



“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”

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Marching Orders for the Future

Now that we’ve had two events at the Lincoln Memorial to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, it is important to remember a few things about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. beyond his “I Have a Dream” speech.

The question is always asked: What happens after the marches are over? Demonstrators left Washington, D.C. in 1963 determined to change the American landscape. Consequently, we had passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Those laws were passed not because of a speech in the nation’s capital, but because of the hard work and dedication of people at the local, state and national level to bring about change.

While the “I Have a Dream” speech might have been Dr. King’s most popular oration, it was not his most substantive one. In 1963, Dr. King etched a prosaic picture of what America should look like in the future. But a far more important one was his “Mountain-top” speech, delivered in Memphis the night before he was assassinated.

In that speech, Dr. King outlined a plan for economic empowerment and told us how to strengthen our institutions to accomplish that goal. He reminded us, “Always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal.”

Dr. King explained, “We don’t have to argue with anybody. We don’t have to curse and go around

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George E. Curry



acting bad with our words. We don’t need any bricks and bottles, we don’t need any Molotov cocktails. We just need to go around to these stores, and to these massive industries in our country, and say, ‘God sent us by here, to say to you that you’re not treating his chil-

Instead of placing so much emphasis on what Dr. King said in 1963, we should look at what he was doing at the time of his death

dren right. And we’ve come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda—fair treatment, where God’s children are concerned. Now, if you are not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you.”

He urged us to “strengthen our Black institutions” by patronizing them.

Instead of placing so much emphasis on what Dr. King said in 1963, we should look at what he was doing at the time of his death.

He wasn’t trying to create a special commission or hold conferences on how to strengthen the middle class. He was organizing a Poor Peoples Campaign, a trek to Washington, D.C. to dramatize the urgent need to help the least among us.

After President Lyndon B. Johnson shifted his focus from the War on Poverty to the war in Vietnam, Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) launched an effort in 1968 to seek economic justice for poor Blacks, Whites, Latinos and Native Americans. The idea was to have another March on Washington that would force political

After six weeks, demonstrators were evicted.

Today, the poor are still suffering. Poverty is defined as a family of four being able to live off of \$23,021 a year. Today, a record 46.2 million people – 15 percent of the U.S. population – are living in poverty.

One of the goals of the 1963 March on Washington was a minimum wage that could lift a family of four out of poverty. They demanded that the minimum wage of \$1.15 an hour be increased to \$2 an hour. As a report by the Economic Policy Institute titled, “The Unfinished March: An Overview,” noted, “The inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage today is about \$2.00 less than it was at its peak value in 1968.”

Worse than living on below-poverty wages is to have no job at all.

“Even when the national unemployment rate has been low, the African American unemployment rate has been high,” the EPI report stated.

When he was assassinated, Dr. King was helping organize garbage workers in Memphis. He was not dreaming because he was not asleep. We honor him by continuing his work, not by merely continuing to recite his “I Have a Dream” speech.

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of Emerge magazine, is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service

After the Commemorations — What’s Next?

The 1963 March on Washington was a pivotal moment for African Americans, a day when people joined to fight for jobs, peace and justice. More than 250,000 people traveled to Washington, coming by busses, trains, and occasionally planes. They came despite the scourge of segregation, which meant that many who were driving had to carefully select the places they could stop and eat (actually most brought goodies from home) or relieve themselves. Despite obstacles, a quarter of a million people showed up in Washington, gathering peacefully and with dignity. As a result of the March, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 was passed with more than three-quarters of the House and Senate supporting both Acts.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. continued his activity for jobs, peace and justice helping to organize the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, which was interrupted by Bloody Sunday. He spoke, in 1965, to Playboy magazine, suggesting that “compensation” (he didn’t use the word reparations) would be the only way to close the economic gap between African Americans and Whites. He began connecting poverty with war in his 1967 speech “Beyond Vietnam.” When he died, he was organizing the Poor People’s Campaign, envisioned as a way to



BENNETT COLLEGE

Julianne Malveaux

bring tens of thousands of people to Washington, D.C. to demand that each department of the federal government recognize and ameliorate poverty issues in housing, education, health, and other areas. The Poor People’s cam-

million African Americans. Proportionately, the 1963 march drew 5 times as many African Americans as the 2013 March.

What does this mean when we look at the status of African Americans then and now?

In 1963, the movement had clear goals. African Americans had been denied employment rights, civil rights, civil liberties, and voting rights. The hundreds of thousands of African Americans who came to Washington were protesting, not only the restoration of these rights, but also a stop to the police brutality that had killed

social and political. Fifty years after the March on Washington, we have yet to achieve the metrics that Dr. King offered. Millions experience “food insecurity”, or have nothing to eat several times a month. The education gap has not been closed, and African American students are differently treated than others in the K-12 education system. Where is the equality? Paraphrasing Dr. King, African Americans have twice the negatives and half to positives in terms of equity. Little freedom has been achieved, especially when trillions are spent on senseless wars, while our national unemployment rate exceeds 7 percent and the unofficial black unemployment rate is 25 percent.

In the five years after the 1963 March on Washington, there were setbacks, but also the achievement of far-reaching goals. After the commemoration, the several events in Washington, DC, parallel events in other cities, and the NAACP’s online march, what will be the results? Will this generation be as effective as Dr. King and his generation was? Will we mobilize around Voting Rights after the setback of a Supreme Court decision? Will we push to close the employment gap between African Americans and others?

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paign was more muted than expected in the wake of Dr. King’s 1968 assassination, but some of the people came anyway.

Even before the 2013 commemorative march was organized, estimates were that 100,000 would join that March. In 1963, about 1.3 percent of our nation’s 18.9 million African Americans marched. Before the 2013 march (numbers may change as t) the 100,000 estimate represents just .2 oof one percent of our nation’s 44

or crippled supporters. People were so focused that change was made, and when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he articulated his vision for our nation. He said:

“I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.” He set out an agenda that was economic,