

Civil Rights March on Washington

All about the March on Washington, August 28, 1963

by Shmuel Ross



PHOTO SOURCE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom took place in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. Attended by some 250,000 people, it was the largest demonstration ever seen in the nation's capital, and one of the first to have extensive television coverage.

Background

[1963](#) was noted for racial unrest and civil rights demonstrations. Nationwide outrage was sparked by media coverage of police actions in Birmingham, Alabama, where attack dogs and fire hoses were turned against protestors, many of whom were in their early teens or younger. Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested and jailed during these protests, writing his famous "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," which advocates civil disobedience against unjust laws. Dozens of additional demonstrations took place across the country, from California to New York, culminating in the March on Washington. [President Kennedy](#) backed a Civil Rights Act, which was stalled in Congress by the summer.

Coalition

The March on Washington represented a coalition of several civil rights organizations, all of which generally had different approaches and different agendas. The "Big Six" organizers were James Farmer, of the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) (CORE); [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); John Lewis, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); [A. Philip Randolph](#), of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Roy Wilkins, of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (NAACP); and Whitney Young, Jr., of the [National Urban League](#). The stated demands of the march were the passage of meaningful civil rights legislation; the elimination of racial segregation in public schools; protection for demonstrators against police brutality; a major public-works program to provide jobs; the passage of a law prohibiting racial discrimination in public and private hiring; a \$2 an hour [minimum wage](#); and self-government for the [District of Columbia](#), which had a black majority.

Opposition

President Kennedy originally discouraged the march, for fear that it might make the legislature vote against civil rights laws in reaction to a perceived threat. Once it became clear that the march would go on, however, he supported it.

While various labor unions supported the march, the [AFL-CIO](#) remained neutral. Outright opposition came from two sides. White supremacist groups, including the [Ku Klux Klan](#), were obviously not in favor of any event supporting racial equality. On the other hand, the march was also condemned by some civil rights activists who felt it presented an inaccurate, sanitized pageant of racial harmony; [Malcolm X](#) called it the "Farce on Washington," and members of the [Nation of Islam](#) who attended the march faced a temporary suspension.

The March on Washington

Nobody was sure how many people would turn up for the demonstration in Washington, D.C. Some travelling from the South were harrassed and threatened. But on August 28, 1963, an estimated quarter of a million people—about a quarter of whom were white—marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, in what turned out to be both a protest and a communal celebration. The heavy police presence turned out to be unnecessary, as the march was noted for its civility and peacefulness. The march was extensively covered by the media, with live international television coverage.

The event included musical performances by [Marian Anderson](#); [Joan Baez](#); [Bob Dylan](#); [Mahalia Jackson](#); Peter, Paul, and Mary; and Josh White. [Charlton Heston](#)—representing a contingent of artists, including Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, Diahann Carroll, Ossie Davis, Sammy Davis Jr., Lena Horne, Paul Newman, and Sidney Poitier—read a speech by [James Baldwin](#).

The speakers included all of the "Big Six" civil-rights leaders (James Farmer, who was imprisoned in Louisiana at the time, had his speech read by [Floyd McKissick](#)); Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious leaders; and labor leader [Walter Reuther](#). The one female speaker was [Josephine Baker](#), who introduced several "Negro Women Fighters for Freedom," including [Rosa Parks](#).

Noteworthy Speeches

The two most noteworthy speeches came from John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lewis represented the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a younger, more radical group than King's. The speech he planned to give, circulated beforehand, was objected to by other participants; it called Kennedy's civil rights bill "too little, too late," asked "which side is the federal government on?" and declared that they would march "through the Heart of Dixie, the way [Sherman](#) did" and "burn [Jim Crow](#) to the ground—nonviolently." In the end, he agreed to tone down the more inflammatory portions of his speech, but even the revised version was the most controversial of the day, stating:

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 hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, nor the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands, and create a great source of power, outside of any national structure that could and would assure us victory." For those who have said, "Be patient and wait!" we must say, "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 the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence.

[King's speech](#) remains one of the most famous speeches in American history. He started with prepared remarks, saying he was there to "cash a check" for "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," while warning fellow protesters not to "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." But then he departed from his script, shifting into the "I have a dream" theme he'd used on prior occasions, drawing on both "[the American dream](#)" and religious themes, speaking of an America where his children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." He followed this with an exhortation to "let freedom ring" across the nation, and concluded with:



SOURCE: AP PHOTOS

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to 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."

MARCH ON WASHINGTON

On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 Americans gathered in Washington, D.C., for a political rally known as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Organized by a number of civil rights and religious groups, the event was designed to shed light on the political and social challenges African Americans continued to face across the country. The march, which became a key moment in the growing struggle for civil rights in the United States, culminated in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, a spirited call for racial justice and equality.

BACKGROUND

Twice in American history, more than twenty years apart, a March on Washington was planned, each intended to dramatize the right of black Americans to political and economic equality.

DID YOU KNOW?

In addition to Martin Luther King Jr., the March on Washington featured speeches and performances from John Lewis, Josephine Baker, Mahalia Jackson, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan.

The first march was proposed in 1941 by A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Blacks had benefited less than other groups from New Deal programs during the Great Depression, and continuing racial discrimination excluded them from defense jobs in the early 1940s. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt showed little inclination to take action on the problem, Randolph called for a March on Washington by fifty thousand people. After repeated efforts to persuade Randolph and his fellow leaders that the march would be inadvisable, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941, forbidding discrimination by any defense contractors and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to investigate charges of racial discrimination. The March on Washington was then canceled. Nearly 2 million blacks were employed in defense work by the end of 1944. Order 8802 represented a limited victory, however; the fepc went out of existence in 1946.

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

As blacks faced continuing discrimination in the postwar years, the March on Washington group met annually to reiterate blacks' demands for economic equality. The civil rights movement of the 1960s transformed the political climate, and in 1963, black leaders began to plan a new March on Washington, designed specifically to advocate passage of the Civil Rights Act then stalled in Congress. Chaired again by A. Philip Randolph and organized by his longtime associate, Bayard Rustin, this new March for Jobs and Freedom was expected to attract 100,000 participants. President John F. Kennedy showed as little enthusiasm for the march as had Roosevelt, but this time the black leaders would not be dissuaded. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference put aside their long-standing rivalry, black

and white groups across the country were urged to attend, and elaborate arrangements were made to ensure a harmonious event. The growing disillusion among some civil rights workers was reflected in a speech planned by John Lewis of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, but in order to preserve the atmosphere of goodwill, leaders of the march persuaded Lewis to omit his harshest criticisms of the Kennedy administration.

The march was an unprecedented success. More than 200,000 black and white Americans shared a joyous day of speeches, songs, and prayers led by a celebrated array of clergymen, civil rights leaders, politicians, and entertainers. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's soaring address climaxed the day; through his eloquence, the phrase "I Have a Dream" became an expression of the highest aspirations of the civil rights movement.

Like its predecessor, the March on Washington of 1963 was followed by years of disillusion and racial strife. Nevertheless, both marches represented an affirmation of hope, of belief in the democratic process, and of faith in the capacity of blacks and whites to work together for racial equality.

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