

THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN:
HOW IT OPERATED – AND ULTIMATELY FAILED –
WITHIN THE STRUCTURE OF A FORMAL NONPROFIT

Emily M. Hall

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Dwight F. Burlingame, Ph.D., Chair

Valerie Grim, Ph.D.

Master's Thesis
Committee

Monroe H. Little, Ph.D.

John R. Kaufman-McKivigan, Ph.D.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Many accounts of the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. begin with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and end on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Others focus on his triumphant “I Have a Dream” speech to the exclusion of almost anything else he accomplished during his short lifetime. Still others tell an uncomplicated tale of a humble pastor chosen as “Man of the Year” by Time magazine in 1963 and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. A story less told is that of King’s role as founder and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), “a permanent organization to facilitate coordinated action of local protest groups.”¹ Originally designed, as the name indicates, to operate solely in the South and with the goal of using nonviolent principles to engage in boycotts, marches, and voter drives, SCLC nonetheless was forced to evolve as the turbulent political and social climate of the 1960s brought about violent protest and a recognition by civil rights leaders that without a comprehensive view of race, class, and poverty, their goals of integration and equality could not be achieved. For SCLC, that meant the creation of the “Poor People’s Campaign” in 1967, a campaign that was the final manifestation of the evolution of King’s philosophy during his time as leader of the organization.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 101.

This thesis is not a biography of King, although it will show that this campaign was inextricably tied to his goals and vision for SCLC. It is a work of research infused with King's spirit, as the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) sprang almost wholly from his observations of urban rioting in the North, his opposition to the Vietnam War, his frustration with President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," and his deep, unyielding belief in the power of nonviolent direct action. Without King's insistence, SCLC might not have initiated such a campaign, and indeed his closest advisors tried time and again to dissuade him from continuing. That is not to say, however, that the PPC was entirely dependent upon King's actions alone. Although several members of the SCLC executive team initially attempted to dissuade King from carrying out the campaign, they eventually came to support the idea. In fact, with just months to go before the proposed start date, they resolved to redouble their efforts and told King that the campaign would be "pursued with full energy" on its original schedule.² That they built Resurrection City in Washington, D.C., and still pursued the passage of an "Economic Bill of Rights" under the leadership of Ralph Abernathy, King's successor, proves that the organization was ultimately responsible for the campaign's outcome.

The PPC "differed from all the SCLC's previous efforts. For the first time, SCLC set out to build a movement from scratch."³ The organization was clearly not equipped to create and maintain such a movement. What ultimately led to

² David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2004), 618.

³ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 359.

the PPC's failure, however, was the very nature of SCLC itself: a nonprofit organization that suffered from dysfunction and disorganization during King's life and nearly collapsed after his death. Competing priorities among the leadership along with Abernathy's inability to maintain SCLC's prominence in the civil rights movement led to further instability and organizational strife. This thesis will show that because the Poor People's Campaign was created by and operated within the formal structure of this nonprofit organization, it was unable to achieve success by almost any measure. SCLC's organizational structure made it extremely difficult to create a national campaign from the ground up, and its leadership strategy guaranteed that it would be virtually impossible to sustain that kind of national campaign.

Comparing Campaigns

The highly visible triumphs of the civil rights era were time and again attributable to a combination of local, grassroots activism and individual actors who exercised great influence on key decision makers. Less nimble and effective during this particular time period were formal organizations, like SCLC, which were often viewed as too slow moving or rigid in their ideologies. Worse yet, long-time residents eyed these organizations with suspicion whenever they would swoop in for a campaign and then depart abruptly when their efforts failed or a bigger opportunity came along. Thus, the SCLC suffered acutely from an inability to create an organizational structure capable of engaging in high-profile

direct action and effective public relations, as well as the more mundane tasks of fundraising and bookkeeping.

Having successfully completed the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” in the summer of 1963, SCLC had certainly proven that with King at the helm the organization could overcome internal squabbling and a lack of preparation in order to achieve its publicly stated goal to “arouse the conscience of America to the need for civil rights legislation.”⁴ Consequently, less than one year later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed Congress. Previous positive outcomes with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the seminal event out of which SCLC developed, and with Birmingham, combined with a later civil rights victory in Selma and the seeming influence the organization exerted on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, created an overinflated impression of SCLC’s actual power. To most outsiders, the organization appeared far more organized and strategic than it actually was.

In reality, during King’s tenure the organization was constantly plagued by budgeting and funding problems, even though King could command upwards of \$10,000 dollars for a single speaking engagement long before he reached the height of his fame.⁵ If Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham created a positive impression of the efficacy of SCLC’s operations, it was due in part to the organization successfully co-opting work being done by other civil rights groups, especially the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the instances of Albany, GA, and St.

⁴ Martin Arnold, “Rights March on Washington Reported Growing,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1963, 57.

⁵ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*. 70

Augustine, FL, the failures of SCLC's campaigns were quietly overlooked due to the fact that they took place on a smaller scale in smaller towns, and also that they were immediately preceded by more successful action in cities that had received attention in the national press. Albany was overshadowed by a quick shift of focus to Alabama, followed thereafter by King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail;" St. Augustine, by the "Freedom Summer" of 1964.⁶

The campaign most salient to understanding the failures of the PPC, and the one that will be examined most fully in this work, is the Chicago Freedom Movement wherein SCLC aimed to wage a "War on Slums" in Chicago. Although it endured for nearly a year and a half, the campaign never achieved its goals of desegregating and improving public housing in that city, despite the involvement of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO), which had previously experienced some success in leveraging nonviolent direct action in protest of certain policies enforced by the Chicago Board of Education. The Chicago campaign came at a crossroads in King's life and at a time when SCLC was struggling to make itself relevant as calls for "Black Power" and more militant solutions for the cause of civil rights were gaining traction across the North and the South. Also worth examining in this context is the role that Operation Breadbasket (a program designed to address job discrimination by increasing employment opportunities for blacks, especially in companies where they were major consumers) played in the Chicago campaign. It is no

⁶ I would be remiss if I did not mention the invaluable chronological resource of the "Daily Journal," part of the King Online Encyclopedia, an online resource provided by *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University (SU)*, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/chronology_contents?category=daily.

coincidence that Operation Breadbasket was both one of the most successful SCLC initiatives and one of the few that functioned largely independent of SCLC's formal structure. That Operation Breadbasket achieved its goals despite its association with SCLC puts into sharp relief the organization's inability to administer the Poor People's Campaign.

Methodology

The inspiration for this area of research came from a brief entry on Martin Luther King that I wrote for Dwight Burlingame's three-volume work *Philanthropy in America: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. SCLC has been a 501(c)(4) since 1962 and although it was one of the premiere nonprofit organizations to operate during the civil rights era, far less attention is paid to SCLC in academic literature when compared to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the National Urban League (NUL), both of whose national offices are 501(c)(3)s.⁷ I wanted to find out what it was that set SCLC apart as a social welfare nonprofit and why I never read about it in the broader context of discussions of civil society in the 1960s. As I learned more about the organization I discovered how the Poor People's Campaign signaled the beginning of the end of SCLC and that the efficacy of the PPC was compromised by the structural issues that had plagued the organization for over a decade.

As a scholar of philanthropic studies, my approach to the historical aspects of this topic is different than that of a typical historian. I focus heavily on

⁷ See Guidestar.org's listings for each organization's status and ruling year.

those aspects of SCLC that relate specifically to its activities as a nonprofit organization, including board governance, tax exempt status, and adherence to its stated mission. In doing so, I occasionally choose to limit the amount of historical context given to certain persons, places, and events within the body of the thesis. In those instances, the reader will find additional contextual information and suggestions for further reading in the footnotes. This is in no way meant to diminish the historical importance of these instances, but rather to maintain focus on my core argument surrounding SCLC's decisions as a nonprofit organization.

My research, however, led me to examine a broad swath of sources both philanthropic and historical, beginning with primary material from the archives of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Both are housed at The King Center in Atlanta, GA, but fortunately for researchers The King Center Imaging Project went live in early 2012, making over one million documents related to King's life and work accessible in digital format. I then discovered that a copy of the SCLC archives also exists at the Georgetown Law Library, where I was able to examine them in their entirety on microfilm. Other primary sources include documents issued by the executive and legislative branches of the federal government; edited volumes containing contemporary essays on the topics of poverty, race, and civil rights; and first-hand accounts of SCLC and the PPC published in newspapers and periodicals.

Comparing and contrasting biographies of King was also an invaluable research tool. King is a complex, towering figure of 20th century history and the

manner of his death caused many writers to cast an uncritical eye on his accomplishments and failures. Consequently, very little attention has been paid specifically to his role as the head of SCLC. As Adam Fairclough argues, “Even the best biographies offer little insight into SCLC, giving only a superficial glance at King’s organizational base.” Never mind that the PPC is often relegated to a mere footnote in shorter accounts of King’s life.

Gaps in the Literature

In all of these works I could find no comprehensive examination of the PPC as a product of a social welfare nonprofit. Some accounts include only those parts of the campaign planned for and carried out under King’s tenure with SCLC. Others consist largely of journalistic observations or later recollections of participants, with little or no mention of the history of SCLC. A great number of academic monographs on poverty and civil rights omit any mention of the campaign altogether. By failing so completely, the PPC had seemingly wiped itself from the historical record, along with any reason to consider SCLC’s role in the civil rights movement after King’s death.

For nearly two decades, scholarship virtually ignored the PPC or refused to acknowledge how little the Abernathy-era SCLC accomplished as compared to the work of other civil rights nonprofits, particularly as the sector transitioned from the nonviolent direct action of the late 1960s into the Black Panther Movement of the early 1970s. Not until David J. Garrow’s Pulitzer Prize winning tome *Bearing the Cross* was published in 1987 did a comprehensive examination of King’s life

through the lens of SCLC exist. One year later Adam Fairclough's *To Redeem the Soul of America* provided additional context for understanding the organizational structure of SCLC and its effect on the PPC. I draw heavily upon the research presented in both of those books.

Equally important to my research is the body of literature on mid-20th century poverty both from contemporary and historical perspectives. The PPC should sit squarely at the nexus of discussions on poverty and civil rights, yet it is rarely discussed in the context of the Great Society or similar political movements designed to address the needs of the poor in the United States.⁸ I believe this is because the campaign was the product of a formal nonprofit, and neither a government initiative nor a community- or grassroots-based movement led directly by those it was designed most directly to affect: namely, the poor. I examined a wide variety of scholarly essays on the topic, paying special attention to critical assessments of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty.⁹

Scope

Although the source material is vast and the topic infinitely interesting, I have chosen to limit my research by focusing narrowly on King's and SCLC's activities on the topics of poverty and economic inequality. I will include

⁸ Key works consulted for this thesis include Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*; Louis A. Ferman, Joyce L. Kornbluh, and Alan Haber, "Poverty in America;" Jennifer Frost, "An Interracial Movement of the Poor:" *Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s*; Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*; Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*; Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. For full information on each, please see the bibliography.

⁹ James L. Sundquist's edited volume of essays in *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience* proved especially crucial in understanding the first few months leading up to the implementation of the War on Poverty, in addition to the first year of its existence.

discussions of King's views on Vietnam, SCLC leadership's interaction with the Johnson administration, and the activities of other civil rights groups during the same time period only as they directly relate to the creation and execution of the Poor People's Campaign. I do not delve into campaigns by organized labor or for welfare rights, the activities of the New Left and Black Power movements in the period leading up to King's death, the controversies surrounding FBI wiretaps and charges of Communism against the organization and its supporters, or the participation of other minority groups in the PPC.

In order to fully understand how King and SCLC arrived at the crucial decision to carry out the Poor People's Campaign, I needed to trace the history of SCLC back to its founding in 1957 as the "Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Non-Violent Integration." Chapter two offers a brief history of the creation of SCLC and how its early directives were generated as an outgrowth of the work of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). This chapter also examines King's appointment as the head of SCLC and the way in which the original leadership team formed around him in response to his sudden presidency.

Chapter three takes a close look at the organization's mission and by-laws in order to understand how that founding document informed SCLC's decision-making processes in its early years. In the wake of Montgomery, the young organization struggled to find its place in the civil rights movement, with campaigns such as the Crusade for Citizenship failing to achieve stated goals. This chapter examines how early organizational shortcomings in public relations

and fundraising laid the groundwork for larger operational problems in SCLC as the 1960s progressed.

Chapter four takes an in-depth look at SCLC's structure and how weaknesses in staff relations and communication, tensions with SCLC affiliates and other nonprofit organizations, and--after Selma and the March on Washington--the ascendancy of King as *the* leader of the civil rights movement created an environment of organizational uncertainty and dysfunction. In the space of less than a decade SCLC had gone from being an organization that focused on inequalities in busing, retail and to a lesser extent education in select cities in the south, to one that emphasized a broader need for voter registration, and finally to one that operated on a national scale, with the aim of economic, as well as racial, equality. Tracing that organizational trajectory is essential to understanding why the PPC was a natural extension of SCLC's mission as the 1960s drew to a close.

This work will then devote significant time to the organizational decisions made by the SCLC from early 1967 until the summer of 1968. The organization had begun the Chicago Freedom Movement in the summer of 1965 and ended that campaign in December of 1966. The months immediately following were a period of reflection for King and ones in which SCLC's staff retreats and King's own sermons reflect his growing belief that improving the economic situation of blacks was the key to garnering government support for the organization's larger goals of racial integration and equal treatment under the law. By the time of King's assassination in April 1968, SCLC had already publicly declared the plans

for a mule train to Washington, D.C., and the creation of Resurrection City as part of the PPC. Within just a few short months, however, the campaign was completely over.

Chapter five discusses in detail the roots of the campaign in the “War on Poverty.” It will illustrate how the Chicago Campaign affected the organization and inspired King’s decision to call for a Poor People’s Campaign, how the organization’s vacillating views affected its execution, and how SCLC ultimately decided to endorse the PPC and accept the concept of economic equality as crucial to the organization’s mission.

Chapter six illustrates that the reality of the Poor People’s Campaign fell far short of the SCLC’s expectations for it, and how Abernathy’s leadership failed to rally both internal and external supporters to the cause. With ten years of experience upon which to draw, SCLC should have been able to carry out King’s final campaign without him. Low turnout and the constant threat of violence in Resurrection City were anathema to King’s vision of mass, nonviolent direct action; thus, the campaign was never able to gain enough momentum to affect real change. This chapter also includes an examination of reporting on the campaign in the mainstream and black presses, with an emphasis on the fact that many of the conflicts among SCLC staff and PPC participants were played out on a national stage by virtue of occurring in plain view of reporters and supporters.

In chapter seven I offer an assessment of the failures of the Poor People’s Campaign by way of examining how the leadership of SCLC was unable to

respond to organizational change and adapt the campaign accordingly. This chapter will also include observations on how the mismanagement of the PPC signaled larger problems for the organization, which led to its decreasing influence in the civil rights movement and eventually its demise. This chapter asks “Why Failure?” and includes an in-depth assessment of SCLC’s struggle to obtain tax-exempt status as a 501(c)(4) organization as a prime example of how the organization’s leadership allowed or outright created barriers to its success. This chapter closes with a brief examination of SCLC’s successful campaigns and how the organization could have learned more from those experiences.

Chapter eight begins with a brief summary of how the civil rights and anti-poverty movements were weakened by the start of the 1970s and how the PPC was a harbinger of those changes. I offer up three specific suggestions for future scholarship as well. I also hope to reveal how King’s legacy was shaped by the PPC and how SCLC’s decision to address the issue of economic inequality directly had far-reaching implications, even laying the groundwork for mass protests such as the recent Occupy Movement. Ultimately, though, I hope to shed some light on the limitations of nonprofit organizations to affect change using a top down approach in an attempt to mobilize a loose coalition of constituents, in this case “poor people,” and the conclusion addresses the topic of power and its implications for the sector as a whole. Absent the necessary structure required to impartially examine an organization’s objectives and its ability to carry out its stated mission, leadership can become incredibly short-sighted and willing to agree to engage in activities that are neither in the best

interest of the organization nor those it is designed to serve. Indeed, without the input and support from those who are the intended beneficiaries, initiatives like the Poor People's Campaign are doomed to fail.

CHAPTER TWO: HOW SCLC CAME TO BE

Buses, Boycotts, and Citizenship

SCLC began as outgrowth of the MIA, a loose coalition of black leaders who had come together in the wake of Rosa Park's arrest on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus and the almost immediately called for a bus boycott. King was chosen as the organization's president during the association's first leadership meeting on December 5, 1955.¹⁰ The MIA had three main goals: better treatment of black riders by white bus drivers, the seating of passengers on a "first come-first served" basis, and the hiring of black drivers on "predominantly Negro routes."¹¹ The MIA rallied mass meetings, organized carpools, and successfully kept nearly 40,000 black passengers from patronizing the bus system during the boycott's first six months.¹² In an address to the 47th NAACP National Convention on June 27th, King attributed the strength of the campaign, and the strength exhibited by those who were participating in the boycott, was owed to "a basic philosophy undergirding the movement. It is a philosophy of non-violent resistance."¹³

As the boycott continued throughout the summer and into the fall, King traveled extensively to a number of speaking engagements in the South designed to rally support for the MIA's efforts in Montgomery. In his "Address to

¹⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 51.

¹¹ Wayne Phillips, "Montgomery Negroes Tell Court of Abuse by City's Bus Drivers," *New York Times*, March 22, 1956, 20.

¹² "New Letter from M.I.A." Vol 1, No. 1, ed. Jo Ann Robinson. SU, accessed 3/20/12, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/560607_001.pdf.

¹³ "Address by MLK at 47th NAACP Annual Convention," June 27, 1956, 7, KCDL, accessed 3/29/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/address-mlk-47th-naacp-annual-convention>.

the First Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting” King made clear that the approach to the boycott was manifold: “Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we’ve come to see that we’ve got to use the tools of coercion. Not only is this thing a process of education, but it is also a process of legislation.”¹⁴ In November 1956, the MIA could claim a clear victory on the legislative process when the Supreme Court issued a mandate declaring the segregation of buses in Montgomery unconstitutional, upholding an earlier decision by an Alabama federal district court that stated in part, “We hold that the statutes and ordinances requiring segregation of the white and colored races on the motor buses of a common carrier of passengers in the City of Montgomery and its police jurisdiction violate the due process and equal protection of the law clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.”¹⁵ Once the MIA knew that all possible appeals to that mandate had been exhausted, a decision was made to announce the lifting of the boycott.

On December 20 King issued a “Statement by the President of the Montgomery Improvement Association,” a letter imbued with his Christian faith which explains King’s belief that the boycott was more than just a refusal to ride the buses; it was a movement. And with that, the ban was lifted: “In light of this [Supreme Court] mandate and the unanimous vote rendered by the Montgomery Improvement Association about a month ago, the year old protest against the city buses is officially called off, and the Negro citizens of Montgomery are urged to

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, “Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting,” *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* eds. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 12.

¹⁵ *Browder v. Gayle*, 142 F. Supp. 707 - Dist. Court, MD Alabama (1956).

return to the buses tomorrow morning on a non-segregated basis.”¹⁶ King closed the statement with a letter of caution, encouraging black riders to continue to adhere to non-violent principles and to hold no ill will to their fellow white riders. The day before the statement, the MIA had distributed a flyer on “Integrated Bus Suggestions” that contained one suggestion in particular that stood out from the rest: “8. According to your own ability and personality, do not be afraid to experiment with new and creative techniques for achieving reconciliation and social change.”¹⁷ Whether he realized it or not, King had penned a suggestion that would apply to his work in the civil rights movement for the remainder of his life.

Building the Leadership

In just 381 days, King had established himself as a charismatic leader capable of leading a movement based on the principles of nonviolent direct action. The boycott had also garnered the attention of other powerful actors in the civil rights movement, including Bayard Rustin, a figure of some controversy owing to his former affiliation with the Communist party and his widely known homosexuality. Rustin had supported the boycott and at its close brought a group of his closest friends to Montgomery to consult with him on the goal “of using the Montgomery movement as the basis for a wider civil rights initiative

¹⁶ The Rev. M. L. King, Jr., “Statement by the President of the Montgomery Improvement Association,” December 20, 1956, KCDL, accessed 3/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/statement-president-montgomery-improvement-association>.

¹⁷ The Rev. M. L. King, Jr., President and The Rev. W. J. Powell, Secretary, “Integrated Bus Suggestions,” December 19, 1956, KCDL, accessed 3/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/mlk-flyer-integrated-bus-suggestions>.

across the South.”¹⁸ It was Rustin and these northerners, white as well as black, who championed the idea of a broader transportation conference, to be led by King and other leaders from across the South; Rustin would contribute by drafting a series of “working papers” to facilitate discussion.¹⁹ The planning and execution of this first meeting set a pattern for how SCLC determined nearly all future actions: although input and feedback from both black and white northerners was solicited and incorporated into the decision making process, it was ultimately SCLC’s black leaders, mostly Southern, mostly preachers, who wielded the most power and had the final say.²⁰

The heads of the MIA convened the Southern Leaders Conference on Transportation and Non-Violent Integration in January 1957, with the goal of capitalizing upon the momentum of the bus boycott and transforming that energy into a bigger campaign. Attendees drafted “A Statement to the South and Nation” in which they “call upon all Negroes in the South and the nation to assert their human dignity” and understand that “non-violent resistance transforms into strength and breeds courage in face of danger.”²¹ With those sentiments, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a name that would not be formally adopted until August of that year, established its mission. The eight working papers covered the usual topics of bus integration and non-violence. But they also covered two new areas for this group, voter registration and “economic

¹⁸ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁰ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 83.

²¹ Southern Leaders Conference on Transportation and Non-violent Integration, “A Statement to the South and Nation,” January 10-11, 1957, 3-4. The King Center Digital Library (KCDL), accessed 3/20/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/statement-south-and-nation-0#>.

sharing,” and included the names of two outsiders: C.K. Steele of Tallahassee and Fred L. Shuttlesworth of Birmingham.²² King was expanding his circle of supporters and on February 14th at the second meeting of the transportation conference, held in New Orleans, they elected him President.²³ He was now head of a formal nonprofit organization with the stated mission of “helping the American Negro attain first class citizenship by NON-VIOLENT direct action and education.”²⁴

Six months later the conference convened for its third meeting, this time returning to Montgomery, at which time the group officially changed its name to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a change that King insisted upon in order to emphasize the role religious leaders had played in the movement thus far and the need to continue to garner support from black churches.²⁵ The organization quickly set out to address the problem of the extremely low number of blacks who were registered to vote. A “Crusade for Citizenship” was the first major initiative of the organization and had an ambitious goal of registering two million black voters by the 1960 election.²⁶ The voter registration campaign started out slowly as King and SCLC leaders found their footing among the other civil rights organizations already addressing the issue of voter registration in the

²² Martin Luther King, C.K. Steele, and Fred L. Shuttlesworth, “Press Release for the Southern Negro Leaders Conference,” January 7, 1956, KCDL, accessed 3/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/press-release-southern-negro-leaders-conference#>.

²³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 90.

²⁴ “Fiscal Facts about SCLC,” undated, KCDL, accessed 3/3/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/fiscal-facts-about-sclc>.

²⁵ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 97. possibly need better source

²⁶ Letter from Martin Luther King to Vice President Nixon, August 30, 1957, KCDL, accessed 3/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-mlk-vice-president-nixon-0#>.

South.²⁷ In a memorandum dated February 4, 1958, King announced that the crusade would officially begin on February 12 of that year and made a point of stating, “The Crusade is not in conflict with the NAACP’s wonderful work or that of any established local groups.”²⁸ The campaign, however, fizzled out, falling far short of the ambitious registration goal set forth in the fall of 1957 and raising only about a quarter of of the \$200,000 budgeted to carry it out.²⁹ The entire incident merited minor attention in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, an edited volume published by King’s estate thirty years after his death.³⁰

The leadership of SCLC realized that if it was to succeed, they needed better funding and a more focused mission. Not until 1963’s Birmingham campaign would SCLC find sure footing as a nonprofit organization effective at mobilizing local citizens, garnering the attention of the national press, and engaging with powerful political figures in support of a cause. Before all of that, though, King indicated his hopes for the future of the civil rights movement, and by extension the work of SCLC, near the end of his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958):

The nonviolent struggle, if conducted with the dignity and courage already shown by the people of Montgomery and the children of Little Rock, will in itself help end the demoralization; but a new frontal assault on the poverty, disease, and ignorance of a people too long ignored by America’s conscience will make victory more certain.

²⁷ For a discussion of the NAACP’s reaction to the Campaign for Citizenship, please see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross* 97-103.

²⁸ M. L. King Jr., President “Memorandum To: Speakers, Local Contacts, Participants in S.C.L.C. RE: Crusade for Citizenship Mass Meeting, February 12, 1958,” February 4, 1958, KCDL, accessed 3/28/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/crusade-citizenship-memorandum>.

²⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 48.

³⁰ *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Clayborne Carson, ed. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 109-110.

In short, we must work on two fronts. On the one hand, we must continue to resist the system of segregation which is the basic cause of our lagging standards; on the other hand we must work constructively to improve our standards themselves.”³¹

With this, King had begun to identify the conditions in which southern blacks lived as a source of their struggle for equality. The next step was to make sure SCLC’s structure and strategy were equipped to address those problems.

³¹ Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 220.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDING ITS FOOTING

Building Support

In 1957 the Constitution and By-Laws of the SCLC were published in pamphlet form, declaring that “the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is established, dedicating itself to justice, refusing to cooperate with evil, appealing to the conscience of man, and working for social change but always in a spirit of good will and non-violence.”³² Those were lofty, if vague, goals to be sure, but this document also set forth specific limitations on the organization in the form of which states it would operate in at first (all southern), the type of membership it would have (affiliate based, not individually based), and term limits for the Executive Board (three years). Of note is this description of the organization, offered under Article I, Section 3 of the By-Laws:

The objects and purposes of said Corporation are to exist and function as an eleemosynary organization, and more particularly to organize and maintain Christian guidance to aid in improving the Civic, Religious, Economic, and Cultural Conditions in the South and in the Nation...This organization hopes to achieve its purposes through non-violent direct action, lectures, dissemination of literature and other means of public instruction.”³³

This is possibly the only time an SCLC publication used the word “eleemosynary” when describing the organization; perhaps the word was used in this instance due to its association with the concept of charitable alms, and in that way is a nod to the Christian aspect of the organization’s purpose. Later SCLC publications favor the term “nonprofit, non-sectarian,” while academics and

³² SCLC 32:4

³³ Ibid.

journalists, if they offer a modifier at all, often describe the SCLC as a “civil rights organization.”

One section of the By-Laws jumps out as having long-term negative consequences for the organization: the reliance on dues from affiliates as a main source of income. Fairclough argues that “without any dues-paying members or a systematic fundraising program, SCLC depended upon the black church for the bulk of its income.”³⁴ That assertion is borne out by King’s correspondence with the 25-member Executive Board during SCLC’s early years.³⁵ In letters sent to invite Board members to the December 1958 board meeting, King included “a personal request” that the board member “put the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in your [the church’s] budget for as large an amount as possible.”³⁶ Even his own father received that request. The larger fundraising issue for the organization, and one that would plague it long after King’s death, was that its financial health was directly correlated with its ability to leverage public relations and the media. No doubt it is perfectly acceptable for a nonprofit to benefit monetarily from positive press and increased public visibility via mass media (and, in the 21st century, social media) channels; in fact, most actively seek such opportunities and rely on the fundraising dollars generated by internal marketing and communications departments or external public relations firms. SCLC was simply not one of those organizations.

³⁴ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 47.

³⁵ Although the number of board members was in constant flux owing to their serving staggered terms, the initial board number was 25, including nine officers of SCLC. See Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 86-87 for a list of members and their occupations. By 1961 a “Revised List of the Executive Board” included the same number of officers, plus 23 additional members, bringing the total number to 32. See SCLC 36:13.

³⁶ SCLC 32:35

With the exception of the voting rights campaign in Selma in 1965 and possibly Operation Breadbasket, SCLC was consistently unable to be proactive, systematic, and strategic in creating press and fundraising opportunities for its own campaigns and initiatives. Only when the organization was responding to a crisis, as in Birmingham, partnering with more powerful civil rights organizations, such as with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, or relying directly on King's force of personality, was it successful in raising sufficient funds to fulfill the whole of its mission. The organization's responses to high-profile political situations, combined with failed campaigns in Albany, St. Augustine, Mississippi, and Chicago, made for disastrous, repeated instances of negative press, resulting in spontaneous fluxuations in staff, chronic budget shortages, and unpredictable organizational capacity.³⁷ Time and again SCLC refused to learn from its previous failures. And it all started with the Crusade for Citizenship.

Victim of Success

In its earliest days, SCLC was able to overcome its lack of structure and income through sheer force of will: the massive success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the accomplishments of the MIA gave SCLC's mission a sense of urgency and timeliness. King was its undisputed leader, and his own rising profile in circles beyond the black church in the South played a key role in

³⁷ Perhaps the most problematic topic for the organization from a PR standpoint was that of Vietnam. SCLC's condemnation of the war in a board resolution issued on April 13, 1966 resulted in a front page story in the *New York Times* that showed a national public opinion poll in which "41% of respondents felt increased black criticism of the war made them less interested in supporting civil rights." See Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 470. A little more than a year later King received particularly scathing press reviews for his 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam." See Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul of America*, 337-340

lending credibility to the fledgling organization. One of SCLC's first events was the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, held in Washington, D.C. on May 17, 1957. As Fairclough explains, "the Prayer Pilgrimage was a golden opportunity to project King as a national figure" and was created by SCLC, in coordination with the NAACP, to do just that.³⁸ The rally yielded a disappointing crowd and attracted little press. In his speech, however, King laid out the justification for SCLC's first campaign, explaining that "all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition. And so our most urgent request...is to give us the right to vote."³⁹

Fewer than five months later, in October 1957, SCLC released a "Press Statement Regarding Crusade for Citizenship," in which the organization announced no less a goal than encouraging "every Negro in the South to register and to vote."⁴⁰ King also built upon the themes of unity and justice he had elucidated at his speech at the Prayer Pilgrimage rally by explaining that "we know that millions of white Southerns [*sic*] recognize the justice of our cause, appreciate the spirit of our method and stand four-square that the time has come when all Americans should exercise the duties and responsibilities of citizenship." The proposed budget for the campaign was \$200,000, to be spent in support of rallies in 20 different southern cities during a January 20 kickoff, and "a special

³⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 39.

³⁹ Martin Luther King, "Give Us the Ballot," *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 47-48.

⁴⁰ "Press Statement Regarding Crusade for Citizenship," October 5, 1957, KCDL, accessed 4/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/press-statement-regarding-crusade-citizenship>.

effort would be made to get the black press to publicize the January rallies.”⁴¹

What the press release did not contain, and which was equally unclear to SCLC staff and supporters alike, was any mention of just how the organization would raise that money and accomplish the goal of full enfranchisement.

By January the campaign was already behind schedule, with the mass rallies postponed until February 12. King issued a memorandum on February 4 in order to ensure a “unity of aim and direction” for the campaign, including a revised goal “to double the number of Negroes who vote in the South.”⁴² While the crusade would focus on the 1958 and 1960 elections in particular, no deadline for doubling black votership was included in the memo. In very short time, and by all objective measurement, the campaign was a failure, if it can even be said that it ever got off the ground. The rallies were poorly attended and received little or no press, depending on the location; what little attention they did receive resulted in headlines such as one in *Newsweek* that read “Drive Lags for Negro Registration.”⁴³ Just like that the Campaign for Citizenship, SCLC’s first campaign came to an abrupt, and abysmal, halt just nine months after it had been announced.

The organization’s public profile did not improve over the next two years. The Voter Education Project (a combination of five civil rights groups’ voter registration campaigns organized under the supervision of the tax exempt Southern Regional Council) and the demonstrations in Albany, Georgia, failed to

⁴¹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 100.

⁴² M.L. King, Jr., “Crusade for Citizenship Memorandum,” February 4, 1958, KCDL, accessed 4/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/crusade-citizenship-memorandum>.

⁴³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 103.

achieve meaningful outcomes or positive press weighed heavily on SCLC's leadership.⁴⁴ On top of that, King was required to maintain a blistering speaking schedule, speaking multiple times a day for sometimes weeks on end, in order to meet the budget required to run the organization's operations.⁴⁵

In his 1962 "Report of the Director," Wyatt Walker, the organization's Executive Director since 1960, called Albany "a proving ground for SCLC."⁴⁶ He went on to claim that the organization "demonstrated that we have an organization that in a moment of national crisis has the personnel, the resources, the program, and the know-how to do a job with Madison Avenue efficiency and yet with the grass-roots touch."⁴⁷ Notably, he credited Albany doctor William G. Anderson's appearance on "Meet the Press" and the CBS documentary "Eyewitness to History" as crucial to bringing attention to SCLC's activities in Albany. While Walker's assessment of Albany was certainly far more positive than the reality there, his statement on fundraising painted a more accurate picture: "We honestly face the fact that our income this year was off page with budget demands. If we are to remain operative at the present rate, much work remains to be done in this area alone."⁴⁸ Two high-profile benefit concerts had yielded \$15,000, but "very little emphasis has been placed on fund-raising through our affiliates."⁴⁹ And although King's speeches continued to bring in money, and the fledgling direct mail program showed promise, Walker closed this

⁴⁴ "Voter Education Project," King Online Encyclopedia, *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University*, accessed 7/7/2012, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_voter_education_project/.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 153.

⁴⁶ SCLC 36:12.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

section of the report by listing celebrity-driven events as the key to making up the deficit before the end of the year; no systematic, sustained method of fundraising was suggested to the Board at that time.⁵⁰

Walker's report also contained language that echoed an assessment done earlier in 1962 with the board and staff. The "Board - Staff Consultation" resulted in eighteen "Specific Program Recommendations," among them increasing affiliation fees on a sliding scale, creating a membership level for individuals living in communities without an affiliate, creating job descriptions of each staff member; and publishing a printed Annual Report.⁵¹ The report also identified "Education and Public Relations" as a "major problem area," and "the development of a South-wide 'grass roots' organization" as a "major concern."⁵² Weaknesses in each of those areas would continue to harm the organization all the way through to the conclusion of the Poor People's Campaign. In a fundraising letter to Mr. Thor Anderson of Marble Collegiate Church on the last day of 1962, King presented the organization's accomplishments from the previous year and closed by telling Anderson that the proposed budget for the next fiscal year was \$233,000.00.⁵³ King was severely underestimating the organization's expenditures. A little over a year later SCLC was spending nearly \$50,000 a month and even the residual positive impact of the March on

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ SCLC, 36:15.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ SCLC 1:11

Washington for Jobs and Freedom did little to improve the organization's fundraising prospects.⁵⁴

Direct Fundraising

SCLC continued to believe that attempts at press-worthy events would translate into donations, but time and again these efforts fell flat. Part of this can be blamed on the tactic of nonviolent direct action, which by its nature was the antithesis of the violent, vocal conflicts of the movement that made for compelling reading or viewing. King was passionately and publicly espousing a radical approach to oppression and segregation that not only "calls upon its adherents to avoid external physical violence, but it calls upon them to avoid internal violence of spirit. It calls on them to engage in that something called love."⁵⁵ That kind of response to provocation might be morally and spiritually superior, but it was also, as King had learned in Albany from Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, not the best means of getting the organization's message across in the absence of a violent response from authorities.⁵⁶

More than half a decade after its founding, the organization was still trying to recapture the magic and efficacy of the Montgomery bus boycotts through calls for mass meetings, mass demonstrations, or mass movements. Such sweeping calls rarely went further than the Board room or translated well from paper to the streets. Increasingly, the organization looked to garner press

⁵⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 319-320.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther King, "Address at the Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall," *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 67.

⁵⁶ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 319.

attention through what might be termed publicity stunts. At an executive staff meeting on January 23, 1963, the group recommended that the upcoming direct action program in Birmingham include the goal to “Recruit as many Board Members as possible to go to jail.”⁵⁷ A similar recommendation for King to go on a hunger strike in the event of a southern filibuster of the civil rights bill in Congress never made it past the board.⁵⁸ In the absence of an organized public relations program, what the organization really needed was an infusion of cash, and it needed it quickly.

When the organization was able to be strategic in its direct fundraising efforts, the success was tremendous. A single ad in the *New York Times* in spring of 1963 netted \$66,000.⁵⁹ The direct mail program, managed out of the New York office, enjoyed similar results. A September 18, 1964 report on the National Mail Direct Fund Raising program signed by Adele Canter (the program at that time was overseen by Stanley Levison) detailed a net income of over \$117,000 in just six months.⁶⁰ The staff had pursued a strategy, after a hiatus in which the previously limited direct mail campaigns had been dormant for some time, of auditing the current mailing list and buying new ones to increase the donor base. The result was the opposite of the gimmicks proposed by the Board. As the report noted: “[These mailings] bring directly to the attention of at least 600,000 selected persons a complete, well stated story of the work, aims and purposes of the SCLC and Dr. King in a way that does not come across in hastily

⁵⁷ SCLC 36:15.

⁵⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 179.

⁵⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 178.

⁶⁰ SCLC 49:1.

scanned, often garbled public news media.” The key conclusion of the document deserves to be quoted in full:

Impressive as the current year’s accomplishments are, and impressive as the forecast may be, two points are worth bearing in mind. This method of raising money is not a new discovery. Hundreds of millions are raised annually by organizations of all kinds in this fashion.

Two elements are necessary for success – (1) Consistent, competent, professional methods. We compete with highly talented professionals and cannot survive with amateur methods. (2) The response to an appeal is based on the accomplishments and consistently effective activity of the organization making the appeal. If the organization’s public image is tarnished by unsound policies or tactics, its income obviously suffers. While, on the other hand, if its policies are sound but it is not getting through to the public, the response also suffers. It should be noted therefore, that the present successful results rest heavily on the exceptionally favorable image of Dr. King and the leadership role SCLC exemplified in its campaigns in Birmingham, Albany, Savannah, Montgomery and elsewhere.”⁶¹

Although the direct mail report also casts a too-positive glow on the organization’s less successful campaigns in Georgia, it nonetheless makes a strong case of the need for the ongoing professional development of SCLC’s leadership as well as its operations.

King acknowledged as much in his 1964 Annual Report, read on October 1 at SCLC’s convention: “Gradually we are attempting to deal with the problems of growth from an organization of 3 to one of 62 in a few years time. We have not yet mastered our job, but we are gaining in our pursuit of the kind of administrative excellence which a movement such as this demands.”⁶² King recounted that SCLC now operated 217 affiliates in 28 states and the District of

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Martin Luther King, Jr. “Annual Report from MLK,” October 2, 1964, KCDL, accessed 4/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/annual-report-mlk>.

Columbia, that almost 100,000 new voters had been added to the rolls in the South, and that in just under two years Operation Breadbasket had added \$2 million in revenue to black Atlantans.⁶³ An organization that had “presented a picture of confusion and drift in early 1964,” according to Thomas F. Jackson, appeared to be heading back in the right direction by the end of the year, with a renewed emphasis on voting rights, and a burgeoning focus on segregated housing and poverty as the roots of systematic discrimination.⁶⁴ Due in no small part to the publicity generated by the Selma campaign, SCLC found itself in relatively good financial health by the middle of 1965. When an exhausted King briefly pondered taking a year-long sabbatical during a Jamaican vacation, it put into sharp relief the organization’s continuously fluctuating fundraising efforts.⁶⁵ Garrow sums it up best by stating that “aside from the well-run direct-mail appeals...SCLC possessed no systematic source of funding beyond the substantial sums produced by King’s speaking appearances.”⁶⁶ A lack of organizational structure meant that SCLC still relied far too heavily on King’s powerful personality and ability to draw a large audience as the sole sources of publicity and income. An examination of the progression of SCLC’s organizational structure will show that a lack of stability and constantly changing staff roles created an environment of uncertainty and fear, especially as the mission evolved and the “problems of growth” became even more amplified.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 190.

⁶⁵ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 428.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 429.

CHAPTER FOUR: STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

The Early Years

The original SCLC by-laws called for an executive board of up to 33 members and between eight and 11 executive officers. As for staffing the organization, “The President and the Administrative Board shall have the authority to procure such a professional staff as would be necessary to further the purposes of the Conference, and to outline and supervise their duties.”⁶⁷

Throughout 1958 and 1959, that professional staff consisted mainly of one full-time person in the form of an Executive Director, a position held temporarily by Ella Baker, followed by Reverend John L. Tilly, and upon his failure by Baker again, that time in a full-time capacity until the appointment of Walker in 1960.⁶⁸

The barely three-year-old organization was having difficulties picking strong staff members, properly training them, and then retaining them for more than a few months at a time. Baker continued to argue for the importance of “office rules” that would define staff roles and duties, a request that fell on deaf ears.⁶⁹

When the board met in October 1959, it was necessary to take “a long, hard look at the organization’s direction,” resulting in the decision to reduce the number of board meetings and provide more focused support for Baker.⁷⁰ King

⁶⁷ SCLC 32:4

⁶⁸ For a concise account of Baker’s terms as SCLC’s first Associate Director and its second Executive Director, see Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 102-104. Baker’s position as the first woman in a leadership position at SCLC and her divergent beliefs on how the organization should operate from a personnel standpoint prevented her from exerting much influence on the other leaders there and ultimately led to her parting ways with SCLC in 1960 in order to take on a leadership role at SNCC.

⁶⁹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 104.

⁷⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 50-51.

and the board also decided that the time had come for him to leave his pastorship at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery in order to live full time in Atlanta and split the pastorship of Ebenezer Baptist Church with Martin Luther King, Sr. In a press release issued by SCLC on December 1, 1959, King declared “we must realize that our crusade for citizenship is also for integrity. We cannot lay the whole blame for our short-comings upon those who oppose us. We must purge ourselves of internal jealousies, defeatism and criminal behavior.”⁷¹ Except for the part about criminal behavior, those statements could apply as much to SCLC as to the civil rights movement as a whole. Baker felt overworked and underappreciated, affiliates were few and far between, and those who were actively engaged were often led by powerful local leaders who, as Fairclough explains, “might seek SCLC’s help, and they might invite King to address mass meetings, but they would not defer to him.”⁷²

The public perception of the organization was turning negative, if even thought of at all. King recognized some of the organizational shortcomings and, in light of the October board meeting and in anticipation of his move to Atlanta, he prepared the “Recommendations to Committee on Future Program,” a document outlining a brief list of immediate changes for SCLC. A strong emphasis was placed on public relations and the issuance of a press release to let the public know that SCLC “is actually expanding its services.”⁷³ In order to

⁷¹ Press release, “Dr. King Leaves Montgomery for Atlanta,” December 1, 1959, KCDL, accessed 4/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/dr-king-leaves-montgomery-atlanta>.

⁷² Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 53.

⁷³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Recommendations to Committee on Future Program,” October 27, 1959, KCDL, accessed 5/10/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/recommendations-committee-future-program>.

accomplish that, King recommended that Bayard Rustin be hired to “start the all-important job of presenting our organization more adequately to the public.” Additionally, the SCLC needed to start a newsletter, “to be mailed to at least five thousand persons,” an idea that echoes King’s recommendations to the board of the MIA in 1956 when he suggested decreasing the number of meetings, increasing the accountability of the finance committee, and creating a newsletter as ways to immediately improve the operations of that organization.⁷⁴ With the MIA, however, the recommendations were more tactical, as the strategy of the organization was clear: to boycott the bus system until certain conditions were met. The 1959 list of recommendations to SCLC clearly show that the organization was still struggling to define its mission. Especially significant is bullet point number six, which concludes with this vague statement: “I recommend that we begin thinking of some of the other areas that should gain our immediate attention.”⁷⁵ No further suggestion as to what those areas might be is included in the document.

The theme of the October 1960 General Fall Conference was “The Southern Struggle and the American Dilemma,” an apt topic because, as Fairclough points out, SCLC at this time was struggling with how to improve its “baffling structure” of southern affiliates and a national office in Atlanta.⁷⁶ Despite the fact that in the early years black churches, church-related organizations, and

⁷⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Recommendations Made to Executive Board of Montgomery Improvement Association,” May 24, 1956, KCDL, accessed 5/10/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/recommendations-made-executive-board-montgomery-improvement-association>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 70.

black civic groups constituted a majority of affiliates - and their members were often middle class - the organization was not reaching new audiences at a rate required to meet budgetary requirements.⁷⁷

The General Fall Conference instead focused on two main areas in pursuit of the theme: voter registration and the student movement.⁷⁸ The emphasis on voter registration was no doubt a direct result of Wyatt T. Walker's having joined the staff as Executive Director in July of that year and the hiring of Reverend Harry Blake as the first dedicated voter registration staff member.⁷⁹ Walker was more focused than his predecessors, he had the luxury of an increase in staff member and a sizable budget, and was able to help get the Citizenship Education Program up and running.⁸⁰ The emphasis on the student movement shows that the organization was perhaps still trying to identify "some of the other areas" of focus that King had recommended in 1959. It was also response to Ella Baker's having called a conference that resulted in the creation of SNCC in the spring of 1960, when she was still SCLC's executive director.⁸¹ In many ways Baker's creation of SNCC was a direct response to her disillusionment at the inertia of SCLC's leadership.⁸² By contrast, the student movement had an "inclination toward group-centered leadership," as she told the *Southern Patriot* in

⁷⁷ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 91.

⁷⁸ "SCLC Fall Conference Agenda," September 30, 1960, KCDL, accessed 5/10/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/sclc-fall-conference-agenda>.

⁷⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 67.

⁸⁰ During Walker's tenure, the annual income increased every year. For a fuller explanation of SCLC financial health during Walker's early years, see Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 226-228.

⁸¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 24. Carson points out that Baker took pains to set up SNCC as a separate entity from SCLC because she knew firsthand "how people and their ideas can be captured by those who have programs of their own," most likely a reference to her treatment by SCLC leadership during her tenure at the organization.

May 1960.⁸³ In any case, with SNCC only a few months old, it stood to reason that SCLC would be focusing on the student movement at that time, although the two organizations would eventually split over the use of non-violent direct action.

Meanwhile, the dues structure continued to hamper SCLC's fundraising and awareness efforts outside of the South, in addition to creating tension with another civil rights organization. Not until the Chicago Campaign would SCLC have a true foot in northern civil rights issues and even then the idea of individual memberships was out of the question, as that would put the organization in direct competition with the NAACP, whose membership structure and emphasis on legal recourse for racial inequality were its two hallmark features and key points of differentiation from SCLC. Since its formation, SCLC had taken great pains to avoid direct competition with the NAACP, with King, other SCLC leaders, and select SCLC affiliate organizations going so far as to purchase lifetime memberships in the NAACP as a show of respect.⁸⁴

If SCLC had made any improvements in organizational structure and efficiency by the end of 1960, they were not apparent during the disappointing Albany campaign of 1961-62. Poor planning on the part of SNCC and SCLC, combined with the failure of nonviolent resistance to goad Chief Pritchett into engaging in direct violence against the protestors, resulted in a city that was still as segregated after the campaign as it was before.⁸⁵ In his concise, insightful account of the Albany Movement, Thomas F. Jackson notes that the strife between SNCC and SCLC was as much to blame as any internal organizational

⁸³ Quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 20.

⁸⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 128.

⁸⁵ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 249-250.

issues, although certainly SCLC's inability to prioritize any action beyond getting press coverage of King's time in jail was a contributing factor.⁸⁶ Unlike Montgomery, there was no clear target upon which direct action would be successful. Jackson explains that "Most of SCLC's leaders agreed that the Albany Movement's diffuse goals prevented concerted pressure that might have won tangible, limited victories."⁸⁷ The organization was at that moment a victim of its own vague mission and the instant SCLC strayed beyond the previous years' focus on voter registration it experienced the limitations of direct non-violent action to affect change on multiple areas simultaneously. Again, it was time for a reshuffling of organizational goals and structure.

A "Benevolent Autocracy"

The year 1963 began with a reigning in of expenses and a focus on Birmingham, the site of their previous annual convention in September of 1962, for the next direct action program. At a meeting on January 23, the executive staff decided to take back all credit cards from field staff, send statements out to those who still owed for travel expenses on those cards, and require that staff submit travel plans in advance, and report their long-distance phone calls to the finance office.⁸⁸ Although the Albany Campaign had not claimed any significant victory or, more importantly, any positive press, the leadership felt that in Birmingham "SCLC can profit by and build on [the] Albany experience. (Birmingham can give new image of the power of nonviolence so much needed

⁸⁶ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 149.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸⁸ SCLC 36:15.

at this time).⁸⁹ The result was Project C (for Confrontation), initiated at the behest of King's former SCLC co-founder and colleague Fred Shuttlesworth. Having learned a few lessons from Albany, SCLC set forth six specific goals for Birmingham, most of them centered on the desegregation of public facilities and retail stores and equal employment opportunities for black residents.⁹⁰ Over the course of several months, SCLC and Shuttlesworth engaged in a campaign of boycotts, jailings, mass meetings, and demonstrations designed to get the city to agree to their demands.

The campaign, and SCLC's organization and management of it, was effective in that Project C started the process of desegregation in Birmingham, even if it did not occur as quickly and completely as SCLC had originally demanded. In a paper of this length, a full assessment of the Birmingham campaign is not possible, but the scholarly literature on the topic generally agrees that the success of Birmingham was due as much to King's and SCLC's perception in the public eye as it was to the residents of Birmingham, at least in the days and weeks immediately following the negotiated settlement with the city.⁹¹ Later claims by Shuttlesworth and Walker that Birmingham directly brought about the 1964 Civil Rights Bill are harder to support. As Fairclough rightly points out, it "did not reach the statute book until July 1964, and until Lyndon Johnson became president it looked doubtful that it would pass at all."⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 237.

⁹¹ For further proof of this, see Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America*, 194; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 264; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 165-166; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 452.

⁹² Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 132

This campaign did witness King coming into his own as a figure of national and even international renown. Major newspapers covered the campaign and King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was featured in the *New York Post Sunday Magazine* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, among other publications. By the time King concluded his "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in the summer of 1963, his status as the leader of the civil rights movement was cemented. King's rising celebrity, however, came at a cost to the organization, as Wyatt Walker tendered his resignation just days after the annual convention in Richmond, due in part, as Diane McWhorter argues, to "the executive prestige he had lost when King refused to discipline the insubordinate Jim Bevel during Project C."⁹³ In another instance, albeit minor, of staff indignities, Abernathy was miffed at having received a hotel room inferior to King's.⁹⁴

Walker's last "Report of the Director," part of the 1963 annual report and also referenced in chapter three, closed with this entreaty to the conference attendees: "We need to call our attention repeatedly to the role of the President...It is recommended that the Conference express to our President our sincere gratitude for the great work that he does in the interest of SCLC."⁹⁵ Walker also recommended providing a stipend for King, although it was expected that he would turn it down. Later at the conference, Walker's request for a pay raise would be denied and his position redefined from "executive director" to

⁹³ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 544.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ SCLC 36:12.

“executive assistant.”⁹⁶ After King refused his resignation Walker ended up staying with SCLC until the summer of 1964 and one of his last campaigns there was in St. Augustine, where he accompanied King, in the words of Garrow, “to bring greater order to SCLC’s typically free-wheeling efforts.”⁹⁷ Walker tried to impress upon King the need for order, discipline, and schedules, in addition to establishing a clear chain of command among the field staff. Walker’s advice went unheeded and SCLC ended up quietly slipping away from St. Augustine after the campaign there fizzled out.⁹⁸

A number of changes occurred in the organizational structure of SCLC in 1964, including some attempts to better define the roles of the national office and affiliates. The organization had been operated like a “benevolent autocracy” in the words of Fairclough: King was the undisputed leader and decision maker, and his overlapping circles of advisors, staff, and committees created a Venn diagram of never ending opinions, ideas, and demands.⁹⁹ A document on “Suggested SCLC Organizational Structure” was circulated sometime in 1964 after Walker’s departure and it established six departments: Voter Registration, Operation Breadbasket, Nonviolent Education, Citizenship Education and the Washington Office and Special Projects (including fundraising and public relations).¹⁰⁰ Each department was to be headed up by a director, and each of those directors would report to the Program Director, who in turn reported to the

⁹⁶ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 164.

⁹⁷ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 325.

⁹⁸ King wrote just two paragraphs out of a twelve-page document on the campaign in the 1964 Annual Report. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Annual Report from MLK,” October 2, 1964, 3, KCDL, accessed 4/30/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/annual-report-mlk>.

⁹⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 168.

¹⁰⁰ SCLC 36:15

President. Each department was to receive an annual budget and would be required to send a monthly progress report to their department head. In short, the chain of command and accountability that Walker had tried to instill in the organization was finally beginning to be put into place, at least on paper.

The Selma marches gave SCLC the perfect opportunity to test out its new structure and make the most of an increased national office and field staff. Again, a detailed analysis of a campaign the size of that in Selma is beyond the scope of this paper, however, King sums up the impact of the marches from Selma to Montgomery best in his autobiography:

When SCLC went into Selma in January 1965, it had limited objectives. It sought primarily to correct wrongs existing in that small city. But our adversaries met us with such unrestrained brutality that they enlarged the issues to a national scale. The ironic and splendid result of the small Selma project was nothing less than the Voting Rights Act of 1965...We had a federal law which could be used, and use it we would. Where it fell short, we had our tradition of struggle and the method of nonviolent direct action, and these too we would use.¹⁰¹

While scholars debate a direct correlation between Selma and the Voting Rights Act, it was undeniable that SCLC was back in the national spotlight, but also due to King's force of personality and due in no small part to the role that mass media, television especially, played in broadcasting the brutality of the segregationists.

For one brief, final period, SCLC was able to translate favorable publicity into positive results, namely in the form of fundraising for the organization's mission. Between September 1964 and June 1965 the total income was over \$1.5 million, much of that in small donations via the direct mail program in New

¹⁰¹ *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Carson, 288.

York.¹⁰² Staff size likewise grew, with field secretaries (another position defined in the “Suggested SCLC Organizational Structure” document) in every southern state but Florida and Tennessee.¹⁰³ Despite being flush with cash, the organization still had no systemic way of sustaining that level of income, outside of King’s speaking appearances. When King considered taking a year-long sabbatical in the summer of 1965, SCLC leadership, both staff and advisors, realized just how cash-strapped the organization could become in a short matter of time. Stanley Levison suggested tapping into the fundraising power of the black church as “the question of an organized structure not dependent on him [King] becomes critically urgent.”¹⁰⁴ That was not a radical idea, as King’s earliest letters to the board, the majority of whom were ministers, had included similar, albeit informal, requests for donations, as was shown in chapter three.

Denial and Neglect

The 1965 ad in the *The Afro-American* “Some Important Fiscal Facts about the SCLC” shed little light on the organizations’ finances. The pamphlet took pains to point out that King took no salary, that SCLC’s “administrative costs are well below the ratio regarded as standard,” and that their “fundraising is done in the most careful, economical fashion by our own staff and volunteers.”¹⁰⁵ The ad contained no actual facts and would have done little to reassure donors had they known about SCLC’s problems with financial oversight, or the lack thereof.

¹⁰² Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 255.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 256.

¹⁰⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 429.

¹⁰⁵ “Some Important Fiscal Facts about the SCLC,” *The Afro-American*, April 17, 1965, 3.

But 1965 was not the year for any of those concerns. At his address to the Ninth Annual Convention in Birmingham on August 11, King proudly stated that the “organizational growth and expansion” as well as an increase in professional staff from 75 to 200 and the resulting tripling of the budget as a result was owing to “the fine quality of our professional staff,” implying that expansion was carried out with “a minimum amount of growing pains.”¹⁰⁶ The remainder of the address related the successes of various departments over the course of the previous year, and also hinted at the future of SCLC with sections on “Unemployment and Poverty” and the “Violence of Poverty.”¹⁰⁷ The summary of the convention, published at roughly the same time, offered little additional insight into how the rapid expansion of the organization was being supported by additional structure, other than to say “While we have been engaged in expanding the staff we have, at the same time, worked at building the strongest staff possible. In this regard, we have added three people with doctorate degrees.”¹⁰⁸ Again, the document provides little indication that SCLC had actually taken to heart the advice of Baker, Walker, or Levison in creating a strategy around organizational operations.

It should come as no surprise, then, that by 1966 the organization was dipping into its reserve fund in order to continue paying for existing programming. A January 21 memo from Abernathy to King recapped the latest executive staff meeting, wherein the staff learned of “the desire of the President that the body be

¹⁰⁶ “SCLC Annual Report by MLK, 1965,” August 11, 1965, KCDL, accessed 5/10/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/sclc-annual-report-mlk-1965>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ “SCLC: Summary of Ninth Annual Convention,” August 13, 1965, KCDL, accessed 5/10/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/sclc-summary-ninth-annual-convention#>.

advised as to the financial condition of the organization and the desire that all department heads curtail their spending for at least two weeks, so that S.C.L.C. may not be embarrassed financially.”¹⁰⁹ By then the Chicago campaign, to be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, was off to a rocky start and the Summer Community Organization and Political Education project (SCOPE) was eating up \$100,000 each month, and it was operating solely in the South.¹¹⁰ The memo admitted that the organization did not know what they were spending on each program and that project funds might not be going directly toward programming, as the amount of liquor being consumed by field staff was just one area of concern in the organization’s “financial policies and practices.”¹¹¹

Other operational issues were being neglected as well. Erma Burton sent a letter to the Steering Committee expressing concern “over the lack of control exhibited in the preservation of valuable historical materials pertaining to the organization.”¹¹² Lillie Hunter wrote a memo to King and the executive staff regarding the lack of rules and regulations around the national office, although things were “gradually taking shape and are moving with a little more uniformity and coordination.” The office, it should be noticed, had been in existence for nearly a decade at that point. Things were not much better in the field, as a report from Grenada, Mississippi, in August 1967 illustrated. The project director there expressed frustration at “the seemingly lack of interest by former SCLC staffers in implementing much needed programs” in addition to unreimbursed

¹⁰⁹ SCLC 47:15.

¹¹⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 429.

¹¹¹ SCLC 47:15.

¹¹² SCLC 48:1.

expenses, a lack of economic research on the area, and a lack of operational expenses.¹¹³ In short, the Grenada project was “in a state of confusion.”¹¹⁴ King spending so much time in the north, especially Chicago, was doing SCLC no favors, as both that campaign and the organization itself were experiencing serious mission drift. Voter registration was no longer the focus of the majority of organizational programs and newer projects like Operation Breadbasket worked well on a small scale but had yet to garner the attention needed to generate much-needed publicity and donations.

In July 1966 King penned a letter to several staff members telling them that they were being removed from the payroll. He explained that in light of Selma, the organization had nearly doubled its capacity, but now found itself “in the embarrassing position of having to reduce our staff to it’s [sic] normal capacity,” as if the plan all along had been to maintain a certain number of “regular” positions.¹¹⁵ After the anticlimactic conclusion of the Chicago campaign and a backlash in the popular press against King’s antiwar speeches and sermons on Vietnam, SCLC in 1967 found itself adrift. In two separate staff retreats that year King began to outline his vision for the next phase of SCLC’s work and mission. On November 28 he stated “that we must formulate a program and we must fashion new tactics which do not count on government good will, but instead serve to compel unwilling authorities to yield to the

¹¹³ SCLC 47:15.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “Letter from MLK” July 26, 1966, KCDL, accessed 5/10/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-mlk-0>.

mandate of justice.”¹¹⁶ He believed there was still room for non-violent direct action in the struggle for equality, but that it must now “be adapted to urban conditions and urban moods,” a sharp change from the southern-focused work of the organization’s first decade.¹¹⁷ To accomplish these goals would require no less than “a radical restructuring of the architecture of American society,” and the primary recipient of that restructuring would be those living in poverty.¹¹⁸

King’s fervent beliefs in affecting societal change would not be enough to keep SCLC solvent in the immediate future, however. A “Moratorium on All Expenditures” memorandum issued to all executive and field staff just one week later declared a three-week moratorium on all organizational expenditures beyond salaries, previous priorities, or emergencies.¹¹⁹ On December 8 a separate memo on “Expenditures and Reimbursement of Expenses” was issued to the Executive Staff and Steering Committees, letting them know of the all-staff memo, and describing a dire state of affairs both financial and organizational for SCLC:

A review of our financial position and general expenditures reveals an alarming state of affairs. Many field staff members are working without adequate supervision; they neither know who their supervisor is, nor submit reports to maintain contact with the Organization. Many other staff members have been making unauthorized trips, staying in hotels and engaging in other activities which are neither authorized or in the interest of SCLC.¹²⁰

All department heads were immediately to oversee all expenditures and approve in writing only those related to the mission. With morale low and finances even

¹¹⁶ SCLC 28:42.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ SCLC 48:2.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

lower, SCLC needed a campaign to reinvigorate staff and supporters and rally a national audience around its cause. What the organization got instead was the Poor People's Campaign.

CHAPTER FIVE: POVERTY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Where did the idea for a Poor People's Campaign originate? Why did the topic of poverty emerge above all else for an organization that had been primarily focused on voting drives, boycotts, marches, and other traditional tactics of non-violent direct action? The basis of the PPC can be found in three different areas: the administration's challenges in taking on the subject of poverty, the failed attempt by SCLC to engage in an impactful northern campaign on a massive scale, and King's own changing beliefs on the interrelatedness of social and economic injustices, especially as viewed through the lens of his growing anti-war stance. These conditions combined to form a situation in which SCLC found itself growing increasingly inconsequential in a world of more militant civil rights organizations, unable to deal with the complexities of a society in which segregation was no longer the *de jure* way of life for millions who had previously rallied around SCLC's causes, at least not legally after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. SCLC needed to gain a broader base of support, especially financially, if it was to continue to remain solvent as well as relevant as the 1960s progressed.

The Chicago Campaign

Lyndon Johnson's 1964 State of the Union Address was remarkable on several accounts, not least of which being that it marked the first time the word "poverty" was entered into either the *Congressional Record* or *The Public Papers*

of the President.¹²¹ In declaring “unconditional war” on poverty, Johnson was poised to carry out an ambitious initiative begun under the Kennedy administration with an equally ambitious plan of new programs, offices, and research on a topic that many Americans knew, and lived, but rarely discussed openly in the political sphere. The ramifications of such a program for the black community, however, were complicated and at some times contradictory. The initial task force organized under Sargent Shriver, at the time a Special Assistant to President Johnson, went so far as to publish a memorandum entitled “Why the Poverty Program Is Not a Negro Program,” a tacit acknowledgement that the planners of the war on poverty were simply not equipped to grapple fully with the racial implications of the program, especially with regards to the problems of poor urban blacks, more specifically those in the North.¹²² As Adam Yarmolinsky, a member of the task force, argued in an essay on the topic in 1967, “In fact, the whole problem of the northern ghetto was still not seen in anything like its full depth and complexity...Negro poverty was thought about and talked about largely in the geographical context of the Deep South, and Black Power had not even been heard of.”¹²³ The task force would go on formally to organize as the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

Whether SCLC leadership knew specifically of the obstacles faced by the administration’s task force or ever read Yarmolinsky’s essay is unknown, but King’s attempt to engage the organization in a meaningful northern campaign

¹²¹ James L. Sundquist, “Origins of the War on Poverty,” in *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience*, ed. James L. Sundquist, (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 6.

¹²² Adam Yarmolinsky, “The Beginnings of OEO,” in *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience*, ed. James L. Sundquist, (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 42.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 49.

beginning in 1966 certainly makes sense when examined in light of the limitations of the war on poverty. King chose Chicago as the site of this campaign not only because “it is clearly the prototype of the northern urban race problem,” but because the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) had already built “a united action program” designed to “call attention to the various sore spots in Chicago society.”¹²⁴ The campaign would focus on substandard housing conditions by waging a “war on slums”; King and his family even took up temporary, and intermittent, residence in a tenement on the west side of the city. SCLC staff and advisors had been torn on the decision to engage in a northern campaign, with members of King’s research committee, an informal group of intellectuals originally convened to educate King on current events, encouraging a continued focus on the South as well as continued support of the Voting Rights Act.¹²⁵ The lure of the big city, and the huge number of urban dwellers who could be mobilized in support of the cause, however, was too strong for King to resist.¹²⁶

SCLC and King made two crucial mistakes in engaging the organization in this campaign: they utilized similar strategies and tactics to those they had used in Selma and Montgomery, and they severely underestimated the power of Mayor Richard J. Daley’s Democratic political machine. An undated, unsigned document in the King Archives entitled “An Evaluation of the Racial Problems of Chicago” explains that race relations in Chicago were far different than in the

¹²⁴ “Chicago Nonviolent Action Proposal,” January 5, 1966, 2-3, KCDL, accessed 4/14/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/chicago-nonviolent-action-proposal>.

¹²⁵ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 274. For an explanation on the formation of the research committee and its lack of power within the organization, see pages 170-171.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

South because, while racial segregation was undoubtedly a facet of daily life in that city, there was still “a political apparatus...through which Negroes can seek remedies, increase their political representation and maintain some degree of political influence in the Democratic Councils.”¹²⁷ It became apparent that SCLC and CCCO’s Chicago Freedom Movement had perhaps not done its due diligence in researching what blacks in Chicago needed or even wanted, especially when it came to well-established institutions in the city. The conservative members of the National Baptist Convention were represented by the powerful leader Dr. J. H. Jackson, who continually challenged the campaign’s tactics and aims, arguing “that the city’s government and certain private agencies have already begun making headway to eliminate the problems of the disadvantaged.”¹²⁸ Likewise, slum dwellers as a group were far less inclined to engage in political action against authority than their poor Southern counterparts and were more likely to trust in the power of government and private agencies to look out for their best interests. Fairclough explains, “As Bevel’s staff had discovered earlier in the year [1967], slum-dwellers responded to SCLC’s moral entreaties with apathy, cynicism, and sometimes hostility...many welfare recipients, public housing tenants, and city employees felt dependent on the [Democratic political] machine.”¹²⁹ Consequently, a July rally at Soldier Field brought out 30,000 supporters, far short of the 100,000 SCLC had hoped for, and “well below the 57,000 persons” who had showed up at a similar event two years

¹²⁷ “An Evaluation of the Racial Problems of Chicago,” undated, 1, KCDL, accessed 4/14/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/evaluation-racial-problems-chicago>.

¹²⁸ Bety Washington, “Dr. King, Rev. Jackson Air Differences: Chicago Rallies Is Thorny Issue Washington,” *Chicago Defender*, Jul 7, 1966, 4.

¹²⁹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 304.

earlier.¹³⁰ The campaign dragged on throughout 1966, with marches for open housing consistently drawing small numbers and little progress being made through negotiations with the city. King himself was too distracted to fully focus on Chicago as the April board meeting resulted both in a published statement on Vietnam that quickly garnered more press attention than any of the organization's efforts in Chicago and in a staff divided both ideologically and geographically on the organization's mission.¹³¹

An August conference bringing together representatives of the mayor's office and a coalition of organizations and activists including SCLC, CCCO, and CORE resulted in the September creation of the Metropolitan Leadership Council for Fair Housing; it was charged with carrying out the tenets of the settlement reached by the group.¹³² The settlement and the work of the council was underwhelming to say the least. In fact, Chicago CORE leader Robert Lucas called the council a "farce" just three months later.¹³³ When King returned to Chicago in March 1967, the focus was centered more on Vietnam than on open housing.¹³⁴ Manning Marable summed up the entire Chicago campaign best when, writing in *Race, Rebellion, and Reform*, he argued that "The meager anti-racist concessions which King and other top aides, notably Jesse Jackson, James Bevel, and Andrew Young, were able to extract from 'Northern

¹³⁰ "Thousands Go to Soldiers' Field Rights Rally" *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1966, 1.

¹³¹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 468-471.

¹³² *Ibid.* 530.

¹³³ Betty Washington, "City Open Housing Council Ridiculed By CORE's Lucas," *The Chicago Defender* (National edition), November 5, 1966, 1.

¹³⁴ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 549.

segregationists' did not justify the financial and personnel expenditures of the long and hard campaign."¹³⁵

SCLC's organizational structure was again in disarray by the beginning of 1967, as staff facing strained finances struggled to maintain efforts in both the North and the South. L. D. Reddick, a long-time supporter and sometimes travel companion of King's, told King that "SCLC had better do some 'purposeful thinking,'" and consider three particular topics: finances and fund-raising, organization and staff changes, and, most important, program content.¹³⁶ At that time in the North only Operation Breadbasket fully delivered on its stated mission. When speaking or writing about SCLC's efforts in Chicago, King always summarized the topic by shifting focus to Operation Breadbasket, perhaps to make the campaign appear as if it ended better than it did, or to make it seem as if the organization had planned to transition the focus from open housing to jobs in Chicago all along.¹³⁷

In June 1967 King wrote a direct fundraising appeal letter to an undisclosed list of "friends," explaining that the "confusions of the past year" should not be held against SCLC, as its role "is clearly defined in the total effort for political reform and eradication of economic deprivation," a marked change in mission from the voting rights and citizenship education programs of the past.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 115.

¹³⁶ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 542.

¹³⁷ For two different examples of this shifting focus, see King's *Autobiography's* chapter on "Chicago Campaign" and King's 1967 address "Where Do We Go From Here?" at the Eleventh Annual Convention of the SCLC, August 16, 1967.

¹³⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from MLK Concerning the Sustainability of SCLC," June, 1967, KCDL, accessed 5/14/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-mlk-concerning-sustainability-sclc>.

This letter, which for the first time stated that checks could be made out to “SCL Foundation,” (a full explanation of the organization’s tax exempt status appears in chapter seven) clearly did not have the intended effect, as the financial memos examined in chapter four demonstrate. At the same time King was issuing a moratorium on expenditures, he was preparing SCLC staff for the “Washington Spring Project,” an endeavor he had hinted at in his “Why A Movement” address to staff at their November 28 retreat. “We’re talking about the right to eat, the right to live. This is what we’re going to Washington about,” King explained; “You see, I don’t care if we don’t name the demand - just go to Washington!”¹³⁹ As SCLC would soon learn, however, King’s enthusiasm and inability to fully articulate the demands of the PPC would nearly tear the organization apart and harm the campaign itself.

Mobilizing for the Poor

The decision to focus on poor people was not entirely outside the scope of SCLC’s mission, nor was it out of character for King. In his autobiography he recalls “I could never get out of my mind the economic insecurity of many of my playmates and the tragic poverty of those living around me.”¹⁴⁰ A pamphlet published by the MIA when King was still president listed “Improvement of Economic Status” as one of the ten main concerns of the organization, with

¹³⁹ SCLC 28:42, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁰ King, *Autobiography*, 10.

finding and training for jobs as top priorities.¹⁴¹ In his 1963 speech at Cobo Hall in Detroit, he linked the violence of segregation with the inability to gain economic equality: “We’ve been pushed around so long; we’ve been the victims of lynching mobs so long; we’ve been the victims of economic injustice so long.”¹⁴² And of course, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was designed by a broad coalition of organizations to address matters racial as well as economic.

Perhaps no other document embodies King’s beliefs on the twin evils of racial and economic inequality better than his 1964 book *Why We Can’t Wait*. Although the majority of the book is dedicated to recounting the campaign in Birmingham and its immediate aftermath, the final two chapters include key insights from King with respect to the growth of SCLC and the direction of the larger civil rights movement. King believed that “every social revolution simultaneously does two things: It attracts to itself fresh forces and strength, and at the same time it crystallizes the opposition.”¹⁴³ Accordingly, the number of SCLC affiliates that year increased from 85 to 110, with the strength of the overall movement made possible only through the support of blacks and whites.¹⁴⁴ Near the end of the book King makes a startling call for a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, a stimulus package, to borrow a modern phrase, which would “be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance

¹⁴¹ “Looking Forward: The Montgomery Improvement Association, Inc.,” undated. KCDL, accessed 5/14/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/looking-forward-montgomery-improvement-association-inc#>.

¹⁴² King, “Address at the Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall,” *A Call to Conscience*, 68.

¹⁴³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*, (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 108.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

with the accepted practice of common law.”¹⁴⁵ The program was not designed to offer reparations, but rather to provide education and training that would lead to full employment not just for blacks but also for impoverished whites. Notably King viewed the federal government and Executive Office not as obstacles to achieving economic parity but as the institutions whose support was most crucial to the program’s success.¹⁴⁶ Although King did not directly pursue the passage of a Bill of Rights of the Disadvantaged, he became increasingly interested in how the socioeconomic challenges faced by poor whites and blacks alike, with the latter suffering from “a double disability” of racial discrimination as well as poverty.¹⁴⁷

In a letter sent on December 4, 1967, King announced that SCLC “will lead waves of the nation’s poor and disinherited to Washington, D.C., next spring to demand redress of their grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all.”¹⁴⁸ He goes on to explain, “SCLC decided to go to Washington because, if we did not act, we would be abdicating our responsibilities as an organization committed to nonviolence and freedom.”¹⁴⁹ The decision to engage in the PPC, however, was far from unanimous. The staff felt unprepared to launch such a massive campaign on such short notice, and

¹⁴⁵ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 127-128.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴⁷ Martin Luther King, “Where Do We Go From Here?” *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* eds. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard. (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 188.

¹⁴⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “MLK Announces a New SCLC March in Washington, D.C.,” December 6, 1967, KCDL, accessed 5/14/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/mlk-announces-new-sclc-march-washington-d.c.>

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

was concerned about another failure in the wake of Chicago.¹⁵⁰ King, sensing that his current staff felt they did not have the capacity to manage the PPC, sought to ameliorate their concerns by insisting that “we are planning a little more, and a little longer in advance than we have ever planned before.”¹⁵¹ To that end, on December 13 the organization issued a press release announcing a “complete reorganization of SCLC” and the appointment of former Freedom Rider Bernard Lafayette, Jr. to the newly created position of program administrator; Andrew Young was named Executive Vice President, and Rutherford assumed the position of Executive Director.¹⁵² In addition to bringing an outsider’s perspective to the organization, Lafayette’s appointment was clearly “an attempt to link the less militant SCLC with black youths in major cities,” as the *Chicago Defender* pointed out.¹⁵³ It was a desperately needed infusion of youth to an organization whose Board of Directors comprised 53 members that consisted largely of old guard movement supporters and ministers.¹⁵⁴ Lafayette was 27 years old at the time, just one year older than King had been at the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

No project of King’s or SCLC’s thus far was quite as ambitious in its scope as mobilizing a constituency outside of its traditional geographic and demographic bases. Boycotting buses required residents of Montgomery to find alternate means of transportation; they did not have to give up their homes or

¹⁵⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 593.

¹⁵¹ King’s comments to staff on second day of Special Staff Retreat, January 14-16, 1968, as quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 593.

¹⁵² SCLC 122:8

¹⁵³ “King Revamps SCLC, Names Campaign Head,” *Chicago Defender*, December 14, 1967, 8.

¹⁵⁴ SCLC 122:8

their jobs to engage in direct action. Even when faced with physical danger, as the Freedom Riders or the marchers from Selma to Montgomery were on repeated occasions, there was a community support system available to provide medical care, transportation, or otherwise to attend to the needs of the protesters. What King was suggesting was to take poor people out of their homes, out of their communities, and away from every support system they knew and to trust fully that SCLC would provide for their physical, social, and political needs in the nation's capitol. A leap of faith would be required on the part of the participants, as well as the organization.

As the precise goals of the PPC remained unclear at the turn of the new year, King had publicly stated that a full list of goals would be announced in March, an internal document circulated in January elucidating a "Statement of Purpose" that read more like a motivational speech than a memorandum, as if the organization were attempting to justify to *itself* the need for such a campaign.¹⁵⁵ Frustrations with "an economically oriented power structure" could only be addressed through the use of "massive energetic protest tactics" designed to "dislocate or slow down the functioning of a city without harming it."¹⁵⁶ The document neither makes mention of the preparation required for such large-scale demonstrations nor does it outline a strategy for achieving jobs and income for the poor who would descend on Washington. An emergency staff retreat was called in mid-January to address the campaign and at that time Rutherford began to engage outside organizations for additional lobbying and

¹⁵⁵ SCLC 49:3.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

research support, beginning with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC).¹⁵⁷ King also reached out to his New York advisors for similar strategies and was met with open hostility from Rustin, who believed SCLC should be focusing on cooperation with labor unions to help achieve employment for the poor and that a campaign built upon a shanty town in the nation's capitol would only lead to backlash from both blacks and whites.¹⁵⁸ King, as he had many times before with his most trusted confidants, did not express personal dissatisfaction with Rustin, but conveyed disappointment on behalf of SCLC and the PPC. Henry Wachtel, another New York advisor present at the meeting, later said that "He [King] felt let down, because he held you [Rustin] up so high."¹⁵⁹

Building Momentum

Throughout late winter and early spring of 1968, the PPC continued to be more of a rhetorical device than a well-planned campaign, with King traveling the country to drum up support by appealing to the emotional side of audiences' experience. While he may have "translated abstractions and policy prescriptions into compelling images and promises of tangible benefits" as Jackson argues, what is unknown is just how many of those who volunteered to travel by mule train or otherwise get to Washington knew what to expect once they arrived.¹⁶⁰

Letters from potential volunteers to SCLC described in very personal terms their

¹⁵⁷ See SCLC 57:4 for a summary of early discussions between SCLC and AFSC regarding artistic and PR support for the PPC. See also AFSC's online resource "The Unfinished Business of the Poor People's Campaign," <http://afsc.org/resource/unfinished-business-poor-peoples-campaign>.

¹⁵⁸ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 679.

¹⁵⁹ Wachtel to Rustin, September 25, 1995, as quoted in Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 679.

¹⁶⁰ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 346.

desire for everything from medicine for children to land ownership to receiving full Social Security benefits as motivation for joining the campaign.¹⁶¹ Many individuals considered the PPC to be their only way of ever possibly affecting change in government. SCLC's supporters from other organizations, meanwhile, had been approaching the campaign in a far more strategic and critical manner. In a January 19 letter to King on behalf of the General Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Methodist Church, General Secretary A. Dudley Ward expressed concern that the D.C. SCLC President had been visiting various groups, demanding support for the campaign. However, "He [the D.C. SCLC President] offers no details, goals or tactics to be used, and so far as we are able to determine, he is being turned down everywhere so far."¹⁶²

Weeks passed with little improvement in preparations for the campaign. At a February 11 staff meeting, King scolded a select group of high-level staff for failing to recruit what Branch calls "a legion of hard-core poor" and for exhibiting little enthusiasm for carrying out the work of the campaign.¹⁶³ Two weeks later the AFSC, which was continuing to provide support to the research committee in preparation for the campaign, came to a similar conclusion, dictating a letter to King and Wachtel with the recommendations that SCLC would need to create "specific demands, articulated in relation to the power and response generated by the early stage of the campaign" and take "immediate steps to define a longer list of specific bills and/or executive actions and to 'research' the Washington scene in order to come up with a list of viable solutions to the problems of

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 347-348.

¹⁶² SCLC 2:20.

¹⁶³ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 692.

poverty.”¹⁶⁴ The organization would have been wise to heed such suggestions, as SCLC had yet to make a cohesive statement on the demands of the PPC, especially as they related to legislation and/or presidential action. At that time, the campaign was less than six weeks away.

One week later, on March 4, SCLC issued a press release to announce that the campaign would be delayed by two weeks, so as to allow for the conclusion of the Cherry Blossom Festival and to coincide with the reconvening of Congress.¹⁶⁵ While legislative specifics were still lacking at a lightly attended press conference, King finally offered a rough schedule of events, with visits to Congress to begin on April 22 while a mule train of 3,000 poor would simultaneously begin their journey to Washington.¹⁶⁶ King acknowledged only that the demands of the campaign would be similar to those of the Kerner Commission Report, which had been issued on February 29, 1968 and called for an overhaul of the welfare system and a minimum income guarantee, among other recommendations.¹⁶⁷

Support for the campaign had grown throughout February, and by early March a number of trade unions and religious organizations were helping mobilize volunteers and collect donations.¹⁶⁸ By mid-March SCLC had convened a coalition of “53 non-Negro minority group organizations” in support of the PPC and publicly announced that “many” of the 3,000 participants had been

¹⁶⁴ SCLC 42:5.

¹⁶⁵ “King Delays March on Washington,” *The Washington Post*, Mar 5, 1968, A1.

¹⁶⁶ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 707.

¹⁶⁷ Herbers, John, “Panel On Civil Disorders Calls For Drastic Action To Avoid 2-Society Nation,” *New York Times*, Feb 29, 1968, A1.

¹⁶⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 369.

recruited.¹⁶⁹ The momentum of the campaign had changed, at least publicly, but a troubling memo issued by Marian Logan, the Assistant Secretary of SCLC's board, certainly cast doubts internally.

In her scathing memo, Logan warned King and members of the board that SCLC might actually do more harm than good to the cause of economic equality by engaging in the PPC, especially if the participants did not adhere to the principle of non-violent direct action.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, she expressed her disappointment at the lack of organization in preparing for the campaign:

Even if I were able to concede the desirability at how inadequately they have been planned. Such Demonstrations, I believe, should have been preceded, several months in advance, by the most careful and skilled groundwork and planning by someone--from SCLC or elsewhere--in whose capabilities the movement has faith. Without meaning to criticize those in whose hands responsibility for advance planning has been vested, it does not appear to me, or to anyone with whom I have talked, that an adequate job has been done.¹⁷¹

Logan's admonishment stands in stark contrast to King's earlier claims that the PPC was organized farther in advance than any other SCLC campaign. Logan continued her memo by questioning whether the organization had been doing an adequate job of defining its mission for supporters and donors overall, and she then reiterated a list of proposed programs she sent to the board in August of 1967, including job training and lobbying for acceptance of black skilled workers into unions. King attempted for a week to get her to withdraw the memo, but

¹⁶⁹ "Dr. King Says He Is Confident Of Support on His Drive for Poor," Special to *New York Times*, Mar 15, 1968, 36.

¹⁷⁰ SCLC 40:3.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Logan refused.¹⁷² Privately, King expressed his own doubts about SCLC's ability to carry out the campaign, going so far as lamenting to Levison "that from a public relations point of view and every other way we are in serious trouble."¹⁷³ Levison managed to persuade King to stay the course, but SCLC staff members were likewise growing anxious as April 22 neared, with concerns about the health and safety of the participants foremost on their minds. With nearly 10,000 potential law enforcement officials waiting to be mobilized in response to 3,000 participants, and no camp site selected by mid-March, those in the organization charged with carrying out the campaign had a right to be concerned.¹⁷⁴

SCLC and King's participation in the sanitation worker's strike in Memphis only compounded the tension in the organization.¹⁷⁵ Staff members openly questioned SCLC's ability to manage two campaigns simultaneously, especially with expenses outpacing fundraising.¹⁷⁶ After the March 28 march to Memphis' City Hall disintegrated into violence, staff support for the PPC hit an all time low.¹⁷⁷ On April 1, a confidential memorandum was circulated as a result of an all-day meeting among King, the executive staff, and a select group of outside advisors. The memo instructed staff in no uncertain terms that both the Memphis and Poor People's campaigns were still to be administered as planned.¹⁷⁸ Notably, the memo acknowledged that "as this is a particularly soul searching

¹⁷² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 601.

¹⁷³ King's comments quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 614.

¹⁷⁴ Ben A. Franklin, "Law Enforcement Men to Outnumber Protesters at March of Poor in Capital," *New York Times*, Mar 4, 1968, 22.

¹⁷⁵ In just one example of the stress placed on King and SCLC by striking in Memphis and planning the PPC, see Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 341-342.

¹⁷⁶ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 607.

¹⁷⁷ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 379-381.

¹⁷⁸ SCLC 122:10.

time for us, communication among ourselves is perhaps more important than ever.”¹⁷⁹ On a positive note, SCLC encouraged its staff to engage in open dialogue internally; on a negative note, the memo was also likely a reminder to staff not to speak to the press about internal strife.

Interestingly, a Washington, D.C., news conference called by King on that same day received different treatment in two major newspapers. The *Baltimore Sun* declared “King is Resolute on Poor March,” while the *New York Times* stated “Dr. King Hints He’d Cancel March if Aid is Offered”; these headlines perhaps reflected the nation’s own ambivalence toward the campaign.¹⁸⁰ The *Times*, in particular was far more harsh in its criticism of the campaign in light of the Memphis march, and other national and regional newspapers warned that the PPC could easily result in an outbreak of violence over which SCLC would have little to no control.¹⁸¹ SCLC staff remained divided on the wisdom of pursuing the campaign with Jim Bevel and Jesse Jackson, as Garrow explains, remaining “openly opposed” to it.¹⁸²

Tragically, it is King’s assassination on April 4 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis that can largely be credited with reinvigorating staff and outside support for the PPC. Three days before King’s funeral, SCLC’s Washington office was “hard at work” preparing for the campaign, engaging volunteer committees, soliciting fund-raising from star athletes, and replying to condolence letters.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ “King is Resolute on Poor March,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 1, 1968, A1 and Ben A. Franklin, “Dr. King Hints He’d Cancel March if Aid Is Offered,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1968, 20.

¹⁸¹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 378.

¹⁸² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 616.

¹⁸³ Bernadette Carey, “King Aides Go Ahead With Plans for March,” *The Washington Post*, Apr 6, 1968, A15.

Over \$300,000 in donations flowed into the organization via an advertisement in the *New York Times*.¹⁸⁴ Additionally on April 22, what would have been the start of the campaign, Abernathy announced a timetable for the mule train and “City of Hope” shanty town, the latter of which was to be built beginning May 13.¹⁸⁵ On the surface, at least, it appeared that SCLC was going to be able to carry out the Poor People’s Campaign, even without its charismatic leader, without whom there would have been no campaign. SCLC leaders quickly realized, however, that the years of neglect regarding organizational structure and strategy would create a situation in which the campaign was unable to meet even the most basic needs of its participants, let alone achieve the grand goals set forth by King.

¹⁸⁴ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 386.

¹⁸⁵ SCLC 122:10.

CHAPTER SIX: A NEW ERA IN LEADERSHIP

Abernathy's Ascension

By all measures, Ralph David Abernathy was unprepared to assume the role of SCLC's president. Abernathy was perhaps closer to the "real" King than any other SCLC staff member or advisor, yet that very closeness made it difficult for him to emerge from King's shadow to build a strong, effective leadership team for the Poor People's Campaign. While an accomplished orator and well-respected member of the civil rights movement, Abernathy was simply unequipped to take over leadership of a nonprofit organization in such a fragile state. As Fairclough observes, "Abernathy's misfortune was that he served King so selflessly for so long that he developed few of the qualities necessary for effective leadership of an organization like SCLC."¹⁸⁶ Abernathy had subsumed his own desires for King's, and had little concept of how to manage the financial, organizational, and strategic challenges exhibited by SCLC in the wake of King's death.

As early as spring 1965, King had brought up the issue of succession with SCLC's board, surprising them with his recommendation of Abernathy, then treasurer, as the heir apparent.¹⁸⁷ Many in SCLC's leadership were taken aback by the announcement, not because of King and Abernathy's personal attachment, which was obvious to all, but because King had never before

¹⁸⁶ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 389.

¹⁸⁷ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 372.

indicated that the organization create a plan in the case of his death.¹⁸⁸ King had anointed Abernathy as his successor before, when both were part of the Montgomery Improvement Association. In a undated draft of a column, King praised Abernathy's leadership skills and indicated that he would be the perfect person to keep the MIA on course: "The new President, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, is a man of boundless integrity, inexhaustible energy and eloquent courage. He generates the kind of inspiration which will be needed to hold the loyal cooperation of the other officers and the rank and file of the organization."¹⁸⁹ Had that column instead been written one decade later about SCLC, it would have described perfectly the kind of leader the organization desperately needed. The Abernathy of 1968, however, was simply not up to the task, as the next few months would show.

On April 22 SCLC issued a press release in which Abernathy announced the new schedule for the PPC. The campaign would kick off on April 29 when "Dr. Abernathy and about 100 poor people from throughout the nation and other national leaders begin presenting demands to government officials and Congressional leaders" for a period of three days.¹⁹⁰ Next, a series of marches would take place throughout the first three weeks of May, and participants would camp out at the "City of Hope" in Washington until May 30, when the campaign would culminate in a mass march on Washington, to which anyone was invited to

¹⁸⁸ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 197-98.

¹⁸⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Martin Luther King Column (1)," undated, KCDL, accessed 5/15/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/martin-luther-king-column-1>.

¹⁹⁰ SCLC 122:10.

attend.¹⁹¹ Abernathy's plan hewed closely to King's vision for the campaign, albeit with a modified timeline: Abernathy did not indicate that the encampment would continue indefinitely, as King had urged. In a statement following King's assassination, Abernathy hinted at his desire to achieve the goals of the PPC as quickly as possible, explaining that if Congress met the demands of the campaign and would "enact legislation at once that guarantees a job to all and for those unable to work a guaranteed annual income" then that would be a recognition of the immense tragedy of King's assassination and "the healing of the nation's wounds can begin immediately."¹⁹² Perhaps Abernathy was using King's death as an opportunity to pressure Congress to act upon the campaign's demands without having to go to Washington; Abernathy must have known he was in over his head.

A Muddled Campaign

Unfortunately, most of the records kept by SCLC regarding the Poor People's Campaign were destroyed on June 24, 1968, when Capitol Police raided the shantytown - by then renamed "Resurrection City" - and evicted all of its inhabitants.¹⁹³ The King Library Digital Collection contains just five documents dated after King's death pertaining to the campaign. Luckily, however, a large body of journalistic accounts exists that details the PPC. Most scholars, if they

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Martin Luther King Column (1)," undated, KCDL, accessed 5/15/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/reverend-ralph-d-abernathys-statement-following-mlks-assasination>.

¹⁹³ Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954–1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), xx.

acknowledge the organization's administration of the campaign at all, agree that it was a failure for both SCLC and those who camped out for weeks on the National Mall. Popular opinion was divided, with black leaders such as Dr. Thomas Matthew, president of National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization (NEGRO), lambasting "the pie in the sky promises of the Poor People's March" as nothing more than glorified government handouts that would "perpetuate slavery."¹⁹⁴ On the other side, *Washington Post* columnist Roscoe Drummond asserted that the poor should be welcome in Washington, as "They are not demanding the impossible nor the ridiculous nor the extreme. They are demanding that private industry and Government at every level put a higher priority on wiping out poverty in the United States."¹⁹⁵

The treatment of the PPC in the black press was also consistent with that of the white press, with the *Chicago Defender* contributing a series of assessments focused largely on SCLC's leadership struggles at the camp and throughout the organization. Responding to the "rumors that the crusade was on the verge of becoming a massive flop," an SCLC spokesman told the *Defender* on May 20, the first Monday after all of the caravans were scheduled to arrive at the camp, that Resurrection City residents had plenty of food, were working cooperatively to build additional structures on site, and were receiving adequate medical care.¹⁹⁶ There was even a modicum of entertainment because "taxi cab

¹⁹⁴ Jim Hoagland, "Negro Surgeon Blasts Poor People's March," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 1968, D2.

¹⁹⁵ Roscoe Drummond, "D.C. Ought to Welcome Poor People's Campaign," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1968, A17.

¹⁹⁶ One positive aspect of living in Resurrection City for many poor participants was the availability of quality health care services, if limited in scope, including preventative medicine screenings, dental care, access to prescription drugs, and mental health assessments. In all,

drivers are volunteering to take the kids on free tours of the city.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, everything was going according to plan. Only it wasn’t. In the most comprehensive first-person account of the campaign, Charles Fager observed that SCLC was already struggling to maintain order at this early stage of implementation. The biggest immediate concern was, as Fairclough sums it up, that “SCLC had given virtually no thought to the question of how Resurrection City ought to be organized and administered.”¹⁹⁸ This assessment is borne out by Fager’s recollection that by the time Abernathy called a press conference at the site on May 17, there were still no showers on site and electricity reached only a few parts of the camp.¹⁹⁹ Worse, SCLC was continuing a long-standing pattern of mishandling the press, with press conferences running hours late from the very beginning.²⁰⁰ The public relations situation soured so quickly that by May 17 “the disgusted reporters,” whose newspaper bosses had had little sympathy for the campaign in the first place, “would begin feeding them [the newspaper editorial staffs] the kind of copy they wanted,” that is, negative.²⁰¹

And the negative copy flowed indeed. On May 21, SCLC leadership announced a postponement of the mass march that Abernathy had originally

nearly 4,000 visits were made to the on-site health care facilities, and health care workers were some of the last to leave the camp. Like most of the campaign, the medical and sanitary planning was scarce, but was one area that drew successfully on local volunteers for support. For two excellent assessments of the health care provided at Resurrection City, see Gloria Billings, “Health Care in Resurrection City,” *The American Journal of Nursing*, 68, no. 8 (1968), 1695-1698, JSTOR, accessed 11/6/2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3420977>; and Murray Grant, “Health Services for the Poor People’s Campaign,” *Public Health Reports*, 84, no. 2 (1969), 102-106, JSTOR, accessed 11/9/2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4593513>.

¹⁹⁷ Betty Washington, “Poor Campaign Isn’t In Trouble, Its Leaders Say,” *Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1968, 4.

¹⁹⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 386.

¹⁹⁹ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People’s Campaign*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 42-43.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

announced for May 30. “We’re not ready. We need more time,” explained an unnamed SCLC spokesman; Abernathy offered no comment to the press regarding the postponement.²⁰² A day later the first group of protestors descended upon the Capitol Building, only to be turned away by Capitol Police for lack of admission credentials.²⁰³ On May 24, 18 protestors with the campaign were arrested near the Capitol, a mere fraction of those in attendance. An SCLC spokesman explained to the press that the campaign was not prepared for mass arrest just yet, with poor communication among leadership staff contributing to such ongoing, less-than-impressive efforts.²⁰⁴ As Fager recounted, only three demonstrations resulted in arrests, with a total of fewer than 40 people arrested, with those arrests usually involving people not officially involved with SCLC’s demonstrations.²⁰⁵

A bigger problem was looming, however, as the physical conditions of Resurrection City deteriorated, especially after near-record-level rains soaked the National Mall in late spring. Camp manager Jesse Jackson told the *Baltimore Sun* on May 25 that several dozen inhabitants would be re-housed in light of the ankle-deep mud in the camp, but that most were staying put.²⁰⁶ Five days later the camp was again deluged with rain. This time Abernathy spoke to the *Baltimore Sun*, taking pains to point out to a reporter his own tent on the

²⁰² Earl Caldwell, “March in Capital Delayed by Poor,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1968, 34.

²⁰³ Ben A. Franklin, “Most on a March by Poor Are Barred From House Gallery for Lack of Passes,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1968, 22.

²⁰⁴ Ben A. Franklin, “18 Arrested in Protest by Poor Near Capitol,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1968, 1.

²⁰⁵ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 51.

²⁰⁶ Joseph R. L. Sterne, “Rains Muddy Poor Camp-In, But Evacuation Is Ruled Out,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 25, 1968, A1.

grounds.²⁰⁷ SCLC leadership had come under increasing fire for leaving the management of Resurrection City to a handful of paid staff, augmented by the presence of 20 members of a “Temporary City Government,” led by City Manager Bertrand Ransome.²⁰⁸ Most of these men were unequipped to handle the increasing number of “dudes” (rowdy youth, many of whom were gang members) who were engaged in harassing fellow campers in sometimes violent confrontations.²⁰⁹ Marian Logan once again expressed her disgust with SCLC leaders after visiting Resurrection City and realizing that most of the staff had taken up residence in nearby Pitts Motel in relatively luxurious conditions.²¹⁰

Too Little Too Late

By the end of May, Abernathy realized the campaign was in serious trouble and not even the minor concessions obtained by NAACP lawyer Marian Wright from the Department of Agriculture or the well attended Mother’s Day March that Coretta Scott King led could give the PPC any significant measure of success against its goals.²¹¹ Abernathy attempted to ameliorate the dysfunction of the camp by appointing Hosea Williams to manage Resurrection City and the direct action demonstrations, reassigning Jesse Jackson to a vague position of

²⁰⁷ Joseph R. L. Sterne, “Tent Blows Down, Cabins Flood In Resurrection City,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 29, 1968, A1.

²⁰⁸ SCLC 49:50.

²⁰⁹ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 51-52.

²¹⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 387.

²¹¹ Wright had hoped to extract from the Department of Agriculture (DOA) a reform in food stamps legislature so that people with a monthly income of \$30 or less would not have to pay for food stamps. When that proved impossible owing to a nearly \$100 million price tag, the DOA instead “scraped together \$43 million to expand the distribution of surplus commodities in the poorest rural counties.” For a brief discussion of this topic and the few additional victories achieved by the PPC, see Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 356-358.

organizing “action cadres” at other cities around the country, with the intent of bringing these cadres to Washington if necessary.²¹² Andrew Young took pains to state that Jackson had not received a demotion, but the dissension among SCLC’s internal ranks was now playing out publicly. A June 2 *New York Times* article further illustrated that reality, stating that staff were beginning to complain about Abernathy’s leadership, his lack of strategy, and his hesitation to engage in massive non-violent direct action.²¹³ The reporter pointed out that “Disarray within the S.C.L.C. staff organization has been apparent here for weeks” with Abernathy “reacting to the criticism of his leadership with uncertainty and snappishness.”²¹⁴

At the same time, Abernathy was attempting to gain a measure of control over the struggling campaign by asking Bayard Rustin to manage the “Solidarity Day” demonstrations scheduled for June 19, the date decided upon after the mass march was delayed from May 30.²¹⁵ Not even Rustin could overcome the disorganization among SCLC leadership, however, and, after submitting his own list of demands for Washington to the ire of staff who knew nothing about the list, he resigned after only a few days.²¹⁶ By mid-June SCLC leadership was virtually paralyzed by indecision and conflict. Complicating

²¹² Earl Caldwell, “New Chief Named To Spur Campaign Of Poor in Capital: New Chief Named to Spur Campaign,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1968, 1.

²¹³ Ben A. Franklin, “Friction Is Developing Over Abernathy Leadership,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1968, 88.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Ben A. Franklin, “The Poor: A Realist Is Called In To Save a Dream,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1968, E4.

²¹⁶ See Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 387 for a summary of Rustin’s brief tenure with the PPC; see also “Poor’s Leaders Splitting With Bayard Rustin” and “Rev. Abernathy, Rustin Split Over March Goals,” both published in the June 6, 1968 issue of *Chicago Defender*, 12 and 28.

matters were the conflicts among the various minority groups represented in the camp, a situation that came to a head when Williams engaged in a shouting match with Reies Tijerina, the leader of the Chicano participants.²¹⁷

Most damaging to SCLC was that all of these conflicts were taking place out in the open and in full view of the national press, undoubtedly inflicting greater organizational damage than any previous internal squabbles. “The disorganization and violence of Resurrection City,” explains Fager, “combined with the embarrassing interethnic quarrels, grossly compromised the leadership’s image.”²¹⁸ As publications like the *Washington Post* continued to promote headlines such as “Leadership Crisis Perils Poor March,” “Poor People’s Campaign in Chaos,” and “Confusion Obscures Poor People’s Specific Demands,” the organization of the Solidarity Day march took a backseat to more pressing concerns. In one bright spot, a number of churches around the country along with the National Council of Churches were organizing congregants and donations in support of the march.²¹⁹

Remarkably, the march ended up mobilizing nearly 50,000 participants, a fraction of Abernathy’s original goal, but a respectable number nonetheless, and due in no small part to outside organizations mobilizing around the event.²²⁰ Mayors from twenty-two cities - including New York’s Mayor John Lindsay - wrote a statement in support of Solidarity Day which stated, in part “We, the undersigned Mayors, feel it only fitting and proper that we publicly proclaim our

²¹⁷ Paul W. Valentine, “Marchers’ Rift Breaks Into the Open,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 1968, B1.

²¹⁸ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 71.

²¹⁹ George Dugan, “Many Here Back Washington Poor,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1968, 24.

²²⁰ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 76.

commitment to the goal of those who march tomorrow.”²²¹ The *Chicago Defender* called it “a fitting tribute” to King, with Abernathy and other SCLC leadership joined again by Coretta Scott King.²²² In the end, it was her words, not Abernathy’s, that left a lasting impression on the marchers and roused them to a standing ovation, as she concluded her speech in the same way King had: “Free at last, thank God almighty I’m free at last.”²²³ Abernathy spoke after her, but owing to the late hour and the dwindling crowd, his words made far less of an impact as Coretta King’s. His speech pointed out a number of minor concessions the campaign had elicited from members of Congress in the areas of food stamps and the Head Start program. Abernathy then called for members of Congress to do more: “This is not enough. This is not going to satisfy the poor people in their campaign. We are not leaving until he [Bertrand Harding, Deputy Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity] ensures a real voice for the poor in all of the poverty programs of this country.”²²⁴ After 61 minutes of speaking, Abernathy closed with a repetition of the phrase “Let my people go” and the lyrics of a Baptist hymn, which were met with brief but enthusiastic cheers from the crowd.²²⁵ Fager called the speech “more articulate and carefully organized than any of his previous sermons during the summer.”²²⁶ Perhaps Abernathy finally had enough distance from King’s death to begin to formulate his own strategy for

²²¹ Ben A. Franklin, “22 Mayors Back March Today In Washington in Behalf of Poor,” *New York Times*, Jun 19, 1968, 1.

²²² “The March: A Fitting Tribute To Dr. King,” *Chicago Defender*, June 20, 1968, 2.

²²³ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 80.

²²⁴ Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Speech on the Poor People’s Campaign, delivered June 19, 1968, Library of Congress Pacifica Radio Archives, accessed 7/8/2012, <http://archive.org/details/ReverendRalphAbernathySpeechOnThePoorPeoplesCampaign>.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 81.

the organization, as he concluded by laying out six specific demands of the campaign: ending hunger, bad housing, and unemployment, with the addition of guaranteed incomes for those unable to work; adequate health care for all citizens; full equality of educational opportunity for all citizens; and an “end to violence and repression at home and abroad.”²²⁷

In the end, it was too little too late. Resurrection City’s permit with the National Park Service expired on June 24 and SCLC leadership’s request for an extension was denied.²²⁸ Increasing violence within and without the encampment made Washington officials disinclined to continue to house the shrinking number of participants.²²⁹ On eviction day Abernathy made a statement to the press that campers would not leave voluntarily and that “No matter what happens to me or to Resurrection City, the Poor People’s Campaign will go on.”²³⁰ A few hours later, U.S. Capitol Police sealed off the camp, rounding up Abernathy and the remaining residents, all of whom were peacefully taken to jail; the clearing of the camp took just 90 minutes.²³¹ What had begun as King’s sweeping vision of mass mobilization of the poor ended quietly under the demoralized leadership of Abernathy. SCLC’s viability as an affective force for change in the civil rights movement was in question, as was its leadership structure moving forward. The challenges of the PPC had put into sharp relief the organization’s now complete inability to fulfill its mission.

²²⁷ Ibid., 83.

²²⁸ “Officials Agree Not to Extend Resurrection City’s Permit,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1968, A1.

²²⁹ For a more complete account of the violence plaguing the camp in the wake of Solidarity Day, see Fager’s chapter “Violence Inside and Out,” *Uncertain Resurrection*, 86-112.

²³⁰ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 114-115.

²³¹ Joseph A. Loftuss, “City of the Poor Shuts Peacefully,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1968, 29.

CHAPTER SEVEN: UNDERSTANDING THE FAILURE OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Aftermath

A handful of additional protests and demonstrations occurred throughout June and July, with a group of Quakers being the most vocal outside group to show support for Abernathy as he served out his sentence.²³² Emerging after 20 days in jail, Abernathy promised that the Poor People's Campaign was not over, and that phase two would take place on a national scale, but, as the *Chicago Defender* reported, "[H]e gave no details about his specific plans."²³³ By then many Washingtonians were burned out on the campaign; some were outright resentful of what SCLC had left behind in its wake. *Washington Post* "Potomac Watch" columnist William Raspberry had already expressed sharp criticism of SCLC's internal disorganization and poor handling of the press.²³⁴ In his July 1 editorial "Remaining Poor Hinder Campaign," Raspberry recounted the story of one such woman who had opposed the campaign, yet sought to help some of the children displaced by Resurrection City's closure. She told him "I'm part of what amounts to a cleanup committee. We're opposed to the Campaign, but the leaders know they can call on us when things get fouled up; there are always people like me who'll do what they can to cover up other people's goofs."²³⁵ Raspberry concluded the column by criticizing the campaign for not having

²³² Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 171-174.

²³³ "I'll Resurrect Poor Campaign,' Abernathy Vows," *Chicago Defender*, Jul 15, 1968, 7.

²³⁴ William Raspberry, "Potomac Watch: Poor People's Campaign Nearing Fiasco," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1968, D1.

²³⁵ William Raspberry, "Remaining Poor Hinder the Campaign," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 1968, C1.

engaged local leaders earlier, a criticism that had been hurled at SCLC numerous times before, during, and after the PPC ended, especially with regards to local political figures.²³⁶

SCLC struggled in the wake of the PPC's conclusion. At the 12th Annual Convention in Memphis in August of 1968, rumors of contention among the ranks, especially the executive staff, proved to be unfounded, but the *Chicago Defender* reported that "signs of dissension over the present strategy of SCLC's program in the Poor People's Campaign were evident throughout the convention."²³⁷ Affiliates from eastern and southern states attempted to propose an alternate platform for the organization, one focused on "ownership of the means of income" rather than just jobs; those delegates, however, were not even given time to present their alternatives.²³⁸ "Due to the urgent need to reduce staff," SCLC once again found itself in the position of laying off employees at the national office in early October.²³⁹ The organization still owed the federal government over \$71,000 for the cost of damages resulting from Resurrection City. It would take another year for them to pay off the bill, for a negotiated settlement of \$10,000.²⁴⁰ In the spring of 1969, Abernathy and SCLC leaders attempted to engage the organization in a second Poor People's Campaign, with a broad focus "on the welfare, education, nutrition, housing and employment

²³⁶ For one example of how this frustration played out with the Mayor's office and District officials, see Carl Bernstein, "Resurrection City Wears Out D. C. Officials' Welcome," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 1968, A10.

²³⁷ "SCLC Dissension Rumors Prove To Be Unfounded," *Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1968, 2.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ SCLC 40:22.

²⁴⁰ "SCLC Pays Off 'Tent City' Tab," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1969, 4.

problems of the nation's poor," and no mention of any encampment.²⁴¹ Although the campaign garnered minor press attention, as well as an audience with President Richard Nixon, a frustrated, defeated Abernathy called off the event after just a few days in Washington.²⁴²

Why Failure?

It would be easy to blame the Poor People's Campaign's inability to achieve any lasting, meaningful results on King's assassination, on weather, on the Johnson administration, on Vietnam, or on any number of factors out of SCLC's direct control. But as this thesis has shown, the fault lies squarely with the perpetual lack of structure and strategy in this social welfare nonprofit organization. The Poor People's Campaign was not just a singular failure, either. It was a turning point for SCLC, the beginning of the end of its dominance among civil rights leaders and the formal and informal nonprofit organizations that had been created in support of the movement. Three particular issues hampered SCLC's ability to operate efficiently as a nonprofit, each ultimately contributing to the defeat of the PPC and the decline of the organization: an inability to adhere to a clear, actionable mission; a struggle to obtain tax exempt status; and an organizational inelasticity that prevented SCLC from being able to respond to the changing needs of those whom it served.

The unofficial mission statement of SCLC was "To Redeem the Soul of America," an oft-repeated phrase that appears nowhere in the organization's

²⁴¹ Philip D. Carter, "Poor People's Campaign Leaders to Return Here Monday," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1969, 28.

²⁴² Roy Reeds, "Abernathy Ends Drive to Aid Poor," *New York Times*, May 17, 1969, 40.

Constitution and By-Laws; in reality, King had written the phrase on a window at SCLC's headquarters.²⁴³ As the discussion of the bylaws in the first part of chapter three showed, SCLC originally intended to focus mainly on the South, and from the start had a very lofty, or some might say vague, mission. Part III of the "Aims and Purposes" stated that SCLC was "organized as a service agency to facilitate coordinated action of local protest groups and to assist in their sharing of resources and experiences."²⁴⁴ In other words, the organization itself would not provide any direct services; it would serve to support other formal and informal organizations "attempting to bring full democracy to our great nation."²⁴⁵ Almost immediately, however, SCLC violated its own directives by creating the "Crusade of Citizenship," an initiative wholly of its own creation, and one for which the organization was ill suited to operate, as was shown in the second part of chapter three. As SCLC grew and expanded, a case of what might be termed "mission evolution" occurred. This situation can be defined as what occurs when an organization's mission transforms over time in an attempt to stay relevant to the shifting demands of its core constituencies. It might also be thought of as a less severe form of "mission creep," a condition that arises when an organization's operations and programs stray from its original stated mission, often spreading thin existing resources in an attempt to take on additional activities.²⁴⁶ In some instances, mission creep can be a good thing for a

²⁴³ See footnote to the abstract in Hilda Raye Tompkins, "'To Redeem the Soul of America': The Leadership Challenges Martin Luther King, Jr. Faced and Managed as Leader of a Social Movement" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Georgia, 2009).

²⁴⁴ SCLC 32:4.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ As Kim Jonker & William F. Meehan III explain in their Case Study "Curbing Mission Creep," (Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2008), "Mission creep plagues the nonprofit sector. In

nonprofit, as it demonstrates that the organization is changing in response to needs both internal and external.

In the case of SCLC, however, such a “mission evolution” caused the organization to suffer the same setbacks time and again by refusing to learn from past mistakes. Instead of thoroughly researching and strategizing before entering into a new campaign, a practice which would have greatly enhanced the organization’s ability to facilitate the coordination of local groups, SCLC relied on the force of King’s personality to achieve the organization’s goals. Oftentimes - the Albany, St. Augustine, and Chicago campaigns are obvious examples - SCLC dropped into the middle of a campaign and created their own demands, the Albany, St. Augustine, and Chicago campaigns being obvious examples; those demands often were not necessarily aligned with those of the local organizations who had already been working for their own causes, creating tension among the groups and ultimately compromising SCLC’s effectiveness.²⁴⁷ Had SCLC been disciplined enough to focus on its core strengths and listen more closely to the changing demands of those for whom it was designed to serve, it might have been far more effective at achieving the broad goal of “full democracy” that it desired. In the absence of that discipline, the organization was forced to reinvent itself for nearly every campaign. Undoubtedly SCLC made great strides in accomplishing its “basic aim of achieving full citizenship

the private sector, pencil manufacturers, for example, rarely dive into the bakery business or into human resources consulting. Yet nonprofits routinely do the equivalent, expanding their programs far beyond their organizations’ original scope, skills, and core competencies – often in response to funding opportunities or staff members’ interests.”

²⁴⁷ For examples of how competing organizational interests affected these campaigns see Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 107 (Albany); Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 190-191 (St. Augustine); and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 467-8 (Chicago).

rights, equality, and the integration of the Negro in all aspects of American life,” as the successes of Birmingham and Selma demonstrate.²⁴⁸ But with few opportunities for organizational learning and little development of a shared organizational memory, especially at the highest leadership levels, SCLC was unable to turn its “mission evolution” into a positive asset, which further hampered its ability to achieve success in the years leading up to and including the Poor People’s Campaign.

Fundraising challenges and financial fluctuations plagued SCLC for most of its existence. As shown in chapters three and four, the organization’s fiscal health depended largely on its ability to leverage public relations for favorable press of King and select high-profile campaigns. Unfortunately, due to repeated oversight by SCLC’s leadership, the organization was unable to accept tax-deductible donations, one of the major benefits of nonprofit status, until 1966. SCLC had certainly accepted donations since its inception, but the vast majority of those were individual, non-deductible donations, largely generated via the direct mail campaigns and newspaper advertisements. Obtaining broader, sustained sources of funding, like the types of grants and awards pursued by the NAACP and the National Urban League, was impossible in the absence of the required IRS status. For example, the organization was awarded a \$26,000 grant in 1961 from the Field Foundation for citizenship training, but had to turn down the offer.²⁴⁹ Wyatt Walker subsequently applied for 501(c)(4) nonprofit status for SCLC at the end of 1961, but failed to prove that the organization met

²⁴⁸ SCLC 32:4.

²⁴⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 161.

the IRS's guidelines. On January 2, 1962, Chauncey Eskridge, a lawyer at the firm of McCoy, Ming & Leighton, strongly advised that SCLC hire an outside accounting firm to manage its finances.²⁵⁰ That advice went unheeded and throughout 1962 Walker himself engaged in a back and forth with the IRS over the application status.²⁵¹ Sloppy bookkeeping and poor communication continued to hamper SCLC's ability to obtain this status, with Walker even going so far as to admit in a February 26 letter to the chief of the Exempt Organizations Branch of the IRS that it would take time to comply with the IRS's request for information because "From date of incorporation through August 31, 1960 our financial statements were not prepared on a consistent fiscal year basis."²⁵² Henry Wachtel, surprised to learn of the organization's non-tax-exempt status, had attempted to set up a separate entity, the Gandhi Society, to accept such donations, but ongoing deliberations among SCLC staff and the IRS held up the process.²⁵³

By the end of 1962 SCLC had obtained 501(c)(4) status, but still did not have an easy way to accept tax-deductible donations from supporters. Walker's attention turned elsewhere, as he increasingly focused on traveling with King, who was on the road six to eight months a year for speaking engagements, and ensuring that SCLC "made the maximum amount of money" from those

²⁵⁰ SCLC 35:13.

²⁵¹ A series of correspondence between Walker and the Exempt Organizations Branch of the U.S. Treasury Department took place throughout January and February 1962. See SCLC 35:13 for full documentation.

²⁵² SCLC 35:13. For the list of information requested by the IRS, please see their letter to SCLC, also available in 35:13.

²⁵³ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 97.

speeches.²⁵⁴ When Walker left the organization in 1964, it was flush with cash from King's speeches, but still struggling to communicate with individual supporters who believed SCLC to be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit like many other civil rights groups. In October 1964, SCLC received a strongly worded letter from a donor's lawyer, after the donor's taxes were audited and the IRS denied his deducting a donation to SCLC.²⁵⁵ In a response to that letter, Andrew Young replied that the lawyer was correct; SCLC did not have 501(c)(3) status, but that donations could be made to the American Institute on Nonviolent Education, an "auxiliary unit" that had just that month received 501(c)(3) status.²⁵⁶ What Young probably meant to reference was the American Foundation on Nonviolence (AFON), the new name Wachtel had chosen for the Gandhi society (by then a 501(c)(3)) as the main channel by which tax-exempt donations could be made to SCLC.²⁵⁷

Nearly a decade after SCLC's founding, in April 1966, a letter from the U.S. Treasury Department to King stated that the newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Foundation was awarded 501(c)(3) status, making it an additional source of tax-exempt donations.²⁵⁸ By that time, however, the organization was again experiencing serious financial problems, as illustrated in chapter five, and the leadership was ill-equipped to fully exploit the opportunities presented by using the Foundation as a major funding stream. It would be impossible to estimate the amount of donations SCLC was unable to accept in

²⁵⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 227-228.

²⁵⁵ SCLC 38:5.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 542.

²⁵⁸ SCLC 48:10

the nearly ten years it took for it to create a tax-exempt entity with the same name and brand recognition as the organization.²⁵⁹ Walker's fateful decision to ignore the advice of Eskridge and engage an outside accounting firm, and the ongoing lack of staff support for matters financial, only served to prevent SCLC from pursuing additional projects related to its mission. The Atlanta office never did take seriously its need to develop and maintain a comprehensive fundraising program distinct from the direct mail campaign, with leadership consistently choosing instead to rely on King's ability to command large speaking fees and drum up support through celebrity fundraising tours to make up for budget deficits.²⁶⁰ Likewise, the organization as a whole never had a realistic perception of how much it would cost to carry out its various campaigns, nor did budget surpluses last long enough to create any sense of financial stability, a pattern that continued through to the PPC.²⁶¹

Equally detrimental to SCLC's organizational effectiveness was that it never fully identified what Lester Salamon calls the direct, indirect, and/or community benefits that serve as the organizational foundation of a social service nonprofit.²⁶² "In addition to the *direct benefits* that accrue to the immediate recipients of services, there are a variety of *indirect or community benefits* that accrue to a wide assortment of other people--family members, acquaintances,

²⁵⁹ Curiously, the SCL Foundation today makes no mention of the organization's roots in SCLC, choosing instead to highlight the fact that Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier - two long-time supporters of King's and SCLC's work - were founding Trustees, <http://www.scifoundation.org/>.

²⁶⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 287-288.

²⁶¹ In preparation for the building of Resurrection City, SCLC had posted a \$5,000 bond toward any damage caused to the National Park space. The entire camp ended up costing the federal government nearly \$250,000. See "Poor's Camp-in Cost \$250,000," *The Baltimore Sun*, June 29, 1968, A5.

²⁶² Lester M. Salamon, "Social Services," in *Who Benefits from the Nonprofit Sector*, ed. Charles T. Clotfelter, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 142.

neighbors, the general public.”²⁶³ Only when SCLC narrowly defined the scope of its campaigns was it successful in achieving these benefits. The southern-based campaigns that used targeted, non-violent direct action in pursuit of voter registration and equal access to public facilities, direct benefits to SCLC’s intended recipients, were also able to desegregate buses, integrate schools, register thousands of voters, and unseat racist elected officials, indirectly benefitting the entire community.

SCLC had only one taste of that success in the North, with Operation Breadbasket, a program that existed and thrived largely because it was outside of the direct control of the leadership of the national office. The program used targeted consumer boycotts to demand that companies who sold to black shoppers provide jobs for black employees, a direct benefit strategy that resulted in 1,000 new white-collar jobs in Philadelphia, in addition to “selective buying efforts” in multiple major northern cities.²⁶⁴ Operations Breadbasket’s success in the wake of the PPC, however, was also its downfall, as the national SCLC office grew resentful of Director Jesse Jackson’s growing fame.²⁶⁵ Jackson, however, desired a greater say in the organization’s operations. In an interview with the *Chicago Defender* in August 1970, Abernathy defended SCLC’s decision not to amend its constitution in order to promote Jackson to first vice president-at-large, as doing so “would ‘further complicate the structure,’” even though rumors of

²⁶³ Ibid., emphasis in the original.

²⁶⁴ Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) 120.

²⁶⁵ “Hint Major Split in SCLC,” *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1969, 1.

internal dissension were again running rampant.²⁶⁶ By the end of 1971, Jackson left the organization, “depriving SCLC of its most popular officer and most effective fundraiser. It also robbed SCLC of its principal base in the North.”²⁶⁷ Once again, SCLC leadership had failed to learn from past organizational mistakes. Jackson had already been denied once during the PPC; he would not be denied again.

Had SCLC been able to capitalize on the successes of Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, and Operation Breadbasket, and produce meaningful direct or indirect benefits in the intervening campaigns, then the organization might have had a clearer focus leading up to the Poor People’s Campaign. The *Baltimore Sun*’s Joseph R. L. Sterne, writing on June 30, 1968 asserted that SCLC leaders operated tactically, not strategically, a “technique that worked admirably in those simpler days when the ‘race issue’ was...voting in Birmingham.”²⁶⁸ Sterne pointed out that the times had changed, with “a growing belief in Washington that nonviolent protest as a means of rousing the nation is giving way to a multitude of ghetto-oriented action programs.”²⁶⁹ SCLC, still “able to move in the vanguard” according to Sterne, was nonetheless an organization whose techniques were becoming “passé.”²⁷⁰ It had grown increasingly out of touch with both its direct recipients and those who might benefit tangentially from its efforts. While the organization was struggling in the wake of the Chicago

²⁶⁶ “Why They Didn’t Name Jesse,” *Chicago Defender*, August 18, 1970, 1.

²⁶⁷ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 394.

²⁶⁸ Joseph R. L. Sterne, “King’s last dream finds unhappy ending: Abernathy finds Washington isn’t Selma,” June 30, 1968, PK3.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

campaign, the Black Panthers were administering free breakfast and healthcare services in East Oakland, California.²⁷¹ While SCLC was still recovering from the aftermath of the PPC, the National Welfare Rights Organization was taking on the limitation of the Food Stamps program, arguing that its restrictions and limitations were ultimately detrimental to recipients.²⁷²

SCLC was unable to evolve in a strategic manner; it was stuck in the mindset of the mass direct actions of the early civil rights movement, with Resurrection City a relic of a bygone era. In a December 14, 1968, interview with the *Chicago Defender*, Bernard Lafayette claimed that the PPC had achieved “about half” of its goals, including the creation of new food distribution programs and nearly \$10 million in Congressional appropriations for school lunch programs.²⁷³ The article goes on, however, to recount a laundry list of demands that were not met, including “housing, employment, and welfare” reforms, along with changes to health care and education for the poor.²⁷⁴ The article concludes that “we can visualize some merit even if small” in the minor achievements of the PPC, but that only another campaign, “probably one that is not only better organized but inclusive of more people who will make more and bigger demands” would affect real change for the poor.²⁷⁵ SCLC was not the organization to rise to that challenge and, as such, was quickly relegated to an after-thought as the civil rights movements of the 1960s gave way to Black Nationalism, second-wave feminism, and student activism.

²⁷¹ Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 122.

²⁷² Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 132-136.

²⁷³ Frank Stanley, “People, Places, Problems,” *Daily Chicago Defender*, December 14, 1968, 15.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE SCHOLARLY RESEARCH

Evolution of a Movement

By 1969 Richard Nixon was in office, the OEO had become one of the most controversial agencies in the federal government, and the civil rights movement was giving way to new calls for Black Nationalism and women's liberation.²⁷⁶ Old-line civil rights movement organizations like SNCC spent the end of the decade shedding veteran members, only to find that the younger leadership, while still seeking ways to be engaged in the civil rights movement, was no longer interested in what was formerly SNCC's core mission.²⁷⁷ In that way, the Poor People's Campaign was symbolic of the movement as a whole. A report issued two months after the end of the campaign concluded that "The Negro majority that registered at Resurrection city and traveled toward Washington late last [sic] spring, was mostly between the ages of 13 and 24, male, single, and poor."²⁷⁸ The white participants were of a similar demographic, although the report found that most of them were "non-poor" college students.²⁷⁹ That a significant number of youths were still interested in engaging in non-violent direct action indicates that SCLC's work was not completely irrelevant to a new generation. They were simply unable to channel that youthful energy.

²⁷⁶ For a full discussion of the critical response to OEO during Shriver's tenure, see William C. Selover, "The View from Capitol Hill: Harassment and Survival," Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty*, 158-187.

²⁷⁷ Carson, *In Struggle*, 293-296.

²⁷⁸ Joseph R. L. Sterne, "Study Says Poor Campaign Consisted Mostly Of Youths," *The Baltimore Sun*, August 24, 1968, A6.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

The report concluded that the violent outbreaks among younger residents at Resurrection City could “have acted as an invisible social force in the campaign, one favoring the pursuit of personal (rather than organizational) goals, ‘doing your own thing’ instead of ‘getting together,’ unless counteracted by strong, persuasive and consistent leadership.”²⁸⁰ As this paper has shown, SCLC was far from able to provide that kind of leadership. Consequently, the organization lost out on a potentially huge opportunity to bring a new, youthful, truly grassroots base of supporters to its mission. To assume that young donors and direct-action doers would be the prime movers to reignite civil rights organizations, however, would be to deny the growing complexities inherent to the movement at that time. Marable adeptly summarizes the challenges facing all those who were engaged in the cause at the dawn of the 1970s:

Thus, after the assassinations of Malcolm and Martin, the modern black movement for biracial democracy had been crippled, for sure, but it was by no means destroyed. Yet the absence of a widely shared theory and strategy for black liberation was still missing; the political goal of black equality was still murky and ill-defined; the opportunism and accommodation of many black militants and political leaders still raised unresolved questions for future struggles; and the programmatic relationship between democracy and racial justice, socialism and peace that DuBois and King had strived to attain was becoming ever more distant.²⁸¹

Perhaps after over a dozen years in operation, SCLC’s work was no longer relevant to the struggle for racial equality. Perhaps it was an organization whose time had come and gone. Or perhaps it was just simply unable to operate without the glue of King’s force of personality holding it together, and no

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 126-7.

campaign, whether focused on the poor or otherwise, would have achieved success under those conditions.

Future Scholarship

This paper sought to examine the failures of the Poor People's Campaign through the lens of SCLC's organizational structure and strategy. As I dug further into the primary document archive, it became apparent that I needed to examine more specifically the decision-making process of the leadership team and the ways in which SCLC prepared, or in many cases did not prepare, for its major campaigns. A paper of this length and scope must necessarily be narrow in focus, but my research led me to consider additional theories as to why the PPC ended the way it did. I would encourage future scholars to take up this topic, with its paucity of research yet rich sources of material as yet untapped, especially as it relates to the following three additional areas of research.

1) One aspect of SCLC not thoroughly discussed above was its roots in the black church, and how the management requirements of a preacher can be quite different from those of the leader of a nonprofit organization. Did SCLC leadership run the organization too much like a church? Churches fall under 501(c)(3) status, making their purpose somewhat different from that of SCLC's. However, King was known to rely on prayer as a recurring method of making crucial decisions, even if his advisors, including his own pastor father, disagreed with the outcome.²⁸² At times, King's "charismatic leadership," rooted in his

²⁸² For one example of King's use of prayer as a decision-making technique, see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 242.

training as a black preacher, compromised the health of the organization, as Aldon D. Morris, writing in *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, argues: “The SCLC leadership’s attitude toward formal organizations grew out of the charismatic and fluid personal relationships characteristic of the black church.”²⁸³ If SCLC was indeed “a church-related protest organization,” a direct extension of the black church structure and leadership in the South, as Morris argues quite convincingly, then SCLC’s chronic financial problems and the organization’s inability to budget properly when organizing its campaigns make sense.²⁸⁴ Writing in *The Black Church and the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya argue that

While a few elite black churches and pastors have been engaged in important projects that could help the economic development of their local areas, the majority of pastors and churches lacked adequate knowledge about financial investments and about the economic development of their own institutions and that of the surrounding community. One of the major weaknesses of the historic black denominations is in the area of training and teaching their denominational leaders, pastors, and laity about all aspects of economic stewardship, from careful record keeping, financial accountability, and investments to the economic development of their communities.²⁸⁵

SCLC certainly exhibited many of those weaknesses from its inception through the end of the PPC. An examination of the standard management practices of black churches both North and South during the civil rights era might yield additional insight into SCLC’s operation and how the negative aspects of those practices informed it.

²⁸³ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 113.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁸⁵ Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press: 1990), 262.

2) Also research worthy is a closer examination of the board governance and how its relatively minor influence on the organization contributed to SCLC's structural, financial, and strategic problems. Fairclough points out that from its earliest days, SCLC's decision makers included an "amorphous and ever-expanding circle of friends, colleagues, and advisers. Of these, least important was SCLC's board of directors."²⁸⁶ In a 1968 report to the executive board, Rutherford confirmed that a deep skepticism of the usefulness of official decision making bodies within the organization still existed, only half joking when he stated, "I am intimidated because of the basic tendency of Boards of Directors to allow their Executives to work without advice or supervision and then throw rocks at them after the fact, whenever possible."²⁸⁷ King relied on advisors like Stanley Levison and Bayard Rustin far more than he ever consulted any member of the board; Levison never formally worked for the organization.²⁸⁸ A scholar of nonprofit governance might find an excellent case study with SCLC.

3) Missing from most accounts of the PPC is an integration of the voices of the people it was designed to serve. During their time at the camp, participants were instructed never to speak directly to the press, even though their personal stories were being used for PR purposes.²⁸⁹ As such, scholars might find it challenging to research additional first-hand accounts of the march, especially those from the viewpoint of any who left their homes behind to live in

²⁸⁶ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 168.

²⁸⁷ "Executive Director's Report," February 6, 1968, 2, KCDL, accessed 4/18/12, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/executive-directors-report>.

²⁸⁸ The issue of Vietnam was an especially contentious one with SCLC's board, and was one of the few instances when they denied King's demands outright. Rustin and Levison were the advisors to whom King turned as he continued to evolve his views on the topic. For a concise overview of this incident, see Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 310-320.

²⁸⁹ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 35.

Resurrection City. Examining how - if at all - the PPC affected the lives of the poor participants after they returned to their homes might yield more fruitful results. Were participants' long-term economic situation improved as a result of having been a part of the campaign? Were they changed by the experience in a way that had far-reaching effects on their families and communities? Because the vast majority of Resurrection City residents were members of racial and ethnic minorities it would be beneficial to examine contemporary black newspapers and periodicals (e.g. *Atlanta Daily World*, *The Crisis*, *Ebony*, and *Jet*), as well as periodicals aimed at Native American and Chicano audiences. Special emphasis could also be placed on rural Southern publications or those affiliated with black churches.

Additional topics to explore would include a more thorough evaluation of SCLC's southern operations versus its northern ones. I was only briefly able to touch upon the Chicago campaign, but it's worth noting that while SCLC's attempt to achieve open housing in the city was almost completely rebuffed, Jesse Jackson successfully organized Operation Breadbasket there as part of the same effort. Likewise, the New York office managed an efficient, effective direct mail program, something the national office never even attempted. It is possible that unless King himself was present, northern campaigns and offices operated largely outside of the rest of the organization, possibly making them immune to its shortcomings and consequently more successful. Also essential to this line of research is a comparison of SCLC's affiliates in both the North and the South. Understanding how the national office affected these loosely coordinated

support organizations could yield a deeper understanding of how SCLC chose to coordinate outside groups for the PPC.

Conclusion

The legacy of the Poor People's Campaign, however, is not entirely one of negative outcomes. While the demands of the campaign that were met numbered in the low single digits, and the overall impact of participants' demonstrations and sit-ins on Capitol Hill was minimal, there were a few critics who found positive aspects.²⁹⁰ The PPC was a failure in the sense that it was unable to achieve its stated goals, but that does not mean that SCLC as a whole was a failed organization, or that Abernathy should be judged as a failed leader based upon just this campaign. Likewise King's legacy, while not enhanced by the way SCLC carried out his final vision, was certainly not diminished by it.²⁹¹ In the epilogue to *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* Jackson reaches the conclusion that "we can give King and his generation more credit for changing the country than he could at the time...The freedom movement, the civil rights acts, and the war on poverty did not eradicate racism and poverty. But cumulatively they helped raise black incomes, improved the quality of life in many black communities, and provided training grounds for the thousands of black elected officials who followed."²⁹²

²⁹⁰ For two examples of this see Joseph Kraft's editorial "Poor People Were Treated In a Sensible, Humane Way," *The Washington Post*, Jun 20, 1968, A20; and "The Poor's Campaign," *Chicago Defender*, Jul 13, 1968, 10.

²⁹¹ "Dr. King's dream...gradually coming true," *Chicago Defender*, Apr 5, 1972, 11.

²⁹² Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 366.

The campaign had also asked an important question both of SCLC leadership and PPC participants: How do you address power? And while the organization may not have fully known how to answer that question, there is no doubt that many participants were given a sense of agency just by virtue of participating. Kay Shannon, the D.C. Coordinator for Resurrection City, recalled residents feeling a “fierce pride” in their self-made shantytown.²⁹³ Certainly any campaign that instills in its participants a feeling of hope for the future cannot be called a complete failure.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the PPC is only now being realized. In the wake of Occupy movements around the world, the goals of the PPC seem in some ways more relevant than ever. Cameron Turner, writing in the Los Angeles *Sentinel*, argues that “If Dr. King were alive today, he certainly would be voicing strong support for the Occupy Wall Street movement,” citing King’s sentiments in his 1967 speech “Where Do We Go From Here” as evidence that King’s fight for economic equality and the rights of the poor was very much in line with the demands of the “99%.”²⁹⁴ There is much to be said for that argument, and the similarities between the campaigns are obvious: building coalitions of diverse supporters, emphasizing non-violent direct action, providing amenities and resources to participants to which they might not otherwise have access, and focusing on the seats of power as potential sources of change. An October 2011 editorial in the *New York Times* regarding Occupy Wall Street could have been written about the PPC as well. It closes with this: “It is not the job of the

²⁹³ Shannon quoted in Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 354.

²⁹⁴ Cameron Turner, “Dr. King Would Have Occupied Wall Street,” *Sentinel*, October 20, 2011, A1.

protesters to draft legislation. That's the job of the nation's leaders, and if they had been doing it all along there might not be a need for these marches and rallies. Because they have not, the public airing of grievances is a legitimate and important end in itself."²⁹⁵ Likewise, a *New York Times* editorial from June 1968 seems shockingly contemporary:

But, by their example of nonviolent discipline in submitting peacefully to arrest, the campaigners did earn respect for their convictions. The orderly behavior of protestors and police in the Washington evacuation should have served as an object lesson that it is possible to entertain strong dissent in this country, even to the point of civil disobedience, without endangering the foundation of law and order on which the rights and liberties of all Americans rest.²⁹⁶

As an object lesson, as an exercise in democracy, and as a public statement on the realities faced by the least among us, the Poor People's Campaign was a success. It could have been so much more had SCLC given it the chance.

²⁹⁵ "Protestors Against Wall Street," *New York Times*, October 9, 2011, SR10.

²⁹⁶ "Go With Dignity," *New York Times*, June 25, 1968, 40.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Emily M. Hall

Education:

Master of Arts in History, Indiana University, IUPUI, 2012

Master of Arts in Philanthropic Studies, Indiana University, IUPUI, 2012

Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Political Science, University of Chicago, 2001

Research and Training Experience:

Assistant to the Textual Editor
Frederick Douglass Papers
August 2004-July 2005
Indianapolis, IN

Project Assistant
Philanthropic Innovation in Indianapolis
August 2004-June 2005
Indianapolis, IN

Writer/Researcher
The Union Institute/INDEPENDENT SECTOR
June 2004-July 2004
Washington, D.C.

Graduate Assistant
Center on Philanthropy
August 2002-June 2004
Indianapolis, IN

Program Assistant
The Polis Center
January 2003-November 2003
Indianapolis, IN

Teaching Assistant
U.S. History, History Department, IUPUI
August 2003-May 2004
Indianapolis, IN

Professional Experience:

New Media Director
Citizen Effect
May 2012-Present
Washington, D.C.

Marketing Manager
Zipcar
March 2011-May 2012
Washington, D.C.

Senior Social Media Strategist
CTG, Inc.
November 2010-March 2011
Washington, D.C.

Web Communications Manager
USO
April 2009-November 2010
Arlington, VA

Retail Marketing Manager
Goodwill of Greater Washington
June 2007-April 2009
Washington, D.C.

Corporate Development Associate
Goodwill of Greater Washington
May 2006-May 2007
Washington, D.C.

Conferences Attended:

Invited Presenter: "Using Social Media Tools Effectively for Orgs and Nonprofits,"
Digital Capital Week, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2010.

Invited Panelist: "Effective Social Media in a Nonprofit Environment," American
Marketing Association--D.C.'s Non-Profit Special Interest Group, Washington,
D.C., May 5, 2010.

Invited Presenter: Successful Sponsorships: Cultivating the Corporate
Relationship, at the Center for Nonprofit Advancement Washington, D.C., August
3, 2006.

Participant: American Historical Association Annual Meeting Seattle, Washington, January 6-9, 2005.

Staff: Educating for a Civil Society, sponsored by the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University Indianapolis, IN, October 31-November 2, 2004.

Invited Participant: Philanthropic Strategies for Helping the Poor, sponsored by the Philanthropy Roundtable Washington, D.C., May 13, 2004.

Co-Organizer: Careers in History, sponsored by the History Department at IUPUI Indianapolis, IN, April 17, 2004.

British Historian Search Committee Member: American Historical Association Annual Meeting Washington, D.C., January 8-11, 2004.

Invited Presenter: "Civic Engagement among College Students" at the Governor's Inaugural Conference on Service and Volunteerism, sponsored by the Indiana Commission on Service and Volunteerism, Indianapolis, IN, October 23, 2003.

Invited Participant: Education Leadership Colloquium, sponsored by Campus Compact Denver, CO, July 16-17, 2003.

Invited Participant: ARNOVA, Montreal, Quebec, CANADA, November 19-22, 2003.

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