Legacy of the Marchers on Washington

Excerpt from Speech by President Obama at the "Let Freedom Ring" Ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington

Five decades ago today, Americans came to this honored place to lay claim to a promise made at our founding: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In 1963, almost 200 years after those words were set to paper, a full century after a great war was fought and emancipation proclaimed, that promise -- those truths -- remained unmet. And so they came by the thousands from every corner of our country, men and women, young and old, blacks who longed for freedom and whites who could no longer accept freedom for themselves while witnessing the subjugation of others.

[...]

On a hot summer day, they assembled here, in our nation’s capital, under the shadow of the Great Emancipator -- to offer testimony of injustice, to petition their government for redress, and to awaken America’s long-slumbering conscience.

We rightly and best remember Dr. King’s soaring oratory that day, how he gave mighty voice to the quiet hopes of millions; how he offered a salvation path for oppressed and oppressors alike. His words belong to the ages, possessing a power and prophecy unmatched in our time.
But we would do well to recall that day itself also belonged to those ordinary people whose names never appeared in the history books, never got on TV. Many had gone to segregated schools and sat at segregated lunch counters. They lived in towns where they couldn’t vote and cities where their votes didn’t matter. They were couples in love who couldn’t marry, soldiers who fought for freedom abroad that they found denied to them at home. They had seen loved ones beaten, and children fire-hosed, and they had every reason to lash out in anger, or resign themselves to a bitter fate.

And yet they chose a different path. In the face of hatred, they prayed for their tormentors. In the face of violence, they stood up and sat in, with the moral force of nonviolence. Willingly, they went to jail to protest unjust laws, their cells swelling with the sound of freedom songs. A lifetime of indignities had taught them that no man can take away the dignity and grace that God grants us. They had learned through hard experience what Frederick Douglass once taught -- that freedom is not given, it must be won, through struggle and discipline, persistence and faith.

That was the spirit they brought here that day... That was the spirit that they carried with them, like a torch, back to their cities and their neighborhoods. That steady flame of conscience and courage that would sustain them through the campaigns to come -- through boycotts and voter registration drives and smaller marches far from the spotlight; through the loss of four little girls in Birmingham, and the carnage of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the agony of Dallas and California and Memphis. Through setbacks and heartbreaks and gnawing doubt, that flame of justice flickered; it never died.

And because they kept marching, America changed. Because they marched, a Civil Rights law was passed. Because they marched, a Voting Rights law was signed. Because they marched, doors of opportunity and education swung open so their daughters and sons could finally imagine a life for themselves beyond washing somebody else’s laundry or shining somebody else’s shoes. Because they marched, city councils changed and state legislatures changed, and Congress changed, and, yes, eventually, the White House changed.

Because they marched, America became more free and more fair -- not just for African Americans, but for women and Latinos, Asians and Native Americans; for Catholics, Jews, and Muslims; for gays, for Americans with a disability. America changed for you and for me, and the entire world drew strength from that example.

[...]
Those are the victories they won, with iron wills and hope in their hearts. That is the transformation that they wrought, with each step of their well-worn shoes. That’s the debt that I and millions of Americans owe those [...] people who could have given up and given in, but kept on keeping on, knowing that “weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

On the battlefield of justice, men and women without rank or wealth or title or fame would liberate us all in ways that our children now take for granted, as people of all colors and creeds live together and learn together and walk together, and fight alongside one another, and love one another, and judge one another by the content of our character in this greatest nation on Earth.

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

1. What founding promise remained unmet in America in 1963?
   
   A. Both men and women have the right to vote on their government.
   B. All men are created equal and have certain unalienable rights.
   C. All men should have equal access to education and opportunities.
   D. No person shall be held as a slave in the United States of America.

2. What does President Obama describe at the beginning of the speech?
   
   A. the marchers on Washington and the injustices they faced
   B. how the March on Washington affected America decades later
   C. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech at the March on Washington
   D. boycotts, voter registration drives, and small marches

3. The March on Washington led to new legislation that was a victory for equality. What evidence from the speech supports this conclusion?
   
   A. African Americans continued to march in their home towns.
   B. Boycotts and voter registration drives were organized after the March.
   C. Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws were signed because people marched.
   D. America became more fair for Latinos, women, and gay people.

4. What is one of the main reasons why President Obama delivered this speech?
   
   A. to encourage Americans to never give up the fight for justice
   B. to remember Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech
   C. to dedicate a monument in memory of the March on Washington
   D. to remember and honor the legacy of the marchers on Washington

5. What is this speech mostly about?
   
   A. how the March on Washington changed America
   B. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech at the March on Washington
   C. the ordinary people from across the U.S. who marched on Washington
   D. how the March on Washington brought about a Civil Rights law
6. Read the following sentence: “On the battlefield of justice, men and women without rank or wealth or title or fame would **liberate** us all in ways that our children now take for granted, as people of all colors and creeds live together and learn together and walk together, and fight alongside one another, and love one another, and judge one another by the content of our character in this greatest nation on Earth.”

As used in this sentence, what does the word “**liberate**” mean?

A  to control  
B  to free  
C  to steal  
D  to open

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

In the 1960s, many African Americans responded to their oppression with nonviolence,  ________ they had been treated violently.

A  even though  
B  as a result  
C  initially  
D  especially

8. Describe an example of how African Americans practiced nonviolent protest.

________________________________________________________________________

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________________________________________________________________________
9. Explain how the March on Washington changed America over time.

______________________________________________________________________
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______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

10. "Those are the victories they won, with iron wills and hope in their hearts. That is the transformation that they wrought, with each step of their well-worn shoes. That’s the debt that I and millions of Americans owe those [...] people who could have given up and given in, but kept on keeping on, knowing that ‘weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.’”

Explain what debt Americans owe the marchers on Washington, and why they owe that debt. Support your answer using information from the speech.

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Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1260

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8. Describe an example of how African Americans practiced nonviolent protest.

**Suggested answer:** African Americans practiced nonviolent protest by willingly going to jail to protest unjust laws.

9. Explain how the March on Washington changed America over time.

**Suggested answer:** Over time, the March on Washington made America “more free and more fair” for all its citizens. This change was brought about through a Civil Rights law; a Voter Rights law; increased opportunity and education for minorities; and changes in city councils, state legislature, Congress, and the White House.

10. “Those are the victories they won, with iron wills and hope in their hearts. That is the transformation that they wrought, with each step of their well-worn shoes. That’s the debt that I and millions of Americans owe those [...] people who could have given up and given in, but kept on keeping on, knowing that ‘weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.’”

Explain what debt Americans owe the marchers on Washington, and why they owe that debt. Support your answer using information from the speech.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Students should indicate that Americans owe the marchers on Washington for their bravery in marching on Washington and their bravery in continuing to campaign for equality in the face of violent resistance and adversity. Americans owe these marchers for helping to change America for the better, making it a country “more free and more fair” for all Americans.