

# NEW REPUBLIC

From the Stacks: A 1963 Profile of the Man Who Led the March Washington

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by Murray Kempton | August 27, 2013

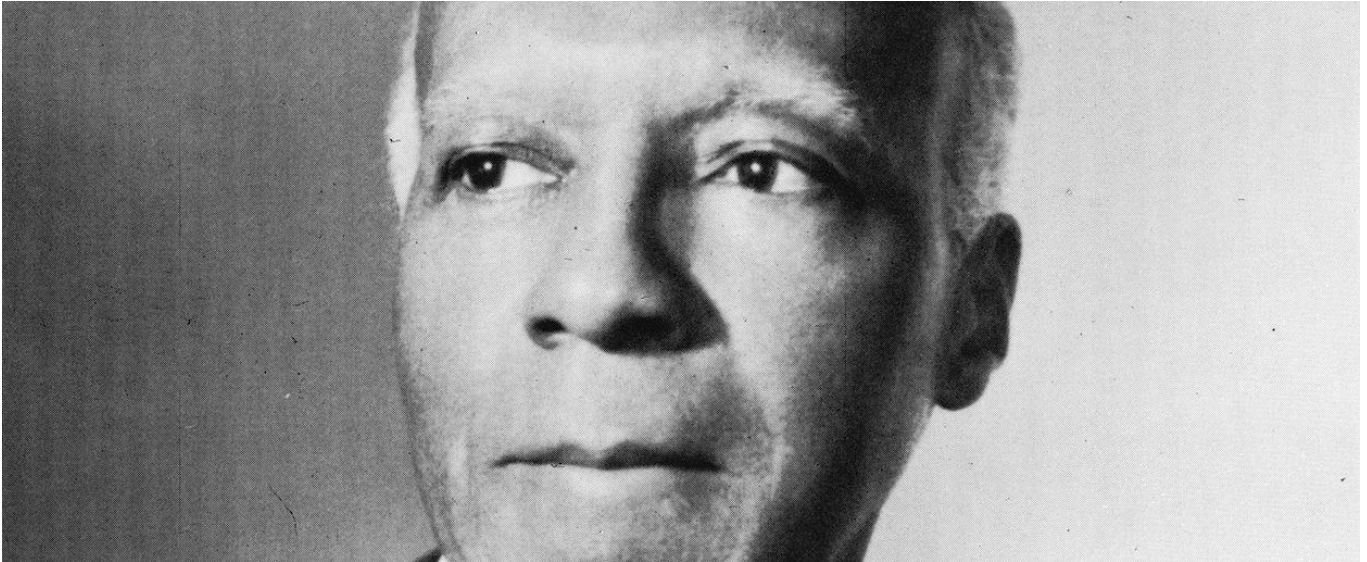


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It is not Asa Philip Randolph's style to embarrass presidents of the United States in large assemblies; and so, when he came as a vice president of the AFL-CIO to the White House along with 300 other labor leaders, Mr. Randolph's brief comment on the President's televised speech on civil rights two nights before was at once a stately compliment and a measured reminder: "It was a magnificent speech, but it was, *unfortunately*, made rather late."

When the President had left the room and his audience was moving toward the outer air, a Southern "brother" approached Philip Randolph and asked where he could find someone from the Labor Department. "I got a problem to tell him about," he said. "The colored people are doing all right in my state. It's the white people I'm worried about. They're being discriminated against."

Randolph gravely escorted this stray over to the nearest Labor Department official and went away. He returned to Harlem amused but unsurprised; he is the only figure in the American labor movement who has, for 20 years, been able continually to surprise his country, but nothing surprises him.

His Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is aged and fading; it never had more than 15,000 members and no more than 5,000 of these are working now. Porters with 30 years of service endlessly deal the brittle old playing cards in their recreation room on 125th Street in New York, awaiting their chance for an odd, infrequent extra run. The porters may strike any day for the 40-hour work week which they alone among the operating railroad crafts have not achieved. They can expect the other unions to support their picket lines; this little group of old men could produce a national railroad strike. Nothing is new about their headquarters except the fresh picket signs.

The porter has always been poor and a menial; segregation created his job; the Pullman Company hired Negroes as porters because Negroes were inexpensive. And for most of the 37 years of their union's history, the porters have taxed themselves for campaigns to destroy segregation on the railroads, but they seem to have been defeated by economic history. Their union has raised their

pay scale to a basic \$436 a month which has made a porter's job one fit for white men, so fit in fact that occasionally a white youth comes to the Brotherhood in search of a union card; it cannot be given him, because there are not enough jobs for the old members, let alone new ones. There will be no white porters, and there will be no Negro engineers; the rule for employment on the railroads is not opportunity but seniority.

World War II was the best time they have known as workers. They used its rewards to finance Randolph's March-on-Washington movement, whose threat in 1943 won from Franklin D. Roosevelt the executive order, which set up the wartime Fair Employment Practices Committee.

The First Freedom Rides into North and South Carolina and Tennessee were planned in Randolph's office in 1946. Bayard Rustin, a veteran of that first adventure into jail, remembers that everyone else had discouraged him until he came to Randolph. "It doesn't matter if you only get 18 people," Randolph said then. "If you go down there, other people will rise and follow." He was looking 17 years ahead as though they were the next day.

Ralph Bunche remembers traveling to Atlanta on the Seaboard line in 1947. South of Washington he went to the diner and was shown a table behind a partition. He looked at it, announced that he had not lived quite long enough yet to accept segregation and went back to his room.

"About half an hour later, my door buzzer buzzed. I opened it and there were two sleeping car porters and a waiter from the dining car with trays neatly covered and they told me that they had decided to bring me this food, because no Negro, in their view, who refused to eat at that Jim Crow table would ever grow hungry on a train where they served. They didn't mention it, but I took it that the food was with the compliments of the company."

The Brotherhood Building on 125th Street was the headquarters of Thomas Patterson, Eastern Supervisor of the Sleeping Car Porters Union, who once traveled to Wilmington, North Carolina, to negotiate with the Atlantic Coast Line. He was ejected from its dining car for refusing to sit at the segregated table. The next morning, Patterson completed his union business with a Coast Line lawyer; that afternoon, he sued the Line for his humiliation on the diner. The railroad settled out of court and removed for all time its Jim Crow partition; Patterson gave his profits to the Brotherhood.

In 1955, Edward D. Nixon, a Pullman porter, summoned the Negro community of Montgomery, Alabama, to boycott its buses. Nixon knew that it would be politic to choose one of the Negro ministers as leader of the boycott. The youngest and a stranger among them was Martin Luther King of the Dexter Street Baptist Church.

"He didn't say much, and I didn't know whether to trust him. But he had the richest church and he could hurt us," Nixon remembered. "So then and there, I nominated him to head our committee. I figured on pushing him out so far that he couldn't run away. And, with that bad guess, we got Moses."

Such is the history which enfolds this old command post set away in a Harlem that has changed hardly at all. Three floors down are the displays of studios that offer tap, ballet and other lessons in how to escape to the great world, and the advertisements of employment offices that offer jobs for maids in New Jersey.

"What was your class at Harvard, Phil?" Franklin D. Roosevelt asked once, bemused by the massively cultivated tone of a man whose only degree was from Cookman College, a Negro high school in Florida. "Who is Randolph?" a World War II government lawyer asked as he brought in draft after draft of an FEPC order in 1943 only to be told that "Randolph" was not yet satisfied that any of them went far enough.

"I wish you hadn't said that, Mr. Randolph," Harry Truman answered when Randolph told him in 1948 that he would advise every young Negro to refuse to serve in the Army so long as it was segregated. Randolph answered that he was sorry to have to say it; and, when President Truman was restored to calm, he signed the order, which integrated the armed forces.

In 1951, William Mills, a Pullman porter, escorted a detachment of American soldiers into his car at Spartansburg, South Carolina. The sergeant was a Negro; most of the men in his command were white. One of the white boys put his head out of the window and asked in the accent of the South, "Sergeant, what time we supposed to get off." The sergeant answered and turned to see William Mills looking at him. "Yes," the sergeant said. "It's true. It's true."

Randolph is 74, thinner than he used to be. Men who have worked with him for 30 years call him "Chief" and treat him like a piece of old china; he tires more than he used to and lies down for a nap in the afternoon, like any country lawyer.

His only vanity is his manners. He has lived all his life in Harlem; he travels to the outside world as the ambassador of a Negro union. He carries a courtesy so old-fashioned that the white men with whom he negotiates are sometimes driven to outsized rages by the shock that anyone so polite could cling so stubbornly to what he believes; it was from such a shock presumably that George Meany breached the customary decorum of an AFL-CIO convention in 1959 by rasping, "Just who elected you, Phil, to represent all the American Negroes?" Randolph, almost alone on the convention floor, had been persisting in his insistence that the AFL-CIO had been derelict in its promises about civil rights.

"Every now and then," says Bayard Rustin, "I think he permits good manners to get in the way and that he even prefers them to sound tactics. Once I complained about that and he answered, 'Bayard, we must with good manners accept everyone. Now is the time for us to learn good manners. We will need them when this is over, because we must show good manners after we have won'."

Yet the Black Muslims trust Randolph more than they do any other Negro leader. When he organized a neighborhood committee on Harlem's economic problems, he invited Malcolm X, the local Muslim prophet, to join. There were objections from the respectable. Randolph replied that when any group of citizens offered a representative, it "would be most improper not to recognize him, even though it will, of course, be most unfortunate if some of the ministers decide they can't go along."

Malcolm X came to his office. Randolph patiently explained how the Negro and the white will have to live together and how wrong he thought the Muslims were not to think so. Then he congratulated the Muslims on their campaign against whiskey and narcotics. "That," he said gravely, "may be the greatest contribution any of us have ever made," and arose to help Malcolm X on with his coat and see him to the door. Malcolm X has said since that all Negro leaders are confused, but that Randolph is less confused than any of them. Last spring the Muslims put a picture of this pacifist on the cover of their weekly journal.

"When Randolph began," says Bayard Rustin, "the Negro leader had the terrible problem of living by his wits. It was very important that there be one man who could not be corrupted. That man was Randolph. Even now, any time you have a plan and don't quite trust yourself, you go to Randolph and, if you are fooling yourself morally, you can trust him to point it out."

Randolph suddenly appears as the only figure who can reconcile the painful personal differences that have fallen upon the Negro protest movement at the height of its sweep and its fashion. We confront one of those occasions familiar in all revolutionary movements when doctrinal differences pass over into personal quarrels. Its moment of revelation came just after the murder of Medgar Evers, Mississippi secretary of the NAACP. Martin Luther King called an NAACP official to suggest

that together they proclaim a day of national mourning and self-examination and was told that he was always rushing into cases where he had no place or business.

The alliance between King and the NAACP has always been uneasy. They have moved by different roads in the same direction. King mainly in the streets, the NAACP in the courts. King's young can seem irresponsible to the NAACP's middle-aged; and the NAACP's middle-aged can seem stodgy to King's young.

Randolph is alone among these leaders because he neither feels hostility for nor excites it in any other of them. He is a pacifist in a native American tradition; before most members of King's non-violent army were born, he was reminding the Negro of Thoreau's prescription to cast the total vote with feet and voice along with the ballot. He has a natural sympathy for King. Still, there are ways in which he is more moderate than the NAACP. While the association has been in open war with the AFL-CIO, Randolph has kept his friends there, offending them only on matters of principle. The porters remain as they have always been, moderate in the particular, which involves manners, and radical in the general, which involves principle.

Not even a malignant imagination could assign Randolph one side or another in the quarrel between King and the NAACP. King he judges to be not just a modest man but a humble one, which, for him, disposes of the NAACP's complaint. On the other side, he reminds the radical young how important it is to respect the association and Roy Wilkins, its executive secretary. "We must cultivate Roy," he tells them. "The association is the most important of all our organizations." He respects King because he has roused the poor Negro with results more consequential than any leader before him; and he respects the NAACP because it reaches the Negro middle class and can call upon its local chapters for hundreds of thousands of dollars in a real crisis; there is no other resource like this one.

Two months ago, Randolph had announced that he would call 100,000 Negroes to Washington to demonstrate against unemployment in October; it had seemed then just an echo of his 1943 march on Washington and scarcely relevant. Wilkins and King had different concerns and higher priorities, and without them, Randolph seemed reduced to the depleted resources of the porters. But then President Kennedy introduced his civil rights bill; Washington had again become the center and Randolph's march the only certain item on the movement's agenda this summer. Randolph moved his march to August; he and King agreed to widen its scope to cover the civil rights bill. There was suddenly the surprising prospect that Congress would debate these bills with thousands of Negroes standing outside.

Randolph and others were called again to the White House on June 22, just before the President was to leave for Europe. Mr. Kennedy said that he hoped that it wouldn't be necessary for Negroes to come to Washington in great groups while the debate was going on. Philip Randolph answered that he was afraid the choice was no longer whether Negroes came to Washington or not. "The choice, Mr. President, is between a controlled and non-violent demonstration and an uncontrolled and violent one."

Mr. Kennedy answered that a President had many responsibilities and he wanted it made clear that he was not inviting them. Randolph's manners instructed him that Mr. Kennedy was talking for the record.

He returned to plan a march that would be unlimited in aim, and that would remember above all the needs of all the poor and displaced, whatever their color.

"The Negro people are just one other depressed area," he said the other day. "As long as there is unemployment, it's going to hit us. The Negro is in the position of the white hod carrier and the

white longshoreman. I should like all the unemployed to come with us. We complain because the building trades have no room for Negroes, but the real trouble now is that these unions are designed for profit through scarcity. If the crafts were open to us, that could not, in the present economy, create more than 40,000 jobs.

"When we have won, there will remain the Negro sharecropper. We shall end, great as this is, with a very sharp disillusionment when the great rallies are over. We had this experience with sitdowns in the '30's. We are basically a working-class group; we will not move unless we move with the rest of the working class."

More than anything else, Philip Randolph said, he would like to bring the displaced miners of Hazard, Kentucky, to Washington with him. He was silent just a moment, contemplating what all this sudden energy could mean, not just to the Negro, but to the whole United States. His secretary came in and reminded him that it was time for his afternoon nap. The Pullman porter, weary and depleted, has raised himself for just this one last effort to redeem his country.

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