



# The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

Excerpted from "[History & Timeline](#)"

## Origins of the March

For more than two decades, A. Philip Randolph had dreamed of a massive march on Washington for jobs and justice. As President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, President of the Negro American Labor Council, and Vice President of the AFL-CIO, he is the towering senior statesman of the Black struggle for equality and opportunity. Back in 1941, with the support of Bayard Rustin and A.J. Muste, Randolph had threatened to mobilize 100,000 Blacks to march on Washington to protest segregation in the armed forces and employment discrimination in the burgeoning war industries. To forestall Randolph's march, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 (later known as the Fair Employment Act) which outlawed racial discrimination in the national defense industry. This was the first Federal action ever taken against racially-biased employment practices.

Today in the 21st Century, when mass marches in the nation's capitol are commonplace (five in 2007, for example), it is hard to imagine how radical Randolph's threat of 100,000 Black protesters descending on Washington seemed to the political establishment. Back then, mass marches in DC were rare, few and far between. The largest previous event had been a racist march by 35,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan in 1925. The suffragettes had managed to mobilize 8,000 marchers in 1913 for womens' voting rights, and in 1957 Randolph, Rustin, and King mobilized close to 30,000 for a Prayer Pilgrimage for Civil Rights. And in 1932, in the depths of the Depression, soldiers under General Douglas MacArthur had used tear gas, bayonets, and sabers to brutally disperse 20,000 World War I veterans pleading for their promised bonus (killing two and wounding hundreds). But those marches were entirely, or predominantly, white. No one had ever brought 100,000 Black protesters into the streets of DC.

In the closing days of 1962, as the Freedom Movement intensifies across the nation, Randolph asks Rustin to draw up plans for a large jobs-oriented protest in Washington.

After Birmingham, direct-action protests flare across the country in the Spring of '63, but the Kennedy administration still hesitates over committing its energies to passage of new civil rights legislation. In May, Dr. King begins to consider the need for national-scale action in Washington to push for an effective civil rights bill. *"We are on a breakthrough,"* King tells his staff, *"We need a mass protest ... to unite in one luminous action all of the forces along the far flung front."*

On June 11, 1963 — the same day as President Kennedy's address to the nation on civil rights — SCLC leaders announce plans to demonstrate in Washington for new civil rights legislation. They call for: *"Massive, militant, monumental sit-ins on Congress..."* and *"Massive acts of civil disobedience all over this nation. We will tie up public transportation by laying our bodies prostrate on runways of airports, across railroad tracks, and in bus depots."* Later that night Medgar Evers is assassinated.

King, Randolph, and Rustin join forces. Their calls for large-scale direct-action in Washington disturb the Kennedys and annoy members of Congress. On June 22nd, President Kennedy meets with civil rights leaders at the White House to get them to call off the march (which still has no date, no formal plan, no office, no staff, and no funds). Attending are: A. Phillip Randolph, Jim Farmer (CORE), Dr. King (SCLC), John Lewis (SNCC), Roy Wilkens (NAACP), and Whitney Young (Urban League). The press dub them the “Big Six” of civil rights. Though Wilkens and Young are undecided about the march, the direct- action wing of the Movement — Randolph, Farmer, King, and Lewis — refuse to cancel it.

After the meeting, JFK tells his aides: “*Well, if we can’t stop it, we’ll run the damn thing.*”

## **Coalition Politics**

On July 2nd, Randolph and King convene a summit meeting in New York of the “Big Six” to plan a united action in Washington for “Jobs and Freedom.”

Roy Wilkens makes it clear that the NAACP — the largest and best funded of all the civil rights organizations — will not participate in any event that includes any form of civil disobedience. Nor is he willing to allow any criticism of, or risk any break with, the Kennedy administration. The call to mobilize 100,000 protesters has inevitably created a numbers game in which success or failure will be judged by turnout. To get that many people to Washington requires chartering and filling more than 2,000 busses. But that cannot be done without the NAACP’s financial resources and its hundreds of chapters across the country. Therefore, thoughts of sit-ins and civil disobedience have to be set aside. It is agreed that the event will be a legally-sanctioned march in cooperation with authorities — a march *in* Washington, not a march *on* Washington.

The Kennedys are very uneasy at thought of thousands of Blacks protesting in the streets of Washington. Though JFK publicly supports the march, behind the scenes his administration moves to limit and control it. To reduce the numbers who can participate they demand that it be held on a weekday — a working day — rather than on the weekend. Nervous at the thought of young Blacks loose on the streets at night after the march, they require that all marchers arrive in the morning and be gone from the city by dark. Politically, they want to prevent any placards or banners critical of the administration — only officially approved signs can be carried. Wilkens insists on acceptance of all these restrictions as the price of NAACP support, and the march is scheduled for Wednesday, August 28 — just 8 weeks away.

The march is intended to be the largest mass protest in American history (up to that time). Only a master organizer can successfully pull it together in just 8 weeks. Everyone at the July 2nd meeting knows that Bayard Rustin is the best man for the job — perhaps the only one who can do it. But Wilkens and Young oppose appointing Rustin to head the march. Rustin, a Quaker, served prison time during WWII as a Conscientious Objector and to them that makes him a “draft dodger;” as a Socialist, Rustin is political anathema; and as a homosexual who had once been arrested on a “morals” charge, they view Rustin as a social pariah and fear that opponents will use Rustin’s past to smear the march. Randolph, King, and Farmer defend Rustin — he’s the one who can get it done, and both Randolph and King have worked successfully with Rustin on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Prayer Pilgrimage to DC for Civil Rights, and the two Youth Marches for Integrated Schools. The debate is hot and bitter. Finally, a compromise is reached, Randolph will be the titular head of the march and Rustin will be his “deputy.” Everyone understands that Rustin will do the actual work of organizing the march.

SNCC is ambivalent about the march. Deeply suspicious of Kennedy and the traditional, conservative Black leadership, many SNCC activists fear the march is an effort to co-opt and contain rising Black militancy. Others fear it will be an empty gesture — a demonstration without organizing — that

distracts and undermines their grass-roots efforts in the Deep South; to them, change does not come from the top by appealing to a government that cares nothing for those at the bottom of society, but rather by building up political power from below. Some SNCC organizers such as Stokely Carmichael refuse to go to Washington at all. On the day before the march, twenty or so SNCC activists led by Bob Moses picket the Department of Justice. He carries a sign reading: "When there is no justice what is the state but a robber band enlarged?" All Tuesday night they hold vigil and on Wednesday morning some of them participate in the march, others do not.

Yet many in SNCC support the march, believing that any form of direct-action, especially large-scale action, helps break down the fear and isolation that play such a large role in the South's culture of oppression. To them, the march is also a chance to educate the nation about the issues, the Freedom Movement, the courage of people in struggle, and the suffering that Blacks are forced to endure. (To some extent, this disagreement continues the Direct-Action vs Voter Registration debate of 1961.)

In the Black communities where SNCC is working, the idea of the march fires the imagination of local people, many of whom are eager to participate. Unwilling to break the unity of the Freedom Movement, and committed to supporting the aspirations of the local folks who form the base of the struggle, SNCC as an organization agrees to join the coalition. But the NAACP's restrictions against civil-disobedience and militant direct-action rankle.

Though the "Big Six" try to present a united front to the public, behind the scenes significant divisions remain. To the NAACP and the Urban League, the purpose of the march is to support the President's civil rights bill. "*We see this as an all-inclusive demonstration of our belief in the Presidents' program,*" Young tells a national TV audience on *Meet the Press*. For Randolph, Rustin, and King, economic issues — unemployment, employment discrimination, raising the minimum wage — are as important as supporting strong, effective civil rights legislation regardless of Kennedy's stand. "*[The march seeks] to arouse the conscience of the nation over the economic plight of the Negro,*" King counters on the same TV show. SNCC and CORE, while agreeing with Randolph and King on the importance of economic issues and the need to go beyond the Kennedy bill, see the march as a protest of, and challenge to, the administration's shameful civil rights record of inactivity, neglect, and collaboration with Southern segregationists.

## **The March Demands**

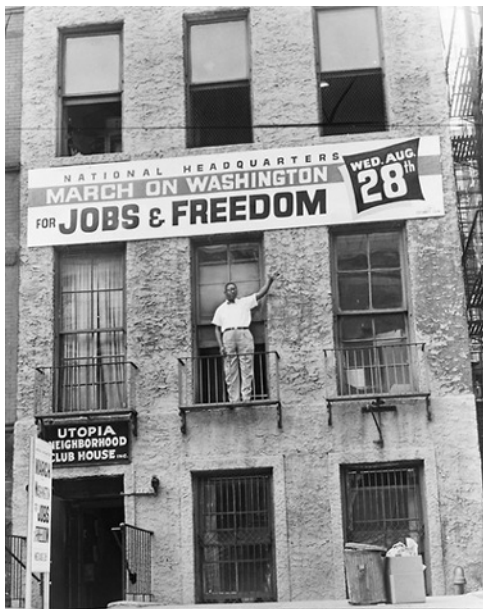
Eventually, a set of 10 demands for the march is agreed upon:

### **The 10 Demands of the March on Washington**

1. Comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation from the present Congress — without compromise or filibuster — to guarantee all Americans:
  - Access to all public accommodations
  - Decent housing
  - Adequate and integrated education
  - The right to vote
2. Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.
3. Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.
4. Enforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment — reducing Congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.
5. A new Executive Order banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.

6. Authority for the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits when any Constitutional right is violated.
7. A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers — Negro and white — on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.
8. A national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living. (Government surveys show that anything less than \$2.00 an hour fails to do this.) [The minimum wage at the time of the march is \$1.15/hour.]
9. A broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include all areas of employment which are presently excluded.
10. A federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination by federal, state, and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies, and trade unions.

## Building the March



Rustin sets up headquarters in a Harlem walk-up tenement at 170 W. 130th Street near 7th Avenue. Tom Kahn, a veteran activist and one of the few white graduates of Howard University, becomes his chief of staff. The sponsoring organizations assign one or more staff members to the effort. Norman Hill and Blyden Jackson from CORE, and from SNCC, Cortland Cox and the Ladner sisters Joyce and Dorie work with Rustin in New York, while SNCC members Ed Brown, Bill Mahoney, and Cleveland Sellers work in DC.

Rachelle Horowitz of the Workers Defense League takes on the enormous and critical task of coordinating the busses, trains, planes, and auto caravans that will carry marchers across the country. Local Movement organizations nationwide — NAACP and CORE chapters, SCLC and SNCC affiliates, labor unions, church and student groups — charter and pay for transportation to DC. Because few southern Blacks have money for long-distance travel, funds have to be raised nationally to bring marchers up from Movement centers in the

Deep South. But northern Movement groups are focused on raising money to get their own members to the march, so while some funds are raised it is not enough to bring to Washington all those from the South who want to participate. Thousands of protesters who had braved the KKK, police, gas, dogs, and jails are left behind.

Randolph is a Vice-President of the AFL-CIO and he asks that body to endorse the march. While some AFL-CIO member unions have long and honorable histories of multi-racial struggle, others are still “white-only,” some maintain segregated Black and white locals, and some discriminate against Blacks and Latinos in regards to apprenticeship, training, and access to higher-paid skilled jobs. Randolph and AFL-CIO President George Meany have often clashed over Meany’s “gradualist” approach to ending racism in organized labor. Randolph supports preferential hiring and promotion programs to redress past discrimination, but Meany supports the seniority system which leaves past inequities uncorrected. And Meany is furious at Randolph for organizing the Negro American Labor Council in 1960 as a forum for pressuring the AFL-CIO on racial issues. Meany does support new civil rights legislation, but he opposes all forms of direct-action, including marches of any kind. After a bitter debate, the AFL-CIO Executive Council refuses to endorse the march. Despite the lack of AFL-CIO endorsement, some individual unions such as the Sleeping Car Porters, UAW, ILGWU, TWU, District-65, and others

support the march, and ultimately tens of thousands of marchers are brought to Washington on busses chartered and paid for by unions. Walter Reuther of the UAW is added to the march committee as a labor representative.

To broaden the base of the march — both numerically and financially — representatives of the major faiths are added to the committee in July: Rabbi Joachim Prinz of the American Jewish Congress, Dr. Mathew Ahmann of the National Catholic Conference, and Eugene Black of the Presbyterian Church. While the Black church has been a foundation stone of the Freedom Movement in the South, it is with the March on Washington that national-level religious bodies and inter-denominational organizations in the North begin to play expanded roles.

Women form the backbone of the Freedom Movement, though men get most of the publicity women play key leadership roles. But not a single woman is asked to speak from the platform at either the Washington Monument or Lincoln Memorial. Singers Marian Anderson, Eva Jessye, Mahalia Jackson, Odetta, and Joan Baez are included as performers, but women such as Ella Baker and Dorothy Height (whose National Council of Negro Women is far more active in the struggle than Whitney Young's Urban League) are not invited to speak on substantive issues. When Randolph agrees to address the all-male National Press Club (no female reporters allowed), Anna Hedgeman and other women on the march staff protest to the committee. The leaders refuse to add any women to the speakers list, but in a minor concession they agree that Myrlie Evers can briefly acknowledge Daisy Bates, Diane Nash, Mrs. Herbert Lee, Rosa Parks, and Gloria Richardson from the platform (Myrlie is unable to attend, so Daisy Bates substitutes for her).

## Fear and Hysteria

The Movement-related violence of recent years has been perpetrated by white racists and white cops against peaceful, nonviolent, demonstrators. Nevertheless, the Kennedy administration, the mainstream press, and the white establishment are obsessed by fears of Black protesters erupting into looting and violence on the streets of Washington.

"The general feeling is that the Vandals are coming to sack Rome," states the Washington Daily News. According to *Business Week*, "One small disturbance could set off a wave of mob violence." And on *Meet the Press*, host Lawrence Spivak challenges Wilkens and King, citing "numerous" (but un-named) authorities who "believe it would be impossible to bring more than 100,000 militant Negroes into Washington without incidents and possibly rioting."

A "State of Emergency" is declared. All DC liquor stores and bars are ordered closed on August 28th — apparently in the belief that Blacks who come to march for freedom will seek out the nearest booze to get drunk and disorderly. Federal employees are told they don't have to come to work on march day and the majority stay home. Store owners remove merchandise to safe storage out of town. Hospitals cancel elective surgery so as to be ready for mass riot casualties. The Washington Senator's baseball game against the Minnesota Twins is cancelled. Some Southern Congressmen caution their female staff to avoid the city rather than risk gang rape by the Black horde, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* reports: "The deep concern of husbands and bosses for the safety of their wives and secretaries was expressed from one end of the city to the other."

The entire DC police force is mobilized along with 500 reserves and 2,500 members of the National Guard. Some 4,000 Army soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets are stationed across the Potomac at Fort Myer, and 15,000 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division are placed on alert. March organizers know such fears are irrational and racist, but all direct-action protests need leadership and coordination, so they recruit and train some 2,000 parade marshals. Half of them are Black police officers from New York and other cities who belong to the Guardian, a fraternal organization of Black

cops. The other half are Movement activists trained by Julius Hobson of DC CORE. (In the event, none of this presence is needed, both police and marshals spend the day coordinating traffic and giving directions.)

## The Rolling of the Busses

On Saturday, August 24th, chartered busses from the West Coast begin the long cross-country journey to Washington. From San Francisco they head east up over Donner Pass and through the shimmering heat of the high desert, from Los Angeles they traverse the Mojave on Route 66 — the “Mother Road” of the Depression and the Dustbowl. From Portland and Seattle they begin rolling east across the dry lands. On Sunday, busses hit the long-distance highways of the mountain west, and on Monday & Tuesday bus after bus after bus departs from the states and cities of the heartland — Minneapolis and Kansas City, Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Louis.

On Tuesday morning a crowd gathers in Birmingham's Kelly Ingram Park to squeeze aboard six busses — all they can afford to charter. Hundreds have to be left behind for lack of funds. Up from other freedom battlegrounds of the Deep South busses begin rolling north, from Plaquemine and New Orleans Louisiana, from the Mississippi Delta, from the embattled communities of Alabama, from Atlanta and Southwest Georgia, the busses roll towards Washington. A “Freedom Special” train pulls out of Florida, traveling up the East Coast, picking up marchers as it goes. By the time it reaches DC, it's 22 cars long. With no money for busses, a caravan of 200 autos loaded with marchers moves up out of North Carolina, headlights pointing north through the night.

As the hour approaches midnight, they begin boarding busses in Boston, Hartford, and New Haven. In the dead of night more than 40,000 protesters assemble at pickup points around New York City and then head south on 600 busses and 11 chartered trains. 85 busses depart from New Jersey and 100 from Philadelphia. From Detroit and Cleveland and Pittsburgh, from Louisville and Cincinnati, the busses roll towards Washington. Through the dark night they roll east on Route 40 and south on US-1.

In the morning hours of August 28, more than 2,000 busses, 21 special trains, 10 chartered aircraft, and uncounted autos converge on Washington. The regularly scheduled planes, trains, and busses are filled to capacity. And in DC itself — “Chocolate City,” at that time the only major metropolis in America with a Black majority population — tens of thousands, young and old, step out of their front doors and head for the gathering point — the towering spire of the Washington Monument.



## Censoring SNCC

But behind the scenes there is bitter controversy. Newly elected SNCC Chairman John Lewis drafts his speech with input from many SNCC activists — Julian Bond, Cortland Cox, Jim Forman, Prathia Hall, Eleanor Holmes (Norton), Joyce Ladner, Sheila Michaels, Gloria Richardson, Avon Rollins, Ruby Doris Smith (Robinson), and others. It evolves into a collective SNCC statement rather than the personal remarks of Lewis. It is a strong, powerful condemnation of racism and government complicity.

The evening before the march, Washington's Archbishop O'Boyle — who is scheduled to give the invocation at the main rally — sees a copy of SNCC's speech. A staunch Kennedy supporter, he is disturbed by its forthright criticism of the administration and what he feels is “inflammatory” rhetoric.

He alerts the White House, and tells Rustin he will pull out of the event if Lewis is allowed to proceed. Rustin meets with Lewis who agrees to a few minor cosmetic changes that they hope will placate O'Boyle and the Catholic Church.

The next day, as the marchers flow towards the Lincoln Memorial, behind the stage controversy flares again over SNCC's speech. Burke Marshall of the Justice Department objects to its condemnation of the administration, Walter Reuther of the UAW is irate at criticism of Kennedy's proposed civil rights bill, and O'Boyle is still upset over "inflammatory" language. Lewis and Wilkens argue, voices raised, fingers shaking in each others' face. Rustin manages to get O'Boyle to start the program with his invocation while an ad-hoc committee battles with SNCC over language. To gain time, Fred Shuttlesworth is asked to give an impromptu speech, and more music is added to the program.



SNCC is furious that those who have done so little for the struggle want to blunt their heartfelt criticism of administration failures and emasculate their call to militant struggle for justice. SNCC did not join the march to support the Kennedys, but to challenge them. Finally, Randolph, the beloved and admired elder statesman of the Movement makes a personal appeal: *"I have waited twenty-two years for this. I've waited all my life for this opportunity. Please don't ruin it. John, we've come this far together. Let us stay together."*

Out of respect for Randolph, SNCC leaders Lewis, Forman, and Cox reluctantly agree to make some changes in language, but not in essential substance. In regards to Kennedy's proposed legislation they cut the phrase, "too little and too late," but retain, "In good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration's civil rights bill. There's not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality." They make a few minor cosmetic edits, and agree to drop, "We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did." And they delete the pointed question, "Which side is the Federal government on?"

Writing years later in *Walking With the Wind*, John Lewis sums up:

I was angry. But when we were done, I was satisfied. So was Forman. The speech still had fire. It still had bite, certainly more teeth than any other speech made that day. It still had an edge, with no talk of "Negroes" – I spoke instead of "black citizens" and "the black masses," the only speaker that day to use those terms. We all agreed – Forman, Cox, and I – that our message was not compromised.

And in his own book, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Jim Forman concluded:

The speech John Lewis finally delivered, despite its concession on the phrase about support [of the Kennedy bill], was still a strong indictment that could not have made the bosses of the march very happy.





300,000, though for some reason history texts usually use the figure of 250,000. Roughly one quarter are white, and one sixth are students. Most marchers, regardless of color, are from the urban North. Southern Blacks are represented — their spirited singing evident to all — but far too many who wanted to come have been left behind for lack of funds.

At the Lincoln Memorial, Marian Anderson is supposed to begin the program with the National Anthem, but the jam of people is so great she is unable to reach the stage in time. Carmilla Williams of Danville VA stands in for her and Anderson sings later in the day. Movie stars, entertainers, celebrities, and a few politicians appear. They are all seated in special reserved sections. Some of them are introduced from the stage.

In sad counterpoint, it is announced from the platform that a giant has fallen — news just arrived from Ghana reports that W.E.B. DuBois has passed on at the age of 95. Author of seminal work such as *The Souls of Blackfolk*, one of the founders of the NAACP, editor of *Crises* magazine, a socialist and Communist, an opponent of nuclear weapons, the “Father of Pan-Africanism,” he had been driven into African exile during the red-baiting witch-hunts of the McCarthy era.

Proudly wearing the *Croix de Guerre* and *Legion d’Honneur* awarded for her courage as an underground courier in the French Resistance during WWII, expatriate jazz singer Josephine Baker briefly speaks to great applause, “*I am glad that in my home this day has come to pass ... The world is behind you.*”

Mahalia Jackson electrifies the crowd with “*I’ve Been ’Buked, and I’ve Been Scorned.*” Lerone Bennet, editor of *Ebony*, later writes of her performance:

There is a nerve that lies beneath the smoothest of black exteriors, a nerve four hundred years old and throbbing with hurt and indignation. Mahalia Jackson penetrated the facade and exposed the nerve to public view... The button-down men in front and the old women in the back came to their feet screaming and shouting. They had not known that this thing was in them and that they wanted it touched. From different places, in different ways, with different dreams, they had come and now, hearing this sung, they were one.

Each of the 10 sponsoring organizations has a speaker on the program. To ensure that the event ends on time and all the marchers are out of town before dark, each address is limited to a maximum of seven minutes. Dr. King is the last of the organizational speakers. Deeply rooted in the rhythm and cadence of the Black church, he is one of the great orators of the 20th Century. To the disappointment of the Kennedys and their supporters on the platform, he completely ignores the President's civil rights bill. Instead, he reaches for a higher truth that transcends the specifics of any single piece of legislation or the role of one man, or one administration.

Today, Dr. King's address is famous as the *I Have a Dream* speech. But the dream section, which is forever repeated in TV sound-bites and classroom recordings, is not part of his original draft. When King nears the end of his seven minutes of prepared text — the metaphor of the bounced check and the echo of Amos that “*... we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream*” — he senses — as do others on the platform — that something more has to be said. That the march itself requires some summing up, some articulation of the vision that moves the Movement, some expression of the aspirations, pride, determination, and courage of not just these marchers, but the Freedom Movement as a whole.

Sitting behind him, Mahalia Jackson leans forward, “*Tell them about the dream, Martin.*” She had heard him speak the dream at recent rallies. And with that, he steps over the seven-minute limit and off his

prepared text to soar, speaking from the soul of the struggle to the heart of oppressed people everywhere, *“Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, ... go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, ... Let us not wallow in the valley of despair ... And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a 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 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! ...”* As he rolls on with his majestic cadences towards his ringing conclusion, *“Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, free at last,”* Mahalia and others on the platform can be heard over the loudspeakers backing him up with the traditional affirmation of the Black church, *“My Lord! My Lord!”*

Deeply rooted in two cherished gospels — the Old Testament and the unfulfilled promise of the American creed — King's 19 minute address indelibly positions the Freedom Movement in faith and history.

Following Dr. King, Randolph and Rustin read the 10 demands, asking the marchers to affirm each one and pledge to carry on the struggle, which they do in a thunder of 300,000 voices. Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College gives the benediction, and the organ plays *We Shall Overcome*. The marchers in their thousands stand together, hands clasped in stranger's hands, and sing the Movement anthem.

As the crowds disperse back to their busses, SNCC activists form a song-circle and raise up their voices. SNCC member Bob Zellner recalls:

SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and NAACP kids, mostly SNCC, joining hands in a huge circle just below the speakers stand, and singing our hearts to the heights. The “event” itself had been controlled with a heavy hand and even what singing there was – Mahalia Jackson, the freedom singers, etc – was doled out sparingly so as not to incite the “mob.” Breaking the rules by singing was our feeble attempt to protest the forced changing of our Chairman John Lewis's speech because it was too fiery and militant.

SNCC organizer Joyce Ladner recalls a photo of that defiant song-circle:

Today, some forty years later, that picture reminds me of the loneliness of the battle, the small number of people who were really in the thick of the war against American apartheid, and the almost desolate landscape around us.

## Media Coverage

Media coverage of the march is extensive and world-wide. There are roughly 1,200 accredited journalists and reporters in Washington, and most of them cover the march. In addition, 1,600 special march-related press passes are issued. The result is the most extensive media coverage of any event in Washington since the funeral of President Roosevelt. CBS broadcasts live coverage of the entire Lincoln Memorial program, the march is the lead story on all 3 network news shows, and it's on the front page of every major newspaper the next day.

But rather than focus on the issues, most stories in the northern press focus on the amazing (to them) fact that thousands of Blacks engaged in peaceful protest without getting drunk and running riot. The *San Francisco Examiner* begins its description of the march with:

The freedom march on Washington yesterday turned out to be a profoundly moving demonstration — so big, so orderly, so sweet-singing and good-natured, so boldly confident and at the same time relaxed, so completely right from start to finish, that America was done proud beyond measure.

Many papers in the South take a different tack, they condemn the march, the Kennedys, and the entire Civil Rights Movement. The *Chattanooga Free Press* writes:

The marchers were not primarily seeking to gain civil rights for themselves but to deprive others of their civil rights so that the demonstrators might have what belongs to others.

International interest in the march is high. There are sympathy demonstrations in Berlin, Munich, London, Amsterdam, Kingston, and elsewhere. BBC broadcasts the march live — one of the very first live telecasts beamed across the Atlantic by the Telstar satellite. TV and film crews from Canada, France, Japan, and Germany, record the event. The major London papers fly in special correspondents, as do papers in Canada, Cuba, and cities in Europe, and Asia. The march is the front page story in the Soviet Union's *Izvestia*.

## Effect of the March

- **Effect on those who marched.** The people most strongly affected by any direct-action protest are those who participate in it.

Many of the marchers, particularly those mobilized by labor and northern churches, have never before participated in a civil rights protest. After years of violent images of police and racist violence and a week of hysterical media hype, some of them are nervous on the busses coming down, fearful of what might occur. Others are excited and empowered by being part of something larger than themselves. For most, the dedication and discipline, unity and solidarity, of the march is a revelation, an awakening, and for some a life-altering epiphany that moves them into social reform for years and decades to come. Lerone Bennet writes:

The participants knew that [even] if the march had changed no votes in Congress or no hearts in America that it had changed them... men and women would look back on this day and tell their children and their grandchildren: "There was a march in the middle of the twentieth century, the biggest demonstration for civil rights in history — and I was there."

Somewhat over half of the marchers have been previously active in the Freedom Movement, most of them in the North, some in the South. For those up from the lonely, desperate battlegrounds of the South, the march is a powerful antidote for isolation, and an affirmation that not only are they not alone, but that they are part of a powerful nation-wide struggle. And for most, North and South, the march is an inspiration that rededicates them to the struggle. One marcher recalls:

*"For six months before the march I had been active with CORE in the West. But fear of consequences — from parents, from school, for future employment — held me back from courting arrest with acts of civil disobedience. When I returned from Washington that was all changed. In the following months I dropped out of school and became a full-time activist. I was arrested a number of times. Then I went South and served as an SCLC field secretary in Alabama and Mississippi for two years."*

But for SNCC and CORE's dedicated field staff — the organizers in the South who daily confront danger and death — the march and its aftermath are deeply disappointing. They are angry and bitter at the heavy hand of the Kennedys and the censorship of SNCC's statement. And after the vast outpouring of energy they see no change — no change in segregation, no change in denial of voting rights, no change in police brutality, no change in racist violence, and no change in Federal appeasement of southern racism.

John Lewis later writes:

In the days that followed, too much of the national press, in my opinion, focused not on the substance of the day but on the setting. Their stories portrayed the event as a big picnic, a hootenanny combined with the spirit of a revival prayer meeting. Too many commentators and reporters softened and trivialized the hard edges of pain and suffering that brought about this day in the first place, virtually ignoring the hard issues that needed to be addressed, the issues that had stirred up so much trouble in my own speech. It was revealing that the quotes they gathered from most of the congressional leaders on Capitol Hill dealt not with the legislator's stand on the civil rights bill but instead focused on praising the 'behavior' and 'peacefulness' of the mass marchers.

- **Effect on the Country.** Millions of Americans, Black and white, watch the march and rally on TV. For most of them, this is their first direct exposure to the Freedom Movement beyond brief sound-bites and newspaper interpretations. While the march does little to change the minds of committed segregationists, for the rest of the population the dignity, strength, purpose, and discipline of the freedom marchers has a positive affect.

A national poll reports that more than 75% of white Americans support ending segregation in public facilities, equal job opportunities, "good" housing for Blacks, and integrated schools. Two-thirds of them support passage of Kennedy's civil rights bill. **But**, 97% of whites oppose preferential hiring of Blacks to make up for past discrimination, the great majority oppose any Federal legislation against housing discrimination, and 56% oppose any further protests by Blacks.

In 1963, fear of Communism dominates the political thinking of a great many white Americans. Most Blacks have long since dismissed "red menace" and "Communist plot" smears against civil rights activists by racists such as Hoover of the FBI, and segregationist Senators such as Eastland and Thurmond. But red-baiting attacks on the Freedom Movement still influence a large number of whites. Now, at least for some of the millions of whites who watch the march and King's entire 19-minute speech live on national TV — and hear for the first time, not just a few sound-bites but the full content of a freedom sermon — those slanders of foreign-subversion and secret plots begin losing credibility.

- **Effect on Congress.** Before, during, and after the march, members of Congress vow in strident chorus that it will not influence or affect their votes in any way, shape, or form. But as the elders teach us, "*The proof of the pudding is in the eating.*" In the 86 years since the end of Reconstruction, not a single piece of effective, race-related civil rights legislation is signed into law. In the two years following the March on Washington, the two most effective civil rights bills ever enacted, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, are passed. It is the Freedom Movement as a whole that forces passage of these acts — not the march alone — but the march does make clear to legislators from rural states and suburban districts outside the South that at least some of their constituents, Black and white, do care about civil rights, and that those constituents are watching

how they vote in Congress. Since the crucial votes to overcome the Southern filibusters against the two bills are extremely close, a shift of even one or two votes makes a critical difference.

But while the march does affect Congress in regards to basic civil rights, it has little affect on the economic issues that form a key portion of the 10 demands. There are no Black Senators, and only five Black Representatives in the House. They and their progressive allies are unable to move federal legislation on open housing. Segregated, “separate but equal,” school systems are slowly being integrated, but adequate education for all remains an unfulfilled dream. Unemployment remains high — doubly so for non-whites — and the call for dignified jobs at decent wages falls on deaf ears, as do demands to increase the minimum wage to a living wage.

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Looking back on the march later, Evelyn Cunningham, New York Editor for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, recalls:

*I must've cried for an hour and a half at one point during the march. Part of it was sheer happiness, part of it was pride, and part of it was my family. I'm steeped in my respect for my people. After the march, I thought, 'Oh my God, we're almost there — God, was I wrong.*

See the “[History & Timeline](#)”  
for descriptions and analyses of other Freedom Movement events and struggles.