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THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL, THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT,
AND THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM

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THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL, THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT,
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Washington is a city of spectacles. Every four years, imposing Presidential inaugurations attract the great and the mighty. Kings, prime ministers, heroes and celebrities of every description have been feted there for more than 150 years. But in its entire glittering history, Washington had never seen a spectacle of the size and grandeur that assembled there on August 28, 1963. Among the nearly 250,000 people who journeyed that day to the capital, there were many dignitaries and many celebrities, but the stirring emotion came from the mass of ordinary people who stood in majestic dignity as witnesses to their single-minded determination to achieve democracy in their time.
—Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Why We Can't Wait* 122–123)

A Memorial to the Savior of the Union

Washington, DC marked the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth on February 12, 1909. Amidst the celebrations of that week, two pivotal events in American history took place: Congress debated proposals to erect a national monument honoring Lincoln and civil rights leaders issued the famous "Lincoln Birthday Call" for a meeting to organize what would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although both had their origins in an impulse to honor the martyred president, their interpretations of Abraham Lincoln were quite different. While black Americans saw Lincoln as, first and foremost, an emancipator and gadfly for demanding civil rights, Washington politicians—especially the Grand Old Party Republicans in power at the time—saw him almost exclusively as a symbol of white consensus and sectional reunion. In the Taft Commission's report to Congress recommending the monument, allusions to "the man who saved the Union" were made twenty times, while "emancipator" was used just once (Sandage 138–141).

The monument was part of the McMillan Plan for Washington, drafted by a group of Republican artists and architects in 1901–1902. The plan embodied, in architecture and landscape design, a visual representation of the Republican program to expand the federal government's authority under a powerful presidency. The Lincoln Memorial, ending one axis of the Mall, would be a tribute to the party patron and an emblem of the ideal president: strong, yet compassionate (Thomas xxvi–xxvii).

The memorial itself became a symbol of national consensus, in its conception and construction. It linked North and South, both physically—in its location across the Potomac from Virginia—and in the provenience of its component materials. By design, architect Henry Bacon's exterior would make references to reunion only. For example, the number of columns in the peristyle, thirty-six, equaled that of the number of states reunited in 1865. Bacon maintained that this was unintentional and claimed not to have known, at the time, the number of states at the close of the war. He did, however, capitalize on the coincidence, inscribing the named of a state in the frieze above each column, linked by intertwined pairs of wreaths (Thomas 63).

In a letter to Bacon, art critic Royal Cortissoz wrote:

The memorial must be a common ground for the meeting of the north and the south. By emphasizing [Lincoln's] saving the union you appeal to both sections. By saying nothing about slavery you avoid the rubbing of old sores. —Cortissoz to Bacon (Sandage 141)

Indeed, the only allusions made to American slavery in the shrine—overt or symbolic—are supplied by Lincoln himself, in the texts of his addresses carved into the walls. But above these, high on the wall behind Lincoln's head, is the inscription dedicating this “temple,” a sacred shrine in American civic religion, to the savior of the Union:

IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER

The memorial was dedicated on May 30, 1922. President Warren Harding addressed the crowd and declared that, “Emancipation was a means to the great end—maintained union and nationality.” Only one black speaker was included in the program: Robert Russa Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor at the Tuskegee Institute, an ally of the Republican Party, and an accommodationist, not a spokesperson for black interests like Marcus Garvey or W. E. B. Du Bois. Moton spoke to a segregated audience and, despite being handpicked, his speech betrayed his reservations about the success of American democracy. He compared two ships bound for America—the *Mayflower*, headed for Plymouth and a promised land of religious freedom, and a slave ship *en route* from Africa to Jamestown, carrying its human cargo. Ever since then, Moton observed, two principles had been contending for the soul of America: liberty and bondage (Thomas 156–157).

Moton's talk was early in the program, allowing for corrections from subsequent speakers. Both Harding and Chief Justice Taft distracted attention from Moton's point, asserting that Lincoln's greatness lay in his saving the nation, not freeing the slaves. Washington papers also glossed over Moton's talk and even re-interpreted the gist of it, but black journalists were not as easily hoodwinked. The editor of the black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, wrote a scathing, but prescient, piece. Moton's words, he said, fell “on ears closed and deaf to reason” and Harding's speech “opened” the memorial, but did not “dedicate” it. The editor called for a boycott of the monument until “juster and more grateful men come to power and history shall have rebuked offenders against the name of Abraham Lincoln” (Thomas 156–158).

He closed with a remarkable prediction:

With song, prayer, bold and truthful speech, with faith in God and country, later on let us dedicate the temple thus far only opened. —June 10, 1922 (Thomas 158)

In the years that followed, black leaders contested the reaffirmations of “Lincoln as Savior,” versus “Lincoln as Emancipator,” during annual Lincoln’s Birthday ceremonies at the memorial. They held their first organized gathering at the monument—a mass religious service—in August of 1926. However, it would be thirteen years before the memorial would be rededicated “with song, prayer, bold and truthful speech” (Sandage 143).

Rededicating the Lincoln Memorial as a Civil Rights Stage

On Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939, contralto Marian Anderson made history as she stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and sang to the largest audience ever assembled there. An African American, Ms. Anderson had been denied the opportunity to perform at Constitution Hall, a venue managed by the Daughters of the American Revolution. At the time, she was one of the nation’s foremost classical singers, performing to audiences around the globe, and yet—because of her race—the DAR had turned her away. When the Roosevelt administration learned of the DAR’s decision, they quickly offered her the Lincoln Memorial as an alternate venue (Teachout 55).

The decision to push for a performance in Washington had not been made by Anderson, but rather by her manager, impresario Sol Hurok, who was eager to book her in a major hall there—the first step, he believed, in opening the South to one of his most profitable clients. Previously, Anderson had performed in the nation’s capital only in churches and schools, notably all-black Howard University. Hurok felt that, given Anderson’s increasing recognition and popularity, it was time she appeared in a place more appropriate to her stature and before a racially mixed audience (Shawcross).

The premier auditorium in the district at that time was the 4,000-seat Constitution Hall. When negotiations began for Anderson’s concert, a clause appeared in all contracts that restricted the hall to “a concert by white artists only, and for no other purpose.” In February, when the Daughters realized that the booking was being sought for a “singer of color,” they refused to make an exception (Teachout 55; Sandage 143; Handy).

Immediately the NAACP launched a publicity campaign aimed at shaming the DAR into allowing Anderson to perform at Constitution Hall. Public outrage was enormous, prompting First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to resign from the organization in protest.¹ The DAR stood firm. After an unproductive attempt to arrange a recital at a local all-white high school—a move blocked by the District of Columbia Board of Education—Hurok was struck with the idea of holding an outdoor performance. NAACP executive secretary Walter White suggested the Lincoln Memorial. The use of the monument, he said, “would double the news value of the event” (Teachout 55; Shawcross; Sandage 144):

It would be far better . . . for Miss Anderson to sing out-of-doors, for example, at the Lincoln Memorial, erected to commemorate the memory of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, or not to sing in Washington at all until democracy can surmount the color line in the nation’s capital. —Walter White (Sandage 144)

¹ According to historian Scott Sandage, biographers have made more out of Eleanor Roosevelt’s involvement in the concert than can be justified. The first lady neither planned nor attended the event (145).

White approached ranking officials in the Department of the Interior. Permission for an Easter Sunday performance was quickly secured from Department Secretary Harold Ickes,² through his deputy, assistant secretary of the Interior, Oscar L. Chapman.³ Ickes had first cleared the performance with President Roosevelt who reportedly responded by saying, “She can sing from the top of the Washington Monument, if she wants to!” And when no reputable hotel in segregated Washington would accommodate a black guest, Anderson was offered a room in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Pinchot (Teachout 55; Shawcross; Sandage 135, 143–144, 147 n. 23).

Planning for the concert was under the direction of White, a master publicist who had once called Herbert Hoover “the man in the lily-White House.” He focused his attention on the symbolism of the site: Anderson would begin her program with “America,” he determined, because of the “ironic implications;” cabinet members, congressmen, and Supreme Court justices were invited to sit on the landing where Anderson would sing; Boy Scouts—both black and white—were enlisted to hand out programs, the cover page of which was printed with the opening words of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, also inscribed on the south wall of the monument:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. —Abraham Lincoln, Nov. 19, 1863

The concert was given free of charge on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, open to as many people who cared to come. The event drew a racially mixed crowd of some 75,000—including two U.S. Supreme Court justices, three members of the Roosevelt cabinet, and four senators—and was broadcast by NBC to a listening audience of millions (Shawcross; Teachout 55; Thomas 160).

Before singing, Anderson was introduced by Ickes, reading from a script that drew almost verbatim from White’s press release:

Miss Anderson, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In this great auditorium under the sky all of us are free. [Applause]

When God gave us this wonderful outdoors and the sun, the moon, and the stars, He made no distinction of race, or creed, or color. [Applause] And 130 years ago He sent to us one of His truly great in order that He might restore freedom to those from whom we had disregardfully taken it. [Applause]

In carrying out this great task, Abraham Lincoln laid down his life. And so it is as appropriate as it is fortunate that today we stand reverently and humbly at the base of this memorial to the great emancipator where glorious tribute is rendered to his memory by a daughter of the race from which he struck the chains of slavery. [Applause] —Harold Ickes, April 9, 1939

² According to historian Terry Teachout, Ickes hoped that, as a result of this gesture, blacks—who, at the time, primarily voted Republican—would switch their loyalty to the Roosevelt administration (55).

³ Thirty years earlier, Chapman had learned “a stern lesson in intolerance” after purchasing a portrait of Lincoln to hang in his Omega, Virginia school. After a community uproar, Chapman—then an eighth grader—was expelled by the local school board (Sandage 135).

Visibly nervous, but determined, Anderson began the concert at 5 PM. She later recalled:

When we went back that afternoon for the performance, I had such a feeling that I had never had before. . . . My heart was pounding to the point where I could hardly hear anything. . . . When we went out onto the steps there was a multitude such that you could only imagine, in your wildest imagination. . . . It seemed to me as far as the eye could go directly in front of me there were people. And on either side, all kinds of people and everyone there with a sort of—well, I had the feeling that everyone there . . . wanted to say that they were with one. . . . There was such an emotional upheaval that I wonder now, as I look back, just how we might have come to the end of the program. —Marian Anderson (Shawcross)⁴

As planned, Anderson launched the program with “America,”⁵ proclaiming her citizenship—“my country”—and claiming the nation’s inherent freedoms. Anderson changed the words of the first verse from “*of thee I sing*” to “*to thee we sing*”—simultaneously appealing to our nation’s ideals and subtly questioning whether or not they had been achieved. The “sweet land of liberty” becomes more of an aspiration than an accurate description. Anderson followed with an Italian aria, Schubert’s “Ave Maria,” and three Negro spirituals: “Gospel Train,” “Trampin,” and “My Soul is Anchored in the Lord.” Although the title does not appear on the program, she also sang, appropriately, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” (Teachout 55; Branham 623; Sandage 135–6; Handy).⁶

White newspapers and the Washington elite characterized the event as the end to an embarrassing controversy, but black leaders saw it as a new beginning. Writing the next day, Mary McLeod Bethune proclaimed, “We are on the right track. Through the Marian Anderson protest concert we made our triumphant entry into the democratic spirit of American life” (Sandage 136).

Later, Anderson—never one to court controversy—commented on the event:

Regardless of my feelings in the matter, I know that it would not have been right not to have followed the path laid out to appear in Washington. . . . You cannot accomplish anything if you run away from it. If you have something to offer . . . and you feel that it is sufficiently sincere to make an impression, then I think you should do it, in your own manner. —Marian Anderson (Shawcross)

A few months later, in July 1939, Anderson was awarded the Springarn Medal by the NAACP, acknowledging the event as a milestone in the struggle for racial equality in the United States. The medal was presented to Ms. Anderson by Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1955, Anderson would become the first black singer ever to perform with New York’s Metropolitan Opera (Shawcross; Teachout 53).

⁴ Audio of interview can be found at <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/lincoln.html>.

⁵ Better known today by its first line, “My country! ‘tis of thee.” The choice of “America” as the first song in the program had many historical precedents. The song was an important touchstone for Black orators, who drew distinctions between the principles of the song and the reality of America, and more than sixty alternate versions, drafted by abolitionists and others, are known to exist (Branham 633).

⁶ Anderson sang again on the steps of the monument in 1952, at a memorial service for Ickes (Sandage 145).

In his article, “Civil Rights and the Lincoln Memorial,” Scott Sandage reveals that the Anderson concert was not the first civil rights gathering at the Lincoln Memorial, nor would it be the largest. It was, however, the first black mass gathering to garner positive national publicity. In 1939, Lincoln was an increasingly coveted cultural symbol of the American way of life. By using Lincoln’s monument, he argues, the black leaders were able to claim successfully the moral high ground and portray their adversaries as un-American and counter to the great ideals upon which our nation was founded. They used Lincoln’s memory and his monument as weapons in their struggle for political and economic equality. The monument offered the black leaders what Sandage calls a “cultural language” to speak to white America and elicit support. In the process, they also changed the public meaning of the hero and his shrine. Lincoln’s role as “the man who saved the Union” took a step back and his role as emancipator claimed center stage. “In one bold stroke,” Sandage writes, “the Easter concert swept away the shrine’s official dedication to the ‘savior of the union’ and made it a stronghold of racial justice” (Sandage 136, 145–147).

Newspaper accounts of the time recognized the change and its impact on the nation. A *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial proclaimed a “New Message of the Lincoln Shrine” and influential journalist Franklin P. Adams compared the DAR to the Nazi German-American Bund, calling those “Daughters of the American Reactionaries” “stuffed petticoats” who had been exposed as “un-American” (Sandage 147).

A. Philip Randolph and the March for Jobs, 1941

After the Anderson concert, blacks began to seek the Lincoln Memorial for more overt protests. When government cooperation was not forthcoming, activists quickly learned that more diplomatic demonstrations—evoking spirituality and American civic pride—would sidestep such opposition. Soon, Sandage argues, a “standardized civil rights protest ritual” emerged: using mass rallies instead of pickets, performing spiritual and patriotic music, inviting prominent speakers and guests, self-policing the event to project the image of order, and alluding to Lincoln in speeches and associated publicity. Above all, insisting that the event take place at the memorial—rather than another site in the capital—was key. In this way, politics was sugarcoated in civic religion, and racism was confronted powerfully, but indirectly, emphasizing national values over direct criticism (Sandage 152).

In 1941, the nation was preparing for war, but discriminatory hiring practices meant there were no jobs for blacks in the booming war-related industries. A. Philip Randolph—the trailblazing black labor leader who’d founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters⁷—threatened “an ‘all-out’ thundering march on Washington, ending in a monster and huge demonstration at Lincoln’s Monument” to “shake up white America.” The march, Randolph announced in the early spring, would take place on July 1st:

Be not dismayed in these terrible times. You possess power, great power. Our problem is to hitch it up for action on the broadest, daring and most gigantic scale. In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure . . . To this end we propose that 10,000 Negroes MARCH ON WASHINGTON

7 The nation’s first African American union, started by Randolph in 1925.

FOR JOBS IN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND EQUAL INTEGRATION INTO THE FIGHTING FORCES

... Mass power can cause President Roosevelt to issue an executive order abolishing discrimination.

—A. Philip Randolph, March 1941 (Anderson 250)

By the end of May, Randolph was calling for 100,000 marchers. Fearful that such an action would end in violence and rioting—not only in the capital, but also in other urban centers across the nation—President Roosevelt felt compelled to capitulate. He issued Executive Order 8806, creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee and guaranteeing jobs for black men and women in the wartime armament industries. It was the first executive order protecting African American rights since the Emancipation Proclamation (Anderson 248–259)

Roosevelt’s action stopped the demonstration cold; the following year, Randolph’s permit request for a similar gathering was denied. Ickes wrote to Randolph, saying that such a protest would “dim the glory” of Anderson’s concert. “I do not believe,” he added, “that even such a meeting as you propose would be in the true spirit of the Lincoln Memorial.” Having learned the importance of projecting a peaceful image, Randolph was finally successful in 1953 with a small, interracial, interfaith prayer pilgrimage to the Memorial on Lincoln’s birthday. His dreams of a massive March on Washington, however, coupled with a large demonstration at the monument, never died (Sandage 153).

1957 Prayer Pilgrimage

In 1957, as the third anniversary of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling approached without southern compliance, newly minted civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., felt that direct action was needed. King had come to prominence as the leader of the Montgomery bus boycott in early December of 1955, just days after Rosa Parks had been arrested, and was known for his penchant for mass action.⁸ On February 14, 1957, King met in New Orleans with civil rights leaders from throughout the South. The group determined that they would call themselves the Southern Leadership Conference; more importantly, King announced that they would sponsor a “pilgrimage” to Washington if President Eisenhower refused to show his support for desegregation in the South. “This will not be a political march,” King declared, tapping into the successful formula for black protest. “It will be one rooted in deep spiritual faith” (*Bearing the Cross* 90).

King sent a telegram to Eisenhower, asking him to consider making a speech in the South urging law and order. It also called for a White House conference on compliance with integration laws (Branch 212–213).

In the absence of some early and effective remedial action, we will have no moral choice but to lead a Pilgrimage of Prayer to Washington. If you, our president, cannot come South to relieve our harassed

⁸ Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give her seat in the Caucasian section of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white male passenger. The bus boycott in the city began almost immediately thereafter. On December 5th, King was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, making him the official spokesperson for the boycott.

people, we shall have to lead our people to you in the capital in order to call the nation's attention to the violence and organized terror. —Martin Luther King, Jr., to President Eisenhower (Branch 213)

Eisenhower received King's telegram while on vacation in Thomasville, Georgia. He had just shot his first turkey, riding around Treasury Secretary Humphrey's farm in wicker carriages pulled by white mules and driven by what a friend called "the old colored retainers." He had no intention of receiving a Negro delegation at the White House to discuss civil rights and he did not reply to King's telegram (Branch 213).

At a planning session held on April 5th in Washington, King, Randolph, and NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins set the date of the pilgrimage for May 17th, the third anniversary of the *Brown* decision. Bayard Rustin was charged with the task of coordinating the day's events. Rustin, the Executive Secretary of the War Resisters League and an advocate of nonviolent protest, was a close associate of Randolph's and had worked with King during the Montgomery bus boycott. He and Stanley Levison, King's confidant and closest white friend, had worked together on the Eisenhower telegram and now prepared drafts for King's remarks to be made at the Pilgrimage's main event: A rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Levison emphasized the labor movement and the interests of black people; Rustin told King "there is not sufficient spiritual content" and asked him "to call upon Negroes north and south to adhere to nonviolence in work, thought, and deed." King accepted only part of their suggestions; he focused his text on the demand for U.S. Government action to protect black peoples' right to vote in the South (*Bearing the Cross* 92; Branch 212, 216).

At noon on Friday, May 17th, roughly 25,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, less than half of the predicted estimates. Mordecai Johnson led the crowd in prayer "in the presence of the memory of Abraham Lincoln and of the God and father of our people." Mahalia Jackson, in a coda to the Marian Anderson concert, led the crowd in singing "America." Of all the speakers, King—the last of the group—received the most enthusiastic response. His call to "Give us the ballot" supplied the headline for news accounts of the rally. As a result, King emerged within the black press as the new leader of the civil rights movement (Sandage 154; *Bearing the Cross* 93–94; Branch 217–218).

Reporting on the Pilgrimage, Edward Morgan, radio commentator for ABC News, asked how the Ku Klux Klan or white citizens' councils could match the power of "a respectable and respectful gathering of American citizens in clean shirts and chic dresses" whose only weapons were the law and human dignity.

A burning cross, a bomb, floggings, a lynching party, these are blunt, cumbersome weapons against a force of this kind. Of course, the racists might refine their approach. They might henceforth picket the Lincoln Memorial as contaminated by such a host of Negroes. —Edward P. Morgan, ABC News, May 17, 1957 (Sandage 155)

As the monument became more identified with the civil rights movement, it did become a place of contention, with white supremacists targeting it for graffiti and demonstrations.

Randolph and Rustin: Rekindling the Idea

Randolph never abandoned his idea for a massive march on Washington and demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial. Even before the prayer gathering, his associate Rustin was jotting down notes for a larger event, with a full staff and broad sponsorship. The small scale of the 1957 pilgrimage whet their appetite for a larger action and served almost as a trial run for what would later evolve into the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Efforts should be made as early as possible to get a permit to march in Washington and to hold a mass meeting before the Lincoln Memorial. There may be trouble, but this could make the situation all the more lively if handled carefully. —Bayard Rustin, 1962 (Sandage 155)⁹

In the beginning of 1963, 100 years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, plans had been made to celebrate the centennial of black Americans' liberation from slavery. A federal commission in Washington had been established to mark the event, and governors and mayors across the country were naming committees, issuing statements, and preparing social and state celebrations. All this pomp and circumstance, however, only served to remind black Americans how far they were from being truly free: Schools were still segregated; work and advancement in it were still limited; home ownership and access to housing loans were restricted; and President Kennedy, who three years earlier had run, in part, on a civil rights platform, had failed to deliver concrete results to the African American majority who helped put him in office (*Why We Can't Wait* 17–23).

In one of Rustin's frequent visits to Randolph's office in Harlem, the latter again discussed a "mass protest rally" at the memorial, to proclaim a concrete "Emancipation Program" in the centennial year of Lincoln's proclamation. Rustin knew instantly that he would devote himself to the project:

I was deeply involved emotionally . . . I knew [Randolph] always had a hankering for a march and my emotional commitment was . . . to bring about what had always been one of his dreams. —Bayard Rustin (D'Emilio 327)

Randolph envisioned a two-day gathering with the aim of drawing national attention to "the economic subordination of the American Negro." The substantive goal of the march, as outlined by Bayard Rustin, would be "a broad and fundamental program of economic justice" and in particular "the creation of more jobs for all Americans." "Integration in the fields of education, housing, transportation and public accommodations," Rustin wrote, "will be of limited extent and duration so long as fundamental economic inequality along racial lines persists" (Sandage 156; "King" 27–28).

In the early stages of planning, Randolph and Rustin anticipated a group as large as 100,000 protesters picketing Congress, followed by a public mass rally at the Lincoln Memorial the next

⁹ Rustin, Bayard. "Some Plans and Suggestions for a March to Washington for Civil Rights, October 1956" Rustin Papers.

day. As weeks went by in early 1963, their target dates shifted from May to mid-June and then to October, but neither of the two largest civil rights groups—the NAACP, headed by the sometimes cautious Roy Wilkins, and the National Urban League, led by Whitney Young—offered support or encouragement when informed of Randolph’s plan. The other major players on the civil rights stage, King and his renamed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), were too busy during the early months of 1963 to consider Randolph’s nascent idea. King was preoccupied with the planning of a massive civil action campaign in Birmingham, Alabama: a series of protests that would bring the attention of the nation—and the world—to the civil rights movement, and would pave the way for a successful March on Washington (“King” 28).

Birmingham, 1963

After months of planning, SCLC’s Birmingham demonstrations got underway in April of 1963. The campaign’s objectives were desegregated facilities and job opportunities in the city’s downtown department stores. But Birmingham’s racist public safety commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor, was committed to doing everything he could to obstruct negotiations between the business owners and the protesters. Four weeks later, the demonstrations made national news, with televised scenes of Birmingham policemen and firemen unleashing snarling German shepherds and high-powered fire hoses against black marchers and onlookers (“King” 28).

Birmingham, and the worldwide news coverage its violence received, catapulted the civil rights struggle to greater national prominence than ever before and inspired a wave of demonstrations elsewhere. During what became known as the “Summer of Discontent,” 1,222 civil rights demonstrations were mounted in over a hundred American cities, resulting in more than twenty thousand arrests. On June 1st King talked strategy with Stanley Levison, over a wiretapped phone line¹⁰ (Sandage 158).

We are on the threshold of a significant breakthrough and the greatest weapon is the mass demonstration. . . . We are at the point where we can mobilize all of this righteous indignation into a powerful mass movement. —Martin Luther King, Jr., to Stanley Levison, June 1, 1963 (“King” 28)

King told Levison that they should publicly support Randolph’s March on Washington—a movement they’d known about since early spring— for “the threat itself may so frighten the President that he would have to do something” (“King” 28; D’Emilio 329–330).

Months later, King reflected on his decision to participate in the march, born of the protests in Birmingham and across the nation:

The thundering events of the summer required an appropriate climax. The dean of Negro leaders, A. Philip Randolph, whose gifts of imagination and tireless militancy had for decades dramatized the civil-rights struggle, once again provided the uniquely suitable answer. He proposed a March

¹⁰ The Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, believed Levison to be a secret Communist agent who was manipulating King, and had obtained Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy’s approval for the wiretapping a year earlier.

on Washington to unite in one luminous action all of the forces along the far-flung front. —Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Why We Can't Wait* 122)

JFK

A week after the wire-tapped conversation, King went public with his support of the march, saying that such an event might feature “sit-in” protests at the U.S. Capitol. The front page headline of the June 10th *New York Times* read: “King Denounces President on Rights” and quoted King saying that President Kennedy must start speaking of race as “a moral issue,” in terms “we seldom if ever hear” from the White House (“King” 29; Branch 822–23).

Given the disinterested attitude that President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, had adopted toward the movement, neither King nor his colleagues had any reason to believe that the Kennedys would change their stance on civil rights without such public pressure. Indeed, up until May of 1963, the Kennedy administration had purposely tried to keep civil rights issues on the back burner. The events in Birmingham made that impossible. What King and the press did not know was that, privately—more than two weeks prior to King’s statement—the president, the attorney general, and their closest civil rights advisors had been secretly drafting an outline for sweeping civil rights legislation. Perhaps in response to King’s statements in the *Times*, the following day Kennedy announced—to startled aides—that he would reveal his civil rights bill that night. At 8PM on June 11th, President Kennedy went before the American people on nationwide television to announce their proposal, and delivered his historic civil rights speech, much of which was unscripted (Branch 823; “King” 29).

Taking his cue from King, the president declared that the problem confronting the nation was “a moral issue”:

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. 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.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it. And we cherish our freedom here at home. But are we to say to the world—and much more importantly, to each other—that this is the land of the free, except for Negroes, that we have no second-class citizens, except Negroes, that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race, except with respect to Negroes?

Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. . . . We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and a people . . . A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. —John F. Kennedy (Branch 824)

Listening in Atlanta, King was elated. He sent an instant response to the Kennedy:

I have just listened to your speech to the nation. It was one of the most eloquent, profound, and unequivocal pleas for Justice and the Freedom of all men ever made by any President. You spoke

passionately to the moral issues involved in the integration struggle. —Martin Luther King, Jr., to John F. Kennedy (Branch 824)

Hoping that the legislation would help persuade them to abandon the proposed march, on Saturday, June 22nd, Kennedy called King, Randolph, Wilkins, and other civil rights leaders to the White House to discuss his concerns. A mass gathering, Kennedy believed, would damage the image of the United States internationally and might further aggravate racial tensions at home in America. He also feared it had the potential to undermine the efforts being made to secure civil rights legislation. Kennedy told those gathered:

We want success in Congress, not just a big show at the Capitol. It seemed to me a great mistake to announce a march on Washington before the bill was even in committee. The only effect is to create an atmosphere of intimidation—and this may give some members of Congress an out. . . . To get the votes we need, we have, first, to oppose demonstrations which will lead to violence, and, second, give Congress a fair chance to work its will. —John F. Kennedy (“King” 29)

The president did not overtly ask for cancellation of the march, but his opposition was clear. In spite of his best efforts, however, Kennedy was unable to persuade the organizers to cancel the march. Randolph declared, “The Negroes are already in the streets,” announcing with his booming bass voice: “There *will* be a march.” The only question was whether or not it would be violent or nonviolent, well or poorly led (Branch 840).

Toward the end of the two-hour meeting, King also spoke in favor of the demonstration. The event, he said, could dramatize the civil rights issue positively,

. . . mobilizing support in parts of the country that don't know the problem firsthand. I think it will serve a purpose. It may seem ill-timed. Frankly, I have never engaged in a direct-action movement that did not seem ill-timed. —Martin Luther King, June 22, 1963 (Branch 840)

Randolph and Rustin originally planned to stress economic injustice and to press for a new federal jobs program and a higher minimum wage. A nationwide recession that had begun in 1959 was still in progress in 1963. The black unemployment rate was twice that of whites, with over one and a half million blacks looking for work. To stress these economic concerns—in addition to the standard civil rights agenda—the massive protest was dubbed the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” But the events in Birmingham and the Kennedy legislation changed the agenda; the emphasis shifted to lobbying for the civil rights bill that was wending its way through Congress (D’Emilio 335).

Planning the March

At a meeting on July 2nd in New York’s Roosevelt Hotel, attended by the “Big Six” civil rights leaders— King, Randolph, Wilkins, James Farmer (CORE), John Lewis (SNCC), and Whitney Young, Jr. (SCLC)—a march organization was established. Randolph—who for more than 20 years had worked toward such an event—was the obvious choice to lead the effort. To coordinate

the planning, Randolph turned to Bayard Rustin, despite some skittish opposition based on his being a pacifist, a socialist, and a homosexual. During the meeting, the Big Six truncated the event to one day only and set the date for August 28th. The organizers further announced that there would be no sit-ins or civil disobedience of any kind during the event, and worries on the part of government officials lessened (Branch 847–848; “King” 30; D’Emilio 339).

Rustin, whose official title was Deputy Director for the March, was the center of a whirlwind of activity for the next two months. He set up headquarters in an old stucco building on West 130th in Harlem, owned by the Friendship Baptist Church, and hung a giant banner from the third-story window reading “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—August 28.” Inside there was no elevator. Frenetic planners ran up and down the steps, while Rustin, in an upstairs office, chain-smoked his way through meetings and dashed between telephones and borrowed typewriters. He and his small staff had less than two months to plan what would be the largest demonstration in the history of the capitol. Rustin hit the ground running; within two weeks he had distributed his *Organizer’s Manual No. 1* to two thousand interested leaders and the massive organizing effort was underway (D’Emilio 314; Branch 850–851).

Under Rustin’s direction, the event was planned down to the minutest detail. In order to present the march as orderly and respectable, rooted in faith and justice, cooperation with the Kennedy administration was purposely sought and the message that went out to the media carefully controlled. Even the banners and signs carried during the march were all approved by Rustin and his team ahead of time (Sandage 156).

At Rustin’s request, District police and Park Service officials agreed to a meeting with the planning group on July 11th. Howard V. Covell, Deputy Chief of Police, ran the meeting and the primary spokesperson for the civil rights leaders was Rustin. Those present included Sutton Jett, NPS Regional Director for the Washington Area, and Nelson Murdock, Chief of the U.S. Park Police (Minutes 3).

During the meeting, Rustin laid out the plans for the event as they then stood, including the march down Pennsylvania Avenue and the mass meeting at the Lincoln Memorial.¹¹ Sutton Jett asked Rustin to “get with us at the Lincoln Memorial” as early as possible to discuss physical arrangements at the site, and hoped that the organizers would be sensitive to the peak traffic time (4:30-6:30) around Lincoln Memorial Circle when scheduling the march to and meeting at the site (Minutes 6).

Throughout the meeting, police and NPS officials stressed their willingness to work with the organizers of the march. “The entire idea of this meeting,” Deputy Coverall said, “is to be cooperative as much as possible.” The only thing that Sutton Jett requested of Rustin and the others was that they encourage participants to clean up their trash (Minutes 13; 22).

Nelson Murdock, Chief of Park Police, began his comments by praising Rustin and others:

11 At this point there were also plans for a demonstration at the White House and lobbying activities on Capitol Hill. These activities were eventually dropped in order to focus the event on the march and the Lincoln Memorial program.

I commend the inspired leadership that has been exhibited here and . . . if this is an indication of what can be done, then I think that everything will go off very smoothly. We are a very small unit, the Park Police as a unit of the National Park Service. I wish that I could assure you that we are great in numbers, that we would be able to meet almost any spontaneous incident that might come up. I wish that I could give you that assurance. I don't believe it will be necessary. It has already been mentioned that our great concern of course is for the general public at all times and especially the time of a great crowd like this. We'll work with you just as closely as we can in an endeavor to help your plans come to full fruition and that it will be completely successful. . . . I join with Chief Murray in acknowledging that we will provide all the cooperation that we possibly can. We do want to maintain closely with your contacts, so that we can be close enough to the plans that we can plan also. —Chief Nelson Murdock, July 11, 1963 (Minutes 23)

The final destination of the march was, and had always been, the Lincoln Memorial. In an effort to maintain the greatest possible order—and in keeping with the tried-and-true formula for successful protests at the memorial—Rustin made the calculated decision to dedicate the event to the memories of Medgar Evers and William Moore, martyrs in the cause.

We are doing that again in the interest of maintaining the greatest order, because if one has that type of parade, people tend to take the meaning of that parade seriously; therefore, there will not be a great deal of chanting and shouting. What we would do if we do that is to intersperse the march—not with bands, but with choirs which would sing, “We Shall Overcome;” and the purpose of designing it in this manner is to give it serious thought that it will be extremely orderly. —Bayard Rustin (Minutes 24)

On July 17th, President Kennedy publicly endorsed the march, and administration officials quietly began assisting the planners in their efforts to ensure a trouble-free event. Most members of Congress sent back excuses to Rustin's invitations to participate, until it became clear that the event was going to draw thousands of participants and millions of constituents watching from home.

As we got closer [and they] saw it was going to be bigger and more important, the relatives became less important, the trips home became less important, the going to Europe became less important. —Bayard Rustin (D'Emilio 350–351)

The National Council of the AFL-CIO, despite direct appeals from Randolph, chose not to support the march, adopting a position of neutrality. However, AFL-CIO president George Meany gave individual unions the freedom to participate if they so-desired. Among the larger unions, the UAW and the Steelworkers participated, as did the Ladies' Garment Workers, the Packinghouse Workers, and the Electrical Workers. Central labor councils from many American cities also fully supported the effort, contributed funds, and attended the march in substantial numbers, along with a number of international unions. Some black organizations, notably the Nation of Islam, condemned the march. Malcolm X referred to the event as the “farce on Washington,” and any

member of the Nation who attended faced a potential 90-day suspension from the organization (D'Emilio 350).

King cast the feuding in a gentle light, basing the difference on the amount of faith the groups had in the “Negro’s abilities” to execute the event successfully:

The debate on the proposal neatly polarized positions. Those with faith in the Negro’s abilities, endurance and discipline welcomed the challenge. On the other side were the timid, confused and uncertain friends, along with those who had never believed in the Negro’s capacity to organize anything of significance. The conclusion was never really in doubt, because the powerful momentum of the revolutionary summer had swept aside all opposition. —Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Why We Can’t Wait* 122)

For his part, King kept himself busy talking up the march and the mass meeting at the memorial. He told journalists that the march would “arouse the conscience of the nation over the economic plight of the Negro,” echoing Randolph’s original theme. Just days after the meeting at the White House, he told a crowd of more than 125,000 in Detroit that the time had come for a demonstration in Washington to support the civil rights bill.

Let’s not fool ourselves: this bill isn’t going to get through if we don’t put some work in it and some determined pressure. And this is why I’ve said that in order to get this bill through, we’ve got to arouse the conscience of the nation, and we ought to march to Washington more than 100,000 in order to say, [*Applause*] in order to say that we are determined, and in order to engage in a nonviolent protest to keep this issue before the conscience of the nation.

And if we will do this, we will be able to bring that new day of freedom into being. If we will do this, we will be able to make the American dream a reality. And I do not want to give you the impression that it’s going to be easy. . . . [But] we must go on with a determination and with a faith that this problem can be solved. —Martin Luther King, Jr., June 23, 1963 (“Address at the Freedom Rally” 70)

At the end of his speech, King delivered a longer version of the “Dream” sequence that would become famous just two months later in Washington (Branch 842–843).¹²

Setting the Agenda at the Lincoln Memorial

When questions arose about what to include in the day’s schedule, a positive, uplifting program at the Lincoln Memorial was at the top of the list, given the historic associations with the Anderson concert. King himself had mixed feelings about Lincoln and his role in civil rights history, calling him, at one time, “a vacillating president” who “finally [came] to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation” and, at another, the only president who “had ever sufficiently given that degree of support to our struggle for freedom to justify our confidence.” When commenting on the choice to use the Lincoln Memorial as the final destination of the

12 King again used the “I Have a Dream” segment in Chicago, in mid-August, just a week before the march.

1963 march, James Farmer, founder of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), indicated that feelings about Lincoln, the man, had very little to do with the decision to gather at the monument (Washington 279; *Why We Can't Wait* 147).

It doesn't say anything about what we thought about Lincoln. It says something about how great the image of Lincoln was, and it was something we could use to achieve our noteworthy objectives, that's all. —James Farmer (Sandage 150)

Rustin set the schedule of speakers and musical performances at the monument. In Hollywood and New York, celebrities began announcing their intention to attend and, in some cases, perform. Harry Belafonte coordinated the celebrity mobilization, which included Burt Lancaster, Sammy Davis, Jr., Charlton Heston, Sidney Portier, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Eartha Kitt, and Joan Baez. In addition to musical performances by popular acts of the day, each of the leaders would speak. King, Rustin decided, would speak last, in part because no other leader wanted to follow him. Four days before the march King told Al Duckett—a black journalist who was ghostwriting a forthcoming King book¹³—that the speech needed to be a “sort of Gettysburg Address” (D’Emilio 346; “King” 30).

Final Preparations

Toward the end of July, a number of local groups finalized their travel plans. Bus-, train-, and plane-loads of marchers would arrive the morning of the 28th and be brought to the Washington Monument. Rachele Horowitz, Rustin’s transportation coordinator, kept close tabs on the numbers and, by August, she was sure that at least 89,000 people would be coming. The number grew as the days passed. On August 10th, New York’s *Amsterdam News* predicted 250,000 participants (D’Emilio 351).

By early August, when Rustin released his second manual to guide the organizers, there were no longer any plans to lobby; there would be no demonstrations, other than the large march and rally, and there would be no civil disobedience. The goal was to move the crowds into Washington starting at dawn and out again before dusk. Because he was concerned about the racial friction that might ensue if a white person was seen arresting a black, Rustin recruited his own policing force for the event, consisting of out-of-uniform black officers from cities up and down the East Coast (Branch 873; D’Emilio 345).

Still, the powers-that-be in Washington were unwilling to take chances. DC police units had all their leaves canceled; neighboring suburban forces were given special riot-control training. With Birmingham in mind, the attorney general expressly forbade the presence of police dogs. Liquor sales would be banned that day, for the first time since Prohibition. Two Washington Senators’ baseball games were postponed. The Justice Department and the army coordinated preparations for emergency military deployments of 4,000 troops assembled in the suburbs, backed by 15,000 paratroopers on alert in North Carolina, and seventy different potential emergency scenarios were studied. Washington area hospitals canceled elective surgery for the day. Hundreds of businesses

13 The book in question is King’s *Why We Can't Wait*.

planned to close and many federal employees decided to take the day off in order to avoid the city altogether. The Justice Department and the police worked with the march committee to develop a state-of-the-art public-address system; unbeknownst to the march coordinators, the police rigged the system so that they could take control of it if trouble arose. The main rally at the Lincoln Memorial held powerful associations for the organizers, but the police liked the site because, with water on three sides, demonstrators could be easily contained (D'Emilio 343, 353; Branch 872).

The Saturday before the march, Belafonte hosted a benefit at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. With headliners Tony Bennett, Quincy Jones, Theolonius Monk, and Herbie Mann, the event raised over \$30,000 and added a feeling of joyous celebration to the final days. The next morning, Rustin left for Washington (D'Emilio 352).

Rustin and his core staff of 200 volunteers made their final preparations for the 28th. They sprinkled the Mall with several hundred portable toilets, twenty-one temporary drinking fountains, twenty-four first aid stations, and a check-cashing facility. Farther north, volunteers in New York's Riverside Church worked in shifts to make 80,000 cheese-sandwich lunches for overnight travelers (Branch 873).

The Events of the Day

In the early morning hours of August 28th the marchers began to arrive. From Florida, Georgia, and elsewhere, they came in twenty-one reserved railroad coaches. Participants from greater distances arrived on hired planes and buses poured south through the Baltimore tunnel at the rate of 100 per hour. An 82-year-old bicycled from Ohio and one young Negro arrived after a week-long journey from Chicago on roller skates, sporting a bright red sash that read "Freedom" (Branch 876).

Rustin was up at dawn and walked toward his headquarters on the Mall: a sea of green and white striped tents billowing in the breeze around the Washington Monument. One of his team, Norman Hill, later related a scene that he described as "uniquely Bayard":

He carried in those days a pocket watch, a round pocket watch in his pants. And I remember him pulling a piece of paper out of the side pocket of his jacket. And he looked at the watch, looked at the piece of paper, and then turned to the reporters. He took on a scholarly British accent, and said 'everything was right on schedule.' What the reporters didn't know was that the piece of paper was blank. —Norman Hill (D'Emilio 354)

Rustin returned to the hotel to gather the civil rights leaders—a group that had grown in number and was now known collectively as the "Big Ten"—and bring them to a series of meetings on Capitol Hill. In the meantime, the crowd on the Mall was growing. By 9:30, it had reached 40,000; before 11:00, police estimated the number had grown to 90,000, with more arriving continuously. At noon, nearly two hours before the rally at the memorial would begin, police raised the number to 200,000. Finally, the count reached a quarter of a million (D'Emilio 354; Branch 878).

Rustin's plan was to wait until 11:30, at which point the crowd would be directed into two lines at the Washington Monument and would then file toward the Lincoln Memorial along

both Constitution and Independence Avenues. But the crowd—despite performances by Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and others—was anxious to move. With the sun high in the sky, thousands began streaming spontaneously toward the rally site. Rustin's marshals didn't have the heart to hold them back. "My God!" Rustin shouted. "They're going!" He scrambled to pull the Big Ten together. By the time the leaders were ready, the crowd of early marchers was so thick it took practically a military operation to make a break in the line. After an opening had been made, King, Randolph, Wilkins and the others were inserted. The Big Ten linked arms and from a flatbed truck the paparazzi snapped photos of the men "leading" the historic march (Branch 877; D'Emilio 355).

The Lincoln Memorial Program

The march was mostly silent. As the masses approached the Lincoln Memorial, they heard the voices of singers—Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, and others. In another reference to 1939, Marian Anderson was originally scheduled to open the events at the monument by singing the national anthem. Delayed by traffic, she performed later in the program, singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." The entertainment was meant to be a prelude to the heart of the program: the speeches of each of the ten civil rights leaders. It also allowed the leaders some time to revise SNCC leader John Lewis's fiery speech. The changes were hastily accomplished in a meeting between Randolph, King, Lewis, and Rev. Eugene Carson Blake,¹⁴ inside a small guard station below the giant seat of Lincoln's statue (D'Emilio 355; Sandage 156; Teachout 56; Branch 878–879).

Rustin allotted four minutes to each speaker, warning that a "hook man" would yank them from the podium if they exceeded seven. Most, however, went on far longer. They tested the patience of the people assembled, many of whom had been on the road since the previous evening. After nine of the ten speakers had finished, the crowd was drifting. At that moment, Mahalia Jackson stepped up to the mic. With a stirring rendition of the Negro spiritual "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned," Jackson moved the huge audience to tears. She had been deliberately placed in the program by Rustin as a warm-up for the final speaker: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Branch 873, 881; D'Emilio 356).

King himself was tremendously energized by what he'd seen that day and wrote eloquently on the crowd assembled at the memorial:

They came from almost every state in the union; they came in every form of transportation; they gave up from one to three days' pay plus the cost of transportation, which for many was a heavy financial sacrifice. They were good-humored and relaxed, yet disciplined and thoughtful. They applauded their leaders generously, but the leaders, in their own hearts, applauded their audience. Many a Negro speaker that day had his respect for his own people deepened as he felt the strength of their dedication. The enormous multitude was the living, beating heart of an infinitely noble movement. It was an army without guns, but not without strength. It was an army into which no one had to be drafted. It was white and Negro, and of all ages. It had adherents of every faith, members of every

14 A prominent white clergyman from the National Conference of Churches.

class, every profession, every political party, united by a single ideal. It was a fighting army, but no one could mistake that its most powerful weapon was love. —Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Why We Can't Wait* 123)

The Speech

King had arrived in Washington very late the night before, after two days on the road. He sequestered himself in his suite at the Willard Hotel to work on his speech, having devoted no concentrated time to it beforehand. All night long he revised his language until he had squeezed in the themes he wanted to address. It wasn't until the wee hours of August 28th that King finished the final revisions on the text for the speech, to be distributed to the press early that morning. The text, when typed and mimeographed, came to three double-spaced pages of legal size paper (Branch 875; "King" 30).

The production of advance copy was unusual, practically unprecedented, for King. A southern-style preacher, King spoke in public as he did from the pulpit: extemporaneously. Drawing on oral tradition methods, he wove together segments of material that he'd delivered countless times before and knew by heart. He didn't write speeches so much as assemble them, rearranging and adapting these "set pieces" as the occasion demanded ("King" 31).

By the time King took the stage, it was late in the afternoon. ABC and NBC had cut away from afternoon soap operas to join CBS's continuous live coverage of the program. Having been introduced by Randolph as "the moral leader of our nation," King thanked the crowd for joining "the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation." Then he started making his way through his speech verbatim. He echoed the Gettysburg Address, saying, "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." Within moments he'd started into one of his familiar "set pieces," in which he described Negroes as having been presented a "bad check" from an America that had defaulted on its promise to black citizens. From here, King slipped into one of his favorite rhetorical devices, an anaphora featuring the phrase "Now is the time," calling for America to live up to its promises (Branch 881; "I Have a Dream" 81; "King" 31).

Rousing the audience, he launched into another deliberate repetition, this time of the phrase, "We can never be satisfied":

We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied [*Applause*] as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. [*Applause*] We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their dignity by signs stating "for whites only." [*Applause*] We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. (*Yes*) [*Applause*] No, no, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. [*Applause*]
—Martin Luther King, Jr. ("Dream" 84)

After paraphrasing the prophet Amos on justice and righteousness, King was nearing the end of his prepared text. Responding to the growing energy of the crowd, he could not bring himself to deliver the next line of his conclusion, which Taylor Branch describes as the “lamest and most pretentious section” of the speech, exhorting his listeners to return to their communities as “members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction” (Branch 882).

Instead, he decided to preach. Knowing that King had wandered far from his text, listeners on the podium behind him encouraged him onward. Mahalia Jackson, as if from an Amen Corner, shouted out, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin.” It’s not known if her words reached him (Branch 882).

In a private interview three months later, King recalled:

I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point, and just all of a sudden, I decided—the audience response was wonderful that day, you know—and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used—I’d used it many times before, that thing about “I have a dream”—and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don’t know why, I hadn’t thought about it before the speech. —Martin Luther King, Jr. (“King” 31–35)

King had indeed used the “I Have a Dream” sequence a number of times before—in the fall of 1962 in Albany, Georgia, and in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and more recently in Birmingham, Chicago, and Detroit. But never before did it have the impact it had that day at the Lincoln Memorial. Historians such as Drew Hanson and King biographer Taylor Branch argue that, without the spontaneous “Dream” section, the speech would not have been remembered at all. It was, to quote Branch, “politically sound, but far from historic.” It was only when King shifted into his voice as preacher, rather than public speaker, that the national audience was exposed to his real sermonic power (“King” 35; Branch 875; “I Have a Dream” 85).

King described his dream of racial equality as one “deeply rooted in the American dream.”

I have a dream that one day (*Yes*) 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.” (*Yes*) [*Applause*]

. . . I have a dream (*Well*) [*Applause*] 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. (*My Lord*) I have a dream today. [*Applause*]

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of “interposition” and “nullification” (*Yes*), one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today. [*Applause*] —Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963 (“I Have a Dream” 85)

To articulate the substance of his dream, King drew on the lyrics of a song his audience knew well, the song sung on those same steps by Marian Anderson nearly twenty-five years earlier:

. . . This will be the day when all of God's children (*Yes*) will be able to sing with new meaning:
My country, 'tis of thee (*Yes*), sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride (*Yes*)
From every mountainside, let freedom ring!
And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. —Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28,
1963 ("I Have a Dream" 86)

Like Anderson, King used the lyrics of the song to both protest injustice and to express his hope that, someday, America will achieve those principles expressed in the song that bears its name (Branham 624).

King adapted the concluding paragraphs of his speech from a similar address delivered by family friend Archibald Carey at the 1952 Republican National Convention. Like King, Carey recounted the first verse of the national hymn, "America," then proceeded to name American mountain ranges from which freedom would, in a just and righteous future, "ring": the Green Mountains of Vermont and the White Mountains of New Hampshire; the Ozarks in Arkansas and Stone Mountain in Georgia; the Smokies of Tennessee and the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia (Branham 642).

King elaborated on this theme at the Lincoln Memorial:

And so let freedom ring (*Yes*) from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire . . .
But not only that: let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. (*Yes*)
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. (*Yes*)
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. (*Yes*)
From every mountainside, let freedom ring. [*Applause*]
—Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963 ("I Have a Dream" 87)

By then, the crowd was rapturous, as were the honored guests seated behind King. With every phrase, Mahalia Jackson shouted, ecstatically, "My Lord! My Lord!" As King spoke of the bells of freedom, ringing out from each part of the land, his whole body shook, pushing to an end that was new to the world, if old to King:

And when this happens [*Applause continues*], when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state, and every city (*Yes*), we will be able to speed up that day when all 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! (*Yes*) Free at last!
Thank God almighty, we are free at last!" [*Applause*]
—Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963 ("I Have a Dream" 87)

The audience was thrilled.

When I looked over the crowd as Dr. King finished his speech, I felt that, at last, we were all united in creating a new society. He had done more than deliver a speech. He had sent out a challenge to the world. It was as though he had seen into the hearts and souls of people everywhere and touched their deepest longing for a shared destiny, a common purpose, a sense of mission. He made us see how “We shall overcome, black and white together.” —Dorothy I. Height (“I Have a Dream” 78)¹⁵

And throughout King’s speech, the giant statue of Lincoln brooded over his shoulder, bathed in special lights to enhance its visibility for television and news photography (Sandage 157).

After-Effects

King’s speech was instantly hailed as historic. The front page of the *New York Times* contained no fewer than five stories on the march, with the headline—“‘I Have a Dream . . .’ Peroration by Dr. King Sums Up a Day the Capital Will Remember”—going to King. The author of the piece, James Reston, linked Dr. King with other courageous, forward-thinking Americans, including Henry David Thoreau and Eugene Debs. Other journalists focused on the mood of the day: the aura of celebration and determination, the participants dressed in their Sunday best, the peaceful march. The *Atlanta Daily World*, a conservative black paper, proclaimed that the rally had “forever changed” racial perceptions and relaxed its long-standing prohibition against picturing King on the front page (D’Emilio 356–357; Branch 886).

The front page of the *New York Herald Tribune* maintained that the rally had also changed the Lincoln Memorial.

The shrine that was the assembly point was so entirely appropriate, that you looked at it in a new way. [It imparted] a feeling that is often hard for people to get in their every-day life.

A feeling for country. Tens of thousands of these petitioning Negroes had never been to Washington before, and probably would never come again. Now here they were. And this was their Washington . . . and that great marble memorial was their own memorial to the man who had emancipated them. —Richard S. Bird, August 29, 1963 (Sandage 157)

President Kennedy received the Big Ten at the White House immediately following the program at the memorial. Like most Americans the president had watched King’s speech on television. Also like most Americans, it was the first complete speech he’d ever witnessed by King. “He’s damn good,” Kennedy reportedly told White House aides. While the leaders filed into the Cabinet Room, Kennedy—who knew a good line when he heard it—approached King, greeting him with an outstretched hand, a smile, and the phrase “I Have a Dream.” The leaders of the march spoke with Kennedy about the civil rights bill until 6:12PM. Then, having met with the president for seventy-two minutes, they were ushered out. Kennedy promised to keep them all informed of legislative counts (Branch 883–886).

Rustin didn’t join the leaders at the White House, but instead stayed behind at the memorial, directing the clean-up efforts and basking in the glow of what had been a phenomenal

15 Dorothy Height was president of the National Council of Negro Women from 1957 until 1998.

accomplishment. Later, he spoke of “electricity in the air. Everyone who was there knew that the event was a landmark.” It was, he said, “one of the great days in American history” (D’Emilio 357).

Shortly after the march, King wrote of its lasting effects on white Americans:

Millions of white Americans, for the first time, had a clear, long look at Negroes engaged in a serious occupation. For the first time millions listened to the informed and thoughtful words of Negro spokesmen, from all walks of life. The stereotype of the Negro suffered a heavy blow. This was evident in some of the comments, which reflected surprise at the dignity, the organization and even the wearing apparel and friendly spirit of the participants. If the press had expected something akin to a minstrel show, or a brawl, or a comic display of odd clothes and bad manners, they were disappointed. —Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Why We Can’t Wait* 124)

Scott Sandage and other historians argue that it was not only seeing black Americans assemble peacefully that impressed the viewing audience, but what was seen *behind* them, as well. Between 1939 and 1963, advocates for civil rights succeeded in wresting the Lincoln Memorial away from its official dedication to Lincoln as “Savior of the Union” and rededicated it to Lincoln as Emancipator. In turn, the memorial served as a legitimizing factor, painting the issues facing black Americans as being ones that all America could and should support, and those who were denying the rights of blacks as being in opposition to the ideals which Lincoln and our forefathers espoused—as being, in essence, un-American. Rachele Horowitz remembered that the marchers of 1963 wanted to communicate a simple message: “We represent the core of what this country believes in” (Thomas xxv; Sandage 158–161).

[Civil rights advocates] had to keep going back . . . It’s a sense of whether you have just a protest rally or whether you’re having something with historical dimensions. And I think that Lincoln does add that. You’re standing there in the face of history. In the face of history that has to be completed . . . In terms of both symbolism and the need to go forward, the memorial is the perfect place. —Rachele Horowitz (Sandage 161)

The arresting image of the famous picket sign “I AM A MAN” might have carried moral weight, Sandage argues, but what was needed to win legal and political rights for blacks required a more focused message: I AM AN AMERICAN. Nowhere was this more a possibility than standing in front of the super-sized image of our nation’s great leader, Abraham Lincoln, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (Sandage 138).

Though he doesn’t make specific reference to the memorial, King also underlined the democratizing influence of “that radiant August day” and its broadcast world-wide:

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 every dedicated American could be proud that a dynamic experience of democracy in his nation’s capital had been made visible to the world. —Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Why We Can’t Wait* 125)

A generation later, marches on Washington have become what Rustin biographer John D'Emilio calls "ritualized dramas, carefully scripted with few surprises." This was not the case in 1963. The idea seemed fresh and bold to most Americans. Other than the veterans' Bonus Expeditionary March during the Great Depression, there had never been this kind of mass descent on the nation's capital. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom changed that. By the end of the 1960s they were common, as opponents of the Vietnam War took their message to the streets of Washington, typically ending at the White House or Capitol Hill. In more recent decades, practically every cause, every constituency, and every group wanting change has paraded through DC, thanks in no small part to the success of the 1963 march (D'Emilio 339).

Ten months after the March on Washington, Kennedy's bill was signed into law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, followed a year later by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The bills had been championed in Congress by Lyndon B. Johnson, successor to the presidency after John F. Kennedy's assassination ("King" 35).

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., also was assassinated, as he stood on the second-floor balcony of a Memphis motel. Within a few weeks of his death, the August 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech regained public prominence and since then has come to dominate public memory of King. The speech, with its positive message and optimistic tone, has overshadowed the darker and more challenging parts of King's legacy, seen most clearly in his 1967–1968 attacks on American economic inequality and foreign policy. King biographer David Garrow calls it the "equivalent of the Declaration of Independence" and "the most notable oratorical achievement of the 20th century" (*Bearing the Cross* 623; "King" 35).

To commemorate the speech, the National Park Service placed an inscription in the stone of the Lincoln Memorial stairs where King spoke. Dedicated on August 28, 2003, the 40th anniversary of the march, the inscription reads:

I HAVE A DREAM
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON
FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM
AUGUST 28, 1963

The addition to the memorial was initiated legislatively by Congresswoman Anne Northrup of Kentucky, in response to a request from her constituent, Thomas Williams of Louisville. On King's birthday each year, the Park Service and the Department of Interior sponsor a ceremony for Washington area school children. Part of the event is a recitation of the "I Have A Dream" speech. The children take turns reading in the cold January air, standing on the same spot where King himself stood nearly a half century before (Kelly).

* * * * *

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