

They Had a Dream

Topic: March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

Grade Level: Grades 3 - 6

Subject Area: Social Studies and Language Arts

Time Required: 2- 3 class periods

Goals/Rationale

Many students know that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his historic speech on August 28, 1963, at the march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. But they may not realize that the leaders of the March arranged to meet with President Kennedy in the White House on the day of the March. In this activity, students act as historians as they analyze a photograph taken at that meeting and reflect on the significance of the March. They then take on the role of a civil rights leader as they write a letter to President Kennedy requesting to have a meeting on the day of the March on Washington.

Essential Question

How can primary sources such as photographs and letters help us to understand the past?

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- analyze and interpret a photograph to discover information about a historical event.
- write a letter to President Kennedy in the role of a civil rights leader.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National Council for History Education:

History's Habits of the Mind 3 and 10

National History Standards:

Historical Comprehension

Historical Analysis and Interpretation

Historical Research Capabilities

National History Content Standard:

Standard 4: How democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols.

National Standards for Civics and Government:

II. What are the Basic Values and Principles of American Democracy?

V. What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should have basic knowledge about the civil rights movement. They should be familiar with different types of letters, specifically, business letters.

Historical Background and Context

The struggle for equal rights began many decades before John F. Kennedy became President. When he took office, public places in the South such as playgrounds, amusement parks, and stores had signs that said “white only.” There were movie theaters, bus stations, and restaurants that had separate sections for black people. Bathrooms and water fountains were labeled “White” or “Colored.” The facilities for white people were often newer and nicely kept while the facilities for black people were not well maintained. Local and state government officials enforced segregation.

Before and during Kennedy’s presidency, a growing number of people, black and white, young and old, wanted to end segregation and used civil disobedience and non-violent actions to challenge discrimination. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders, led thousands of people to organize protests, sit-ins, boycotts, and other actions to make it known that they were not willing to accept unfair treatment any longer. In an effort to galvanize the movement, leaders from different civil rights organizations joined forces to plan a massive peaceful protest that would take place on August 28, 1963, in the nation’s capital. They hoped that the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom would help achieve the goal of equal rights and economic justice for all Americans.

In response to mass arrests of protesters and increasing violence, President Kennedy took a strong stand in support of equal rights. On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy spoke to the nation in a *Television and Radio Report to the American People on Civil Rights*, laying out his position on civil rights. He passionately articulated why segregation was morally wrong and advocated for a civil rights act that would make segregation illegal.

Eleven days later, civil rights leaders, including those planning the march, met with President Kennedy and informed him of their plans to organize a national demonstration. The President was reluctant to support their efforts. He was determined to pass the Civil Rights Act and knew it was not going to be easy. He had to convince enough legislators to support the law, and many continued to support segregation. President Kennedy was concerned that a large-scale protest might make it more difficult to pass the landmark legislation. What if the protest turned violent? Would the March further polarize the country, making lawmakers who supported segregation more adamant about their position?

In response to his concerns, A. Philip Randolph, the director of the march, explained that “the black masses were restless” and that they could not stop them from demonstrating their opposition to segregation. President Kennedy, eager to make sure the event was peaceful and safe, provided behind-the-scenes government support for the project.

On August 28, 1963, over 250,000 people from across the nation traveled by bus, train, plane, car, bicycle, and even roller skates to attend the March. After rousing songs, heartfelt prayers, and inspirational speeches by nine other civil rights leaders, Martin Luther King Jr., addressed a sweltering but energized crowd in the afternoon heat. The event exceeded all expectations; it was a powerful and peaceful demonstration for equality and justice. Following the event, civil rights leaders met with President Kennedy.

The photograph provided was taken at this meeting which occurred in the Oval Office in the White House on August 28, 1963, a few hours after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed, "I have a dream." The photograph shows President Kennedy, Vice-President Johnson, and Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz meeting with the leaders of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the group known as the "Top Ten." When the group entered the Oval Office, President Kennedy gave each of them his heartfelt congratulations on organizing such an inspiring event. There was, however, some tension at the meeting. The leaders wanted to push President Kennedy to make his proposed Civil Rights Act stronger, to help end discrimination in jobs and education. The Civil Rights Act that became law in July 1964, eight months after President Kennedy's death, did not include all of the leaders' demands, but it was an important step in ending segregation.

Pictured in the photograph (l. to r.): Willard Wirtz, Mathew Ahmann, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, A. Philip Randolph, President John F. Kennedy, Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson, Walter Reuther, Whitney Young, and Floyd McKissack. (Floyd McKissack came in place of James Farmer who had been arrested and imprisoned after leading a sit-in in Georgia. Roy Wilkins was at the meeting but cannot be seen in the photograph.)

Materials

- Photograph of the "Top Ten" meeting with President Kennedy, also available at: http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/CKDb1LSEckmIUln_NPzRSw/
- Philip Randolph's letter to President Kennedy
- Sample business letters (provided by teacher)

Procedure

Preparation

Lead a discussion about the civil rights movement drawing on students' prior knowledge of leaders, events, and the goals of the movement. You may make a "web" of student responses on chart paper or record ideas on a list.

Analyzing a Photograph

1. Explain that historians examine evidence, such as photographs and letters to find out more about the past, and that they are going to investigate a photograph to find out more about the civil rights movement.

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2. Project the photograph on a screen or distribute copies to students. You may access it on our website at:

http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/CKDb1LSEckmIUln_NPzRSw/

3. Ask students what they notice about the photograph. Do they recognize any of the people? Encourage students to make observations about the people, the room, and other details in the photograph.
4. Ask students to interpret the photograph. What might be happening in the photograph? Why are the people gathered together? When do they think it was taken? What do they think might have happened before the photograph was taken? What might have happened after it was taken? What is the importance of the photograph? What questions do they have about the photograph?
5. Explain that the photograph was taken on the day that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and other leaders spoke at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Share background information with the students as appropriate. Explain that the leaders of the March, known as the “Top Ten,” met with President Kennedy in the Oval Office at the White House on August 28, 1963. Ask students why they think the leaders of the March wanted to meet with the President that day. What do they think they spoke about at the meeting? Do they think the meeting occurred before the March or afterwards?

Writing a Letter to President Kennedy

1. Ask students how they think the meeting with the President was arranged. Explain that a few weeks before the March, the director of the project, A. Philip Randolph, sent a letter to President Kennedy on behalf of the “Top Ten,” the name given to the group of men who organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Explain that they are going to imagine that they are one of the “Top Ten,” one of the leaders in the photograph, and they are going to write a letter to President Kennedy requesting a meeting on August 28, 1963.
2. Discuss the content of the letter. What is the purpose of the letter? What information should it include? What would be important for President Kennedy to know? How will they persuade President Kennedy to meet with them? How should they organize the letter?
3. As a whole class, in small groups, or individually, have students put themselves in the role of A. Philip Randolph, or another civil rights leader and write a letter to President Kennedy requesting a meeting to discuss civil rights on August 28, 1963, the day of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

4. Show students samples of business letters to identify the different components (heading, salutation, body, closing) to help them format their letters.
5. Have students share letters, give feedback, make edits, and write final drafts. To add to the authenticity of the project, you may want to respond to the letter, using “White House” stationary.
6. After creating their own letters, students may view the actual letter A. Philip Randolph wrote to President Kennedy. Analyze and compare it to their letter. What was the same and what was different? Would they change anything about their letter? You can access it on p.9 under A. Philip Randolph in our online exhibit, *Leaders in the Struggle for Civil Rights*:

<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education/Students/Leaders-in-the-Struggle-for-Civil-Rights/>

Note: A. Philip Randolph originally requested a 10:30 am meeting. Meeting before the March would enable the leaders to announce to the crowds that they had met with President Kennedy that morning and report on his response to their demands for equal rights, jobs, and education. Special Assistant to the President, Kenneth O’Donnell, responded to Randolph’s letter, fixing the appointment at 5 pm, after the March. Perhaps President Kennedy wanted to make sure the March was successful and peaceful before meeting with the leaders. As it turned out, the March was a great success and President Kennedy gave the leaders his heartfelt congratulations when they arrived in the Oval Office. At the meeting, however, the leaders made it clear to the President that they wanted to see a strong law passed to help end discrimination in jobs and education.

Assessment

Have students write “text bubbles” for A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., and President Kennedy, to add to a copy of the photograph. The text should reflect what each person might be thinking at the moment the photograph was taken, based on the information gained in the lesson.

Accommodations

Provide students with a letter template to help organize their content and format.

Extensions

1. Have students research members of the “Top Ten” and write biographies about them. You will find biographical information and documents related to some of the leaders in the online exhibit, *Leaders in the Struggle for Civil Rights*.
<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education/Students/Leaders-in-the-Struggle-for-Civil-Rights/>

2. To see the official program from the March on Washington, visit:
<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=old&doc=96#>

Additional Resources

Books

Haskins, James. *The March on Washington*.
New York: HarperCollins, 1994; 144 pages.

McWhorter, Diane. *A Dream of Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968*.
New York: Scholastic, 2004; 160 pages.

Websites

<http://www.life.com/image/52259555/in-gallery/23101>

Access a slideshow of photographs of the March on Washington from Life Magazine.

<http://www.crmvet.org/crmlinks.htm>

An indexed list of relevant websites which includes many excellent links. The site provides timelines, essays, interviews, photographs, and documents from those who participated in the Freedom Movement.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aointro.html>

An exhibition entitled, The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship, from the Library of Congress. Displaying more than 240 items, including books, government documents, manuscripts, maps, musical scores, plays, films, and recordings, this was the largest black history exhibit ever held at the Library.

<http://www.npr.org/news/specials/march40th/>

On August 28, 2003, National Public Radio marked the 40th anniversary of the March on Washington by interviewing people who were there, including marchers, organizers. Listen to audio clips from the March itself.

<http://pbskids.org/wayback/civilrights/index.html>

A PBS history site appropriate for upper elementary students, "Way Back: Stand Up for Your Rights," includes interviews with "history makers", games, activities using historical photographs, and background information on civil rights history.

<http://www.teachersdomain.org/>

After registering on this site, you can access many primary sources from the civil rights movement such as documents, video footage, and music. Information is categorized by topic and grade level. An interactive timeline gives a comprehensive view of historical events.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civilrights/civilrights-home.html>

An online exhibit draws from the individual accounts and oral histories collected by the Voices of Civil Rights project, a collaborative effort of AARP, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) and the Library of Congress.



Prepared by the Department of Education and Public Programs, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

A .Philip Randolph's Letter to President Kennedy, requesting a meeting for 10:30am on August 28, 1963

**Wednesday
August 28, 1963**

MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM

170 West 130 Street
New York 27, New York
Filmore 8-1900

THE WHITE HOUSE
Aug 15 9 13 AM '63
RECEIVED

August 13, 1963

Founding Chairmen

Mathew Ahmann
Eugene Carson Blake
James Farmer
Martin Luther King
John Lewis
Joachim Prinz
A. Philip Randolph
Walter Reuther
Roy Wilkins
Whitney Young

Administrative Committee

Cleveland Robinson
Chairman
Courtland Cox
Ann Arnold Hedgeman
Rev. Thomas Kilgore, Jr.
Rev. George Lawrence
James McLean
Clotter Current
Colobard Parris
Erwin Suali

Director

A. Philip Randolph

Deputy Director

Bayard Rustin

Coordinators

Norman Hill
L. Joseph Overton

Southern Administrators

Dr. Aaron Henry
Worth Long
Att. Floyd McKissick
Rev. Wyatt Walker

President John F. Kennedy
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear President Kennedy:

As you know, the largest outpouring of Americans of all races, colors, and creeds ever to assemble in our Nation's Capital will take place on Wednesday, August 28, in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

This action is designed to focus nationwide attention on the plight of millions of Negro Americans 100 years after Emancipation and to press for a redress of their intolerable grievances in the present session of the Congress.

On behalf of the sponsors of the March: James Farmer, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Mathew Ahmann, Reverend Eugene Carson Blake, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, Walter Reuther, and myself, I have been authorized to request an appointment with you on that date.

It is our hope that the sponsoring committee will be afforded an opportunity at such a conference to discuss the program of the March and plans for its implementation by your Administration and Congress.

In view of the schedule of activities for that date, we would be deeply gratified if such a conference could be arranged for 10:30 A.M. on August 28.

Very respectfully,

A. Philip Randolph