

## ***THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION***

***Classroom: Grades 9-12***

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

***C. JFK, A. Philip Randolph, and the March on Washington***

### ***TEACHER'S TEXT***

#### ***Lesson Overview***

Using the tools of his office, a president holds enormous power to bring changes, both subtle and dramatic, in the nation he governs. Certain leaders of the civil rights movement understood that by using organized mass pressure they could tap this source of executive power to accomplish goals.

*Part A: President Franklin D. Roosevelt, A. Philip Randolph, and the Desegregation of the Defense Industries.*

Among civil rights leaders, perhaps no one recognized this potent presidential power more than Asa Philip Randolph. In 1940, this dignified, tall, fifty-one-year-old man was at the pinnacle of his career as a national labor organizer. As the president of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, he had a complaint with the federal government. War was raging in Europe, and it seemed inevitable that the United States would be drawn into it. To provide the resources needed by the beleaguered British and to prepare the United States for possible involvement in the war, the nation had begun to rearm. After years of depression, employment figures were up, as huge defense contracts created new jobs. But not for black Americans, for the defense industry was thoroughly segregated. So were the armed services. When a meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to address these problems yielded no results, Randolph threatened to bring 100,000 black workers to the capital for a "March on Washington" as a means of calling attention to these injustices. Randolph, who had scheduled the march for July 1, 1941, refused to back down without substantial gains, and Roosevelt was forced to act. Using his power to issue executive orders, the president desegregated the defense industry and the civilian federal government by a single stroke of a pen. Furthermore, Executive Order 8802 created the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate reported cases of discrimination. Though Randolph called off the march, the organizational structure for a planned March on Washington was not disbanded, just put on hold for another time.

*Part B: President Harry S. Truman, A. Philip Randolph, and the Desegregation of the Armed Services*

Despite the fact that blacks were hired in defense industries during World War II, the armed services were not desegregated. The legal separation of blacks through so-called Jim Crow laws affected not only civilians but servicemen as well. Blacks continued to be taken into the service under a limited quota system, and although they sometimes trained with white troops, they rode Jim Crow trains and lived in segregated barracks.<sup>1</sup> Since the end of World War II, A. Philip Randolph had been seeking ways to pressure the federal government to end discrimination in the armed forces. A study released in 1946 revealed that little was being done to change the segregated status of blacks in the military. In late 1947, Truman had requested passage of a program called Universal Military Training, a preparedness approach that required every young man between the ages of eighteen and twenty to be trained for one year as a reserve force. These units could be called to active duty in the event that the cold war turned "hot." Though it was unlikely that Congress would enact this program, it seemed certain that some kind of draft legislation would be forthcoming. Truman had given a strong civil rights message to Congress in February 1948 but black leaders saw little evidence that he was backing his words with action. When the president made a strong appeal in early March for Universal Military Training and a Selective Service Act (or draft), he made no mention of changing segregated conditions in the military. Though Truman had said he wanted to rid the armed services of discrimination, a strong desegregation clause had been deleted from the Selective Service Act at the request of the army. In a White House meeting with Truman shortly thereafter, Randolph let it be known that the passage of a "Jim Crow" draft would cause an uproar among blacks. "Negroes are in no mood to shoulder a gun for democracy abroad so long as they are denied democracy here at home," he told the president.<sup>2</sup> Truman was outraged, calling Randolph's statement a threat and "treason." Randolph continued his pressure. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, he stated, "I personally will advise Negroes to refuse to fight as slaves for a democracy they cannot possess and . . . enjoy."<sup>3</sup> The response, even from liberal senators, was disheartening. Randolph came to believe that only Truman could set the "moral pace" and end segregation. Continued application of pressure had its effects. It would not look good for a nation that was supposed to be the "bulwark of democracy" against communist tyranny to have a million black Americans refuse military service. On July 26, 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981 desegregating the military. Still believing the order to be ambiguous, Randolph insisted on meetings to clarify its language and gain a strong commitment for follow-through. On August 18, 1948, A. Philip Randolph called off the campaign of civil disobedience.

*Part C: President John F. Kennedy, A. Philip Randolph, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*

By 1963, a surging civil rights movement was gaining great momentum. Spurred by the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, dramatized through the new medium of television and led by the charismatic Dr. Martin Luther King, blacks were

beginning to apply massive pressure to agencies of the government, demanding change. John F. Kennedy was president and appalled by violence against civil rights marchers in the South; he had begun to label civil rights a "moral cause." In June 1963, Kennedy, though still concerned about alienating southern voters, had sent a civil rights bill to Congress. Black leaders knew the struggle for that bill's passage would be fierce. To encourage a positive vote on the bill, dramatize the need for change, and impress Kennedy with the magnitude of the movement, a peaceful march for "jobs and freedom" was planned. A. Philip Randolph, who had conceived of this idea so long ago, gave enormous energy to the March on Washington of August 28, 1963. A man of great integrity, he was able to coalesce both the militant, moderate, and conservative elements of the civil rights movement to plan and execute this great event. The march, 250,000 strong, provided dramatic evidence not only to the president, but also to Congress, that blacks would continue to fight for racial justice. Understanding the power of this "massive political force" to press for change, Kennedy used the White House as a setting for a meeting with Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., and other black leaders both before and after the march. In those Oval Office meetings, two great forces of democratic power came together: the constitutional authority of the president of the United States, and the leadership of a popular mass movement. The successful and peaceful March on Washington was "a high point for those who believed that the grievances of the blacks could be redressed by working within the system."<sup>5</sup> Low points were ahead for the civil rights movement, both in terms of its splintering leadership and its ability to effect solutions for deep social and economic problems. Yet for A. Philip Randolph, the March on Washington was the fulfillment of a lifetime of work and validated something he had always believed: power flows from the people.

### ***Learning Outcomes***

By successfully completing these three lesson segments and accompanying activities, students will:

1. Strengthen their understanding of certain National Standards for History objectives, especially those that will enable them to:

evaluate the agendas, strategies, and effectiveness of various African Americans in the quest for civil rights and opportunities;

describe how minorities organized to gain access to wartime jobs and how they confronted discrimination;

assess the role of the executive branch in advancing the civil rights movement;

evaluate the implementation of a decision by analyzing the interests it served;

estimating the position, power, and priority of each player involved; assessing the ethical dimensions of the decision;

and evaluating its costs and benefits from a variety of perspectives; and

2. Demonstrate an understanding of specific lesson objectives, including being able to:

define executive order; describe how the White House, as a symbol of democratic government, provides an important setting for leaders to meet and define methods of solving social or political problems;

assess the power of personal persuasion as a means of solving political or social problems that might escalate into crisis;

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### ***CLASSROOM LESSON***

In the spring of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in the midst of a campaign to force the desegregation of the downtown department stores of Birmingham, Alabama. The goal was narrowly focused: persuade the city fathers to act by applying pressure through boycotts and public demonstrations. Response to that pressure, King understood, would bring a strong reaction from Eugene "Bull" Connor, the police commissioner in Birmingham. That in turn would bring national news attention, and had the possibility of bringing federal government intervention in the ongoing civil rights struggle in the South. By May in Birmingham, King made a controversial decision to use children in demonstrations. Determined not to yield to the demands of blacks taking to the streets, Connor used German shepherds and fire hoses to keep them under control. Television cameras rolled, as young demonstrators skittered under the force of hoses equipped with "monitor nozzles" capable of, as one fire department advertised, "knocking bricks loose from mortar . . . at a distance of one hundred feet." German shepherds dug their teeth into the flesh of protesters, and Americans saw it all on the evening news.<sup>1</sup> President John F. Kennedy was sickened by the images, telling an audience in mid-May that the "shameful scenes" in Birmingham were "so much more eloquently reported by the news cameras than by any number of explanatory words."<sup>2</sup> People across the nation and the world were horrified: was this a "just" punishment for black Americans demanding the right to buy a hamburger at a local lunch counter? Blacks were mobilized by the scenes from Birmingham as well. No longer were protests limited to college campuses or the actions of a few dedicated activists. Throughout the South, African Americans marched with a kind of unity of purpose that could not be denied. Taking note of the new intensity, Martin Luther King believed it was the right time to bring the civil rights movement to a new level. He began talking with other civil rights leaders about his sense that the movement was at a breakthrough point. It was time for "a mass protest," he told them, something that would take advantage of the momentum of Birmingham. It was vital to step up the pressure on the federal government. A civil rights bill was needed, and many black leaders believed that President Kennedy was on the verge of introducing such legislation. "We need the President to do crusading work for us," King had said.<sup>3</sup>

With the urging of some young staff members in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), King began to talk about a massive demonstration in Washington. He would bring a quarter of a million people to the heart of the nation's capital as an

expression of black determination to end the crippling effects of racial discrimination. In a May 1963 meeting, King told other civil rights planners, "Contact A. Philip Randolph." As the head of the Negro American Labor Council, the seventy-four-year-old black leader was still hard at work on civil rights issues. He was very busy planning his own march on Washington to dramatize the need for jobs; it was scheduled for October. As King considered the possibility of a much larger march, he wondered if Randolph could be persuaded to merge his October march for jobs with an August march for freedom. "Something dramatic must be done," King said, to support a civil rights bill once Kennedy introduced it in Congress. Without pressure from blacks through some impressive public action, King didn't believe the bill had a chance of becoming law.<sup>4</sup>

But first President John F. Kennedy had to act and send a bill to Capitol Hill. In that early summer of 1963, events in another area of Alabama would act as a catalyst for that action. For weeks Alabama's Governor George Wallace had threatened to "stand in the schoolhouse door" to prevent two black students from entering the state's all-white university. The president's brother, Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, along with his deputy, Nicholas Katzenbach, were in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, with federal marshals, protecting the two Negroes. Wallace had said he would keep his inauguration pledge of "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" by resisting a federal court order to admit the students on June 11. That day had arrived, its 100-degree heat a match for the building tension, and Wallace was poised. The president kept informed through a chain of phone calls from Robert Kennedy's office. At 11:00 a.m., Katzenbach walked up the steps to the university and told the governor, who stood at the door, that in the name of the president of the United States he was ordered to "cease and desist."<sup>5</sup> Wallace railed out against the "illegal, unwelcomed, and unwarranted intrusion" by the federal government. When he saw Wallace would not move, Katzenbach withdrew. By afternoon, Thirty-First Infantry General Henry Graham was on the scene: "Governor Wallace, it is my sad duty to inform you that the National Guard has been federalized. Please stand aside so that the order of the court can be accomplished." Wallace moved aside, saluted, and left "in the flashing lights of a motorcade."<sup>6</sup> Soon one hundred U.S. National Guardsmen would be on campus to protect the two students.

That very morning at breakfast Kennedy had heard Mike Mansfield, the leader of the Senate Democrats, tell him, as they discussed the Alabama crisis, "There has to be a bill—a civil rights bill."<sup>7</sup> The president told Mansfield he was working on it, but it wasn't that easy. He didn't want southerners to oppose his tax bill and the rest of his legislative package because they were riled up over civil rights. That same afternoon as events unfolded dramatically in Alabama, Kennedy sat in the Oval Office reading a telegram from King urging him to do something about the fire-hose, nightstick brutality the police were using against protesters in Danville, Virginia. King told Kennedy, "The Negro's endurance may be at a breaking point."<sup>8</sup> There was an even stronger message from King on the front page of the New York Times. An article highlighted King's judgment that passage of a promised civil rights bill would never happen if the president just sent it to Congress. It would require "the total weight of the President and his prestige."<sup>9</sup> He said supporters of such a bill would stage a march on Washington if need be.



*President Kennedy's address to the nation on civil rights*

In the late afternoon, the words of both Mansfield and King fresh on his memory, the president watched a television rerun of the Wallace confrontation at the University of Alabama. He made a decision: this would be the day he would address the nation on the subject of civil rights. He asked for fifteen minutes of television airtime at 8:00 p.m. and gathered his political advisors to get ideas for the speech. By 7:00 p.m. the president's speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, was in the White House Cabinet Room with Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall piecing together a speech. He and

the president were still making changes in it until four minutes before airtime. By 8:00 p.m., Kennedy still had no finished text but went before the cameras anyway.<sup>10</sup> He talked to the American people about the racial crisis, beginning with the struggle in Alabama to admit two black students, telling his television audience:

This is not a sectional issue. . . . Nor is this a partisan issue. . . . This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. . . . We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution.

If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public schools available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him . . . then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed? Who among us would then be content with counsels of patience and delay?

The president got specific:

I am, therefore, asking the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores and similar establishments. . . . I am also asking Congress to authorize the Federal government to participate more fully in lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education. . . . Other features will also be requested, including greater protection for the right to vote.<sup>11</sup>

As Richard Reeves said in President Kennedy, "This was it. Legislation would follow, but, at, last, the President of the United States had chosen sides." Soon a great army of 250,000 Americans would arrive in Washington to punctuate their desire that this historic piece of legislation be signed into law.<sup>12</sup>

Kennedy had taken the crucial step. Now plans for the march went into full swing. A. Philip Randolph would lead the 1963 version of the March on Washington. Combining the economic need for jobs with the personal and constitutional right to freedom, the march soon had its dual focus. Securing the passage of Kennedy's proposed civil rights

legislation framed the timing of the event. The marchers would come to Washington during the week a Senate filibuster was planned against the bill. Randolph took to the task readily, explaining to organizers in the initial meeting, "I've been planning this for twenty years." He chose for his chief deputy Bayard Rustin, a brilliant but controversial organizer, and the work began. The orderly systems that Rustin and other leaders began to refine for the March stood out in contrast to recent violence against "soldiers" of the movement. The slaying of Medgar Evers, field secretary of the NAACP in Jackson, Mississippi, on June 11 chillingly dramatized the danger inherent to those who sought to overthrow deeply established patterns of racism in the South.

### ***Collaboration***

The death of the NAACP field secretary, Medgar Evers, weighed on President Kennedy. It seemed cruelly ironic that the young black leader was gunned down by a sniper on the very night the president had made his civil rights speech to the nation. Shot as he was returning home from a civil rights strategy session, Evers had died on his own driveway, a pile of "Jim Crow Must Go" t-shirts still clutched in his arm.<sup>13</sup> Kennedy was shocked, telling a Democratic congressional leader, "You know, it's like they shoot this guy in Mississippi . . . I mean, it's just in everything. I mean, this has become everything."<sup>14</sup> After a springtime of brutal racial confrontations, Kennedy sought solutions. He called a series of White House meetings with groups of American leaders from across the country—clergyman, lawyers, labor leaders, educators, chain-store executives—people with a whole range of statuses. He hoped that this cross-section of the nation's diverse interests might generate creative methods for solving civil rights problems. At the last meeting of this series, on June 21, 1963, A. Philip Randolph, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and other black civil rights leaders were present. Randolph chose that occasion to announce that they were organizing a mass March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and it was scheduled for August 28.<sup>15</sup> Understanding the importance of such an announcement, the president asked to meet with the civil rights leaders specifically about this proposed march on the following day.

The next morning in the White House Cabinet Room, Kennedy welcomed the civil rights leaders. John Lewis, very young and representing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) remembered the president's big smile and the "choppy 'Hello, hello, hello' as he hurriedly shook hands around the table."<sup>16</sup> After some rather stiff introductions, the president began by emphasizing the need for a strong partnership in support of the new civil rights bill. Historian Taylor Branch describes how Kennedy told the leaders that the problem now was to get the bill through Congress and launched into details about the obstacles—"the tangled committees, the sectional and personal complications of key legislators, the formidable muck of the Southern filibuster in the Senate."<sup>17</sup> The president reminded the assembled leaders that since he had taken the strong stand on civil rights, his approval rating in the polls had dropped from 60 to 47 percent and that he might very well lose the next election because of his public commitment. He needed their help, he told them, in getting the bill passed. The civil rights leaders' initial awkwardness disappeared, and they began to offer suggestions.

## *The Negroes Are Already in the Streets*



*White House meeting with civil rights leaders*

Whitney Young of the National Urban League asked Kennedy at one point in the exchange of ideas if he was opposed to the March on Washington. Kennedy told him he thought it was a big mistake to announce the march before the bill had even been sent to committee, then added, "We want success in the Congress, not a big show on the Capitol."<sup>18</sup> A. Philip Randolph took the other side, telling him, "The Negroes are already in the streets," referring to more militant black groups who were less inclined to embrace the nonviolent strategies of seasoned leaders. "If they are bound to

be in the streets in any case is it not better that they be led by organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor non-violence?" he asked. Then he added, rather ominously, "If the civil rights leadership were to call the Negroes off the streets, it is problematic whether they would come."<sup>19</sup> Vice President Lyndon Johnson, also present at the meeting, argued that the most effective approach was "deal-making, flesh-hammering corridor politics."<sup>20</sup> Finally, nearing the end of the two-hour meeting, King spoke, saying that the march and traditional politics were "not antagonistic alternatives," they could actually be complementary. Apply pressure, he said, both in traditional ways and through marches, which dramatized the civil rights problems to great effect. Kennedy held out for his position that the march might hurt the leaders' overall civil rights cause. The black leaders stressed to the president that they could have problems among their own organizations if they called off the march. Kennedy told them, "You have your problems, I have my problems."<sup>21</sup> Finally ending the meeting by saying they should help each other and keep in touch, Kennedy told the group he had a plane to catch. He was on his way by helicopter to Camp David and thence to Germany by the time civil rights leaders were speaking to the press in the Rose Garden. King told the news media that the president had not explicitly opposed the march and stated unequivocally that, "If there is a filibuster in Washington, we will have a nonviolent peaceful demonstration in Washington."<sup>22</sup>

## *Mobilizing an Army of Marchers*

By the time the August 28 date of the March on Washington had been decided, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin were fully involved in planning and organizing an event of enormous magnitude. By early July, the march leaders had formed an interracial coalition of ten civil rights groups, religious associations, and labor organizations, including Randolph's Negro American Labor Council, the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial

Equality (CORE). The National Council of Churches was participating as well, along with the American Jewish Congress.<sup>23</sup> In the early stages, the first priority was getting the word of the march to the people: staffs of black and white volunteers sent out copies of pamphlets, handbills, letters, and organizational manuals. Money was an issue. To help cover costs, Rustin helped raise money by selling march buttons, featuring a strong black and white handshake, to civil rights organizations. Traveling to Washington for the event was problematic to those who had few resources, so marchers who were better off financially were encouraged to finance the trip of three others who had less. Sponsoring groups were urged to declare Wednesday, August 28, Freedom Day, so workers could get the day off without threat of penalty.<sup>24</sup>

As time passed, the focus shifted to other organizational problems. Attention to detail was crucial. As Rustin said, "Assume that everybody is absolutely stupid. And assume that you yourself—that you're stupid."<sup>25</sup> To avoid traffic congestion, groups were asked to raise money for buses. Each bus was to be equipped with first aid supplies and extra water. Two hundred volunteers provided similar services on the Mall: twenty-one drinking fountains, twenty-four first-aid stations, even a check-cashing facility. Most Washington restaurants would be closed on the day of the march, so marchers had to bring their own food. Planning for Washington's blistering August heat, organizers listed menus for lunches that would not spoil in the hot sun. Volunteer groups helped provide food. On the last evening before the march, volunteers at New York's Riverside Church worked in shifts to prepare 80,000 cheese sandwich bag lunches to transport to Washington by bus.<sup>26</sup>

Nonviolence was essential to the success of the March, and the organizers thought of every detail. All marchers would be under the leadership of locally appointed captains who would account for their safety and discipline. Two thousand marchers were trained for "internal marshaling." They would wear white shirts and dark trousers and strive to create an atmosphere of "passive, peaceful, non-violent behavior."<sup>27</sup> To minimize the risk of confrontation with hostile groups, the march was planned as a one-day, Wednesday event. With no weekend on either side of the march day, most workers would need to get back home. Ceremonies would last no later than 4:00 p.m., so the buses could be loaded and out of town before darkness fell. The organizers would work hand in hand with government agencies as well.

In fact, once President Kennedy accepted that the March on Washington would take place despite his misgivings, he made sure the attorney general, Robert Kennedy, and his assistant, Burke Marshall, were in constant contact with the march organizers so that no security question was left to chance. As early as six weeks prior to the date of the march, representatives of the attorney general met with Randolph and Rustin specifically, and they worked through each relevant decision together. Of great importance was the site of the rally. The Lincoln Memorial was the perfect spot. Blacks had used the monument, dedicated in 1922, as a symbol of freedom, linking their struggle against discrimination with the memory of the Great Emancipator.<sup>28</sup> It was virtually hallowed ground—not a setting likely to stir anger and violence. To ensure better control, the march would take place within a narrow range of less than a mile—between the Washington Monument and

the memorial. As time for the event neared and problems of logistics arose, Attorney General Kennedy and his deputy Marshall continued to offer the full range of government resources. One of the president's advance organizers, and an expert on crowd control, even thought of what to do if speakers at the rally stirred the audience to dangerous levels. Should that happen, from his position behind Lincoln's statue he could flip a special switch that would cut the power on the public address system.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, if internal crowd controls put in place by Rustin did not work, the government was prepared. On the day of the March, all leave was cancelled for Washington's 2,900 police and for 1,000 police in the nearby suburbs.<sup>30</sup> The city banned liquor sales, and Washington hospitals canceled elective surgery for the day in case any injuries put extra demands on the facility. Several thousand U.S. troops were standing by in Maryland and Virginia to be called into service if needed. Some thought all of this preparation "overkill." The black comedian Dick Gregory told Burke Marshall, "I know these senators and congressmen are scared of what's going to happen. I'll tell you what's going to happen. It's going to be a great big Sunday picnic."<sup>31</sup>

### *Before the Sunday Picnic*



*Civil rights leaders at the Lincoln Memorial*

In the meeting with civil rights leaders that June 22, Kennedy had told King, "We're in this up to our necks."<sup>32</sup> As the momentum for the march began to build, the president was keenly aware that its success was by no means guaranteed. The potential for negative political fallout was great, and Kennedy moved cautiously, holding back. He declined to speak at the Lincoln Memorial rally, since he could not think of a speech that would satisfy the crowd there and those watching it on television. He wouldn't meet with Randolph and King just before the event to avoid photographs that might embarrass him if the things went badly. Finally, he didn't want civil rights leaders making demands on him and then denouncing him at the rally for not meeting them.<sup>33</sup> He had sent the bill to the Congress, had invited the leaders to the White House, and was providing every government resource to assure the marchers' safety. For the moment, that was about as far as he would go.

The potential for political fallout became crystal clear when the White House got a copy of the speech that John Lewis, the young president of the increasingly militant SNCC, planned to give at the Lincoln Memorial rally. The sentence that bothered Kennedy was "In good conscience, we cannot support the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little too late."<sup>34</sup> Primarily Lewis opposed the fact that the bill did not protect blacks from violence or guarantee the right to vote, but the statement seemed a clear denial of the link between the march and the Kennedy's efforts to secure passage of this act. Others

were offended by Lewis's speech as well. The Roman Catholic Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle was troubled by the phrase, "Patience is a dirty and nasty word," and the militancy of the lines: "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 non-violently."<sup>35</sup> A man who had worked tirelessly as a civil rights activist for many years, O'Boyle said that if the "Sherman" part wasn't changed he wouldn't deliver the invocation the next day. On the day before the March, when Lewis met with Rustin and others and raised O'Boyle's criticism, Lewis agreed to change only one small line. Rustin told him there would be more criticism the next day as march leaders read copies of his prepared remarks. Lewis remembered that, "By the time I got back to the room, I was incensed. This was a good speech, maybe a great one. That's how everyone who had seen it felt—everyone with SNCC." Lewis told Rustin he would listen to the others but would make no promises.<sup>36</sup>



*Civil rights march in Washington, August 28, 1963*



*A demonstrator joins the march on Washington, August 28, 1963*

By late morning on the day of the march, Lewis and several other SNCC leaders were huddled together with march leaders in a security guard's office behind Lincoln's statue still debating various edited revisions of the speech. At one point a last-minute version of the speech edited by the president himself was delivered by deputy attorney general, Burke Marshall, who had rushed over in the sidecar of a police motorcycle.<sup>37</sup> Angry words were exchanged, and rumors flew. Finally, Bayard Rustin brought a truce committee: A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, and Reverend Eugene Blake of the National Council of Churches—the March's only white speaker. By this time Courtland Cox and James Forman of SNCC had worked their way back to the tiny office, telling the committee any changes to the speech would be over their dead bodies. At some point during the course of the harsh discussions, Randolph told them, "I've waited twenty-two years for this. Would you young men please accommodate an old man? Please don't ruin it."<sup>38</sup> Describing the event later, Lewis said that Randolph turned to him and said, "John, we've come this far together. Let us stay together." "This was as close to a plea as a man as dignified as he could come," Lewis concluded. "How could I say no? It would be like saying no to Mother Teresa."<sup>39</sup> Lewis said he would fix the speech. James Forman began to work furiously on a portable typewriter, typing and deleting words as he and Lewis went over the speech line by line. Finally, perhaps to preserve the spirit of unity and out

of respect for the long struggle of a venerable leader, a salvaged agreement was made. Despite the changes in wording, Lewis's speech was the most militant of the day. Telling an audience who interrupted his speech with applause fourteen times that "the revolution is at hand," his strident, impassioned language was a harbinger of a separate movement to come.<sup>40</sup>

### *Glory Day*

Now was the time for Dick Gregory's promised Sunday school picnic. August 28, 1963 dawned bright and sunny in Washington, D.C., a good sign. At first, in the early morning, march lieutenants were worried as they drove around the main avenues of the city and found them almost deserted. For a while they imagined that the enormous efforts of the previous months would not bear fruit. But soon the word began to filter in. By 8:00 a.m. someone reported that buses were pouring south through the Baltimore tunnel 45 miles away at the rate of one hundred per hour. Before midmorning, organizers reported that twenty-one charter trains had pulled into Washington's Union Station, and over 1,500 buses had arrived in the city and were parked in their specially designated spots.<sup>41</sup> The civil rights leaders were elated as they saw more and more news commentators setting up to report the story. All told, more than three thousand reporters from all over the world were in Washington to cover the event. By 11:30 a.m., all three networks began live coverage. A CBS camera positioned in the Washington Monument showed television viewers a "thick carpet of people on both sides of the half-mile reflecting pool and all around the base of the Memorial."<sup>42</sup> President Kennedy watched on TV while sitting in the Oval Office with his brother and Burke Marshall. At noon he began shuttling between the TV set and a meeting about Vietnam in the Cabinet Room.<sup>43</sup> Kennedy watched as the camera panned the streets of the Mall. One thing was clear: people were coming in droves, and from the looks of it, they were in a fine mood.

By the time marchers began their mile walk from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, at least a quarter million people had gathered. Leading the march with a long line of distinguished notables was A. Philip Randolph. His dream of the March on Washington Movement was at last a reality. Appropriately, he was the first speaker of the day. With the seated figure of Abraham Lincoln as a background, Randolph's rich voice boomed out over the microphones, "Let the nation know the meaning of our numbers! We are the advanced guard of a massive revolution for jobs and freedom." He ended his message with the theme that had defined his life's work. Blacks would continue to apply pressure until they received full citizenship:

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 ever growing numbers until total freedom is ours.<sup>44</sup>

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the last speaker of the rally. The day had been full, the people were tired, but with the promise of King's remarks, they began to stir again. The black gospel singer Mahalia Jackson warmed up the faltering crowd for

his speech, singing the old spiritual, born of the slave experience, "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned."<sup>45</sup> The speech would be historic, and its refrains repeated for years to come. Biographer Taylor Branch describes how Dr. King's "dream" metaphor built to a dramatic ending:

As King tolled the freedom bells from New Hampshire to California and back across Mississippi, his solid, square frame shook and his stateliness barely contained the push to an end that was old to King but new to the world: 'And when this happens . . . 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!'"<sup>46</sup>

The president was watching on TV in the living quarters of the White House as King spoke. Realizing he had never heard an entire speech of the civil rights leader, Kennedy was mesmerized. All he could say was, "He's good! He's damn good!" The president had invited the leaders of the March on Washington for a meeting at the White House after the rally ended. When they filed into the Cabinet Room, virtually glowing in triumph, Kennedy greeted King with a smiling, "I have a dream." As Taylor Branch notes, it was "as a fellow speechmaker who valued a good line."<sup>47</sup> The president and the march leaders settled into a serious discussion of how the civil rights bill could be strengthened. Kennedy wanted to talk numbers and told the leaders state by state how many votes had been secured in each House, and which representatives might be won over in the future. Finally, Randolph said to the president, "It's obvious it's going to take a crusade to win approval for these civil rights measures." Kennedy said he certainly thought it would be helpful. Then Randolph told him, "It's going to be a crusade then. And I think that nobody can lead this crusade but you, Mr. President." The meeting with Kennedy ended cordially, with him promising to keep in touch on the head counts.<sup>48</sup> Not a person present could have imagined that this young leader would be felled by an assassin's bullet just three months hence. It would be the work of his successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, who would get the necessary head count to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

### *A Whirlwind*

Ralph Abernathy of SCLC aptly described the sense of accomplishment that almost every march leader felt at the end of that long and eventful day when he said, "I went back to the grounds about six or seven o'clock that evening. There was nothing but the wind blowing across the reflection pool, moving and blowing and keeping music. We were so proud that no violence had taken place that day. We were so pleased. This beautiful scene of the wind dancing on the sands of the Lincoln Memorial I will never forget."<sup>49</sup> A. Philip Randolph would not forget it either, calling August 28, 1963, the "most glorious day of my life." He had made a call for marchers in 1941, "You possess power," he told them then, "great power." It had been a rising wind. Now it had become a whirlwind.

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#### ***LESSON 4: Endnotes***

##### An Introduction for Teachers

1. Paula F. Pfeffer. A Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement, p. 134.
2. Ibid, p. 138.
3. Lillie Patterson. A Philip Randolph, Messenger for the Masses, p. 84.
4. Pfeffer, p. 148.
5. William Manchester. The Glory and the Dream, p. 982.

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1. Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters*, p. 759.
2. Adam Fairclough. *Martin Luther King Jr.*, p. 84.
3. *Ibid*, p. 85.
4. Branch, p. 820.
5. Richard Reeves. *President Kennedy: Profile in Power*, p. 519.
6. *Ibid*, p. 520.
7. *Ibid*, p. 518.
8. Branch, p. 822.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Reeves, p. 521.
11. Clayborne Carson and others, *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, p. 161.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Reeves, p. 523.
14. Branch, p. 828.
15. Reeves, p. 529.
16. Branch, p. 839.
17. *Ibid*.
18. *Ibid*, p. 840.
19. Paula Pfeffer. *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 244.
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21. *Ibid*.
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23. Pfeffer, p. 245.
24. Ibid.
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26. Ibid.
27. Pfeffer, p. 249.
28. Fairclough, p. 89.
29. Reeves, p. 581.
30. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom*, p. 161.
31. Ibid.
32. Reeves, p. 581.
33. Ibid.
34. Manning Marable and Keith Mullings. *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, p. 407.
35. Reeves, p. 581.
36. John Lewis. *Walking with the Wind*. p. 223.
37. Branch, p. 878.
38. Hampton, p. 164.
39. Lewis, p. 226.
40. Branch, p. 880.
41. Reeves, p. 578.
42. Branch, p. 878.
43. Reeves, p. 578.
44. A. Philip Randolph. Address at the 1963 March on Washington.
45. Branch, p. 881.

46. Ibid, pp. 882-883.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid, p. 886.
49. Hampton, p. 170.