

“The Top Ten” Leaders of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Biographical Information

(Asa) Philip Randolph

- Director of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
- He was born on April 15, 1889 in Crescent City, Florida. He was 74 years old at the time of the March.
- As a young boy, he would recite sermons, imitating his father who was a minister. He was the valedictorian, the student with the highest rank, who spoke at his high school graduation.
- He grew up during a time of intense violence and injustice against African Americans.
- As a young man, he organized workers so that they could be treated more fairly, receiving better wages and better working conditions. He believed that black and white working people should join together to fight for better jobs and pay.
- With his friend, Chandler Owen, he created *The Messenger*, a magazine for the black community. The articles expressed strong opinions, such as African Americans should not go to war if they have to be segregated in the military.
- Randolph was asked to organize black workers for the Pullman Company, a railway company. He became head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first black labor union. Labor unions are organizations that fight for workers' rights. Sleeping car porters were people who served food on trains, prepared beds, and attended train passengers.
- He planned a large demonstration in 1941 that would bring 10,000 African Americans to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC to try to get better jobs and pay. The plan convinced President Roosevelt to take action. When Roosevelt signed an executive order banning discrimination in defense jobs, Randolph called off the march.
- Succeeded in convincing President Truman to integrate the US military after World War II.
- Originally named the 1963 march, “Emancipation for Jobs.” When other civil rights leaders were not interested, he changed the name to “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” so it would appeal to them.

- His big concerns were jobs, unemployment, and workers' rights. He believed all workers should receive fair pay and be treated with dignity. He thought that true equality would come when people earned enough money to live a decent life.

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Eugene Carson Blake

- He was born on November 7, 1906 in St. Louis, Missouri. He was 57 years old at the time of the March.
- He spent a year studying at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and then graduated from Princeton University in 1928. He spent the following year teaching English in Lahore, Pakistan (it was India at the time.)
- He worked as a Presbyterian minister in New York and California for almost 20 years.
- Stated Clerk (executive head) of the United Presbyterian Church and former president of the National Council of Churches.
- He became the secretary general to the World Council of Churches, an organization which brings together churches around the world to improve people’s lives through better education, health care, and improving human rights.
- On July 4, 1963, he was arrested with 283 other activists for trying to integrate an amusement park. He was the only white leader who spoke at the March who had been arrested in a civil rights action.
- One of three religious leaders invited to speak at the March.
- He was one of the March leaders who pressured John Lewis to change his speech at the last minute. Blake thought the language was too strong.
- Helped integrate national offices of the Presbyterian Church.
- Planned participation of church support for civil rights.
- Justice and fairness were the most important values to him.
- He had been former President Eisenhower’s pastor during his time in office. After the March, Kennedy asked him to meet with Eisenhower to get the former president’s help in convincing lawmakers to pass the civil rights bill. Blake then met with Kennedy for over an hour to report on the Eisenhower meeting.
- He once said, “Ministers must risk being wrong rather than to be silent and safe.”

John Lewis

- He was born on February 21, 1940 outside of Troy, Alabama. At 25 years old, he was the youngest speaker at the time of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
- His father was a sharecropper and Lewis, from an early age, worked alongside him. As a young boy, he practiced his preaching skills on his “congregation” of chickens and even baptized them. Instead of starting farm work in the morning, he would hide and then jump on the school bus when it arrived, so as to not miss school.
- Growing up during segregation, he was puzzled by what he saw around him. Not being allowed into the public library made him furious. His family had to bring food on road trips since they would not be able to stop at restaurants.
- He was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. from the first time he heard him on the radio. Lewis followed the news of the bus boycott in Montgomery which was about fifty miles from his home. He wanted to fight for civil rights, too.
- As a student at Fisk University, he studied how to fight injustice with “nonviolence.” He helped create SNCC (pronounced “snick”), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and then became its national chairman. SNCC was an important civil rights organization that led young people to participate in sit-ins and other protests. Lewis was one of the first students to participate in sit-ins and Freedom Rides.
- He believed that the best way to challenge segregation was by taking action that would get people’s attention, including police and elected officials.
- Between 1960-1966, he was jailed more than 40 times and beaten severely several times.
- He was forced to change parts of his March on Washington speech by government and religious leaders who did not like the angry tone and some of the sentences. They thought it would make people take dangerous action.
- A US Congressman representing Georgia since 1986, Lewis has devoted his life to working for justice.
- The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library Foundation honored him with the Profile in Courage Award for Lifetime Achievement, and President Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

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Walter Reuther

- He was born on September 1, 1907, in Wheeling, West Virginia. He was almost 56 years old at the time of the March.
- The second oldest of five children. His father, who worked in a brewery – a factory that makes beer, was a union member. Walter learned about justice and social issues through lively family debates.
- He was trained as a “tool and die” worker, a skilled worker who makes tools and other machine parts. He moved to Detroit to work in the automobile industry. He saw early on how poorly workers were treated. He believed everyone deserved to be treated with dignity and respect.
- Reuther began to organize workers into the United Auto Workers union so that they could have a voice in the automobile industry. He helped lead strikes during which union members stopped working until their employer such as Ford or Chrysler would negotiate, or discuss their demands.
- The struggle to organize workers was dangerous. Automobile companies such as Ford and Chrysler did not want to have to have unions which would give workers more power. Reuther was attacked while trying to give out union information. Gunmen fired into his home and wounded his right arm.
- He was elected president of the United Auto Workers, a powerful, mostly white labor union, and served 1946-1970.
- As an advisor to four US presidents, he used his influence to help those in need.
- The United Auto Workers Union provided support to Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in their effort to gain better wages and working conditions.
- Reliable friend of the civil rights movement and a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His union gave money to Martin Luther King Jr. to help free hundreds of young people jailed during the Birmingham demonstrations.
- His guiding philosophy: “There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow men. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to do it well.”

- At first he was against the March. He worked closely with President Kennedy and wanted to keep good relationships with him and other government officials. After Kennedy met with him and civil rights leaders, Reuther invited the activists to lunch to discuss plans for moving forward with the demonstration.

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James Farmer

- He was born on January 12, 1920 in Marshall, Texas. He was 43 years old at the time of the March.
- He was the son of a preacher and scholar, and a grandson of a former slave. His father is believed to have been the first black man in Texas to earn a doctoral degree (Ph.D.) He worked as a minister and college professor. The family’s house was full of books and conversations about ideas.
- Farmer did well in school and began attending Wiley College at the age of 14. He was captain of the debate team, whose story is portrayed in the film *The Great Debaters*. He was president of his senior class.
- He first became aware of segregation when, as a young boy, he asked his mother if they could go into a store to buy a drink. She had to explain that they could not because of the color of their skin.
- He wanted to devote his life to making things more fair. During his graduate studies at Howard University, he learned about Mohandas Gandhi, a leader in India who led people to fight for change through nonviolent civil disobedience.
- Farmer created the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942 and became its National Director. CORE was the first organization to use non-violence to fight segregation. He led the first sit-ins, in 1943, and a Freedom Ride in 1947.
- As National Director of CORE, he organized the Freedom Rides of 1961 to challenge segregation in buses and bus stations across different states. Freedom Riders were beaten and arrested. Farmer spent forty days in Mississippi jails in harsh and humiliating conditions. He risked his life in organizing demonstrations.
- He was one of the “Big Six” leaders of the March, but was in jail at the time of the demonstration, having been arrested at a protest in Louisiana. He chose not to leave fellow activists in jail to attend the March. He asked Floyd McKissick, the National Chairman of CORE, to read his speech.
- He ran for US Congress in 1968 but lost the race to Shirley Chisholm, an African-American woman who also supported better access to jobs, healthcare, and education for people of all races.
- Farmer worked in the administration of President Nixon as an assistant secretary in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

- President Clinton awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to him in 1998, a year before Farmer's death.

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Whitney Young

- He was born on July 31, 1921 in Lincoln Ridge, Kentucky. He was 42 years old at time of the March.
- His father was a teacher and head of the Lincoln Institute, a black high school. Young watched his father carefully. His father knew how to talk with white businessmen and government officials to raise money for the school.
- Even though his father was head of a school, Young lived in a segregated world. He had to drink out of separate water fountains, sit in a separate section in the movie theater, and eat in certain restaurants. He was called names on his way to elementary school. He admired how his mother spoke out when she or anyone in her family was treated with disrespect.
- He graduated from Kentucky State College and wanted to go to medical school but not many programs accepted blacks. After college, he taught and coached sports in a high school.
- He served in the Army in World War II. Black soldiers were segregated from whites. Young learned that he had a talent for working out disagreements between black soldiers and white officers.
- Young first became involved in the National Urban League, the second oldest civil rights organization for blacks, when he attended graduate school in social work at the University of Minnesota. The National Urban League was created by blacks and whites to improve conditions for blacks in cities. It is still in existence today.
- After he received his graduate degree, he taught social work at a college and worked as a dean, or head, of a school of social work.
- He stayed involved in the National Urban League and was elected executive director in 1961. Young was very skilled at working with wealthy white people in business, government, and organizations. He knew how to explain the challenges blacks faced and was able to raise large amounts of money so that people could learn job skills, find jobs, and better their health and education.
- He advised three presidents.
- At first he did not want to hold the March because he wanted to keep good relationships with the president and other government officials. He did not want to cause conflicts with them. He eventually agreed to support the March.

Mathew Ahmann

- He was born on September 10, 1931 in St. Cloud, Minnesota. He was the second youngest speaker at the March at 32 years old.
- He grew up in a mostly white community but from an early age took action when he witnessed someone being treated unfairly because of race or religion. When he was a teenager, his cousins made fun of a Jewish woman who was a dinner guest. He demanded that they stop. She stayed in touch after this incident.
- A graduate of St. John's College, he then attended the University of Chicago for graduate studies but left to become a civil rights activist.
- In Chicago, he worked with Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy's brother-in-law, to convince Catholic leaders and church members that they should get involved in the fight for racial justice.
- He created and then became the director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, an organization that encouraged Catholic leaders and church members to learn, discuss, and take action to help attain civil rights for everyone.
- Traveling throughout the United States, he helped create groups all over the country to involve Catholics in the struggle for equal rights.
- He organized the 1963 National Conference on Race and Religion which was the first meeting in which leaders of the three main religious groups of the United States – Jews, Catholics, and Protestants—came together to speak out in favor of civil rights. Martin Luther King Jr. and other March leaders spoke at this historic meeting.
- He is the author of two books, one of which is called, *The New Negro*, and includes writings by well-known black writers such as James Baldwin.
- He was one of three religious leaders invited to speak at the March.
- After protesters were terribly beaten at the 1965 Selma, Alabama march for voting rights, Reverend Ralph Abernathy called for religious leaders to come to Selma to support the protest. Ahmann organized priests, nuns, and other Catholics all over the country to travel to Alabama for a second demonstration to complete the planned route of the march.

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Roy Wilkins

- He was born on August 30, 1901 in St. Louis, Missouri. He was 62 years old at the time of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
- His mother died when he was four years old and he went to live with his uncle and aunt in St. Paul, Minnesota. His uncle taught him that blacks could do well in the United States if they got a good education and stayed out of trouble.
- When he was in college at the University of Minnesota, a young black man was lynched (killed) in Duluth, Minnesota. Wilkins became committed to fighting for racial justice.
- As editor of *The Call*, Kansas City's black newspaper, he made his strong opinions known about the widespread segregation in that city.
- He believed the best way to make things more fair for African Americans was to work through the legal system, the courts, and to challenge unfair laws.
- He went to work for the NAACP in 1931 and became its leader in 1955. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was one of the oldest and most important civil rights organizations in the US and is still in existence today. Wilkins was executive director until 1977 (20 years!)
- He played an important role in challenging segregation through court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this case, the NAACP argued that students could not receive an equal education in segregated schools. Winning the case was a turning point in civil rights history.
- Wanted to stay on good terms with government leaders and not come into conflict with them.
- At first, he did not support the idea of having the March because he did not think it was the best way to achieve equal rights. When it was clear that a main goal of the March was to support a new civil rights law, he decided to support it.
- When he saw that fifteen civil rights leaders had been chosen to plan the March, he chose himself and five others to be the main planners: A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, James Farmer, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and himself. They were called the Big Six.
- He was a journalist and editor before he became a civil rights activist.
- In 1967, President Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz

- Born in a small village in Upper Silesia (which was Germany and is now Poland) on May 10, 1902. He was 61 years old at the March.
- His family was not religious but he became a rabbi and, at 24 years old, the youngest rabbi ever to lead a congregation in Berlin, Germany. He served as a rabbi there for over eleven years. He was so popular that people waited in line to go to his services.
- He wrote and spoke about the dangers of Nazism long before Adolph Hitler came into power in 1933. Under Hitler, the government began to segregate and take away the rights of Jews and other minorities. But many German Jews did not think Hitler was a threat. Prinz urged Jews to leave Germany.
- He was arrested several times and then forced to leave Germany in 1937. With a pregnant wife and two children, he traveled by ship to New York.
- When he became a rabbi of a large congregation in New Jersey in 1939, many new members joined. It was not unusual for 1,000 people to come to a service.
- He worked with national and international organizations on such issues as getting funds for Jews who had lost possessions during World War II, and helping to create the State of Israel. He even visited his former home, Berlin, which had been destroyed during the war.
- President of American Jewish Congress 1958-1966.
- Committed to civil rights struggle. Participated in demonstrations and had close relationships with the black community. In April, 1960, he led a demonstration in front of a Woolworth's in New York City to protest segregation in the South.

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Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

- Born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta Georgia. He was the third youngest speaker at the March at 34 years old.
- Growing up in the segregated south, he faced discrimination. A white man who owned a neighborhood store would not let his son be friends with King. Also, the boys had to go to separate schools.
- He went to Morehouse College like his father, and then was president of his class at Crozier Theological Seminary, a mostly white school. He also received a very difficult degree to earn, a Ph.D., from Boston University.
- He was a young minister in Montgomery, Alabama when Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat to a white person. He was selected to be president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that led the bus boycott after Rosa Parks was arrested.
- King was committed to non-violent resistance based on the teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi who had led India to independence from Great Britain. Non-violent resistance means that you take action to challenge something that isn't fair but you don't use weapons or other forms of violence.
- He believed in loving one's enemy and creating a community based on love.
- Believed active protest and direct action were the best way to end segregation.
- With Bayard Rustin, created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to organize protests and demonstrations against segregation. He was elected president of the organization in 1957.
- Led many protest campaigns, including Project C in Birmingham, Alabama in 1962-1963 to desegregate stores and businesses. Even high school students marched in these demonstrations and provoked a violent reaction from police.
- After President Kennedy introduced a civil rights law, King thought the March would encourage Congress (the people who make our laws) to vote for it.
- FBI “bugged” or wiretapped King's telephones because they thought he was a Communist.

- He was newer to the civil rights movement than some of the other leaders but he was the most well-known.
- He received the Nobel Peace Prize at age 35.