, the Negroes' deepest disappointments and direst defeats, their tragic trials and outrageous oppressions in these dreadful days of destruction and disaster to democracy and freedom, and the rights of minority peoples, and the dignity and independence of the human spirit, is the Negroes' greatest opportunity to rise to the highest heights of struggle for freedom and justice in Government, in industry, in labor unions, education, social service, religion, and culture.

With faith and confidence of the Negro people in their own power for self-liberation, Negroes can break down that barriers of discrimination against employment in National Defense. Negroes can kill the deadly serpent of race hatred in the Army, Navy, Air and Marine Corps, and smash through and blast the Government, business and labor-union red tape to win the right to equal opportunity in vocational training and re-training in defense employment.

Most important and vital of all, Negroes, by the mobilization and coordination of their mass power, can cause PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT TO ISSUE AN EXECUTIVE ORDER ABOLISHING DISCRIMINATIONS IN ALL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT, ARMY, NAVY, AIR CORPS AND NATIONAL DEFENSE JOBS.

Of course, the task is not easy. In very truth, it is big, tremendous and difficult.

It will cost money.

It will require sacrifice.

It will tax the Negroes' courage, determination and will to struggle. But we can, must and will triumph.

The Negroes' stake in national defense is big. It consists of jobs, thousands of jobs. It may represent millions, yes hundreds of millions of dollars in wages. It consists of new industrial opportunities and hope. This is worth fighting for.

But to win our stakes, it will require an "all-out," bold and total effort and demonstration of colossal proportions.

Negroes can build a mammoth machine of mass action with a terrific and tremendous driving and striking power that can shatter and crush the evil fortress of race prejudice and hate, if they will only resolve to do so and never stop, until victory comes.

Dear fellow Negro Americans, be not dismayed by these terrible times. You possess power, great power. Our problem is to harness and hitch it up for action on the broadest, daring and most gigantic scale.

In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure, more pressure, and still more pressure, through the tactic and strategy of broad, organized, aggressive mass action behind the vital and important issues of the Negro. To this end, we propose that ten thousand Negroes MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS IN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND EQUAL INTEGRATION IN THE FIGHTING FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES.

An "all-out" thundering march on Washington, ending in a monster and huge demonstration at Lincoln's Monument will shake up white America.

It will shake up official Washington.

It will give encouragement to our white friends to fight all the harder by our side, with us, for our righteous cause.

It will gain respect for the Negro people.

It will create a new sense of self-respect among Negroes.

But what of national unity?

We believe in national unity which recognizes equal opportunity of black and white citizens to jobs in national defense and the armed forces, and in all other institutions and endeavors in America. We condemn all dictatorships, Fascist, Nazi and Communist. We are loyal, patriotic Americans all.

But if American democracy will not defend its defenders; if American democracy will not protect its protectors; if American democracy will not give jobs to its toilers because of race or color; if American democracy will not insure equality of opportunity, freedom and justice to its citizens, black and white, it is a hollow mockery and belies the principles for which it is supposed to stand. . .

Today we call on President Roosevelt, a great humanitarian and idealist, to . . . free American Negro citizens of the stigma, humiliation and insult of discrimination and Jim-Crowism in Government departments and national defense.

The Federal Government cannot with clear conscience call upon private industry and labor unions to abolish discrimination based on race and color as long as it practices discrimination itself against Negro Americans.

[From A. Philip Randolph, "Call to Negro America to March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense," *Black Worker* 14 (May 1941)]

## **The March on Washington Original Draft of SNCC Chairman John Lewis' Speech to the March**

[Note — Below is the text of the speech that John Lewis and SNCC activists originally wrote (taken from [\*Walking With the Wind\*](#)).]

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. They have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages, or no wages at all.

In good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little and too late. There's not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality.

This bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses, for engaging in peaceful demonstrations: This bill will not protect the citizens in Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear in a police state. This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped up charges. What about the three young men in Americus, Georgia, who face the death penalty for engaging in peaceful protest?

The voting section of this bill will not help thousands of black citizens who want to vote. It will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama and Georgia, who are qualified to vote but lack a sixth-grade education. "ONE MAN, ONE VOTE" is the African cry. It is ours, too. It must be ours.

People have been forced to leave their homes because they dared to exercise their right to register to vote. What is there in this bill to ensure the equality of a maid who earns \$5 a week in the home of a family whose income is \$100,000 a year?

For the first time in one hundred years this nation is being awakened to the fact that segregation is evil and that it must be destroyed in all forms. Your presence today proves that you have been aroused to the point of action.

We are now involved in a serious revolution. This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic and social exploitation. What political leader here can stand up and say, "My party is the party of principles?" The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of Javits is also the party of Goldwater. Where is *our* party?

In some parts of the South we work in the fields from sunup to sundown for \$12 a week. In Albany, Georgia, nine of our leaders have been indicted not by Dixiecrats but by the federal government for peaceful protest. But what did the federal government do when Albany's deputy sheriff beat attorney C. B. King and left him half dead? What did the federal government do when local police officials kicked and assaulted the pregnant wife of Slater King, and she lost her baby?

It seems to me that the Albany indictment is part of a conspiracy on the part of the federal government and local politicians in the interest of expediency.

I want to know, which side is the federal government on?

The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery. The nonviolent revolution is saying, "We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure, that could and would assure us a victory."

To those who have said, "Be patient and wait," we must say that "patience" is a dirty and nasty word. We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually. We want our freedom, and we want it *now*. We cannot depend on any political party, for both the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence.

We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about. In the struggle, we must seek more than civil rights; we must work for the community of love, peace and true brotherhood. Our minds, souls and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for *all people*.

The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it into the courts. Listen, Mr. Kennedy. Listen, Mr. Congressman. Listen, fellow citizens. The black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won't be a "cooling-off" period.

All of us must get in the revolution. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete. In the Delta of Mississippi, in southwest Georgia, in Alabama, Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march!

We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Bameett, Wallace and Thurmond won't stop this revolution. The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own scorched earth" policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently. We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy. We will make the action of the past few months look petty. And I say to you, WAKE UP AMERICA!

[The Kennedy administration and some of the more conservative speakers objected to some of John's language. To maintain solidarity and as a gesture of respect for A. Philip Randolph, John agreed to modify some elements of the speech — Cut were the words that criticized the President's bill as being "too little and too late." Lost was the call to march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did." Gone was the question asking, "which side is the federal government on?" The word "cheap" was removed to describe some political leaders. The ending of John's speech as it was actually delivered is shown below:]

We will not stop. If we do not get meaningful legislation out of this Congress, the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today.

By the force of our demands, our determination and our numbers, we shall splinter the desegregated South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of God and democracy.

We must say, "Wake up, America. *Wake up!!!* For we cannot stop, and we *will* not be patient."

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<http://www.crmvet.org/info/mowjl.htm>

The March on Washington (1963)

I Have a Dream

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, [a great American](#), in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the [Emancipation Proclamation](#). This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the [Declaration of Independence](#), they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds.

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.

We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead.

We cannot turn back.

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. \*We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." \* We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."<sup>1</sup>

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. And some of you have come from areas where your quest -- quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."<sup>2</sup>

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

*My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.*

*Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,*

*From every mountainside, let freedom ring!*

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that:

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.

From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

*Free at last! Free at last!*

*Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*<sup>3</sup>

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<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>

## Take My Hand, Precious Lord

**Written by Thomas Dorsey**

**Performed by Mahalia Jackson**

Precious Lord, take my hand  
Lead me on, let me stand  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn  
Through the storm, through the night  
Lead me on to the light  
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

When my way grows drear  
Precious Lord linger near  
When my life is almost gone  
Hear my cry, hear my call  
Hold my hand lest I fall  
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

When the darkness appears  
And the night draws near  
And the day is past and gone  
At the river I stand  
Guide my feet, hold my hand  
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

Precious Lord, take my hand  
Lead me on, let me stand  
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone  
Through the storm, through the night  
Lead me on to the light  
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/soundtrack-lyrics/#hand>

## I'm On My Way

**Performed by the Carlton Reese Memorial Unity Choir featuring Mamie Brown-Mason and Performed by Odetta at the March on Washington**

I'm on my way to the freedom land  
I'm on my way to the freedom land  
I'm on my way to the freedom land  
Yes I'm on my way, oh Lord  
to the freedom land

It's an uphill journey, but I'm on my way  
It's an uphill journey, but I'm on my way  
It's an uphill journey, but I'm on my way

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/soundtrack-lyrics/#miss>

## Press

*The Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1963

### **Editorial: A Right and a Responsibility**

There is no more basic right guaranteed by the Constitution than the freedom of "the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

In less than 24 hours, tens of thousands of Americans will exercise that right in a massive civil rights demonstration in Washington. Leaders of the extraordinary march on the nation's capital call it a "living petition."

The vast majority of their countrymen concur in demands for equality by Negroes and other minorities, and they deplore the inequities that have led to the civil rights march. But they are concerned -- as apparently are demonstration officials -- that the march could somehow miscarry, that the very numbers participating will make it vulnerable to disorder...

...A demonstration that falls into violence would be disastrous, but even a well-ordered march is not likely to change the position of Congress members, pro or con, on the President's civil rights proposals. And although proper federal legislation will be helpful, the main fight to end discrimination must still be waged at the local and state level.

*The New York Times*, August 29, 1963

### **Editorial: Equality is Their Right**

The huge assemblage of Negro and white citizens in Washington yesterday to demand equality in all aspects of American life embodied, in concept and in execution, the noblest tradition of our democracy. It reflected their conviction that, if enough of the people demonstrate that they care enough, no force in the United States is more powerful than an appeal to conscience and basic morality.

They massed, 200,000 strong, at the Lincoln Memorial beside the seated figure of the President who signed the Emancipation Proclamation a century ago...

...The discipline maintained by the civil rights pilgrims was as impressive as their dedication. That so vast a movement could be carried out with such decorum is a tribute to the responsibility of both leaders and followers...

*The New Orleans Times-Picayune, August 30, 1963*

#### **Editorial: Massing Precedent**

Negroes in and out of Washington who assembled in the estimated number of 200,000 in the capital are to be congratulated for their orderliness, and celerity of departure. There was, however, no telling, at any time, what might happen; there is no telling to what extent similar massive gatherings, with or without governmental encouragement, with or without peaceful intent, to whatever end or with whatever motive, will become a fixture in the mechanics of trying to get what you want in the way of legislation...

*The New York Times, August 30, 1963*

#### **Editorial: After the March is Over**

...The national conscience, most potent of all spurs to social action, has been stirred in ways that will find expression in laws and in community practice. The only question is whether the translation of attitude into action will come fast enough to prevent new explosions of interracial violence.

The unity of Negro and white citizens in the leadership of the march and in its rank and file demonstrated the indivisibility of the fight for genuine equality in all phases of American affairs. It was a rebuke to those in both races -- the White Citizens Councils and the Black Muslims -- who favor a pulling-apart instead of a pulling-together...

*The Chicago Tribune, September 4, 1963*

#### **Letters to the Editor: The March**

...Without exception, this was the most outstanding, finest, most wonderful group of Americans which ever assembled voluntarily for anything. They were of the stuff which made this country great.

John J. Walsh  
Chicago

The litter and debris thrown about the grounds near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington is a disgrace and certainly no credit to the freedom marchers. If these people want to be accepted, they must also show some responsibility.

Disgusted Taxpayer  
Chicago

[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/story/08\\_washington.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/story/08_washington.html)