

Aim:

What would be required to organize a March on Washington today, 50 years after the 1963 March?

Instructional Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. identify the different organizing and logistics tasks that had to be completed to safely bring a quarter of million people to Washington DC for the 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom;
2. explain why each of these tasks were necessary, with a particular focus on ensuring that the focus of the day was on the demands of the march and not diverted by acts of violence;
3. compare and contrast the means of communication available to Bayard Rustin and the organizers of the 1963, on the one hand, and the means of communication that would be available to organizers of a march on Washington today, explaining how the differences would impact on the ability to organize a demonstration;
4. analyze the extent to which fears of violence at the 1963 March on Washington were based on prejudice about the alleged violent propensities of African-Americans as opposed to genuine concerns.

Grade Level: Secondary, Grades 6-8

Common Core Standards

Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#) *Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2](#) *Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6](#) *Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7](#) *Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9](#) *Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.10](#) *By the end of grade 8, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1](#) *Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.8](#) *Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.*

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.9](#) *Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.*

Length:

One 40 minute period.

Resource Materials:

- Selections from different histories and memoirs of the civil rights movement which focus on the organizing logistics of the 1963 March on Washington provided at the end of this lesson plan.
- List of “Rustin’s Things to Do” from *Cobblestone Magazine*, provided at the end of this lesson plan.
- Organizing Manual for the 1963 March on Washington, available at <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/images/ORGANIZING-MANUAL-OF-MARCH.pdf>.

About The Lesson:

This lesson follows logically and sequentially from the lesson on Bayard Rustin, *Why has Bayard Rustin, the main organizer of the 1963 March on Washington and an important leader in the civil rights movement, been hidden from American history?* The reading from different histories and memoirs of the civil rights movement which focus on the organizing logistics of the 1963 March on Washington, together with the questions at the end, can be given to the students as homework the night before in order to prepare them for the lesson.

Motivating Exercise:

Imagine that your class wants to take a trip to Washington D.C. What would you have to do to make this trip a reality?

Lesson Development:

Students are divided into teams of four, and given a copy of “Rustin’s Things to Do.” They are told to select the ten most important item on Rustin’s list, and to explain why the item is important. There is a worksheet for this purpose provided at the end of this lesson plan. Student report out their findings.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why was organizing the 1963 March on Washington such a difficult undertaking?
2. How did the demands of the March reflect its focus on both Jobs **and** Freedom?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders took a huge risk in calling for the 1963 March on Washington.
4. Why do you think that A. Philip Randolph insisted upon having Bayard Rustin as the main organizer of the march, even though he knew that the enemies of the African-American freedom struggle would use Rustin’s past against the march? Did Randolph make the right decision?

5. If you were organizing a March on Washington today, what means of communication would you have that were not available to Rustin and his volunteers in 1963? How would that change your organizing work?

6. Since there had never a demonstration in Washington on the scale on the 1963 March, let alone a demonstration organized by African-Americans, there was a great deal of speculation on whether the march might turn violent. To what extent do you think that this speculation was based on real concerns, and to what extent was it based on prejudices that African-Americans were more likely to be violent?

Summary Question:

With what you have learned about the work that goes into a March on Washington, would you be prepared to organize one for a cause you support?

How the 1963 March on Washington Got Started

Selection from David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004. p. 266.)

At the end of January 1963, [Bayard Rustin](#) and...associates, [Norm Hill](#), [[Velma Hill](#)], and [Tom Kahn](#), had prepared a three page memo for [A. Philip Randolph](#) that proposed a two-day “mass descent” upon Washington in May 1963. They suggested a target figure of 100,000 marchers, and argued that mass action was necessary to draw public attention to “the economic subordination of the American Negro,” the pressing need for the “creation of more jobs for all Americans,” and “the wider goal of “a broad and fundamental program of economic justice.” “Integration in the fields of education, housing, transportation and public accommodations will be of limited extent and duration so long as fundamental economic inequality along racial lines persists,” the planning document argued. On the first day of the pilgrimage there would be a “mass descent” upon Congress, blocking all legislative business, while a smaller delegation visited the White House. Both Congress and the President would be presented with specific legislative demands, demands that could be drafted in Randolph approved the project and gave his staffers permission to approach other civil rights activists and liberal sympathizers in organized labor and religious groups. The second day of the march would be devoted to “a mass protest rally.”

(As more civil rights leaders and organizations joined the march, the first day of actions was dropped, and only the “mass protest rally” remained, which was rescheduled for August 1963.)

DEMANDS OF THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON

1. Comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation from the present Congress to guarantee all Americans access to all public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, and the right to vote.
2. Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.
3. Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.
4. Enforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment – reducing Congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.
5. A new Executive Order banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.
6. Authority for the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits when any constitutional right is violated.
7. A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers – Negro and white – on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.
8. A national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living.

9. A broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include areas of employment which are presently excluded.

10. A federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination by federal, state and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies, and trade unions.

The Radical Idea of a March on Washington

(Selection from John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. p. 339.)

A generation later, marches on Washington have become ritualized drama, carefully scripted with few surprises. By the end of the 1960s, they were commonplace, as opponents of the Vietnam War made White House and Congress the targets of their discontent. In the decades since, virtually every cause, every constituency, every identity group has descended upon the nation’s capitol, paraded through its streets, and assembled on the Mall to hear an array of speakers and entertainers. Increasingly these marches are professionally produced. By the 1990s, the fax machine, the laptop computer, e-mail, the World Wide Web (Internet), and the mobile phone had dramatically simplified the tasks of communicating and organizing, yet the fact that dates of marches are typically chosen more than a year in advance suggests that they are detached from immediate events, timely goals, or explosive political situations. Marches are often set for weekends, slow days for the national media when Congress is not in session and many members are home in their districts. Marching on Washington has evolved into political spectacle, weekend entertainment posing as politics.

This was not the case in 1963. Then the idea was bold, fresh, and untried. No one had ever witnessed a mass descent on the nation’s capitol, unless one counts the Bonus Expeditionary March of veterans at the height of the Great Depression, an undertaking disastrous in every way. Now the civil rights leadership was proclaiming its intention to bring 100,000 protesters to Washington.

Organizing the 1963 March on Washington

(Selection from John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998. p. 215.)

([John Lewis](#) was one of the “big six” leaders of civil rights organizations that sponsored the 1963 March – he was the leader of the [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee](#). Today he is a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia, a position he has held for twenty-six years.)

The weekend before the march, I went up to New York, where an old four story church building on West 130th Street in Harlem had been turned into command central for the “MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM,” as a hand-painted banner flapping outside the third-floor window proclaimed it.

More than a hundred civil, labor and religious organizations from across the country had committed themselves to supporting and participating in this event, and several white labor and religious leaders had signed on as sponsors – people ranging from [Rabbi Joachim Prinz](#) of the American Jewish Congress to [Walter Reuther](#) of the AFL-CIO. (March director [A. Philip Randolph](#) called it a “coalition of conscience.” But basically this was Bayard Rustin’s show. And this building in Harlem was where he was making it happen.)

This was Bayard at his best, seemingly everywhere, with that gray bushy hair, those high cheekbones and an ever-present cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He, along with “transportation director” Rachelle Horowitz, directed dozens of volunteers who were working around the clock, swarming over lists and charts and telephones, passing updates back and forth to an army of organizers in virtually every major city in the nation. Estimates were that 100,000 people going to descend on D.C. by bus, train, airplane and any other way they could get there. But there was really no way of knowing how many people would actually come.

Most of us had no doubt that there would be many more than that, and the logistics and preparations were dizzying. Doctors, drinking water, food, getting the march routes to the crowds that would be pouring into the capital that morning, a sound system to accommodate an audience the size of a small city, press passes to the three thousand members of the media expected to arrive to cover the event... and toilets. Toilets were a major concern. I will never forget Bayard proclaiming, in that rich British accent of his: “Now we *cawn’t* have any disorganized *pissing* in Washington.”

There was not one detail that Bayard missed. The staffer rushing in and out of those offices each wore a small button displaying a black and a white hand clasped together in solidarity – Bayard had commissioned the buttons to help raise money. They sold for a quarter apiece, and by the weekend I arrived 175,000 had been bought, with 150,000 more on order.

Fear of Violence at 1963 March

(Selection from Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988. pp. 872-873.)

[Roy Wilkins](#) (of the NAACP) and Martin Luther King Jr. did their cooperative best to project the March in a positive light – there was not a shaving’s distance between them in tone or substance – but public expectations brimmed with apprehension. In Washington, authorities from all sectors guarded against the possibility that marauding Negroes might sack the city like [Moors](#) or [Visigoths](#) reincarnate. The city banned liquor sales for the first time since [Prohibition](#). President Kennedy and his military chiefs were poised with pre-drafted proclamations that would trigger suppression by 4,000 troops assembled in the suburbs, backed by 15,000 paratroopers on alert in North Carolina. Washington hospitals cancelled [elective surgery](#). Some storekeepers transferred merchandise to warehouses to safeguard against looting. Chief Judge John Lewis Smith Jr. notified his fifteen colleagues to be prepared for all-night criminal hearings, and practically no baseball fans protested when the Washington Senators postponed two days’ games until Thursday, when the march would be safely over.

Similar fears penetrated the movement itself. Bayard Rustin spent countless hours arranging police security and imported a supplementary force of four thousand volunteer marshals from New York. From his new headquarters tent near the Washington Monument, he announced that the psychology of peace was fragile and that there was no telling what might happen if attackers burned one of the two thousand buses headed toward Washington, as they had burned the [Freedom Ride](#) bus, or if any bombs were detonated, as in Birmingham.¹ It was Rustin’s obsession to make sure that no flaws in the arrangements permitted [claustrophobia](#) or discomfort to flare into violence. He drove his core staff of

¹ Less than a month later, the Ku Klux Klan [bombed](#) a Birmingham church during Sunday school, killing four young African-American girls.

LESSON PLANS ON THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON – ALBERT SHANKER INSTITUTE

two hundred volunteers to pepper the Mall with two hundred portable toilets, twenty-one temporary drinking fountains, twenty-four first aid stations and even a cash-checking facility. Meanwhile, in the Great Hall of New York's Riverside Church, volunteers worked in shifts to prepare 80,000 cheese-sandwich bags for overnight transport to Washington – to feed growling stomachs, and thereby to prevent growling people. Over the vast march area, Rustin had signs posted high enough to be read by someone jammed in a crowd. "If you want to organize something," he kept saying, "assume that everybody is absolutely stupid. And assume yourself that you're stupid."

As to the program, Rustin notified all speakers that a hook-man would unceremoniously yank them from the podium if their speeches exceeded seven minutes. He was determined to move the huge mass of people into Washington after dawn and out again before dusk, and therefore he could not tolerate the usual stretch of performers' egos. Strict discipline would allow timely evacuation, which would reduce the chance of violence by or upon Negroes wandering strange city streets at night. It would also refute the racial stereotype of imprecision and inbred, self-indulgent tardiness. The planners wrestled not only with logistics but with the weight of perceptions that had accumulated over centuries. Never before had white America accepted a prescheduled Negro political event for national attention. By guilt or [aversion](#), many of the most sympathetic whites retained a [subliminal belief](#) pairing Negroes with violence, such that even innocent beating victims were implicated to some degree in their fate...

Questions:

7. Why was organizing the 1963 March on Washington such a difficult undertaking?
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11. If you were organizing a March on Washington today, what means of communication would you have that were not available to Rustin and his volunteers in 1963? How would that change your organizing work?
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