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THE POWER OF THE MARCH—AND AFTER

“The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it in 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.’”—
John Lewis at the Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963.

The success of the March on Washington is now a part of American history. But its ramifying effects on the civil rights revolution will be long in unfolding.

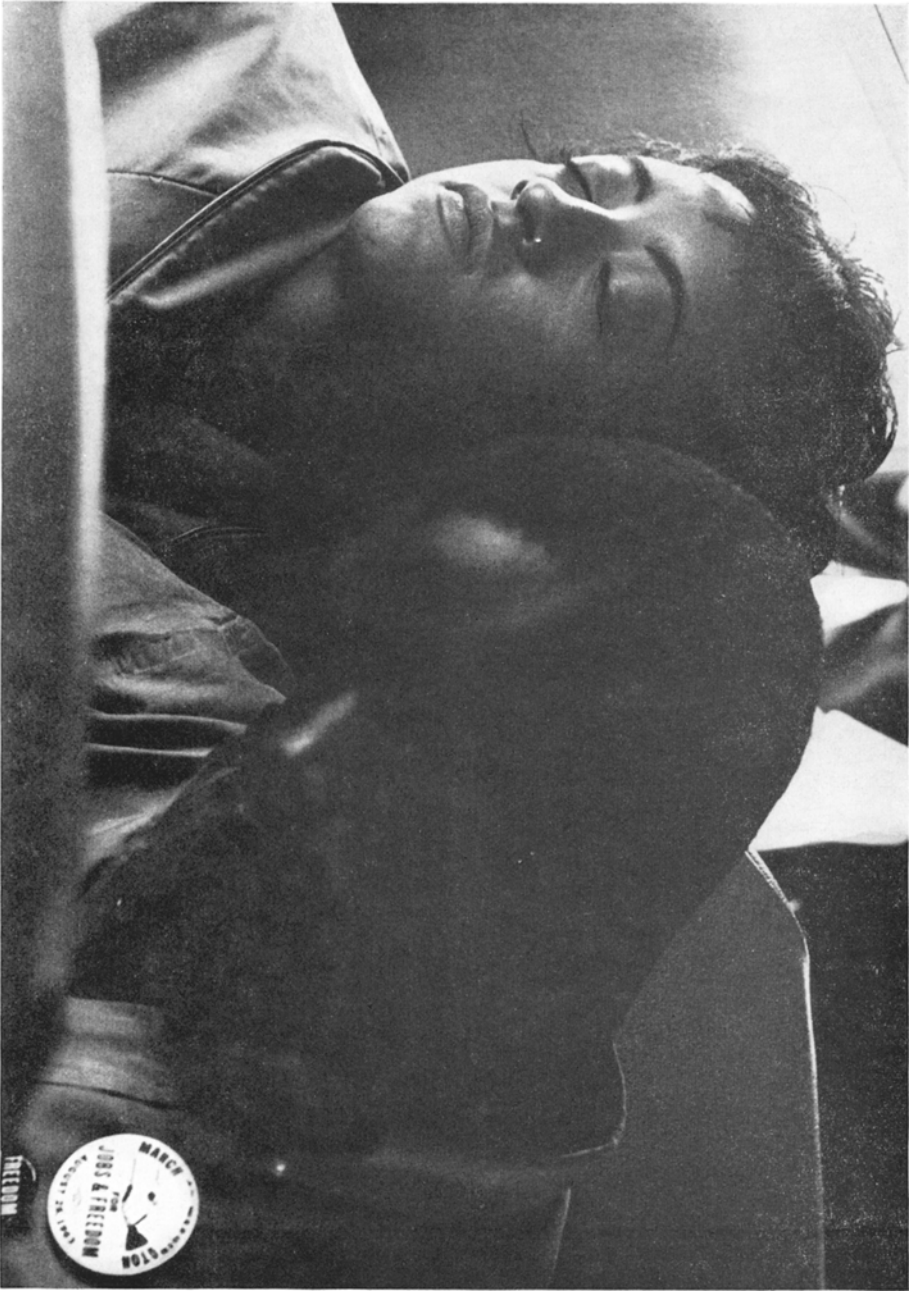
Certainly the moral impact of the March was incalculable. As one of its organizers put it, “Every Negro feels two feet taller now.” Of the quarter of a million marchers, 200,000 were black. That means one out of every 100 American Negroes was in Washington on August 28.

Looking out over the vast throng that took undisputed possession of the Lincoln Memorial, one saw more than the fruit of a heroic six-week organizing job. One saw—and felt almost as a physical presence—the fulfillment of a promise made over twenty years ago. For it was in 1940 that A. Philip Randolph called for 100,000 Negroes to descend on the capital to demand a federal FEPC. Unable to break Randolph’s iron insistence. President Roosevelt finally and reluctantly issued Executive Order 8802, and Randolph canceled the March.

But the march idea hung in the air, periodically revived in an oratorical extravagance, always growing heavier with the weight of new grievances, outrages, frustrations. Then came the Prayer Pilgrimage of 1957, followed by the Youth Marches for Integrated Schools of 1958 and 1959. None approached the 100,000 mark.

Not that the number 100,000 became an obsession. But at least some Harlem old-timers wondered from time to time whether, if Roosevelt had stood firm, Randolph could have delivered the threatened blow. Maybe Negro leaders were all bark and no bite. How much white complacency has accumulated on the confidence that Negroes could never unite and . . .

In Harlem, on the eve of the March, there was a feeling that this might be it. Community organizing was at a high pitch as thousands



AFTER THE MARCH

of bus and train seats were being sold. Activity was only intensified when bus companies announced exhaustion of their facilities. Everyone was too busy to fulfill prophecies that the summer would bring race riots like those of 1919. To senseless violence there was an alternative—to heave a massive powerful force against the power structure in Washington. For black Americans, lacking decisive economic and political power, that force could only be their own numbers. And numbers are important to a minority.



Some observers in Washington were disappointed that less than 20% of the Marchers were white. They missed the real point of the day—which was not mainly an occasion for whites to display their solidarity with the struggle. The meaning of the day—and the source of its joy—was that Negroes had assembled themselves in such numbers that alone they presented the federal government and its agencies with unprecedented logistical problems. Downtown Washington virtually closed down.

The March put a greater strain on Washington police than any event in the city's history. The telephone company complained that its facilities were overtaxed. Never before had so many television, radio, and newspaper reporters converged on Washington, not even for a presidential inauguration. Local merchants—those who stayed open—reported enormous loss in sales. And during the twenty-four hours when the Marchers dominated the capital, police in this predominantly Negro city reported a record low crime rate—only two arrests.

For weeks prior to the March the press was obsessed with the possibility of violence; reporters harassed the March office for details of internal marshaling, while often indifferent to the political programming. The fear of mayhem expressed in editorials (including one in the *New York Times*) was reflected in the pre-March scurrying of Washington's bureaucracy and merchantry.

Beneath these obsessive fears there was a profound sense of guilt, akin to what underlay Southern nightmares of slave uprisings before the Civil War and generated a paranoia that could not tolerate Negroes gathering in groups except for carefully supervised religious services. Then as now the paranoia was not completely unfounded. The error of the latest paranoids is that they underestimated the ability of the Negro to follow his *own* discipline; and the tragedy of our time is that respectable America still fears gatherings of angry black people more than it hates the cause of their gathering.

In any case, no demonstration so large has ever been conducted with greater dignity and unity of spirit. Those who stood on the Washington Monument platform and could see thousands of people spontaneously forming tight-knit, slow-moving wedges that funneled into the lines of march on Constitution and Independence Avenues, were as moved by the eloquence of mass orderliness and instinctive self-discipline as by the Lincoln Memorial speeches.

Here was an old lesson learned anew at a time when it had been well-nigh forgotten: a mass is not necessarily a mob, and masses in motion are capable of enormous self-direction and purposive coordinated action—that is, when inspired by a great cause and when conscious of the challenge before them.

That is precisely why the segregationists' threats to launch their own nonviolent mass movement are hollow. At bottom, their impulses are too corroded by a desperate selfishness, by a distorted vision of the world and themselves, by a hostility to the democracy of mass action.



The Luce publications were particularly impressed by the "picnic" atmosphere of the March, the meaning of which to them was that, say what you will, Negroes in this country are a pretty happy lot. Ironically, the purveyors of the pleasure principle have high standards of austerity for movements dedicated to more serious principles.

Sure, there was picnicking on the grass and innumerable black and white feet soaked happily in the Reflecting Pools of the Lincoln Memorial. The incomparable Mahalia Jackson evoked a chest-swelling, hand-clapping elation, and the presence of Hollywood stars was scarcely conducive to funereal depression.

But joyful confidence is not to be confused with frivolity. The spirit that possessed the audience when Mahalia Jackson let loose was also the spirit that brought us to our feet at the conclusion of Dr. King's "Dream Speech." It was the spirit that made us stand, when the Senators and Congressmen arrived on the scene, and shout "Pass the bill!" in a roar that echoed for a mile. It was the spirit that answered Bayard Rustin's reading of the demands with thunderous assent.

It was not the spirit of frivolity. Nor was it the spirit of conciliation or of awed reticence in the presence of government dignitaries in the seat of political power.



Malcolm X (who appeared at the March headquarters in the Statler Hotel on the eve of the March) charges that the really militant forces in the Negro community stayed away from Washington when it became clear that white liberals had subverted the original radical program of the March. The Negroes who participated, he says, wanted to hobnob with white folks. What a curious statement for a self-styled spokesman of the black masses to make about 200,000 of his own people, including the 300 who bussed all the way from Mississippi. Not curious, insulting.

Just what the original radical program of the March was has, inevitably, become the subject of widespread gossip in many circles. Undoubtedly those who formulated the earliest conceptions of the March thought in terms of direct action that would bring Congressional business to a halt for the day. Bayard Rustin, the prime organizational gen-

ius behind the March, has called for such action from many platforms over the years.

Many of us are convinced that action along those lines may be ultimately necessary to force the federal government into the kind of reconstruction of Southern states that can eliminate racist power in the nation. Yet it became clear that no such program of radical action on August 28 could enlist the support of all the civil rights groups, not to speak of other forces whose participation was deemed essential.

The importance of welding these various forces into a coalition has not been fully appreciated by some, who apparently located the chief significance of the March in stories about how Archbishop O'Boyle censored the militant speech of John Lewis, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—stories too embellished by the press to form the basis of serious discussion. The issue involved in Lewis' speech was not censorship—it is not true that the Archbishop threatened to withdraw from the March, nor would the civil rights leaders have tolerated such a threat. The real issue was whether the March and its chairmen should express support, though with reservations, for the Kennedy civil rights bills. The decision to do so, the March chairmen felt, had been one of the original agreements underlying the coalition. The first draft of John Lewis' speech expressly withholding support of the bills was, in the view of the others, susceptible to divisive and misleading interpretations. True, there were objections to some of the rhetoric of Lewis' first draft (which I personally preferred to the revisions), but these were peripheral to the political question.

How we assess this question depends on how we assess the coalition and its program. Had the coalition been formed merely to stimulate popular clamor for the Kennedy bills, strong criticisms would have been in order. As it was, the demands which the Marchers carried to Washington not only constitute a critique of the Administration's policies but represented a broad program for social reform.

On the political level, the Marchers called for reduction of Dixiecrat representation in Congress through enforcement of Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment. It is a sign of the times that this demand, constitutionally sound as it is politically revolutionary, is being revived after years of lying dormant. In addition, the Marchers went beyond the Administration in calling for:

- 1) authority for the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits when *any* constitutional right is violated;
- 2) withholding of federal funds from all programs in which discrimination is practiced;
- 3) desegregation of all school districts in 1963.

But it is on another level that the radical character of the March emerges: the combination of demands for civil and political freedom with a far-reaching economic program. A glance at this program—

- 1) a massive federal program to train and place *all* unem-

ployed workers—Negro and white—on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages;

2) a national minimum wage of \$2.00 an hour;

3) a federal Fair Employment Practices Act;

4) a broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include *all* areas of employment;

—is sufficient to know that it means nothing less, and probably more, than a recrudescence of the New Deal and all the possibilities that would open up for social planning and imagination. Certainly a political upheaval of some magnitude is implicit in these demands, for it is chimerical to assume that they could be realized without, at the very least, destroying the national power of the coalition of Dixiecrats and reactionary Republicans.

It was A. Philip Randolph, veteran socialist and director of the March, who gave sharpest expression to the implications of the March. As the first of the chairmen to speak, he called for an all-out crusade against “the unholy coalition that strangles Congress” and asserted that Negro freedom could not be won without fundamental changes in the nation’s “political and economic philosophies and institutions.”

Whatever the long-range implications of the March program, the ten demands are militant and the unification of so many diverse forces around them must be considered a major advance. Whether those forces remain together and committed to the demands will not be up to the leaders alone.

At the Lincoln Memorial, a quarter of a million people pledged to continue the struggle at home—in the streets as well as in the courts. This pledge may well turn out to be more important than the eloquent speeches or the specific demands. The streets were the incubators of the March on Washington, and it was pressures from the streets that fused jobs and freedom into a single slogan. Action in the streets in cities and towns across the country, in keeping with the pledge, will keep the March on Washington Movement alive and militant.