

A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939–1963

Scott A. Sandage

Around 1910 the graduating eighth graders in Omega, Virginia, earned five dollars at a taffy pull and elected a boy named Oscar to buy a picture for their school. At a store in a nearby town, he chose a dandy one in an ornate frame. The clerk asked, "Are you sure you want that one?" Oscar was sure; he went back and hung it in the school. "The next morning . . . the teacher came, and she was horrified," Oscar's widow recalls. "The pupils went home at lunchtime and told their parents. By afternoon there was great commotion about it," and the school board expelled Oscar the next day. The ornate frame held a portrait of Abe Lincoln. The boy was soon reinstated once his guardian reminded the school board that McGuffey's reader told nothing of Lincoln's crimes against the Old South, still a living memory in Omega. Oscar graduated having learned "a stern lesson in intolerance." Thirty years later, as Franklin D. Roosevelt's assistant secretary of the interior, Oscar L. Chapman did not hesitate when a civil rights leader asked permission to use the Lincoln Memorial for an open-air concert by contralto Marian Anderson, whom the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) had refused to book into Constitution Hall because she was black.¹

On Easter Sunday 1939, Anderson sang to an integrated crowd of seventy-five thousand at the Lincoln Memorial: "My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, To thee we sing." Not "Of thee I sing," as the lyric usually goes, but "*To thee we*

Scott A. Sandage is a Ph.D. candidate in United States history at Rutgers University. This essay received the Louis Pelzer Memorial Award for 1993.

For their challenges and suggestions, I am grateful to T. J. Jackson Lears, John R. Gillis, Dee Garrison, David Levering Lewis, David Thelen, and, particularly, John Whiteclay Chambers II. I also thank David S. Jasper, Reginald L. Allen, Cindy W. Anderson, Susan Armeny, Rudolph M. Bell, Carol F. Helstosky, Rhys Isaac, Suzanne M. Kaufman, Glen D. Kuecker, James L. Livingston, Jacquelyn C. Miller, Brian E. Roberts, John B. Sandage, Shirley M. Sandage, Thomas L. Slaughter, Sarah McNair Vosmeier—and David W. Blight, David Glassberg, Mark H. Leff, Robert E. McGlone, and the other referees for the *Journal of American History*.

¹ Ann Chapman interview by Scott A. Sandage, Nov. 6, 1989, transcript pp. 3–4 (in Scott A. Sandage's possession). Oscar Chapman recounted his expulsion at the time of Marian Anderson's concert. See *Washington Daily News*, April 6, 1939, p. 29.

sing." The change made the national hymn subtly political, painting "land of liberty" as more aspiration than description and catching both the communalism and conflict of that famous day. White editors and Washington power brokers praised the concert as a stirring but welcome end to an embarrassing controversy. But black leaders saw it as an exciting beginning: an epiphany that revealed a format for mass politics. "We are on the right track," wrote Mary McLeod Bethune the next day. "Through the Marian Anderson protest concert we made our triumphant entry into the democratic spirit of American life."²

Tactically, the modern civil rights movement came of age on Easter Sunday 1939. The concert was not the first African-American political use of Lincoln's memory, nor even the first civil rights gathering at his memorial. But it was, significantly, the first black mass action to evoke laudatory national publicity and earn a positive place in American public memory (our sometimes collective, always political sense of our past). Without fiery speeches or banners, without even mentioning the DAR, black organizers transformed a recital of sacred music at a national shrine into a political rally. In an era obsessed with defining Americanism, activists successfully portrayed their adversary as un-American. It was a formula civil rights activists and other protesters would repeat at the Lincoln Memorial in more than one hundred big and small rallies in subsequent decades—most notably in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom when Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed his Dream from the steps where Marian Anderson had sung.

This essay argues that African Americans' struggles to hold a series of rallies at the Lincoln Memorial between 1939 and 1963 constituted a tactical learning experience that contributed to the civil rights movement's strategies of nonviolent action. Black protesters refined a politics of memory at the Lincoln Memorial. Within the sacred, national space of the memorial, activists perfected a complex ritual of mass politics, one that exploited the ambiguities of cherished American values to circumvent opposition, unify coalitions, and legitimate black voices in national politics. Memory and ritual have been central concepts in the writing of cultural history but remain mostly unexplored in studies of black activism after 1940; this essay looks toward a cultural history of the civil rights movement. It is necessarily a dual inquiry into not only political tactics but also political imagery—in particular, the ambivalent relationship between African Americans and the icon called Abraham Lincoln. Blacks strategically appropriated Lincoln's memory and monument as political weapons, in the process layering and changing the public meanings of the hero and his shrine. But this political style was double-edged. The amalgam of a ritualized format, a sacred and public site, and nationalistic imagery constrained

² The subtle change in lyrics has not been noted by other scholars but is clearly discernible on the radio broadcast recording. See "Marian Anderson Concert at the Lincoln Memorial," April 9, 1939, tape RWA-2850, NBC radio collection (Division of Recorded Sound, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). *Washington Post*, April 10, 1939, p. 8; Mary McLeod Bethune to Charles H. Houston, April 10, 1939, folder 4, box 1-1, Marian Anderson / DAR Controversy Collection (Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University Library, Washington, D.C.). Although the collection is labeled "Marian Anderson / DAR Controversy Collection," it actually consists of the papers of the Marian Anderson Citizens' Committee.

activists even as it empowered them. The power of these protests always lay in their inherent tensions between celebration and confrontation, between commemoration and politics, between sacred and profane.³

The Lincoln Memorial may be the best American example of what Pierre Nora has called a “memory site”: a place where we struggle over tensions between our experience of the past (memory) and our organization of it (history). Ritual is a powerful weapon in these contests because it can be used conservatively or radically, to confirm or to transform social arrangements by affixing useful meanings onto sites and symbols. Civic leaders, for example, often try to forge a usable past by erecting monuments. But as Oscar Chapman’s school expulsion attests, symbols such as Abraham Lincoln are always contested. Thus, memory sites are loci of struggle between the official groups that often create them and the vernacular groups that inevitably interpret and reinterpret them in competing ways. This essay employs John Bodnar’s terms “official” and “vernacular” because they convey both the political essence of memory formation and the reality of unequal power relationships among competitors.⁴

However, prevailing concepts of public memory cannot fully absorb the interactions among the diverse political actors at the Lincoln Memorial. Architects, bureaucrats, editors, Hollywood filmmakers, patriotic societies, presidents, and protesters struggled against one another—frequently by cooperating with one another—to define often irreconcilable memories of Abraham Lincoln. Such paradoxical alliances defy our analytical categories. Further, the Lincoln Memorial case forces us to grapple with the centrality of race in the making of American public memory. When black protesters worked with the Department of the Interior to arrange Anderson’s Lincoln Memorial concert, what kind of memory was being made? Official or vernacular? White or black? Even within distinct categories of actors, such as bureaucrats or black protesters, internal differences of motive, style, and historical interpretation make it difficult to speak of collective memory with any precision. Yet our past is composed of broadly resonant cultural moments like the 1939 Anderson concert and the marches on Washington.

A cultural history of civil rights struggles must wrestle with these dilemmas, and it must analyze blacks’ symbolic tactics in terms of the cultural mood that made Americans receptive to their appeals for the first time since Reconstruction. This essay views the 1939 concert and 1963 march as brackets around what Warren I. Susman described as “a new era of nationalism,” a time when depression and war kindled a search for common values and an “American Way of Life.” But Susman imagined cul-

³ The logistical benefits of the memorial may be an additional factor in protesters’ choosing it; the shrine’s steps are an ideal speaker’s platform, and the adjacent open spaces accommodate large crowds, albeit with broken sight lines. However, crowds of more than ten thousand were a rarity before 1963, and if this essay’s thesis holds, by then protesters’ choice of site was already a matter of tradition and symbolic strategy, not logistics.

⁴ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* (no. 26, Spring 1989), 7–25. For an overview of recent work on public memory, see David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington, 1990). On my use of ritual, see note 14 below. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992), esp. 13–20.

tural nationalism as merely underpinning a Cold War consensus that curbed dissent until the militant 1960s. Likewise, some critics of the civil rights movement argue that accommodation and coalitions with white liberals led inevitably to co-optation and fragmentation.⁵

Such views overlook exactly what studies of ritual and memory can show—that it was often activists who did the co-opting. Protesters mobilized mainstream symbols to further alternative ends, to constitute (not just reflect) shared beliefs, and to open spaces for social change. It was precisely the unrelenting nationalism that reigned from the 1930s to the 1960s that finally offered black activists a cultural language to speak to white America and to elicit support. The black church and Gandhian non-violence were not the movement's only wellsprings of unity and strength; the stories and values of American history were equally vital resources. The famous picket sign, "I AM A MAN," may have been morally compelling, but winning political and legal rights for blacks required a more focused message: I AM AN AMERICAN. Nowhere was this idea dramatized more vividly than in the Lincoln Memorial protests held from 1939 to 1963.

Among the most conspicuous gaps in the large historical literature on Abraham Lincoln, man and symbol, is the lack of any sustained analysis of the dynamic and complex relationship between African Americans and Lincoln's memory in the 128 years since his death.⁶ The Lincoln Memorial and the foremost civil rights organization of the twentieth century both originated in impulses to honor Lincoln on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, February 12, 1909. During the week of Lincoln's centennial, while Congress debated proposals to erect a national monument, civil rights pioneers issued their famous "Lincoln Birthday Call" for a meeting to organize what became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The monument and movement were in this sense twinned, but their incompatible interpretations of Abraham Lincoln contributed directly to the rise of a racial politics

⁵ A useful overview of recent work is Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review*, 96 (April 1991), 456–71. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), 150–83; Warren I. Susman with Edward Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago, 1989), 19–37; Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London, 1985), 87–97. For insights into the challenges that oppositional politics present to critical theory, see Gerald Graff, "Co-optation," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York, 1989), 168–81.

⁶ No comprehensive study has appeared of the Lincoln symbol or the intense political and cultural contests over it. Nor is there any study of blacks' views about Lincoln although many works analyze Lincoln's evolving racial attitudes. A helpful introduction to Lincoln studies is Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History* (Urbana, 1988). For brief references to blacks' feelings about Lincoln, see Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York, 1962), 208–10; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), 88, 137; Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, 1983), 28–29, 91–93, 196, 225n55; William H. Wiggins, Jr., *O Freedom! Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations* (Knoxville, 1987); John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York, 1942); and Yvette Fulcher's survey of black attitudes toward Lincoln, summarized in Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Emancipation: 113 Years Later," *Lincoln Lore* (no. 1653, Nov. 1975), 1–3.

of memory. Like the nation he had described in his celebrated 1858 speech, Lincoln's own marble memorial would quickly become a house divided.⁷

African Americans had tried to construct a usable public memory of Lincoln as early as 1876, when Frederick Douglass dedicated a Washington, D.C., statue, which was paid for by freedmen and portrayed Lincoln emancipating a slave. (See figure 1.) Douglass criticized the statue for showing "the Negro on his knees," but he also saw strategic potential in publicly honoring Lincoln as the Emancipator. Blacks were thereby "fastening ourselves to a name and fame imperishable and immortal," Douglass said, and fulfilling a political duty to show gratitude for emancipation. Historian David W. Blight has shown that Douglass was trying to "make Lincoln mythic" and to create a mood for racial justice by promulgating a public memory of the Civil War as an emancipatory struggle. Likewise, the NAACP founders in 1909 wrote that Lincoln's centennial should be a day for "taking stock of the nation's progress" toward racial justice. They noted ironically that on January 1, 1909 (Emancipation Day and only a month before Lincoln's hundredth birthday), Georgia had become the last southern state to enact black disfranchisement laws. If Lincoln were alive, they ventured, he would be "disheartened and discouraged."⁸

Such views did not prevail in 1911 when Congress created a commission to memorialize Lincoln, chaired by President William Howard Taft. The early twentieth century celebrated the economic and political reunion of North and South. Lincoln's ties to black freedom waned as politicians and scholars sculpted him into a "pro-Southern conservative" honored on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line: the patron saint of what Richard Nelson Current labels "reunion with reaction, . . . nationalism revitalized at the expense of racial justice." As Lincoln assumed the role of Christ in American civil religion, signifying national redemption, it seemed he could not be both the Great Emancipator and the Savior of the Union. *Emancipator* became a casual synonym for *Lincoln*, not necessarily meant to evoke black freedom. When British dramatist John Drinkwater, in his popular 1920 book *Lincoln: The World Emancipator*, hailed "a profound unity of being in our two races," he meant not blacks and whites but Americans and Britons.⁹

⁷ For debates over House Joint Resolution 247 and House Joint Resolution 254, see *Congressional Record*, 60 Cong., 2 sess., Jan. 26, 1909, pp. 1418–19; *ibid.*, Feb. 10, 1909, pp. 2147–48, 2175; and *ibid.*, Feb. 11, 1909, pp. 2201–2. "Lincoln Birthday Call 1909," reprinted in NAACP fiftieth anniversary meeting invitation, Feb. 12, 1959, box A255, group III, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). Abraham Lincoln, "A House Divided," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (9 vols., New Brunswick, 1959), II, 461–69.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln," in *The Voice of Black America: Major Speeches by Negroes in the United States, 1797–1971*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, 1972), 434–43, esp. 443; Freeman Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture* (1916; Freeport, 1972), 199; David W. Blight, "For Something beyond the Battlefield: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War," in *Memory and American History*, ed. Thelen, 27–49, esp. 36; "Lincoln Birthday Call 1909."

⁹ Public Law 61-346 passed Feb. 9, 1911, and established the Lincoln Memorial Commission. See reprint in Lincoln Memorial Commission, *Report of the Commission* (Washington, 1913), 62 Cong., 3 sess., Sen. doc. 965, pp. 7–8. Richard Nelson Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana, 1983), 166; Michael Davis, *The Image of Lincoln in the South* (Knoxville, 1971); John Drinkwater, *Lincoln: The World Emancipator* (Boston, 1920), 6; Roy Basler, *The Lincoln Legend: A Study in Changing Conceptions* (Boston, 1935), 202; Eyal J. Naveh, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to*

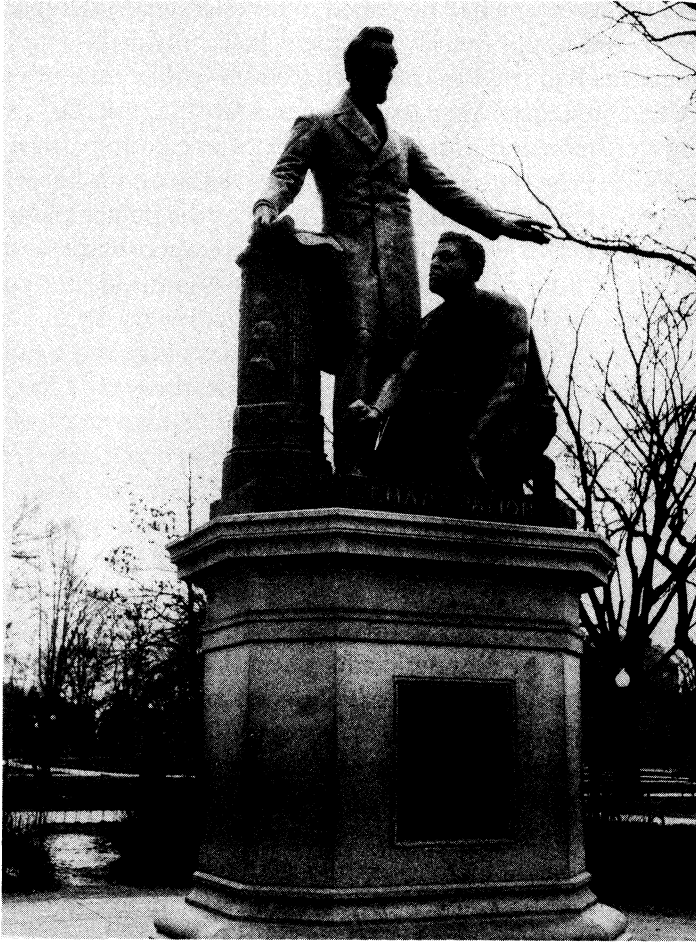


Figure 1
Freedmen's Memorial Monument, Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C. (*Emancipation*, by Thomas Ball, 1876). Frederick Douglass criticized the image as demeaning, and the statue soon acquired the nickname, "Shine, Sir?" Courtesy the Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Whitewashed views of Lincoln guided the design of the memorial, constructed between 1912 and 1921. Even its Potomac River site opposite Robert E. Lee's former Virginia home bespoke sectional reunion.¹⁰ The Taft Commission's forty-one-page

Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, 1990), 58–59, 202n45; Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, 96 (Winter 1967), 1–21, esp. 10–11, 14, 18.

¹⁰ On the Lincoln Memorial as a symbol of white consensus and sectional reunion, see Kirk Savage, "The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument," in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, forthcoming 1993); and Christopher Alexander Thomas, "The Lincoln

report to Congress made clear which Lincoln they honored, alluding twenty times to "the man who saved the Union" but to "emancipator" just once, in a rejected design. Architect Henry Bacon's final plan promised an exterior with a single message, with columns and festoons embodying the states as "a symbol of the union." Inside, Daniel Chester French's stony Lincoln presides beneath an inscription: "In This Temple as in the Hearts of the People for Whom He Saved the Union the Memory of Abraham Lincoln Is Enshrined Forever." Art critic Royal Cortissoz wrote these lines and explained their subtlety to Bacon: "The memorial must make a common ground for the meeting of the north and the south. By emphasizing his saving the union you appeal to both sections. By saying nothing about slavery you avoid the rubbing of old sores." Lincoln himself supplies the only allusions to American slavery in the temple; his Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address are carved into the walls. But as Dixon Wecter observed in 1940, these orations have been "worn so smooth by a million tongues that we are not apt to feel the edge of Lincoln's words." The Lincoln Memorial was conceived as a symbol of national consensus, linking North and South on holy, national ground.¹¹

The shrine's 1922 dedication threw the racial schism over Lincoln's memory into stark, if fleeting, relief. Taft, now chief justice of the Supreme Court, mentioned slavery not once in a long address. President Warren G. Harding reassured the South that Lincoln "would have been the last man in the republic to resort to arms to effect . . . abolition. Emancipation was a means to the great end—maintained union and nationality." One speaker breached the consensus. Robert Russa Moton, successor to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute, granted that "Lincoln died to save the union" but countered that the martyr's greatness stemmed from the fact that he "put his trust in God and spoke the word that gave freedom to a race, and vindicated the honor of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." But even as Moton spoke, prominent black Washingtonians were being confined by military ushers to a "colored" seating area at the rear of the crowd. (Many sources allege that Moton was also seated there and allowed on the platform only during his speech, but this is inaccurate. See figure 2.) The black press denounced the biased speeches and segregated seating as a mockery of Lincoln's ideals. Mainstream newspapers simply ignored the furor and headlined Moton's remark that blacks were obliged to justify emancipation by being loyal citizens. This round in the contest over Lincoln's memory went to the politicians.¹²

Memorial and Its Architect, Henry Bacon (1866–1924)" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990). On the shrine's use by African-American protesters, see *ibid.*, 639–41.

¹¹ Lincoln Memorial Commission, *Report*, 12–14, 25–27, 31, 33, 34, 36, 39, 40; John Russell Pope, "Appendix C: Report of the Architect on Designs for the Meridian Hill and the Soldiers' Home Sites," *ibid.*, 29–31; Henry Bacon, "Appendix D: Report of the Architect on Alternative Designs for the Potomac Park Site," *ibid.*, 33–34; Royal Cortissoz to Henry Bacon, April 6, 1919, quoted in *Washington Evening Star*, March 2, 1977, sec. C, pp. 1, 3; Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero Worship* (1941; Ann Arbor, 1966), 254. Jules Guérin's murals in the memorial depict slavery allegorically, but Guérin, like Henry Bacon, saw the Union motif as primary. See Jules Guérin, "The Great Lincoln Memorial," *Ladies' Home Journal* (Oct. 1921), 14–15, 160–61.

¹² Rexford L. Holmes, Inc., ed., "Dedicatory Exercises Incident to the Formal Dedication of the Lincoln Memorial," May 30, 1922, not paginated, in entry 372, Records of the Lincoln Memorial Commission, RG 42 (Na-

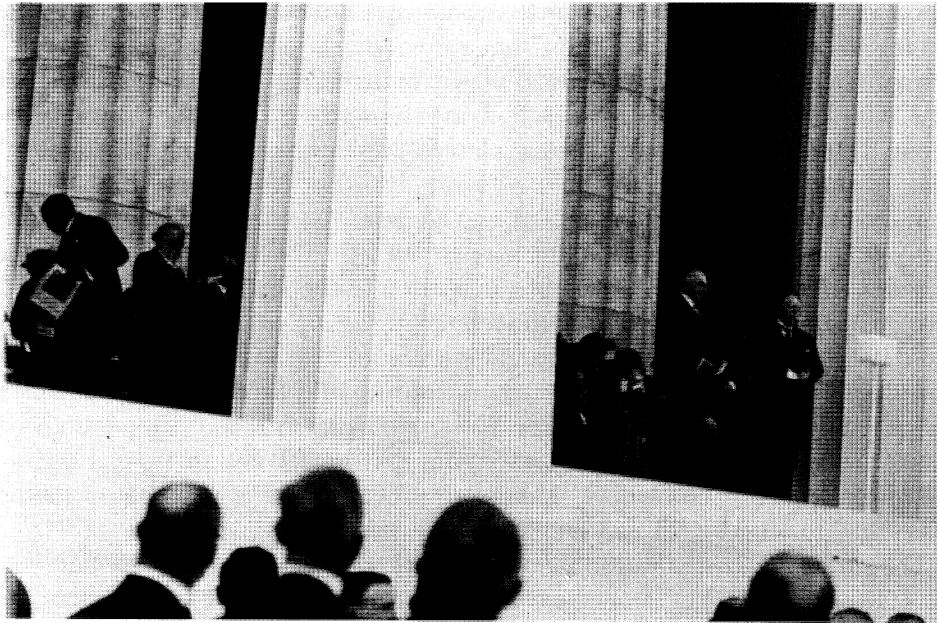


Figure 2

Dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, May 30, 1922, Herbert L. French, photographer.

Taken well after Robert Russa Moton's speech, this photograph of Moton at his seat (with program, at left) proves that he was not forced to sit in the "colored" section as has often been alleged.

Other photographs show black Civil War veterans seated among the dignitaries. *Courtesy*

Library of Congress.

But a renewed battle between official and vernacular memories of Lincoln now existed, particularly at the national temple honoring him. "Proving that Lincoln will be remembered less as emancipator than as the man who kept the states together would tax a world of genius," balked a columnist for the black weekly *Chicago Defender*. In fact, there was a contrived, vulnerable quality to the bowdlerized Lincoln consecrated by politicians in the 1910s and 1920s. Surely the folks in Omega, Virginia, who expelled young Oscar Chapman were not fooled by revisionist memories of Lincoln as nonsectional hero—nor were the United Confederate Veterans, who caused a furor only weeks after the temple's dedication by publicly blaming Lincoln for the Civil War. The consensus Lincoln seemed to need regular maintenance;

tional Archives, Washington, D.C.). The Robert Russa Moton legend is repeated in, among many examples, Constance McL. Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, 1967), 199–201. Black press reports make no mention of Moton having sat in the "colored section." See *Washington Tribune*, June 3, 1922, pp. 1, 8; *ibid.*, June 10, 1922, p. 1; *Chicago Defender*, June 10, 1922, p. 1; and "Lincoln, Harding, James Crow, and Taft," *Crisis*, 24 (July 1922), 122. For reception of Moton's speech, see *Washington Post*, May 31, 1922, p. 2; and *New York Times*, May 31, 1922, pp. 1, 3. Figure 2 of this essay is photo no. 18882, vol. 5, p. 53, Lot 12294 (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

starting in 1923, politicians and patriotic societies annually reaffirmed the primacy of Savior over Emancipator in Lincoln's Birthday ceremonies at the shrine. Black leaders continued to contest such interpretations; their first organized gathering at the memorial was a mass religious service in August 1926. The main speaker, a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, predictably told an audience of two thousand that "the immortality of the great emancipator lay not in his preservation of the Union, but in his giving freedom to the negroes of America."¹³

Conceived and dedicated as holy ground, the Lincoln Memorial became, as early as 1922, racially contested ground. By chance or design, the shrine straddled boundaries: between North and South, between black and white, and between official and vernacular memory. As both temple and tourist attraction, it sat on the cusp between sacred and secular. The memorial is a liminal space in Victor Turner's sense of being "betwixt and between" customary social categories. Liminal space is a realm of ambiguity—and therefore of possibility—where public rituals and appeals to sacred symbols possess an unusual potency to effect both social change and group unity, or *communitas*. African Americans were what Turner calls liminal personae. Despite emancipation, they remained betwixt and between: no longer slaves, not yet full citizens. By invoking and reinterpreting a national icon, black protesters explored the ambiguities and possibilities of American society in the mid-twentieth century. Their protests at the Lincoln Memorial were repeated, standardized rituals that evolved from experience and ultimately constituted a formidable politics of memory. The strategy was born, as Mary McLeod Bethune wrote, in the epiphany of Anderson's concert on Easter Sunday 1939.¹⁴

Maestro Arturo Toscanini said in 1935 that a voice like Anderson's was "heard once in a hundred years." Her fame by 1939 caused Howard University to seek a larger, off-campus auditorium for her annual Washington recital. On January 9, the Daughters of the American Revolution barred Anderson from their tax-exempt Constitution Hall, stating flatly that it was open "to white artists" only. Soon the District of Columbia Board of Education refused Anderson the use of a high school auditorium. Anderson was neither the first nor last black performer banned by the DAR, but in 1939 First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's public resignation from the DAR and black activists' skill at press relations elicited a flurry of pious editorials about national values.¹⁵

¹³ *Chicago Defender*, June 10, 1922, part II, p. 1. For the Confederate controversy, see *Washington Post*, June 22, 1922, p. 3; *ibid.*, June 24, 1922, p. 3; and *Washington Evening Star*, July 7, 1922, p. 6. For northern and southern homage to Lincoln, see *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 1928, p. 5; *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1925, p. 4; and *Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 1928, pp. 1–2. Bishop E. D. W. Jones, speaker at the 1926 gathering, is paraphrased *ibid.*, Aug. 6, 1926, p. 8.

¹⁴ In Victor Turner's view, liminal rituals are performed in "privileged spaces and times," after which one returns "changed in some way, to mundane life." Some public rituals invite rededication to shared values and the teachings of a society's "establishers of morality." Others can criticize public policies and "ritually transform" the sites themselves. See Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1988), 25–26, 102; and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969). See also Kathleen Ashley, ed., *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology* (Bloomington, 1990).

¹⁵ For Arturo Toscanini's comments, see S. Hurok, with Ruth Goode, *Impresario: A Memoir* (New York, 1946), 240. Sarah Robert, Daughters of the American Revolution president general, to Harold Ickes, Feb. 3, 1939, box

An outraged coalition of black civic leaders and NAACP officers (as well as Anderson's artistic managers) soon realized that bringing Abraham Lincoln into the fray by what seemed an unprecedented use of his memorial "would double the news value" of the event. On March 13, the NAACP board of directors voted that rather than finding another concert hall, "it would be far better . . . for Miss Anderson to sing out-of-doors, for example, at the Lincoln Memorial, erected to commemorate the Memory of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, or not to sing in Washington at all until democracy can surmount the color line in the nation's capital." Permission was quickly secured from Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes—through his deputy, Oscar Chapman. Ickes cleared the idea with President Roosevelt, who reportedly quipped, "She can sing from the top of the Washington Monument if she wants to!"¹⁶

The concert's planning was spearheaded by NAACP secretary Walter White, a gifted publicist who had once called Herbert Hoover "the man in the lily-White House." He took care that plans for the concert would avoid any "impression that propaganda for the Negro was the objective instead of the emphasizing of a principle." He rejected as undignified an early proposal that Anderson sing in a park opposite Constitution Hall, "because that would be like a naughty boy thumbing his nose at the back of a larger boy who had socked him." More would be gained by taking the high road. Even so, behind the scenes, White took every opportunity to embarrass the DAR, belittling them in correspondence with journalists and politicians as the "funny old ladies of the DAR" and attempting to get Grant Wood's satirical painting, *Daughters of Revolution*, printed on the cover of *Time* magazine.¹⁷

Having secured sacred ground for the concert site, White intensified his attention to symbolism. Anderson would begin by singing "America" because of the "ironic implications." Members of the cabinet, Congress, and the Supreme Court were

2967, entry 1-280, Marian Anderson Subfile, Central Classified Files 1937-1953, Records of the Secretary of the Interior, RG 48 (National Archives); *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1939, pp. 1, 5. Many editorials are reprinted in Anson Phelps Stokes, *Art and the Color Line* (Washington, 1939), 12-20. Two useful accounts of Anderson's concert (which, however, do not analyze planners' attention to symbolism) are Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 257-66; and Allida M. Black, "Championing a Champion: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Marian Anderson 'Freedom Concert,'" *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 20 (Fall 1990), 719-36. Among the other performers whom the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) barred from Constitution Hall were Paul Robeson, the Hampton Institute Singers, and Harry Belafonte. See *Washington Star*, Sept. 9, 1979, sec. G, p. 2; *Washington Herald-Tribune*, Feb. 23, 1939, p. 16; and *Washington Tribune*, March 22, 1941, clipping in "Black Segregation and Discrimination / Marian Anderson Concert" folder, Washingtoniana Collection (Martin Luther King, Jr., Public Library, Washington, D.C.).

¹⁶ "News Value" in Walter White to Houston, March 21, 1939, box C59, group I, NAACP Papers. Oscar L. Chapman claimed to have thought of using the memorial, but black leaders were discussing the idea at least two weeks before their first recorded meeting with Chapman. Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship, Based on Eleanor Roosevelt's Private Papers* (New York, 1971), 527; White to Houston, March 6, 1939, box L1, group II, NAACP Papers; [White], "Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors," March 13, 1939, p. 4, box L2, *ibid.*; Roosevelt quoted in Chapman interview, p. 1.

¹⁷ Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York, 1948), 104, 182; "Marian Anderson Will Sing in the 'Open Air' as Rebuke to D.A.R.," press release, Feb. 24, 1939, box L2, group II, NAACP Papers; White to Gertrude [Stone], March 14, 1939, box L1, *ibid.*; White to Harry E. Davis, Feb. 24, 1939, box L2, *ibid.*; White to Fiorello LaGuardia, April 21, 1939, *ibid.*; White to Lester B. Granger, June 13, 1939, *ibid.*; White to Edward G. Robinson, March 1, 1939, *ibid.*

recruited as public sponsors and invited to sit on the landing where Anderson would sing. "Boy Scouts, white and colored," were enlisted to hand out the concert's printed program—with the Gettysburg Address quoted on its cover. A script provided to radio commentators (and incorporated nearly verbatim into Harold Ickes's introduction) read, "It is both fitting and symbolic that [Anderson] should be singing on Easter Sunday on the steps of the Memorial to the Great Emancipator who struck the shackles of slavery from her people seventy-six years ago."¹⁸

On the afternoon of April 9, these elements came together brilliantly. After the brief introduction by Secretary Ickes, the singer descended the steps in front of the statue and, in White's words, "poured out in her superb voice 'sweet land of liberty' almost as though it was a prayer." Those who attended remember the concert, which was captured by newsreel cameras and broadcast live by national radio networks, as "like a religious service" and "a great spiritual experience of common sympathy and understanding." Civil rights attorney Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., recalled, "It was quite a beautiful awakening of blacks in the city there. Everyone was there in their best clothes. . . . You got this feeling, there she was in front of Lincoln, and what a great step forward this was." The next day activists discussed making the concert an annual event to hold public attention on racial issues. In the next two decades, planners repeatedly hearkened back to the Anderson concert as a formative moment (and the singer renewed public memories of the event in 1952, when she sang again on the steps of the shrine at a memorial service for Ickes). The Easter recital seemed a tactical epiphany to black activists because it suggested a site and format for injecting the civil rights cause into the mainstream of debates about national values and the American Way.¹⁹

Hagiographers have made the Anderson affair into a story about Eleanor Roosevelt, who neither planned nor attended the concert. Emphasis on the First Lady obscures the event's larger importance: With the concert, the civil rights movement began to develop a strategy of mass, symbolic protest that used ritual and appeals to memory to make race a national issue. By 1939 Abraham Lincoln was an increasingly coveted cultural and political symbol of the American Way of Life, a symbol interpreted by everyone from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Carl Sandburg, from

¹⁸ White to Houston and V. D. Johnston, March 31, 1939, box L1, group II, NAACP Papers. [Charles H. Houston], radio script, April 8, 1939, folder 35, box 2-2, Marian Anderson / DAR Controversy Collection. "Remarks of the Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes in Introducing Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial Concert to be Held at 5:00 p.m. (EST), Sunday April 9, 1939," box L2, group II, NAACP Papers.

¹⁹ White, *Man Called White*, 184; Chapman interview, 1; Charles H. Houston, remarks on the presentation of a Marian Anderson concert mural, untitled typescript, Jan. 6, 1943, p. 2, folder 49, box 2-2, Marian Anderson / DAR Controversy Collection. In 1941, Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., drafted Franklin D. Roosevelt's antidiscrimination rule, Executive Order 8802, and he attended or helped organize nearly all the demonstrations discussed in this article; see Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., interview by Sandage, Nov. 11, 1989, transcript, p. 1 (in Sandage's possession). Houston to Oscar L. Chapman, April 11, 1939, folder 4, box 1-1, Marian Anderson / DAR Controversy Collection. For strategists' later references to Anderson, see White to Chapman, April 11, 1947, box A34, group II, NAACP Papers; and Roy Wilkins to Sol Hurok, telegram, April 12, 1957, box A245, group III, *ibid.* On Anderson's performance at the Ickes service, see *Washington Post*, April 21, 1952, sec. B, p. 1. For contemporary evidence of the debate over "The American Way," see the winning essays of a contest to define the phrase, in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 176 (Feb.-May 1938).



Figure 3

Marian Anderson, Lincoln Memorial, April 9, 1939. LIFE Magazine *photograph by Thomas McAvoy*, ©1939 Time Warner.

Hollywood moguls to the American Communist party. Still, Lincoln's connection to racial justice remained controversial. Two months before Anderson's concert, Lincoln scholar Paul Angle had declared flatly that the president's fame as an emancipator was "unhistorical," unsupported by fact. In one bold stroke, the Easter concert

swept away the shrine's official dedication to the "savior of the union" and made it a stronghold of racial justice. One concertgoer, the black baritone Todd Duncan, recalls that the performance seemed to transform the memorial into "a wonderful citadel, a cathedral," a place to both affirm the nation and struggle to make it just.²⁰

White America recognized one half of the metamorphosis—affirmation—and a catharsis of nationalism followed. A Massachusetts editor predicted that DAR members would not attend the concert. "We expect they would feel uncomfortable on that ground, and a little out of place," he wrote, sensing that the memorial had become a powerfully charged site. Likewise, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial proclaimed a "New Message of the Lincoln Shrine." The influential columnist Franklin P. Adams compared the DAR to the Nazi German-American Bund, and vocal members of the public agreed. Those "Daughters of the American Reactionaries" were "stuffed petticoats" who had been unmasked as "un-American." "That's the stuff," one citizen wrote Ickes, "Give the colored girl a show. The D.A.R. don't own this country which is still free, thank the Lord. And it's most fitting that the spirit of Lincoln will be at this concert." Another wrote, "It's a strange world when you find the DAR in the same pew with the Ku-Kluxers." A Sunday concert had become a national referendum, polled at barbershops and breakfast tables across the land.²¹

Of course, not all the editorials and citizens' letters were supportive. And in the segregated capital, Marian Anderson had to sleep in a private home because no reputable hotel would accommodate a black guest. Some blacks were appalled that Anderson had to sing out of doors, regardless of the noble setting. White newspapers referred to the thirty-seven-year-old diva as "the Negro Girl from Philadelphia" and "this colored girl out of the slums," or paternalistically, by her first name only. The symbolic triumph left much unchanged. Even Eleanor Roosevelt was not always a reliable ally. Ironically, only a year after the concert she crossed a picket line for perhaps the only time in her life, bypassing black protesters to attend the 1940 premiere of the Raymond Massey film *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* at a segregated Washington theater.²²

²⁰ Nancy J. Weiss, Allida M. Black, and many other scholars inflate Eleanor Roosevelt's role in planning the concert, for which Weiss admits there is little written evidence. See Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 260. Paul Angle quoted in Wecter, *Hero in America*, 251. On Lincoln in the 1930s, see Alfred Haworth Jones, *Roosevelt's Image Brokers: Poets, Playwrights, and the Use of the Lincoln Symbol* (Port Washington, 1974); and Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), 509. Todd Duncan interviewed in "Marian Anderson," prod. Dante J. James, Bernard Seabrooks, and Tamara E. Robinson (WETA, May 8, 1991).

²¹ *Worcester Gazette*, April 1939, clipping in scrapbook 494, Harold L. Ickes Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 1, 1939, p. 8; "Bund and D.A.R. Are Stable Mates, Says N.Y. Columnist," press release, Feb. 24, 1939, box L2, group II, NAACP Papers; anonymous letter to DAR from "an obscure, middle aged, red-blooded, old-fashioned, native-born American housewife out here in Canton, Ohio," n.d., *ibid.*; Beatrice Gurry to Rand School of Social Science, n.d., *ibid.*; Charles S. Cuney to the editor, unidentified newspaper, *ibid.*; Henry Lee to Ickes, April 3, 1939, Herbert Friedenwald to Ickes, March 30, 1939, Records of the Secretary of the Interior.

²² The singer stayed at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Pinchot. See Chapman interview, 2. *Washington Evening Star*, March 31, 1939, p. A20; *Washington Times-Herald*, March 29, 1939, p. 10; *Washington Post*, April 12, 1939, p. 9. Raymond Massey, who played Lincoln on Broadway and in the film *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, writes that

These contradictions in what has become a towering moment in American folklore, the Marian Anderson concert of 1939, reveal the inherent ambiguity of symbolic black protest at the Lincoln Memorial. Memory, theorists tell us, is a deeply visual medium. The concert and the ritualistic rallies that ensued in the 1940s and 1950s presented a compelling mnemonic image—the juxtaposition of the Great Emancipator with descendants of freed slaves. Like the “invented traditions” described by Eric Hobsbawm, that image used “history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion.” The political resonance of such an appeal hinges on what scholars call the social dimensions of memory, the extent to which an image tells an instantly recognizable “mythic story.” Viewers connect such images idiosyncratically to their private understandings of the collective past. Black protesters at the memorial evoked the American cultural masterplot that “Lincoln freed the slaves.” This catechism proved remarkably resilient despite efforts to suppress it.²³

But even as activists used the masterplot to argue for justice, they could not avoid replicating a stereotypical image of black subordination: that of the “grateful Negro at Lincoln’s feet.” Among the most familiar tableaux of American race relations, this duo appears in the 1876 monument dedicated (and criticized) by Douglass, in myriad popular prints, and even on a 1940 United States postage stamp. David Brion Davis locates the image within a genre he calls the “Emancipation Moment,” arguing that its subtext of racial hierarchy imposes on real-life blacks a posture of indebtedness and moral obligation. We have already observed this at the memorial’s 1922 dedication, when the white press focused on Robert Moton’s remarks about “Negro loyalty.”²⁴

Themes of self-congratulatory nationalism and implicit racial hierarchy pervaded responses to Anderson’s concert. A *Washington Post* columnist wrote that concert-

the First Lady told him she decided to ignore the protest because “the picketing organization was not approved by the NAACP.” See Raymond Massey, *A Hundred Different Lives: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1979), 257. Eleanor Roosevelt did speak at an NAACP rally at the memorial, along with President Harry S. Truman and Sen. Wayne Morse, on June 29, 1947. Walter White arranged the event with the cooperation of Chapman, by then Harry S. Truman’s secretary of the interior. “Largest Mass Meeting in Nation’s History Planned by NAACP,” press release, June 6, 1947, box A33, group II, NAACP Papers.

²³ Patrick H. Hutton, “The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (July–Sept. 1987), 371–92. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 1–14, esp. 12. David Thelen, “Introduction: Memory and American History,” in *Memory and American History*, ed. Thelen, vii–xix. I am indebted to Rhys Isaac for discussing with me his concept of “mythic recognition” as a component of successful public messages about the past.

²⁴ Postage stamp in Wiggins, *O Freedom!*, 123. For analyses of various nineteenth- and twentieth-century images of the grateful Negro at Lincoln’s feet, see Savage, “Politics of Memory”; and Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., *Changing the Lincoln Image* (Fort Wayne, 1985), 44–52, 123; *Washington Evening Star*, Feb. 12, 1947, sec. A, p. 2; Weldon Petz, *In the Presence of Abraham Lincoln* (Harrogate, Tenn., 1973), 92; Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 123, 125; and *Washington Post Magazine*, Feb. 18, 1990, p. 11. Two striking unpublished examples are Marjory Collins’s series of three photos for the U.S. Office of War Information and a photograph sent to the NAACP by a free-lance photographer. See *Negro Boys Admiring the Lincoln Memorial*, photographs, by Marjory Collins, spring 1942, reel 14, lot 216 (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress); and photograph in Lawrence Needleman to Henry Lee Moon, Jan. 16, 1957, box A255, group III, NAACP Papers. David Brion Davis, “The Emancipation Moment,” in *Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York, 1992), 63–88.

goers felt "a little nobler" gazing at "the slender colored girl on the front steps . . . with the massive figure of Lincoln looking down benevolently." Compare this to *Life* magazine's photo of the dignified Anderson. Then consider a 1939 cartoon in which the diva becomes a pickaninny, drawn in the limp cotton dress of a field hand, sleeves rolled up and arms thrown up rapturously to the towering emancipator. An artist of the Popular Front lampooned the DAR, but his drawing likewise subordinates a tiny, featureless singer to the colossal Lincoln. (See figures 3–5.) The ubiquitous emancipation moment also appeared in Frank Capra's 1939 film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Filming for this paean to the American Way of Life began in the capital a mere eleven days after Anderson's recital. In James Stewart's famous scene at the memorial, as a white boy and his grandfather read aloud "new birth of freedom" from the Gettysburg Address, Capra crosscuts to an elderly black man, eyes glistening as he doffs his hat and looks up at the statue. In 1947 a photo showing National Park Service janitors crouched on Lincoln's statue and captioned to evoke the stock figure of the black shoeshine boy appeared in *National Geographic* the same month that the NAACP held a large rally at the memorial. (See figure 6.) The emancipation moment validates the status quo; Lincoln's noble work is done, it seems to say, and the Negro must now remember his place. Just as Eleanor Roosevelt eclipses Marian Anderson, in a broader sense Lincoln, as a symbol of the nation and of white magnanimity, becomes more important than emancipation or civil rights.²⁵

From the time of Frederick Douglass, black leaders had known that whites might construe their use of Lincoln's memory in this way. NAACP secretary James Weldon Johnson ritually re-enacted the emancipation moment on Lincoln's Birthday, 1925; wrapping himself in a chain of flowers, he stood near Lincoln's statue in New York City's Union Square and broke the chain. Such performances imply a political choice, not a natural affinity of blacks for "Father Abraham." Historians have obscured this point by assimilating the perspective of the emancipation moment; many assume uncritically that blacks felt "almost universal admiration for Lincoln" until the Black Power backlash of the 1960s. This simplistic view ignores earlier ambivalence among both leaders and ordinary blacks. In 1927 a black teenager wrote W. E. B. Du Bois that youths in her Illinois town opposed celebrating Lincoln's Birthday. What, she asked, had Lincoln ever done for blacks? The *Washington Afro-American* wondered the same thing in 1946. Many who staged rallies at the memorial shared these doubts. Whitney M. Young, Jr., of the National Urban

²⁵ *Washington Post*, April 12, 1939, p. 9; untitled cartoon, by [Jack] Sparling, *Washington Times-Herald*, March 31, 1939, p. 18; "It's All Lincoln's Fault," cartoon by [Fred] Ellis, *Indianapolis Recorder*, May 6, 1939, p. 13. (This citation is from an African-American newspaper, but Ellis drew for and seems to have been distributed by the *Daily Worker*.) *Washington Post*, April 20, 1939, p. 8; *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, dir. Frank Capra (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1939). An updated variant appears in Oliver Stone's *JFK*; as Kevin Costner muses at John F. Kennedy's grave, a reverent black father and son stand to the side. *JFK*, dir. Oliver Stone (Camelot Productions, 1991). *Seated in His Memorial, Abraham Lincoln Gets White Marble Shoes Shined*, photograph by B. Anthony Stewart, in *National Geographic Magazine*, 91 (June 1947), 703. (See also a photo of a black White House butler polishing silver under a portrait of Lincoln, *ibid.*, 709).

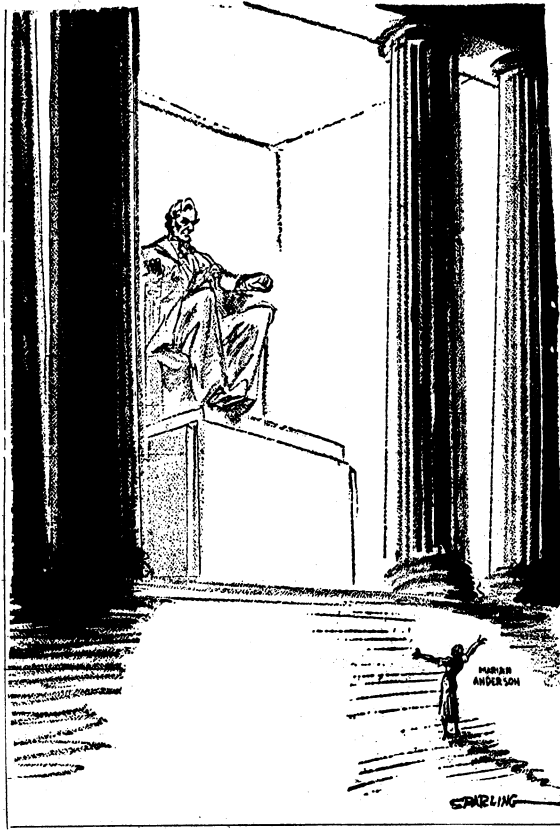


Figure 4

Untitled cartoon, by [Jack] Sparling. Copyright 1939, The Washington Post, reprinted with permission.

League, confessed “mixed feelings about Lincoln.” Martin Luther King, Jr., called Lincoln “vacillating” but also saw him as the only president who had ever earned blacks’ confidence. James Farmer, founder of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), recently emphasized the conscious strategy of black protest at the memorial. “It doesn’t say anything about what we thought about Lincoln,” Farmer explained. “It says something about how great the image of Lincoln was, and it was something we could use to achieve our noteworthy objectives, that’s all.” Black leaders regarded public appeals to Lincoln and national memory as the only symbolic language available to them to communicate with white America. The potential gains seemed worth the compromises.²⁶

²⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, Feb. 13, 1925, p. 5; Davis, *Image of Lincoln in the South*, 153. The letter to W. E. B. Du Bois hints at black intergenerational conflict over Lincoln as well as white authorities’ success in purging emancipation from Lincoln’s memory; “my attending white school,” the girl wrote Du Bois, “may be the cause of me not knowing what [Lincoln] has done for the Negro Race.” Gertrude M. Banks to W. E. B. Du Bois, Feb.



Figure 5
 "It's All Lincoln's Fault," by [Fred] Ellis. *Courtesy*
 Indianapolis Recorder.

The emancipation moment and black ambivalence about Lincoln are directly relevant to the advent of a racial politics of memory at the memorial because they expose the gap between black and white perceptions of the protests and underscore the terms of struggle after 1939. Anderson's concert came to symbolize the promise of protest—at least to blacks. But at a public ceremony in 1943, Ickes promulgated a very different official memory of Easter Sunday 1939 in light of the rising wartime domestic unrest among blacks. "Marian Anderson's voice and personality," Ickes declared, "have come to be a symbol—a symbol of American unity at a time when a lack of it might well prove fatal to us as a people." Here, as in the white response to Robert Moton in 1922, was the grateful Negro at Lincoln's feet. Ickes's emphasis on national unity echoed earlier official attempts to use Lincoln's memory to obscure national differences (such as the subtle inscription Cortissoz composed for the memorial). Despite Anderson's symbolic triumph, the inertia of white attitudes remained an obstacle. Using Lincoln to affirm national values was one thing; using him to struggle for change, quite another.²⁷

9, 1927, reel 21, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). Du Bois to Banks, March 9, 1927, *ibid.* *Washington Afro-American*, Feb. 16, 1946, p. 4; Whitney M. Young, Jr., quoted in Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York, 1965), 168; James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco, 1986), 279–86, esp. 279; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1963), 162; James Farmer interview by Sandage, Nov. 29, 1989, transcript, p. 8 (in Sandage's possession).

²⁷ Harold L. Ickes, remarks on the presentation of a Marian Anderson concert mural, untitled typescript, Jan. 6, 1943, pp. 3–4, folder 49, box 2-2, Marian Anderson / DAR Controversy Collection.

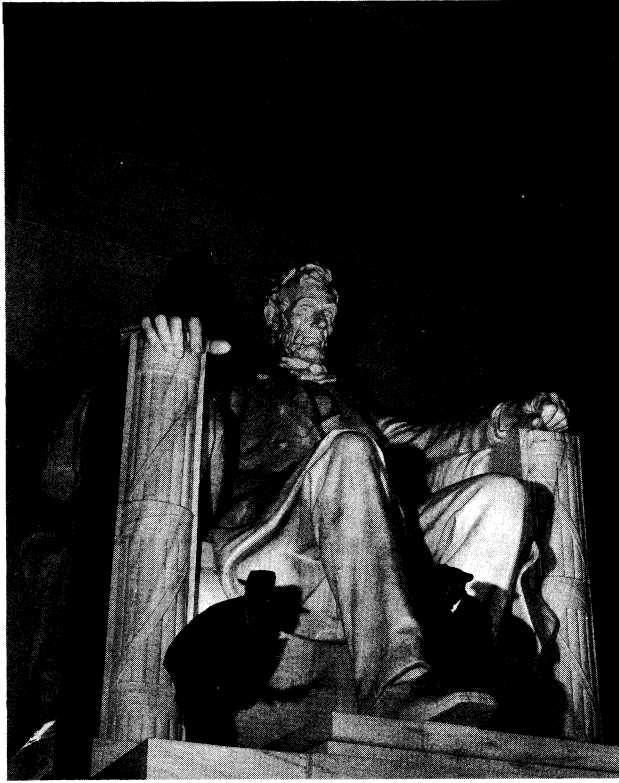


Figure 6

Seated in His Memorial, Abraham Lincoln Gets White Marble Shoes Shined, photograph by B. Anthony Stewart, in June 1947 *National Geographic Magazine*. Compare this image of National Park Service janitors to figure 1. Courtesy National Geographic Society.

Government cooperation was not forthcoming in the decades after 1939, when blacks began to seek the memorial for more overt protests, rather than Sunday concerts. Activists gradually learned that the skillful use of ritual and memory could circumvent such opposition. A standardized civil rights protest ritual evolved from the elements in Marian Anderson's concert, such as using mass rallies instead of pickets, performing patriotic and spiritual music, choosing a religious format, inviting prominent platform guests, self-policing the crowds to project an orderly image, alluding to Lincoln in publicity and oratory, and insisting on using the memorial rather than another site. The civil rights ritual absorbed the profane into the sacred, coating politics with civil religion. It confronted racism powerfully but indirectly, shrewdly emphasizing national values over direct political criticism. Protesters refined this approach during the 1940s and 1950s as they engaged bureaucrats in sporadic tugs-of-war over using the memorial.

In 1941 black labor leader A. Philip Randolph coerced Roosevelt into issuing Executive Order 8806 (which created the Fair Employment Practices Committee) by

threatening "an 'all-out' thundering march on Washington, ending in a monster and huge demonstration at Lincoln's Monument" to "shake up white America." Roosevelt's capitulation averted the rally, but Randolph's bid for a permit for a similar event the next year was denied. FDR and Ickes worried that the memorial was becoming a soapbox. Ickes confided to his diary, "If we allow one controversial subject to be discussed" at the memorial, "it would be difficult for us to deny its use on other similar occasions." Ickes wrote Randolph and explained that a protest would "dim the glory" of Anderson's historic concert, adding, "I do not believe that even such a meeting as you propose would be in the true spirit of the Lincoln Memorial."²⁸

Randolph persevered. His next proposal suggests that activists were learning that access to this powerful symbol might depend on projecting peaceful, ritualistic images approximating the emancipation moment. In 1943 Randolph organized a small, interracial, interfaith prayer pilgrimage to the memorial on Lincoln's Birthday. The Howard University Glee Club sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Go Down, Moses," juxtaposing their refrains of "His truth is marching on" with "Let my people go." Eleanor Roosevelt was invited to this exercise in civil religion but chose instead to attend an official wreath-laying ceremony there with her husband earlier in the day. Undaunted, Randolph planned for the future. "Next year," he wrote,

I hope that we shall have not one such ceremony, but hundreds, all over America, *wherever there is a statue of Lincoln*, and wherever groups of enlightened citizens of both races, both churchmen and laymen, can be brought together to re-affirm Lincoln's high faith and to advance the cause he served.²⁹

Here Randolph is prescribing ritual appeals to Lincoln's memory not just to legitimate political action but to unify a coalition, to evoke *communitas*. Rallies at the memorial could help rejuvenate frontline activists and unify leadership factions. For example, NAACP secretary Roy Wilkins reacted skeptically to the direct actions led in the 1950s by Martin Luther King, Jr. But in 1957 as the third anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling neared without southern compliance, the two leaders agreed that an uplifting event was needed, in Wilkins's words, to "allow our people to participate in something and express themselves in some way."³⁰

²⁸ [A. Philip Randolph], "Call to Negro America: To March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense," in A. Philip Randolph to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 5, 1941, in *Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933-1945*, ed. Susan Ware and William H. Chafe (microfilm, 20 reels, Frederick, Md., 1986), reel 15; Herbert Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for FEPC* (New York, 1969), 38-42, 82-83; Ickes to Randolph, April 13, 1942, box 213, Ickes Papers; Harold L. Ickes Diary, April 11, 1942, p. 6530, *ibid.* For a re-evaluation of Randolph's important tactical role in the movement, see Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, 1990).

²⁹ Randolph and B. F. McLaurin, "Special Release," Feb. 14, 1943, box 26, A. Philip Randolph Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress), italics added; Malvina C. Thompson to Winifred Raushenbush, Feb. 15, 1943, box 24, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Papers, *ibid.* In 1943, four hundred Orthodox rabbis held a similar event, praying at the "symbol of liberation" for the United States to admit Jewish refugees. See *Washington Post*, Oct. 7, 1943, p. 1.

³⁰ On the tactical conflict between Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King, Jr., see David J. Garrow, *Bearing the*

Again the Department of the Interior balked, claiming limply that blacks' bid to hold a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom at the shrine would "inconvenience" tourists and deprive them of "undisturbed contemplation of this inspiring Memorial." Instead, officials offered an amphitheater near the Washington Monument. In appeal, the NAACP's Clarence Mitchell stressed the memorial's power as a place for unity and regeneration, explaining "that the symbolic value of the Lincoln Memorial for this meeting was of tremendous importance in overcoming the despair, disillusionment and anger which have been generated by recent acts of racial violence and intimidation in the South." Incredibly, still protecting the memorial, the bureaucrats in turn suggested that blacks gather on the plaza in front of the Supreme Court! When Mitchell rejected this and other counterproposals, the officials finally capitulated. The NAACP issued a special press release: "Secure Lincoln Memorial for Prayer Pilgrimage."³¹

The format exalted principle over direct confrontation. "There will be no picket lines, resolutions or attempts to call on the President," assured the NAACP, only prayers "for deliverance from the cancer of racism." On May 17, 1957, thirty thousand people prayed "in the presence of the memory of Abraham Lincoln and of the God and father of our people." Lest a zealous crowd unmask the day as a political rally, the printed program (above even the title of the event) warned that applause was improper at a religious service. Wilkins raised the flag of nationalism: "We are Americans. . . . We believe in our Constitution and its Bill of Rights." King affirmed his place as the movement's preeminent spokesman with his oration, "Give us the ballot—We will transform the South." Mahalia Jackson led the crowd in the hymn that Marian Anderson had politicized, "My Country 'Tis of Thee."³²

The 1957 event concluded with an addition to the politics of memory, the mass recitation of an "Affirmation and Pledge." Entreating "all Americans to join us in prayer and in work to eradicate racial and religious prejudices," the pledge not only served the ritual function of building *communitas*, it fostered a subtle transition from the realm of memory to that of politics. Protesters were asking Americans, not merely to remember, but to act. Adding a pledge to the civil rights ritual also completed the underlying pattern of nonviolent action that had been evolving at the Lincoln Memorial. A few days before the pilgrimage, the activist Bayard Rustin explained that pattern to King. In the context of helping King focus a draft of the speech he would deliver at the memorial, Rustin wrote that

the form in creative action is always Yes-No-Yes. That is to say a positive action such as the idea of brotherhood, followed by a rejection—a No. Rejection of segrega-

Cross: *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 91. Wilkins quoted in NAACP Board of Directors minutes, March 11, 1957, p. 2, box A14, group I, NAACP Papers.

³¹ E. T. Scoyen to Clarence Mitchell, April 16, 1957, box A245, group III, NAACP Papers; Mitchell to Roy Wilkins, April 22, 1957, *ibid.*; "Secure Lincoln Memorial for Prayer Pilgrimage," press release, April 25, 1957, *ibid.*

³² For comments about picket lines, see "'Prayer Pilgrimage' to Nation's Capital Launched; Rev. L. Sylvester Odom to Chair Northwest Effort," press release, April 29, 1957, box A245, group III, NAACP Papers. For the prayer, see Mordecai Johnson, remarks at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, May 17, 1957, *ibid.* Roy Wilkins, remarks at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, May 17, 1957, *ibid.*; "Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., May 17, 1957, 12 Noon, Program," box 157, NAACP Washington Bureau Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope*, 197–200.

tion, discrimination; injustice; this must be followed by a positive action. . . . a common action.³³

The pattern resonates strongly with the American jeremiad, a rhetorical convention favored not only by many black speakers but also by Abraham Lincoln. Rustin's explanation in 1957 underscores how ritual aims to bring people together and energize them for a common purpose. But the larger point is this: Years before activists like Rustin and King began to espouse a Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence in the South, the basic pattern was in place in the rituals performed at the Lincoln Memorial. The essence (masking power and politics beneath a peaceful, communal gathering) was there in 1939, and it became more focused in later decades.³⁴

By 1957 that essence was attracting notice; the Lincoln Memorial protests were starting to transcend the emancipation moment. To a point, responses to the 1957 pilgrimage echoed 1939: blacks were again seen as taking the high road, painting their adversaries as un-American, and charging the sacred space of the memorial with a special force. How, asked Edward P. Morgan in his radio commentary for ABC News, could the Ku Klux Klan or white citizens' councils match the power of "a respectable and respectful gathering of American citizens in clean shirts and chic dresses" whose only weapons were the law and human dignity?

A burning cross, a bomb, floggings, a lynching party, these are blunt, cumbersome weapons against a force of this kind. Of course, the racists might refine their approach. They might henceforth picket the Lincoln Memorial as contaminated by such a host of Negroes.

The Lincoln Memorial continued to be seen as a contested space, but one that was becoming ever more identified with the civil rights movement and its politics of memory and ritual. Moreover, the ritual was reaching maturity in its dual functions of unifying protesters and legitimating black voices in national politics. Morgan urged his nationwide audience in 1957 to look again at the "respectable and respectful" assemblage at the memorial: "Here, if you looked at it closely, was a demonstration of power."³⁵

Randolph never abandoned his idea of a big march on Washington. Even before the 1957 pilgrimage, his associate Rustin was jotting down ideas for a larger event, later realized as the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. "Efforts should be made as early as possible to get a permit to march in Washington and to hold a mass meeting before the Lincoln Memorial," Rustin wrote, fully aware of the publicity value of tussling with officials for a permit. "There may be trouble, but this could make the situation all the more lively if handled carefully." In late 1962, as local activism swelled in the South and the movement sought a federal civil

³³ Pledge quoted in "Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom"; Bayard Rustin to Martin Luther King, Jr., May 10, 1957, typescript copy, Bayard Rustin Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

³⁴ David Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric, from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois, 1841-1919," *American Quarterly*, 38 (no. 3, 1986), 481-92. On pledges, see Harriet Hyman Alonso, *The Women's Peace Union and the Outlawry of War, 1921-1942* (Knoxville, 1989), 19.

³⁵ "Edward P. Morgan and the News," radio typescript, May 17, 1957, box A245, group III, NAACP Papers.

rights bill, Randolph proposed "a mass protest rally" at the memorial to proclaim a concrete "Emancipation Program" in the centenary year of Lincoln's proclamation.³⁶ These early plans rebut the frequent assertion that the memorial was a compromise site for the March on Washington, chosen when more confrontational locales were abandoned. Organizers did discuss sit-ins at the Capitol and a White House demonstration, but a rally at the Lincoln Memorial was always in their plans.

As initial thoughts about the march evolved into a concrete plan, organizers eschewed militant activities. This story has been well told elsewhere; moderating influences included the tension between the movement's old and new guards, the addition of church and labor groups to the march coalition, and the choice to negotiate for the cooperation of the Kennedy administration (which concurrently introduced the bill that would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964). On the day of the march, even signs and banners had to be approved by planners, and last-minute changes were demanded to Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader John Lewis's hard-hitting speech. Despite such moderations in the 1963 march, no event since Marian Anderson's concert created a more indelible public memory of the civil rights movement or, indeed, of the Lincoln Memorial.³⁷

The march culminated the politics of memory begun in 1939. On August 28, 1963, four hundred thousand people massed at the shrine. In this "living petition," as Lerone Bennett, Jr., wrote in *Ebony*, marchers "said with their bodies that the Negro . . . was still not free." Marian Anderson was there; slated to open the program with the national anthem, she was delayed by dense crowds and later sang a spiritual. Marchers prayed and orated, and Randolph led the throng in a pledge: "Standing before the Lincoln Memorial . . . in the centennial year of emancipation, I affirm my complete personal commitment for the struggle for jobs and freedom for all Americans." Here again was the final "Yes" in Rustin's formula for an effective protest: the common action that nurtured both *communitas* and political commitment. "What mattered most at the Lincoln Memorial," Rustin later wrote, was not the eloquent speeches, but rather "the pledge of a quarter million Americans, black and white, to carry the civil rights revolution into the streets."³⁸

³⁶ [Bayard Rustin], "Some Plans and Suggestions for a March to Washington for Civil Rights, October 1956," Rustin Papers. This memo calls for a full-time staff and a broad sponsorship, clearly linking it to the 1963 march, not the smaller 1957 event. The memorial is also specified in early 1963 memos, meeting agendas, and correspondence. See BR, TK & NH [Rustin, Tom Kahn, and Norman Hill], untitled memo, Jan. 1963, *ibid.*; "Proposals for Emancipation March on Washington" [March 22-23, 1963], *ibid.*; and Randolph to Stewart L. Udall, May 24, 1963, *ibid.*

³⁷ Among many works reporting that the memorial was a compromise site, see Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York, 1981), 160. For a discussion of Capitol sit-ins, see BR, TK & NH [Rustin, Kahn, and Hill], untitled memo, Jan. 1963. For a discussion of a White House demonstration, see "Proposed Plans for March," July 2, 1963, box 26, Randolph Papers. Marable, *Black American Politics*, 91-97; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 281-83. For slogan restrictions, see *Organizing Manual No. 2: Final Plans for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, 10, Rustin Papers; and [Randolph], "Slogans," n.d., box A229, group III, NAACP Papers. Several approved slogans refer to Lincoln and emancipation.

³⁸ Although most sources number the 1963 marchers at 250,000, Thomas Gentile analyzes crowd-counting procedures and makes a case for 400,000. See Thomas Gentile, *March on Washington: August 28, 1963* (Washington, 1983), 230. See also Farmer interview, 6-7. Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Masses Were March Heroes," *Ebony*, 19 (Nov. 1963), 35-40, 42, 44, 46, 119-20, 122, 124, esp. 35, 36; *Washington Post*, Aug. 29, 1963, sec. E, p. 1; "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963: Lincoln Memorial Program," leaflet, Rustin Papers; *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 1963, p. 16; Rustin, typescript excerpt of article in *Liberation*, Oct. [1963], Rustin Papers.

In American memory, the most eloquent speech of the day was King's. The final speaker, he wanted his remarks to be "sort of a Gettysburg Address." He began with the emancipation moment: "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." King alternated between confrontation (musing that Negroes had been given "a bad check") and the visionary nationalism of a dream "deeply rooted in the American dream." Near the end of his oration, he recited the hymn that Anderson had sung twenty-four years earlier, "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Once more, black leaders offered America an inspiring and reverent national moment that subtly portrayed the movement's adversaries as un-American. As historian Richard Lentz has recently observed, "the power of King's oration ultimately derived from the confluence of two antithetical symbols—the Birmingham of Bull Connor with its snarling police dogs and lashing fire hoses, and the March with its assemblage of Americans sharing King's dream of America made whole." As the crowd and nationwide broadcast audience listened to King's cadences, Lincoln brooded over his shoulder—the statue bathed in special lights to enhance its visibility on television and in news photographs.³⁹

Journalists filed dozens of mood pieces to convey the ambience of the day: how dressed up the marchers were, the overwhelming aura of celebration "and utter determination," and a sense that the rally had somehow changed the memorial. "The shrine that was the assembly point was so entirely appropriate," Richard S. Bird wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune*, "that you looked at it in a new way." The ritual imbued participants with

a feeling that is often hard for people to get in their every-day life.

A feeling for country. Tens of thousands of these petitioning Negroes had never been to Washington before, and probably would never come again. Now here they were. And this was their Washington . . . and that great marble memorial was their own memorial to the man who had emancipated them.⁴⁰

Marchers absorbed the mix of memory and *communitas*. One woman told a reporter, "I think Lincoln is moved by this: he must know what is happening." But she also knew the day was not really about Lincoln at all, exclaiming, "I am so proud of my people!" Lerone Bennett, Jr., pinpointed the day's legacy:

If the March changed no votes in Congress or no hearts in America, it did, at least change the marchers themselves. Those who thought, in the beginning, that it was too respectable, and those who thought it was too radical . . . for a moment in time they were one.⁴¹

³⁹ Nicolaus Mills, "Heard and Unheard Speeches: What Really Happened at the March on Washington?" *Dissent*, 35 (Summer 1988), 285–91, esp. 285; Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope*, 217–20; Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge, 1990), 76–78, 109.

⁴⁰ *New York Herald Tribune*, Aug. 29, 1963, pp. 1, 8.

⁴¹ *Washington Post*, Aug. 29, 1963, sec. A, p. 1; Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The March," in *The Day They Marched*, ed. Doris E. Saunders (Chicago, 1963), 3–14, esp. 14.



Figure 7

1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Jim Atherton, photographer.
Note the floodlights used to make the statue visible from
the other side on television and in photographs.

Courtesy UPI/Bettmann.

Pundits before and after the march predicted that it would change no votes on the civil rights bill. This cry originated among moderate and right-wing opponents, who warned that the event would be counterproductive. Later it figured in left critiques by activists and scholars, who felt the march had devolved from a protest into a "church picnic."⁴²

Such critics missed the point of the march and the strategy it fulfilled. In the summer of 1963, called the "Summer of Discontent," 1,122 civil rights demonstrations occurred nationwide; an unprecedented 20,000 protesters were arrested in the South. The tactical brilliance of the march, as of earlier rallies at the memorial, was to raise subtly the threat of similar militancy in Washington—and to do it in a way that attracted public support and evaded government suppression. The Kennedy

⁴² The classic statement here is Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; New York, 1973), 278–81. The phrase "church picnic" originated among journalists as an approbation, not a condemnation, of the march. See *New York Herald Tribune*, Aug. 29, 1963, pp. 1, 8; *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 1963, pp. 1, 17; and Kay Boyle, "No Other Place to Be," *Liberation*, 3 (Sept. 1963), 9.

administration did press for moderation; but protesters had long ago learned how to outmaneuver bureaucrats and arrive at the Lincoln Memorial. They were there again in spring 1964; while the civil rights bill languished in filibuster, seminarians of many races and faiths held a twenty-four hour vigil at the shrine for months. They were certain, one of them recalled, that "Lincoln was on our side." Just before the bill passed on June 10, Vice President Hubert Humphrey confided to activists, "The secret of passing the bill is the prayer groups." Who could ban a church picnic?⁴³

Looking broadly from 1939 to the mid-1960s, then, the civil rights rituals at the Lincoln Memorial had repeatedly served two functions, uniting and invigorating activists and legitimating black political action. Black leaders assembled at the shrine a compelling universe of national symbols—Marian Anderson and Eleanor Roosevelt, the American flag and the national anthem, preachers and church choirs, senators and presidents, boy scouts and Abraham Lincoln—all of which linked the black political agenda to the regnant cultural nationalism of the era. In turn, such icons were held up in opposition to a growing rogue's gallery of un-Americans that included the DAR, the lynch mob, the Ku Klux Klan, Mississippi senator Theodore G. Bilbo, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, the white citizens councils, and Theophilus Eugene ("Bull") Connor.⁴⁴

Randolph's press release for the 1958 Youth March for Integrated Schools made such pairings explicit; a rally at the Lincoln Memorial would "highlight the American Way of Life" and "alert public opinion to the grave danger of the poison of Little Rock Faubusism infecting the bloodstream of American life." Organizers understood exactly what they were doing at this national shrine, and they knew that public memory hinged on compelling visual images. To compete for public attention against modern distractions such as baseball's World Series and the sputniks, Randolph wrote, "any human cause, though great and imperative, must be given sharp picturization." He added, "The propaganda of the deed is more powerful than the propaganda of the word."⁴⁵

A politics of memory might have worked just as well if protesters had gone to the White House or the Capitol. But a ritual strategy at the Lincoln Memorial had special advantages, both in getting a message to the public and in broadening participation. The distinction between protests at the Lincoln Memorial and those at other sites, Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., asserted, was in "how you're aiming." Smaller events

⁴³ James W. Vander Zanden, "A Sociologist's Appraisal," *Midwest Quarterly*, 5 (Jan. 1964), 99–108; Marable, *Black American Politics*, 89–90; *Washington Evening Star*, April 28, 1964, sec. A, pp. 1, 4; *Washington Post*, May 11, 1964, sec. A, p. 6; John C. Raines interview by Sandage, Oct. 25, 1989, transcript, p. 2 (in Sandage's possession). Hubert Humphrey quoted in Charles Whalen and Barbara Whalen, *The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act* (Cabin John, 1984), 164.

⁴⁴ Sen. Theodore G. Bilbo was the villain of two 1946 antilynching rallies at the memorial. See note 46.

⁴⁵ Randolph, "Why the Interracial Youth March for Integrated Schools?" [1958], Rustin Papers. For other evidence that black leaders invoked Lincoln's memory as part of a broad public relations strategy, see the NAACP's annual national radio broadcasts on Lincoln's Birthday throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. On the 1956 broadcast, Roy Wilkins asked the South African humanitarian Alan Paton, "Can the peoples of South Africa invoke the memory of Lincoln in the struggle against apartheid?" See "Suggested opening remarks and questions for NBC radio program to be recorded on Feb. 7," box A255, group III, NAACP Papers.

were "directed right at the president," but mass meetings at the shrine were aimed at public opinion. Protesters made the shrine into a kind of Supreme Court of Public Opinion; they chose to affirm cherished principles, not to criticize the policy makers who ultimately had to decide whether to change the system. Paul Robeson, leader of a 1946 antilynching rally at the memorial, observed this distinction. His blunt demands in a White House meeting with President Harry S. Truman created a minor furor; but at the Lincoln Memorial later the same day, Robeson merely sang and read a new emancipation proclamation.⁴⁶

Activists also used the memorial to bring more people into the movement. Norman Hill, a leading organizer of the 1963 march, explained that protests there had a "diffused" impact and recalled that in 1963,

as the march unfolded and developed, there was a growing sense that in fact the mood . . . of the country was shifting toward the movement. Therefore, if one wanted . . . to pass [the civil rights bill] and also to generate real numbers in the march itself—tactically it became more important to do that than to do the direct confrontational things like sitting-in in various halls of government.⁴⁷

Even with the ritualistic format used at the Lincoln Memorial, assembling before government buildings would have been more directly confrontational, more accusatory, more likely to be counterproductive. Moreover, many nonactivists, both black and white, might have feared to join a chanting (possibly violent) throng outside the president's house or the Capitol. A "church picnic" at the Lincoln Memorial seemed less forbidding. Repeatedly, observers of the rallies remarked how they brought new people into the movement. "An awful lot of black people who'd never been at a *protest* were there," Rauh recalled of the 1939 concert. Paula Sandburg, the poet's widow, caught the ambience of the shrine when she chose it for her husband's memorial service: "It would be especially appropriate, as people from all walks of life would feel welcome there."⁴⁸

Efforts at inclusion and indirect confrontation intensified the symbolism of protests at the Lincoln Memorial. The shrine was distant from government buildings, but it was by no means neutral ground or a compromise site that diluted the power of black protest. Conceived in a quest for white consensus, Lincoln's temple had been subsequently defined through interracial conflict and transformed into a "moral high ground" from which to exhort America to finish what Lincoln called "the great task remaining before us." In this way, the memorial is a powerfully confrontational site. Protesters presented themselves as orderly, patriotic citizens. They made the past a resource and made Lincoln a signifier of the dissonance between America's professed and achieved values. Rachelle Horowitz, transportation director

⁴⁶ Rauh interview, 6; Paul Robeson's antilynching rally competed with a similar NAACP-sponsored event, also at the memorial. See *Washington Post*, Sept. 29, 1946, sec. B, p. 5; *Washington Evening Star*, Aug. 6, 1946, sec. A, p. 2; and *Washington Afro-American*, Sept. 28, 1946, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Norman Hill interview by Sandage, Dec. 7, 1989, transcript, p. 2 (in Sandage's possession).

⁴⁸ Rauh interview, 1; *Washington Evening Star*, Sept. 20, 1967, clipping in "Lincoln Memorial 1960-1970" folder, Washingtoniana Collection.

of the 1963 march, remembered that marchers wanted to communicate a simple message: "We represent the core of what this country believes in." Rallying again and again at the memorial (hammering their message home and drawing strength to keep fighting) was like returning to home base, Horowitz said. She and other protesters

had to keep going back. . . . It's a sense of whether you have just a protest rally or whether you're having something with historical dimensions. And I think that Lincoln does add that. You're standing there in the face of history. In the face of history that has to be completed. . . . In terms of both symbolism and the need to go forward, the memorial is the perfect place.⁴⁹

Symbolic needs, of course, change over time. After 1963 many blacks deserted both the rituals and symbols that had been so forcefully merged at the Lincoln Memorial. The politics of memory had involved choices between militant confrontation and longer-term public education, between separatism and coalition building. The ritual that evolved from those choices, the sacred status of the memorial itself, and the fact that using the site required government permission narrowed protesters' tactical options. Wisconsin fair housing activists did hold an eight-day vigil there in 1967, and the antiwar March on the Pentagon stepped off from the memorial the same year. But as the general climate of protest turned more militant in the late 1960s, black leaders, including King, explored new tactics. The disastrous Poor People's Campaign of 1968—the last action King helped plan—built a shantytown within sight of the Lincoln Memorial, finally bringing to Washington the kind of long-term direct confrontation pursued in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama.⁵⁰

Likewise, blacks abandoned Lincoln after 1963, as the success of their movement transformed protesters' sense of identity. In 1964 the black novelist John Oliver Killens attempted to explain the widening gap between blacks and sympathetic white liberals. "You give us moody Abraham Lincoln, but many of us prefer John Brown, whom most of you hold in contempt and regard as a fanatic," he wrote. Malcolm X declared that Lincoln "probably did more to trick Negroes than any other man in history." It surely did not help that (just as newsman Edward Morgan had predicted in 1957) the shrine's growing identification with black freedom was increasingly rebutted by racists—from the anonymous graffitist who scrawled "NIGGER LOVER" on an outside wall of the shrine after a 1962 commemoration of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation to a 1972 wreath-laying ceremony there by the National Socialist White People's Party (the American Nazis).⁵¹

⁴⁹ Rachelle Horowitz interview by Sandage, Dec. 20, 1989, transcript, p. 4 (in Sandage's possession); Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, VII, 17–23.

⁵⁰ *Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 1967, sec. A, p. 32; *Washington Evening Star*, Oct. 21, 1967, sec. A, pp. 1, 2; Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope*, 64–72; *Washington Post*, June 20, 1968, sec. A, pp. 1, 8–9; *ibid.*, June 21, 1968, sec. A, pp. 1, 23.

⁵¹ John Oliver Killens, "Explanation of the 'Black Psyche,'" *New York Times Magazine*, June 7, 1964, pp. 37–38, 42, 47–48, esp. 47. Malcolm X quoted in Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 262. Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" *Ebony*, 23 (Feb. 1968), 35–40, 43; *Washington Evening Star*, Sept. 27, 1962, sec. B, p. 1; *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 1972, sec. A, p. 2. For a Citizens Councils of America advertisement quoting



Figure 8

Graffiti at the Lincoln Memorial after the centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, September 22, 1962. *Courtesy National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.*

By 1968 journalist Mary McGrory could write with certainty that “the Negroes are repudiating [Lincoln] as their champion and friend. . . . They have decided that he has been imposed upon them as ‘a folk symbol.’” That repudiation applied equally to the Lincoln Memorial. “How many times,” asked Julius Lester that same year, explicitly rejecting the emancipation moment,

has the photograph been reprinted of the small Negro boy staring up at the huge statue of Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial? The photograph would mean nothing if the boy doing the staring were white. What is the catechism the black child learns from Grade One on? “Class, what did Abraham Lincoln do?” “Lincoln freed the slaves,” and the point is driven home that you’d still be down on Mr. Charlie’s plantation working from can to can’t if Mr. Lincoln hadn’t done your great-great-grandmama a favor.⁵²

allegedly racist comments by Lincoln, see *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1968, p. 36. The media often quoted Lincoln’s speeches to discredit protesters in the late 1960s. See David Levering Lewis, *Martin Luther King: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1970), 316; and “Riots and Mob Spirit: America’s Greatest Danger,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Aug. 28, 1967, pp. 92, 91.

⁵² *Washington Evening Star*, Feb. 13, 1968, sec. A, p. 3; Julius Lester, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power’s Gon’ Get Your Mama!* (New York, 1968), 57–58.

Earlier, Lincoln had been the only symbol of interracial appeal on whom black protesters could lay claim; the martyrdom of King, Malcolm X, and others, the rise of Black Power, and the advent of black history programs gave protesters a constellation of contemporary black heroes. An interracial politics of memory, placing blacks at the center of the American story by juxtaposing them with its noblest hero, was no longer tactically useful if freedom remained a gift rather than the product of struggle—and if whites, influenced by the emancipation moment, continued to see the Lincoln symbol as bigger than the movement that was using it. Memory thereby threatened to become an end in itself, rather than an incentive to further action.⁵³

Ironically, blacks' rejection of Lincoln in the late 1960s was in part a denial of an icon they themselves had profoundly remade. The extent of the African-American appropriation of national memory was attested by the counter-efforts of government officials and others after 1960 to recapture Lincoln and his memorial. The Civil War Centennial Commission, organizing the 1962 Lincoln Memorial ceremony for the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, was so eager to control the message imparted there that it neglected to invite any black speakers. (Thurgood Marshall was added to the program after activists threatened a boycott.) During their presidential crises, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon both spoke at the shrine to defend their policies and compare themselves to Lincoln. On July 4, 1970, at the behest of Nixon's aides, entertainer Bob Hope and evangelist Billy Graham organized a jingoistic rally called Honor America Day; a crowd of thirty thousand at the Lincoln Memorial heard Graham deliver a sermon that was a remarkable response to the protest tradition that began when Marian Anderson politicized a national hymn. Graham declared, with unintended irony, "Let the world know that the vast majority of us still proudly sing: 'My Country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty.'" In a time when dissenters were turning to violent resistance, Graham urged his hearers to "never give in! Never give in! Never! Never! Never! Never!"⁵⁴

One of the enduring tragedies of the 1960s may be that black activists abandoned their rituals of alternative patriotism just when they had become most effective. In the late 1960s, the commingling of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements yielded new symbolic strategies. Peace historian Charles Chatfield argues that burning flags and draft cards did not represent anti-Americanism, but rather anti-"Americanism." Instead of using and subverting the patriotic icons and nationalism that Susman argued had dominated American culture since the 1930s, anti-war strategists rejected them outright. The cultural journey from the 1930s to the 1960s

⁵³ On the historical roots of this problem, see Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York, 1981), 236–37.

⁵⁴ On the emancipation centennial, see *Washington Afro-American*, Sept. 22, 1962, p. 4; *Washington Evening Star*, Sept. 19, 1962, p. 1; and *Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 1962, sec. B, p. 1. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 210–11. On Lyndon B. Johnson, see *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1968, p. 46; on Richard M. Nixon, see *Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 1974, sec. A, pp. 1–2. On Honor America Day, see *ibid.*, July 5, 1970, sec. A, pp. 1, 22. Billy Graham quoted *ibid.*, sec. A, p. 1.



Figure 9

Police arresting members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War for attempting to seal off the memorial, December 28, 1971. *Courtesy Associated Press.*

is seen in the stark difference between Easter 1939, when Marian Anderson sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and Christmas 1971, when eighty-seven members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War were arrested for attempting to seize and seal off the Lincoln Memorial. Cultural nationalism was no longer a resource; protesters now saw it as part of the problem. And where some determined to go next, their broad coalitions would not follow. As balladeer Phil Ochs sang in 1966,

I go to the civil rights rallies,
And I put down the old D.A.R. . . .
But don't talk about revolution;
That's going a little bit too far.
So love me, love me, love me; I'm a liberal.⁵⁵

Civil rights rallies at the Lincoln Memorial were more than just protests in a dramatic setting; they were transformative rituals that reveal the complexity of American na-

⁵⁵ Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, 1990), 395–96; David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, 1988). *Washington Post*, Dec. 29, 1971, sec. A, p. 1, sec. D, p. 1; Phil Ochs, "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," Phil Ochs, *There But for Fortune*, compact disk, Electra, 9-60832-2, 1989 (originally released on *Phil Ochs in Concert*, 1966).

tionalism and the context of the civil rights movement's symbolic strategies. The ritual that evolved after Marian Anderson's 1939 concert set patterns that foreshadowed blacks' later philosophy of nonviolent action. It unified and rejuvenated activists, broadened support and participation among the white (and even the black) public, and evaded bureaucratic roadblocks. Striving to make racial justice an essential component of the American Way of Life during decades ruled by a complacent cultural nationalism, African Americans redefined the American Way by counterexample—praying in their “Sunday best” on a national stage and creating events that could be neither ignored nor suppressed. Protesters used a national shrine as a kind of Trojan horse, evoking the specter of militancy in the capital through peaceful rituals that celebrated national values even as they strove to change them.

This was the essence of the politics of memory: activists brought politics into the temple, but in a way that preserved the temple's holiness and conferred upon them its power as a national site. Remarkably, after the Jim Crow incidents at the memorial's 1922 dedication ceremonies, a black newspaper editorialist had prescribed exactly this course. The shrine had been opened to the public, he wrote, “but not dedicated.” Asking readers not to visit the memorial until black Americans could affirm its rightful message of emancipation, he described with uncanny foresight the rites of national memory that would become so important to the black freedom movement. “With song, prayer, bold and truthful speech, with faith in God and country,” he wrote, “later on let us dedicate the temple thus far only opened.” By transforming the memorial from a symbol of consensus into, in Rauh's words, “the protest palace,” black activists claimed it as their own, very powerful, memory site.⁵⁶

In using concepts of public memory to analyze the civil rights movement, this essay has attempted to focus on the complex form and content of the events themselves. The Lincoln Memorial protests were celebratory moments when national collective memory seemed to be at its most inclusive, when there seemed to be the widest agreement about Abraham Lincoln's legacy—yet precisely then was the Lincoln symbol most hotly contested. The point here is not merely that there was room for oppositional expression during decades of Cold War consensus but that nationalism and public memory, often viewed as servants of the status quo, were themselves used to subvert or change the consensus; they were even used to demonstrate, as in the 1960s, that there really was no consensus. White Americans' persistent tendency to see national unity rather than protest in symbols like the Lincoln Memorial suggests that conflicts over public memory were integral to protesters' tactical shift in the late 1960s from a universalist, coalition-based approach to more militant and particularist strategies. It was not so much that blacks' early tactics had led to co-optation, but rather that activists' sophisticated attempts to co-opt dominant symbols could never fully overcome irreducible differences between black and white ways of remembering the American past.

⁵⁶ *Chicago Defender*, June 10, 1922, p. 1; Rauh interview, 1.

Given the fragmented oppositional politics of our own time, activists might revive the strategy of a politics of memory, with its remarkable ability both to unify protesters and to legitimate protest. Although mass demonstrations did resume at the memorial after the hiatus coinciding with King's assassination and the Vietnam War, these efforts have more often reflected a particularist politics of identity than a broad-based strategy. In the past twenty years activists there have demanded abortion rights, fetal rights, gay rights, and the right to smoke marijuana. Other groups demonstrating there have implored the American people to end the arms race, intervention in El Salvador, housing discrimination, world hunger, and even the presidency of Richard M. Nixon. Rallies at the memorial have spotlighted the plight of soldiers missing in Vietnam, embassy hostages in Iran, victims of drunk drivers, and persons with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Demonstrators have sought freedom for the people of Cuba, Taiwan, Czechoslovakia, Thailand, Pakistan, South Africa, and China. The 1963 March on Washington was itself commemorated with large rallies on its anniversaries in 1983 and 1988. Since 1982, Lincoln's shrine has been adjoined by a newer site of contested memory, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.⁵⁷

Not surprisingly, many of these recent protests invoke King's memory more than Lincoln's. The heavy hand of official memory is now sculpting King into the kind of consensus hero made of Lincoln in the 1910s. When King's birthday became a national holiday in 1986, conservative Georgia congressman Newt Gingrich observed, "No one can claim Dr. King. He transcends all of us." How much this echoes the apotheosis of Lincoln: the icon that belongs to all can be the weapon of no faction in particular. Manning Marable speaks for many contemporary activists when he deplores "the gradual ossification of Martin Luther King Jr., his ideological and political development frozen on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. . . . Half forgotten and deliberately obscured are the final radical years of King's public life."⁵⁸ King's induction into the pantheon of official memory threatens to construct a new national savior whose work is, of course, finished. King on those steps, reciting his Dream: Is this the new emancipation moment, at once liberating and limiting?

Struggles over public memory continue. Each year on King's birthday, a wreath-laying ceremony is held for him on that hallowed spot at the Lincoln Memorial; a group of schoolchildren recently enlisted their congressman to urge the National Park Service to honor King and his immortal speech by erecting a plaque at the

⁵⁷ National Park Service Ranger Logbooks, Lincoln Memorial, Dec. 17, 1955–Nov. 9, 1989, 21 vols. (Office of Mall Operations, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.). Clever landscaping prevents large rallies from being staged at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the Park Service restricts permits for political actions there because of the "sacred and personal nature of the site." John Williams interview by Sandage, Sept. 26, 1989, notes, p. 2 (in Sandage's possession). Williams is supervisory park ranger of mall operations, National Park Service. On the symbiosis of the memorials to Lincoln and to Vietnam veterans, see Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 4; and Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (Summer 1986), 688–719.

⁵⁸ Newt Gingrich quoted in Naveh, *Crown of Thorns*, 189. For Manning Marable's comments, see *Guardian*, Feb. 21, 1990, pp. 10–11. See also "A Round Table: Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Journal of American History*, 74 (Sept. 1987), 436–81.

base of the memorial. One wonders how the embittered residents of long-ago Omega, Virginia, the town that expelled Oscar Chapman from grammar school, might react to this. Or to the African-American schoolgirl who visited the memorial one day in the 1980s and stood staring up at the huge statue. "Do you know who that is?" an adult asked the child. "That's Lincoln," she replied. "Do you know who freed the slaves?" She completed the catechism by rote: "Martin Luther King."⁹

⁹ *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1992, sec. A, p. 18; *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 1990, sec. B, p. 3; schoolgirl quoted in Frederick T. D. Hunt interview by Sandage, Dec. 21, 1989, transcript, p. 4–5 (in Sandage's possession). Hunt attended the memorial's 1922 dedication, and from 1955 to 1981 he organized the annual Lincoln's Birthday ceremony held at the memorial by the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of Honor of the United States.