CORRESPONDENT

THE COLOUR DIVIDE ‘My countrymen are the terrorists of my life’

The day a ‘dream’ jogged the conscience of a racist America

The famous stirring Washington speech of Martin Luther King still resonates around the US 50 years later, writes Nick O’Malley.

When James Adams travelled by bus from New York to attend the March on Washington 50 years ago this month to hear Martin Luther King give his famous “I have a dream” speech, King was already a towering figure in her life.

Her parents were college-educated and among the first black children to attend a white school in New York City.

While in the South, the children at the missionary stereotype of schools could expect to be assimilated, the horrors of integration were more psychological than physical in the North, Adams reflected.

One day as did she walked into a classroom with her head held high, but in her face and grabbed at her. She searched, as she had been taught to do, in class with the激起 in her hair, worrying about what she had to do with her hands in the classroom.

Two years later she met Dr King at the Riverside Church and was bowled over by his speech. He was he, and asked her, "What have you done for our people?"

I go to school uptown, Adams replied. King urged her chiin to her hand and told her she was "only just beginning" the work. She told him what she was doing is important, and she felt cleansed of hatred and learning enough to fight on. That was, says Adams, was a healthy optimism of 4 million African Americans with his "I have a dream" address that day in the National Mall.

Next Saturday a rally will commemorate the event and the speech, now widely known as the March on Washington. Adams has been in the same room with King, a peaceful manner of such size and moral power that it became a seminal event in the civil rights struggle that can trace its roots to the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. For a decade, northern troops occupied the South, attempting to enforce integration, but resistance of many in the South ensured the will of the war was nowhere stronger.

As Reconstruction failed, the vacuum was filled by segregation enforced by the quasi-legislative powers of the Ku Klux Klan and the system of so-called Jim Crow laws by which Southern states legally administered segregation. It would not be until after World War II that the Civil Rights movement was strong enough to challenge Jim Crow.

In 1954 the Supreme Court finally ruled segregation unconstitutional and a year later Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus, prompting the bus boycott organized by King. Across the South, and into the northern states, civil rights struggles — many of them intractable — the Southern black civil disobedience anchored by King continued their struggle, often in the face violent suppression by police forces either unwilling or outright hostile to their cause.

In August 1963 a coalition of civil rights groups began organizing the March on Washington, setting out goals that included job creation programs, an end to employment discrimination and the passage of federal laws guaranteeing voting rights.

Many fondly refer to the period as Camelot, but Adams, now a prominent journalist and historian, recalls it as a "murderous time."

On June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers, director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Mississippi, was killed at his home by a sniper, a white man who would escape justice for more than 20 years. Three weeks after the March on Washington, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed. Listing four girls, and less than a year later three civil rights activists, two white and one black, were shot dead in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Adams, then 16, remembers how her bus to the March was attacked and revisited violently from side to side as it stopped in Delaware. “Every time I hear the United States talking of terrorism abroad I think how I know terrorism at home. My countrymen are the terrorists of my life.”

The ordeal of the journey only heightened the experience for Adams. “We had come through the flames to get to DC, it was not some sort of picnic. So when we got there it was elation and relief. It was such a sense of triumph to see such a crowd, all holding the same way. She remembers masses of people singing, We Shall Overcome, and Mahalia Jackson’s rendition of How Great Thou Art.

Along with the underground railroad that delivered escaped slaves to Canada, Adams considered the communication and mobilization of the march as one of two occasions when Americans crossed the racial divide to work for justice together. August 28 was Emily Dussier’s 13th birthday and as usual her father had taken the day off work to spend it with her. Some years they took a boat ride on the Potomac, some years they went to an amusement park. That year the little white girl was adamant that she wanted to join the parade. She had come through the flames to get to DC, it was not some sort of picnic. So when we got there it was elation and relief. It was such a sense of triumph to see such a crowd, all holding the same way. She remembers masses of people singing, We Shall Overcome, and Mahalia Jackson’s rendition of How Great Thou Art.

Emily remembers a solemn but joyful mood in the crowd, unlike the Vietnam protests she joined in later years. John Hamin, also white, was then a social worker in Lincoln, Nebraska. To him the organization leading up to the march, the recruiting and planning, and then the long train journey to Washington was as much a part of the occasion as the event itself. He watched King speak over from a kilometre away at the foot of the Washington Monument and struggled to hear the speech, but the day moved him so much that he stopped to scribble a postcard to his wife.

Frank Smith was a 21-year-old member of one of the key organizing groups, and veteran of the movement and the process of Mississippi. Today he is director of the African American Civil War Museum and chairman of the Washington organizing committee of next week’s commemorative march.

He remembers that King spoke at the head of a list of 18 or so speakers on a chilly day. “When he went to work on his I Have a Dream speech, everyone was on their feet clapping,” says Smith, standing beneath a tree only metres from where he had been born that afternoon 50 years ago.

He talked about those of us who had come up from the Mississippi gangs and Alabama Blues and Georgia jazz and said he said go back and finish what you are doing, knowing that you will be free some day.

“We needed it. We had come a long way to get here, we had taken walks on dusty roads and we needed someone to tell us we were on the right track.”

Asked what King’s speech achieved that day, Adams echoes Smith. “To me his voice was a soothing balm. Those who heard him speak found the strength to push on with the struggles of face police truncheons, dogs and water cannon. Further, says Adams, it made the injustices of black oppression an issue of concern.

Historians credit the speech and the rally with providing the impetus for the civil rights movement’s great successes of the period, particularly the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

All those who spoke to me for this story felt that King would be remembered for his actual acts of change in the US last August.

“Despite significant progress, he always knew the Voting Rights Act was overridden and that we needed even more to be done.”

Five years later King was shot and killed, but the movement broke out across America’s cities, his dreams became the reality.

The next day, with smoke coming from the New York fires in the air, and King’s words resonating across the social and political scene, new ground, now as the first black mayor, a prominent Sale Fifth Avenue businessman, a new generation of winter white in embers. When she got to the door, police and black and white alike gathered and covered her, demanding something of the slain dictator, his rabbit-from-cage spirit.

“Each New York City police officer who shot King more than 20 times was a white man in the city, in a position ready to be unconstitutional by a federal judge last month. And none of them believed that anybody Martin Luther King would be followed and killed was not a black youth in a hoodie, or that this killer would have been encountered.

King, as a black Baptist preacher, had proved his craft in one of the world’s great oratorical traditions, spoke for just over 16 minutes. He began in biblical cadence, making reference to the words of the Psalms and the Old Testament, then delivered an impassioned speech of black and white men and women with the same sense of urgency. He was the leader of the African American Civil Rights Movement and chairman of the Washington organizing committee of next week’s commemorative march.

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