

Marching on Washington: The Joy of Victory and the Agony of Defeat as my Feet Hurt and Heart Ached

By [Danny Schechter](#)

Global Research, October 04, 2010

4 October 2010

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

I have been marching on Washington—and covering marches for more years that I can remember. As a kid, I was part of the original March on Washington back in '63. It was for jobs and freedom.

The jobs part was soon forgotten when the event was reduced to four words, “I Have A Dream” in the historical memory. Dr King’s hope for a non-racial America was not the only message, but it is all we remember as anthemic and iconic. Also forgotten, it was an expression of a grass roots movement from below struggling against violent and racist opposition. It was there to showcase that movement, not make a movie.

It was well-organized but hardly as well-produced as The One Nation Marching Together rally this past weekend. This rally seemed like it was out together by special events specialists, the folks who run political conventions with everyone on message, giant screens, filler music, fast-pacing, catchy videos, hip musicians, and scripted intervals, not to mention American flags flying, the star spangled banner and a pledge of allegiance.

Back then, it was a liberatory moment in which many participants didn’t know what would happen. The “White Power Structure,” as it used to be called, was terrified about what would happen when so many black people assembled in one place. There were soldiers out of sight, but on alert, should a feared riot erupt. The next day, the newspapers breathed a sign of relief that Washington was still there.

This time, the newspapers were less important than CSPAN and CNN. It was a show designed to show off the diversity of the crowds—its “Americanness” and its call for jobs and justice although the press labeled it liberal and a Democratic pep rally although no politicians spoke and no candidates were endorsed. There were pro-Obama signs in the crowd with two held high by two photogenic young women, redheaded twins—but that was not the focus.

Rob Kall of Op-Ed News was turned on by the spirit of the day, “they did an amazing job of putting on a show. It was not just a long series of political lectures. Instead, it included singing, dancing, poetry... and why shouldn’t we get that?”

It was more an effort to prime the base, made up primarily of bussed in-trained in old-line union members, to vote and get out the vote in November. (Back in 1963, many didn’t have the right to vote.)

There were two contrasts to be made—one was, and one wasn’t.

The one that wasn't was what has been happening in Europe in the last week. I didn't hear any one mention of the eleven MILLION workers who shut down Spain for a day in a protest against cutbacks in the name of austerity, or the three million who angrily marched in France to defend their pensions. American workers do not have the consciousness or political culture of their European counterparts.

And now in Iceland, "up to 2,000 people caused chaos at the state opening of the Icelandic parliament, with politicians forced to race to the back door of the building because of the large number of protesters at the front. Eggs were said to have hit the prime minister, Jhanna Sigurardttir, other MPs and the wife of the Icelandic president, lafur Ragnar Grmsson... Birgitta Jnsdttir, one of three MPs to join the protesters, said: "There is a realisation that the IMF is going to wipe out our middle classes.""

The other contrast was with the Glenn Beck Tea Party revival meeting a month earlier. That had been organized by a charismatic if deluded media personality using the power of his media, and well-funded and organized network.

It appealed more to individuals than organizations. Its stated message was pro-God but its real mission was political. And it was bigger than the One Nation march, organized more through conference calls and emails, even if it insisted it was not. (The National Parks Service no longer does official counts after it was sued for low-balling the Million Man March years ago.)

I am glad that the numbers game was not the only game in town this time. That's a good thing because we can then focus more on what was said than on how many people heard it. None of that really matters in a TV age, but bear in mind, CSPAN is not known for its high ratings and large audiences. Getting on TV is not as important as getting your political act together.

My hunch is that this event got nowhere near the mainstream coverage of the Beckathon or the expected coverage of Jon Stewart's October Rally for Sanity. Don't forget celebrity coverage usually trumps political coverage of all persuasions, and Jon and Glenn are seen as dueling celebrities. Unless Paris Hilton is going to jail, they will get a lot of airtime.

At first, this march was intended to pressure the Obama Administration to do more and do it better. That approach played more to the mood of anger and disenchantment among Obama backers. But nervous unions who paid for One Nation neutered that approach early on. They pulled everyone's punches.

It was left to gravelly-voiced singer Harry Belafonte, now fighting cancer, to condemn the wars and militarism of the US government. Only a few speakers even alluded to a peace agenda. Most of the messaging was upbeat, focused on labor solidarity and green jobs with former soldiers waxing patriotically and labor leaders appealing for support.

Voices like Michael Moore's were not even on the bill. Earlier, on the same day I read his call for progressive and populist demands as the only way to save the Democrats from an electoral wipeout.

"Sadly," he writes, "it's a situation the Democrats have brought upon themselves — even though the majority of them didn't create the mess we're in." he writes.

“To many, the shellacking they’re about to receive is one they deserve. But if you’re of a mindset that believes a return to 2001-2008 would be sheer insanity, then you probably agree we’ve got no choice but to save the Democrats from themselves.”

His populist progressive proposals include indicting Wall Street criminals—a proposal I put forward in my film *Plunder*—and imposing a moratorium on home foreclosures, something President Franklin Roosevelt did as a part of his New Deal in the 1930’s. (Some big banks have suspended foreclosures when it was revealed they were breaking the law in at least 23 states.)

None of this was on the agenda with no homeowners denouncing foreclosures or speakers educating the public about the crimes of Wall Street, I had offered *Plunder* to help the organizing effort but they never took me up on it.

On the day of the March, the New York Times was reporting on a confrontation between Obama and Wall Street guys who have turned him into an anti-business pariah. Even that debate was not referenced or echoed at the Rally.

So, I was not surprised by the embrace of Democratic Party mainstream in the tone of the rally. Ironically, and as you would expect, the righteous right wing distorted the content into a battle of socialism.

A rapid response video by the hard right-wing and shadowy Americans for Prosperity was up on You Tube before I got home complete with Russian marching anthems to signal the commies were coming. The video focused on the signs of the micro-sized Socialist Party without noting that the Party is fiercely anti-communist, (I guess they don’t care what kind of communists they are.) <http://tinyurl.com/2we44kl>

I am sure the Daily Show could have fun with that foolishness. The Daily Beast has now denounced the working people who shlepped to what comedian Sam Hall called “Washington DCeit” as liberal wingnuts in column dripping with elitest and condescending contempt.

Sadly, the One Nation that came together in Washington was not there to be organized into an ongoing force. No follow-up program was announced, no emails collected, no vision on how to turn all that the energy on the Mall into a powerful progressive alternative to the Tea Party was offered. No longer march strategy was announced. It was a moment in itself not for anything more.

The memorial spirit of the Lincoln Memorial hovered over it even as America is in now in the midst of a new Civil war, the fight of our lives.

The weather was beautiful. The vibe was great. The nostalgia was heartening, especially given my history, but some of it seemed predictable, even phoned it. As Karl M—dare I utter his name?—warned, history repeats itself as farce.

A good time was had by all working together at a cost of millions.

Thank you for being here.

Next!

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