

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

The Historic Demonstration and the Iconic Speech that Changed America

BY CHARLES EUCHNER

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. climbed onto the wooden platform in front of the Lincoln Memorial, he encountered Harry Belafonte and Stanley Levison. He clutched the typed script of the speech he would give in two hours.

“I

wonder if the President will really understand what this day is all about,” King said.

“If he doesn’t understand this one,” Levison said, “he’ll understand the next one.”

On the National Mall, more than a quarter-million people had gathered to make sure that everyone from President John F. Kennedy down to the most modest shop owner understood that now was the time for America to embrace equal rights for all Americans. Everywhere King looked, he saw people with whom he worked, side by side, in the movement for civil rights.

On the dais were the other leaders of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. A. Philip Randolph, the black labor leader who dreamed up this grand day more than two decades before, emceed the program. Moving nervously around the podium was Bayard Rustin, America’s leading apostle of nonviolence who also organized the march. Daisy Bates, who guided the Little Rock Nine during the storms of desegregation in 1957, sat with other heroic women of the movement. Not far away was Roy Wilkins, the head of the National Association for

Civil rights and union leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Walter Reuther, and Sam Weinblatt lead the way to the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, Aug. 28, 1963.

the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Marcus Wood, an old seminary friend, sat about 20 feet from the podium. Mahalia Jackson, the gospel singer whose voice blended the pain and yearnings of oppressed blacks everywhere, awaited her moment on the stage.

Down on America’s 300-acre front lawn, King looked out at the people waging a nonviolent civil war to claim the freedoms promised in the Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

At the foot of the Lincoln Memorial were the “Young Jacobins,” the radicalized young people who were confronting segregation in its most violent precincts, in Alabama and Mississippi and Louisiana. The young activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had grown impatient with the movement’s twin pillars of nonviolence and integration. Words like “black power” were entering their lexicon. They often dismissed older leaders like King, whom they called “Da Lawd.” They were tired of waiting for their rights – and tired of listening to elders who had waited much longer.

On the edge of the mall were three teenaged boys from Gadsden, Ala., who had hitchhiked to Washington. Arriving a week ahead of time, they called Walter Fauntroy, King’s friend who helped organize the march, in the middle of the night. Fauntroy put the boys to work making signs. As they hammered, King found them. In Gadsden a few days before, one of their parents asked King to look after their boys. So he did.

Deep in the crowd was Harvey Jones, who marched that summer against the *Charleston News and Courier* for its distorted coverage of the movement. During one march, out of nowhere, a heavy beer mug whistled toward Jones’s head. When he tensed up, King whirled to confront Jones. “If you don’t think you can respond nonviolently,” King told him, “maybe you should leave the march.” Jones already knew not to fight back. But King’s stern words made a lifelong impression on him.

Lena Horne, the singer whose 1943 rendition of “Stormy Weather” had become a standard, was too ill to perform that day. But she stood before the throng and shouted one word into Washington’s swamplike air: “Freeeeeeee-dom!” That word cut through the crowd’s soft cacophony, uniting the throng for the first time.



Labor leader A. Philip Randolph was instrumental in initiating and organizing the 1963 March on Washington.

Walking around the mall, a young Justice Department (DOJ) lawyer named Ramsey Clark surveyed the unprecedented mix of America's teeming masses – priests, teachers, students, artists, small business people, the unemployed, factory workers, mothers – from a distance. “It was their day,” he recalled years later. At DOJ, Clark helped with security planning. Official Washington's fear of violence dissolved as hundreds of buses and trains snaked into the city.

One of King's closest friends and colleagues, Dorothy Cotton, clutched her husband George's hand as she worked her way to the podium to hear her boss speak. Cotton spent the previous night typing drafts of King's speech. But exhausted by the day, the couple retreated to their hotel room to witness King's speech on live national television.

Walter Johnson, a retired New York cop who led the corps of more than 1,000 volunteer security guards, was on duty. With Rustin, Johnson trained the corps in the techniques of nonviolent crowd control. Now Johnson could bask in the day's peace, at least partly because of his efforts.

Those were just a few of the faces gathered for the greatest demonstration for freedom in American history. In a year, King would stand by President Lyndon B. Johnson as he signed historic civil rights legislation. In December 1964, King would be presented the Nobel Peace Prize. Later he would speak out against the war in Vietnam and the scourge of poverty in the wealthiest nation in history.

Now, King got ready to define the civil rights movement – really for the first time – for the American people and the world. No single person could embody the movement, which was divided over goals, strategies, alliances, time lines, and language. But King possessed, without doubt, its greatest voice. And now he was ready to use it.

Origins of the March

The March on Washington Movement began in 1941, when labor leader A. Philip Randolph called on blacks everywhere to put their bodies on the line for civil rights.

For years, the civil rights movement split over two basic ideals. Booker T. Washington advocated forging vibrant black communities within the constraints of segregation. Blacks, he said, could create their own destiny by building schools, businesses, churches – and strong families and civic life – despite the violence and intimidation of segregation. W.E.B. DuBois, one of the founders of the NAACP, recoiled against this approach. DuBois exhorted the “talented tenth,” a vanguard of the brightest and most successful blacks, to lead an aggressive, uncompromising movement to topple segregation.

Randolph – who the FBI called “the most dangerous Negro in America” for his successful campaign to organize black Pullman porters into a union – offered a third way. Blacks, he said, could escape their “slave mentality” and “inferiority complex” only by putting their bodies on the line. They needed to get on the street, march, speak with a strong voice, and demand their basic rights as citizens. And everyone in the black community – from janitors and sharecroppers to ministers and teachers – needed to join in.

When wartime industries refused to employ blacks during World War II, Randolph organized a march of black men down Pennsylvania Avenue to protest. The marchers would expose the hypocrisy of Americans fighting for democracy abroad while denying blacks their basic rights. President Franklin D. Roosevelt implored Randolph to cancel the march. Randolph refused. How many people would march, Roosevelt wondered. As many as 100,000, Randolph estimated. After long negotiations, Roosevelt issued an executive order banning discrimination in wartime

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Rustin was dispatched to advise the young minister. Behind the scenes, Rustin expanded King's understanding of nonviolence – from Christ's moral admonition to “turn the other cheek” into the most powerful tool of social revolution. Living in King's basement, Rustin wrote speeches and protest songs and helped develop strategy for the burgeoning movement. Rustin not only taught the young minister but also brought him into a vast network of labor organizers, musicians and artists, fundraisers, media people, black businessmen, and pacifists.

Randolph, meanwhile, called marches against the poll tax in 1942 and 1944 and against the segregated armed forces in 1948. Each time he called them off. In 1957, 1958, and 1959, Rustin helped organize rallies attracting 10,000 people on the National Mall for civil rights. In 1960, Rustin and King planned demonstrations at the two party presidential nominating conventions; those protests were called off at the last minute.

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In the fall of 1962, Rustin asked a labor activist named Stanley Aronowitz to quietly ask labor organizations to support a march. In December, Rustin talked with Randolph about the economic crisis of the black community. Blacks faced a double squeeze in the deindustrializing economy. Technology was eliminating jobs in factories and farms. Meanwhile, blacks faced massive discrimination in construction and other jobs. Rustin asked Randolph whether he wanted to call a march on Washington for jobs and justice. Randolph said yes.

Around the same time, King asked President Kennedy to issue a new emancipation proclamation on the centenary of the first. When Kennedy declined, King considered marking the anniversary by tracing the steps that Secretary of State William Seward took on Jan.

industries. It was the greatest civil rights victory since Reconstruction. So Randolph called off the march.

But the dream of a massive demonstration never died. Rustin, who helped recruit marchers for the 1941 march, agitated for years for a massive Washington demonstration. Rustin was one of the nation's leading advocates of nonviolent action. Nonviolence and civil disobedience offered a powerful strategy to confront injustice: When a critical mass of protesters refuses to obey unjust laws – peacefully – the authority of those laws crumbles.

When King agreed to lead a bus boycott in Montgomery in 1955,

1, 1863, to deliver and certify President Abraham Lincoln's historic executive order eliminating slavery in the Confederacy. But King dropped the idea.

When Randolph asked Rustin to outline plans for a possible march, Rustin turned to two young labor organizers named Tom Kahn and Norman Hill. They wrote a memo suggesting a two-day “mass descent” on Congress and a mass rally to speak to the American people. With that memo, Randolph and Rustin began to push for a “march for emancipation” in the nation's front yard.

The Summer of 1963

Birmingham changed everything. In April and May, King led a major assault on the Alabama industrial city. If segregation could be beaten in Birmingham – considered the most violent and racist big city in Dixie – it could be beaten anywhere. King and his lieutenants planned Operation C – for “confrontation” – meticulously. They mapped out Birmingham's churches, schools, downtown, and jails and recruited key black figures in the city. They decided they would use a nonviolent campaign to challenge racism directly, provoking conflict. They knew they would get beaten and go to jail. But if they could survive, they could change history.

One month in Birmingham united the movement – and revealed the brutality of segregation – like never before. King was arrested during a Good Friday march; in jail he wrote “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” now the seminal statement on nonviolence. Thousands marched and thousands went to jail. Police beat marchers with nightsticks, sicced dogs on them, and mowed them down with fire hoses. TV recorded the violence, and the nation was particularly sickened when such heavy-handed tactics were used against a group of demonstrators – teenagers and some younger children – who were part of the “Children's Crusade.” White business leaders called for city leaders to negotiate a truce.

During the Birmingham campaign, King and his followers discussed a march on Washington. James Bevel proposed marching to the capital from all over the United States. But agreeing on a march would take months.

After Birmingham, demonstrations broke out all over – some 2,000 in all, not just in the heart of Dixie but also in New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco. In the South, demonstrators demanded voting rights and equal access to schools, restaurants, beaches, pools, buses, churches, and libraries. In the North, they demanded equal housing, construction jobs, and integrated schools.

As peaceful protests became violent, many young people grew impatient with the integration goal and the nonviolence tactic espoused by the movement. The charismatic Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X rejected both. At a rally in Harlem, he denounced white liberals, Jews, mainstream civil rights leaders, and the very foundations of American life. Segregationists, under siege, hardened their positions. White liberals – in Congress, business, foundations – grew leery of a movement that seemed to spin out of control.

Somehow, the movement needed to be held together. A march started to make more sense than ever before.



On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation from the Oval Office and called for major civil rights legislation.

The Necessity of the March

On May 15, Randolph announced an “emancipation march” for October but couldn’t get enough leaders to help organize the rally. Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the National Urban League declined the invitation. King sent his regrets. Randolph’s dream seemed to fade once again.

But two days changed everything.

In May, Attorney General Robert Kennedy met with a group of black cultural icons including author James Baldwin, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and psychologist Kenneth Clark. A young activist from New Orleans named Jerome Smith joined the group. He confronted Kennedy, declaring that he would not fight for the United States in a war because the country had abandoned blacks. Kennedy, shocked, looked for support. He got none. He left the meeting shaken.

Hours later, a gunman shot and killed Medgar W. Evers, the NAACP’s lead organizer in Mississippi and one of the most beloved figures in the civil rights community.



Alabama, President Kennedy delivered a national address calling for major civil rights legislation. It was the strongest presidential statement ever on the issue.

“The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated,” Kennedy said. “Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise. ... We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and a people. ... Those who do nothing are inviting shame, as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right, as well as reality.”

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Suddenly, the civil rights movement – and the nation – needed the March on Washington.

A march on Washington could not only press Congress to pass Kennedy’s civil rights bill – it could also bring the splintering movement together. It could mobilize supporters, from Capitol Hill to liberal allies, from foundations to Hollywood, from college students to union members. If they could come together for one day, they could also show America the true face of civil rights – not the radical, violent, impatient caricature of segregationists but a humble, determined, disciplined movement determined to force America to embrace its founding ideals.

Planning the March

On July 2, Randolph hosted a meeting of the “Big Six,” the nation’s top civil rights leaders, at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York. In addition to Randolph, the head of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), the group included King of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Wilkins of the NAACP, Young of the National Urban League, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

All agreed that the time was right for a massive march. But Wilkins said he would never accept Rustin as the organizer. No one understood organizing better than Rustin, but he was a



The “Big Six” – leaders of the nation’s largest national black organizations – meet at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City on July 2, 1963, to discuss plans for a march on Washington. They are, from left: John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; Whitney Young of the National Urban League; A. Philip Randolph of the Negro American Labor Council; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality; and Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

controversial figure: He was gay (openly); once joined the Young Communist League (a mistake, he said); and refused military service in World War II (as his pacifist philosophy demanded). When Randolph said he would lead the march, Wilkins agreed. Then Randolph named Rustin his operational man.

Within days, Rustin set up a planning headquarters in a Harlem brownstone. He hired a handful of young organizers and brought in a rolling wave of volunteers. Working from 10 in the morning till 2 at night, they arranged for transportation, security, logistics (everything from portable toilets to parade permits), fundraising, legal issues, souvenirs, and more. Rustin and the Big Six – later expanded into the “Big Ten” to include labor and religious leaders – dealt with politicians and celebrities. In Washington, King’s friend Fauntroy helped with federal agencies and the local details.

Longtime event planners wondered how such a ragtag group could pull off the event. Inaugurations took two years of full-time planning. Rustin let his lieutenants – people like Rachelle Horowitz, Joyce Ladner, Courtland Cox, and Cleveland Robinson – do their jobs and helped when they asked. They made to-do lists, checked tasks off the lists, and then made new lists. Most nights, when the rest of Harlem slept, Rustin gathered his team for progress reports. Sometimes Rustin, who once cut a record with Lead Belly, led the group in singing old spirituals.



AP PHOTO

Top: Bayard Rustin, deputy director of the March on Washington, points out on a map the route marchers will take in Washington, D.C., during a news conference at the march's headquarters in Harlem.

Bottom: Cleveland Robinson, one of the march organizers, waves from a balcony at the March on Washington headquarters in New York.



PHOTO BY ORLANDO FERNANDEZ, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Little actions made a big difference. Horowitz, the transportation coordinator, arranged with toll-takers to give out brochures and directions to the march. Hill traveled all over the country to sign up local march organizing crews. Whatever organization had the most sway in a given city – a local branch of the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, or NALC – got the job. Ossie Davis managed the celebrities. “He took care of prima donna land,” Horowitz cracked.

Rustin was, above all else, pragmatic. He originally planned a march down Pennsylvania Avenue, sit-ins on Capitol Hill, and protests at the Justice Department. The march down Pennsylvania Avenue and sit-ins fell victim to security considerations and local ordinances. The DOJ protests were put off because of political considerations: The Kennedys were now the movement’s most important ally. Plans for an unemployed worker to speak were scuttled because of grumbling from the Big Ten.

Every time Rustin announced compromises, his staff rebelled. “Sellout!” they yelled, half in anger and half in amusement. Rustin explained that the point of the march was to mass hundreds of thousands of people in Washington – to make the urgency of civil rights palpable – to sway the masses in the United States and abroad. CBS planned to cover the march live and it would be broadcast globally over the new Telstar satellite system. Rustin wanted to create a spectacle that would show the world that embracing civil rights was the only option.

The Day

The Great Day began with a sabotage of the state-of-the-art sound system, trepidation about turnout, fears of



The joyous crowd of marchers on the National Mall listened to musical performances and speeches from civil rights leaders before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the demonstrators.

violence, and quarrels over everything from women's role in the march to John Lewis's fiery speech.

But as buses, trains, and cars rolled through Washington's Romanesque boulevards, the movement's unique energy took hold. Marchers wore t-shirts and overalls, plaid shirts and jeans, religious collars and sandwich boards, suits and dresses. Some sang – "This May Be the Last Time" – and others gossiped and explored the mall. The sounds of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the SNCC Freedom Singers, Odetta, and Peter, Paul, and Mary wafted through the air. Celebrities like Ossie Davis, Lena Horne, Dick Gregory, and Burt Lancaster took turns before the Washington Monument.

Around noon, two vast rivers of humanity moved down Constitution and Independence Avenues. They carried signs, sang songs, danced, and marched. After long meetings on Capitol Hill, the Big Ten cut into the front of the line. But ordinary people really led the march. The streets filled with a joyous rumble, determined chants, freedom songs, laughter, and shouts of encouragement.



When marchers assembled before the Lincoln Memorial, they heard from the Big Ten. “We are not a mob,” Randolph said, defying the caricatures of segregationists. Wilkins warned marchers against backsliding, quoting the Book of Luke: “No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

Lewis expressed the raw passion and anger of young people whose lives were in jeopardy in Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and other bastions of the old Confederacy, which he called “a police state.” In an anguished voice, Lewis referred to the colonial struggles worldwide: “‘One man, one vote’ is the African cry. It is ours too. It *must* be ours.” Young described an ambitious agenda for social reform – the first public outline of many elements that would eventually find a place in President Johnson’s “Great Society” set of social programs. Other speakers warned about the dangers of injustice in a nuclear age and ignoring injustice as so many Germans ignored Nazism.

Then, moments after Mahalia Jackson shook the mall with her transcendent gospel performance of “I Been ’Buked and I Been Scorned,” King stepped forward.

The night before, two of King’s top aides – Wyatt Walker and Andrew Young – implored King not to use the imagery of a “dream,” as he had in Detroit weeks before. They called it cliché. King nodded, thanked them for their advice, then, after they left, he practiced those lines.

As he stood, waiting, the crowd erupted in chants of “Hip hip, hooray!” Finally, he spoke. In a mournful drawl, he talked about the promise of Abraham Lincoln and deplored the conditions of the American Negro – “crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination ... on a lonely island of poverty ... an exile in his own country.” Rejecting cries for patience, King declared that “now is the time” to confront centuries of racism. “It would be fatal,” he warned, to misread the temper of the times – that the “whirlwinds of revolt” would not end until segregation ended. “We cannot be satisfied,” King said again and again, without full citizenship.

King admonished his people to maintain their discipline. The movement must remain nonviolent, he said. “We must not be guilty of wrongful deeds,” he said. Above all, he said the movement needed to avoid bitterness and hatred.

Then King told his people – and fighters for freedom everywhere – that the struggle would be long and hard. When some of the marchers returned home, they’d face beatings and cattle prods and fire hoses. They’d lose jobs and homes. They’d get shot at. And of course they’d be the targets of the ugliest epithets.

Then he uttered four words that captured the essence of the movement: “Unearned suffering is redemptive.” Those words were acknowledgement that no one in power gives up without a fight; that fighting for civil rights could be a dangerous business; that people would get hurt, even killed. But the pain and the loss would yield a better day.

And then he moved on to the four most iconic words in American rhetoric: “I have a dream.” After reviewing the promise, tragedy, violence, injustice, and suffering yet to come, King described a better day, made more possible because of the throngs gathered below him.

“I have a dream,” King said eight times, describing the splendid day when blacks and whites would live together in peace, when bastions of racism would give way to brotherhood, when the nation would live out its creed that all men are created equal.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his inimitable “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington.



“I have a dream,” he said, practically in song, “that one day every valley shall be exalted, 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.”

When King rejected his aides’ advice and talked about his dream, he wasn’t being romantic or glossing over the movement’s challenges. He was giving his people something that no one could take away – a vision of a better day. Racists could firebomb homes, take away jobs, beat and even kill blacks. Critics could argue about legislation, policies, strategies, and tactics. But no one could argue against a dream.

Before the speech was over, the throng was dizzy. Young radicals who began the day bitterly complaining about “Da Lawd” now stood and screamed in ecstasy. Marchers felt surges of electricity – a renewal of hope they couldn’t have imagined just hours before.

With the U.S. Capitol in the background, passengers for charter buses walk along a service roadway of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 28, 1963, to find their transportation home after the March on Washington.



Some marchers called out to each other. “I have ...” one would say. “A dream,” the other would say.

King concluded his oration with a stirring call: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

After the March

With King’s final flourish, the crowd exploded – overwhelming the sound system with cheers and whoops while people hugged and cried and smiled.

Below the memorial, the Young Jacobins, who had expressed skepticism about this gathering, formed a vast circle with locked arms and, swaying, sang “We Shall Overcome.” Crowds moved to the buses near the mall and to the trains waiting at Union Station.

On the way home, jazz saxophonist John Handy decided to use his musical gifts to raise money for the movement. A

Minneapolis contingent led by that city’s mayor met Louis Armstrong in the airport and decided to participate in a campaign for civil rights in Mississippi the following summer. A young Washington girl named Ericka Jenkins decided to become a teacher. Fauntroy gathered “pledge” cards from marchers, which he would use to organize a massive letter campaign to help win Washington home rule. Visitors from South Africa thought, for the first time, they might defeat apartheid in their lifetimes.

President Kennedy greeted the Big Ten at the White House. “I have a dream!” he said to King. Then they debated strategy for passing the civil rights legislation. And they discussed the broader ills of race and class – joblessness, poor schools, inadequate housing, and the crisis of the black family. In the final stretch of the journey for basic rights, they set their sights on a broader agenda.

And the rest of America, haltingly, was moving toward expelling the worst poison from its system.
