John Lewis’s “Serious Revolution”: Rhetoric, Resistance, and Revision at the March on Washington

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In American memory, the March on Washington is the high-water mark of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” oration is so central to the memory of the March that it has obscured the speeches by other civil rights activists—including John Lewis. Lewis’s prepared speech was militant, and March organizers pressured him to revise it. Inquiry into Lewis’s speech and the surrounding controversy permits the recovery of what Lewis actually said—which has not been published—and reveals a synecdochic struggle over the rhetoric of the civil rights movement and what was sayable in public on August 28, 1963. Key words: John Lewis, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, March on Washington, civil rights, public memory

In American memory, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is the high-water mark of the civil rights movement: as Milton Viorst notes, “To many Americans, the March on Washington in August of 1963 was the civil rights movement” (199). For many Americans, the image of over 200,000 people gathered around the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and its reflecting pool to peacefully protest racial discrimination stands as a testament to the ability of diverse people to work together for social change and national improvement. The image of blacks and whites marching hand-in-hand, accompanied by the chorus of “We Shall Overcome,” is a powerful vision of interracial cooperation, nonviolent protest, and democratic change. The image of a “beloved community” expressed in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” oration is etched in the national memory. In fact, King’s speech has become so central to the memory of the March itself that it has overshadowed the speeches delivered by other civil rights advocates on August 28, 1963.

Nine other leaders spoke at the March, including the representatives of the “Big Six” civil rights organizations. And the other speeches were not merely opening acts for King’s eloquence: the Washington Post claimed that march leader A. Philip Randolph “secured the greatest emotional response” (Baker A13), and Time praised Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for capturing the attention and imagination of the crowd (“Civil Rights” 15). Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Chairman Floyd McKissick created a sense of drama by reading James Farmer’s statement from a Louisiana jail cell, where the CORE secretary was serving time for leading demonstrations. In contrast to these speakers, who shared King’s temperate dream, one man came armed with a speech that had the potential to fracture the day’s unity and to tarnish the March’s memory as a demonstration of harmony and moderation—John Lewis, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).²

Lewis’s prepared remarks were militant; the original address claimed that civil rights activists would “march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did.” Lewis distributed copies of his speech in advance, and his words immediately created a controversy. The Kennedy administration and several March participants objected to Lewis’s revolutionary timbre and pressured him to tone down his message.
Lewis initially refused, but ultimately revised his remarks for the sake of unity. The behind-the-scenes controversy surrounding Lewis's speech is a significant moment in the history of the American civil rights movement. This conflict about the goals, methods, and rhetoric of the movement represents an early fissure in the coalition between black radicals, black moderates, and white liberals. Although the March on Washington usually is remembered as a spectacular demonstration of unity, the debate over Lewis's address actually foreshadowed the split between SNCC and King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and between SNCC and its white supporters, though few realized it at the time. In short, the struggle over Lewis's prepared remarks was representative of a larger struggle within the civil rights movement.

My argument in this essay is that the public memory of the March on Washington needs interrogation. The memory of the March expressed in anniversary commemorations, popular magazine articles, television documentaries, children's books, and other vehicles of memory most often is a simplistic view. Communication scholars who teach King's "I Have a Dream" speech without presenting the contextual details of the entire event also play a role in perpetuating the dominant, uncomplicated understanding of the March on Washington. A full account of the March would include analyses of all the speeches delivered on August 28, but at a minimum, contrasting King's address with Lewis's actual and original speech texts would help complicate the public understanding of the event. In addition, I will demonstrate that the historical accounts of Lewis's speech are confusing, contradictory, incomplete, and inaccurate. Historians, biographers, former activists, and editors of anthologies have used and printed different versions of Lewis's prepared remarks and his actual address. To my knowledge, an accurate text of what Lewis uttered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial has not yet been published. I will attempt to clarify the contradictions and errors in the historical accounts and will present a transcript of Lewis's speech as delivered. Furthermore, I will undertake a comparative reading of Lewis's prepared and delivered remarks to illustrate why some involved in the March found his words objectionable and to demonstrate the differences between the texts and the significance of the changes. A close reading of the texts will reveal a synecdochic struggle over the rhetoric of the movement and what was sayable in public on August 28, 1963.

Preparation and Prohibition

In the winter of 1962, A. Philip Randolph—president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP)—revived his idea for a mass march on Washington, D.C., which he initially had conceived in 1941. Randolph discussed his proposal with long-time friend and activist Bayard Rustin; Rustin soon directed two of his associates to draft plans for the proposed march, tentatively scheduled for May of 1963. In a speech to the Negro American Labor Council (NALC) on March 7, 1963, Randolph issued a call for a "vast, massive, nationwide Emancipation March on the Nation's Capital for Jobs" (qtd. in Viorst 217). Randolph's call to march was voiced during a lull in the civil rights movement, but after the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, his idea germinated. After the success of the Birmingham protests, King told his SCLC associates, "We are on a breakthrough. We need a mass protest" (qtd. in Branch 816). King suggested a mass march on the capitol, and SCLC soon began to coordinate with Randolph to make the elder leader's dream a reality. On July 2, the leaders of the "Big
Six” civil rights organizations met at New York’s Roosevelt Hotel to discuss the particulars of the March, which had been rescheduled for the end of August.

At that meeting, Randolph announced that Rustin would organize the March, in spite of NAACP Secretary Wilkin’s objections. Rustin, a brilliant organizer, proposed strict rules for the March to insure a peaceful, orderly, unified demonstration. There would be no civil disobedience, blocking of transportation, or mass lobbying (Garrow 277). SNCC had insisted earlier that the March include demonstrations against the Justice Department, which had brought perjury charges against the civil rights leaders in Albany, Georgia, but this plan was prohibited. Rustin also created guidelines for the speeches. He warned the speakers that a hook-man would unceremoniously remove them from the podium if their addresses exceeded the time limit of seven minutes. While Rustin left the selection of topics to the speakers, several informal constraints were suggested: no emphasis on enemies, rather a focus on common goals and grievances; no attacks upon individual senators and congressmen; no violent language; no personal attacks on President Kennedy (Branch 873, Gentile 170). Historian David L. Lewis notes that while Randolph, King, Wilkins, and Rustin operated on the assumption that the speeches should be moderate, not all speakers agreed with or operated under this assumption (222). While the prominent leaders of the March prepared messages that emphasized federal legislation, laced their speeches with optimism, and muted their threats, John Lewis prepared an address that violated many of these assumptions about the March’s rhetoric.

Many members of SNCC thought that the March would have little value, that it would not make a practical difference in the lives of African Americans. The moderate tone of the event, they suggested, stifled any serious challenges to American racist practices and institutions. Still, SNCC did not want to be left out of the day’s events, believing that Lewis’s speech would attract attention and perhaps secure support for its cause. Several SNCC activists also felt that Lewis’s speech should be seen as a chance to launch a blistering criticism of society and to voice a militancy not heard from the prominent civil rights organizations (Forman 332–33). In addition, the speech was an occasion for SNCC to bring its break with conventional liberalism out in the open (Carson 93). Working within these assumptions about the March, Lewis began to draft his speech in late August. Lewis was a gifted mimic, but not a gifted speechwriter. Still, he had no trouble deciding what aspects of the civil rights struggle he would emphasize: he prepared a simple address about the SNCC field secretaries imprisoned in Americus, Georgia; the charges against demonstrators in Plaquemine, Louisiana; and the indictments against activists in Albany, Georgia. Lewis’s draft also questioned the Kennedy administration’s support for civil rights: “Which side is the federal government on?” (Branch 869–70). Although the March might accomplish little, Lewis planned to use the opportunity to communicate a strong sense of urgency and to express SNCC’s swelling discontent.

The final draft of the planned speech was not penned entirely by the SNCC chairman; after Lewis completed his draft, SNCC members met at their Atlanta office to revise the address. SNCC’s democratic character extended to the preparation of the speech, with several members adding sentences and paragraphs to the message. Besides, some of his fellow activists reckoned, Lewis had served as chairman less than three months—too short a period to determine SNCC’s public image by himself. Courtland Cox, who served on the March’s Administrative Committee, claimed that the speech should point out that nothing in Kennedy’s civil rights bill would protect African Americans seeking the vote
or those protesting the violation of their civil rights. Cox also authored the line, "This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped-up charges." This addition, a version of which is retained in the delivered speech, was important to many members of SNCC's field staff, who often were charged with multiple crimes for their demonstrations—including offenses judged capital crimes under many Southern states' Reconstruction statutes. Tom Kahn, a young white activist who had drafted the initial memo about the March for Rustin, penned a line reflecting his socialist ideology: "We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political, or economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about." This sentence is indicative of the rising influence of socialists within SNCC (which in its inception was resistant to socialism), but the line does not appear in the delivered speech. SNCC executive secretary James Forman suggested that Lewis condemn the police brutality against C.B. King and added the sentence about marching through the South like Sherman (Branch 873–74). Thomas Gentile claims that Forman also added a line that later became SNCC's motto—"One Man, One Vote" (171); it is more likely, however, that Lewis wrote this phrase. In an oral history interview, Lewis claims he saw a photograph of demonstrators in Rhodesia carrying signs that read, "One Man, One Vote" before the March and decided to include the phrase in his speech (qtd. in Hampton and Fayer 165). After the additions to the draft were completed, Julian Bond and Eleanor Holmes polished the speech for presentation at the March.

Nicholas Mills suggests that the militant tone of Lewis's prepared text was not imposed on him by SNCC members; rather, Mills claims, the style and substance of the passages that ultimately were modified matched Lewis's own politics (290). In fact, however, Lewis was not militant by SNCC standards. That a man committed to nonviolence, social reform, and racial integration is remembered primarily as the author of a revolutionary speech is an ironic dimension of the history and memory of the civil rights movement. Lewis had been elected SNCC chairman, in part, because of his participation in the Freedom Rides, the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, and other prominent demonstrations. SNCC members admired his intense commitment, his strong character, and his physical courage. By the time of his election in June of 1963, Lewis had been arrested twenty-four times and beaten viciously on several occasions. Lewis was seen as a physically brave, but not militant, leader (Wilentz 24). Mary King notes that Lewis's bravery and commitment "made him appear more militant politically than he actually was, and thus he was a good compromise candidate" (182). Lewis's prepared speech was, as Taylor Branch suggests, a collective manifesto of SNCC's early years (873–74). But while Lewis's original text expressed some of the militancy of SNCC and his own dissatisfaction with the federal government's civil rights record, its religious imagery and emphasis on nonviolence were out of step with SNCC's dominant orientation by the summer of 1963 (Carson 95). In other words, Lewis contributed his own ideas to the speech, which created a text that was a peculiar mixture of revolutionary and reformist rhetoric.

Although Lewis qualified the claim that civil rights workers would "burn Jim Crow to the ground" by inserting the adverb "nonviolently" at the end of the sentence, his planned remarks still were more militant than March participants expected or ultimately would accept. While it is clear that March leaders and Justice Department officials obtained copies of Lewis's planned speech text on Tuesday evening, August 27, chronicles of the March present different explanations of how those copies were
obtained. Gentile claims that Rustin had ordered speakers not to distribute advance copies of their texts (170), whereas Viorst (229) and King (183) claim that Rustin had, in fact, directed speakers to distribute advance copies. Whether Rustin had prohibited or required advance distribution, copies of Lewis’s speech were circulated at the Statler-Hilton Hotel, and one copy ultimately reached Washington’s Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle—the first March participant to object to Lewis’s address. Again, accounts of the March present different narratives about how O’Boyle obtained the speech text. Gentile claims that an aide to O’Boyle picked up a copy of the speech from a table outside the leader’s meeting room at the Statler-Hilton (171). After O’Boyle discussed the speech with his Catholic associates, Gentile claims, Auxiliary Bishop Phillip Hannan contacted Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Burke Marshall (174). In contrast, Mills and Garrow claim that Justice Department assistants obtained a copy of Lewis’s speech, which Robert Kennedy and Marshall decided was too militant to be presented; both men then contacted O’Boyle about the text (Mills 289, Garrow 281–84). However he came across Lewis’s planned remarks, O’Boyle found them inflammatory, and informed Rustin that he would not deliver the invocation at the March unless Lewis changed his speech.

Late Tuesday night, less than twelve hours before the March would begin, Rustin called an emergency meeting of March leaders and organizers to discuss Lewis’s speech. Lewis and Cox defended the address against criticism from Randolph, King, Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers (UAW), and Eugene Carson Blake, head of the National Council of Churches (NCC). Finally, as the morning of the March approached, Lewis agreed to remove the line about marching through the South like General Sherman (Forman 334), and the March leaders agreed to reexamine Lewis’s speech the following day.

The controversy surrounding Lewis’s speech carried over to Wednesday, with O’Boyle still unsatisfied and threatening to walk out. O’Boyle objected not so much to SNCC’s critique of the Kennedy administration as he did to the “scorched earth” language that remained in the speech. Other participants in the March raised new objections. Blake and Wilkins complained that the inclusion of the words “masses” and “revolution” smelled of Communism. Reuther felt that Lewis’s speech still belittled the administration’s civil rights bill, and Rustin objected to the claim that “patience is a dirty and nasty word.” Surprisingly, Burke Marshall arrived in the sidecar of a police motorcycle bearing the Justice Department’s suggestions for revision. Rustin assured O’Boyle and the other objects that the speech would be changed, and appointed a revision committee consisting of himself, Lewis, Cox, Forman, Blake, Randolph, King, and King’s SCLC assistant, Ralph Abernathy. Members of the committee pressured Lewis to amend his speech. The SNCC leaders resisted censure. With the program just minutes away, the committee still had not reached an agreement. Finally—responding to personal appeals by Randolph and King—Lewis, Cox, and Forman capitulated. The three SNCC representatives huddled behind the Lincoln Memorial, and Forman prepared the revised manuscript on a portable typewriter. Forman pecked furiously, with the program starting as he typed. Forman finished, and Lewis was presented with the text as he hurried to take his place next to the other speakers. Minutes later, Lewis rose to speak. O’Boyle prepared to leave the stage in case Lewis reverted. Two Kennedy aides stood ready to pull the plug on the public address system in case Lewis decided to utter his
objectionable words (Garrow 283). The audience could not see the controversy surrounding the stage, and its members listened intently as Lewis spoke.

Lewis was interrupted by rousing applause fourteen times, more than any other speaker except King (Gentile 183). Ebony writer Lerone Bennett, Jr., called Lewis’s speech at the March on Washington one of “the keys to that day” (119). Time magazine claimed that whereas many of the speakers bored the audience with “dull” and “overlong” speeches, “The crowd liked Lewis” (“Civil Rights” 15). Branch claims that Lewis’s “authenticity stirred a crowd that was sleepless from a long afternoon’s drone of self-conscious speeches” (880), and David Lewis claims that the SNCC chairman’s address “had only slightly less impact upon the crowd than Martin’s” (224). The positive response to Lewis’s message helped abate the SNCC representatives’ resentment over being censured. Forman later emphasized that changes preserved the March’s unity and claimed that since the press already had copies of the original text, the deviations in Lewis’s actual speech called further attention to his remarks (335). In his six-month report to the SNCC leadership in December 1963, Lewis advanced a similar argument:

The fact remains that in the name of “unity” I did change the speech, at the same time trying to maintain the original tenor of the speech without sacrifice. . . . Since that time I find that people are asking questions about SNCC. What is SNCC’s program? What is SNCC doing? Who is SNCC? And usually, when they do find out, they want in some way or another to become identified with SNCC. For this we can thank our good brethren, Archbishop Boyle [sic], Messrs. Wilkins, King, Young, and Randolph. (Lewis, Memo 3).

Many members of SNCC, however, were unsatisfied with explanations regarding the decision to revise speech and became angry with Lewis, Forman, and Cox (Stoper 46). Mary King claims that many in the organization—including herself—preferred that Lewis not speak rather than changing the address, and notes that many also felt that the unauthorized revision of the speech undermined SNCC’s democratic tradition (185). In spite of the positive response to Lewis’s delivered address and the attention it garnered, the story about the revision of the original text behind Lincoln’s statue became a painful memory within SNCC. The controversy surrounding the changes to the speech not only foreshadowed SNCC’s split with black moderates and white liberals but also the group’s own fractures and the ousting of Lewis from SNCC’s leadership three years later by its more militant element.

Textual “Authenticity”

Lewis’s speech at the March on Washington raises issues not only of discursive prohibition but also of textuality. The words spoken from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial were heard by those attending the March, but few others have experienced that text. In fact, close attention to the variety of texts published after the speech’s delivery calls into question the notion that a single text can be identified as the text of Lewis’s address. Contemporary newspapers and periodicals published conflicting accounts of what he actually said, and—since then—historical accounts of the March and civil rights anthologies have presented different versions of the speech. An accurate text of Lewis’s message as delivered was not printed in SNCC’s own newsletter; did not appear in any major newspaper, including African American papers; was not contained on The Great March to Washington, the sound recording of the March endorsed by the SCLC, NAACP, and National Urban League (NUL); and is unavailable in historical
accounts of the March, including definitive collections of civil rights documents like *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*. The speech as delivered at the March is, however, preserved on videotape. I have transcribed the speech from a copy of the videotape obtained from John Lewis’s congressional office; this transcript will serve as the delivered text for my analysis (Lewis, “Text”). The original version of the speech text, before its revision in Washington, D.C., also is preserved. The SNCC Papers at the King Center in Atlanta contain a document marked “Text of Speech to be Delivered at Lincoln Memorial, Original”; this document will serve as the original text for my analysis. But in order to fully discuss Lewis’s address at the March, one still must examine competing, conflicting texts. Indeed, the very notion of “text” is unstable in the case of Lewis’s address.

Several African American periodicals and newspapers did not even mention the controversy surrounding Lewis’s speech. Many, including two prominent black newspapers, the *Amsterdam News* and the *Chicago Defender*, published the complete text of King’s address and gave short shrift to the other speakers. The *News* identified Lewis as a “young firebrand leader,” but did not mention his speech (“The Big Question” 1), and the *Defender* did not mention Lewis at all. Those newspapers that did report on the controversy did not quote Lewis’s address. The *Philadelphia Afro-American*, for example, reported that Lewis “found himself besieged by the oldsters for the his use of what they called ‘inflammatory words’ in the original speech he had prepared for delivery at the Lincoln Memorial program,” but did not indicate what Lewis planned to say or what he actually said (Day 12).

*Ebony* was one of the few outlets in the black press to self-consciously print what Lewis had planned to say: the magazine noted that Lewis was “forced to tone his speech down” and paraphrased the prepared text, including the sentence about marching through Dixie like Sherman (Bennett 122). A few African American newspapers also printed excerpts from Lewis’s original speech, but unintentionally. For example, the *Pittsburgh Courier* published a two-column story that included eight paragraphs identified as quotations from Lewis’s delivered address. In fact, the excerpts are from the original text: the *Courier* reported that Lewis actually claimed that “patience is a dirty and nasty word,” and that “we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power outside of any national structure”—lines that appear in the original draft, but not in the actual speech as delivered (“We Can’t Wait” 3). The *Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, and the *Norfolk Journal & Guide* claimed that Lewis called Kennedy’s civil rights bill “too little, too late”—another line that appeared in the original draft but was not spoken (“Here’s What” 1, “March on Washington” 456).

Most accounts of the March in magazines and newspapers run by whites reported on the controversy surrounding Lewis’s speech and excerpted both the original text and the actual remarks. *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report* discussed the debate at the Lincoln Memorial and printed quotations from Lewis’s original draft and his revised remarks (Baker 15, “The ‘March’ ” 34). The *New Republic* claimed that Lewis “had prepared a speech full of terrorsities about how useless the civil rights bill is and what frauds the Democrats and Republicans are,” and noted that he “had to soften his words in deference to elders” (Kempton 20). The *Washington Post* reported that “Lewis had intended to scorch the Kennedy administration and Congress and ‘cheap politicians’ in a
highly emotional speech” (Baker A13). The Post also noted that Lewis changed his speech under pressure, and printed excerpts from his actual presentation. The New York Times published long excerpts from Lewis’s planned and presented remarks. The Times reported that Lewis planned to say that activists will “take matters into [their] own hands” and “march through the South . . . the way Sherman did,” and discussed the pressures on Lewis to change his address (Kenworthy 16, “Prelate Objects” 20). The Chicago Tribune also reported on the controversy, but claimed in error that Lewis had called the civil rights bill “too little, too late” and had decried “cheap political leaders” (Edwards 5).

Several historians have made similar errors in their accounts of Lewis’s speech, presenting quotations from Lewis’s planned remarks as what he actually said at the March. In Race, Reform, and Rebellion, Manning Marable asserts that Lewis dismissed Kennedy’s proposal for civil rights legislation as “too little and too late” (74). David Lewis, in his biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., claims that John Lewis delivered the following lines: “This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders allying themselves with open forms of political economic and social exploitation,” and “Listen, Mr. Kennedy, listen, Mr. Congressman, listen, fellow citizens—the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom” (223). Lewis did not speak any of these lines on August 28. Part of the problem for historians and students of the March on Washington is that multiple versions purported to be the original text and multiple versions purported to be the spoken text have been published.

For example, in Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, former SNCC activist Danny Lyon prints a text that he claims is a mimeograph of Lewis’s original, uncensored speech (86–87). But Staughton Lynd’s anthology Nonviolence in America also contains a speech text alleged to be a mimeograph of the original (482–85). The two texts are different: most significantly, the version in Lyon’s book contains a paragraph that does not appear in the version printed in Lynd’s anthology. Which text is the original? Or, is neither text a copy of the speech Lewis planned to deliver? My own research indicates that Lynd’s version is an accurate reprint of what Lewis was prepared to present at the March. The text of the address reprinted in Lynd’s compilation is identical to the “Text of Speech to be Delivered at Lincoln Memorial, Original” in the SNCC Papers at the King Center. This is not the same text, however, that was distributed to the press. Forman claims that by an oversight the text released to the press read, “In good conscience, we cannot support the administration’s civil rights bill,” although SNCC had decided a few days prior to the March to insert the word “wholeheartedly” in this sentence (335). Forman’s claim is corroborated by documentary evidence: the National Urban League Papers at the Library of Congress contain a copy of Lewis’s speech text circulated the evening before the March: this copy does not contain the word “wholeheartedly.” Lyon’s text most likely is an early draft: it does not contain the word “wholeheartedly,” and its tenth paragraph is not in the texts contained in the SNCC and NUL Papers.

Unlike the original version of the address, an accurate text of what Lewis actually said has not been published—although numerous authors and editors have claimed to have the “authentic” delivered text. Joanne Grant (375–77) and Philip Foner (975–77) have printed identical versions of the speech, purported to be the address actually delivered,
in their anthologies of African American rhetoric. This version, however, contains many of the objectionable phrases that ultimately were excised, including the sentences about “cheap political leaders,” patience being “a dirty and nasty word,” and marching “through the South . . . the way Sherman did.” The text printed by Grant and Foner is not the delivered text, but rather an earlier draft of the speech: the SNCC Papers contain an identical version marked with the heading, “John Lewis: Chairman, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).” James Forman, who typed the revised speech at the March, also has published a version of the speech that he alleges is what Lewis actually said (336–37); this version is reprinted in Herbert Aptheker’s A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States (248–49). While Forman’s version does not contain the offending sentences, it still is not an accurate transcript of what Lewis uttered. Forman’s text is most likely the manuscript that Lewis took to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a text that he revised slightly during his delivery. Except for the order of words in one clause, Forman’s text is identical to the version printed in SNCC’s official publication, the Student Voice (“Text of Lewis’s Speech” 1+), which is where those SNCC members who did not attend the March encountered the text. Gentile also claims to have the genuine delivered text, transcribed from films and audio recordings of the March (178–81). Gentile’s text, though, is missing six sentences that Lewis actually spoke and contains several errors in transcription. By turning to the videotape of the speech—or, for the purposes of this essay, my transcript of the video—the scholarly confusion and contradiction regarding Lewis’s actual words can be resolved. The following is what John Lewis actually said on the afternoon of August 28, 1963:

We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of. For hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. For they are receiving starvation wages, or no wages at all. While we stand here, there are sharecroppers in the Delta of Mississippi who are out in the fields working for less than three dollars a day, twelve hours a day. While we stand here there are students in jail on trumped-up charges. Our brother James Farmer, along with many others, is also in jail. We come here today with a great sense of misgiving.

It is true that we support the administration’s civil rights bill. We support it with great reservations, however. Unless Title III is put in this bill, there is nothing to protect the young children and old women who must face police dogs and fire hoses in the South while they engage in peaceful demonstrations. In its present form, this bill will not protect the citizens of Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear of a police state. It will not protect the hundreds and thousands of people that have been arrested upon trump charges. What about the three young men, SNCC field secretaries in Americus, Georgia, who face the death penalty for engaging in peaceful protest?

As it stands now, the voting section of this bill will not help the thousands of black people who want to vote. It will not help the citizens of Mississippi, of Alabama and Georgia, who are qualified to vote, but lack a sixth-grade education. “One man, one vote” is the African cry. It is ours too. It must be ours!

We must have legislation that will protect the Mississippi sharecropper who is put off of his farm because he dares to register to vote. We need a bill that will provide for the homeless and starving people of this nation. We need a bill that will ensure the equality of a maid who earns five dollars a week in a home of a family whose total income is $100,000 a year. We must have a good FEPC bill.

My friends, let us not forget that we are involved in a serious social revolution. By and large, American politics is dominated by politicians who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation. There are exceptions, of course. We salute those. But what political leader can stand up and say, “My party is the party of principles”? For the party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of
Javits is also the party of Goldwater. Where is our party? Where is the political party that will make it unnecessary to march on Washington?

Where is the political party that will make it unnecessary to march in the streets of Birmingham? Where is the political party that will protect the citizens of Albany, Georgia? Do you know that in Albany, Georgia, nine of our leaders have been indicted, not by the Dixiecrats, but by the federal government for peaceful protest? But what did the federal government do when Albany’s deputy sheriff beat Attorney C.B. King and left him half-dead? What did the federal government do when local police officials kicked and assaulted the pregnant wife of Slater King, and she lost her baby?

To those who have said “Be patient and wait,” we have long said that we cannot be patient. We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to be free now! We are tired. We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. And then you holler, “Be patient.” How long can we be patient? We want our freedom and we want it now. We do not want to go to jail. But we will go to jail if this is the price we must pay for love, brotherhood, and true peace.

I appeal to all of you to get into this great revolution that is sweeping this nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete. We must get in this revolution and complete the revolution. For in the Delta in Mississippi, in southwest Georgia, in the Black Belt of Alabama, in Harlem, in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom.

They’re talking about slow down and stop. We will not stop. All of the forces of Eastland, Barnett, Wallace, and Thurmond will not stop this revolution. If we do not get meaningful legislation out of this Congress, the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South; through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today. By the force of our demands, our determination, and our numbers, we shall splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces and put them together in the image of God and democracy. We must say: “Wake up America! Wake up!” For we cannot stop, and we will not and cannot be patient.

For reasons of historical and rhetorical precision, rhetorical critics should be committed to providing accurate accounts of significant rhetorical acts. Haig Bosmajian, for example, demonstrates that the inaccuracies in the reprints of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech make a difference for the historical record and for the texture and rhetorical impact of King’s address (108–13). But, as close study of Lewis’s speech indicates, the text of a speech often is not reducible to a single draft. The text of what Lewis actually said printed here is an important text, but it is no more the text than the original, unspoken version or other versions. The spoken text is a final text that aids in interpreting the meaning of Lewis’s speech for those who attended the March, those who heard his words over the radio, those who watched his address on television, and those who pressured him to revise his message. The spoken text, however, does not exhaust the meaning of the address.

The rhetorical critic could interrogate what the speech might have meant to white Americans who read the accounts of Lewis’s speech in the New York Times or the New Republic. The critic could analyze what the speech might have meant to African Americans who read excerpts from Lewis’s uncensored speech printed in the black press, believing those to be the words he actually spoke. The critic could explore what the speech might mean as a text largely forgotten by history or encountered in conflicting
versions in historical accounts and civil rights anthologies. In short, the text of Lewis's speech exists in contrasting authoritative versions, each valuable for particular lines and modes of critical inquiry. My goal in undertaking a comparative analysis of the original and spoken texts is to illustrate that the controversy surrounding Lewis's speech reveals a subtext about the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, the meaning of the March, and what was sayable about racial matters at the March. A comparative critique also can explain what the speech meant to the members of SNCC, what it meant for the future of the civil rights movement, including the relationship between SNCC and SCLC, and what it might mean to recover Lewis's speech as part of our public memory today.

Textual Analysis

During the dispute over Lewis's speech, Martin Luther King, Jr., argued that the revision of the address was merely an adjustment of style, not of substance (Branch 879). Similarly, writer Lerone Bennett, Jr., claimed that despite the changes, Lewis still said what "he had intended to say—only in polite language" (122). Gentle calls the controversy overblown, arguing that SNCC members need not have been concerned about "getting their message across and demonstrating where they stood" (178), and Branch calls the textual changes trivial relative to the contention they spawned (879). While the final text does contain some minor modifications in style and language, many of the changes are substantial and radically alter the meaning of the speech. The revised speech is not simply a "toned down" version of the original; rather, it constructs a new relationship between SNCC and the federal government and between Lewis and his hearers. The revisions also alter the text's nature as an instance of self-expression for SNCC.

The opening lines of Lewis's spoken texts are unchanged from the original, but they are strikingly different from the words uttered by the other March leaders. King, like many of the speakers, opens with a self-congratulatory tone toward the March itself: "I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation" (217). In contrast, Lewis's speech begins with a critique of the March: "We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of." Lewis preserved a key part of SNCC's ideology in his actual address—that the March itself would not bring real social change. Whereas many of the prominent civil rights organizations—especially SCLC—focused their efforts on large-scale, short-term public events, SNCC was deeply committed to community organizing. Central to SNCC's ideology was the belief that while SCLC's public event tradition of protest was successful at raising the nation's conscience, it was not successful in meeting African Americans' basic needs and demands. SCLC tended to raise community expectations without making improvements for permanent change and to make blacks feel that they had accomplished something, when they had accomplished little. Furthermore, SNCC members argued, short-term public events interfered with their efforts to develop self-sufficient, local black leadership. Lewis's refusal to exalt the March is indicative of an ideology that ultimately led to SNCC's separation from SCLC less than two years later in Selma, Alabama.

The second paragraph of Lewis's delivered text is significantly different than the original, and underscores further the differences between SNCC and the other "Big Six"
organizations. A comparison of the two texts reveals a major change in the meaning of Lewis's speech:

**Original Text**
In good conscience, we cannot support, wholeheartedly, the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little, and too late. There's not one thing in the bill that will protect our people from police brutality.

**Delivered Text**
It is true that we support the administration’s civil rights bill. We support it with great reservations, however. Unless Title III is put in this bill, there is nothing to protect the young children and old women who must face police dogs and fire hoses in the South while they engage in peaceful demonstrations.

Gentile's claim that SNCC activists should not have been concerned about getting their message across is patently mistaken: the changes that appear in the delivered text represent a major shift in ideology. SNCC did not support the administration's civil rights bill, but rather backed H.R. 7702, a civil rights bill introduced by Robert Kastenmeier (D-Wisconsin). However, in Lewis's delivered speech, he constantly qualifies his criticism of the Kennedy bill. The phrases "Unless Title III is put in this bill," "In its present form," and "As it stands now" in the second and third paragraphs blunt Lewis's indictment of the shortcomings of the Kennedy bill. In place of these qualifiers, the original speech uses anaphora to establish an effective rhythm in its critique of the White House bill: "This bill will not protect young children and old women. . . . This bill will not protect the citizens in Danville, Virginia. . . . This bill will not protect the hundreds of people who have been arrested on trumped-up charges." The fourth paragraph of the delivered text does employ anaphora, like the original, but the phrase, "What is in this bill," is replaced with the less critical phrase, "We need a bill."

The persuasiveness of the original form is partially lost in the revision of the speech, as is the pointed critique of the legislation's failure to protect many African Americans. March sponsors had compelled Lewis to soften his criticism. After Kennedy's June 11 announcement that he would introduce civil rights legislation, King had claimed that the March on Washington should be focused on urging the Congress to pass the president's bill. Wilkins also believed that the March's major purpose was to back the civil rights bill, and he saw Lewis's denunciation of Kennedy's proposal as "a double cross" (Wilkins 293). The pressure on Lewis to modify his speech was more than a trivial matter involving style and context; the dispute centered around the very meaning of the March.

In the fifth paragraph of the original text, Lewis suggests a definition of the meaning of the March, but this paragraph does not appear in the delivered speech. In the original, Lewis claims, "For the first time in 100 years this nation is being awakened to the fact that segregation is evil and that it must be destroyed in all forms. Your presence here today proves that you have been aroused to the point of action." This section possibly was deleted because of the word "destroyed," which, when combined with the language at the end of the speech, contributes to the "scorched earth" tone that O'Boyle condemned. This passage also implies that the purpose of the March is to reinforce an attitude toward segregation and to invigorate the will to protest, rather than urging the crowd to support
the civil rights bill. The sentence following this passage suggests that the appropriate "point of action" is revolution. In addition, as conservative as Lewis's words might sound today, the suggestion that all segregation must be ended sounded extreme in 1963. Kennedy's civil rights bill would end segregation decisively only in places of public accommodation. It was not until Lyndon Johnson's January 8, 1964, State of the Union address that an American president suggested an end to all racial segregation and discrimination.

To those for whom the claims about destroying all forms of segregation sounded militant, the next passage must have resounded with radicalism. A comparison of the fifth paragraph of the delivered text and its counterpart in the original reveals another point of contention between SNCC and the other leaders at the March:

**Original Text**

We are now involved in a serious revolution. This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic and social exploitation.

**Delivered Text**

My friends, let us not forget that we are involved in a serious social revolution. By and large, American politics is dominated by politicians who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation. There are exceptions, of course. We salute those.

The delivered text eliminates Blake's and Wilkin's objection to the "Communist" tone of Lewis's speech by modifying the word "revolution" with the adjective "social." Several of the African American civil rights leaders may have been especially apprehensive of the charge that Lewis's speech sounded Communist-inspired. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover regularly tried to discredit the movement by linking activists, including King's close friend Stanley Levison, with the American Communist Party. Any implied affinity for Communism could damage the movement's public image.

Furthermore, the revision of the original text here suggests that March leaders not only pressured Lewis to change his critique of Kennedy's civil rights bill, but also to alter his indictment of the administration itself, of other politicians, and of the major political parties. By deleting the word "cheap" and the qualifier, "There are exceptions, of course. We salute those," Lewis lessens the blow of his declamation. Still, this passage is harsher than the words uttered by the other speakers at the March. Although the original text may seem like an *ad hominem* attack on political leaders, it reflects SNCC's attitude toward political action. While civil rights organizations like the NAACP, SCLC, and NUL often sought to build coalitions with national political parties and political leaders, SNCC worked to establish bases of local political action. From SNCC's perspective, local politicians usually had the characteristics Lewis planned to describe, and the federal government often seemed to reach compromise solutions to civil rights abuses. Lewis's remarks in the fifth and sixth paragraphs seemed out of place to some of the March leaders because he spoke for African Americans of the deep South—people who, as Howard Zinn notes, rarely had their point of view expressed on the national political stage (191). No political party seemed to represent the poor, rural African Americans that
SNCC tried to organize. In the spring of 1964, SNCC would attempt to answer Lewis’s question, “Where is our party?”—which appears in both the original and spoken texts—by forming the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an organization that attempted to replace the state’s Democratic regulars as the official Mississippi delegates at the Democratic National Convention.

The most substantial revision to Lewis’s speech is the deletion of four paragraphs that would have appeared after the sixth paragraph of the delivered text: only a few lines from these paragraphs are included in a modified form in the delivered speech. The first deleted paragraph outlines a conspiracy theory between the federal government and the local politicians in Albany, Georgia. SNCC had planned to launch demonstrations at the Justice Department during the March on Washington to denounce the department’s management of civil rights protests in Albany. The other March leaders halted SNCC’s planned demonstrations and, apparently, also prevented Lewis from verbally lashing out at Robert Kennedy and his staff. The end of this first paragraph brings the conspiracy theory to a close with piercing question: “I want to know, which side is the Federal Government on?” The deletion of this paragraph not only blunts Lewis’s criticism of the government, but also interrupts the flow of his speech. The original paragraph signals an end to Lewis’s critique of the government, and it ends pointedly. The first half of the original speech is devoted to deprecating the civil rights bill and castigating the Kennedy administration. The second half of the address urges African Americans to establish a power base outside the structures of government. Lewis’s original address roughly follows a problem-solution format, but the logical development and rhetorical force of the speech’s original form is eliminated by the compulsory changes to the text.

The second excised paragraph begins with a sentence that Blake and Wilkins criticized for its “Communist” tone, “The revolution is at hand.” The next sentence of the original text initially curbs the speech’s militancy by calling the implied uprising a “nonviolent revolution,” but the tone shifts quickly back to radicalism:

The nonviolent revolution is saying, “We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure that could and would assure us a victory.”

The remainder of the deleted paragraphs develop this radical theme. The third excised paragraph claims, “We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about,” and the fourth begins, “The revolution is a serious one. Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the street and put it into the courts. Listen Mr. Kennedy, listen Mr. Congressmen, listen fellow citizens, the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom.” This passage contains the objectionable word “masses,” but most likely was removed because of the call for a transformation of American society that moves beyond reform, which is what many involved in the March and the movement planned to effect. The original text suggests that liberal reformers will not bring about meaningful change, and that only the “black masses” can effect the necessary revolution in the nation’s social, political, and economic structures.

With these words, Lewis’s original text challenges the dominant political outlook of the 1960s—the outlook that Godfrey Hodgson calls the ideology of the liberal consensus. This ideology held that America’s racial problems could be solved by integrating African
Americans more closely into white society, by bringing a backward region in line with the norm (Hodgson 179). The liberals supposed that the nation could solve its racial crisis without changing American society in any fundamental way; they believed that they could end segregation and discrimination without changing the social and political institutions of the nation as a whole (Hodgson 465). Most of the civil rights organizations at the March adhered to the ideology of the liberal consensus. By the fall of 1963, the civil rights movement seemed to be a crusade that aimed to repair the structure of American society and its political institutions, not to tear them down or to build its own structures. Lewis’s original remarks contested the ideological underpinnings of the movement and its white liberal allies—both prevented him from unleashing his critique. Rather than voicing SNCC’s rejection of the liberal consensus, Lewis became complicit in one of the most eminent rituals of consensus in American memory.

The four deleted paragraphs reveal not only the ideological differences between SNCC, SCLC, and white liberals but also the differences within SNCC’s own ranks. For example, the original text primarily uses the term “revolution” to describe SNCC’s brand of social change, but also uses the term “nonviolent revolution.” SNCC was wholly committed to nonviolence as a philosophy at its founding, but the number of SNCC members who believed in nonviolence only as a tactic—not as a philosophy—had increased by 1963 (Good 256–59). Lewis had participated in James Lawson’s nonviolence seminars as part of the Nashville Student Movement, which evolved into SNCC in 1960, and remained committed to nonviolence as a way of life. While many within SNCC had lost faith in the ability of nonviolent appeals to change white America’s racist practices and included their frustration in the original text, Lewis included some of the nonviolent ideals to which he was committed. Within the context of SNCC rising black nationalism, Lewis also tried to retain his strong personal commitment to King’s notion of a “beloved community” in his original text: “In the struggle we must seek more than civil rights; we must work for the community of love, peace and true brotherhood. Our minds, souls, and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for all the people.”

Ironically, in their efforts to moderate the radical tone of Lewis’s speech, the March leaders who objected to his prepared text also eliminated some of its emphasis on nonviolence and community.

Some of the ideas contained in the four deleted paragraphs are expressed, with substantial revision, in the seventh paragraph of Lewis’s spoken text. In the spoken text, Lewis expresses his discontent with gradualism but omits the denigration of the word “patience,” to which Rustin and the Catholic coalition objected:

Original Text
To those who have said, “Be patient and Wait,” we must say that, “Patience is a dirty and nasty word.” We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually, we want our freedom, and we want it now.”

Delivered Text
To those who have said, “Be patient and wait,” we have long said that we cannot be patient. We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to be free now! We are tired. We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. And then you holler, “Be patient.” How long can we be patient? We want our freedom, and we want it now.
The revised passage is less harsh in its tone, but the revision is more than stylistic: the very object of Lewis’s criticism is shifted. The original text suggests that patience is futile because the federal government will not act; this passage from the original is preceded by Lewis’s suggestion that civil rights activists “will take matters into [their] own hands,” and is followed by his claim that African Americans “cannot depend on any political party.” The object of Lewis’s criticism in the seventh paragraph of his revised text, however, seems to be the South. The delivered text implies that Southern police officials like Bull Connor—who beat and unleashed police dogs on protestors at Birmingham, Alabama—are preventing African Americans from realizing their freedom. The delivered text suggests that Southern police officials like Laurie Pritchett—who jailed hundreds of demonstrators in Albany, Georgia—are preventing African Americans from realizing their freedom. Whereas the original text charges the government with thwarting African Americans’ struggle to be free, Lewis’s actual address seems to indict the South. Lewis may, in fact, mean to indict the federal government for failing to protect demonstrators, but his revised speech invites an alternate reading not encouraged by the original text.

The revision to the original text alters not only the content but also the structure of Lewis’s argument. The seventh paragraph of the delivered text is an abrupt change from Lewis’s previous words. In the original draft, Lewis’s critique of counsels of patience took on its meaning and force through its textual location—as part of a paragraph that urged African Americans to create their own base of power because of the government’s gradualism and inaction. The revision of the original text breaks up the internal dynamics of Lewis’s speech: the seventh paragraph of the delivered speech has little textual context, as the address shifts quickly from an indictment of political parties and the Kennedy administration to an expression of discontent over being beaten and jailed. Still, this section of Lewis’s address excited his immediate audience at the March on Washington more than any other. Although March leaders compelled Lewis to alter the rhetorical form of his original text, the sincerity communicated in his delivery and the appeal of his ideas to many demonstrators nonetheless garnered vigorous applause.

In the eighth paragraph, Lewis builds upon the audience’s excitement. The rhythm created in this passage through repetition, parallelism, and Lewis’s delivery is moving:

Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete. . . . For in the Delta in Mississippi, in southwest Georgia, in the Black Belt of Alabama, in Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom.

This passage is revised from the original: two substantial changes are worth exploring. First, the original text does not contain the phrase “for jobs and freedom,” but rather ends with the words, “the black masses are on the march.” The paragraph is better punctuated without the prepositional phrase, but the change affects more than rhythm; it also moderates the militant ending of Lewis’s original paragraph. Second, the original text reads, “Get in and stay in the streets . . . until the revolution is complete.” The revised text Lewis and Forman prepared under pressure from March leaders used the term, “the unfinished revolution of 1776,” but Lewis omitted the adjective during his delivery. Nonetheless, the inclusion of the phrase “of 1776” in the delivered address changes the meaning of the word “revolution.”

Rather than calling for a revolution against the system, Lewis calls for the completion of the American Revolution—a powerful symbol in American culture. A single prepositional phrase, “of 1776,” drains the speech of much of its militancy. Lewis’s speech no
longer is a call for social transformation but rather for the fulfillment of American ideals. The appeal to important public symbols—such as the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Jefferson, and Lincoln—is a regular feature of American protest rhetoric: it makes social change seem like an extension of national ideals and traditions, and thereby safe for society. Such discourse, however, often reinforces dominant social values and myths rather than challenging the nation. As a result, the impetus for real social change is moderated, and public debate centers around the meaning of America rather than alternatives to the system (Bercovitch 18, 49). Rather than sounding his bold statement of defiance, Lewis joined the chorus of consensus on August 28, 1963. Although Lewis’s speech is more militant than the other addresses, by the penultimate paragraph Lewis’s call to “revolution” becomes a moderate cry for fulfillment rather than a shout for social and political transformation.

The conversion of Lewis’s militant tone into a moderate call for action also is exhibited in the final paragraph of the delivered speech, a significantly revised version of the final paragraph in the original. Whereas the original text reads, “The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington,” the delivered sentence begins with a conditional phrase: “If we do not get meaningful legislation out of this Congress, the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington.” The inevitability of the original text is transformed into a possibility in the delivered text—a possibility contingent upon the passage of Kennedy’s civil rights bill. The “scorched earth” language of the original text also is eliminated, as is the sentence about marching through the South like Sherman.

The original text reveals the tensions over nonviolence within SNCC, suggesting that the organization will “burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently.” The final paragraph of the delivered text, however, reveals only a commitment to nonviolence as a philosophy: Lewis claims that protesters will march through the South, “with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today.” The delivered text also suggests that SNCC’s social activism is motivated by religious convictions: “[W]e shall splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces and put them together in the image of God and democracy.” The original speech text does not contain the word “God,” and—in fact—some members of SNCC were motivated by purely secular concerns and were scornful of those they called “preachers.” The revision of the final paragraph of Lewis’s address changed more than its tone and style. In the delivered text, SNCC’s protests become dependent upon legislative action—which, for several of the March sponsors, was the event’s central purpose. Lewis’s original text is a peculiar mix of the competing ideologies within SNCC, while the delivered address whitewashes the differences between SNCC members in favor of a speech that matched the beliefs shared by the majority of March leaders. In short, SNCC members had every reason to be anxious about “getting their message across and demonstrating where they stood.” The organization’s most publicized statement did not reflect the convictions of many of its members.

Conclusion

The sponsors of the March on Washington effectively tempered John Lewis’s speech. His revised address still was more militant than the other speeches on August 28, but Lewis’s message was moderated sufficiently to avoid a fracture of the day’s unity. Lewis’s speech was adjusted so that his words resonated within the moderate tone of the peaceful
demonstration that represents for many the high-water mark of the civil rights movement. During its own time and in American memory, the March has stood as a shining symbol of unity and hope. For many it symbolizes what was right with the American civil rights movement. A few years after the event, James Baldwin claimed, “That day, for a moment, it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real, perhaps the beloved community would not forever remain that dream one dreamed in agony” (140). To others, however, the March symbolized what was wrong with the civil rights movement. Soon after the March, Malcolm X called the event “The Farce on Washington,” and in his “Message to the Grass Roots” in Detroit on November 10, 1963, Malcolm indicted the March leaders: “They controlled it so tight, they told those Negroes what time to hit town, how to come, where to stop, what signs to carry, what song to sing, what speech they would make, and what speech they couldn’t make” (260). Although the leaders effectively tempered Lewis’s speech for the day of the March, as Malcolm X suggested, they could not control his rhetoric completely.

Newspapers and periodicals reported on the controversy surrounding Lewis’s speech, and several reprinted excerpts from the original address as if he had actually spoken it. To those who read only the original text, Lewis’s speech was that militant statement. SNCC was unable to express its ideology to the crowd of nearly a quarter million people in Washington, but the press did communicate the organization’s declaration. That the controversy over Lewis’s speech was publicized and that the original text still reached part of its target audience, however, did not satisfy most SNCC members.

For SNCC, the central purpose of Lewis’s speech was not to induce an audience to assent to its principles, nor to persuade African Americans to march through the South, nor to convince them to burn Jim Crow to the ground. The primary purpose of the address was self-expression—to make public the organization’s break with liberalism, to make public its dissatisfaction with the federal government, to make public its discontent with the black moderates’ approach to civil rights. The original text of Lewis’s speech was designed to fulfill what Richard Gregg calls the ego-function of the rhetoric of protest, by constituting the organization’s self-hood through public expression (74). SNCC’s ideology had changed in 1963, and the March on Washington provided an opportunity to express its new self. By forcing Lewis to change his address, March leaders not only glossed over the ideological differences between SNCC and the sponsors of the event in order to reinforce the liberal consensus, but also damaged the organization’s collective ego by prohibiting an important public statement of self. The sponsors preserved unity for the day of the March but planted a seed of bitterness that would come to fruition just a few years later. Moreover, by censoring Lewis’s speech, black moderates and white liberals ignored the early signs of radicalism that ultimately would fracture the movement.

Although the text of Lewis’s speech cannot be reduced to a single draft, both the original and delivered texts deserve our attention. A comparative analysis of these two texts reveals a controversy not about the style or tone of the speeches at the March, but rather about the meaning of the March and what was sayable in public about racial matters. It was acceptable, for example, to voice a critique of the federal government, but not to disparage it—which might break political ties black moderates deemed necessary to effect real social change. It was acceptable, for example, to use motivational rhetoric to propel African Americans toward social activism, but not to urge them to circumvent
fully the established channels of change—which would appear militant and risk the support of moderate whites. My rhetorical approach to Lewis’s address fills in the gaps in narratives of the March by tracing the different versions of the speech, corrects errors in chronicles of the event by providing a record of what Lewis actually said, and provides a sense of the texture of the speech—restrained anger as opposed to true moderation—unavailable in historical accounts. In addition, careful inquiry into the address resolves an apparent paradox about John Lewis’s place in the history of the civil rights movement. Lewis was (and still is) committed to nonviolence and integration but is remembered primarily as the author of a militant speech that March leaders forced him to change. Yet Lewis was ousted from SNCC’s leadership for being too moderate. Close attention to the various speech texts and surrounding controversy reveals that Lewis was not the revolutionary that he has been made to seem in some accounts of the March. Furthermore, rhetorical analysis provides a more complete account of the conflict surrounding Lewis’s speech by reading the controversy through the speech itself. Rhetoricians should be committed to the recovery of significant texts marginalized in their own era and forgotten by history—including all speeches at the March other than King’s. The purpose of this essay has been more limited: to interrogate the memory of the March and to recover Lewis’s speech as part of that event. To recover his speech as part of our memory today is to understand better SNCC, the civil rights movement, and the March on Washington—an event that demands closer scrutiny from rhetorical critics.

Notes

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1Charles M. Payne also notes that the short-term public events of the civil rights movement, best symbolized by the March on Washington, “is the movement of popular memory” (3).

2Lewis, not to be confused with labor leader John L. Lewis, was born in rural Alabama on February 21, 1940. He attended American Baptist Theological Seminary and Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he became involved with nonviolence workshops led by Rev. James Lawson. Lewis led the Nashville Student Movement in sit-ins of places of public accommodation in 1960, was one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders in 1961, helped organize the Freedom Summer project in Mississippi in 1964, and participated in the Selma voting rights campaign in 1965. Lewis served as SNCC’s chairman from June 1963 until May 1966, when he was defeated by Stokely Carmichael. Lewis soon withdrew from the organization, which had discarded its commitment to reform, integration, and nonviolence. Lewis worked with several public, political, and community organizations after his departure from SNCC: he worked with the Field Foundation during the late 1960s; he served as head of the Voter Education Project during the 1970s; he was appointed associate director of ACTION during the Carter administration; and he served on the Atlanta City Council from 1981 to 1986. In 1986, Lewis was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from the Fifth District of Georgia and has been reelected in each subsequent election to date.

3Former SNCC activist Mary King corroborates Lewis’s account in Freedom Song (185).

4In fact, King used the disparity between the militant tone of the original text and Lewis’s own politics to urge him to revise the speech. He told Lewis, “John, I know who you are. I think I know you well. I don’t think this sounds like you” (qtd. in Garrow 283).

5Taylor Branch also claims that an O’Boyle aide obtained a copy of the speech and delivered it to the Archbishop (Parting the Waters 874).

6Randolph pleaded with Lewis: “John, for the sake of unity, we’ve come this far. For the sake of unity, change it” (qtd. in Carson 93).

7Lyon’s book is not the first printing of this version; the same version of the speech text was printed in the September 1963 issue of Liberation (“A Serious Revolution” 8). What Lewis planned to say—and what he actually said—has been unclear since he delivered the speech in 1963.

8This version of the speech was later reprinted in Herbert Aptheker’s A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States (245–47).


“We Can’t Wait, Student Leader Tells Marchers.” *Pittsburgh Courier* 7 Sep. 1963: 3.


