

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #10

While serving a jail sentence for leading a civil rights march in Birmingham, Alabama, in May, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., scribbling in pencil on any paper he could find, composed one of the classic documents of nonviolent civil disobedience: “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” King asked, “Why direct action? There is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth.” The civil rights movement sought, he continued, “to create such a crisis and establish such a creative tension.” Grounding his actions in Christian brotherhood and democratic liberalism, King argued that Americans had confronted a moral choice. They could “preserve the evil system of segregation’ or take the side of “those great wells of democracy...the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

Outraged by the brutality in Birmingham and embarrassed by King’s imprisonment for leading a nonviolent march, President John Kennedy decided that it was time to act. On June 11, 1963, after newly elected Alabama governor George Wallace barred two black students from the state university, Kennedy denounced racism on national television and promised a new civil rights bill. Many black leaders believed that Kennedy’s decision was long overdue, but they nonetheless hailed this “Second Emancipation Proclamation.” That night, Medgar Evers, president of the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP, was shot in the back in his driveway in Jackson, Mississippi, by a white supremacist. The martyrdom of Evers became a spur to further action.

To marshal support for Kennedy’s bill, civil rights leaders adopted a tactic that A. Philip Randolph had first advanced in 1941 – a massive demonstration in Washington, D.C. Under the leadership of Randolph and Bayard Rustin, thousands of volunteers across the country coordinated carpools, “freedom buses,” and “freedom trains.” On August 28, 1963, a quarter of a million people were delivered to the Lincoln Memorial for the officially named March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The March on Washington was the largest civil rights demonstration in American history. To open the program Randolph said, “We are the advance guard of a massive moral revolution for jobs and freedom.”

Although other people primarily did the planning, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the public face of the march. He gave a dramatic speech that captured the imagination of the nation. Standing in front of Lincoln’s statue, King delivered one of the most memorable speeches of the twentieth century. His “I Have a Dream” speech began with his admonition that too many black people lived “on a lonely island of poverty.” King stated eloquently, “I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day...the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.” King ended his speech with the exclamation from a traditional black spiritual – “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!” The sight

of 250,000 blacks and whites marching solemnly together marked the high point of the civil rights movement and confirmed King's position as the leading spokesman for the cause.

Although the March on Washington galvanized public opinion, it changed few congressional votes. Southern Democrat senators continued to block Kennedy's civil rights legislation. Georgia senator Richard Russell, a leader of the opposition, refused to support any bill that would "bring about social equality and intermingling and amalgamation of the races." Then, suddenly, tragedies piled up, one on top of another. In September, 1963 white supremacists bombed a Baptist church in Birmingham, killing four black girls in Sunday school. Fewer than two months later, on November 22, 1963, Kennedy himself lay dead, the victim of assassination.

On assuming the presidency, Lyndon Johnson made passing the civil rights bill a priority. A Southerner from Texas and the former Senate Democrat majority leader, Johnson was renowned for his fierce persuasive style and tough political bargaining. Using moral leverage, the memory of the slain JFK, and his own brand of hardball politics, Johnson overcame a filibuster in the U.S. Senate. In June, 1964 Congress approved the most far-reaching civil rights law since Reconstruction. The keystone of the Civil Rights Act was Title VII. It outlawed discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, national origin, and gender. Another section of the law guaranteed equal access to public accommodations and schools. The law granted new enforcement powers to the U.S. attorney general and established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce the prohibition against job discrimination. The Civil Rights Act was a law with real teeth, but it left untouched the obstacles to black voting rights.