March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

On 28 August 1963, more than 200,000 demonstrators took part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the nation's capital. The march was successful in pressuring the administration of John F. Kennedy to initiate a strong federal civil rights bill in Congress. During this event, Martin Luther King delivered his memorable ''I Have a Dream'' speech.

The 1963 March on Washington had several precedents. In the summer of 1941 A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, called for a march on Washington, D. C., to draw attention to the exclusion of African Americans from positions in the national defense industry. This job market had proven to be closed to blacks, despite the fact that it was growing to supply materials to the Allies in World War II. The threat of 100,000 marchers in Washington, D.C., pushed President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802, which mandated the formation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission to investigate racial discrimination charges against defense firms. In response, Randolph cancelled plans for the march.

Civil rights demonstrators did assemble at the Lincoln Memorial in May 1957 for a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom on the third anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and in October 1958, for a Youth March for Integrated Schools to protest the lack of progress since that ruling. King addressed the 1957 demonstration, but due to ill health after being stabbed by Izola Curry, Coretta Scott King delivered his sched¬uled remarks at the 1958 event.

By 1963, the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, most of the goals of these earlier protests still had not been realized. High levels of black unemployment, work that offered most African Americans only minimal wages and poor job mobility, systematic disenfranchisement of many African Americans, and the persistence of racial segrgation in the South prompted discussions about a large scale march for political and economic justice as early as 1962. On behalf of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Randolph wrote a letter on 24 May 1962 to Secretary Stewart Udall of the Department of the Interior regarding permits for a march culminating at the Lincoln Memorial that fall. Plans for the march were stalled when Udall encouraged the groups to consider the Sylvan Theater at the Washington Monument due to the complications of rerouting traffic and the volume of tourists at the Lincoln Memorial.

In March 1963 Randolph telegraphed King that the NALC had begun planning a June march ''for Negro job rights,'' and asked for King's immediate response (Randolph, 26 March 1963). In May, at the height of the Birmingham Campaign, King joined Randolph, James Farmer of CORE, and Charles McDew of SNCC in calling for such an action later that year, declaring, ''Let the black laboring masses speak!'' (King et al., 7 May 1963) After notifying President Kennedy of their intent, the leaders of the major civil rights organizations set the march date for 28 August.

The stated goals of the protest included ‘‘a comprehensive civil rights bill’’ that would do away with segregated public accommodations; ‘‘protection of the right to vote’’; mechanisms for seeking redress of violations of constitutional rights; ‘‘desegregation of all public schools in 1963’’; a massive federal works program ‘‘to train and place unemployed workers’’; and ‘‘a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination in all employment’’ (‘‘Goals of Rights March’’).

As the summer passed, the list of organizations participating in and sponsoring the event expanded to include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the United Auto Workers (UAW), and many others.

The March on Washington was not universally embraced. It was condemned by the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X who referred to it as ‘‘the Farce on Washington,’’ although he attended nonetheless (Malcolm X, 278). The executive board of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) declined to support the march, adopting a position of neutrality. Nevertheless, many constituent unions attended in substantial numbers.

The diversity of those in attendance was reflected in the event’s speakers and performers. They included singers Marian Anderson, Odetta, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan; Little Rock civil rights veteran Daisy Lee Bates; actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee; American Jewish Congress president Rabbi Joachim Prinz; Randolph; UAW president Walter Reuther; march organizer Bayard Rustin; NAACP president Roy Wilkins; National Urban League president Whitney Young and SNCC leader John Lewis.

A draft of John Lewis’ prepared speech, circulated before the march, was denounced by Reuther, Burke Marshall, and Patrick O’Boyle, the Catholic Archbishop of Washington, D.C., for its militant tone. In the speech’s original version Lewis charged that the Kennedy administration’s proposed Civil Rights Act was ‘‘too little and too late,’’ and threatened not only to march in Washington but to ‘‘march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We will pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy’’ (Lewis, 221; 224). In a caucus that included King, Randolph, and SNCC’s James Forman, Lewis agreed to eliminate those and other phrases, but believed that in its final form his address ‘‘was still a strong speech, very strong’’ (Lewis, 227).

The day’s high point came when King took the podium toward the end of the event, and moved the Lincoln Memorial audience and live television viewers with what has come to be known as his ‘‘I Have a Dream’’ speech. King commented that ‘‘as television beamed the image of this extraordinary gathering across the border oceans, everyone who believed in man’s capacity to better himself had a moment of inspiration and confidence in the future of the human race,’’ and characterized the march as an ‘‘appropriate climax’’ to the summer’s events (King, ‘‘I Have a Dream,’’ 125; 122).

After the march, King and other civil rights leaders met with President Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House, where they discussed the need for bipartisan support of civil rights legislation. Though they were passed after Kennedy’s death, the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 reflect the demands of the march.

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