

# Fifty years after historic march, push for civil rights must continue

The Trayvon Martin case and recent Supreme Court rulings show that there's still much work to be done.

**TOPSHAM** — Fifty years ago this week, on Aug. 28, 1963, more than 250,000 Americans participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

While most of us remember the march for Martin Luther King Jr.'s inspirational "I Have a Dream" speech, the speech was delivered as part of a larger demonstration demanding the passage of legislation to prohibit racial discrimination, end school desegregation and ensure fair-paying jobs.

The momentum from the March on Washington propelled the civil rights movement forward, creating impetus for the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jeffrey Neil Young** is an attorney and partner at McTeague Higbee in Topsham. He can be contacted at 725-5581 or at [jyoung@mcteaguehigbee.com](mailto:jyoung@mcteaguehigbee.com).

Unfortunately, despite the peaceful manner in which the march was conducted, this conduct was not emulated by those who sought to perpetuate segregation and the status quo.

Just several weeks later, a white mob lay siege to the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., culminating in a bombing that claimed the lives of four young girls and injured 22 others.

Less than one year later, three young volunteers who sought to enroll black voters were murdered by Ku Klux Klan conspirators.

In 1965, John Lewis, who had spoken at the March on

Washington, was beaten nearly senseless on Bloody Sunday as he and other marchers tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge into Selma, Ala., in support of voting rights.

That same month, Detroit housewife Viola Liuzzo became the sole white woman to die in the struggle, murdered by a KKK supporter for her support of voting rights.

A lot has happened since the March on Washington, to be sure. We've seen the end of segregation, the enactment of equal opportunity laws and even the election of our first black president.

But the struggle is far from over; blood is still being spilled because of racial fears and stereotyping (see Trayvon Martin), and the current Supreme Court is leading a full-fledged assault on gains made under civil rights statutes.

Just this past term, the Supreme Court effectively overturned the Voting Rights Act of

1965, arguably the crown jewel of all civil rights legislation.

The Voting Rights Act ensured that all U.S. citizens, regardless of race, gender or creed, had the right to vote, without qualification or prerequisite. The act was crucial in outlawing measures designed to limit a citizen's right to vote, such as poll taxes and literacy tests.

Gutting the act, the court declared that the protections were "based on 40-year-old facts having no logical relationship to the present day" and that the country has changed.

Within 24 hours of the court's decision, five of the states that had been required under the act to obtain clearance before changing voting rights laws proved the high court wrong by moving to enact or implement voter ID laws.

Those laws — which Maine rejected this past legislative session — are, like the poll taxes and literacy tests, widely

understood to be attempts to disenfranchise poor and minority voters. Indeed, on Aug. 22, the Justice Department announced that it was suing Texas over the enactment of its voter ID law.

Also this past term, only 10 years after recognizing the importance of considering race in college admissions, the high court imposed severe limits on such affirmative action programs.

The court's decision thumbed its nose not just at the civil rights community, but also at more than 60 Fortune 500 companies and the U.S. military, all of whom supported affirmative action programs in the 2003 case, arguing that exposure to diverse ideas was critical to the national security and success in the global marketplace.

So yes, we have achieved great progress in the past 50 years. However, we still have a long way to go.

We are not a race-blind

society, and much as we might hope and pray otherwise, the effects of 300 years of slavery, segregation and institutional racism cannot be, and have not been, overcome in a mere five decades.

The time has not come where we can ignore race, eliminate voting rights protections and end affirmative action programs.

In his address, Dr. King implored, "We shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back." On this 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, each of us should ask ourselves, and ask our elected leaders, what are we doing today to advance the dream of equality and freedom for all Americans?

We cannot rest on what was achieved a half-century ago — and we must not let the Supreme Court or a cadre of citizens fearful of change turn the dream into a nightmare.

— Special to the Press Herald