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Betraying the march

That 'I have a dream' day was aimed at economic justice - not simply desegregation.

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The 40th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech calls forth countless accolades and commemorations.

Yet this week's celebratory deluge obscures the real story of the march far more than it illuminates it. While the march of course merits praise as one of great civil rights landmarks in American history, its actual legacy is a less happy story than most accounts acknowledge. Indeed, a good argument can be made that much of black America, as well as many white liberals, betrayed the march's real ideals even before the decade of the 1960s had run its course.

On the day it took place, the 1963 march was recognized as a huge popular boost for the antidiscrimination legislation that President Kennedy had put before Congress two months earlier. But the original purpose of the march, as articulated by its primary creators, activists A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, was to transform the civil rights agenda into "a broad and fundamental program of economic justice," not simply to energize opponents of racial segregation.

Randolph and Rustin saw economic change as far more integral than desegregation. "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," Rustin asserted in a pre-march memo. King embraced that emphasis, too, telling reporters in mid-July that the purpose of the march was to "arouse the conscience of the nation over the economic plight of the Negro."

But even well before Aug. 28, 1963, the march's actual name - the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom - was already overshadowed by the perception that the one-day demonstration would be a rally on behalf of Kennedy's civil rights bill rather than a protest against government policies that disadvantaged African-Americans. Then, on Aug. 28, when King's remarkable "dream" speech swamped all other aspects of the day's events, public acknowledgment of the march's actual objective diminished even further.

Yet even in the wake of the hugely successful gathering, Rustin sought to keep the original economic agenda from being lost. He argued that civil rights proponents should highlight how "the roots of discrimination are economic." Only a political alliance between civil rights forces and the labor movement, Rustin thought, could pursue successfully the march's real goals.

In the years after the march, Randolph, Rustin, and King sought to advance transformative economic programs. Rustin and Randolph put forward an ambitious "Freedom Budget" - a proposal for improving the lives of America's poor and dramatically increasing their incomes that made President Johnson's rhetorically uplifting "War on Poverty" look miserly. King likewise articulated an increasingly radical economic agenda. "Our goal is not to bring the discriminated up to a limited, particular level, but to reduce the gap between them and the rest of American society," he told a congressional committee. Asserting that "the elimination of all poverty could become an immediate national reality" if the US would only redirect monies from the military and the space program, King advocated a "guaranteed annual income" be provided to all Americans even in the absence of sufficient jobs.

"The problems we are dealing with," King later added, "are not going to be solved until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power."

But by 1968, King, Rustin, and Randolph stood almost alone in remaining true to the original economic aims of the 1963 march. Starting even before Stokely Carmichael's mid-1966 call for "Black Power," much of the African-American freedom movement began moving away from Rustin and King's belief in coalition politics and toward culturally separatist and politically nationalist forms of activism that enlarged rather than narrowed the racial chasm.

Throughout the late 1960s and well into the 1970s, the Randolph-Rustin-King vision of an economic change coalition was seen as passe, if not reactionary, by most African-American activists. Even in the late 1970s, when the pioneering sociologist William Julius Wilson rearticulated the march's insistence that economic disadvantage remained the biggest hurdle facing black America, many African-American intellectuals greeted his analysis with hostility.

But white America's post-1968 disdain for the march's real goals was even more pronounced. Rustin and King's vision of a biracial coalition enacting redistributive economic policies looked inconceivable when President Nixon and then President Reagan supplanted Johnson and the Kennedy brothers on the national political stage. But the worst insult of all occurred only after Democrats finally recaptured the White House - when President Clinton in 1996 signed into law a welfare reform package that contradicted what Rustin, King, and the 1963 march had envisioned.

So don't celebrate Aug. 28 too enthusiastically. Much of what the 1963 March on Washington sought was indeed soon enacted into law in the 1964 Civil Rights Act - but the most fundamental change that the march called for was ignored, bypassed, and then forgotten by Americans, both black and white. Anniversary commemorations encourage national self-congratulation, but the real legacy of the 1963 march merits a far more sober observance.

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