



After gathering at the Washington Monument, 250,000 attendees of different races and religions marched together to the Lincoln Memorial to listen to speeches by civil rights leaders.



Officially known as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the demonstration captured the nation’s attention. And its message has been preserved through the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which he gave that afternoon.

Its meaning, however, was much broader than the vision of King’s dream of freedom. The primary organizers of the march—labor leader A. Philip Randolph and civil rights and peace activist Bayard Rustin—had brought together the six largest civil rights groups in support of the march. But Randolph and Rustin believed that civil rights and economic rights went hand in hand. “Freedom presupposes a decent standard of living,” Rustin later explained.

So while the marchers called for federal laws against discrimination, they also demanded the right to employment. They called on the government to create a “massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers . . . on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.” They demanded a national minimum wage that guaranteed all Americans a “decent standard of living.” The importance of economic issues for the march organizers is revealed in the event’s official title.

Randolph was the director of the march, but Rustin oversaw the day-to-day organizing effort. Rustin’s attention to both big message issues and small behind-the-scenes details made the march a success. His careful planning covered everything from the order of the program to how to safely and efficiently get people into and out of the city.

At the end of that day in August 1963, Rustin stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and led those assembled in reciting a pledge: “I affirm my complete personal commitment for the struggle for jobs and freedom. I pledge that I will not relax until victory is won.”

The march itself “did not ‘settle anything,’” Rustin admitted weeks later. But “I think we planted a seed deep in the American conscience whose fruit may someday astonish us.” Many of those present that day continued to struggle on behalf of civil rights and economic equality.

And the event’s success can be measured in other ways. It brought together the major civil rights organizations, who did not always share the same vision. It ended in a meeting between the march leaders and President John F. Kennedy, and ultimately led to the passage of major civil rights legislation in 1964. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was a high-water mark of the civil rights movement, showing that nonviolent, peaceful protest can deliver a strong message. 卐