

*From: Voices in Our Blood:
America's Best on the Civil Rights
movement edited by Jan Meacham*

"I Have a Dream . . ."

The New York Times, August 29, 1963

JAMES RESTON

Abraham Lincoln, who presided in his stone temple today above the children of the slaves he emancipated, may have used just the right words to sum up the general reaction to the Negro's massive march on Washington. "I think," he wrote to Gov. Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania in 1861, "the necessity of being ready increases. Look to it." Washington may not have changed a vote today, but it is a little more conscious tonight of the necessity of being ready for freedom. It may not "look to it" at once, since it is looking to so many things, but it will be a long time before it forgets the melodious and melancholy voice of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. crying out his dreams to the multitude.

It was Dr. King who, near the end of the day, touched the vast audience. Until then the pilgrimage was merely a great spectacle. Only those marchers from the embattled towns in the Old Confederacy had anything like the old crusading zeal. For many the day seemed an adventure, a long outing in the late summer sun—part liberation from home, part Sunday School picnic, part political convention, and part fish-fry.

But Dr. King brought them alive in the late afternoon with a peroration that was an anguished echo from all the old American reformers. Roger Williams calling for religious liberty, Sam Adams calling for political liberty, old man Thoreau denouncing coercion, William Lloyd Garrison demanding emancipation, and Eugene V. Debs crying for economic equality—Dr. King echoed them all.

"I have a dream," he cried again and again. And 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 a vision that they might one day all come true.

Find Journey Worthwhile

Dr. King touched all the themes of the day, only better than anybody else. He was full of the symbolism of Lincoln and Gandhi, and the cadences of the Bible.

He was both militant and sad, and he sent the crowd away feeling that the long journey had been worthwhile.

This demonstration impressed political Washington because it combined a number of things no politician can ignore. It had the force of numbers. It had the melodies of both the church and the theater. And it was able to invoke the principles of the founding fathers to rebuke the inequalities and hypocrisies of modern American life.

There was a paradox in the day's performance. The Negro leaders demanded equality "now," while insisting that this was only the "beginning" of the struggle. Yet it was clear that the "now," which appeared on almost every placard on Constitution Avenue, was merely an opening demand, while the exhortation to increase the struggle was what was really on the leaders' minds.

The question of the day, of course, was raised by Dr. King's theme: Was this all a dream or will it help the dream come true?

No doubt this vast effort helped the Negro drive against discrimination. It was better covered by television and the press than any event here since President Kennedy's inauguration, and since indifference is almost as great a problem to the Negro as hostility, this was a plus.

None of the dreadful things Washington feared came about. The racial hooligans were scarce. Even the local Nazi, George Lincoln Rockwell, minded his manners, which is an extraordinary innovation for him. And there were fewer arrests than any normal day for Washington, probably because all the saloons and hootch peddlers were closed.

Politicians Are Impressed

The crowd obviously impressed the politicians. The presence of nearly a quarter of a million petitioners anywhere always makes a Senator think. He seldom ignores that many potential votes, and it did not escape the notice of Congressmen that these Negro organizations, some of which had almost as much trouble getting out a crowd as the Washington Senators several years ago, were now capable of organizing the largest demonstrating throng ever gathered at one spot in the District of Columbia.

It is a question whether this rally raised too many hopes among the Negroes or inspired the Negroes here to work harder for equality when they got back home. Most observers here think the latter is true, even though all the talk of "Freedom NOW" and instant integration is bound to lead to some disappointment.

The meetings between the Negro leaders on the one hand and President Kennedy and the Congressional leaders on the other also went well and probably helped the Negro cause. The Negro leaders were careful not to seem to be putting improper pressure on Congress. They made no specific requests or

threats, but they argued their case in small groups and kept the crowd off Capitol Hill.

Whether this will win any new votes for the civil rights and economic legislation will probably depend on the over-all effect of the day's events on the television audience.

The Major Imponderable

This is the major imponderable of the day. The speeches were varied and spotty. Like their white political brethren, the Negroes cannot run a political meeting without letting everybody talk. Also, the platform was a bedlam of moving figures who seemed to be interested in everything except listening to the speaker. This distracted the audience.

Nevertheless, Dr. King and Roy Wilkins, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and one or two others got the message across. James Baldwin, the author, summed up the day succinctly. The day was important in itself, he said, and "what we do with this day is even more important."

He was convinced that the country was finally grappling with the Negro problem instead of evading it; that the Negro himself was "for the first time" aware of his value as a human being and was "no longer at the mercy of what the white people imagine the Negro to be."

Merely the Beginning

On the whole, the speeches were not calculated to make Republican politicians very happy with the Negro. This may hurt, for without substantial Republican support, the Kennedy program on civil rights and jobs is not going through.

Apparently this point impressed President Kennedy, who listened to some of the speeches on television. When the Negro leaders came out of the White House, Dr. King emphasized that bipartisan support was essential for passage of the Kennedy civil rights program.

Aside from this, the advantages of the day for the Negro cause outran the disadvantages.

Above all, they got over Lincoln's point that "the necessity of being ready increases." For they left no doubt that this was not the climax of their campaign for equality but merely the beginning, that they were going to stay in the streets until they could get equality in the schools, restaurants, houses and employment agencies of the nation, and that, as they demonstrated here today, they had found an effective way to demonstrate for changes in the laws without breaking the law themselves.

Capital Is Occupied by a Gentle Army

The New York Times, August 29, 1963

RUSSELL BAKER

No one could remember an invading army quite as gentle as the 200,000 civil rights marchers who occupied Washington today.

For the most part, they came silently during the night and early morning, occupied the great shaded boulevards along the Mall, and spread through the parklands between the Washington Monument and the Potomac.

But instead of the emotional horde of angry militants that many had feared, what Washington saw was a vast army of quiet, middle-class Americans who had come in the spirit of the church outing.

And instead of the tensions that had been expected, they gave this city a day of sad music, strange silences and good feeling in the streets.

It was apparent from early morning that this would be an extraordinary day. At 8 A.M. when rush-hour traffic is normally creeping bumper-to-bumper across the Virginia bridges and down the main boulevards from Maryland, the streets had the abandoned look of Sunday morning.

From a helicopter over the city, it was possible to see caravans of chartered buses streaming down New York Avenue from Baltimore and points North, but the downtown streets were empty. Nothing moved in front of the White House, nor on Pennsylvania Avenue.

A Day of Siege

For the natives, this was obviously a day of siege and the streets were being left to the marchers.

By 9:30, the number of marchers at the assembly point by the Washington Monument had reached about 40,000, but it was a crowd without fire. Mostly, people who had traveled together sat on the grass or posed for group portraits against the monument, like tourists on a rare visit to the capital.

Here and there, little groups stood in the sunlight and sang. A group of 75 young people from Danville, Va., came dressed in white sweatshirts with crudely cut black mourning bands on their sleeves.

"We're mourning injustice in Danville," explained James Bruce, a 15-year-

old who said he has been arrested three times for participating in demonstrations there.

Standing together, the group sang of the freedom fight in a sad melody with words that went, "Move on, move on, move on with the freedom fight; move on, move on, we're fighting for equal rights."

Other hymns came from groups scattered over the grounds, but there was no cohesion in the crowd.

Instead, a fair grounds atmosphere prevailed. Marchers kept straggling off to ride the elevators to the top of the monument. Women sat on the grass and concentrated on feeding babies.

Among the younger members of the crowd, beards were in high vogue, "It's just that we're so busy saving the world that we don't have time to shave," Kyle Valkar, 19-year-old Washingtonian, explained.

Up on the slope near the monument's base, Peter Ottley, president of the Building Services International Union, Local 144, in New York City, was ignoring the loudspeaker and holding a press conference before about 100 of his delegates.

He thought the march would "convince the legislators that something must be done, because it is the will of the people to give equality to all."

In the background, the amplifier was presenting Joan Baez, the folk singer.

One Note of Bitterness

In one section of the ground, a group from Americus and Albany, Ga., was gathered under its own placards singing its own hymn. The placards conveyed an uncharacteristic note of bitterness.

"What is a state without justice but a robber band enlarged?" asked one. Another bore the following inscription: "Milton Wilkerson—20 stitches. Emanuel McClendon—3 stitches (Age 67). James Williams—broken leg."

Charles Macken, 15, of Albany, explained the placard in a deep Georgia accent.

"That's where the police beat these people up," he said.

Over the loudspeaker, Roosevelt Johnson was urged to come claim his lost son, Lawrence.

From the monument grounds the loudspeaker boomed an announcement that the police had estimated that 90,000 marchers were already on the scene.

At 10:56 the loudspeaker announced desperately that "we are trying to locate Miss Lena Horne," and a group from Cambridge, Md., was kneeling while the Rev. Charles M. Bowen of Bethel A.M.E. Church prayed:

"We know truly that we will—we shall—overcome—some day," he was saying.

The Cambridge group rose and began a gospel hymn and clapped and swayed. The loudspeaker was saying, "Lena—wherever you are—."

Many were simply picnicking. They had brought picnic baskets and thermos jugs and camp stools, and lunched leisurely in the soft August sunshine. Some stretched out to doze on the grass.

Singer Introduced

At 11:10 Bobby Darin, the teen-age pop singer, was being introduced over the amplifier. He was, he announced, "Here as a singer, and I'm proud and kind of choked up."

The marchers by this time, however, had had enough of the Monument grounds. Spontaneously, without advice from the platform, they began to flow away, moving toward the Lincoln Memorial, where the official program was to begin at noon.

Thousands simply began to move out into Constitution Avenue, and in a few minutes it was tens of thousands. They trooped leisurely out into the boulevard and moved happily along in a strange mood of quiet contentment.

By 11:55, much of the crowd had regrouped at the Lincoln Memorial, where the speaker's platform was set on the top step under the Lincoln statue.

This made an impressive stage for the star performers, but it was a bad theater for most of the audience, which was dispersed down the sides of the reflecting pool for a third of a mile.

Still the crowd remained in good temper, and many who could not find comfortable space in the open with a clear view up to the Memorial steps filtered back under the trees and sat down on their placards.

On the platform, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, surveyed the sea of people and said, "I'm very satisfied. It looks like a Yankee game."

Photographers Busy

Inside, under the Lincoln statue, the photographers were deployed five deep around Burt Lancaster, Harry Belafonte and Charlton Heston. On metal chairs in the guest sections, Marlon Brando and Paul Newman were submitting to microphone interviewers.

As the crowd on the steps thickened and gradually became an impassable mass, the extraordinary politeness that characterized the day was dramatized every time an elbow was crooked.

People excused themselves for momentarily obstructing a view, excused themselves for dropping cigarette ashes on shoeshines.

When the marshals called for a clear path, hundreds hastened to fall aside with a goodwill rarely seen in the typical urban crowd. The sweetness and patience of the crowd may have set some sort of national high-water mark in mass decency.

The program at the Memorial began with more music. Peter, Paul and Mary, a folk-singing trio were there "to express in song what this meeting is all about," as Ossie Davis, the master of ceremonies, put it.

Then there was Josh White, in a gray short-sleeved sports shirt, singing "ain't nobody gonna stop me, nobody gonna keep me, from marchin' down freedom's road."

And the Freedom Singers from Mississippi, a hand-clapping group of hot gospel shouters whom Mr. Davis introduced as "straight from one of the prisons of the South."

"They've been in so many, I forget which one it is," he added.

At 1:19 P.M. there was the Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, president of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and a leader of the Birmingham demonstrations.

A 1:28 P.M. Miss Baez was singing "Little baby don't you cry, you know your mama won't die, all your trials will soon be over."

As she sang, Mayor Wagner of New York made his appearance, walking down the Memorial steps.

Bunche Speaks

Miss Baez was followed by Dr. Ralph Bunche.

"Anyone who cannot understand the significance of your presence here today," he said, "is blind and deaf." The crowd roared approval.

Then came Dick Gregory, the comedian.

"The last time I saw this many of us," he said, "Bull Connor was doing all the talking." The reference was to Eugene (Bull) Connor, who was police commissioner of Birmingham during the spring demonstrations there.

To many of the marchers, the program must have begun to seem like eternity, and the great crowd slowly began dissolving from the edges. Mr. Lancaster read a lengthy statement from 1,500 Americans in Europe. They were in favor of the march. Mr. Belafonte read a statement endorsed by a large group of actors, writers and entertainers. They also favored the march.

Bob Dylan, a young folk singer, rendered a lugubrious mountain song about "The day Medgar Evers was buried from a bullet that he caught." Mr. Lancaster, Mr. Belafonte and Mr. Heston found time dragging, stood up to stretch and chat, and set off pandemonium among the photographers. Mr. Brando submitted to another microphone interviewer.

Speaking Begins

At 1:59 the official speaking began. For those who listened it was full of noble statement about democracy and religious sincerity, but the crowd was dissolving fast now.

These missed two of the emotional high points of the day. One was Mahalia Jackson's singing, which seemed to bounce off the Capitol far up the mall. The other was the speech of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Long before that, however, huge portions of the crowd had drifted out of earshot. Thousands had moved back into Constitution Avenue to walk dreamily in the sun. The grass for blocks around was covered with sleepers. Here and there a man sat under a tree and sang to a guitar.

Mostly though, the "marchers" just strolled in the sunshine. Most looked contented and tired and rather pleased with what they had done.