

The March on Washington in the *Century*

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[“Integrate the integration march!”](#) said the August 7, 1963 headline of a short unsigned editorial in the *Century*. The editors joined the National Council of Churches and others in calling for “40,000 white churchmen” to participate in the March on Washington:

A few members of the majority race have honorably taken their place beside their colored brothers in protests against injustice in southern streets, eating places, transportation facilities and jails. Now those of us who have believed these pioneers acted for us can act for ourselves. What if vacation plans had not included a trip to Washington? Plans can be changed! Our churches should encourage and help finance this change.

Noting that “there seems to be no uniform set of directives for participants in the march,” [an August 21 editorial](#) offers a list of 11 suggestions. The first ten are purely logistical; the eleventh is to “pray that the spirit of Christ move in and through the march.”

In the issue that came out the day of the march, the *Century* editorialized twice on the subject. [The lead editorial](#), on the march’s overall symbolism and meaning, includes this:

They march peacefully—not to do violence but to remove the occasions for violence. They march prayerfully, knowing that their cause is just and that they express the moral indignation of millions of Americans who have been deliberately and systematically cut off from the rights which are theirs as men and as American citizens. They march purposefully, not infatuated with marching as an end in itself but moving toward a goal, toward a memorial which promised them a freedom they must now obtain for themselves in resolute and courageous suffering.

A [secondary editorial](#) criticizes the AFL-CIO for declining to endorse the march:

While it is easy to overestimate the importance for Negroes of the Washington demonstration, it is apparently easier for labor chieftains to underestimate the importance for organized labor of making the cause of the disadvantaged their own.

Harold Fey, then the *Century*’s editor, marched that day and [wrote about the experience](#). He saw the event as “a religious event of first importance”:

There were few marching delegations which did not include one or more clergymen. As the delegations moved in a broad stream flowing for hours down Independence and Constitution avenues, they chanted the freedom chant, sang “We Shall Overcome,” often joined in spirituals or in Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” But these were outward signs of religion on the march. The inner quality expressed in subtle ways one had to experience to appreciate. Such courtesy, quiet conviction, patience—yes, even joy—in the face of suffering, deprivation, and struggle against great odds would be impossible without deep faith. Together they attest to the immense power which can be generated by a revolution which explicitly and resolutely refuses to weaken itself by hatred.

Such a revolution is something new in the Western world. It is not surprising that its opponents find it difficult to understand and to measure.

The *Century* ran two more editorials on the march after it took place. On September 4 [it criticized *Meet the Press*](#) for its interview of Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins just before the march:

One question which was put to Wilkins and King in several versions should never have been raised—not because it embarrassed them but because it revealed a total misunderstanding of the nature of the Negro’s struggle and the dimensions of the social revolution. In substance this question and its paraphrases asked whether Negro leadership would moderate its drive for justice if all or substantial parts of the President’s civil rights bill were adopted by Congress. This is a way of saying to the Negro community: “Will you go away and leave us white people alone for a time if we give you part of your rights? How much do we have to pay you for a respite in which you stop asking for more and give us time to make a comfortable adjustment to the concessions we have already made?”

And on September 18, [the editors praised the march](#) as “without example or parallel in American history”—and cited a news report on the many pro-civil-rights letters pastors and churchgoers had been sending to Congress. Then this:

Much mail should be followed by more mail until senators and representatives begin to view the Negro’s struggle—as many of them as yet do not—as this nation’s most critical domestic problem and until they begin to treat the Negro’s plea with honor. Sending an avalanche of letters to Washington is what religious white people should do now, whether the credit for a good civil rights bill redounds to them or not. They owe the Negro this kind of recompense for their long silence and inactivity.

In six editorials and one first-person account, there’s exactly one passing reference to “I Have a Dream”: Fey mentions King’s “stirring prophetic appeal” in a paragraph listing several speeches by religious leaders. (He quotes some of the others but not King’s.) Perhaps it was clearer then than it often seems now that the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the movement that pulled it off were a lot bigger than one man’s dream.