



## I Remember the March on Washington by John Reimann

My parents took me to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

I was 17 at the time, and the memories will be with me for my lifetime. It was part of what made me what I am today.

### Memories

I remember the drive from New York City - the road full of cars and busses. When we stopped at a restaurant to relieve ourselves, the bathrooms were so full that the men headed for the hills so as not to have to wait 15 minutes to get to a urinal. But everybody was so friendly. Strangers nodded and smiled at each other; we all knew we were on the same mission.



I remember sitting in the heat, part of an enormous crowd. Older people sitting there fanning themselves with a piece of paper, everybody a little drained from the heat. Then a group of black youth came marching through, singing and clapping. They were the real backbone of the movement - the SNCC

organizers who were putting their bodies on the line every day in the small communities like Albany, Georgia and Meridian, Mississippi. As they passed by, they energized everybody around them.

I remember Martin Luther King's speech. It was a great piece of oratory, and has been justifiably noted in history. But to this 17 year old, the speech that really struck me was that of John Lewis, a central figure in SNCC at the time. Today, more than ever, that speech really deserves its place in history. It is reprinted below.

### John Lewis

Unfortunately, John Lewis got sucked up in the exact politics

he so bitterly denounced. Today he is a mere shadow of his former self. What few knew at that time - I certainly didn't, of course - was that a struggle had been waged before the march to get Lewis to tone down his speech. As the reprint below shows, he did tone down a few things, but still, the message shone through.

A few other points that have been erased in the official history:

### A. Phillip Randolph

The original "March on Washington" was actually the brain child of A. Phillip Randolph, way back in 1941. The idea of a march on Washington while the country was at war was extremely controversial. Randolph started to organize it to protest the official and rampant

discrimination in the war industry - black workers could only get such jobs as janitor. FDR at the last minute made some compromises that led to Randolph calling off his plans, but Roosevelt only did it under the pressure of Randolph.

### Kennedy & Roosevelt

Today, John F. Kennedy is remembered as being a great friend of the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis's speech

depicts the reality. The fact is that Kennedy saw the revolution in Africa, saw the attraction that the Soviet Union held for the newly independent African nations, and realized that images of black people being beaten in the streets of the United States, being shot with fire hoses and having dogs sicced on them - that this would not do. Therefore, he made a few steps mainly aimed at getting those images erased.

### Mass Media at that time

Today, the liberal and not-so-liberal media remember the March with pretty words. It was not so at the time - something they choose to forget. "One small disturbance could set off a wave of mob violence," claimed *Business Week*. *Meet the Press*'s Lawrence Spivak told Wilkins and Dr. King on air that many believed "it would be impossible to bring more than 100,000 militant Negroes into Washington without incidents and possibly rioting." (<http://thegrio.com/2013/08/16/march-on-washington-was-far-from-popular-in-1963/>)

### Malcolm X

A day or two after the march, Malcolm X - another great leader who the liberals have made into a safe icon today - denounced the March on Washington as "the farce on Washington." The Nation of Islam forbade their members from participating. Malcolm X was right, in a way, but he was also wrong. In his later years, he changed. That ability to learn and change is rare in a leader and was one of the qualities that made him great.

Here is John Lewis's speech as it was originally planned and showing what was taken out.

### **The March on Washington Original Draft of SNCC Chairman John Lewis' Speech to the March**



*John Lewis speaking at March on Washington*

[Note — Below is the text of the speech that John Lewis and SNCC activists originally wrote (taken from [Walking With the Wind](#)).]

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, 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.

In good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little and too late. There's not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality.

This bill will not protect young children and old women from police dogs and fire hoses, for engaging in peaceful demonstrations: This bill will not protect the citizens in Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear in a police state. This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped up charges. What about the three young men in Americus, Georgia, who face the death penalty for engaging in peaceful protest?

The voting section of this bill will not help thousands of black citizens who want to vote. It will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama and Georgia, who are qualified to vote but lack a sixth-grade education. "ONE MAN, ONE VOTE" is the African cry. It is ours, too. It must be ours.

People have been forced to leave their homes because they dared to exercise their right to register to vote. What is there in this bill to ensure the equality of a maid who earns \$5 a week in the home of a family whose income is \$100,000 a year?

For the first time in one hundred years this nation is being awakened to the fact that segregation is evil and that it must be destroyed in all forms. Your presence today proves that you have been aroused to the point of action.

We are now involved in a serious revolution. 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?" The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of Javits is also the party of Goldwater. Where is *our* party?

In some parts of the South we work in the fields from sunup to sundown for \$12 a week. In Albany, Georgia, nine of our leaders have been indicted not by Dixiecrats but by the federal government for peaceful protest. But what did the federal government do when Albany's deputy sheriff beat attorney C. B. King and left him half dead? What did the federal government do when local police officials kicked and assaulted the pregnant wife of Slater King, and she lost her baby?

It seems to me that the Albany indictment is part of a conspiracy on the part of the federal government and local politicians in the interest of expediency.

I want to know, which side is the federal government on?

The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery. The nonviolent revolution is saying, "We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure, that could and would assure us a victory."

To those who have said, "Be patient and wait," we must say that "patience" is a dirty and nasty word. We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually. We want our freedom, and we want it *now*. We cannot depend on any political party, for both the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence.

We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about. In the struggle, we must seek more than civil rights; we must work for the community of love, peace and true brotherhood. Our minds, souls and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for *all people*.

The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it into 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.

All of us must get in the revolution. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete. In the Delta of Mississippi, in southwest Georgia, in Alabama, Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march!

We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Bama, Wallace and Thurmond won't stop this revolution. The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. 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 — nonviolently. 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. And I say to you, WAKE UP AMERICA!

*[The Kennedy administration and some of the more conservative speakers objected to some of John's language. To maintain solidarity and as a gesture of respect for A. Philip Randolph, John agreed to modify some elements of the speech — Cut were the words that criticized the President's bill as being "too little and too late." Lost was the call to march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did." Gone was the question asking, "which side is the federal government on?" The word "cheap" was removed to describe some political leaders. The ending of John's speech as it was actually delivered is shown below:]*

We will not stop. If we do not get meaningful legislation out of this Congress, the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today.

By the force of our demands, our determination and our numbers, we shall splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of God and democracy.

We must say, "Wake up, America. *Wake up!!!* For we cannot stop, and we *will* not be patient."

***Today, the John Lewis of 50 years ago cries out to us to take up that banner once again.***