

Mitchell's Musings 9-17-12: March on Washington

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Recently, I came across a recording of a 1963 radio broadcast made a day after the August 28, 1963 March on Washington, an event which most people identify with Martin Luther King's "I Had a Dream" speech. Since August 28th of this year has come and gone, you could say that this musing is about three weeks late. But next year on August 28th, there will undoubtedly be commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the March. So you could also say this musing is over eleven months early. Either way, when the fiftieth anniversary comes, you will hear or see clips of the "I Had a Dream" speech – probably just the end of the speech - which will be represented as the entire event itself or even the purpose of the event.¹ *Such interpretations will be incorrect.*

I will come back to the broadcast later in this musing, although it explains what I have just asserted, but first some background. The March on Washington took place well before the 1964 Civil Rights Act (and other major civil rights legislation) was enacted including Title 7 banning employment discrimination. At the time, despite the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown* school desegregation decision, segregation was still very much in place in the south. You had only to drive south from Washington, DC to encounter Whites Only signs on restaurants in Virginia. Newspaper ads for apartments in Washington newspapers specified the desired race of tenants. The issue of segregation was still in flux, despite the court decisions and sporadic incidents and demonstrations that received national attention.

The Kennedy administration was not thrilled with the prospect of the March on Washington. The March was in fact meant to pressure it and the Congress for legislation and action. At the time, the south had not flipped from being solidly Democratic to solidly Republican.² Kennedy, as a Catholic, already had religion problems in the south which were compounded by federal attempts to enforce anti-segregation court orders. And the 1964 presidential election, which Kennedy would not live to see, was looming.

Recall that Kennedy had won very narrowly in 1960 with a plurality (not a majority) of the popular vote and uncertainty on the morning after Election Day as to whether he even had the necessary Electoral College votes.³ He would need at least some southern votes in 1964. So the administration would have preferred not to have a large demonstration highlighting the race issue on its front lawn.

I happened to be in Washington during the summer of 1963 between my junior and senior years in college, working at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The job was the outcome of a program

¹ There are copyright issues related to the speech. It comes and goes on YouTube as a result, posted and then taken down. At the moment it can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UV1fs8lAbg>.

² President Johnson famously predicted that in signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he was losing the south to the Democrats.

³ A radio newscast from the day after the 1960 election indicates the uncertainty: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il8T0y96LXU>.

promoted by the Kennedy administration to encourage college students to consider careers in public service. After a competitive interview and essay process, if selected, you would be randomly selected to work in this or that government agency; I happened to be assigned as a GS-4 to BLS in a division that produced “wage chronologies.” Wage chronologies were BLS bulletins that summarized union wage provisions in major industries, the product of an era in which union wage settlements were considered to be important economic developments that needed to be tracked.

Most government agencies in Washington, including the BLS, were shut down on the day of the March, so I was free to attend. But it has always been a family joke that I left before King’s dream speech. I did hear it on the car radio driving back to a boarding house at which I was staying in northern Virginia in the \$100 car I had acquired over the summer.⁴

The broadcast to which I referred at the outset was made by Jean Shepherd, a night time humorist and story teller on a New York City radio station.⁵ However, Shepherd devoted most of his August 29, 1963 broadcast to a serious recounting his experience as a marcher. Excerpts from that broadcast have appeared elsewhere but the full recording is available.⁶ A vast collection of recordings from Shepherd’s radio broadcasts have been gathered on archive.org. (You have to search diligently under Jean Shepherd to find them all since the search engine on archive.org isn’t great and the recordings are scattered on that site.) Many of the recordings appear to be from tapes made by fans that were recorded live off the air. They are not of broadcast quality and have hums and background noise. The August 29, 1963 broadcast is one of those audios available.

What the Shepherd broadcast makes clear is that the presentations on a platform at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 were not the key to what happened or intended to be. The gathering itself was the key because it brought together a vast crowd of people from many parts of the country. The logistics of getting people to and from Washington, and taking care of them while they were in Washington, were complex and much could have gone wrong – but didn’t. Given the size of the crowd, most attendees were nowhere near the Lincoln Memorial. Acoustics were not great. And the actual program of speakers and presentations was nowhere near as organized as the logistics just mentioned.

⁴ During most of the summer, I stayed at a fraternity house at George Washington University in a rented room with others who had gotten summer jobs in Washington. But in the last week of August, the fraternity was closed for repairs and I moved to Virginia. Given the price of the car, few of its attributes other than the radio worked as intended. A GS-4 earned a little over \$80 per week as I recall, so the car cost a little more than a week’s pay for a low-level bureaucrat.

⁵ <http://www.flicklives.com/>; <http://bobkaye.com/Shep.html>; <http://www.keyflux.com/shep/>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Shepherd.

⁶ NPR broadcast excerpts on the 40th anniversary of the March as part of a program which can be heard at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1414581>. Excerpts also appeared on a 2-CD tribute to Jean Shepherd issued by NPR under the title “A Voice in the Night” and was sold or offered as a membership perk: <http://www.npr.org/about/press/000324.shepherd.html>. However, the CDs are apparently no longer available for sale.

Indeed, my impression is that the presentations were rather disorganized. I don't recall there being an actual schedule of who would speak when, or at least no such schedule was disseminated. Exactly who would talk when was unclear. And there seemed to be confusion and delay on the speakers' platform as the program progressed. There certainly was no document that said "great speech" will be delivered at the end of the day or at such and such a time, in part because the King speech was not in final form on the eve of the March. As one of the organizers has since reported, the logistics – not the speech – were the priority of March planners.⁷

I recall hearing quite recently an interview on public radio – sorry, I don't have the citation – in which it was reported that because the program was running late, King was asked to cut his remarks – whatever they were going to be – short (which he fortunately didn't do). On the radio broadcast, Shepherd does refer to the King speech as brilliant, but that's about all he said about it. He hardly mentions it. That is, from the viewpoint of someone there, as opposed to someone seeing a TV news or newsreel clip afterwards, the King speech was just part of a larger event. To hear that alternative perspective, I suggest you now go the Shepherd broadcast.⁸ I have edited out the opening of the broadcast which was unrelated to the March. The March section runs 39 minutes.

Part 1: <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10151238062946522>

Part 2: <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10151238086016522>

Ultimately, what matters in Washington is political pressure and that was what was accomplished and what was intended. The fact that a vast gathering could be brought together, and peacefully, in the capital city did push what – after the assassination of the President – became the Johnson administration and the Congress to enact the subsequent civil rights legislation. The idea of the March on Washington was the March, not the speeches. Shepherd experienced the March as an indication that the "battle is damn near over," clearly an historical overstatement in hindsight but an expression of his impression.

In any case, on August 28, 1963, when I left before the King speech – and even after hearing it on the radio – I didn't think I had missed out on something. The alternative view came about only after the news media decided that the speech was really what had happened rather than that the March on Washington contained the speech. In the new view, the March on Washington was just to provide an audience for the speech. Once that interpretation became the standard verdict of history, it created the family joke that daddy went to the March on Washington but left before the King speech.

⁷ Clarence B. Jones, "On Martin Luther King Day, remembering the first draft of 'I Have a Dream,'" *Washington Post*, January 11, 2011. "The logistical preparations for the march were so burdensome that the speech was not a priority for us. Early in the summer, Martin asked some trusted colleagues... for their thoughts on his address, and during his weeks in New York, we had discussions about it. But it wasn't until mid-August that Martin had Stanley (Levison) and I (Clarence B. Jones) work up a draft. And though I had that material with me when I arrived at the Willard Hotel in Washington for a meeting on the evening of Tuesday, Aug. 27, Martin still didn't know what he was going to say."

⁸ A glossary on the next page provides information on some names and terms used in the broadcast.

Glossary: Since listeners to the 1963 broadcast may not be familiar with names and phrases cited, here is a listing:

V-E Day. Victory in Europe Day, May 8, 1945. Surrender of Nazi Germany ending World War II fighting in Europe but not in the Pacific Theater.

V-J Day. Surrender of Japan, ending World War II. *On August 14, 1945, it was announced that Japan had surrendered unconditionally to the Allies, effectively ending World War II. Since then, both August 14 and August 15 have been known as "Victory over Japan Day," or simply "V-J Day." The term has also been used for September 2, 1945, when Japan's formal surrender took place aboard the U.S.S. Missouri, anchored in Tokyo Bay. Coming several months after the surrender of Nazi Germany, Japan's capitulation in the Pacific brought six years of hostilities to a final and highly anticipated close.* Source: <http://www.history.com/topics/v-j-day>.

Marion Anderson. Famed black singer. Having her sing at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 was symbolic because of a 1939 incident: *In 1939 her manager tried to set up a performance for her at Washington, D.C.'s Constitution Hall. But the owners of the hall, the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.), informed Anderson and her manager that no dates were available. That was far from the truth. The real reason for turning Anderson away lay in a policy put in place by the D.A.R. that committed the hall to being a place strictly for white performers. When word leaked out to the public about what had happened, an uproar ensued, led in part by Eleanor Roosevelt, who invited Anderson to perform instead at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday. In front of a crowd of more than 75,000, Anderson offered up a riveting performance that was broadcast live for millions of radio listeners.* Source: <http://www.biography.com/people/marian-anderson-9184422>.

John Wingate: Reporter and interviewer on WOR, the same station that carried Jean Shepherd's program. Wingate was well known at the time, at least in New York, although much later he met an unhappy fate. Source: http://books.google.com/books?id=1ucCAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA50&ots=ticeYd6_NU&dq=john%20wingate%20wor&pg=PA50#v=onepage&q=john%20wingate%20wor&f=false

Lester Smith: Another WOR reporter.