

The March

No one knew how many people would come to Washington to march for jobs and freedom on a Wednesday in August of 1963. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, didn't know. On Sunday, August 25th, in an interview on Meet the Press, he said he hoped for more than 100,000. [1] On the morning of the march the initial projections were a disappointing 25,000. Reporters at the Washington Monument asked Bayard Rustin, who planned and organized the march in two months, about the low turnout. He studied his legal pad and said, "Gentlemen, everything is going exactly according to plan." An aide glanced at the pad. It was blank. [2] Well played, Bayard.

The Dream

No one knew Dr. King would depart from his script. He was the last speaker of the day so he could run over his allotted 5 minutes. Mahalia Jackson sang before Dr. King spoke. Then, as he neared the end of his prepared remarks she shouted, "Tell them about the dream, Martin." He followed with, "I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream." [2] And the gathering of 250,000, the largest the capital had ever seen, heard the improvised speech. Millions more saw it on television. Thank you, Mahalia.

Why did so many people want to take part in this movement for social change? Roger Shinoster, a member of the Savannah State University panel discussion on August 28, 2013, explained that after the experience of standing up to desegregate the schools in Savannah, "We realized we could make a difference." He wanted to be part of the march so much that he hitchhiked to Washington, DC. He called it, "One of the most rewarding experiences of my life."

Is America the post-racial nation Dr. King envisioned?

Change did come. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But those victories are not final. At the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington Dr. King's son, Martin Luther King III, said, "The task is not done. The journey is not complete. We can and we must do more." [3]

Dr. Otis Johnson, SSU scholar-in-residence, told the campus crowd at the reenactment of the march that, "The fight is definitely not over. Our unemployment rate is still twice that of whites. Our poverty rate is astounding, our dropout rate is still very unacceptable, and you can go on and on about the key factors in the lives of people of color." [4]

On June 25th of this year the Supreme Court of the United States invalidated the section of the Voting Rights Act that monitored states with a history of discriminatory voting laws. To the surprise of no one, those states began passing discriminatory voting laws. Representative John Lewis said, "I gave a little blood on that bridge in Selma, Alabama, (in 1965) for the right to vote. I am not going to stand by and let the Supreme Court take the right to vote away from us." [3]

Would Dr. King be satisfied with the state of race relations in America today?

Not yet. Ironically, the laws designed to make voting more difficult are giving momentum to improved race relations. Groups supporting the Equal Rights Amendment need only three more states for ratification. Georgia could be one of them. The ERA will help all women achieve equal justice regardless of race. [5] Move to Amend is a coalition of hundreds of organizations committed to social and economic justice. MTA is promoting a Constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court Decision that allows unlimited corporate spending in elections. [6]

What else would Dr. King say needs to be done today?

On this Labor Day weekend I can hear him repeating from his 'Dream' speech, "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation." [7] He would say jobs are still the key to economic justice. The NAACP is part of an alliance working to promote a clean energy economy. The BlueGreen Alliance consists of groups that recognize they can accomplish more by working together. The theme of their 2013 Good Jobs, Green Jobs Conference was "Let's Get to Work - Climate Change, Infrastructure and Innovation." In addition to the NAACP the advisory committee list in the conference program includes ten of the largest unions including the American Federation of Teachers, the Communication Workers of America, the Service Employees International Union, the United Auto Workers and the United Steel Workers. They know that clean energy produces more and better paying jobs without the pollution from conventional dirty energy.

What else do we need to do at Savannah State University?

Dr. Cheryl D. Dozier, president of SSU, used her closing remarks at the campus reenactment of the March on Washington to say, "We've come a long way, but still have a long way to go." She issued this challenge to students: "I want us to value education. I want us to be that educational institution that carries the name of this great city - Savannah State University - where we engage and embrace our city, county, and state, but not without you raising some questions about what else we need to do." [4]

In the 1980s students at more than 150 colleges across the nation helped to end a system of racial inequality in South Africa called apartheid. The movement used "divestment" as a tool to

focus attention on companies doing business with the racist regime. Students demanded their schools stop investing in those companies. The students raised public awareness and caused real economic pressure that led to change. Barack Obama gave his first public speech at a divestment rally as a sophomore at Occidental College in 1981. [8]

The same strategy is being used today to put pressure on companies in the fossil fuel industry. Divestment campaigns are a way for students to use their social values to shape the future. The moral imperative is clear. If it is wrong for companies to wreak havoc on people's health and the planet then it is wrong for universities to profit from it. In a recent speech at Georgetown University, President Obama told students, "I'm here to enlist your generation's help in keeping the United States of America a global leader in the fight against climate change...Invest. Divest. Remind folks there's no contradiction between a sound environment and strong economic growth." [8]

Georgetown University answered President Obama's call. So did University of Georgia and more than 300 other colleges. Whether or not we change the investment portfolio at SSU divestment will be a catalyst to unite us in action. A thousand SSU students came together to send a message in 1963. If we can harness that kind of enthusiasm in 2013 we will stand on their shoulders as leaders of a growing global movement that will make the future better for all of us. Let's go Tigers. Let's "Tell them we are rising!"

To learn more about starting a divestment campaign go to: <http://gofossilfree.org/>

Sources

[1] "Meet the Press Special Edition: Remembering the Dream"

Rebroadcast of the August 25, 1963 interview of Dr. Martin Luther King, president SCLC, and Roy Wilkins, executive secretary NAACP on August 25, 2013

<http://presspass.nbcnews.com/news/2013/08/25/20120855-meet-the-press-special-edition-remembering-the-dream?lite>

Bayard Rustin died in 1987 and was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Obama in August of 2013.

[2] "Mahalia Jackson, and King's Improvisation" by Drew Hansen, Op-Ed Contributor, New York Times, August 28, 2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/opinion/mahalia-jackson-and-kings-rhetorical-improvisation.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

[3] "Scenes from the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington"

By Jennifer Preston at the New York Times, August 24, 2013

<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/scenes-from-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington/?hpw>

[4] "Former mayor: Fight definitely is not over. Johnson, others reflect on the anniversary of MLK's speech." By Marcus E. Howard at Savannah Morning News, August 29, 2013

[5] Equal Rights Amendment website: <http://equalrightsamendment.org/>

[6] Move to Amend website: <https://movetoamend.org/>

[7] "Martin Luther King, Jr. – I Have a Dream" delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C., from American Rhetoric, Top 100 Speeches

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

[8] "Obama Embraces the Divestment Movement: From Apartheid to Climate Change" by Peter Dreier, E.P. Clapp distinguished professor of politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College, Huffington Post, June 29, 2013

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/obama-and-the-divestment- b_3520933.html

Further Background

"The Big Six Organizers of the March on Washington: Where are They Now" by Jermaine Spradley, Huffington Post, August 28, 2013

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/28/big-six-march-on-washington n_3826958.html