

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

President and Public Pressure: "For a Redress of Grievances"

Activity - Three Voices

The historic Lincoln Memorial rally held during the 1963 March on Washington featured many powerful speeches of civil rights leaders. There were many speakers, separated by brief appearances from black and white entertainers, including Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, Marian Anderson, and Paul Newman. Three important speakers of that day were A. Philip Randolph, the 74 year-old president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; John Lewis, the president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and only 22 years old; and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., who at thirty-four was the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The rally offered these leaders an extraordinary forum for promoting the goal of full citizenship for black Americans. *GO TO APPENDIX* to view the speeches, then print a copy for your use in this activity.

Activity:

1. Read all three speeches, preferably aloud, to get a sense of rhythm and cadence. (Since Dr. King's speech is so often available in libraries, you might consider simply listening to a recording of his remarks with a copy of his speech in front of you.)
2. Work with other classmates in a group of three to accomplish these tasks:
 - A. Each group member should conduct further research through library, classroom, or Internet sources, to find out more about one of these three civil rights leaders. (Your Student Text already gives you much information about Randolph, so if you do further research about him, be sure you examine a new aspect of a topic, not one you've already studied.) Take notes.
 - B. Each group member should find information about one of the organizations led by these civil rights leaders, either Brotherhood of Porters, SCLC, or SNCC (specifically, when it was founded, what was its scope, who were its leaders at the time of the march, and what was its primary mission?).

Take notes.

3. Before looking at the speeches again, discuss with your group members what you learned from your research about these leaders.
4. Keeping the above background information in mind, and using the print copy speeches, discuss these questions with your partners. Continue to take notes.

Why do you think A. Philip Randolph was the first speaker of the rally, and Martin Luther King was the last? What was the benefit of this order for the momentum of the rally?

Which of the three speeches seemed most practical, the most grounded in specific recommendations for change? Provide supporting examples.

In your opinion, which speech seemed most inspirational? Provide examples.

From each speech, write down what you consider the most forceful or dramatic sentence. Explain your choice.

A goal of the March on Washington was to support President Kennedy's civil rights bill. Did the speakers mention that bill? If so, in what context?

In what ways did all three speakers express discontent with the injustices brought by whites in the past? Provide clear examples.

Which lines from the speeches conveyed the impact of these injustices most dramatically? Write down at least three powerful sentences that seem particularly effective.

In what ways do all three speeches, either in subtle or direct ways, warn white America that blacks will not accept second-class citizenship. Provide at least one specific example from each speech.

Do all three leaders suggest avenues for achieving positive change? Explain. Specifically, what does each speaker ask of Americans for the future? Provide examples.

John Lewis's speech was considered by some black leaders at the March on Washington as too strident and militant (see Student Text, Part 3). Re-read Lewis's speech and compare it to A. Philip Randolph's. In what ways are they similar in tone? How might the leaders' response to John Lewis's speech have been shaped by his youthfulness and his role in SNCC?

Much of A. Philip Randolph's professional career was spent as the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a labor union. Do you think that labor union background is reflected in his speech? Explain.

Dr. Martin Luther King, a graduate of Crozer Theological Seminary, was a minister. At the time of the march he led the SCLC, an alliance of about 100 church-oriented groups. When he accepted the leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he was a young pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Do certain passages in his speech reflect his religious background? Explain.

All three speakers mention historical events either directly or indirectly. (e.g., Dr. King said, "We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies . . . cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.") With the help of your teacher, identify one such event and gather more information about it. Incorporate your findings into your notes so that you can share them with your classmates.

5. As a culminating activity, organize a reader's theater presentation entitled "Three Voices" by making these preparations:

Enlist three students in your class who enjoy acting to prepare one of the three speeches featured in this lesson. Though the actors can't be expected to memorize the speeches, they must be familiar with the speech and decide on a style of presentation.

Your task is to use the information gleaned from the above research and discussion to prepare a dramatic introduction for a student "actor" who will present the Randolph, Lewis, or King speech in a reader's theater format.

Your introduction should incorporate what you learned about your featured speaker to provide background to the audience before the speech is presented. You should try to present your introduction in a creative way. You can use music, art, or drama to convey the message.

Ask your teacher for permission to set up the classroom as a reader's theater by arranging the chairs in a tight semicircle, the "stage" in the middle. With a couple of sturdy flashlights you can create a theater atmosphere. Presenters and actors usually wear all black to create a non-distracting atmosphere for such activities.

Ask a classmate to provide appropriate background music for the beginning and the ending of the presentation. Enlist a fellow student to prepare an introduction to the program with an emphasis on providing a historical context. After a musical prelude and the introduction proceed with the program.

If possible, invite other classes to watch the presentation.

As an added feature

On the day before the reader's theater, ask your teacher to show the segment from the PBS video series, *Eyes on the Prize*, which features the March on Washington ("No Easy Walk"). Your classmates will see the magnitude of the event and gain inspiration for your presentation.

To expand the activity

Click on the activity, "Oh, Freedom." Combine that activity with this one for a more elaborate presentation. If your school celebrates Black History Month these two ideas might provide the basis for a rich and informative assembly program.

As a follow-up to the reader's theater

In all three speeches delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, the speakers looked forward to a time when black Americans would enjoy full citizenship. Using current newspapers, magazines, or the Internet, find articles either suggesting that positive change has occurred in civil rights since the March on Washington, or that there is still work to be done. Cut and paste each article onto your own notebook paper and summarize the articles' main points. Display the articles on a bulletin board in positive and negative categories.

After your class analyzes the findings, pretend you are writing a letter to either Randolph, Lewis or King. Using your personal experiences and the information you have gathered from the articles, explain how conditions have changed for black Americans in the last four decades. Use specific examples and link your points to a specific challenge or problem mentioned in one of the speeches made in 1963. Share your letters with your classmates. Dr. King was assassinated in April 1968 and A. Philip Randolph died in 1979. Consider, though, sending your letter to John Lewis, presently a U.S. Congressman from Georgia.

The March on Washington Speeches

Address at the 1963 March on Washington - A. Philip Randolph

Fellow Americans, we are gathered here in the largest demonstration in the history of this nation. Let the nation and world know the meaning of our numbers. We are not a pressure group. We are not an organization or a group of organizations. We are not a mob. We are the advance guard of a massive moral revolution for jobs and freedom.

This revolution reverberates throughout the land, touching every city, every town, every village where black men are segregated, oppressed, and exploited. But this civil rights revolution is not confined to the Negro nor is it confined to civil rights, for our white allies know that they cannot be free while we are not; and we know we have no future in a society in which six million black and white people are unemployed and millions more live in poverty. Nor is the goal of our civil rights revolution merely the passage of civil rights legislation.

Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens, but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them. Yes, we want a Fair Employment Practices Act, but what good will it do to millions of workers, black and white? We want integrated public schools, but that means we also wanted federal aid to education — all forms of education. We want a free democratic society dedicated to the political, economic, and social advancement of man along moral lines. Now, we know that real freedom will require many changes in the nation's political and social philosophies and institutions. For one thing, we must destroy the notion that Mrs. Murphy's property rights include the right to humiliate me because of the color of my skin. The sanctity of private property takes second place to the sanctity of the human personality.

It falls to the Negro to reassert this proper priority of values because our ancestors were transformed from human personalities into private property. It falls to us to demand new forms of social planning, to create full employment, and to put automation at the service of human needs, not at the service of profits — for we are the first victims of unemployment. Negroes are in the forefront of today's movement for social and racial justice because we know we cannot expect the realization of our aspirations through the same old anti-democratic social institutions and philosophies that have all along frustrated our aspirations.

And so we have taken our struggle into the streets, as the labor movement took its struggle into the streets, as Jesus Christ led the multitudes through the streets of Judea. The plain and simple fact is that until we went into the streets the federal government was indifferent to our demands. It was not until the streets and jails of Birmingham were filled that Congress began to think about civil rights legislation. It was not until thousands demonstrated in the South that lunch counters and other public accommodations were integrated. It was not until the freedom riders were brutalized in Alabama that the 1964 Supreme Court decision banning discrimination in interstate travel was enforced, and it

was not until construction sites were picketed in the North that Negro workers were hired.

Those who deplore our militancy, who exhort patience in the name of a false peace, are in fact supporting segregation and exploitation. They would have social peace at the expense of social and racial justice. They are more concerned with easing racial tensions than with enforcing racial democracy. The months and years ahead will bring new evidence of masses in motion for freedom. The March on Washington is not the climax of our struggle but a new beginning, not only for the Negro but for all Americans who thirst for freedom and a better life.

Look for the enemies of Medicare, for high minimum wages, of social security, of federal aid to education, and there you will find the enemy of the Negro—the coalition of Dixicrats and reactionary Republicans that seek to dominate the Congress. We must develop strength in order that we may be able to back and support the civil rights program of President Kennedy. In the struggle against these forces, all of us should be prepared to take to the streets. The spirit and techniques that built the labor movement, founded churches, and now guide the civil rights evolution must be a massive crusade, must be launched against the unholy coalition of Dixiecrats and the racists that seek to strangle Congress.

We here today are only the first wave. When we leave, it will be to carry the civil rights revolution home with us into every nook and cranny of the land, and we shall return again and again to Washington in very growing numbers until total freedom is ours. We shall settle for nothing less, and may God grant that we may have the courage, the strength, and the faith in this hour of trial by fire never to falter.

Source: The A. Philip Randolph Institute: 1444 "I" Street, Suite 300, Washington, DC.

The Revolution is At Hand - John R. Lewis, 1963

NOTE: This is the text of the speech John Lewis wrote to be delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. Though it is the original text, apparently there were two slightly different versions of it. Almost all of the text below is quoted from Let Nobody Turn Us Around, courtesy of John Lewis himself. The italicized portions denote differences from that source's text found in The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader whose editors credit "a leaflet" version distributed at the March on Washington.

By the morning of the March on Washington, Lewis had already changed the text slightly. Yet not long before the rally, civil rights leaders were still attempting to persuade John Lewis to tone down parts of the speech, which they considered too harsh. You will see the portions of the text that were subsequently changed by Lewis by noticing the [bracketed], asterisked* portions of the text. Look for an annotation of those changes at the end of the document.

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here—for they have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages . . . or no wages at all.

[In good conscience, we cannot support the administration's civil-rights bill, for it is too little, and too late. There's not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality.]1*

The voting section of this bill will not help the thousands of citizens who want to vote; will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama and Georgia who are qualified to vote, who are without a sixth-grade education. "One-Man, OneVote," is the African cry. It is ours, too.

People have been forced to move for they have exercised their right to register to vote. What is in the bill that will protect the homeless and starving people of this nation? What is there in this bill to insure the equality of a maid who earns five dollars a week in the home of a family whose income is a hundred thousand dollars a year?

This bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses for engaging in peaceful demonstrations. [This bill will not protect the citizens in Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear in a police state.]2* This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped-up charges, like those in Americus, Georgia, where four young men are in jail, facing a death penalty, for engaging in peaceful protest.

For the first time in a hundred years this nation is being awakened to the fact that segregation is evil and it must be destroyed in all forms. Our presence today proves that we have been aroused to the point of action.

We are now involved in a serious revolution. This nation is still a place of [cheap] 3* political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromise and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation. What political leader here can stand up and say, "My party is the party of principles"? The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of Javits is also the party of Goldwater. Where is our party?

In some parts of the South we have worked in the fields from sun-up to sundown for twelve dollars a week. In Albany, Georgia, we have seen our people indicted by the federal government for peaceful protest, while the Deputy Sheriff beat Attorney C. B. King and left him half-dead; while local police officials kicked and assaulted the pregnant wife of Slater King, and she lost her baby.

It seems to me that the Albany indictment is part of a conspiracy on the part of the federal government and local politicians for political expediency.

[I want to know, which side is the federal government on?]^{4*}

The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery. The nonviolent revolution is saying, "We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, nor the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands, and create a great source of power, outside of any national structure that could and would assure us victory." For those who have said, "Be patient and wait!" we must say, "Patience is a dirty and nasty word." We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually, we want our freedom, and we want it now. We cannot depend on any political party, for the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence.

We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses must bring them about. In the struggle we must seek more than mere civil rights; we must work for the community of love, peace and true brotherhood. Our minds, souls, and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for all the people. (Lewis' emphasis)

The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it into the courts. Listen, Mr. Kennedy, listen, Mr. Congressman, listen, fellow citizens—the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won't be a "cooling-off period."

We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Barnett and Wallace and Thurmond won't stop this revolution. [The next time we march, we won't march on Washington, but we will march through the South, through the Heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own "scorched earth" policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground - nonviolently.]^{5*} We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy. We will make the action of the past few months look petty. And I say to you, Wake up America!! (Lewis' emphasis.)

All of us must get in the revolution—get in and stay in the streets of every city, village and hamlet of this nation, until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete. The black masses in the Delta of Mississippi, in Southwest Georgia, Alabama, Harlem, Chicago, Philadelphia and all over this nation are on the march.

From *Let Nobody Turns Us Around*, edited by Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, pg.409:

1* Changed to: "True, we support the administration's civil-rights bill, but this bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses."

2* Changed to: "In Danville, Virginia, policemen, armed with submachine guns and in armored cars, regularly broke up mass demonstrations by Negroes. After each demonstration, scores of Negroes were taken to hospitals with fractured skulls and lacerations."

From *Walking With the Wind* by John Lewis, pgs. 227-228.

3* The word "cheap" was removed, through "immoral compromises" remained.

4* This question was removed.

5* The call to march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did" was changed to: "We will march through the South, through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown today."

Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s Famous Speech

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.htm