Civil Rights March on Washington

***All about the March on Washington, August 28, 1963***

by Shmuel Ross

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom took place in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. Attended by some 250,000 people, it was the largest demonstration ever seen in the nation's capital, and one of the first to have extensive television coverage.

**Background**

[1963](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html#events-1963) was noted for racial unrest and civil rights demonstrations. Nationwide outrage was sparked by media coverage of police actions in Birmingham, Alabama, where attack dogs and fire hoses were turned against protestors, many of whom were in their early teens or younger. Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested and jailed during these protests, writing his famous "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," which advocates civil disobedience against unjust laws. Dozens of additional demonstrations took place across the country, from California to New York, culminating in the March on Washington. [President Kennedy](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0760619)backed a Civil Rights Act, which was stalled in Congress by the summer.

**Coalition**

The March on Washington represented a coalition of several civil rights organizations, all of which generally had different approaches and different agendas. The "Big Six" organizers were James Farmer, of the [Congress of Racial Equality](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0813227) (CORE); [Martin Luther King, Jr.](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/mlkbiospot.html), of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); John Lewis, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); [A. Philip Randolph](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0841110), of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Roy Wilkins, of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0834933) (NAACP); and Whitney Young, Jr., of the [National Urban League](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0850177).

The stated demands of the march were the passage of meaningful civil rights legislation; the elimination of racial segregation in public schools; protection for demonstrators against police brutality; a major public-works program to provide jobs; the passage of a law prohibiting racial discrimination in public and private hiring; a $2 an hour [minimum wage](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0833308); and self-government for the [District of Columbia](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0851539), which had a black majority.

**Opposition**

Outright opposition came from two sides. White supremacist groups, including the [Ku Klux Klan](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0828331), were obviously not in favor of any event supporting racial equality. On the other hand, the march was also condemned by some civil rights activists who felt it presented an inaccurate, sanitized pageant of racial harmony; [Malcolm X](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0831348) called it the "Farce on Washington," and members of the[Nation of Islam](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0807794) who attended the march faced a temporary suspension.

**The March on Washington**

Nobody was sure how many people would turn up for the demonstration in Washington, D.C. Some travelling from the South were harrassed and threatened. But on August 28, 1963, an estimated quarter of a million people—about a quarter of whom were white—marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, in what turned out to be both a protest and a communal celebration. The heavy police presence turned out to be unnecessary, as the march was noted for its civility and peacefulness. The march was extensively covered by the media, with live international television coverage.

The event included musical performances by [Marian Anderson](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0906903); [Joan Baez](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0805727); [Bob Dylan](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0816510); [Mahalia Jackson](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0825811); Peter, Paul, and Mary; and Josh White. [Charlton Heston](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0154780)—representing a contingent of artists, including Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, Diahann Carroll, Ossie Davis, Sammy Davis Jr., Lena Horne, Paul Newman, and Sidney Poitier—read a speech by [James Baldwin](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0805876).

The speakers included all of the "Big Six" civil-rights leaders (James Farmer, who was imprisoned in Louisiana at the time, had his speech read by [Floyd McKissick](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0878492)); Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious leaders; and labor leader [Walter Reuther](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0841634). The one female speaker was [Josephine Baker](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0805811), who introduced several "Negro Women Fighters for Freedom," including [Rosa Parks](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0837678).

**Noteworthy Speeches**

The two most noteworthy speeches came from John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lewis represented the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a younger, more radical group than King's. The speech he planned to give, circulated beforehand, was objected to by other participants; it called Kennedy's civil rights bill "too little, too late," asked "which side is the federal government on?" and declared that they would march "through the Heart of Dixie, the way [Sherman](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0844876)did" and "burn [Jim Crow](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0826301) to the ground—nonviolently." In the end, he agreed to tone down the more inflammatory portions of his speech, but even the revised version was the most controversial of the day.

[King's speech](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0874987) remains one of the most famous speeches in American history. He started with prepared remarks, saying he was there to "cash a check" for "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," while warning fellow protesters not to "allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence.