
The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

More than 200,000 people come to D.C. to demand racial equality

President Kennedy is out on a political limb. He's committed his administration to a major new civil rights bill, which he outlines in a nationally-televised address on June 11, 1963. The following week, he submits it to Congress. But its passage is very much in doubt and he needs all the support he can get. Now he's learned that civil rights and labor organizations are planning a big demonstration in the capital this summer which they are calling "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Kennedy is afraid that it will hurt rather than help his chances of getting the bill through Congress.

On June 22, the same day he's scheduled to leave on an important European trip, the President has a pre-arranged meeting with civil rights leaders. A. Philip Randolph, the respected black labor leader is there. He's the driving force behind the proposed March. Martin Luther King Jr. is also present and has joined Randolph in supporting the demonstration. The president tells the group he doesn't want "a big show in the capital" that could jeopardize passage of the bill.

Both Randolph and King argue the positive value of the March. Their view is echoed by James Farmer, head of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. Others are still on the fence, but it's clear from the meeting that the March is going ahead. Roy Wilkins, leader of the NAACP, and Whitney Young of the National Urban League finally sign on with the understanding that one of the main goals of the demonstration will be to drum up support for the civil rights bill.

Randolph appoints his longtime associate, Bayard Rustin, to organize the March. Rustin sets up headquarters in New York City, in Harlem. Here, the "Big Six" – Randolph and leaders of the five major civil rights organizations – are joined by labor leader Walter Reuther and representatives of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish civil rights groups. Known as the "Top Ten," they put out a call to mobilize individuals and groups from all over the country. The March is set to take place on Wednesday, August 28. As plans for the event come together over two short months, the president gradually comes around and expresses support for the demonstration which he says is in the great American tradition of peaceful assembly for redress of grievances. In the aftermath of protests around the country sparked by the Birmingham crisis, Attorney General Robert Kennedy's Justice Department develops a security plan for Washington DC. And Rustin makes recommendations on how the federal government can protect demonstrators.

From Harlem, Rustin predicts 100,000 people will participate. But on August 28, more than twice that number arrive, coming from throughout the US on planes, trains, buses, automobiles, and even bicycles. The enormous multi-racial crowd proceeds down Constitution Avenue to gather before the Lincoln Memorial, overflowing the space around the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall. Television crews broadcast the event to millions around the world. The three-hour-long program features the singing of spirituals, prayers and speeches by leaders of the March, including A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Walter Reuther and the youngest member of the group, John Lewis, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. (While the main speakers are all male, the program does include a "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom.") The most stirring and memorable words of the day come from the final speaker, Martin Luther King Jr.

Following the event, the Top Ten are welcomed at the White House by President Kennedy. After he congratulates them on the success of the March, they get down to business and discuss the Civil Rights Bill and what they hope to do.

1941: Back in 1941, labor leader and civil rights advocate, A. Philip Randolph, had an idea: a march on Washington. Now, the time is right. Civil rights leaders have come together, and the president will listen. **Visionaries and Leaders**

Undated: A. Philip Randolph appoints Bayard Rustin to plan the March. Rustin has two months to get it done. **The Planner (Photograph)**

Undated: America's five main civil rights groups are sponsoring the March. Together with A. Philip Randolph, the groups' leaders are known as the Big Six. When another four religious and labor groups join, they unify as the Top Ten. Their representatives work collaboratively here in this building on 130th and Lenox, rented by Bayard Rustin, the planner of the March. Along with 200 volunteers, they strategize for the day. **Harlem Headquarters (Photograph)**

June 22, 1963: Kennedy gets a memo from Special Assistant Counsel Lee White. Today's meeting will be about many things. One is a proposed march on the Capitol, which the memo says may have a "negative impact." **Notes for President Kennedy (Memo)**

June 22, 1963: Civil rights leaders want a march on the US Capitol. The president and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, oppose the idea, fearing potential violence, and believing it could even endanger the civil rights bill they are working on. **June 22nd Meeting (Photograph)**

June 22, 1963: More people join the meeting than appear in the photo. The civil rights leaders are from all different groups. Agreeing is not always easy. They represent the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Congress of Racial Equality, and the National Urban League. **Meeting Attendees (White House Appointment Book)**

July 11, 1963: Bayard Rustin shares his plans for the March with local police, and the Juvenile Delinquency Planning Board, a division of the US Department of Justice. No one wants any violence. Rustin details what he has put in place to assure a peaceful demonstration. Representatives of the Justice Department and the police explain what they can and can't do to help. **Safety Meeting Minutes (Memo)**

July 17, 1963: A reporter wants to know, will the March be "a handicap" to the president? Kennedy responds. **Two-Way Street (Video)**

August 1, 1963: The March may cost you "political prestige and popularity," a reporter suggests. Kennedy responds, "I assume what you say is probably right." He goes on to share what he thinks a leader should do in a crisis. **Essential Matters (Video)**

August 1, 1963: Mrs. L. Haynes writes from Memphis, Tennessee. She feels strongly that “the proposed march on Washington is a disgrace.” **To Kennedy from Mrs. L. Haynes (Letter)**

August 3, 1963: W. C. Vaughn, of Vaughn Chevrolet and Cadillac in Lynchburg, Virginia, feels the administration is being pressured to “favor colored over white.” **To Lee White from W. C. Vaughn (Letter)**

August 7, 1963: Mail from Sargent Shriver, the president’s and attorney general’s brother-in-law: Catholics will join the March. The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice will recruit them nationally through parishes. Along with Catholics, many other faiths are similarly recruiting marchers. **Special Delivery to Cape Cod (Letter)**

August 13, 1963: On behalf of the civil rights leaders sponsoring the March, A. Philip Randolph writes to the president. They would like to arrange a meeting with him as part of the day. **A Meeting Requested (Letter)**

August 15, 1963: Chrissy C. Michaelson, of San Diego, California, is convinced that African Americans are “being used by the Communist inspired groups and the vote grabbers.” **To Kennedy from Chrissy Michaelson (Letter)**

August 20, 1963: What effect does the president think the March will have on America? a reporter asks. President Kennedy explains that this issue is not just for any one group of people, or any particular person to work out. **180 Million People (Video)**

August 26, 1963: Some governors, including those of Mississippi and Alabama, believe states should handle their own business, including civil rights. Massachusetts does not agree and therefore, endorses the March. **Resolution from Massachusetts (Resolution)**

August 27, 1963: One of the Big Six cannot make it. He is in jail in Plaquemine, Louisiana. He was protesting against police brutality there. **James Farmer is Not Here (Telegram)**

August 28, 1963: Among others, the Big Six will speak today: A. Philip Randolph, John Lewis, James Farmer, Whitney Young Jr., Roy Wilkins, and Martin Luther King Jr., all leaders of separate civil rights organizations. **Today’s Program (Program)**

August 28, 1963: No one expected this many people to be here today. They march with a shared purpose, and amass before the Lincoln Memorial. They sing together, pray with rabbis and reverends, applaud each speaker, and demand equality. **A Day Like No Other (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: More than 200,000 people gather around the Reflecting Pool between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. They overflow a space five city blocks long. **The Crowd Assembles (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: The weather in Washington, DC is hot in August. People find relief together. The crowd behind them looks towards the Lincoln Memorial. **Keeping Cool (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: The final speaker today is Martin Luther King Jr., head of the SCLC. He has a dream, he says. He urges the crowd to make it a reality, not tomorrow, but today, in “the fierce urgency of now.” **King’s Dream (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: Camera crews are covering the March. The nation, and much of the world are watching as an integrated crowd gathers to demand racial equality. The message of speakers and religious leaders is broadcast over the airwaves. **Breaking News (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: In May, children as young as six demonstrated in Birmingham. They were met with violence, and the world saw the worst of America. For this March, planners suggested an age limit: seventeen. But the children are here, and today is different. **Young Folks (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: The crowd is too big for the space around the Reflecting Pool. It reaches beyond the trees, back to the Washington Monument. **Scene from Above (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: It has been a long, eventful day, but there is one more thing to do. The sponsors of the March meet with the president in the Oval Office, along with other civil rights activists. They discuss racial inequality and the civil rights bill. **Leaders Meet after the March (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: Civil rights leaders tell to Kennedy that life in America is not easy for black people, and any solution must include equality in jobs, protected by a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). Roy Wilkins emphasizes the “interracial character” of people seeking equality. A. Philip Randolph says emphasis needs to be placed on the inclusion of the Fair Employment Practice Bill, and Walter Reuther says today was far more than a march. President Kennedy responds, and shares his ideas about the role of education in the Negro community. **Next Steps (Audio recording)**

August 28, 1963: The March has ended. The president has met with its leaders. Now, at 6:15 p.m., he gives his statement to the press. Tomorrow’s papers will tell the world his thoughts about the day’s events, and his administration’s efforts to further the cause of civil rights. **The President to the People (Statement)**

August 29, 1963: Hymie Sosland, of Kansas City, Missouri, has “appreciation and admiration” for the March and its participants. **To Kennedy from Hymie Sosland (Letter)**

September 1, 1963: Daniel Jaquet writes from Washington, DC. He believes the March “will prove to be one of America’s most meaningful days.” **To Kennedy from Daniel Jaquet (Letter)**

September 9, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Special Assistant Counsel Lee White responds to Mrs. L. Haynes. He suggests she find a way to “contribute to the improvement of racial relations.” **To Mrs. L. Haynes from Lee White (Letter)**