

The March on Washington

By Jane Runyon

The groundwork for the 1963 march on Washington, D.C. was laid much earlier. As a matter of fact, the first plans for such a march were made in 1941. A man named A. Philip Randolph was the president of a union for railroad porters. At one time, railroads were the major transportation systems in the United States. Porters were the people who handled luggage, checked tickets, and took care of the needs of passengers on these trains. Mr. Randolph worried about job security for these porters during and after World War II. He decided to put some pressure on President Franklin D. Roosevelt by calling for a march of workers on the capital of the nation. President Roosevelt signed an order protecting the jobs of black workers before the march could take place.

In 1962, it was becoming obvious to black leaders that their fight for equal rights was not moving at the pace they wanted to see. Sit-ins, demonstrations, and speeches were bringing attention to their cause. Some states were still not changing. Black leaders wanted their rights as citizens to be equalized. They felt that this would bring economic relief to many of the poor. A. Philip Randolph again suggested a march. In this way the **plight** of the people would be brought to the attention of the nation.

The idea was to have a three-day event. A massive group of people would be brought to Washington to lobby and rally for the cause. They would form a **coalition** from the many different groups who were interested in the rights of Americans. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He and leaders of the Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) decided to join together in an attempt to persuade Congress and the President to pass a strong civil rights bill.

Unemployment among black citizens was twice as high as it was among white workers. Those blacks who could find jobs were paid a minimum wage. The combined groups wanted a law raising the minimum wage to a higher rate. Supporters believed that the economic problems and civil rights problems were all tied together. A solution for these problems would help heal social and economic problems of the entire nation.

The march was set for August 28, 1963. Organizers expected 175,000 people to converge on Washington, D.C. A program was planned for the crowd. Actors, musicians, and entertainers were given parts in the program. Whites and blacks would be presented together. Speakers from government, the church, labor, and education were prepared to plead their cause.

President John F. Kennedy was a backer of the civil rights cause. He did, however, try to persuade leaders of the march to call it off. He was afraid that if the march somehow turned violent, public opinion would be turned against the movement. The leaders would not be dissuaded.

Security in the Washington area was strengthened as it had never been before. Public events such as baseball games were postponed over a three-day period. Thousands of military and police personnel were called to duty.

People walked, rode buses, and drove their own cars to reach Washington. Even the leaders who planned the march were astounded. A stage was set up at the Washington Monument. From this stage came the strains of "We Shall Overcome" and "Blowin' in the Wind." Estimates range from 200,000 to 500,000 people who attended the rally at the Lincoln Memorial. They carried signs. They sang. They chanted. They listened. The people listened to Charlton Heston, Josephine Baker, and Marion Anderson. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP begged President Kennedy to make sure the civil rights bill before Congress was not weakened by politicians. Finally, they listened to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He gave a speech that is remembered and recited today. His "I Have Dream" words reached into the hearts of all Americans. He dreamed of a day when all children, no matter what their color, would play together.



Name _____



Date _____

The march started quietly. The march ended quietly. The people came and gave their message in peace. The people left their message in peace.

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Questions

_____ 1. The "March on Washington" was held in August of 1941.

- A. False
- B. True

2. Why do you think Mr. Randolph thought a march would put pressure upon the president?

_____ 3. Using clues from the story, what is a coalition?

- A. A combined group
- B. A distinct group
- C. A small group
- D. A team

_____ 4. How many people showed up for the march?

- A. No one
- B. About what was expected
- C. A lot less than expected
- D. A lot more than expected

5. Why do you think security was strengthened during the time of the march?

_____ 6. Who gave the "I Have a Dream" speech?

- A. Marion Anderson
- B. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- C. President Kennedy
- D. Charlton Heston

_____ 7. What problems were the marchers trying to solve?

- A. Parking and eating
- B. Civil rights and economics
- C. Speaking and singing
- D. Voting and campaigning

