

“The Movement”

“You Should See This”

Benjamin Zelenko, Counsel, House Judiciary Committee

Benjamin Zelenko remembers the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Interview recorded May 29, 2014.

Before the march occurred for at least a year, a year and a half, of Kennedy's administration, the civil rights movement was marked by violence, bloodshed in the streets, in Mississippi, throughout the South. And the fear of the administration and Members of Congress was that if you're going to bring 100,000 people or more to Washington we're going to have bedlam on our hands. As a matter of fact I think the army was mobilized in the suburbs just in case riots broke out. Kennedy—this was not a priority initially, he was a reluctant proponent. They feared, they, the administration, feared a gathering. Members of Congress, if you could generalize about it, shared that fear.

When the march came, I attended it with a counsel on the committee named Herb Fuchs and his friend, the Register of Copyrights, named Abe Kaminstein. They were two very gentle men. Abe Kaminstein had been the Register of Copyrights for some years. And they were going to walk down to the Mall from the Cannon Building and asked me to join them. And I said, “I don't want to go down there. Who knows what'll happen? It's going to be dangerous.” They said, “It's not going to be dangerous. You should see this.” Now this was in 1963. I was born in '33, so I was 30 years old. These fellows were in their 50s or 60s. And they prevailed upon me to go down there. Well, of course, I'll never forget it. It was a beautiful thing to witness. We came down to the Mall from Independence Avenue. So we were on the side looking out on the crowd. And it was like a big picnic. It was singing. The feeling was wouldn't this be wonderful if we could have this kind of humanity—of human feeling, brotherly love, instead of all of this terrible bloodshed. And so I'm still looking for the pin I had from that. I was proud to have gone down there. I was so pleased.