

A. Philip Randolph at the National Press Club, August 26, 1963



Asa Philip Randolph during a press interview. World Telegram & Sun photo by Ed Ford, 1964. Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-119496. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division

Civil rights leader and labor activist A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979) addressed a luncheon gathering at the National Press Club two days before the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, for which he served as national director. The march, identified by Randolph's deputy director, Bayard Rustin, as "a watershed event of the civil rights movement," brought more than 250,000 participants to Washington's Mall—the largest demonstration in the nation's capital up to that time—to demonstrate popular support for civil rights legislation pending in Congress and for broad economic goals, including full employment, to be achieved through governmental action. Throughout his career, Randolph believed that moral objectives of equality and justice could be secured only through fundamental changes in the economic structure of American society. He insisted that civil rights legislation by itself would not solve deeply rooted inequities in American life and that African Americans would never lose their status as second-class citizens until opportunities for economic and educational advancement were guaranteed to all on an equal basis. In pursuance of that perspective, he successfully challenged U.S. presidents and persuaded them to support his agenda.

The son of an African Methodist Episcopal preacher in a small community in Florida, Randolph migrated to Harlem at age 22 after finding that the employment opportunities available to him in the South were limited to manual labor jobs due to racial discrimination embedded in the region's legal system and social fabric. In New York, Randolph similarly found that, in his words, "the jobs Negroes could get weren't worth spending much time on." At City College of New York, he immersed himself in the radical thought for which the school was noted and also became involved in Harlem politics and the labor movement. Randolph and a colleague founded the socialist journal *The Messenger* in November 1917. As editor, he provided its predominately black audience with an alternative vision to the then dominant orientations of Booker T. Washington, who stressed black economic progress through self-help while accommodating to segregation practices; W. E. B. Du Bois, who believed that a Negro elite should pursue civil rights legislation for the benefit of all; and Marcus Garvey, leader of the populist, black nationalist Back to Africa movement. *The Messenger* advocated labor unionism, socialism, and working-class solidarity, protested World War I, blamed racial prejudice on capitalism, and issued a call for revolution—"a complete change in the organization of society"—in response to the increase of violence against blacks spreading in the postwar period.

Convinced that "the fight for the Negro masses" would be "the greatest service I can render to my people," Randolph abandoned radicalism in the 1920s for more pragmatic endeavors. In 1925, he helped organize the first black labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), after porters working for the Pullman Company requested that he lead their efforts to press for better pay and working conditions. Aided by the American Federation of Labor, the union succeeded in 1937 after a long struggle to pressure the powerful Pullman Company to agree on a contract, the first ever between a major corporation and a black union. Historians have placed the BSCP in the vanguard of the early grassroots civil rights movement, as its members routinely functioned as couriers to distribute political literature in their travels and to spark organization drives. E. D. Nixon, a BSCP member since the 1920s and local activist in Montgomery, Alabama, devised the idea to organize the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 after Rosa Parks, Nixon's colleague in the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. Nixon also entreated a young local pastor, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to endorse the boycott. King emerged as a prominent civil rights leader after he was chosen to lead the group formed to organize the boycott. Nixon often credited his own initial involvement in the civil rights movement to Randolph. "When I heard Randolph speak, it was like a light," he later remembered. "He done more to bring me in the fight for civil rights than anybody. Before that time, I figure that a Negro would be kicked around and accept whatever the white man did. I never knew the Negro had a right to enjoy freedom like everyone else."

Standing Up to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman

Randolph first spoke of organizing a march on Washington in December 1940 as the U.S. economy improved and the Great Depression ended due to a rise in defense-

related production in preparation for a possible war. Aware that blacks were systematically excluded from defense industry jobs, Randolph issued a call for “a pilgrimage of 10,000 Negroes” to “wake up and shock official Washington as it has never been shocked before.” Fearing violence and not wanting to antagonize southern congressmen, President Franklin D. Roosevelt invited Randolph and NAACP head Walter White to a meeting at the White House in June 1941 to get them to call off the march. Both leaders told the president they expected more than 100,000 blacks to come to the city. Roosevelt offered to pressure defense contractors to hire black workers and to set up a grievance board to investigate charges of discrimination. Randolph insisted, however, that Roosevelt issue an executive order prohibiting defense industry discrimination. The president complied, and Randolph’s victorious encounter with Roosevelt—recounted in the Press Club talk—resulted in the creation of a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) that lasted during the war.

Units in the armed forces still were segregated according to race, however. In 1948, Randolph called for a new march on Washington complete with civil disobedience—a tactic modeled on the successful struggle for independence in India of Mohandas Gandhi’s movement—after President Harry S. Truman announced plans for a bill authorizing a Universal Military Training (UMT) program with no stipulation that segregation in the military would end. Randolph perceived that because the better military jobs and training opportunities went to whites, a segregated army resulted in diminished opportunities for blacks.

Like Roosevelt before him, Truman met with Randolph to try to dissuade him. Randolph angered the president when he stated, “Negroes are in no mood to shoulder a gun for democracy abroad so long as they are denied democracy here at home.” Nine days later, Randolph also upset members of the Senate armed services committee holding UMT hearings when he testified that unless segregation and discrimination in the military were abolished, he would organize a “Gandhi-like” campaign by “millions of Negroes.” He told the committee “passage now of a Jim Crow draft may only result in a mass civil disobedience movement along the lines of the magnificent struggles of the people of India against British imperialism.” He vowed to “call upon all Negro veterans to join this civil disobedience movement and to recruit their younger brothers in an organized refusal to register and be drafted” and threatened to “appeal to the thousands of white youth in schools and colleges who are today vigorously shedding the prejudices of their parents and professors.”

After the UMT bill was signed into law in June 1948 without provisions to prohibit segregation, Randolph co-founded the League for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation to carry out his threats. Complementing Randolph’s efforts, delegates to the Democratic National Convention led by Minneapolis mayor Hubert H. Humphrey passed a plank in the party’s platform calling for desegregation of the armed forces in opposition to Truman’s wishes. Facing a tough reelection campaign with a splintering party, Truman capitulated and signed two executive orders to establish fair employment practices within the federal government and to end segregation in the military. Randolph called off the campaign.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

As with his two predecessors who clashed with Randolph, President John F. Kennedy initially opposed Randolph's plans for a march on Washington. Randolph and Bayard Rustin had formulated plans for the march in December 1962 to press for a public works program to combat unemployment. Rustin initially envisioned a two-day protest, including "a mass descent on Congress" of labor, church, and civil rights delegations to present legislative demands. Aware that Martin Luther King, Jr. also had announced plans for a march to pressure the government for new civil rights legislation, Randolph and Rustin coordinated with King's group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and leaders from the NAACP, the Council for Racial Equality (CORE), the National Urban League (NUL), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to co-sponsor the march. Four white religious and labor leaders later joined the organizing group.

On June 11, 1963, in response to two months of protests in Birmingham, Alabama, and violent police reprisals, and to actions by Alabama Governor George Wallace to attempt to stop the integration of the University of Alabama, Kennedy announced in a televised speech to the nation that he planned to send to Congress comprehensive civil rights legislation. Afraid that the planned March could interfere with his legislative initiative, Kennedy met with March leaders on June 22 to try to get them to call it off. Kennedy's aide, Arthur Schlesinger, called the encounter "the best meeting I attended in my years in the White House." Kennedy, according to Schlesinger, told them, "We want success in Congress, not just a big show at the Capitol. Some of these people are looking for an excuse to be against us. I don't want to give any of them a chance to say, 'Yes I'm for the bill, but I'm damned if I will vote for it at the point of a gun.'"

Randolph argued—"with the quiet dignity which touched Kennedy as it had touched Roosevelt before him," as recounted by Schlesinger—that blacks already were protesting in the streets and that they probably could not be dissuaded. He asked the president, "If they are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about non-violence?" While agreeing that demonstrations in the streets had stimulated his administration to act, Kennedy contended that during the legislative process phase, potentially violent encounters would be counterproductive and might hurt his chances for reelection. He remarked, "we may all go down the drain as a result of this."

According to Schlesinger, the civil rights leaders were persuaded not to "lay siege to Capitol Hill." The planned event was changed to a one-day event, with a symbolic march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and speeches by March leaders. Kennedy supported the revised plan and agreed to meet with the leaders at the day's conclusion.

On August 11, the *Washington Post* published a complimentary profile of Bayard Rustin, the chief organizer of the march, who had coordinated with Randolph a Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington in 1957 and youth marches for integrated schools in 1958 and 1959. Two days later, the segregationist senator from South Carolina, Strom Thurmond, who had been trying to taint March leaders as linked to Communists, castigated the *Post* from the Senate floor for its “whitewash” of Rustin’s past. Armed with information provided by the FBI, Thurmond charged that Rustin was a former communist, that he had been imprisoned during World War II as a pacifist, and had been arrested in 1953 for “sex perversion” with two other men. Thurmond also attacked Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy’s “efforts to whitewash the question of Communist influence or involvement in these Negro demonstrations which have been turning into race riots in various cities in this country.”

Thurmond’s attack served to unify civil rights leaders in their defense of Rustin, who explained to the press that he never had been a member of the Communist Party, although he had joined the Young Communist League as a student in the late 1930s because he thought “they were deeply concerned with social justice.” As a Quaker and pacifist, he explained, he had refused military service during World War II and willingly had surrendered to authorities. Rustin declined to respond to the “sex perversion” charge, stating, “It is for my peers to judge me and my life.” Although NAACP head Roy Wilkins earlier had objected to Rustin as a possible director of the March because of his “liabilities,” he and the other leaders now rallied to Rustin’s support. Randolph stated, “I am sure I speak for the combined Negro leadership in voicing my complete confidence in Bayard Rustin’s character, integrity, and extraordinary ability.” A biographer of Rustin has noted, “With the dignified Randolph as spokesman, journalists did not ask probing questions about sexual perversions.” At the Press Club luncheon, Randolph reiterated his faith in Rustin.

On the day before the March, a draft of a planned speech to be delivered by SNCC Chairman John Lewis was circulated to the press. Lewis’s tone, in comparison with that of the other speeches, was defiant and accusatory. He detailed reasons that Kennedy’s civil rights legislation was “too little and too late.” He castigated “cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic and social exploitation.” He criticized the federal government for arresting civil rights leaders engaged in peaceful protest and for refusing to press charges against police who viciously attacked protesters. In response to those who urged activists to “be patient and wait,” Lewis’s original text read, “we must say that ‘patience’ is a dirty and nasty word. We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually.” He contended they could not rely on the two major political parties, but that “the people, the masses” themselves must bring about the necessary changes. He vowed, “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.”

When the Archbishop of Washington, the Most Rev. Patrick O’Boyle, who was scheduled to open the speeches at the Lincoln Memorial with an invocation, learned of

Lewis's speech, he threatened to withdraw from the March. Rustin tried to talk Lewis into deleting the more provoking passages, but Lewis refused. Rustin then put together a committee to devise a solution and assured O'Boyle that the speech would be changed. Randolph, as part of the committee, implored Lewis and other SNCC members to cooperate. "I have waited twenty-two years for this," he told them. "I've waited all my *life* for this opportunity. Please don't ruin it." With deep respect for Randolph, Lewis agreed to edit the more offending rhetoric without compromising the message.

In his own speech at the March, Randolph called attention to the masses of people who attended, a gathering whose numbers far exceeded expectations. He stated, "Let the nation and the world know the meaning of our numbers" and identified the assembled marchers as "the advance guard of a massive moral revolution for jobs and freedom." Randolph's speech, the first of the day, has been overshadowed in most accounts of the March by that of the final speaker, Dr. King, whom Randolph introduced as "the man who personifies the moral leadership of the civil rights revolution." King's momentous "I Have a Dream" speech brought the March to a rousing conclusion and became the day's defining event for many. As the participants left the Lincoln Memorial, Rustin put his arm around Randolph's shoulder and said, "Mr. Randolph, it looks like your dream has come true." Rustin later remembered that "tears were streaming down his cheeks. It is the one time I can recall that he could not hold back his feelings."

Following the speeches, the leaders of the March met with Kennedy, who affirmed Randolph's goal of economic justice. "The executive branch of the Federal Government will continue its efforts to obtain increased employment and to eliminate discrimination in employment practices, two of the prime goals of the March," Kennedy stated. "This Nation can afford to achieve the goals of a full employment policy—it cannot afford to permit the potential skills and educational capacity of its citizens to be unrealized."

Afterwards

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Rustin has written, "the agenda spelled out at the March on Washington in 1963 had been secured in all but one important respect. Our economic demands—the need for more and better jobs, an expanded housing program, better education as well as integrated schools—had still to be won." In 1966, in conjunction with the A. Philip Randolph Institute—which had been established in 1964—and in alliance with a coalition of civil rights, labor, and religious leaders, and other public intellectuals, Randolph and Rustin submitted a comprehensive proposal to Congress designed to make the goal of full employment a reality. Citing as precedents the Full Employment Act that Roosevelt conceived in 1945 to prevent a postwar depression and Truman's 1947 Marshall Plan to rebuild war-torn Europe, their Freedom Budget for All Americans, a ten-year plan with a cost set at \$185 billion, aimed to provide government jobs for socially-desirable projects, a guaranteed annual income for all workers, increases in minimum wage, farm income, welfare services, and Social Security payments, and the eradication of slums. The plan's chief economist, Dr. Leon Keyserling, who formerly had

drafted some of Roosevelt's New Deal legislation and had been the chairman of Truman's Council of Economic Advisers, maintained that increased consumption resulting from increased income would provide "economic growth dividends" by stimulating production and thus create more than \$400 billion in taxes. Randolph stated that "not since the March on Washington has there been such broad sponsorship and enthusiastic support as has been mobilized on behalf of the Freedom Budget for All Americans."

The plan, which dwarfed President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty program, received little enthusiasm in Congress or the White House. Advocates soon focused their attentions elsewhere, some disagreeing with the program's creators who claimed that expected revenues could accommodate a rise in defense expenditures needed to fight the war in Vietnam, which Randolph and Rustin had refused to address in their proposal. In addition, many younger black activists had rejected the interracial approach that Randolph and Rustin believed was needed to achieve longstanding economic advances for blacks. In 1968, Randolph and Rustin further antagonized black militants—some called the two "Uncle Toms"—by supporting a teachers' union striking to protest community control of New York City schools, a position advocated by poor blacks and Puerto Ricans, some of whom wanted to exclude white teachers from their local schools.

Randolph, who had served as BSCP president since the 1920s and as a vice-president of the AFL-CIO executive council since the merged union's first convention in 1955, retired from both positions in the summer of 1968 following an illness. At his death in his Harlem apartment at age 90 in 1979, the *Washington Post* reprinted part of an interview with Randolph from 1973. Recalling the struggle to organize the BSCP, Randolph mused, "We were able to build a union that had great spiritual qualities that the Pullman Company came to recognize. . . . The Pullman porters movement was quite an example in the life of Negroes of how you can move forward on the basis of education and belief in cooperation with common enemies. There is nothing but hopelessness unless agencies can give the black man the possibility of hopeful change."

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
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