

“The Long March” By DAVID J. GARROW  
New York Times Book Review, 18 August 2013, p. 17.

## THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights

By William P. Jones Illustrated. 296 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. \$26.95.

The 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington is bringing forth innumerable commemorations and reminiscences in all forms. But memories of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech that Aug. 28 afternoon always threaten to overwhelm, if not obliterate, other aspects of what still remains the most famous mass gathering in American history.

William P. Jones, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin and the author of a well-regarded study of Southern black lumber workers, has chosen to emphasize the march’s roots and prehistory in the black trade union movement. His focus in “The March on Washington” is on A. Philip Randolph, the longtime president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who from World War II into the mid-1960s was the universally acknowledged dean of American civil rights leaders. Seventy-four years old in 1963, Randolph had first come to nationwide — that is, white — attention in 1941, when his threat to stage a march on Washington to protest racial discrimination prompted Franklin Roosevelt to summon him to the White House and, just one week later, issue an executive order prohibiting workplace discrimination throughout defense industries. Roosevelt’s decisive action led Randolph to call off the scheduled march, and while compliance with Roosevelt’s order was widely flouted, Randolph’s efforts to maintain a March on Washington movement dissipated well before the war’s end in 1945.

Jones’s most valuable contribution in “The March on Washington” is in detailing the activities of black trade unionists, women as well as men, as they fought employment discrimination across the postwar decades. He also provides a cogent account of the racial divisions that racked the A.F.L.-C.I.O. during the late 1950s, culminating in a public censure of Randolph for what hostile white union leaders claimed were his “unfair and untrue allegations” about the pervasiveness of racial discrimination within many unions. As Jones rightly observes, decade after decade Randolph “displayed a level of confidence and independence that is rarely seen in political movements.”

Anyone who approaches “The March on Washington” anticipating a richly detailed, book-length account of the actual march, however, will be sorely disappointed, for Jones devotes only one chapter out of six to the events of 1963. Another chapter provides an entirely competent but wholly unoriginal account of the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56, and Jones’s familiarity with labor movement figures does not extend to the Southern freedom movement. Within three successive sentences the Rev. Joseph Lowery appears as “Lowry,” the Rev. Theodore Jemison as “Jamison” and Randolph and King’s adviser Stanley Levison as “Levinson.” Terroristic violence experienced by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Greenwood, Miss., is mislocated in Greenville, Miss.

What's more, Jones's fine effort to trace the labor-movement origins of the march in the years up to 1963 is not matched by similar attention to decisive events in the months immediately before August. In late January, the longtime Randolph associate Bayard Rustin, together with two younger associates, Norman Hill and Tom Kahn, presented Randolph with a three-page memo describing how a "mass descent" upon Washington, with as many as 100,000 participants, could highlight "the economic subordination of the American Negro" and the need for "the creation of more jobs for all Americans." Rustin and Randolph's attention to employment and economics is fully in line with Jones's perspective, but "The March on Washington" devotes less than one paragraph to that crucial document. Jones's extensive bibliography omits any mention of either Rustin's or Kahn's papers, both of which are readily available, and lists no oral histories or interviews with Hill or other surviving march organizers.

Randolph and Rustin's vision would be incorporated into the demonstration's formal name — the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom — but popular understanding of the event virtually never acknowledges how significant a challenge to existing American society the two men intended. As Rustin and his colleagues stated in their planning memo, "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."

What made the march a reality, however, was not the decades of thinking by Randolph and others, but the May 1963 demonstrations in Birmingham, Ala., mounted by King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its local allies. Peacefully targeting segregated public accommodations and drawing a response of snarling police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses directed against black schoolchildren, the Birmingham demonstrations attracted widespread news coverage that thrust the civil rights movement onto the national — and presidential — agenda to a far greater extent than ever before.

"We are on the threshold of a significant breakthrough, and the greatest weapon is the mass demonstration," King told his close friend Levison in a telephone call wiretapped by the F.B.I. Because of Birmingham, King went on, "we are at the point where we can mobilize all of this righteous indignation into a powerful mass movement," and even the mere threat of a march on Washington might so "frighten" President Kennedy that he would send a meaningful civil rights bill to Congress.

Less than 10 days later, on June 11, Kennedy did just that in a nationwide television address, and an overjoyed King told Levison "he was really great." Still, planning for the march went ahead, and as the Aug. 28 date approached, Kennedy summoned Randolph, King and other civil rights leaders to the White House to try to dissuade them from proceeding. He was politely rebuffed. By mid-July, as Rustin steadily built an organization of staff members, volunteers and black trade unionists, Kennedy accepted the inevitable and endorsed the march.

Most publicity in the month before the march portrayed it as a rally to press reluctant white members of Congress to back Kennedy's civil rights bill, but King stressed that it sought "to arouse the conscience of the nation over the economic plight of the Negro." When the day itself arrived, Jones notes, Randolph began the program by declaring that "real freedom will require many changes in the nation's political and social philosophies and institutions." Drawing a crowd of more than 200,000 people — vastly more than the original goal of 100,000 — the event was, as Jones writes, "an unmitigated success," highlighted of course by the "compelling vision of interracial harmony" offered in King's closing address.

Jones ends "The March on Washington" with a brief survey of civil rights developments into 1964 and early 1965, but regrettably fails to extend his account to address the "Freedom Budget for All Americans" that Randolph and Rustin, with the endorsement of King and many other luminaries, put forward in 1966. With the twin goals of achieving full employment and wiping out poverty by 1975, the Freedom Budget offered a truly radical agenda for America's future. Even sympathetic liberal senators dismissed it as "utterly unrealistic," but it was entirely in accord with everything Randolph, Rustin and King had intended on Aug. 28, 1963. Just days later Rustin emphasized that the march was "not a climax but a new beginning," yet its actual agenda remains just as unrealized as that of the Freedom Budget.

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