

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963)



View from the Lincoln Memorial toward the Washington Monument

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was held in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, August 28, 1963. The purpose of the march was to advocate for the civil and economic rights of African Americans. At the march, Martin Luther King Jr., standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech in which he called for an end to racism.[3]

The march was organized by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, who built an alliance of civil rights, labor, and religious organizations that came together under the banner of "jobs and freedom." Estimates of the number of participants varied from 200,000 to 300,000. Observers estimated that 75–80% of the marchers were black. The march was one of the largest political rallies for human rights in United States history. The march is credited with helping to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and preceded the Selma Voting Rights Movement which led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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The main song sung by thousands at the March on Washington was "We Shall Overcome" which was the most powerful song of the 20th century. It started out in church pews and picket lines, inspired one of the greatest freedom movements in U.S. history, and went on to topple

governments and bring about reform all over the world. Word for word, the short, simple lyrics of "We Shall Overcome" might be some of the most influential words in the English language.

"We Shall Overcome" has its roots in African American hymns from the early 20th century, and was first used as a protest song in 1945, when striking tobacco workers in Charleston, S.C., sang it on their picket line. By the 1950s, the song had been discovered by the young activists of the African American civil rights movement, and it quickly became the movement's unofficial anthem. Its verses were sung on protest marches and in sit-ins, through clouds of tear gas and under rows of police batons, and it brought courage and comfort to bruised, frightened activists as they waited in jail cells, wondering if they would survive the night. When the long years of struggle ended and President Lyndon Johnson vowed to fight for voting rights for all Americans, he included a final promise: "We shall overcome."

As you listen to "We Shall Overcome," think about the reasons it has brought strength and support to so many people for so many years. And remember that someone, somewhere, is singing it right now.

We Shall Overcome – Joan Baez and Crowd <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7akuOFp-ET8>

I left the seminary in May of 1963. I was busy moving back into my family's home in Chicago and getting a job. The summer job I got was as a Social Worker Aide with the Cook County Department of Public Aid. I was assigned to work with the Social Workers in the Cabrini-Greene housing project on the near northside of Chicago.

Cabrini-Greene was almost entirely a Negro (as the term was used at the time) housing project. Almost all of the people living there were very low income. Part of my work was to coordinate some of the social services the Department of Public Aid provided with area churches, including athletic programs. I hadn't realized until then what types of discrimination in housing, jobs, schools, and many other aspects of daily life were taking place in a northern city like Chicago. There were not separate water fountains and toilets in Chicago, but there were much less opportunities for Negro families and their children compared to white communities. There were some bottom-up organizations supporting efforts to change discrimination in cities like Chicago. But there was a growing awareness of the issues and problems raised by Martin Luther King and other national organizations which were highlighted in the "March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs" in late August of 1963.