

EXCERPTS FROM KING’S SPEECH

“We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we’ve come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

“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. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.”

“We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of

meeting physical force with soul force.”

“We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.”



A ‘DREAM’ MARCH

King’s vision resonated at historic 1963 rally in Washington

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“I have a dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

Those now-iconic words spoken by Martin Luther King Jr. rang out to the quarter of a million people rallying during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Aug. 28, 1963. People of many ethnicities traveled from every corner of the country to the nation’s capital that day, creating a sea of faces on the National Mall and marking the largest demonstration ever assembled in the United States at the time. Their demands? An end to segregation, fair wages, economic justice, voting rights, education and long overdue civil rights protections. Sixty years later, the event is mostly remembered for King’s speech – one of the most famous and impactful oratories in American history – that called out the nation’s failure to act to protect human and civil rights.

The event quickly set the stage for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which President John F. Kennedy had proposed in June, 1963. It also spurred legislators to approve the Fair Employment Practices clause, which prohibited employers, unions and government officials from discriminating against workers on the basis of race, religion, national origin or sex. The demonstration marked a pinnacle in the civil rights movement, but the petitions for economic justice were just as vital to the cause, according to Williams Jones, a historian of 20th-century America and professor at the University of Minnesota. “March leaders insisted that such racially egalitarian measures would be ineffective unless coupled with a minimum wage increase (and) extension of federal labor protections to workers,” he wrote in an analysis of the event. The success of the March was anything but a historical guarantee. Clarence Jones, King’s longtime attorney and adviser, had a long list of worries as people started to fill up the National Mall. That included the presence of agitators from the Ku Klux Klan and Black nationalists opposed to King’s message. But the biggest question: Would enough people show up? “I had this feeling that we were going to throw a big party and nobody comes,” Jones recalled in a 2013 interview. The massive crowd that eventually arrived sent a clear and powerful message to the nation’s law-makers that their demands would not be ignored. Now, 60 years later, the dream described by King still hasn’t been fulfilled. In January, President Joe Biden commemorated the civil-rights activist and Baptist minister by calling on every American to carry the torch that was lit during the March on Washington. “It’s a dream in which we all deserve liberty and justice,” Biden said. “And it is still the task of our time to make that dream a reality, because it’s not there yet.”



Top: Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, addresses marchers during his “I Have a Dream,” speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on Aug. 28, 1963. Above: People carry civil rights signs as they gather before the speech.

THE SPEECHES



John Lewis: The youngest speaker, at 23, at the March on Washington was Lewis, national chairman of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. He began his speech with a demand for fair wages and equal access to job opportunities. He demanded the federal civil rights bill include a provision that would protect the right to vote and the right to protest peacefully.



Roy Wilkins: Executive secretary of the NAACP, Wilkins was one of the last to speak at the March on Washington. He demanded equal access to jobs, an end to Jim Crow and segregated schools, and equal access to public space. He urged President Lyndon B. Johnson to be outspoken on civil rights and Congress to stop using the filibuster as an obstacle to the Civil Rights Act.



Whitney M. Young: The executive director of the National Urban League implored attendees to take the message of the march beyond its historic foothold. He drew attention to the continued perseverance of the Black community and rebuked “those who would make deals, water down civil rights legislation, or take cowardly refuge in technical details around elementary human rights.”

Source: NAACP Legal Defense Fund

THE 10 DEMANDS

Organizers of the March on Washington listed 10 demands in the event’s program distributed during the rally. Bayard Rustin, the deputy director of the march, presented those demands from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

1. Comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation from Congress, without compromise or filibuster, to guarantee all Americans have access to all public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, and the right to vote.
2. Withholding federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.
3. Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.
4. Enforcement of the 14th Amendment by reducing congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.
5. A new executive order banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.
6. Authority for the U.S. attorney general to institute injunctive suits when any constitutional right is violated.
7. A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers — Negro and white — on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.
8. A national minimum wage act that would give all Americans a decent standard of living. (Government surveys at the time showed that anything less than \$2 an hour would fail to do this.)
9. A broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include all areas of employment presently excluded.
10. A federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination by federal, state and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies and trade unions.

THE MUSIC

Marian Anderson performed “He’s Got the Whole World In His Hands” after King’s speech. By 1963, Anderson was a widely acclaimed opera singer and had made her mark on civil rights history. Twenty-four years earlier, Anderson had performed on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for a crowd of 75,000 after she was barred from singing at a segregated venue in Washington, D.C.

Joan Baez led the crowd in “We Shall Overcome.” Written by Pete Seeger and Guy Carawan, the song became permanently tied to Baez, who was already a folk icon and active in the civil rights movement. Decades later, “We Shall Overcome” is still a staple in her repertoire.

The Freedom Singers, Len Chandler, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan performed “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” a classic folk song of the civil rights movement. Like much of folk music, the song’s lyrics have been adapted and traded by different artists and performers throughout history. It remains one of the most iconic and defining songs of the era.

Source: NAACP Legal Defense Fund



Marian Anderson



Joan Baez



Bob Dylan