



seeds of liberation

"...the first wave"

At 9 a.m., on August 28th, TV and news reporters still could not believe that the March on Washington would achieve the historic proportions predicted. The questions most frequently put to Bayard Rustin, organizer of the March, were: "Where are all the people? Aren't you disappointed?" "Not a bit," Rustin replied. "They will be here." Eight hours later, as the last speech ended and the crowd of over two hundred thousand (about a third of them white) began to move homeward, one of the "Big 6" Negro leaders turned to him and exclaimed: "Rustin, I have to hand it to you. You're a genius."

But the chief reason for the success of the March was not the genius of any one man or group of men. It was the fact that all over the country Negroes have reached the point where they are saying, from the depth of their being, what John Lewis, of S.N.C.C., said on the speakers' platform: "We want our freedom and we want it now!" All other questions of program and philosophy were subordinated, on August 28th, to the immediacy of this cry, a cry which, because of the accomplishments of the March, will be heard with increasing urgency throughout the country.

"We have taken our struggle into the streets," said A. Philip Randolph. "Until we did so, the government was indifferent to our demands. . . . All of us should be prepared to take to the streets. . . . This is only the first wave. We will carry the civil rights revolution home with us into every nook and cranny of the land." And few who felt the surging, irrepressible spirit of the crowd could doubt that he was right.

The night beforehand, Randolph had announced that the basic objective of the March had already been achieved: "It has focused the attention of the country on the problems of human dignity and freedom for Negroes. It has reached the heart, mind, and conscience of America." He pointed out that there was more news coverage on hand than there had ever been for a Presidential inauguration. At the time, this fact was impressive, but 24 hours later it faded into insignificance compared to the impact of the day on those who had taken part (and, undoubtedly, to a lesser extent, on millions who had viewed it on television). There are two ways in which a social revolution can be made respectable: the false way of toning down its demands to meet current standards, and the more difficult way of changing the public's conception of what is urgently called for. The March carried the Negroes' struggle for human rights a long way in the latter direction.

Some of the speeches would have been dull, under ordinary circumstances; others would have been pregnant with meaning wherever they were delivered. All were given additional poignancy by the occasion. This was especially true of the pointed words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, president of the American Jewish Congress, words that have been largely overlooked in the general reportage but bear repeating here:

"When I was the rabbi of the Jewish Community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned in my life and under those tragic circumstances is that bigotry and hatred are

not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

"A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. . . . America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us."

If there was a danger that the ugly realities of police brutality, grim economic suffering, and political hypocrisy would be overlooked in the general euphoria of the occasion (abetted by the cooperation of Washington officialdom) two of the leaders, in particular, lessened this danger. The first was James Farmer, of CORE, arrested a week earlier in Plaquemine, Louisiana. He sent a message, which was read by Floyd B. McKissick, national chairman of CORE. It read, in part:

"From a south Louisiana parish jail, I salute the march on Washington for jobs and freedom. Two hundred and thirty-two freedom fighters jailed with me in Plaquemine, La., also send their greetings.

"I wanted to be with you with all my heart on this great day. My imprisoned brothers and sisters wanted to be there too. I cannot come out of jail while they are still in; for their crime was the same as mine—demanding *freedom now*.

"Some of us may die, like William L. Moore and Medgar Evers, but our war is for life, not for death, and we will not stop our demand for 'FREEDOM NOW.' We will not stop till the

dogs stop biting us in the South, and the rats stop biting us in the North."

Farmer's message also included some profoundly instructive words for those who are concerned lest integration of whites and blacks be followed (or perhaps preceded) by the atomic disintegration of all of us:

"If we can solve our problems and remove the heavy heel of oppression from our necks with our nonviolent methods, then man has no problem anywhere in the world which cannot be solved without death."

The other leader who offset any possible tendency to lose sight of the grim realities of the struggle was John Lewis. The first draft of his speech was so searing in its indictment of the Kennedy administration that Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle, of Washington, said he would withdraw from the program unless the text was revised. Other leaders felt that parts of the speech, particularly a reference to marching through the South "the way Sherman did . . . and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently" would be misunderstood by those less practiced in nonviolence than Lewis. After hasty conferences (the first at 3 a.m. and the second while the crowd was waiting impatiently for the program to begin), Lewis made minor revisions, none of which significantly altered the content. Because Lewis is one of the younger leaders closest to the day-to-day struggle which made the March possible, we are reprinting the original text of his speech on the following page, to help LIBERATION readers understand the temper of an important segment of the movement: the militant students whose heroic and often unknown sacrifices are the cutting edge of the struggle for human rights. D.D.

