

August 28 - A Story of American Struggle

Written by U. S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.)
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WASHINGTON - Next year this nation will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington on August 28, 2013. Many of you will be on your way to DC to honor the legacy of a movement that helped liberate, not only African Americans but all Americans from the chains of legalized segregation.

Pictured: U.S. Representative John Lewis

As we approach this significant moment in our history, I challenge you to dig even deeper into your own legacy and reflect upon the importance that this one day-- August 28th--has played in our history. You will find that its history reads like a chronicle of the modern African American story.

It was on August 28, 1955, that a 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till was kidnapped from his uncle's home in Money, Mississippi and lynched. Many historians mark his death as the launch of the modern-day Civil Rights Movement in America. Just a few months later on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks' action would inspire the boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery,

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Alabama that lasted 381 days.

On August 28, 1957, Strom Thurmond, a Republican senator from South Carolina and a staunch segregationist held the longest filibuster any one senator ever conducted to block passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The bill was written by then Senate Majority Leader, Lyndon Johnson, and originally devised as an attempt to mandate voting rights for African Americans by outlawing intimidation and coercion at the polls. The filibuster ended with alterations to the bill, but it did not stop its passage. It was ultimately signed into law by President Dwight Eisenhower, establishing the Civil Rights Commission and the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Those two agencies continue to play powerful roles in helping to ensure that the voting rights and civil rights of African Americans and all Americans are enforced to this day.

On August 28, 1963, Dr. King gave his historic I Have A Dream Speech on the National Mall at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was a testament to the power of non-violent resistance. But just one year later on August 28, 1964, acts of police brutality incited rioting in Philadelphia. Over 300 were injured and over 700 arrested. Altogether seven American cities experienced rioting that summer including the Harlem riots and, Rochester, New York and those in Paterson and Elizabeth City, New Jersey. Violence struck again on the 28th in 1968 outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago due to another episode of police brutality.

By midday on August 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed the New Orleans coast with 145 mile an hour winds prompting a mandatory evacuation of Orleans Parish. And finally on August 28, 2008, as if to link this great past to a turning point in America's future, Barack Obama became the first African American Democratic nominee for President of the United States.

The story of August 28 tells a powerful tale of the African American struggle to demand respect for human dignity in America. I was there when Dr. King pricked the moral conscience of the nation calling us to lay down the burdens of hate and division. As the last remaining speaker from the March on Washington I can tell you that the lessons of that make it plain that we cannot defeat the adversaries of justice in one day, a week or a year. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime. We must dedicate ourselves to this higher calling and stay in the struggle. The only way to make a difference is to get involved and stay engaged, through the highs and lows, the easy times and the difficult struggles. That is the lesson of August 28th. We have to keep on pushing and pulling knowing without a doubt that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it always bend toward justice."

That is why we must vote in November and vote like never before, not because we have gotten everything we ever wanted from the political process. But because, if we do not join forces together and continue to take action, we cannot ever expect to get what we so rightly deserve.