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HEARD AND UNHEARD SPEECHES

What Really Happened at the March on Washington?

It was not the speech Martin Luther King planned to give. He wanted his contribution to the March on Washington to be brief, "sort of a *Gettysburg Address.*" He would, he knew, be following a long list of speakers. A fiery sermon would not do. Not for this audience. The aim of the march was to pressure Congress into passing President Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill. Demonstration, not civil disobedience, the march sponsors had agreed, would be the order of the day. It was crucial to make sure the crowd that had come to Washington stayed calm and did nothing to offend the congressmen on whom final passage of civil rights legislation depended. In an earlier meeting with the leaders of the march, the president himself had warned against "the wrong kind of demonstration at the wrong time."

Once King took the microphone and looked out at the two hundred thousand people gathered around the Reflecting Pool of the Lincoln Memorial, he knew, however, that neither he nor any of the march sponsors had imagined a gathering on this scale. Downtown Washington was deserted, but everywhere King looked there were people. They were even perched in the trees that bordered the Reflecting Pool. The marchers had begun assembling at the Washington Monument in early dawn. By 10:30 there were fifty thousand, and by noon the number had doubled. Opening the program, A. Philip Randolph, the seventy-four-year-old director of the march, announced, "We are gathered here in the largest demonstration in the history of this nation." King, too, was awed. As he waited for the applause that greeted him to die down, his movements were stiff, almost jerky. He started out reading his prepared speech, and only after he had gotten through most of it did he begin to speak extemporaneously.

It was a decision that made all the difference in the world. Until his "I have a dream" peroration, there was little in King's speech that moved his audience. He had tried too hard to write an updated *Gettysburg Address.* What emerged from his prepared text was not moral passion but historical self-consciousness. It was a speech so dominated by carefully worked out metaphors that it left little room for spontaneity. In Lincolnesque fashion King began, "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." Next came an even more elaborate historical reference—to the promissory note the Founding Fathers signed when they wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. "It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as citizens of color are concerned," King declared. "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.' "

"But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt," King continued. "*Now* is the time to make real the promises of democracy. *Now* is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice." Then, after a litany of all that was wrong with black life in America, King moved on to another appeal for action. "We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro

in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote," he insisted.

Once King began to speak of his dream, however, what he had to say became an altogether different story. "I'd used it many times before, that thing about 'I have a dream,'" King would modestly acknowledge. But in the context of the March on Washington, there was nothing "used" about King's peroration. It transformed his words so that his speech no longer had a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end. It became a dialogue between him and the crowd. King offered a dream. The crowd answered back with applause. King responded with a new dream. It was no longer just civil rights that King was talking about now. It was civil religion—the nation's destiny as the carrying out of God's will. As King began to speak about his dream, God's purposes, American history, and the fate of the nation's black population became inseparable. His "I have a dream" image was the Bible made political, the southern revivalist tradition linked to the idea of equality.

King would cite the Declaration of Independence, then picture the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners sitting down together at the table of brotherhood. He would quote Isaiah—"Every valley shall be exalted and every hill and mountain shall be made low"—and imagine freedom ringing from "every hill and molehill of Mississippi." He would call for the day when "all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty,'" and he would end by envisioning a future in which the entire nation would "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.'"

King's vision took the country from its beginnings to the present, and as he repeated his "I have a dream" litany (four times in the first paragraph in which he used it, eight times in all), the momentum of what he was saying began to build. Each dream stood on its own, yet melted into the others. And as the process repeated itself, the hope King was expressing became more tenable.

In the next day's *New York Times,* columnist James Reston summed up King's speech by comparing his words to those of Roger Williams, Sam Adams, Henry Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, and Eugene Debs. "Each time the dream was a promise out of our ancient articles of faith: phrases from the Constitution, lines from the great anthem of the nation, guarantees from the Bill of Rights, all ending with the vision that they might one day all come true," Reston wrote. It was the kind of front-page analysis political speeches rarely receive in this country, but King had created a context in which Reston's praise did not seem extravagant. By the time King finished, there wasn't a base he had failed to touch. Built on repetition, his speech grew stronger as it was replayed on television in homes across the country. One did not have to be in the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial to identify with the hope it expressed.

King's success at the March on Washington was especially crucial for the civil rights movement. Plans for the march had been in the works since 1962, when A. Philip Randolph, the founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, proposed a "mass descent" on Washington that would draw public attention to the economic plight of blacks in America and the need for more civil rights legislation. But by early 1963 it seemed unlikely that there would be a march. Randolph could not get other civil rights leaders to agree that the time was right. Only in June, when Martin Luther King concluded that the civil rights demonstrations he had been conducting in Birmingham against Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor and the city's merchants needed to be followed by protests on a national level, did prospects for holding the march revive. Even then, the civil rights leadership was divided over how the march should be conducted and who should foot the bill for it. The problem of paying for the march was removed when Stephen Currier, president of the liberal Taconic Foundation, proposed the establishment of the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership (CUCRL), which would serve as a clearinghouse for dividing the larger contributions that Currier himself promised to solicit on behalf of the march.

But not until June 24 was the date for the march set, and even at that point infighting continued. The NAACP's Roy Wilkins objected to Bayard Rustin, who had spent time in prison for refusing to serve in the army and had an arrest record for homosexuality, being named director of the march (Rustin was instead given the title of deputy director). The leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was unhappy with the decision of the march sponsors to forbid civil disobedience.

King's speech did not make such internal differences vanish, but it did deflect public attention from what divided the march's black leaders, who, in addition to Randolph and King, included Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, John Lewis of SNCC, James Farmer of CORE, and Whitney M. Young, Jr. of the National Urban League. King's vision of a civil rights movement rooted in a belief in American justice forced the public and the media to think about the reasons for the march. After King finished speaking, it was easy for Bayard Rustin to step to the podium and get the crowd to roar its approval of the goals of the march. The nation was put in the same position. In the face of King's dream, it seemed petty to dwell on any divisions among the march's six black sponsors.

King's speech also furthered the kind of biracial coalition the established civil rights movement believed was needed in order to get Congress to act. In addition to the black sponsors of the march, there were four key white sponsors: Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers; Matthew Ahmann, director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice; Rabbi Joachim Prinz, president of the American Jewish Congress; and the Reverend Eugene Carson Blake, the chief executive officer of the United Presbyterian Church. King's speech not only said they were welcome; it said that in a country where racial justice was both a religious and secular concern the kinds of organizations these men belonged to had an obligation to participate in the civil rights movement.

Finally, King's triumph at the march on Washington was crucial for the Kennedy administration. The relationship between King and Kennedy had become extremely complicated by 1963. During the 1960 presidential campaign Kennedy had publicly intervened to have King released from a Georgia jail, and in 1963, when King was in jail in Alabama, Kennedy had acted again, this time calling Coretta King to assure her the FBI had ascertained that her husband was safe. The calls earned Kennedy the gratitude of the King family as well as a great many black votes. But the calls did not make King look the other way when the Kennedy administration sought to keep "order" in the South rather than support black protest. In early June, King made headlines when he described the president's record on civil rights as "inadequate" and charged him with not living up to his campaign promises.

Only reluctantly did the president commit himself to supporting the March on Washington. It was not until June 22, after plans to hold a march sometime in August were announced, that the president asked the leaders of the march to the White House. At that meeting he did everything in his power, short of asking them to call off the march, to discourage them from going ahead with it. "It seemed to me a great mistake to announce a march on Washington before the [Civil Rights] bill was even in committee," the president told the march leaders. "Now we are in a new phase, the legislative phase, and results are essential. . . . we have, first, to oppose demonstrations which will lead to violence, and, second, give Congress a fair chance to work its will." Three weeks then went by before the president gave his formal blessing to the march, and in doing so, he made sure that the press understood that in his mind it was "not a march on the capital" but "a peaceful assembly calling for a redress of grievances."

The president was gambling. By coming out ahead of time in favor of the march, he wanted to make sure that its target was the southern senators opposing his Civil Rights Bill rather than his own record on civil rights. The national reaction to King's "I have a dream" speech redeemed that strategy. The optimism

of King's speech, its equation of civil rights and Americanism, was tailor-made to the kind of political image the Kennedy administration wanted to project. The order maintained by the marchers added to that image. At the end of the day, the president no longer had to worry that he had made a mistake in supporting the march. He could share in the march's triumph by inviting its leaders to the White House and announcing, "This nation can properly be proud of the demonstration that has occurred here today. The leaders of the organizations sponsoring the march and all who have participated in it deserve our appreciation for the detailed preparations that made it possible and for the orderly manner in which it has been conducted."

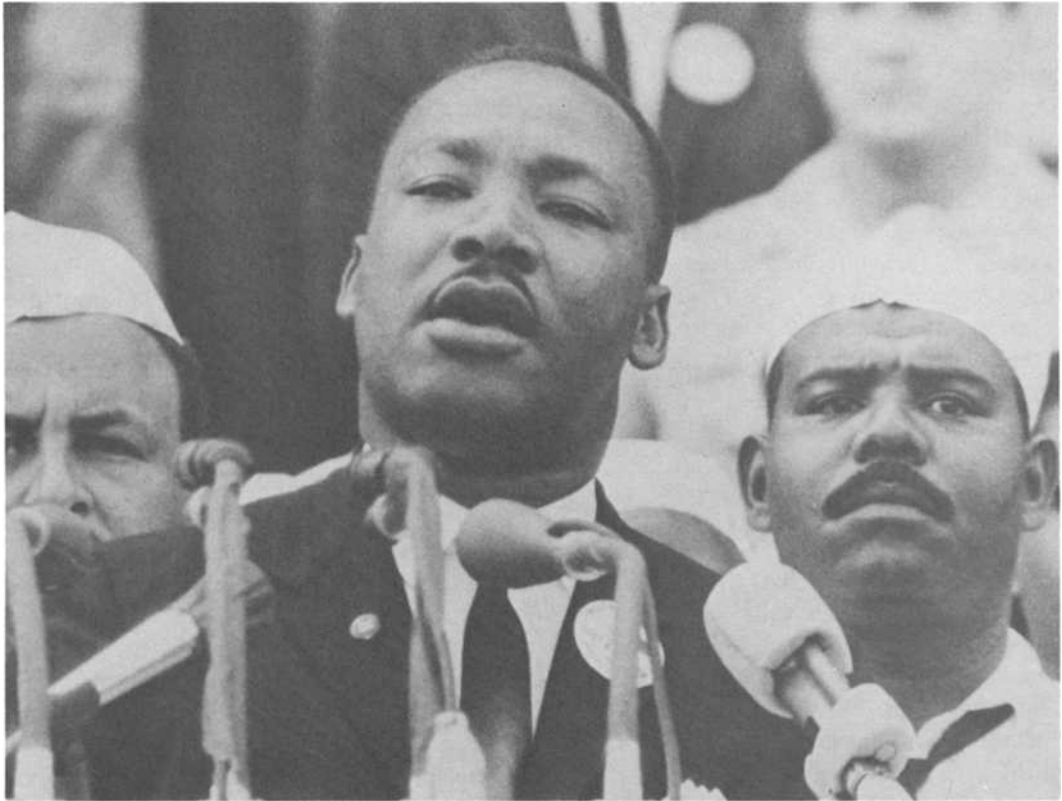
Skepticism from Blacks

As he listened to the speeches and watched the marchers (three-fourths of whom, a Bureau of Social Science Research survey would reveal, held white-collar jobs) Malcolm X, then at the height of his influence as a black nationalist, was horrified. The organization that so impressed reporters—eighty thousand premade lunches, one thousand five hundred volunteer marshals, printed picket signs—struck Malcolm as proof of how thoroughly the march leaders had caved in to white demands. "Who ever heard of angry revolutionaries swinging their bare feet together with their oppressor in lily pad pools, with gospels and guitars and 'I have a dream' speeches?" Malcolm would write in his *Autobiography*. "There wasn't a single logistics aspect uncontrolled. The marchers had been instructed to bring no signs—signs were provided. They had been told to sing one song: 'We Shall Overcome.' They had been told *how* to arrive, *when, where* to arrive, where to assemble, when to *start* marching, the *route* to march."

Malcolm X was not the only black leader with doubts about the march. For very different reasons, John Lewis, the new chairman of SNCC, also had doubts. At twenty-five, the youngest of the march sponsors, Lewis was initially ignored by most of the press and the other march leaders. The Sunday before the march, the *New York Times Magazine* carried a symposium on what black leaders wanted, but neither Lewis nor SNCC was asked to participate, and when the time came to divide the money that had been raised for the civil rights organizations sponsoring the march, SNCC found itself shortchanged. While the NAACP and Urban League received $125,000 each and King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) $50,000, SNCC, whose field secretaries in Mississippi were risking their lives daily, got only $15,000.

What was most troubling to Lewis about the march was not, however, its logistics or the financial treatment of SNCC. What bothered Lewis most were the compromises the march sponsors were prepared to make in order to maintain unity and gain the support of the Kennedy administration. The constituency that John Lewis spoke for was, as far as he was concerned, already on the front lines in the South. In addressing the March on Washington, Lewis saw his task as one of shattering illusions and setting the record straight. It was all that was missing from the March on Washington that preoccupied Lewis. "We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of," Lewis declared in his opening sentences. "For hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. They have no money for their transportation, for they are receiving starvation wages or no wages at all. While we stand here, there are sharecroppers in the Delta of Mississippi who are out in the fields working for less than three dollars a day for twelve hours of work."

Few at the march and still fewer watching on television were prepared for Lewis's anger. But as he warmed up and got further into his speech, Lewis made no attempt to close the distance he had staked out in his opening paragraph. In contrast to King, who would wait for applause before going on to a new idea, Lewis moved at his own pace, barely pausing to catch his breath between paragraphs. The Kennedy administration and the moderate tone of the march were his next targets. "It is true that we support the present civil rights bill in Congress. We support it with great reservations, however. Unless Title Three is put in this bill, there is nothing to protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses, their penalty for engaging in peaceful demonstrations," Lewis declared. "As it stands now the voting section of this bill will not help



The wire services reported that King called the march the "greatest demonstration of freedom in the history of our nation." (UPI)

thousands of black people who want to vote." Blacks in America are at the end of their patience, Lewis warned. It was now up to the federal government to intervene on their behalf or face the consequences. "To those who have said be patient and wait, we must say that we cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually. We want our freedom and we want it now," Lewis insisted. Then in a far more militant reference to the Founding Fathers than King's gentle one, Lewis went on to conclude, "All of us must get in this great social revolution sweeping our nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village, and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the unfinished revolution of 1776 is complete."

Lewis's most powerful criticisms were not, however, voiced in the speech he gave at the Lincoln Memorial but in the speech he intended to deliver but was forced to change. An advance copy of the speech had been read by Attorney General Robert Kennedy and his assistant for civil rights, Burke Marshall. They then passed on the speech to Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle, the Catholic prelate scheduled to give the march invocation. O'Boyle's negative reaction to the speech was the same as Kennedy's, and he threatened to withdraw from the march unless Lewis's militant language was changed. When news of Cardinal O'Boyle's objections reached Bayard Rustin on Tuesday, he called a meeting of the march sponsors and that night met with Lewis in an effort to get him to change his text. Lewis refused, and early Wednesday morning, with the start of the march just hours away, the dispute continued. O'Boyle's objections put Rustin in a difficult position. The specific deletions that the cardinal wanted, as David Garrow notes in *Bearing the Cross*, had been

drafted by Tom Kahn, Rustin's aide. But to lose O'Boyle's support at this juncture would be to lose the kind of unity the march was designed to achieve. O'Boyle warned that, if the changes in Lewis's speech were not made, he and the other religious leaders would leave the march. Finally, with the march program only minutes away, Lewis agreed to change his speech. In a small room just behind the statue of Lincoln, Lewis and SNCC staffers James Forman and Courtland Cox worked out a new speech designed to meet the cardinal's demands.

Lewis's decision to change his speech did not, however, persuade him that his original draft had been a mistake. The militancy of what he had planned to say had not been imposed on him by Tom Kahn. Lewis was among the SNCC leaders who wanted demonstrations at the Justice Department to be included in the march plans, and he believed then, as he would observe twenty-five years later, "The speech was very much in keeping with American ideals." Nothing in the original speech would have been a surprise to anyone who knew the commitment Lewis had made to the civil rights movement, beginning with the Nashville sit-ins of 1960. But there was an unmistakable difference in Lewis's two speeches. At the March on Washington Lewis was struggling not only to keep a lid on his emotions but to express himself in language that fell short of what he wanted to say.

It was a different story with the uncensored speech. There Lewis spoke for a SNCC that was skeptical of the Kennedys and believed, as James Forman would later write, that the administration wanted the march "to take the steam out of the black anger then rising in the South." At the march Lewis had softened his doubts about the president's Civil Rights Bill, first announcing that SNCC supported the bill, then announcing that it had reservations. In his original speech, on the other hand, Lewis felt no need for such qualification. "In good conscience we cannot support, wholeheartedly, the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little, and too late," he declared. "There is not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality."

By the end of the 1960s, it would be de rigueur for any black leader who wanted to be seen as militant to attack liberal civil rights legislation, but there was nothing contrived about the anger in Lewis's undelivered speech. His was not the kind of put-on protest that Tom Wolfe would later characterize as "mau-mauing" the white man. In style and substance the passages that so upset Cardinal O'Boyle matched Lewis's politics. It was General Sherman in Georgia, not Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," rather than soothing black spirituals, that Lewis wanted his Washington audience to go away thinking about. As his original text made clear in the bluntest possible language, Lewis believed that the real problem for blacks in the South was not southern politicians so much as the American political system itself. "This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises 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'?" Lewis asked. The party of Kennedy, he pointed out, was also the party of Mississippi Senator James Eastland. Although the two men seemed like opposites, their conduct was often similar. The president, Lewis argued, had not merely proposed an inadequate civil rights bill, he was doing his best to slow the pace of black protest. "Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the street and put it into the courts," Lewis charged. "I want to know, which side is the Federal Government on?"

There was, however, no turning back the forces that the civil rights revolution had unleashed, Lewis insisted, and in the conclusion of his speech, the part that most offended Cardinal O'Boyle, Lewis predicted what blacks would and should do: "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." In his final paragraph Lewis assumed the voice of a modern Jeremiah, predicting that the civil rights revolution of the 1960s would conquer

the South much as the Civil War had. By comparison with King's language, Lewis's language here was spare, a march tune rather than a hymn. But Lewis, too, could use metaphor and there was no mistaking the threat in his deliberately repetitive syntax ("We will"/"We shall" each key sentence began). "The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington," Lewis proclaimed. "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. 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."

John Lewis would later insist that the militant role he played at the March on Washington worked to SNCC's benefit. In his year-end report to SNCC, Lewis would look back on the march and observe, "Since that time I find that people are asking questions about SNCC. What is SNCC's program? What is SNCC doing? Who is SNCC? And usually when they do find out, they want in some way or another to become identified with SNCC. For this we can thank our good brethren Archbishop O'Boyle, Messrs. Wilkins, King, Young, and Randolph." In 1963, Lewis's view was shared by few outside SNCC. In less than a year, it would be clear, however, that, although the drama of the March on Washington belonged to Martin Luther King, its prophetic voice belonged to John Lewis.

In signalling SNCC's break with the conventional liberalism of the early 1960s, Lewis had forecast both the strategy and the tone of the next stage of civil rights activity in the South. The compromises the March on Washington's black sponsors had made in order to win over the media and the Kennedy administration would no longer be the way of the future. A new era was at hand, one in which blacks like Lewis would continue to work with whites, but now in coalitions they determined, not on the liberal assumption of "We're all in this together."

By the following June there would be a new cutting edge to the civil rights movement. It would not be supplied by the lawyers of the NAACP or the ministers of SCLC but by a generation of young SNCC field secretaries, most of them in their twenties, most of them unknown to the public. For the next two years, until Lewis was replaced by Stokely Carmichael as SNCC chairman, they would lead the civil rights movement through its most productive period. The result would be the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and, most dramatic of all, the Mississippi Summer Project, in which a SNCC-led volunteer army, composed primarily of northern college students, would show that even the most racially feared state in the Deep South could be challenged. □