



THOUSANDS EXPECTED FOR MARCH ON WASHINGTON ANNIVERSARY

August 20, 2003

On Aug. 23, political and religious leaders will gather to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the March on Washington, an event led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders that changed the course of the civil rights movement.

The anniversary celebration, expected to draw thousands, will remind the nation of the goals of those first civil rights activists. More than 100 groups will participate, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Organization for Women, and the Arab American Institute. Led by Martin Luther King III, organizers also hope to register voters for the 2004 presidential election.

Roughly 250,000 people marched through Washington, D.C., on Aug. 28, 1963. Called “The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” the event called the nation’s attention to the injustice and inequalities that black Americans faced because of the color of their skin. In support of civil rights for all Americans, the demonstrators made their way from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his memorable and moving “I Have A Dream” speech.

History

The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal.” But even after the Civil War and the end of slavery, people of color found themselves treated unfairly. They weren’t allowed in many public schools, they had to eat at separate restaurants and use separate bathrooms, and they had to pay taxes and pass literacy tests to vote. The idea was to keep blacks “separate but equal.”

By the late 1950s a movement had started. People were demanding laws to protect their civil rights – rights that all free Americans are guaranteed as citizens of this country. One was Thurgood Marshall, a lawyer who went on to become the first black justice on the Supreme Court. Another was Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her bus seat to white passengers. One particularly influential speaker and activist was Martin Luther King Jr.

A Man with A Dream

King was a minister from Alabama who became one of the leading voices of the civil rights movement. One of his first successes was the Montgomery Bus Boycott – a 382-day operation that led to the desegregation of bussing. King was threatened with violence and jail, and his house was even bombed, but this did little to stop him.

From then on King was at the forefront of the civil rights movement. He traveled across the country, organizing protests and marches to call attention to the struggle of black Americans. Though on several occasions King was thrown in jail, he maintained a philosophy of nonviolence. King believed that fighting back would only make things worse, and the true path to victory could be achieved through preaching truth and acceptance.

The March

In late 1962, civil rights activists started to organize what would become the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of the United States. It took awhile, but by June of 1963, they had put together an impressive group of leaders and speakers – including King – to help them. They would need it.

The organizers of the march had to make sure people had a way of getting into the city. They had to make sure marchers knew where to go and what to do once they got there. They had to have doctors and nurses in case anyone needed first aid. They had to provide water, security, and be ready for any emergency. And they needed some way to pay for all of it. It was going to take fund raising, planning and lots of work.

On Aug. 28, the city swelled with marchers. They drove in. They bussed in. They took trains. Three student marchers walked and hitchhiked 700 miles to get there. A quarter million people waved signs and cheered and listened to speakers address the civil rights problems challenging America. The last speaker was Martin Luther King Jr.

“I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation,” King began. His ensuing speech is remembered as one of the corner stones of the civil rights movement.

A year later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made segregation in public places illegal, required employers to provide equal employment opportunities, and protected the right to vote of every American, black and white.

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