

'I Have a Dream' Speech Background

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The "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr. before a crowd of some 250,000 people at the 1963 March on Washington, remains one of the most famous speeches in history. Weaving in references to the country's Founding Fathers and the Bible, King used universal themes to depict the struggles of African Americans before closing with an improvised riff on his dreams of equality. The eloquent speech was immediately recognized as a highlight of the successful protest, and has endured as one of the signature moments of the civil rights movement.

Civil Rights Momentum

Martin Luther King, Jr., a young Baptist minister, rose to prominence in the 1950s as a spiritual leader of the burgeoning civil rights movement and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

By the early 1960s, African Americans had seen gains made through organized campaigns that placed its participants in harm's way but also garnered attention for their plight. One such campaign, the 1961 Freedom Rides, resulted in vicious beatings for many participants, but resulted in the Interstate Commerce Commission ruling that ended the practice of segregation on buses and in stations.

Similarly, the Birmingham Campaign of 1963, designed to challenge the Alabama city's segregationist policies, produced the searing images of demonstrators being beaten, attacked by dogs and blasted with high-powered water hoses.

Around the time he wrote his famed "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King decided to move forward with the idea for another event that coordinated with Negro American Labor Council (NALC) founder A. Philip Randolph's plans for a job rights march.

March on Washington

Thanks to the efforts of veteran organizer Bayard Rustin, the logistics of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom came together by the summer of 1963.

Joining Randolph and King were the fellow heads of the "Big Six" civil rights organizations: Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Whitney Young of the National Urban League (NUL), James Farmer of the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) and John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Other influential leaders also came aboard, including Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Joachim Prinz of the American Jewish Congress (AJC).

Scheduled for August 28, the event was to consist of a mile-long march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, in honor of the president who had signed the Emancipation Proclamation a century earlier, and would feature a series of prominent speakers.

Its stated goals included demands for desegregated public accommodations and public schools, redress of violations of constitutional rights and an expansive federal works program to train employees.

The March on Washington produced a bigger turnout than expected, as an estimated 250,000 people arrived to participate in what was then the largest gathering for an event in the history of the nation's capital.

Along with notable speeches by Randolph and Lewis, the audience was treated to performances by folk luminaries Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and gospel favorite Mahalia Jackson.

'I Have a Dream' Speech Origins

In preparation for his turn at the event, King solicited contributions from colleagues and incorporated successful elements from previous speeches. Although his "I have a dream" segment did not appear in his written text, it had been used to great effect before, most recently during a June 1963 speech to 150,000 supporters in Detroit.

Unlike his fellow speakers in Washington, King didn't have the text ready for advance distribution by August 27. He didn't even sit down to write the speech until after arriving at his hotel room later that evening, finishing up a draft after midnight.

'Free At Last'

As the March on Washington drew to a close, television cameras beamed Martin Luther King's image to a national audience. He began his speech slowly but soon showed his gift for weaving recognizable references to the Bible, the U.S. Constitution and other universal themes into his oratory.

Pointing out how the country's founders had signed a "promissory note" that offered great freedom and opportunity, King noted that "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

At times warning of the potential for revolt, King nevertheless maintained a positive, uplifting tone, imploring the audience to "go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair."

Around the halfway point of the speech, Mahalia Jackson implored him to "Tell 'em about the 'Dream,' Martin." Whether or not King consciously heard, he soon moved away from his prepared text.

Repeating the mantra, "I have a dream," he offered up hope that "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" and the desire to "transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."

"And when this happens," he bellowed in his closing remarks, "and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

MLK Speech Reception

King's stirring speech was immediately singled out as the highlight of the successful march.

James Reston of The New York Times wrote that the "pilgrimage was merely a great spectacle" until King's turn, and James Baldwin later described the impact of King's words as making it seem that "we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real."

Just three weeks after the march, King returned to the difficult realities of the struggle by eulogizing three of the girls killed in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Still, his televised triumph at the feet of Lincoln brought favorable exposure to his movement, and eventually helped secure the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. The following year, after the violent Selma to Montgomery march in Alabama, African Americans secured another victory with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Over the final years of his life, King continued to spearhead campaigns for change even as he faced challenges by increasingly radical factions of the movement he helped popularize. Shortly after visiting Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking sanitation workers, and just hours after delivering another celebrated speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," King was assassinated by shooter James Earl Ray on the balcony of his hotel room on April 4, 1968.

Legacy

Remembered for its powerful imagery and its repetition of a simple and memorable phrase, King's "I Have a Dream" speech has endured as a signature moment of the civil rights struggle, and a crowning achievement of one of the movement's most famous faces.

The Library of Congress added the speech to the National Recording Registry in 2002, and the following year the National Park Service dedicated an inscribed marble slab to mark the spot where King stood that day.

In 2016, Time included the speech as one of its 10 greatest orations in history.

"I have a dream ... " We all know the words that start the famous speech.

But Martin Luther King Jr.'s crowning moment may never have happened without one of the largest protests ever — the March on Washington on August 28, 1963.

After growing backlash against blacks in the South, King and five others planned the event, a peaceful demonstration to end segregation and promote equal rights.

King crafted his famous speech specifically for the 250,000 people who would gather in the nation's capital that day.

Stop 1

In 1963, Birmingham, Alabama had become the epicenter of racist violence in America. A KKK member bombed a Baptist church, killing four young girls in September. Denise McNair, 11; Carole Robertson, 14; Addie Mae Collins, 14; and Cynthia Wesley, 14; from left, died in the fire.



AP Photo

Stop 2

As a result, Martin Luther King, Jr. turned his focus to the area, organizing many anti-segregation demonstrations there. Police arrested King and his fellow civil rights proponent, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, on April 12, 1963 during a demonstration.



Stop 3

The situation in the South continued to worsen. Below, firefighters in Birmingham turn a high-powered hose on peaceful demonstrators. Bayard Rustin, the march's head organizer, said that credit for mobilizing the march could go to "Bull Connor [Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham], his police dogs, and his fire hoses."



Stop 4

The assassination of Medgar Evers, the first director of the Mississippi NAACP, on June 12, 1963 also created outrage and sorrow in the black community. Below, his widow, Myrlie Louise Evers, bends down to kiss her deceased husband at a public viewing at a funeral home in Mississippi.



Stop 5

Days later, black demonstrators descended on Washington. Demonstrators marched from the White House to the Department of Justice with few incidents, defying speculations of violence and other negative press. Here, Attorney General Robert Kennedy addresses the crowd with a bullhorn.



Stop 6

Demonstrations around the country began happening with greater fervency and frequency. Here, Alison Turaj continued marching through Gwynn Oak Amusement Park in Baltimore, despite a cut on her forehead. During a peaceful demonstration in July, a mob of angry whites threw rocks at her and others. Yet police arrested more than 100 black and white integrationists that day.



Stop 7

Six of the most prominent black leaders gathered in New York City on July 2 to plan a civil rights march on Washington.



From left: John Lewis, chairman Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee; Whitney Young national director, Urban League; A. Philip Randolph, president of the Negro American Labor Council; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., president Southern Christian Leadership Conference; James Farmer, Congress of Racial Equality director; and Roy Wilkins, executive secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Stop 8

Bayard Rustin acted as head organizer for the march. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously at the march's 50th anniversary commemoration in 2013. Rustin reportedly came up with the idea of selling buttons to raise funds for the march.



Stop 9

Rustin set up the march's headquarters in a walk-up apartment in Harlem.



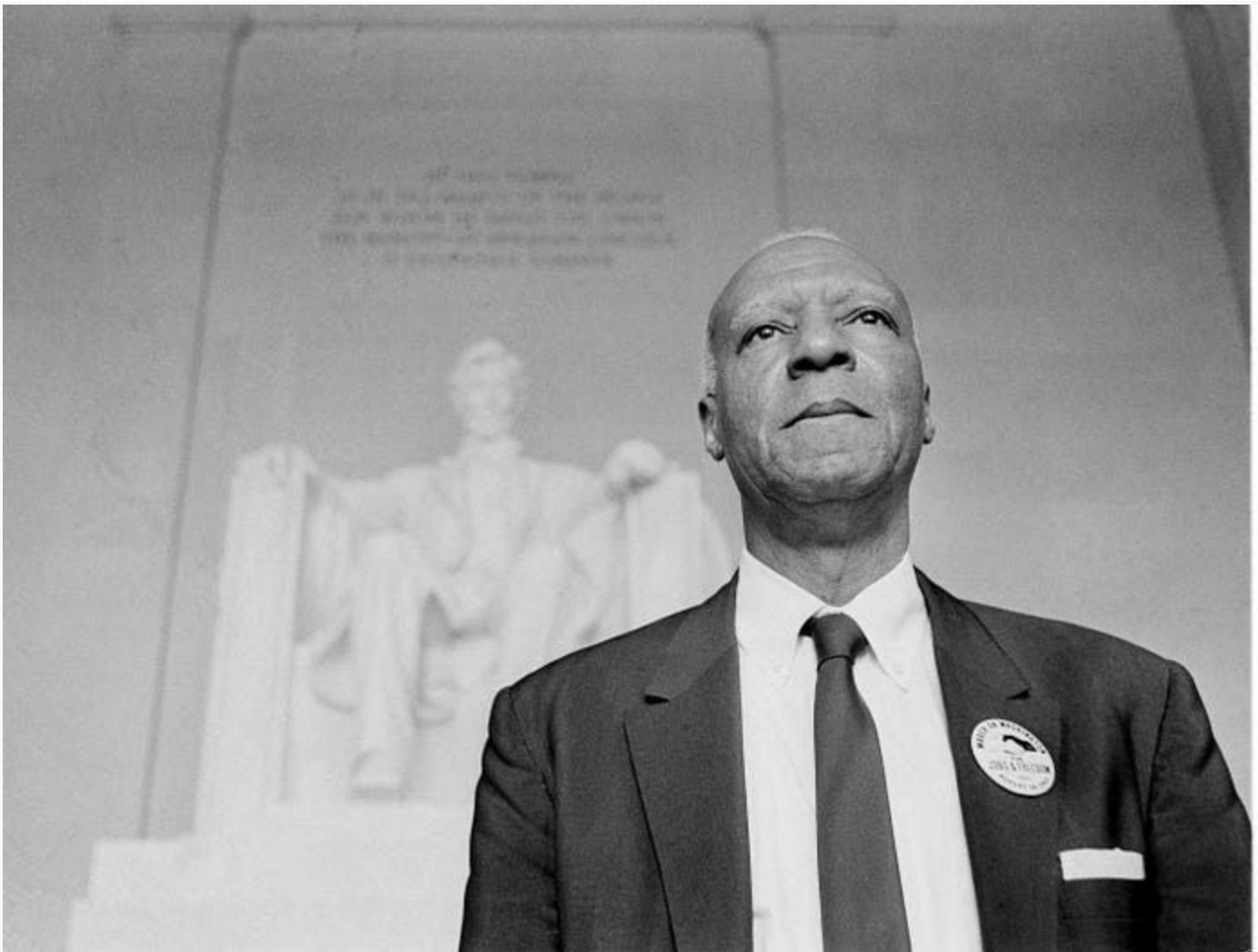
Stop 10

Celebrities also played a crucial role in financing the March on Washington. A. Philip Randolph, right, the director of the March on Washington, shakes hands with actor Paul Newman at a benefit performance at Harlem's Apollo Theater. Stars performed a four-hour, post-midnight show that night that raised \$30,000 only four days before the march began.



Stop 11

But the March on Washington owes the most to labor unions. Randolph, shown below in front of the Lincoln Memorial, led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, one the first and largest black labor unions, which provided initial money as well as much of the door-to-door organizing power for the march.



Stop 12

On the day of the march, people of all ages and races from across the country made their way to the nation's capital.



AP Photo

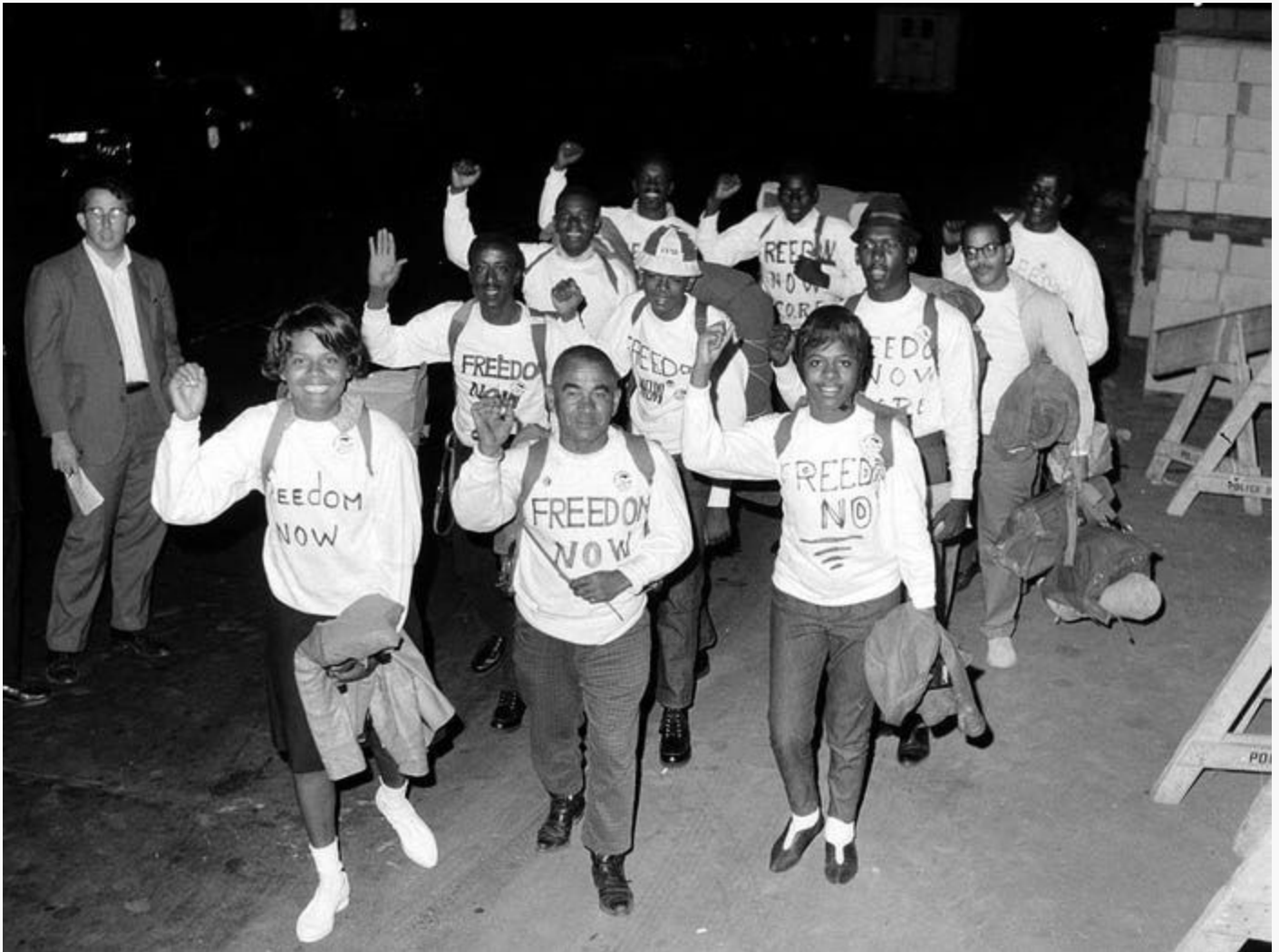
Stop 13

Some traveled very far in unconventional ways. Ledger Smith, 27, began his journey from Chicago to Washington on August 17. The professional roller skater, known by his stage name "Rollerman," skated the 685 miles in 10 days to join civil rights demonstrators at the nation's capital on August 28.



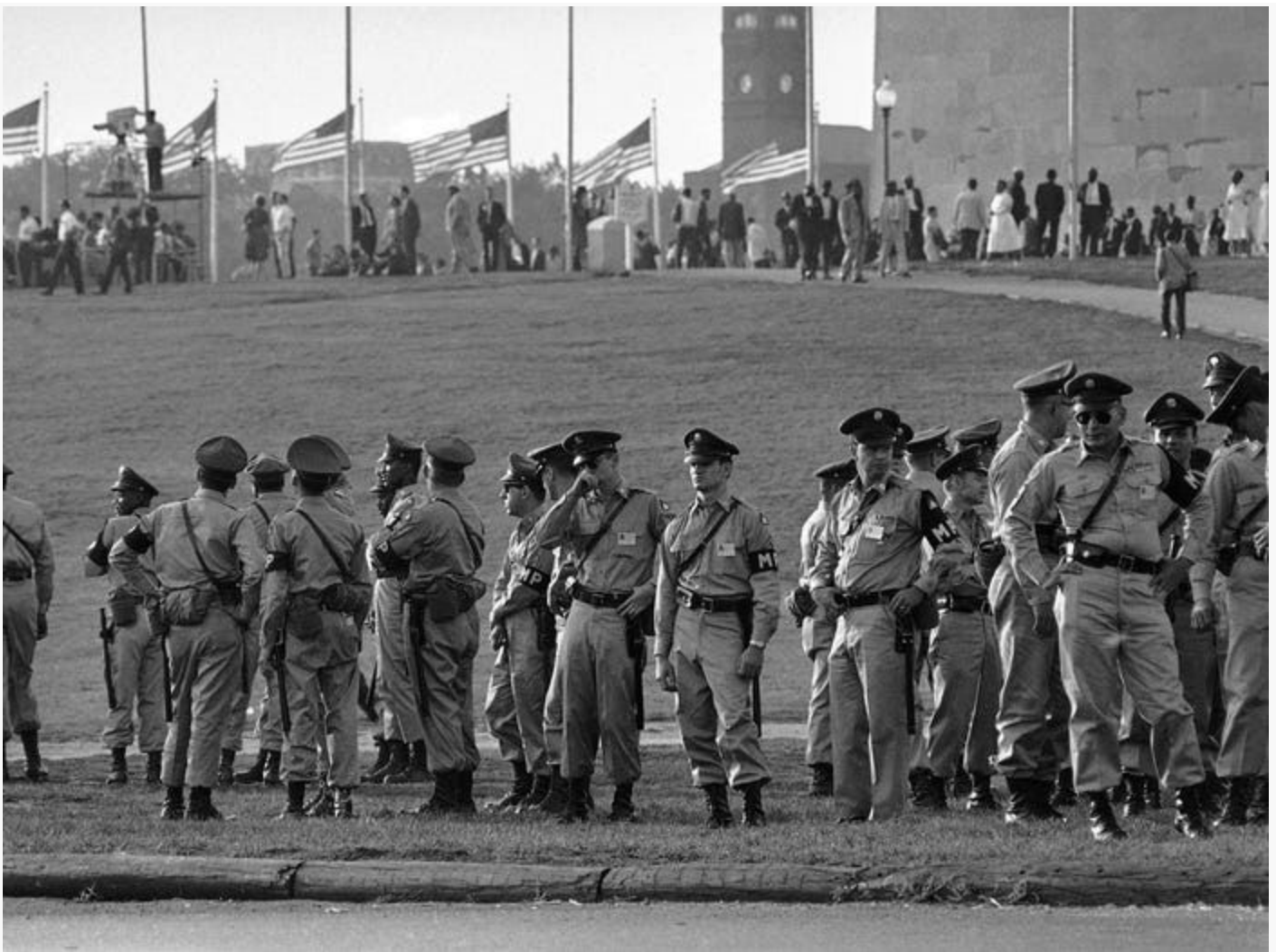
Stop 14

Others simply walked, determined to join the march. Members of Congress of Racial Equality, one of the march's sponsors, walked 250 miles to Washington, D.C. They left Brooklyn on August 17.



Stop 15

As protesters began to arrive at the National Mall, thousands of military police — security for "expected" violence at the event — greeted them.



Stop 16

For safety reasons, counter-protesters weren't allowed to march. George Rockwell (shown below smoking a corn cob pipe) tried to gain access to the parade but police denied him a permit. As leader of the Anti-Negro Anti-Jew American Nazi Party, he and his followers showed up without their usual uniforms.



Stop 17

More than 100,000 people were expected to attend the march. Here, workmen install extra telephone poles to uphold general communication at the event.



Stop 18

On the day of the march, participants totaled an estimated 250,000, one of the largest protests in US history.



AP Photo

Stop 19

After marching through downtown Washington, D.C., participants gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hear King's famous "I Have A Dream" Speech.



AP Photo/File

Stop 20

The night before the march, one of King's advisers told him, "Don't use the lines about 'I have a dream.' It's trite, it's cliché. You've used it too many times already."



Stop 21

But King didn't listen. His words that day became the most important political speech of the 20th century, according to a study by the University of Wisconsin.

'I Have a Dream . . .'

*Peroration by Dr. King Sums Up
A Day the Capital Will Remember*

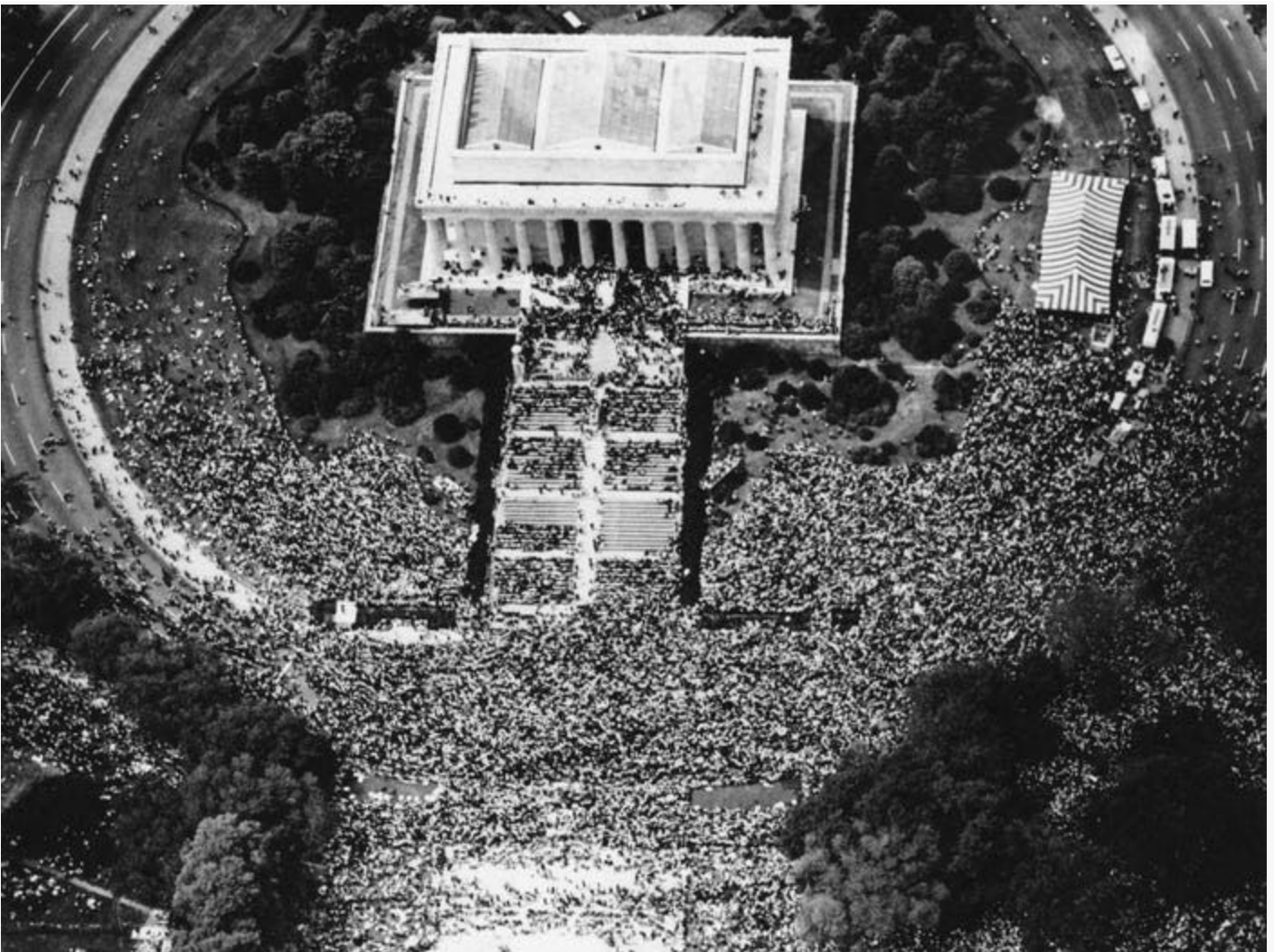
By **JAMES RESTON**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 28.—American reformers. Roger
Abraham Lincoln, who presided Williams calling for religious
in his stone temple today above liberty, Sam Adams calling for
the children of the slaves he political liberty, old man Tho-
emancipated, may have used reau denouncing coercion, Wil-
just the right words to sum up liam Lloyd Garrison demand-
the general reaction to taeing emancipation, and Eugene
Negro's massive march on V. Debs erving for economic

Stop 22

After he spoke, thousands of peaceful, sign-carriers traveled to the Washington Monument to continue their fight for equal rights.



Museum Quiz

1. What is one thing that inspired the march to be planned?
2. Name one other person who helped plan the march.
3. Name one way they raised money for the march.
4. What is one unique way that people got to the march?
5. What line was MLK advised to not use in the speech?

Bonus: How many people attended the march?

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