



What was the March on Washington?

The events in Birmingham in the spring of 1963 made race a national issue. Martin Luther King wanted to extend the protest on a massive scale by holding a march on Washington on 28 August 1963. The original aim of the march was to draw attention to black employment issues. A new aim was to put pressure on Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill.

King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph worked together with other organisations. These included the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, the Conference of Racial Equality, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Urban League.

The march had critics on the radical side of the civil rights movement. Malcolm X called it the 'Farce on Washington.' Stokely Carmichael of SNCC said it was "only a sanitized, middle-class version of the real black movement." The Black Muslims and other separatist groups were not asked to take part in the march.

President Kennedy was not keen on the demonstration going ahead. The authorities feared an outbreak of violence. Washington police units had all their leave cancelled and other forces were given training in riot control. There were 4000 army troops and 15,000 paratroopers on standby. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, tried to wreck plans for the march. He ran an undercover campaign to try to ruin King's reputation.

As it turned out, the march was a success and the largest political demonstration in the United States. Press coverage of the event was massive. It was broadcast live around the world using a newly launched satellite.

The demonstrators gathered at the Washington Monument for performances from well-known singers such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Celebrities showed their support, for example Charlton Heston, Marlon Brando and Sidney Poitier. This was followed by a rally at the Lincoln Memorial, with speakers from the civil rights organisations. There was a tribute to women such as civil rights protester Rosa Parks. Finally, Martin Luther King delivered one of the most famous speeches in history, summing up his message with "I have a dream".



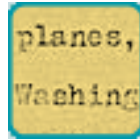
HEROES & VILLAINS

King & civil rights > March on Washington

Examine these sources to find out more:



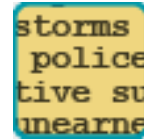
Leaflet asking people to march on Washington



British report on the March on Washington, 1963



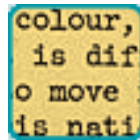
Photo of King at the rally, 29 August 1963



King's speech: "I have a dream"



Other speeches made at the rally



JF Kennedy's statement on civil rights, August 1963