THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON, 1963

“We Stood on a Height”

In the spring and summer of 1963 the events in Birmingham inspired a wave of demonstrations elsewhere, more extensive than all that had come before. Almost a thousand actions were mounted in over a hundred southern cities, resulting in over twenty thousand arrests. On June 19 President Kennedy sent Congress the promised civil rights bill, which offered federal protection to African Americans seeking to vote, to shop, to eat out, and to be educated on equal terms. Pressuring Congress to adopt this bill and consolidating the huge upsurge in protest activities brought together major civil rights, labor, and religious groups to organize a massive Washington demonstration.

The roots of the 1963 March on Washington go back to a 1941 initiative by A. Philip Randolph, the trailblazing president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph had organized the original March on Washington Movement, which was designed to pressure President Roosevelt to guarantee jobs for black men and women in the wartime armament industries. The 1941 march was canceled at the last moment when Roosevelt capitulated to the demands and issued the first executive order protecting African-American rights since the Emancipation Proclamation. After the war Randolph also succeeded in persuading President Harry S. Truman to ban racial discrimination in the military.

At the end of 1962 Randolph began to talk to organizer Bayard Rustin about staging a big Washington demonstration. They conceived of two days of rallying and lobbying “to embody in one gesture civil rights as well as national economic demands.” A coalition would be formed to bring in as many people as possible. A massive protest gathering might be accompanied by direct-action campaigns, such as sit-ins in congressional offices.

Martin Luther King, Jr., had also been thinking about some new and larger form
of demonstration. He said to his aides, “We are on a breakthrough. . . . We need a mass protest,” and told them that offers of help had come from certain trade unions and from Paul Newman and Marlon Brando—both “Kennedy men.” King asked the aides to contact Randolph to see if they could all work together. On June 11—the same day that Kennedy made his historic civil rights speech and the eve of Medgar Evers’s murder—King announced to the press plans for a march on Washington.

On July 2, at New York’s Roosevelt Hotel, a march organization was established at a meeting attended by the “Big Six” civil rights leaders: Randolph, Roy Wilkins (NAACP), James Farmer (CORE), John Lewis (SNCC), Whitney Young, Jr. (Urban League), and King (SCLC). Bayard Rustin was named chief coordinator of the march, overcoming some skittish opposition based on his being a pacifist, socialist, and homosexual.

Randolph and Rustin originally planned to stress economic inequities 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 civil rights bill changed the agenda; the emphasis shifted to lobbying for the civil rights bill that was wending its way through Congress.

The march was scheduled for August 28. That left just under two months for Rustin (working out of an office on Harlem’s West 130th Street) to organize the turnout and handle the logistics of getting an expected 100,000 demonstrators in and out of town. Within two weeks he had distributed two thousand copies of his Organizing Manual No. One to movement leaders at centers throughout the nation.

The budget for the march organization was put at $120,000—a huge sum. Funds came in through big donations and small. Official march buttons were sold for a quarter each, with 175,000 sold by August 17 and 150,000 more on order. The official memento of the march, sold for one dollar, was a portfolio of five red, white, blue, and black collage-based prints that incorporated Life magazine photographs of dog and fire-hose attacks and other movement dramas; forty thousand were printed. A big fund-raiser lit up Harlem’s Apollo Theatre on the Friday night before the march. William “Cozy” Cole, Herbie Mann, Quincy Jones, Tony Bennett, Thelonious Monk, Carmen McRae, and Billy Eckstine were among those donating performances. Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, and Burt Lancaster led a march in Paris to support the upcoming one in Washington.

President Kennedy tried to persuade the leadership to cancel the march. “We
want success in Congress, not just a big show at the Capitol. Some of these people are looking for an excuse to be against us; and I don’t want to give any of them a chance to say ‘Yes, I’m for the bill, but I am damned if I will vote for it at the point of a gun.’”4 Failing to stop it, Kennedy publicly embraced the march.

Fears of a possible riot were intense, and the Washington authorities and the march organizers were determined to ensure a peaceful day. D.C. 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 were banned for a day—for the first time since Prohibition. Two Washington Senators’ baseball games were postponed. The Justice Department and the army coordinated preparations for emergency troop deployments; seventy different potential emergency scenarios were studied. A crew of lawyers was convened to prepare in advance proclamations authorizing military deployments. Fifteen thousand paratroopers were put on alert. 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 would be at the Lincoln Memorial. For the organizers, that site had a powerful symbolism, particularly on the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. The police liked the site because, with water on three sides, the demonstrators could be easily contained.

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover repeatedly tried to scuttle the march. In the months leading up to it he intensified his already passionate campaign to defame Martin Luther King, Jr. Hoover tried to persuade the Kennedys that King was being influenced by Communists, and his spurious denunciations of some King associates were taken much more seriously by the Kennedys than was warranted. As a result, they strong-armed King into cutting off some of his closest friends and advisers on the grounds that they might be enemy agents. Hoover’s baseless suspicions about King, his virulent attacks on him, and his repeated attempts to destroy his reputation with the Kennedys were spurred by racist delusions and other pathological animosities. Hoover tried, unsuccessfully, to exploit wiretap information about King’s sexual indiscretions and about Rustin’s homosexual liaisons. On the very morning of the march, Hoover assigned several agents to telephone celebrity participants in a futile last-ditch attempt to get them to withdraw their support. His attacks on King are some of the darkest examples of official paranoia and character assassination in America.

For the marchers, the trip to Washington was an often festive affair, enlivened with freedom songs and the excitement of participating in what they knew to be a historic action. Most demonstrators came in buses chartered by local branches of the movement; another thirty thousand or so arrived in twenty-one chartered trains. On August 28, the day of the march, New York’s Penn Station reported the largest early morning crowd since
the end of World War II. Members of CORE’s Brooklyn chapter walked the 230 miles to the march in thirteen days. Three of the first arrivals were Robert Thomas, age eighteen; Robert Avery, seventeen; and James F. Smith, sixteen—all veterans of the Gadsden (Alabama) Student Movement. Arriving almost a week ahead of time after a 700-mile walk and hitchhike, they were housed and put to work by Rev. Walter Fauntroy, head of the Washington branch of the SCLC. Surveys indicate that about 15 percent of the participants were students, about 25 percent were white, and a majority of the black participants were middle class, northern, and urban. Estimates of the crowd size range from 200,000 to 500,000. It was unquestionably the largest political demonstration in the United States to date.

Demonstrators’ signs and slogans ranged from the mass-produced to the unique. The United Auto Workers union, one of the march’s biggest sponsors, printed hundreds of signs with slogans such as “UAW Says Jobs and Freedom for Every American.” A young black man in a white shirt and tie wrote on his sign “There Would Be More of Us Here But So Many of Us Are in Jail. Freedom Now.” A young white woman painted “Stop Legal Murders” on her sign. On the day before the march Robert Moses picketed the Justice Department with a sign reading, “When There Is No Justice, What Is the State But a Robber Band Enlarged?” A young black woman in a paisley dress carried a sign reading, “Not ‘Negroes’ But AfroAmericans! We Must Be Accorded Full Rights as Americans Not in the Future but Now.” (Debates over appropriate labels were heating up in the summer of 1963. “Negro” was used almost exclusively in the march speeches; only John Lewis referred to “black people” and “the black masses.”) One elderly black man ingeniously covered twenty-one slats of a five-foot-wide venetian blind with his poem “Martyr Medgar Evers,” one stanza of which read:

Ole Glory’s tarnished with his blood
for having shabbily allowed
a noble son to be downtrod
because he was both black and proud!

The demonstrators gathered at the Washington Monument, where a stage had been set up for morning entertainment. Joan Baez opened the program with “Oh Freedom” and also led a rendition of “We Shall Overcome.” Other performers included Odetta; Josh White (Bayard Rustin had been his sideman thirty years earlier); the Albany Freedom Singers; Bob Dylan; and Peter, Paul and Mary, whose version of Dylan’s civil rights anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind” was then number two on the charts (after Martha and the Vandellas’ “Heat Wave”).

Before noon and ahead of schedule, impatient demonstrators began to march up Independence and Constitution Avenues to the Lincoln Memorial. The march leaders got word of this surprise development while lobbying on Capitol Hill, and they rushed to join
the advancing throng. Enterprising march marshals opened a passageway for them so that they could be photographed arm in arm “leading” the march.

Press coverage was more extensive than for any previous political demonstration in U.S. history. A huge tent near the Lincoln Memorial held the march committee’s “News HQ.” The committee issued no fewer than 1,655 special press passes, augmenting the 1,220 members of the regular Washington press corps. News agencies sent large crews of reporters and photographers—some assigned to celebrities, others to everyday marchers, others to aerial coverage. Leading newspapers in many countries ran the march story on their front pages. It was also one of the first events to be broadcast live around the world, via the newly launched communications satellite Telstar. The three major television networks spent over three hundred thousand dollars (more than twice the march committee’s budget) to broadcast the event. CBS covered the rally “gavel to gavel,” from 1:30 to 4:30, canceling As the World Turns, Password, Art Linkletter’s House Party, To Tell the Truth, The Edge of Night, and Secret Storm.

The huge audience heard many speakers and singers, both scheduled and unscheduled. One of the first, reading a speech written by James Baldwin, was Charlton Heston, representing an “arts contingent” that included Ossie Davis, Marlon Brando, Sammy Davis, Jr., Sidney Poitier, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll, Paul Newman, and Harry Belafonte. Josephine Baker, wearing her Free French uniform with her Legion of Honor decoration, was the only woman to speak at the rally. The exclusion of women speakers had been debated, with the all-male leadership opting for only a “Tribute to Women”: Rustin introduced to the roaring crowd Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, Diane Nash, Gloria Richardson (a leader from Cambridge, Maryland), and Mrs. Herbert Lee (widow of the slain Mississippi activist), as well as citing Myrlie Evers in absentia. Marian Anderson, the great contralto, made it to the platform too late to lead the national anthem as planned; instead, she later sang “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.”

In his speech NAACP president Roy Wilkins warned President Kennedy not to let his already overmoderate civil rights bill be further watered down. Wilkins also announced the death in Ghana that morning of W.E.B. Du Bois, father of pan-Africanism and of the NAACP.

Whitney Young’s speech, which focused on urban inequities, was addressed to future black marchers:

They must march from the rat infested, overcrowded ghettos to decent, wholesome, unrestricted residential areas dispersed throughout the cities. They must march from the relief rolls to the established retraining centers. . . . They must march from the cemeteries where our young, our newborn die three times sooner, and our parents die seven years earlier. . . . They must march from the congested, ill-equipped schools which breed dropouts and which smother motivation. . . . And finally, they must
march from a present feeling of despair and hopelessness, despair and frustration, to renewed faith and confidence.6

The most controversial speech was given by John Lewis. When a draft of the speech was circulated in advance, march leaders and Attorney General Kennedy raised strenuous objections to Lewis's calling the Kennedy civil rights bill “too little, too late” and especially to his rhetoric: “We will march through the South, through the Heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We will pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently. We will fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy.” A compromise speech was hammered out only after the aging Randolph made a personal appeal to Lewis and other SNCC leaders not to mar the occasion that he had worked for all his life. Lewis's toned-down speech was received with unmatched enthusiasm; it was interrupted by applause fourteen times. When he finished, Lewis walked past the other leaders on the platform. Every black hand reached out for his, while every white speaker sat still, staring into space.

After Lewis, Mahalia Jackson stepped up to warm the crowd in anticipation of the final scheduled speaker, Martin Luther King, Jr. She sang the gospel classic, “I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorne." A journalist has eloquently described the response to her performance: “The button-down men in front and the old women in 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 and different ways, with different dreams they had come, and now, hearing this sung, they were one.”8

At the end of a long procession of speech and song, Martin Luther King, Jr., stepped up to the podium to deliver the closing address. Part of it had been written during the preceding hurried hours, parts of it rehearsed many times. With its final crescendo improvised in response to the crowd, “I Have a Dream” became instantly famous and remains one of the great moments of modern oratory. King began, “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.” He concluded:

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 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!”9

The D.C. police reported that within half an hour after the closing anthem, “We Shall Overcome,” only a couple thousand marchers remained in the vicinity of the Lincoln Memorial. As the crowd withdrew, Rustin noticed Randolph standing alone at the dais. He walked over and put his arm around the old man's shoulder and said,
“Mr. Randolph, it looks like your dream has come true.” Randolph replied that it was “the most beautiful and glorious day of his life.” Rustin saw tears streaming down his friend’s face.10

As the marchers dispersed, thrilled with new confidence in their strength, the leaders rushed to a White House strategy meeting on the pending civil rights bill. When they entered the Cabinet Room, the president smiled at King and said, “I have a dream,” acknowledging a catchy refrain. Kennedy felt that the march had been nice but it would hardly extricate him from the political dilemma posed by the bill. Foreseeing disaster for the Democrats if he backed it too forcefully, he would not give the civil rights leaders a strong commitment of support.

Some movement stalwarts felt that the march had been manipulated by the president to project a prettified image of racial harmony. Malcolm X called it the “Farce on Washington.” Historian Clayborne Carson, who was attending his first civil rights demonstration, originally experienced it as an “epiphany” but then had second thoughts when Stokely Carmichael of SNCC told him it was “only a sanitized, middle-class version of the real black movement.”11

But the size and diversity of the gathered masses, the pageantry of their display, the emotional intensity of the songs and speeches, and the peacefulness and good humor of everyone under the hot sun deeply impressed most observers. Russell Baker wrote in the New York Times: “No one could remember an invading army quite as gentle as the two hundred thousand civil-rights marchers who occupied Washington today. . . . The sweetness and patience of the crowd may have set some sort of national high-water mark in mass decency.”12

On Sunday, September 15, barely two weeks after the march, Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was celebrating Youth Day. The church was full of children. A bomb was flung from a speeding car. The explosion injured twenty-one children and killed four young girls.

On November 22 President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. On July 2, 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed by Congress. The act banned racial discrimination in public facilities and in voting rights, but it proved to be only one step forward toward a distant goal.
The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of 1963 was the largest political demonstration in U.S. history to that date and still one of the most vividly remembered. James Baldwin wrote, "That day, for a moment, it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance: perhaps we could make the kingdom real, perhaps the beloved community would not forever remain the dream one dreamed in agony.

This picture shows an excited contingent of SNCC activists, including Mendy Sampson (seated lower left, white shirt, head framed by overalls), Dorrie Ladner (waving, middle right, hair brushed back), and Casey Hayden (bottom right, blond hair, sunglasses).
Photographer Nat Herz rode to the march in a chartered bus with fellow CORE members. After his return home, he excitedly assembled a book of words and photographs to "give basic justice to this day of history and hope." He wrote: "What was the mood of the standing, sitting, thousands and thousands of waiting people? Well, here we are, well here we are, great God a mighty here we are! It's beautiful! Has anything like this ever been seen? Great God a mighty we are here! Great God a mighty I am here! Great lord a plenty, 20,000 I's are here! Fine to be here, glad to be here, mighty, mighty proud to be here!"
Left to right: Whitney Young, Jr. (Urban League); Martin Luther King, Jr. (SCLC); John Lewis (SNCC); Rabbi Joachim Prinz (American Jewish Congress); Dr. Eugene Carson Blake (National Council of Churches); A. Philip Randolph; President Kennedy; Walter Reuther (United Auto Workers); and Vice President Johnson (behind Reuther).

The meeting lasted seventy-two minutes and concentrated on the political maneuvering that would be needed to get the Kennedy civil rights bill through Congress.
"We Stood on a Height"

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., GIVING THE "I HAVE A DREAM" SPEECH. UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
Four girls perished in the September 5 bombing of Youth Day classes: Addie Mae Collins, age fourteen; Carol Robertson, fourteen; Cynthia Wesley, fourteen; and Denise McNair, eleven.

As historian Taylor Branch relates: “[Maxine] McNair searched desperately for her only child until she finally came upon a sobbing old man and screamed, ‘Daddy, I can’t find Denise!’ The man helplessly replied, ‘She’s dead, baby. I’ve got one of her shoes.’ He held a girl’s white dress shoe, and the look on his daughter’s face made him scream out, ‘I’d like to blow the whole town up!’”

Fourteen years later, Robert Chambliss was convicted of the murder of Denise McNair and sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 1985. Chambliss was a Klansman who proudly bore the nickname “Dynamite Bob.”
REV. FRED SHUTTLESWORTH ADDRESSING THE JOINT FUNERAL. DANNY LYON
In 1962–64 Gloria Richardson led the black community in an extensive series of demonstrations against and negotiations with the white power structure of Cambridge, Maryland— the seat of Dorchester County, on the Chesapeake Bay, not far from Washington, D.C. The National Guard occupied Cambridge from June 14, 1963, through July 7, 1964.

According to historian Annette Brock: “In some ways, Cambridge was unique. It was the first grass-roots movement outside the deep South; it was one of the first campaigns to focus on economic conditions rather than just civil rights, the Kennedy administration intervened on a broader scale than ever before (the actual signing of an ‘Accord’ took place); nonviolence was questioned as a tactic; and it was the first major movement of which a woman was the leader.”
“That night Clifford Vaughs, who was from California and had recently begun to make pictures for SNCC, handed me his flash, saying he didn’t need it because he was going to be arrested. People were sitting down in the street. Someone hurled a bottle towards the guard troops, and Gloria Richardson mounted a National Guard jeep to ask for calm. Then the guard tried to arrest Clifford, and a tug-of-war developed as demonstrators held Clifford’s feet while the guard pulled him away.”